

It had been the custom in Savalik for centuries: The old, knowing that their spirit was tired of this world, should be allowed to die in the manner of their choosing. This much Christopher Apak understood as he guided his grandfather to the sled hooked onto the back of his snowmobile. The old man, Taliriktug was his name, had been sour for weeks, ever since the great mist had fallen on the North. His face, once as ruddy as the blood of a bear, had now become as yellow as lichen. The flesh was sinking into his bones. His eyes stared inward. So, too, his toes had turned. When he walked he was like a newborn caribou, fragile, at angles, twigs for legs. But unlike the caribou, Taliriktug would never learn to stand again. The only food he had taken

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in this period of decline was a few sips of broth, made from muktuk, the meat of whales. Medication — the white man's penicillin — he had sneered at. Furthermore, he had put away his feathers and charms. This, people muttered, was a greater sign that his living was done with than any liverishness or tired shamanic ramblings. Even the comfort of a single bed, heated by a blanket fed by electricity, had been rejected. Taliriktug was ready to ride a sled. It was his time to sit upon the ice, he had said. In the modern way, this was forbidden. But when a raven landed on the roof of his house, the wise ones in the village had noted the omen and turned their eyes away from the laws of the South. From that moment on it was clear to all that Taliriktug would die in the ways of his fathers — alone, without help, stranded in the wilderness, there to be claimed by the spirits of the North.

“Are you comfortable, Grandfather?”

The old man pulled his furs around him. His mouth, long devoid of any consistency of enamel, with only bunched, dried wrinkles to indicate lips, did not say

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“yes” and did not say “no.” He was sitting cross-legged, facing away from his final destination, pointing at each of the wooden shacks that were built into the land that curved around the bay, as if he were counting them, or possibly even blessing them. This place had been his home since he could first gut a fish. Yet no one stood on the shoreline, watching. That was the Savalik way.

Apak fired up the snowmobile. Gently opening the throttle, he nudged the machine forward. The rope that bound the sled jerked itself tense. Taliriktug gave a nod as they began to move. The hood of his coat slipped back a little, revealing a line of thinning black hair. Then he began to chant. A breathy, incongruous, unharmonic wail. A song for the ghosts of his ancestors. Apak let in a little more gas, keeping his gears low and his speed to a funereal constant. In the South he had heard that this was a ritual: to travel at a duck’s pace to the place of burial. But his speed had little to do with respect. He was merely fearful of any sudden bumps that might ship his grandfather onto the ice too soon. That would

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have been a legend of embarrassment, one worthy of his own demise.

As the snowmobile eased across Savalik Bay, the north wind bled into Apak's face, cutting lines above his goggles and spiking both his nostrils and the corners of his mouth. He steered toward open ice, well away from any ridges that might be giving shelter to a hungry bear. Bears. The thought of them made him frown. Lately, they had been on everyone's tongues, especially in the news reports filling up the television screens. No one had seen Nanuk for weeks, and every day scientists would speak their piece about it. Some were making claims that bears had merely disappeared from view, lost in the cloud that had formed across the Arctic, following their observed migration north. Others were sure they had drowned. Apak did not believe this. How could the great white servant of Sedna one day be walking and the next day be not? Yet he could not deny that this very same worry had darkened the hearts of the villagers of Savalik. Peter Amitak, his neighbor, an experienced hunter, had taken out his dogs when these

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rumors had begun and searched the known bear runs for three complete days. He had come back saying that Nanuk was either shy or had turned himself to snow. Not a hair or a single print could be found. Some villagers, hearing this, had shut themselves away and boarded up their windows. The End of Days was upon them, they said. And no one wanted to see it.

Taliriktug had been consulted, of course. The oldest and wisest shaman in the region had studied his charms, then asked for a drum to be sounded from the highest rock at the edge of Seal Point. The beat was kept slow, to match the pace of Nanuk's heart, to encourage him to find himself, here, within the village. *Thump*. Across the ocean. *Thump*. Across the land. *Thump*. *Thump*. *Thump*. *Thump*. Like a ball bouncing from the earth to the sky. Then, during the fourteenth hour, a light had appeared in the pillows of the mist and the *inua* of the bear had come to Taliriktug. The old man had risen up and put on the bear's cloak, giving out nothing but hisses at first, before slobbering like Nanuk and speaking in his roar. This mist was a living thing, the

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bear said. A breathing organ. A spirit of fire. Long ago, the world had been nothing but an egg, laid from the innards of a giant bird. Now the bird had returned to its nest. And all the world was about to know it.

Apak had been present when these words had been uttered. It always chilled him to see his grandfather taken by a voice from the ancient spirit world. Afterward, when the spirit had departed, the old man had collapsed, exhausted, and Apak had left him to the care of others and stepped outside to light a cigarette. He nudged the shale around his feet with the toe of his boot. Then the tobacco caught in his throat and a great anger came upon him. He cursed and stamped the earth. It did not feel like the shell of an egg. An egg would have cracked and spilled its yellow heart. The world was solid. Real. Unbreakable. What “mist” could possibly change it?

