The Universe Has Secrets We Were Never Meant to Know



Dark Energy

The Mortal Fracture

by E.R. Sebastian

Dark Energy:
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E.R. Sebastian



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CLOSING YOUR EYES WON'T MAKE
IT GO AWAY…

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CHAPTER ONE: ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Arctic – Winter 2010

The cold water pressed in from all sides—clear, silent, eternal. Bubbles from the divers' auger masks drifted upward like tiny silver orbs, collecting along the icy ceiling of the Arctic Ocean. As the team drifted past frozen formations, they reached out instinctively, trailing their gloved fingers along the surface and chasing the bubbles they'd released into this glittering alien world.

Though it was the heart of winter, and sunlight hadn't touched the horizon in over a week, the submerged environment pulsed with a quiet glow. Surface lights from the research vessel seeped through the ice like veins of electric memory, spilling illumination through translucent sheets of glacial tundra. It looked less like water and more like a cathedral made of frozen glass.

Four figures moved beneath the ice: Dr. Eisla Sade, Dr. Marco Wasi, Carl Kim, and Meeka Datsapolis. Their bulky gear masked all but the most distinct features—making them interchangeable shadows in the deep. Only their proportions gave clues to their identity: Wasi's solid, muscular build cut through the water like a porpoise. Kim and Datsapolis had streamlined profiles, seal-like and agile. Sade, the smallest of the group, darted among them like a minnow—quick, deliberate, unafraid.

Their mission: measure how infrared light behaves in the pitch-dark Arctic waters. A study with few apparent applications—but one the military was particularly eager to fund. Sade fired bursts of infrared lasers toward the submerged ice shelf while Kim and Datsapolis charted each reflection, calculating distance, dispersion, and distortion.

Sade, for her part, was a paradox—brilliant and defiant, driven by intuition rather than authority. She wasn't the kind of scientist who volunteered for military contracts, yet here she was: buried beneath the Arctic, deep in a project funded by oversight-heavy government dollars. Her presence defied logic—and perhaps, that was precisely why she'd been chosen.

But she hadn't come here by chance.

To understand how she ended up in this frozen crucible of light, secrecy, and ice... we must go back.

Back to where the fracture first split.

#

Hamilton, Montana – 1988

It began in that brief space between seasons—the final breath of summer mingling with the crisp anticipation of autumn. The air smelled of turning leaves and fading sunshine, and the forest felt like one last playground before the structure and confinement of school resumed.

For Sade, the countryside was sacred. Her grandmother's home sat nestled between woods and worn trails, offering an untamed escape where she could be wild, impulsive, and unmonitored. It was where she felt most like herself: unplanned, unafraid.

As she kissed her grandmother's cheek and darted out the door, a gentle voice called after her—"Be careful, darlin'." But the warning was lost to the slam of the kitchen door and the wind tugging at her hair.

Her bare feet thudded against packed earth as she ran, eyes locked on a shadowed ridge beyond the tree line. There, cloaked in fog and legend, sat the old quartz mine. She'd spent a dozen summers exploring every inch

of the property—except *that* place. It repelled most with its stench: the rot of things that had fallen in and never climbed out. Dead animals. Drowned secrets.

But this morning, the mine pulled at her.

The air grew cooler. The wind hissed through branches like a warning too late. The sky dimmed without the sun. She felt it—something unnatural, seductive. Like a dare wrapped in mystery.

At the mine's edge, she flicked on her flashlight. The beam sliced through dripping shadows, catching jagged quartz and glistening walls. She shouted into the void just to hear it echo back, and when silence returned, she stepped inside—drawn toward the whispers her imagination had been feeding for years.

She dragged her fingers along the walls, the textures shifting beneath her touch: silky quartz fading into coarse sandstone, then slick veins of Galena that shimmered like wet stone. Deeper still, the colors twisted—green serpentine streaked with metallic lines, like some ancient organism turned to rock.

Eventually, she'd gone a hundred feet down, feet gripped by solid ground where she'd expected the muck her grandmother warned of. The mine was dry—but the air was muggy, heavy with sulfur and decay.

Three shafts waited ahead.

She swept her light through each one, heart pulsing with strange delight. Darkness excited her; it hid things. Secrets were more thrilling than truths. And this mine—this uncharted place—offered riddles in stone.

She stepped toward the middle shaft, but froze.

A voice, faint and warbled, curled through the air from the left passage. It slithered into her mind, reshaping her thoughts. She turned toward it, compelled by the twisted melody.

A whisper beckoned.

#

Arctic – Winter 2010

The Arctic waters shimmered like a dream, weightless and hushed. Pulses of infrared light sliced gently through the deep, brushing across the frozen underside of the ice shelf with surgical precision. Kim drifted behind the luminous sweep, tracking each reflection with breathless intent—as if the light were guiding him through something sacred.

Suspended in the void, he adjusted his visor and made quick notes on his waterproof tablet. Then he signaled Sade to shift to the next testing distance. Ten years as her research assistant had taught him patience—an understanding of her brilliance, her eccentric rhythm, and her unique fluency with the shadows. He protected her because he admired her. But also, because a private burden tethered him quietly to her: a secret he couldn't share, and one she never pressed him to speak aloud.

