



50
Years

RICH SHAPERO

WILD ANIMUS

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Rich Shapero



HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media
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Also by Rich Shapero

Arms from the Sea

The Hope We Seek

Too Far

Prologue

The Alaskan forest rose steadily, patched with muskegs and trenched by rivers. Ridges and crags broke through, and at the heads of valleys, glaciers appeared. Out of this confusion, Mt. Wrangell's giant white dome towered into the midday sky, icy curve glinting, a thousand blue hatches splitting its flanks as if something were stirring within. A storm was sweeping from the south, and in that quarter gray clouds cloaked the lowlands. The mountain's summit seemed smooth from a distance, broken only by a few points of rock. Closer, the rocks became the rims of three craters, and from the northernmost coils of steam rose. In human terms, the crater was huge—three-quarters of a mile across—dwarfing the yellow helicopter that circled above it.

The chopper tossed in the high winds. The rotor faltered and a downdraft sent it careening to the right, banking around a fumarole rising from the crater floor. Billows blew past the cockpit's curved glass. Inside, the engine's pulse was thunderous. A state trooper with a headset was speaking over the intercom to the pilot beside him.

"There's blood on his chest—"

The trooper choked as sulphur fumes invaded the cabin and the windows turned white. The intercom silence was broken by the sobs of a young woman behind them. Raising his arm to breathe through his coat sleeve, the trooper watched the pilot's hand tremble the collective. The pilot's feet were pedaling, fighting for control as they circled the steam. Again the rotor hesitated, the helicopter's nose dipped. When the pilot tried to master it, the machine bucked, instrument needles quivering. He glanced to the south. The tide of gray storm clouds was moving swiftly, obscuring forests and rocky spurs.

"Only a few minutes left," the pilot warned.

The trooper nodded. To remain longer would be fatal. The storm would seal over the lowlands, cutting off their retreat, and they'd be stranded on this white island, circling above it until their fuel ran out. "Miss?" He turned with a regretful expression.

Lindy Altman regarded him mutely, her cheeks washed with tears. Beneath the band of her headset, a star-shaped scar flamed from her hairline. Rescue paraphernalia was piled beside her. The windshield cleared as the chopper came around

the fumarole. Her fingers found the pendant on her sternum, lifting it to her lips. She kissed it as she peered down. The crater's rim rose to rocky peaks in places, the snowy interior tumbled with ice and crossed by blue rifts. Solfatara rose from caves and pits, staining the snow lemon, and in a dozen places the crater's bowl was streaked with ash. At the base of an obelisk of ice, on a steep white slope gleaming with refrozen meltwater, a figure lay twisted. His head was dark and strangely enlarged, and his chest was splashed with blood. One leg verged the funnel of a steam vent, and the white tatters of his legging, eaten by volcanic acids, were flapping in the winds.

Lindy stared through the glass, unprepared despite everything that had happened. The memories she had let crowd her mind vanished, and the last embers of hope blinked out. The chopper lurched and her shoulders came forward. Her gaze was fixed on him, trying to say goodbye. Then a veil of mist intervened and all she could see was the point of the obelisk, shining and corniced with rime.

The pilot clenched his jaw and budged the collective. The chopper lifted its nose to clear the crater rim. A sudden downdraft threatened to dash them against the rock. At the last moment, they were boosted on an upswell and passed over. Lindy could see the trail of prints leading to the cauldron. She craned to keep his track in view until the waves of loose snow racing across the summit obscured it.

In the buffets, she heard his voice—a frightening remembrance—his invocations heartfelt, frenzied with emotion.

They banked to the west and fell down the side of the dome, racing the advancing storm. Crevasses glided beneath them. Swathes of mist sheared past.

“Hang on,” the pilot said. The intercom crackled like a foretoken of atmospherics to come. They hit a bump, rolled into a roil of gray cloud, then plunged through a tear. The vista blew open.

“There’s the Chetaslina,” the trooper said with relief.

To Lindy, the dark spurs and rolling lowlands waiting below were like a world in ruins at the bottom of the sea.



The Ram

One

A canister hit the asphalt thirty feet from Sam Altman, and white smoke coiled from its top. Waking from his reverie, he came to a halt—a six-foot statue with shoulder-length hair, oversize shirt and burgundy bell bottoms. As the smoke spread, his gray-green eyes watched the students scatter. The air was pulsing violently around him. Sam lifted his head and saw a drab helicopter hovering toward him like a giant insect, spotting him through the trees with glass eyes. The helicopter tipped its aureole and drummed over him, unknotting a scarf of white fog from its side. Sam turned, hearing the cries of alarm and seeing the panic behind him.

Hundreds of students were racing from all directions, converging on Sather Gate, trying to leave the Berkeley campus. In the courtyard below the student union, they were racing

toward the stores on Bancroft Way. On his right, they poured into Sproul Plaza, shouting and shielding their faces as they hurried past. Sam's eyes stung. His lids were slitting. He drew a disbelieving breath and choked on it. Tear gas.

A month before, radicals had squatted on a university parking lot, laying sod and planting trees. When the National Guard arrived to evict the squatters from "People's Park," demonstrations started. The government was retaliating. Facing forward, Sam joined the crowd leaving campus, laughing at the absurdity of his circumstance. He cared nothing for the Park or the radicals, or California's belligerent governor. They were turning the university into a war zone, and somehow he'd landed in the middle of it.

His eyes seared. His lips scorched, and the air was like fire in his throat, as if he'd thrust his head in a furnace. The way forward blurred. He could see moving bodies, bright areas, pools of shadow. He reached his hand out.

Another hand appeared, brushing his own. It hung before him like a flesh-colored bird lost in a cloud. Then it sank. He clasped it, feeling thin fingers, soft and feminine, stiff with fear. A girl, gasping for breath. He continued forward, taking her with him.