And so, as he drove into the first wisps of vapor, two miles, maybe three, from the safety of the village, he did not let his thoughts stray far from the rifle bouncing in

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its harness across his back. For he could find no meaning in this talk about birds, but plenty of reasons to still believe that hungry bears roamed freely around him.

The mist closed in, quickly like a fist. Without warning, the snowmobile faltered. The engine coughed. The single yellow headlight flickered and died. Apak rubbed a glove across the frosted fuel gauge. Two points green. Juice enough. With a spit of anger he twisted the throttle grip back and forth, slapping it cruelly when it had no effect. The engine coughed again and immediately cut. Apak pulled sideways, curdling a long arc of snow as he stopped. He dropped his shoulders, cursed his maker and the makers of machinery, then looked back.

Taliriktug was not on the sled.

Apak felt a wave of panic in his chest. He knew it was the accepted tradition that the elderly should simply roll off the sled when they considered they had ridden far enough. (The sudden change of course once momentum had been lost would have prematurely aided that.) But as his mind sent roots into the origins of his fear, Apak came to realize that what he was feeling

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had nothing to do with his poor maneuvering. He was experiencing a primeval terror, one to do with the greater unknown. He was thinking now about his brother, Tootega, who'd been lost mysteriously out on the ice some five years before. A disappearance that gnawed at Apak's superstitious heart just as surely as the voice of the bear that had flowed out of Taliriktug's entranced mouth. He dismounted the snowmobile and looked warily around him. A bleak, unnatural darkness had descended, one that pressed against the jelly of the eyes. And though he could not conjure up a reason why, Apak felt the darkness had killed the engine. Was it the spirit of his brother, perhaps? Angry. Vengeful. Come to take them both.

“Grandfather!” he cried, but his voice seemed deadened and did not carry far. Yet the mist extended as though it had been punched, before flowing quickly back into his mouth, stroking the walls of his throat and lungs. In an instant he could feel it riding through his blood, reaching into his fingertips and toes. A living fire. As if it had possessed him.

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Then, from a few paces west, he heard the faint rise and fall of chanting.

Apak unclipped his rifle and crept toward the sound. The old man's silhouette came into view. Taliriktug was sitting in the manner of a baby, swaying slightly, looking as if the merest breath of wind would topple him.

"What do you see?" Apak asked nervously, jerking the rifle to emphasize his fear. The old man was clearly wrapped in a trance.

Taliriktug spread his hands in a welcoming gesture. And then a wind did come, with such unexpected ferocity that it was Apak who was quickly blown over, to his knees. Terrified, he quickly rolled onto his back and tried to open fire at the source of the wind. Several thoughts crossed his mind in that brief unstable moment, but the strangest of them all was this: that the wind had risen from the beating of wings, as if a great bird had landed.

The trigger locked hard against its clasp, but no sound or bullet emerged from the gun. Apak squealed

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and tried twice more, before clumsily turning the weapon around, thinking he might use the butt like a club. Ashes of snow began to fall around him. Then the mist parted and a beast emerged. It was five times larger than a standing bear, with stout clawed feet and a rounded chest covered not in fur but in frosted scales. Its head was shaped like the skull of a dog. The eyes set into it were as violet as the brightest winter aurora. Before Apak could think to scream, two streams of light flashed out of the eyes and drilled into the center of his grandfather's palms. Taliriktug glowed for a moment, then his spirit rose out of his body. Apak saw the apparition separate cleanly, before it broke into a thousand fragments and was sucked into the light as the eye beams retracted.

Taliriktug's body slumped to one side. And Apak knew that what physically remained of his grandfather was dead.

Shaking with dread, he stared at the creature. It tilted its head and studied him a moment, as though it were trying to evaluate his worth. A plume of white

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smoke drained out of its nostrils, crystallizing slightly in its own flow of air. It took one pace backward, gracefully for its size, then lifted two enormous wings and with one beat summoned up another great wind that blew the gun out of Apak's hands and drove him several feet along the ice. When at last he summoned up the courage to rise, the creature had gone and tears were frostbitten onto his cheeks. His lank black hair was frozen stiff. A trail of urine had iced itself against his thigh.

In the distance a yellow light pierced the gloom, followed by the sound of an engine starting. The snowmobile had come back to life. Apak gave a thin wail of disbelief. He hauled himself across and walked around it several times, kicking snow against it, afraid to touch. But when need overcame distrust he climbed aboard and set the thing into motion, stopping twice momentarily, first to pay homage to his grandfather's body, then to pick up the rifle.

Only once, emerging from the edges of the mist, did he glance back over his shoulder. The clouds were

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folding freely again, tucking their mysteries in. Apak spat sideways out of the wind and powered the snowmobile's nose into the air. He raced it back to Savalik, there to tell the people that Taliriktug's prediction of the bird at the top of the world was true. This story he would come to share with all who would listen, though many would dispute his description of the creature. Yet, in time, as the story would start to filter south, the rumors would begin that the Inuk who had broken through the great north mist had seen not a bird, but something from the far side of human mythology.

And they were right.

Christopher Apak had seen the past and the future.

He had looked into the face of the ice dragon, G'Oreal.