Their mutual obsession with darkness ran deep—though from divergent origins. Sade's fixation had roots in trauma, but Kim's fascination was born of conscious curiosity. As a boy, he had devoured creation myths from every corner of the globe. Nearly all began in the dark. Not a metaphor—an origin. To Kim, this recurring theme wasn't coincidence but evidence. If all life emerged from the void, then the void must carry secrets. Power. Meaning. And somewhere within it, he hoped to find the truth he'd chased since he was sixteen.

Sade fired another light burst toward the submerged wall.

Kim stared blankly as the stream of particles passed him by—unseen without his visor. Datsapolis tapped his shoulder, gesturing for him to lower it. Once Kim dropped the visor into place, the infrared beam revealed its glowing path—ribbons of light dancing against the ice like ghostly paint. He watched them pulse, then recorded the readings.

Datsapolis—or "Datz" as Sade affectionately called him—was a last-minute addition to the team. A particle tech savant from Greece, he had designed nearly every piece of equipment they now depended on: infrared visors, rebreather units, data-scanning gloves. Burly and excitable, Datz was a whirlwind of enthusiasm with a flair for theatrics. His presence was expensive, but Sade never doubted the return on her investment.

In contrast, Wasi was a quiet storm incarnate. A predator expert with a resume full of classified military ops, he had little interest in light or technology. His concern was survival—and the consequences of drawing attention in the wild. Hired as both consultant and security officer, Wasi was less scientist, more sentinel. Towering at 6'5", built like a Viking, he was an intimidating presence. Yet beneath the glacial exterior lived a thoughtful mind and a depth of insight that tugged at Sade in ways she didn't fully understand.

As the team continued their testing, a low hum rippled through the deep.

Wasi froze.

The vibration climbed up his spine, tripping his instincts and igniting muscle memory. Danger was near—or something that mimicked it.

He scanned the gloom.

A shape emerged—shadowy, slow, and growing. From the depths, a narwhal ascended, its spiraled tusk cutting through the black like a blade. It glided toward

the surface with purpose, using echolocation to find a breathable break in the ice.

Wasi followed its path until the great mammal reached a distant crack in the shelf. It breached smoothly, exhaling in a burst of steam and crystalline spray. Below, the reverberation sounded like hail against a steel drum.

The narwhal took one breath, dove, and continued onward—breaching again, and again, like an ancient god tracing the edge of the frozen world.

Wasi watched until it vanished into the dark—its final ripple disappearing into silence.

#

Above the frozen world, the Arctic wind screamed—a wild sculptor carving frost devils from shards of airborne ice. The landscape lay smothered beneath twilight, silent and stark. No wingbeats. No paws. No breath beyond the wind itself. Winter here wasn't just a season—it was a siege. Empty. Merciless. Waiting.

From a shifting mound of snow, something stirred. A snout broke the crust, then two black, gleaming eyes—wide, searching. The polar bear inhaled sharply, nostrils flaring against the sting of frigid air. Hunger clawed at its gut, old and aching. It needed warmth. Meat. Life.

But the wind held no scent.

So, the bear moved on, pacing beneath the ghost-white ceiling of sky, following the currents with feral intuition. It paused now and then, tilting its head slightly to listen. Beneath the ice, voices echoed songs of survival. Whales sang in long, mournful tones that hummed through the ice like lullabies from a forgotten world. Seals barked and chattered in staccato bursts, skittering along in erratic rhythms that confused the bear's ear. Still, it listened. Calculating. Hoping.

When the gusts returned, they scattered sound like broken glass. The bear turned to its eyes—those ancient lenses sharp enough to read density in the ice. It searched for weakness: thin veils where breath-hungry sea mammals might burst through. Time was short. Fat reserves dwindled. The bear's strength faltered.

Then—*crack.*

The sound of shattering ice halted its steps. Its breath hitched, then came in short, snorting bursts. The wind twisted through its fur as hunger distorted the frozen horizon. Its pupils widened, pulling in light.

A scent.

Blood. Skin. Life.

With a growl more instinct than sound, the bear lunged forward. Its massive paws struck the ice in thunderous rhythm, propelled not by choice—but by the sheer, primal desire for one more day.

#

Hamilton, Montana – 1988

The chamber narrowed and twisted, descending deeper into the belly of the mountain. Soon, Sade was forced to crawl—knees scraping stone, elbows tucked in tight—as the tunnel constricted. With each foot forward, the walls evolved, shedding their jagged skin for something smooth and surreal. Eventually, they were polished to a glass-like finish, slick beneath her fingertips and eerily luminous.

Her breathing grew labored. The oxygen was thinning. She stopped, resting against the wall, chest heaving. When her lungs finally surrendered to calm, she let her hands roam over the surface beside her. It was impossibly smooth—like ancient glacial ice—but

strangely warm. Not stone, not ice. It felt almost molten once, perhaps transfigured by fire into emerald glass. Pressing her nose against its surface, she caught faint glimpses of the bedrock three feet beyond—visible, yet obscured through a smoky jade sheen.