The smoke thinned. Through his smeared vision, Sam saw a line of soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder in the street. Their eyes were goggled beneath olive crowns, the black snouts of their gas masks protruding, long hoses coiling down. Each held a rifle with a bayonet pointed, while behind them, a convoy of trucks was parked. Beyond the cordon, the streets were

crowded with troops and vehicles. He felt his companion falter, but he held her hand tightly and hurried toward the line.

As they approached the gap between two soldiers, one turned. His bayonet shifted, its blade two feet from the girl's chest. Sam jerked her behind him, facing the soldier with an angry look. The man mumbled an apology, turned his rifle aside and let them pass.

She cried out as they reached the sidewalk. Through his burning squint, Sam saw her vaguely—blonde, maybe five-six, in a brown vest and a green skirt. She made a sound of gratitude and pulled her hand away.

"I can't see," she said, touching her eyes.

"We need to wash them out." Sam started down the block. She followed.

He wove through the crowd, coughing as he went. As he turned down a walkway, he felt her hand again, taking his. He led her around a corner into a burger joint, stumbling among the tables, nearly tipping one over. Down a hall, he fumbled for the men's room door, opened it and pulled her in with him.

Sam turned on the tap and splashed water in his face. She bumped against him and did the same. The stinging subsided. He straightened and grabbed paper towels from the dispenser. He passed a wad to her, then held a handful over his eyes, hearing her muffled breath beside him. It was a fantasy from his childhood—in the bathroom with a girl, and the adults didn't know.

He drew the towels away. Through the resolving blur, he saw blonde hair divided in the middle of her crown. A

pyramid of high forehead. Cheeks bounded by sickle-shaped locks that pricked her chin. Her eyes were blue, fixed on him with the gravest stare he'd ever seen. He waited for her to bow her head, to turn, to laugh—but she didn't flinch. What made those great gulfs of eyes? And how could she invite a stranger to fathom them? Sam gazed deeper, seeing the sides of rugged canyons, the dark drop-offs of a different world. A hidden joy flickered in the depths, burning amid a consuming sorrow, and as he focused on that brightness, it blazed up. Without thinking, his heart went out to her. There was no foundation here, only a desperate longing for one.

"Are you a part of . . ." Sam gestured toward the bathroom door. He meant to ask whether she was a protester, but before he could rephrase the question, she shook her head.

"I feel like I know you," he said.

"I understand your sadness," she replied.

"Sadness?" He realized the cause of her confusion and laughed. He'd made the same mistake, reading a chasm of grief into her red eyes and wet cheeks.

She smiled, willing to give the riot gas credit. But her look left open the possibility that through their tears something had been shared. "You'll find your way," she said.

Sam shied from her gaze, discomposed by the thought that the sorrow he'd imagined was a mirror of his own troubled state.

She turned to put the towel in the trash, and he saw the underside of her breast through the armhole of her leather vest. Then she swung the door open and strode out.

He followed. She moved through the burger joint with a jaunty stride, confidence mixed with animal posturing. But it was the buoyancy of childhood in her gait that spoke loudest to him. He felt boyish himself.

She paused on the sidewalk, looking across the street as if she was unaware he was still behind her. He saw her frame clearly now, narrow-waisted and curvy, her sleek calves and thighs cased in chocolate tights. The traffic was frozen, drivers watching the students collect on Telegraph Avenue. She left the curb, threading between the cars. He followed, coming up to her on the far side.

You'll find your way, she'd said. It was true, Sam thought. He was lost, and it was visible to a total stranger. But the moment they'd shared—there was more to it than that. They had some kind of understanding. He couldn't divine its source, but he could feel it. She was watching him out of the corner of her eye.

"Can I call you?" he said.

She recoiled as if his eyes were flames that might burn her. Then she nodded.

The crowd was thick with coughing students. Demonstrators with black armbands were arguing with police in blue jump suits. Sam felt in his pocket and found a pen. "I don't have anything to write on."

She shook her head. Neither did she.

A group of protesters barged up Telegraph, shouting and forcing people off the curb. She was sideswiped, elbowed into the crowd. Sam lunged, circled her with his arm and pulled her across the sidewalk into the corner smoke shop.

He reached for a magazine with white on the cover, put a dollar on the counter and turned back, handing the pen and magazine over without looking at her. She wrote her name down and was halfway through her number when she stopped and raised her eyes, as if she was unsure that what she'd seen was really there. He gazed at her full in the face, and the power that leaped between them made the pen point tear the cover. She tightened her grip and completed the number.

He pushed the door open and they stepped back into the crowd. She handed him the magazine and pen.

"I'm Sam," he said.

"Hello Sam." She smiled, fear edging her eyes. Then she turned and started across Telegraph.

Sam stood watching. At the peak of her stride, she seemed to glide, as if gravity had lost control of her. His heart was thumping. He looked at the magazine. *Alaska Sportsman*. The white on the cover was a ram with golden horns standing on a mountain precipice. "Lindy" and a phone number were written across the animal's chest. Sam's finger felt where the pen had cut, imagining the tension in her hand.

When he looked up, he saw Josh Shuman moving toward him, quivering with emotion and shaking his head, a black armband around his sleeve. In the wake of the attack on the campus and his unexpected encounter, Sam was glad to see a familiar face. Even so, he coiled the magazine.

Josh jabbed Sam's shoulder and snarled at the Guards. "Pigs."

Sam grinned. Josh's rancor vanished, and he laughed like a five-year-old, bangs jumping on his forehead, his grown-up eyes trapped between.

"You got gassed." Josh noticed Sam's swollen lids.

Sam nodded, wide-eyed, suggesting something unworldly.

"What was it like?" Josh wondered, playing along.

"I was in the cloud." Sam spoke like a prophet. "I reached out, and an angel came down."

Josh saw Sam's longing. "Some chick," he guessed.

Sam nodded. "Sad but wise. She's going to stay with me."

"It's about time," Josh said.

Across the street, two policemen were cuffing a demonstrator over the hood of a car.