Something about the chamber's texture unsettled her. It didn't belong. Among the craggy chaos of the mountain's natural tunnels, this membrane was deliberate. Designed. A boundary, perhaps—or a cocoon.

Her watch ticked loudly. Time was up.

She aimed her flashlight down the shaft. The tunnel simply stretched on—no edge, no terminus, just endless black. Turning back, she saw the same.

Then her watch alarm chirped. A sharp LED flare burst from the dial, refracted instantly across the glassy walls. Beams fractured into hundreds of shards of light, ricocheting in dizzying directions. Sade gasped, then screamed—the sound ripped out of her throat and echoed violently through the tunnel, cascading into the void like it was being chased.

The brilliance faded.

But the walls around her still pulsed—with light, and something deeper.

#

Arctic – Winter 2010

The research team continued tracing the contours of the frozen ceiling, beams of infrared light dancing along the ice like spectral fingers searching for secrets. Near one of the breathing holes left by the narwhal, Kim hovered patiently, waiting for the next flare of light to appear. Above him, the ice murmured and groaned—and then it roared.

The sound was thunderous, primal. Snow-driven wind clawed across the surface, and the entire shelf seemed to shudder. Wasi, pulled from his focused descent into the abyss, spun toward Kim just in time to see a shadow—a hulking, surging figure—bearing down on the breach hole.

"Kim!" Wasi shouted, but the researcher was too absorbed in his readings, his visor dimmed and unaware.

Wasi darted through the cold dark, cutting water with urgency—but it was already too late.

With a deafening crash, a polar bear exploded through the fragile skin of ice, its massive weight collapsing the shell and plunging it into the sea. The force sucked shards of ice, tools, and Kim himself toward the beast's gaping maw.

A swipe of the bear's paw shattered Kim's auger mask, sending him reeling. The polar bear seized Kim by the thigh, hauling his limp body effortlessly out of the water. Below, red clouds bloomed into the frigid sea—nothing remained but a spectral echo of Kim's presence.

Wasi and the other divers broke the surface seconds too late.

Wasi clawed onto the shelf, yanked off his mask, and scanned the terrain. A trail of bloodied ice led away—northward, across the sheet. In the distance, the surface team's headlights flickered like fireflies scattered against a velvet night. Nearly two miles away. Twenty minutes under ideal conditions.

Wasi wrenched out a short-wave radio, fingers numb and clumsy. "Emergency," he barked. "We need backup. One down. Bear moving north. I'm in pursuit."

Then he ran. No hesitation. Just hunger—for retribution, for survival, for Kim.

Through wind and darkness, he bounded across ice like a beast reborn, covering distance with raw, feral

determination. Eventually, Wasi crouched behind a heaved mass of whale ice, lungs burning, senses alight. He inhaled—and tasted blood.

Carefully, he leaned out.

The bear was feeding.

Kim's skull was locked in its jaws. Bone cracked like permafrost. The creature chewed slowly, savoring the kill. Wasi w beneath boots. Wasi watched, spellbound and helpless. He knew predator behavior well, but never like this—never in the middle of the ritual, never at this distance. It was grotesque, but still beautiful.

Then the sound of snowmobiles buzzed through the howl of the storm. Gas fumes curled through the cold, snapping at the bear's concentration.

It dragged Kim's body by a leg, unwilling to surrender the kill.

A rifle fired.

The bear dropped the body, eyes now wild and aware—flashing hatred toward the oncoming machines. It snarled, muscles tense, calculating. These were its enemies. Humans. Interlopers.

A second shot rang out.

#

Hamilton, Montana – 1988

"Shit, that scared me," Sade laughed nervously, trying to calm the throb of adrenaline now pulsing in her neck. The burst of brilliance from her watch alarm had stunned her—tiny stars still danced behind her eyelids. She shielded her eyes, fumbling clumsily with the strap to silence the maddening chirp.

Her sigh echoed softly in the emerald chamber.

Time was up.

With a mixture of disappointment and reluctant acceptance, she turned toward the entrance. Colors pulsed in her vision—blue, yellow, phantom afterimages burned into her retinas. She shifted her weight, knees clicking as she turned to crawl back the way she came.

Then it hit.

A sound—low, primal, impossible. Not a growl. Not an animal.

It was the groan of earth collapsing, a voice from the mountain's gut, raw and ancient. She'd heard that sound once before—during the demolition of the mine next door. It wasn't something you forget.

The walls began to tremble.

Sade bolted, knees scraping, her palms slipping over the polished stone. Her jeans tore. The tunnel shrieked with splintering cracks, and her body became a blur of motion and instinct. Blood smeared behind her in streaks of panic.

Then—a flicker of hope.

The chamber's exit appeared like salvation, just yards ahead.

She smiled.

And then the earth betrayed her.

With a sudden, seismic lurch, the ground gave way. A massive space opened beneath her, and she dropped—swallowed by the mountain itself. Her scream poured into the void, but there was no echo. The silence swallowed everything. Even sound.

She fell for seconds—or hours. Time dissolved.

And then—impact.

The breath left her lungs in a rush, her chest convulsing in shock. Her flashlight skidded nearby, bouncing once before settling dimly in the dust.

She crawled to it. Her trembling fingers wrapped around the grip as she scanned her surroundings.

A cavern.

Wide. Ancient. Silent.

Multiple shafts yawned around her, mouths of rock leading deeper into the unknown. No cliff beneath her now—just ground. But the air was hot. Wet. Thick. The darkness pressed in, not passively, but actively—like it was watching. Advancing.

She leaned against the wall, trying to anchor herself in logic. Two hours. Her grandmother would call her parents if she wasn't home by three. She just had to wait it out. Stay calm.

The flashlight flickered.

She breathed deeper.

It dimmed.

"It's fine," she whispered to herself.

Then, with an awful finality, it went dark

#

Arctic – Winter 2010

The crack of the rifle split the frigid air and slammed Kim's body back into motion. He spasmed violently, as though yanked from the edge of death by invisible wires. His lungs expelled pure horror, shrieking like a banshee across the icy tundra. The sound was sharp, jagged, and unrelenting—so piercing that it made the rescue team flinch on instinct.

But it did something else, too. It stirred the bear.

The monstrous creature, blood already slick across its muzzle, lowered its head, unable to resist the invitation to feed. It locked its jaws around Kim's neck with a final, brutal intention. Kim's scream pitched upward—terror, desperation, agony—all boiled into a single note.

Then the third rifle shot.

Silence fell.

The bear crumpled beside Kim with a seismic thud, lifeless and looming even in death. Snow and blood mixed beneath its belly like ink bleeding into paper.

Wasi approached cautiously, the rifle still warm in his hand. He studied the slain beast—its mass, its quietness, its tragedy. Something in him shifted. There was grief there, buried beneath his stoicism. The bear was just doing what it knew, just as Wasi often did. Predator to predator. He wondered: was this his own fate, foreshadowed in blood and ice?

The rescue team arrived in a flurry of urgency. Snowmobiles howled, medics leapt, and a wave of activity surrounded Kim's shredded body. His chest barely moved, face pale, trachea shattered, deep cuts marking his scalp like battle scars. He wasn't breathing.

Sade and Datz skidded to a halt at the scene, breath fogging in the chill. Sade dropped to her knees, her face tight with emotion she refused to unleash. Not yet. Not here.

"I need an airway," the medic barked.

A tube was handed over, followed by swift, trained movements—tube in, bag up, compressions down. Kim convulsed against them, his eyes rolling. His body resisted rescue.

"Hold him down!" the medic snapped.

Sade peeled off her gloves and tried, but her strength wasn't enough. She shouted for help, her voice raw.

"Wasi! Get over here!"

He turned, reluctant to abandon the bear, but he saw Sade's desperation and moved.

Kim thrashed violently. Something was wrong.

"The bag's not working," the assistant muttered.

"The airway's blocked."

“No,” the medic insisted. “He's intubated.”

Sade watched Kim closely, saw the bruising in his eyes—the bursting vessels, the strain. She laid a hand on the medic’s arm.

“Stop,” she said quietly. “He’s drowning.”

The medic frowned. “What?”

Sade’s voice was firm, urgent. “The bear knocked off his mask underwater. He lost consciousness mid-dive. His body still thinks it’s drowning.”

She explained fast: a protective reaction, the closing of airways, the illusion of submersion.

“If you push air through right now, you’ll rupture his throat,” she warned.

“Then what do we do?”

Sade didn’t wait. She wiped the blood from Kim’s mouth, held his head steady as the medic applied the collar. She leaned close, face-to-face with his half-aware stare.

“Carl… it’s Eisla,” she whispered. “You’re on the surface. You’re not drowning. You're safe. Do you hear me?”

His gaze flicked. His limbs quieted. His breath stuttered—but didn’t return.

Sade gently stroked his hair, voice soothing as moonlight.

“You’re safe. You’re not drowning. I need you to relax. Can you show me you understand?”

Kim blinked.

She smiled, eyes glistening now—but controlled. “Okay,” she said softly, nodding to the medic.

They tried again.

The first push of air failed. Kim’s chest stayed flat.

The second—

A twitch.

Then movement.

His chest rose, fell. Crimson air gurgled behind the mask, grim but vital.

"Thank God," the medic breathed.

Kim was lifted carefully onto a backboard. Wasi cleared the sled, and the team worked in rhythm, sweat and snow mixing under frantic hands. Datz climbed aboard last, steadying Kim as the snowmobile roared back toward base.

Behind them, the ice held the silence. Only the polar bear remained, a shadow of instinct turned monument to survival.

#

University of Montana, Missoula – 2001

The University Center Complex pulsed with first-week energy. Students darted between kiosks, clutching overpriced textbooks and lattes like lifelines. Anxiety hung in the air—sharp, caffeinated, and unmistakably academic.

Nestled near a sunlit potted palm, Sade sat in silent contrast to the frenzy. Her pen moved with elegant precision across a page of quantum physics notes, as though she were immune to the chaos. That quiet focus—magnetic and undisturbed—caught the eye of Kim, a wide-eyed freshman, newly uprooted and visibly out of sync with his surroundings.