"Come on." Josh forced his way through the corner crowd and started down Telegraph, away from campus. Sam followed. They skirted a group of students huddled around a woman with a water pail and sponge. A pair of jeeps drove past with Guardsmen in masks.

"What's going on?" Sam said.

"It's war, and we're the enemy. They've got a tank down at the marina."

"What's with the armband?"

"Vigil for Rector. We marched to the chancellor's house."

"Rector?"

Josh rolled his eyes. "The guy who was killed?"

Sam nodded, recalling.

"We've got to do something," Josh said.

Sam watched a girl in tie-dye pinning notices to the plywood boarded over a store's broken windows. "I don't care about any of this. It's a carnival, Josh. Throwing firecrackers at daddy."

"Don't be an elitist."

Sam shook his head. "There's no higher view. The flower children are making yogurt, the bikers are shooting smack, and the lowbrows are sniffing glue. Fifty years from now, people will look back and say, 'What a bunch of idiots.'"

"We're all playing our part." Josh's sigh betrayed his own disheartenment.

"Sitting in class for four years, soaking up worthless information? We learned more on LSD."

"Any news on grad school?" Josh asked.

"Not yet," Sam said.

"I got my acceptance letter yesterday."

Sam stared at him.

"Another five years and I'm a professor." Josh hung his head.

"You're going to do it," Sam said.

"Probably."

Sam looked away. "I need the fellowship."

"That's a given, with your fans."

"We'll see."

"You give a great lecture on Blake," Josh said. "Might as well get paid for it."

"The closer it looms, the odder it seems. I've always thought of school as a rehearsal. Not the main event."

"There's always business," Josh said.

"It's climbing the human pyramid, either way."

"That's what adults do. Theo signed a recording contract last week."

Sam didn't react.

"Maybe you should have stuck with him," Josh said.

The Future, Sam thought. He remembered the long nights they had wrestled with the alternatives together.

"It was easier a few centuries ago," Josh said. "You just looked at your last name. Cutler? I'll make knives."

Sam's gaze drifted eastward, into the Berkeley hills.

"Carter?" Josh said. "I'll make carts."

Sam's shoulders stiffened, like someone about to be sentenced, unjustly accused.

"Shuman? I'll make shoes." Josh laughed. "Sam?"

"I'm thinking."

"You're not here, man. I'm looking at you, I'm talking to you, but you're not here."

"I'm wondering."

"About what?"

"There's something beyond all this." He spoke of the waking world as if it was a wrapper. "We see hints in books and music. We feel it when we're coming or when we're high, when the things that don't matter are stripped away. We can't just pick up our diplomas and forget."

"You're a drug, all your own." Josh sounded wistful. "My favorite, I think."

"You're the only real friend I have," Sam said.

“That’s not true.”

“Tell me, Josh. Your honest opinion. Is there any greatness in me?” His voice lilted with doubt.

“You know the answer,” Josh said.

“In his heart there was something that glowed like a gypsy’s fire seen across the hills and mists of night, burning in a wild land.” Sam’s voice brimmed with feeling. “These are the gems of the human soul, the rubies and pearls of a lovesick eye, the countless gold of the aching heart, the martyr’s groan, and the lover’s sigh.” The corners of his mouth drew down and a softness circled his cheeks. “I want to reach for something precious, to make whatever sacrifice that requires. It’s all so . . . vague and grandiose. Purity of heart. Poetry and daydreams.” He gave Josh a helpless look. “Nothing like a career or a job.”

“Some people do that,” Josh said.

“Do what?”

“Follow a dream.”

Sam saw the ardor in his friend’s eyes.

“Not a corporal dream,” Josh said, “of deeds or possessions. A dream of the soul. Of the spirit.”

Sam nodded. Josh yearned for some home for the aspirations he was about to set aside. “Growing up means letting go of that, doesn’t it.”

“Not for everyone.”

“I don’t have a dream worth devoting my life to,” Sam said.

“You might find one.” Josh smiled. “No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings.”

Shouts came from a rooftop lined with students. A dozen Berkeley policemen hurried down the street, clubs in their fists. From the crowded sidewalk, hisses rose.

"You're supposed to talk me down," Sam said.

Josh shook his head. "You're unusual, Sam. You're at home in the void. It's too bad acid isn't legal. You'd have it made as a guide."

"I don't want the void. I don't want fantasies. I want something real—not another fragment of truth to puzzle over, the morning after an acid trip. I want to live in a new world, a true one of my own devising." Sam's features quickened, gaze turning inward. "Inexhaustible desire, at the service of a unique perception. That's what life should be. A journey of the mind and heart that gives birth to something like Hopkins' inscape or Machen's hieroglyphics. Germinating an idea like that, tending it, urging it to grow until it roots itself in you and takes you over, and your life becomes the proof of it." He raised the coiled magazine, extending his finger to touch the air. "Something so concrete, you can feel its edges a century later—"

Sam halted mid-stride. He stared at the magazine and unrolled it.

Josh looked over his shoulder.

"There's a picture of freedom," Sam said. The magazine cover was a window to a distant realm. Sam imagined he had stepped through it and was with the animal, standing on that small shelf, a scrap of green carpet without tree or brush,

surrounded by rugged peaks. Pure white with black hooves, the ram bore a striking nobility, his golden horns curled nearly full around. “Look how high he is.” Sam could feel the ram’s exhilaration, his love of precarious altitude, the command of vast terrain, the clarity of vast space.

“What’s this about?” Josh said.

“I just grabbed—” Sam stopped, wondering. He’d seen the animal out of the corner of his eye. Had it been unconscious? “Maybe *he* found *me*.” He imagined the wild creature leaping from mountain to mountain, headed for the corner smoke shop.

“There’s wisdom in his eyes,” Josh said. “He got some ewe to write her number on his chest.”

Sam nodded. “He lives on love. For him, sex is like rocket fuel.”

They laughed. Sam coiled the magazine and slid his free hand into his pant pocket. As they continued down the street, he drew his hand out and extended it. A pair of pink capsules rolled into Josh’s palm.