He drifted toward her as if drawn by a subtle gravitational pull. When he reached her, he simply stood there, motionless, staring. Sade looked up, smiled—a calm, unreadable gesture—and returned to her work.

Kim remained.

He hadn't intended to stay so long, but her lack of reaction froze him in place. She didn't dismiss him,

engage him, or even acknowledge the awkwardness. His thoughts twisted into knots. Was he invisible? Was this some kind of silent challenge? He tried to make sense of her serenity and his own rising discomfort.

Then—impact.

A blur of motion, a passing student, and in an instant, Kim's arms were empty. His books resonated against the tile, echoing louder than it should have through the building. Heads turned. Conversations paused.

Sade flinched, jolted out of her academic trance. She met Kim's panicked gaze. For a suspended moment, time itself held its breath. The complex stilled, as if waiting for her to respond and reset the rhythm of the day.

She moved fluidly to the floor, kneeling beside the scattered pages of ancient mysteries and cosmic origin stories. Her fingers traced the covers as she gathered them: *The Book of the Dead, The Creation Myths of the Incas and Mayas, The Big Bang Theory.* The titles whispered of someone searching for meaning.

She glanced up, eyes thoughtful. "Interesting collection," she murmured, handing the stack back.

Then, without another word, she reclaimed her seat, like a dancer returning to the final pose of a routine only she understood—leaving Kim at the edge of something he couldn't yet define.

#

Arctic – Winter 2010

Just as the team prepared to depart, Sade caught the lead medic by the sleeve and leaned in, her voice low and deliberate. "Don't alert Fish and Game yet. Not until Medivac confirms Kim's transfer to Anchorage. They'll

need to know about the bear—but later, when the priority is no longer Kim."

The medic nodded. "Understood, Doc."

With Kim bundled onto the sled and Datz riding point, the snowmobiles tore away into the white. The quiet that followed was brutal. Sade and Wasi stood behind, alone now with the massive bear's body, discarded equipment, and a single idle vehicle. Ice nipped at their joints, creeping up their clothes as if the cold was trying to make statues of them.

They didn't speak.

They didn't need to.

This death mattered.

The polar bear wasn't just a casualty—it was a rare specimen, a powerful enigma frozen at their feet. Both Sade and Wasi understood the magnitude. They also knew how quickly that opportunity would slip away. It was illegal to harvest a polar bear in this sector of the Arctic, and Fish and Game would be on their way to retrieve the carcass. Time was the enemy.

But locked within the bear's towering frame—between 1,200 and 1,500 pounds of sinew, instinct, and evolutionary precision—were clues. Answers. The data they'd been chasing for months could lie in its musculature, in the biochemistry of its survival, in the very fur that bristled in death.

They had only minutes.

The snow sighed quietly as the world held its breath.

#

Hamilton, Montana – 1988

On the surface, darkness is never absolute. Moonlight weaves through clouds, stars glint from cosmic edges, and artificial bulbs flicker behind windows like guardian fireflies. Shadows there are gentle—imperfect, interrupted.

But beneath the Earth's skin, in the belly of stone and soil, darkness becomes something else entirely.

It is whole.

Here, there is no guidance from sky or machine. No orientation. No shape to your surroundings. Above, below, ahead, behind—everything vanishes into suffocating black. It isn't simply unseen. It's unknowable.

This terrifying truth gripped Sade just as a low hum awakened the silence. Something was moving.

A stream of fluid crept through the chamber, slow and deliberate, groaning as it slithered past jagged rock. Cold seeped into her skin. It brushed her fingertips—then her leg. Thick. Slippery. Curious.

It tasted her.

Sade stumbled backward, scrambling for higher ground, but the walls of the cave closed in. The liquid filled every recess, spreading like sentient ink across a page. She was pinned now, cornered by liquid and stone.

She screamed.

Her voice sliced through the silence, raw and sharp as shattered glass—until it didn't. Something in her throat gave way, and pain flooded her neck. Her cry collapsed into choking silence.

Clutching her throat, panic blooming behind her ribs, she sensed motion.

From the far side of the cavern, something emerged—an amorphous entity drenched in liquid

shadow. It swam with purpose, pulling treachery behind it like a cloak.

Desperate, Sade reached for her watch, her thumb smashing the light switch. The LED flared to life, cutting through the black.

The chamber lit up in stuttering fragments, revealing stalactites like teeth and walls smeared with mineral decay. A ripple passed her waist—swift and deliberate—leaving a wake that tugged at her knees.

She peered down, trying to locate the source.

The liquid resisted her gaze.

Its surface shimmered, reflecting the light in mocking denial. With a surge of breath, she plunged beneath. Her limbs flailed through the viscous dark, searching for what shared this tomb. Her pulse thundered.

She found nothing.

Surfacing, she twisted in place, scanning for an exit.

Then her beam caught them.

Eyes.

Not beastly, not monstrous—but human-sized and disturbingly still. They hovered, refracting light like wet glass.

Sade's mouth opened in shock, but sound failed her. Instead, only foam—dark pink and frothing—spilled past her lips. It engulfed her, curling around her chest, her limbs, her mind.

Then the water took her.

#

Arctic – Winter 2010

With the wind screaming around them like a pack of wolves and ice biting at their gear, Sade glanced at the hulking mass beside them and muttered through smirking lips, “Tell me, Wasi… how in hell are we supposed to get that back to camp?”

#

CHAPTER TWO: NOT QUITE LEGAL, BUT INTERESTING

Arctic – Winter 2010

The snowmobile roared across the frozen tundra like a beast enraged, its engine straining against the brutal wind and the heavy load strapped to its rear. Shards of ice whipped at the two doctors riding it—Sade and Wasi—cutting into their gear, stinging exposed flesh, reminding them of the razor-edged world they were racing through. Far ahead, the lights of base camp shimmered dimly on the horizon, a pale glow in the vast Arctic gloom. Barrow, the nearest city, lay fifty miles west—irrelevant and unreachable now.

Neither spoke.

There was no point. The blizzard made communication impossible, even with headsets. Still, each knew what came next. Wasi would prep the lab, secure their sample. Sade would ready the sonogram, organize her tools, and keep nosy team members well out of the way.

As they reached the camp, Wasi steered toward the back—a low, isolated structure not built for secrecy but suitable in a pinch. Sade leapt off, slammed her fist against the access panel, and the bay door groaned open. Wasi drove straight in, snowmobile and all.

Once inside, Sade sealed the door. The building was dark, windowless, and freezing. Ideal, in a twisted sort of way.

They moved fast—stripping out of their soaked suits, converting their breathless adrenaline into swift action. The bear's body, motionless and massive, was soon hoisted via harness and weighed before being gently settled onto a reinforced exam table.

“It’s light,” Wasi said gravely.

“How much underweight?” Sade asked, already logging results.

“Twenty percent, minimum,” Wasi replied, pulling back the bear’s lip to examine pale, receded gums. “Dehydrated. Severely. Loose skin, diminished musculature, shrunken liver.”

“Hibernation?” Sade guessed aloud.

“Could be. It's been a hard season.”

“Blood samples?”

“On it.”

Wasi peeled away his remaining gear, revealing a rash blooming across his shoulders. He scratched it absently, pulled on a lab coat, slipped into gloves, and leaned over the bear with a syringe. He extracted vials of viscous blood, each darker than the last.

Meanwhile, Sade adjusted into her lab attire and wheeled the sonogram into position. The bear’s thin frame offered little resistance—perfect for imaging. She powered up the machine.

“Ready,” she said.

Wasi stored the blood samples and joined her at the monitor. What they saw wasn’t what they’d hoped for. The liver was misshapen, stunted.

“Tumors?” Wasi asked.

“None. It’s clean,” Sade replied, tilting the wand for clarity. “So?”

“It was starving to death.”

Sade glanced at the clock. “Damn it. Fish and Game’ll be here any minute. Let’s get enzyme samples.”

She guided the needle deep—past fur, through skin and muscle—and into the frail liver. Vial after vial emerged. Wasi labeled and packed each one quickly.

Commotion outside signaled their time had run out.

“Fridge,” Sade ordered, as she cleaned blood from the bear’s neck and fluffed its fur to hide any evidence of intrusion.

A loud knock rattled the bay door. Sade nodded to Wasi. He opened it.

Two Fish and Game officers stepped in, flanked by Datz.

“All good in here?” Datz asked, eyes scanning for secrets.

“Just grabbing data for the tagging project,” Sade lied easily, gesturing to the tag on the bear’s ear.

“Looks rough,” Officer Nanoq muttered as he inspected the body.

“It’s starved,” Sade offered, pointing to the signs of emaciation Wasi had noted.

Nanoq knelt, his fingers brushing the bear’s neck. He paused.

“Funny,” he said. “This wound looks more like a dart puncture than a bullet hole.”

“You’re saying we darted it?” Sade snapped.

Wasi stepped in before the tension became violent. “We were underwater when it broke through the ice and dragged our teammate out. We responded.”

Nanoq looked him over, chest deflating slightly.

“Can I speak to the victim?” he asked, pulling out a notebook.

“Not easily,” Sade replied sharply. “The bear crushed his throat. He's being evac’d.”

The officer turned to see the mangled body being loaded onto a helicopter.

“We've got photos,” Wasi added calmly, guiding him toward the exit.

“Need help with the bear?” Wasi offered.

“No. My crew can handle it.” Nanoq tipped his hat. “Pleasure, Doc.”

Sade didn’t respond. She watched silently as the bear was taken away—her one chance at studying a rare specimen now locked behind regulations and suspicion. It felt like a theft. A waste.

And somewhere in her mind, the memory that started this obsession with Arctic predators flickered back to life, whispering that this was far from over.

#

Antarctica - January 1913

What began as a bold journey into the polar wilds—driven by curiosity, grit, and a yearning for triumph—soon unraveled into one of the bleakest tales in Arctic exploration.

Xavier Mertz and his two companions set off with high hopes, accompanied by fifty sturdy Greenland sled dogs bred for endurance and battle-hardened against the cold. But the ice had other plans.