Josh examined the caps. “Christopher?”

“He had a grocery bag full of them.”

Josh put the caps in his pocket. “He’s going off the deep end. Keep your distance.”

Sam didn’t reply.

“A friend of Theo’s just got sent to Lompoc. No future in that. Locked in a cage with psychopaths for fifteen years. Speaking of which—” His expression was apologetic.

“What?”

“Julia called.”

Sam exhaled. When his sister couldn’t reach him, she phoned Josh.

“She said—”

“I don’t want to know.” Sam’s gaze returned to the crest-line of the hills. “Their hearts are dead.”

“Give them some of this acid,” Josh patted his pocket. “That would change them.”

“It might,” Sam nodded. “It might change you, too.”

Josh didn’t reply.

Sam regretted his words. “You’ll be a great teacher. The kind we hoped we’d find.”

Josh shrugged.

“I mean it,” Sam said.

“Been a while since we got high together. We had some good times.”

“We’ll have more,” Sam said.

“Still taking acid alone?”

Sam nodded.

The corner ahead was crowded. A girl naked to the waist was handing flowers to the soldiers posted there.

Josh peered at Sam. “Is our friendship going to survive *The Future*?”

“Of course.”

“Just checking.”

They reached the corner and gazed east, up Haste. There were Guardsmen flanking the street entrance. Beyond, People’s Park was visible, surrounded by a chain link fence

the military had erected five days earlier. They were using it as their headquarters, and there were tents and trucks, and soldiers bivouacked inside.

Josh glanced at the magazine in Sam's hand. "Who's Lindy?"

Two

The sun was declining over Berkeley's Elmwood district. The aging two-story houses shadowed each other, but their western windows were gold. A tree with leaves like colored glass reached toward the face of Sam's rental cottage, set back from the noise of College Avenue. Glowing gnats wove arabesques before the door.

Inside, Sam stood before the mirror. His eyes were mostly pupil.

"I'm feeling it," Lindy said. She was beside his desk, watching him. They had downed the pink capsules forty minutes before.

"I'm counting on you," she said. She'd only taken LSD a few times before.

“Don’t worry. I get confused sometimes, but—” Sam turned. “There’s always a happy ending.”

She lifted his key chain from the desktop. She was nineteen, two years younger than he. The self-assurance she’d shown two days before had vanished. Her small features looked fragile inside the crescents of blonde hair. She wore a different skirt, but the leather vest remained. “What’s this?” She waggled a brass disk attached to the key chain.

“Track medal. Broad jump.”

Sam stepped closer.

“Jumping was a way to escape,” he said.

She examined the medal. “A torch.”

“The Greeks ran races with them,” he said. “They carried fire between their temples.” The inadvertent wordplay struck him, and he saw it register in her face at the same moment. The magazine with the ram on its cover lay in a pool of sunlight beside the phone. “Like him,” he said, pointing at the ram.

“What made you pick that from the stand? Have you ever been to Alaska?”

Sam shook his head. “I thought he’d be easy for you to write on.” The words seemed absurdly loaded. His tether to the world was unraveling. He watched Lindy touch the ram with her finger. The ram shifted, shanks quivering.

“You’ll laugh, but—”

“What?” She smiled at his shyness.

“All I’ve been doing since we met is thinking of you. And staring at him.”

As before, the gulfs in her eyes opened to admit him.

"Dall sheep." Sam lifted the magazine. "They live five thousand feet up. Most of the year, the mountains are covered with snow. That's why they're white."

Lindy watched him.

"It's like I stumbled over directions to a buried treasure," Sam said.

"When you look at him, what do you see?"

"Inspiration. Passion. A wisdom that comes from gazing at immensities."

"He's vulnerable."

"It's an exposed place," Sam agreed. "He could fall a long way."

"He looks nervous to me. Fearful."

Sam studied the animal's face. "Yes, I can see that now."

Lindy turned and stepped away. The room was like a green aquarium, and her hips made waves. Sam watched a hundred dark parentheses ripple toward him. His guitar was propped against the dresser. She stopped in front of it.

"Play something."

"It would be a disappointment," he said.

"To whom?"

"Me."

She sensed there was more and waited.

"You've heard of Volt Vogel?"

"The band? I've seen them."

"I wrote most of their songs," Sam said.

She didn't reply.

Sam wasn't surprised. "That's why I quit."

"The singer's a jackass."

"Theo acts like a half-wit on stage, but he's a bright guy. And he works hard. He just doesn't have any integrity. That's what brought us together. That's what I admired."

"That he lacks integrity?"

"That it doesn't get in his way," Sam said. "I was afraid that if I required every word and action to be a true expression, I'd never do anything."

"And now?"

"It's the truth or nothing."

Lindy smiled. His confession didn't disturb her. She was energized by it.

"Unfortunately," Sam said, "nothing's come to mind."

"Forget your mind," she said. "Let your heart speak its own music."

Her injunction, so simple and reflexive, startled him. She had a truth of her own, and she felt it deeply. He could see that in her eyes.

She picked up the guitar and passed it to him.

Sam dropped the *Alaska Sportsman* onto the bedstand, sat on the mattress and rested the instrument on his knee. She retrieved her water glass and drank, watching him over the rim.

He lifted his left hand to the guitar's neck, the pearl dots dancing between the frets. He imagined a power welling

inside him, set loose from his center—his heart’s music. But his fingers were still. “I can’t hear it.”

He laid the guitar aside. As he rose, Lindy put the glass down on the magazine.

“You will,” she said.

Sam smiled at the blessing, then saw there was more. Quick as a child, she embraced him and kissed him. He felt the warmth of her mouth, then a floodgate opened and a torrent of tenderness caught him up. His lips were tentative, struggling with the gift.

She put her hand over his heart. “Hear it?”

His pulse was pounding. Her eyes seemed bottomless. Whether it was real or an effect of the drug, the yearning he saw was unlike anything he’d experienced.