Early on the expedition, disaster struck. Belgrave Ninnis, along with the best-trained dogs and nearly all the team's food supplies, vanished into a yawning crevasse. One moment he was part of the team. The next, he was swallowed whole by the ice, leaving Mertz and Douglas Mawson scrambling to survive.

Their odds were grim. Three hundred miles of frozen wasteland stood between them and any hope of rescue. Still, they pressed forward, driven by desperation and dwindling strength.

The trek devastated their remaining dogs. One by one, they collapsed—too weak to continue. Necessity overtook compassion, and the fallen dogs became food. Their flesh was coarse and sinewy, barely edible even when boiled. But their livers… those offered warmth,

richness, and an illusion of sustenance. The men consumed them gratefully. However, they didn't realize they were consuming poison.

Weeks later, the symptoms emerged. It began subtly—cramping, nausea, vision loss. Then came the cascade of signs: dramatic weight loss, brittle hair falling in clumps, and the slow failure of organs. The culprit? Vitamin A toxicity from the dogs' livers.

Mertz's condition deteriorated rapidly.

By January 1913, just under two months into the mission, he succumbed. Frozen in time, his death marked the final unraveling of what was supposed to be a noble adventure.

#

Arctic Research Center – Winter 2010

It was the first fatal case on record—hypervitaminosis A brought on by consuming the livers of polar predators. The memory of that doomed expedition haunted Sade as she studied the sonogram images glowing on the screen. The polar bear's liver, dark and distorted, held secrets she was determined to crack.

She knew the science well: Arctic predators like polar bears stored Vitamin A at levels far beyond human tolerance. That capacity granted them heightened vision—adapted not just to survive in darkness, but to perceive more of the spectrum than humans ever could. In the white wilderness, seeing the unseen had kept them alive.

For Sade, this was more than military funding and biochemical curiosity.

It was personal.

While global defense agencies pumped resources into her research, hoping to push the human body beyond its natural threshold—to give soldiers superior night vision—Sade's obsession came from somewhere deeper. She wasn't interested in tactical advantages. She wanted to peel back the dark and see what it was hiding.

The science was alluring but unforgiving.

Yes, increasing Vitamin A intake could sharpen human vision in low light. But there was a biological ceiling. The human body lacked some unnamed molecular safeguard—a buffer that Arctic animals possessed. Without it, too much Vitamin A triggered a devastating chain reaction. The liver's stellate cells, designed to store retinol, ruptured under overload. The result: toxicity that spread like wildfire.

The symptoms were unmistakable. First came the nausea. Then visual distortions, skin decay, and renal collapse. In the case that haunted her most, it ended in death—slow, brutal, and irreversible.

And yet, here she was, staring into the ghost-shaped shadows of the bear's malfunctioning liver, chasing an answer that might one day change human vision… or destroy it.

#

Wasi's gloved hands moved with precision, threading vials into the centrifuge and lining up samples under the fluorescent hum of the lab. He spun the blood, layer by layer pulling apart its secrets. Beside him, the serum analyzer hummed through its biochemical assessment, parsing the liver enzymes extracted from the polar bear. Though the lab thrummed with equipment, it was a room wrapped in silence. Sade and Wasi remained

locked in their own quiet minds, chasing answers they weren't sure existed.

Sade sat across the room, comparing new data to archival charts from a bear once housed at the Anchorage Zoo—an animal treated for a liver tumor, but otherwise healthy. That bear's enzyme levels had long served as her baseline. Through partnerships with facilities around the country, she'd built a library of biological data ethically harvested through routine health exams—never through distress. She believed in science, but not in cruelty.

Now, she hoped the comparison between that healthy liver and the emaciated specimen before them might expose the mystery. Some fingerprint in the enzyme or protein ratios that would explain how Arctic predators tolerated, even thrived on, Vitamin A levels that would poison a human.

"How's it coming?" she asked, approaching the workstation.

Wasi gave a tired nod. "Almost there. A few more minutes."

A machine chirped its completion, winding to a halt. Wasi retrieved one vial, pipetted a sample onto a slide, and initiated the sequencing. The results blinked onto the monitor—protein concentrations, enzyme activity, retinol traces.

Sade leaned in. "What do we have?"

He squinted, overlaying the starved bear's data with the healthy one. "Retinol's low. Expected, given the condition."

"Anything missing?"

"I'm not sure…" He layered the graphs and frowned, frustration seeping in. "Everything tracks with the malnourishment. Nothing unexpected."

Sade pushed further. “We know high Vitamin A concentrations correlate with extended light spectrum sensitivity. Malnourished bears lose that edge.”

“Yes.”

“So, something in the body must be metabolizing the excess Vitamin A into a compound that sharpens vision. If it’s not in the liver, maybe it’s circulating. What did the plasma show?”

Wasi rubbed his eyes and scanned the latest report. “Normal… normal… hang on.” He froze.

“What?” Sade asked, alert now.

He highlighted a spike. “Hydroxylated PCB metabolite—look at this. In the healthy bear, it's nearly double what we found here.”