Lindy reached up and touched his hairline.

Without knowing why, Sam drew back. Her wonder dissolved, replaced by sorrow. It struck him wrong, and the irritation must have shown in his face, because her gaze turned inward. She seemed dangerously poised, a collection of unstable pieces, ready to fall to tears or despair.

Why, Sam thought. Why had he pulled away? That’s what he was doing these days. Pulling away. He had his reasons, the ones he admitted to himself—he was getting serious about his life. But there were other reasons for him to shy from sorrow and need. He sensed that the unusual blessing Lindy offered came with an unusual obligation.

“Let’s go outside,” he said.

She seemed not to hear, but when he opened the door, she followed.

The sun blared in their faces and the drug played havoc with their senses. The runners of fence ivy were swollen with light, sparks flying from the leaves. Sam stepped into a scroll of energy, the glittering gnats whirling around him. He saw Lindy turn in his slipstream with her eyes closed. Then she stopped, sniffed the breeze and moved down the drive.

When he reached the street, she was stooped over a burst of nasturtiums, smiling and restored. They started north along College together. She took his hand.

"I love these old houses," she said. Ornate balustrades and classical colonnades bespoke the pride of the original owners, but the fences were leaning and the paint was peeling. Across the street, someone had taped a picture of Che Guevara in a gable window.

"There used to be families in them."

"Families," she nodded.

"How was yours?"

Lindy gazed at a two-story with blackened shingles. Its uncurtained panes were small and sooty. "As dark as that one."

He watched her lips part, then close again. "I had some dark moments," he said.

"For me, there were a lot of them."

They passed another house in silence.

"I never knew my mother," Lindy said. "She died in a car accident when I was a baby. My father's sister and her kids, my

cousins, came to live with us in Fresno. It would start after he came home. They cocktailed. By eight they were drunk.” She might have been talking about something that happened to someone else. “My aunt would goad him till he got his gun out. Then she’d call the police and they’d haul him away.”

Lindy’s face had aged.

“When he was gone, she’d break things. Glasses, plates, mirrors, windows—” Lindy laughed. “Then she’d get on me.”

“How bad was it?”

She raised her hand to her face. He thought she was combing her hair with her fingers. Instead, she held the locks back. At the corner of her forehead, below the hairline, was a star-shaped scar with bright scarlet arms.

“She did that with the fireplace poker.”

Lindy’s skin had shattered around the blow like crusted coals, the glowing interior visible through the cracks.

She let her hair fall back. Her mouth went slack and the life drained from her eyes. It was as if she’d departed and Sam was gazing at a mask. “You’re shaking,” he said, and he took her hand.

“Nice, huh?”

Sam felt her humiliation. Her face was creased with self-pity. A world that could do that, didn’t deserve her.

The traffic on College halted, and a car honked.

“This way,” he said, stepping off the curb.

He led her up a side street, away from the bustle.

“What about you?” she mumbled.

“Nothing like that.” Too late, Sam saw how his words stung her. He tried to give her a reassuring look, but she’d turned to face the houses.

Like those on College, they’d been divided into student quarters. The quiet street made them look abandoned. A tangled garden hose lay in foot-high grass. Shrubs had invaded a veranda. Eaves had cracked, rain gutters were hanging.

He felt Lindy squeeze his hand. Her cheer had returned, joined, as he watched, by a childlike hope that rose to brighten her features.

“Tell me,” she said.

“Just another broken family in the city of the stars,” Sam said. “My mother wanted to be one. She took her failure out on my father. He was a machinist, an emotional dwarf. She tied him in knots.”

Lindy’s blue eyes blinked.

“They’d fight,” he said. “She’d leave him crying in the bedroom. I’d try to comfort him. It got worse and worse. Then she caught him with a woman and he left.

“Eventually he remarried, but it didn’t last. Now he has cancer. He’s dying. Mother sues him every couple of years. There’s nothing to get, but she can’t forgive him.”

“Can you?”

Sam shook his head. “I despise him.” The truth was hard to utter. “All he wanted to do was crawl away to his shop. Julia and I didn’t exist.”

“Your sister?”

"Yes," Sam said softly. "My sister. She couldn't separate herself from it. She cracked up, and no one cared. She wouldn't eat unless I fed her. She couldn't sleep unless she was with me."

"Didn't your mother—"

"She was oblivious. I'd help her out of bed and dress her. She'd tell me how happy she was before she got pregnant. When she was still getting parts." Sam took a breath. Pity for his mother made him physically ill. "I still love her, or what I remember of her. She gave me my imagination."

"They aren't bad people. They took a wrong turn and never found their way back. I couldn't help them. I tried, but I couldn't." He watched his feet move. The sidewalk was spidered and buckled.

"You were alone."

"I still am," Sam said.

The house on their right was overgrown, windows crowded by creepers, balconies drizzling with vines.

"I came here on my own," Lindy said. "Forged my father's signature on my application. The day after graduation, I hitchhiked here from Fresno. I've been living off student loans."

"Do you talk to them?"

She shook her head. "My cousins are both in foster homes. Neighbors, teachers—everyone knew." Her tone was almost whimsical. "A nervous disease. That's what the school nurse called it." Lindy laughed. "I'm in a frenzy. People talk, but I don't hear." She cocked her head. "Is someone speaking to me? I'm not sure. The voice is a long way off." Her eyes glinted as if

she was sharing a prank with him. “The only sensation I feel, really feel, is speed. Running, flying, never coming back. That’s happiness—speed that carries you away from everything.”

Sam felt her despair, and all the hope and energy seething around it. The throbbing in his chest made it impossible to speak.

“Am I fast to you?” She laughed and looked away. “I’m still frenzied, still crazy to leave.”

The root of an elm had raised the sidewalk, and her toe caught the concrete.

Sam dove to save her. He teetered for a moment, his arm curled around her, seeing relief in her face, then surprise as he let them both fall. A gentle bank met them. He embraced her, feeling her quiver against him, his lips finding hers.

Her heart roared at him like fire from an opened furnace, and the world around him dissolved. All he could feel was the welling in his chest, a bulb of heat mounting, chugging his pulse and stopping his breath. His center seemed to burst, and he gave himself over, his pain, his loneliness, everything. The miracle was that she was there to receive him. Her innocence welcomed him, her wisdom understood him, and her longing consumed him. Their hearts, so hot and so close, melted and flowed together.

The bliss Sam felt was suddenly familiar. He was a little boy spinning in circles with his arms raised to the trees. The memory of childhood joy welled within him, as if it had been waiting for this very moment. And he sensed a kindred waking

in Lindy. This was what she had dreamed of and prayed for when she was running and flying and never coming back. She would take any risk for that. It was all that mattered. In this clarity, they hovered for what seemed a long time.

As they drew apart, Sam saw the star-shaped scar flaming on her brow. Her eyes were open, and so was her heart. All the frenzied pieces of her shattered spirit were calm and united. She knew who she was. The center hadn't been lost. Then, as he watched, her eyes shifted, grew secretive, doubtful. He felt her fragility, and wondered at how little it took to tip the balance.

"Where are we?" she murmured.

Sam looked around, seeing a derelict garden, gently sloped. A hedge separated it from a white clapboard house. "Someone's front yard." Fuchsia bells and pomegranates grew on either side. Spikes of digitalis tipped creamy urns over them. A plant part rested on the lapel of Lindy's vest.

He picked it up. It was a nodule the size of the end of his finger, with appendages cranking from its top, all finely fashioned. Maybe a root, maybe a fruit. The wind and sun had polished it amber, and it had a magical translucency. Esses and crescents swirled within, as if it had once been fluid.

"A heart," Sam showed her. "A molten one."

"Is the music reaching you?"

At first, he didn't understand. Then she put her hand on his chest, and turned her ear, as if listening. He listened with her, thinking of the nodule as the urge to surrender, love in its yearning state.

“It’s us,” he said, turning it like a precious stone.

Lindy’s eyes welled with feeling, pressing him to continue.

“The molten heart,” he said, “shot into us at our creation.”

The image was suddenly vivid for him. “It’s hardened into something with boundaries, discrete and alone. But it longs to rejoin its source.” Did she understand what he was trying to say?

“That’s the sweetest song—” She could barely speak.

“There isn’t another human on earth I could sing it to.”

Sam felt something precious taking root inside him. He rose onto one knee.

Lindy frowned.

He stood, glancing down the street. “I want to be physically high.”

“Right now?” Lindy rose beside him.

A minute later, they were at the corner of Piedmont and Ashby. Sam faced the oncoming traffic and stuck out his thumb.

A camper van braked to a halt on Grizzly Peak Road. The door opened and Sam and Lindy jumped out. As the van pulled away, Sam motioned to a trail leading into the forest. Twenty minutes later, Lindy was sitting beneath a knobcone pine on a knoll overlooking San Francisco Bay. A thick bough twisted like a sheltering arm above her head.

“Shoulders down,” she said. “Head up—”

Sam stood hunched at the edge of a steep drop, trying

to imitate the bearing of the ram. The dark pines formed an amphitheater behind him.

"Now the lofty look," Lindy said.

Sam flared his nostrils and gazed wide-eyed at the buzzing gridwork far below. He held the regal pose for a moment, then glanced back. When she giggled, he staggered toward her and collapsed beneath the bough. "How do sheep screw?" he wondered.

She gave him a sly look. "Like dogs, I bet."

He kissed her. Then he sighed and drew away.

"What is it?"

"I'm not enough for someone like you," Sam said.

"Let me decide that." She turned the amber nodule between her thumb and forefinger.

"You will."

She shook her head, confused and disturbed.

"Hear that?" Sam gazed over the drop. Down in the urban hive, campanile bells were tolling. "Mankind's sleeping heart." He eyed the nodule. "It sits in its prison, dreaming. And I'm dreaming too."

Lindy put her hand on his arm.

"I'm saying goodbye," he muttered. "Not just to my family. To my friends, the professors who've helped me. Everyone. But I have nowhere to go."

"Sam— Look where we are." She gazed around them as if the web of giant pines was a nest out of which a new life might spring.

Saying goodbye might be a beginning.

On the strength of her hope, he let his doubts go. They were borne away like leaves on a breeze. The knoll was more than an overlook. It was the boundary between two worlds. The line of tree crowns rising from the ridge below was the capstone of a wall, and only wild things were on their side. He had joked at playing the ram, but now he felt the sensations he had come here to feel—the ram’s exhilaration, the mystery of remote peaks, the thrill of being free to climb them.

Then all at once, a great idea—the truth he’d dreamt of—was before him, as tangible as the amber nodule that Lindy held. The joy he’d felt in the derelict garden, and was feeling now, was a sacred power. In the west, the sun was tangled in pine boughs, and as he turned to face it, he saw a cosmic font, great limbs of flame welling from the scarlet trunk, molten rivers branching out. If, at his birth, a dollop of some universal heart was splashed into him, perhaps that same heart-beat enlivened everything. No sooner had the thought formed itself, than a veil seemed to fall. The knoll was thumping beneath him. The pine needles were quivering. The arcs of the dragonflies followed that duple, and so did the songs of the birds in the brush.

“Lindy—” Was this his own pulse, or had a stray frequency reached his receiver?

She could see his excitement.

“I can hear the molten heart,” Sam said. From who and where was this great gift bestowed? He imagined what it

might take to answer that question, what a great distance it might lead him, and what sacrifices he might make. He felt Lindy circle his waist. When he peered at her, she was listening along, her eyes gleaming like a conspirator's.

"Look." She directed his gaze toward San Francisco. "It's just floating there. Like a piece of drift."

Sam put his cheek to hers and touched the Bay Bridge with his finger. "Held in place by a rope." The bridge piers hung like trailing algae. "If you cut it," he snipped his fingers, "they would all wash out to sea."