Sade’s mind raced. “Isn’t that the compound that binds to transthyretin?”

“Yes,” Wasi said, a flicker of excitement returning. He sifted through a decade's worth of sample reports, pulling up graphs from previous studies.

But then confusion crossed his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“This elevation—it’s rare. None of the other samples show it. Why would it be present in that bear but not the rest?”

Sade grabbed the report and examined the specimen's notes. Her eyes landed on the detail. “She was a nursing mother.”

They both paused.

“What if the mechanism responsible for metabolizing Vitamin A into a sensory-enhancing compound isn’t enzymatic… but immunochemical?” Sade asked. “Passed through colostrum. If so, her body would've ramped up the production while nursing.”

“Which would drop off once she weaned…”

Sade nodded slowly. “And that compound—it could be fat-soluble, absorbed by cubs through her milk. A starter culture for building tolerance.”

They sat in silence, ideas bouncing between them like lightning. Wasi leaned back.

“Possible,” he said. “So how do we test it?”

“We need colostrum,” she said. “From a nursing polar bear.”

Wasi sighed. “Know anyone?”

“No.”

Just then, the lab intercom buzzed. “Dr. Sade, call from Anchorage General—line one.”

Her face tightened. “It must be about Kim,” she whispered, disappearing with the receiver.

Wasi stayed by the door, listening. Her voice on the other side was soft—heavy with meaning.

He leaned his forehead against the cool frame, reflecting. Kim wasn’t a close friend, but he was solid. Trustworthy. After-hours beers. No history shared, but no awkward silence either. Just mutual respect. Now, in the shadow of death, Wasi wondered—was there family? Beliefs? Final wishes?

Sade would know.

He hoped she’d speak for him. Not just as a scientist. But as someone who understood what silence could mean.

#

Hamilton, Montana – 1988

Sade drifted through the frigid, ink-like liquid—adrift between consciousness and oblivion. At times, fear held her in a vice. The cold gnawed at her bones, and isolation pressed down like weighted stone. Yet in scattered moments, she felt something unfamiliar: warmth. It circled her body like invisible arms, buoying her in the endless dark.

Her strength ebbed, surrendering to paralysis. The cold tugged at her soul, a persistent whisper coaxing her downward into the abyss. Just as her awareness began to flicker, her eyes fluttered open.

A figure hovered beside her.

Human. Watching.

She couldn't cry out. Couldn't move. Every fiber of her being screamed for release, for some gesture of life—but her body remained a shell.

And yet, she felt safe.

His presence was soothing and still. She could barely distinguish his form—only the silhouette of a body and the strange scent that lingered in the fluid: something like salt and smoke. His gaze touched her like candlelight, steady but unreachable.

Then the sensation shifted.

She was rising—gently, as though lifted by invisible wings. Her hand moved, trembling, reaching for the phantom. She longed to brush against his skin, just to prove he existed. But before her fingers could close the distance, gravity reclaimed her.

She plummeted.

Again, she was alone.

The cold swallowed her, and despair crept into the space where hope had flickered. Sade shut her eyes and begged for the darkness to take her fully, for the fear to

dissolve into finality. But her plea was denied—not with peace, but with chaos.

She tumbled into a dreamscape, saturated with everything she feared most. Sensations pulsed through the void: raw sound, creeping pain, glimpses of the figure who had held her and then let go. It was torment wrapped in memory, looping endlessly. Her spirit circled indignity like a tethered ghost.

Until, without warning, her eyes opened.

Light greeted her.

But it was not salvation.

It was merely the beginning of the next descent.

#

Arctic Research Center – Winter 2010

Wasi heard the soft click of the receiver being placed back in its cradle, but Sade didn't return.

Curious, he glanced toward the portal in the interior door—and froze.

She was slumped against the wall, her hands covering her face, her body folded in on itself like a breaking wave. In that moment, Sade wasn't the resolute scientist, the unflinching problem-solver he knew. She was raw. Unshielded. Human.

Wasi backed away, unnerved by the intimacy of the moment—as though he'd intruded on something private, sacred. He'd never seen her like this. Vulnerable. And the discomfort it stirred in him was matched by an immediate resolution: He would act as if he hadn't seen a thing.

Without a sound, he returned to the workstation, refocusing on the data. He scribbled notes about the enzyme profiles and quietly chased the leads they'd

uncovered that night, as if grief hadn't crept into the room.

Minutes passed.

Then she re-entered.

Her eyes were puffy, the redness unmistakable, but Wasi kept his gaze locked on the screen, giving her space. Sade darted through the lab with erratic energy—like a hummingbird that had lost its rhythm—anxious, grieving, determined not to fall apart where someone could see.

"I called in the plane," she said, voice taut with emotion. "Kim's going into surgery first thing tomorrow."

She turned.

Wasi sat still, tension pooling in his shoulders as he felt her eyes pressing into him.

He swallowed. "How long will we be gone?"

"A few days," she replied. "Maybe a week… maybe longer. We'll play it by ear."

She walked out.

And Wasi sat in the silence she left behind, wondering just how far this detour would take them—from the lab, from the research, and from the part of themselves they'd never meant to reveal.

#