Before she could respond, Sam turned on himself. His attitude toward the world repulsed him.

"Cut it," she whispered.

Was she waiting for him to speak? No, she closed her eyes and put her lips to his. The knoll seemed to drop from beneath him. Only her kiss kept him suspended. Where had her confidence come from? Her commitment seemed absolute.

As they drew apart, Lindy's yearning was before him, naked and vulnerable. This was the start of their journey. He was supposed to proclaim it.

Instead, he turned away.

He wasn't ready for this. He couldn't inspire belief in her or anyone else. He looked around the knoll, still sensing the beat, but knowing the perception was fleeting. It was the drug. Tomorrow the molten heart would be inaudible, and everything would be as bleak as before.

Lindy rose.

“It’s getting dark,” he said. “We’d better start back.”

She nodded, accepting his disengagement. Was he mistaken? No. At a word, she would have cast her fate with his. Pinpricks of light twinkled below, the false stars of the human grid. She had invited him to jump off the world and he was clinging to its edge.

“I never imagined I would meet someone like you,” Sam said.

Three

A week after the military action on campus, the troops were withdrawing. The demonstrations had subsided, and the curfew had been lifted. It was evening, and Josh Shuman and Theo Vogel were walking along College Avenue, on the way to Sam's cottage.

"I know the producer I want." Theo's long locks swung beneath his flat-brimmed cordoba, opening and closing his aquiline face. "But I'll listen to Sam's opinion."

Josh, a foot shorter than Theo, gazed up at him. "I wouldn't launch into that right away."

"Course not," Theo agreed, putting his fists in his pockets. "Asshole," he muttered.

Josh slowed. "Maybe this is a bad idea."

“Okay, okay. I love Sam, you know that.” Theo’s voice grew plaintive. “We’re brothers, we belong together. Fuck—I’m going into the studio in sixty days.” His aggravation resurfaced. “You’re his friend—do something.”

Theo’s self-interest was so blatant, Josh laughed. Theo laughed too.

“That first night,” he remembered, “he was bringing over some dope for Frank. He just starts making up verses, and the next thing you know, it’s four in the morning and we’re a new band.”

“He was excited.”

“I thought, ‘Shit, this is what Elvis felt like when he met Otis Blackwell.’ If someone had showed up that night and handed us a recording contract, Sam would have been hysterical. He’s changed.”

“He has, and he hasn’t.”

Beneath the streetlights, cars sped past. The scent of jasmine drifted over them from a nearby hedge.

“Sam was that way when he was five,” Josh said. “He’d dream up adventures with long journeys and trials, and we’d act them out. It was competitive. There were fights for the best parts. Grade school’s a blur, but I’ll never forget being the Prince of Catumbria. I loved the Prince. But when Sam was done with him, he put him to sleep.”

“What are you telling me?” Theo said with irritation.

“Don’t count on Sam. Volt Vogel is far from his thoughts.”

“What about this new chick of his?” Theo countered. “She might be crazy about us. That would change things.”

Josh shook his head. "I've been so close to Sam for so long—" He struggled with his thoughts. "I'm finally realizing how different he is. It's hard to imagine myself as an adult. But with Sam, it's impossible. He lives in his dreams, and the larger the world looms, the bigger and bolder his dreams have to be to overshadow it. Knights and castles won't cut it," he glanced at Theo, "and neither will songs about love and war. He needs the Unified Field Theory of fantasies right now. And if he finds it—"

"What?"

"It might not include us."

Theo rolled his eyes. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Beneath his dark bangs, Josh's gaze sharpened. "Sam's getting ready to leave."

"Where's he going?"

"I don't know." For a moment, Josh was lost in thought, then he spoke again, looking straight ahead. "There's a piece of Sam's history I'm sure you haven't heard. He won't talk about it, even to me. It happened when we were eight. He and his mother and Julia, his sister, were at the beach. Julia was in the water, hanging onto one of those inflatable toys. Sam had gone to the hot dog stand to get his mother something to eat. His father showed up, and the two of them got into a fight. Mom picks up her things and stomps off in a rage. She thought Dad would stick around and take care of the kids. But Dad took off. He said later he didn't see Sam and Julia and figured they'd walked home. Sam's watching all this from the hot dog stand. Julia's doing the same, sitting on her toy while

it's drifting beyond the breakers. By the time Sam returned, she was halfway out to sea. Julia waved her arms at him, then she panicked, let go of the toy, and started dog-paddling back. Sam tore his clothes off and swam out to get her. He saw her go under and come up quite a few times. I don't know how he did it. Both of them nearly drowned. Julia swallowed a lot of water, and he was fighting a strong current. The next day, he told me that the whole time, he was wondering what he was swimming back to."

"Parents are fucked," Theo said.

"He dragged Julia up onto the beach. Then he carried her to the pier. He begged some change and called me. Dad and I picked them up." Josh shook his head. "I'll never forget the look in his eyes. He acted calm. He had to control his fear to save Julia, and he was still controlling it. 'Yes,' he told Dad. 'I'm by myself.' But he was fine—that's what his eyes said. There wasn't any cause for concern. It was simple—his parents and his home had disappeared while he was at the hot dog stand, and he was going to move on."

They turned down the drive toward Sam's cottage. Night was thick beneath the trees.

"That's the same look I've been seeing these past few months," Josh said. "It's just like it was then—he doesn't think he has any choice. He's written everything off. He doesn't know where he's going, but he's not staying here."

Theo turned his head. A spare guitar line throbbed against the cottage window, a tightrope of minors and sevenths, far from the home key.

Theo smiled. "There's one thing he hasn't written off." He knocked on the door.

Josh noticed letters in the mailbox and retrieved them.

The door opened a few inches and stopped. Lindy peered at them in the light from the cottage's interior. She recognized the singer and waited for him to speak.

"Where is he?" Theo said, gazing past her.

Lindy didn't move. "Sam," she called out.

Sam came to the door, greeting them with half a smile.

"Can we come in?" Josh asked.

Sam looked at Lindy, nodded and stepped back.

Theo passed over the threshold and pivoted on his boot heels. He hadn't been in the cottage since Sam's departure from the band, but everything was as it had been. He shook his finger at the guitar.

Josh handed Sam his mail and turned to Lindy. "My name's Josh."

"Sorry," Sam said. He glanced at Lindy. "My friend from the Palisades."

"Good to hear you play." Theo gave Sam a selfless look. "A new style. *Perilous*. I like it."

"Thanks," Sam said. "What do you want?"

"Just business." Theo passed the interaction to Josh with a wave of his hand. He gazed around the cottage as if considering the place for his own use, picked up the guitar and collapsed in Sam's chair.

"The pink caps were crazy," Josh said by way of thanks. He sat on the sofa. "Can we get a couple dozen more?"

“They’re gone,” Sam said. “I’ve got white tabs.”

“Good?”

“Christopher says so.” Sam looked at the clock, then at Lindy.

“We’ll take twenty,” Josh said, glancing at Theo. The singer was fingering chords silently.

“Has Sam played any Volt for you?” Theo asked, smiling at Lindy.

She smiled back.

Sam was thumbing through his mail. He raised one of the letters and sat on the bed to open it. Josh pulled a wad from his pocket and counted out the bills on the sofa.

“Have a look.” Sam passed the letter to him.

Lindy sat beside Sam and whispered in his ear. He laughed and nodded.

Josh finished reading and handed the letter back. “Congratulations,” he said.

Sam eyed him coldly.

“You have a decision to make,” Josh hurried to correct himself.

Without a word, Sam picked up the bills and stepped into the hallway.

A slapping came from Sam’s chair. Theo was beating time on the arm. He craned his neck and stooped his head, mouthing silent lyrics at Lindy. She looked away.

Sam returned. He tossed a baggie with white tablets to Josh and remained standing, inviting the visitors to leave.

Josh rose. "Good to meet you," he nodded at Lindy.

She stood and so did Theo.

"Gotta try this." Theo slid his hand beneath his hair and pulled a joint from behind his ear.

"No thanks," Sam said.

"Be cool." Theo struck a match. "To celebrate." He inhaled and blew the smoke toward Sam. "The pigs are gone," he grinned. "We overcame." He waved the joint at Lindy.

She ignored him. Josh motioned to Theo, but he acted oblivious.

"We pulled them together," Theo told Lindy. "Sam and I." He passed the joint to Josh. "Volt played 'Dream of Love' at Oxford Hall." He grinned at Sam. "The crowd went wild."

Lindy watched Sam. He was shaking his head at Theo.

"Away crawls hate," Theo crooned. *"I'm standing straight."* He jiggered his wrist. "I put my hand in my pants and jerked off like Jim Morrison."

Sam laughed despite himself.

Josh flared his eyes and turned to Lindy. "He needs to learn an instrument."

"Come on," Theo implored.

Sam glanced at Lindy, took the joint from Josh and drew on it.

A childish glee gurgled in Theo's throat. "You gotta hear this song I wrote," he thrust his face a few inches from Sam's. "Great music, but the lyrics need work." His expression sobered. "It's the big time now."

Sam nodded. Lindy was watching him.

"You've got Alaska on the brain." Josh turned from the bookshelf, a green volume in his hand. "Who's Charles Sheldon?" He opened the book to a photo of a white ram lying dead on a slope beside snowshoes and rifle.

"A friend of Teddy Roosevelt's," Sam said. "He fell in love with Dall sheep."

Lindy drew beside him, clasped his hand and stared at Theo. Theo stared back.

Josh set the book down. "We'd better go."

"Is she living here?" Theo looked puzzled.

Josh grabbed his arm and urged him toward the door.

A smile danced over Lindy's lips.

"Look at that," Theo said. "She's fucking laughing." He mimicked Lindy's expression. "Bitch."

Lindy recoiled as if she'd been struck. Sam reached for her, but she huddled aside. Sam wheeled and drove his fist at Theo's face.

Theo staggered back, hand to his jaw.

"Why did you bring him here?" Sam raged at Josh. "I'm fed up with Volt." He turned to Lindy. Pain welled in her eyes, and shame. "It has nothing to do with her," Sam said.

"Tell *him*," Josh glared at Theo.

Blood was trickling between Theo's fingers. "Are you leaving us, Sam?"

"Get him out of here," Sam said.

Josh threw the door open.

“Fuck the world,” Theo snarled. “Fuck your pals. Lock yourself in an ivory tower with some poison cunt.”

Josh circled Theo’s middle and dragged him over the threshold.

“Want to be alone?” Theo stormed at Sam. “You will be. Dead alone. That’s where you’re headed,” he sneered at Lindy. “That’s Sam’s new music—bones rattling in a box.”

Sam slammed the door. When he turned, Lindy was looking at him with one eye narrowed, still cringing from Theo’s epithet. “Nice friends.”

“I shouldn’t have let them in.” His face clouded.

“It wasn’t your fault.” She averted her face. Abuse had turned her into an abuser, leaving her doubly shamed.

The phone rang.

Sam ignored it, embracing her. “It’s over,” he said.

She nodded, but there was a question in her eyes.

The phone continued to ring. Sam wasn’t going to answer it. Lindy stepped toward it and picked up the receiver. After a moment, she looked at him and mouthed “Julia.”

Sam shook his head.

“He’s not here,” Lindy told the caller. She listened to a long response. “Really, he’s not here. I can give him a message—” Lindy eyed Sam. “Of course. I’ll tell him it’s an emergency—”

Sam sighed and held out his hand. Lindy passed him the receiver.

“My girl,” he said.

“Sambo?” The high-pitched voice gasped with relief.

“I’m here, I’m here,” he reassured her.

“No you’re not,” Julia laughed. “You’re *there*. If you had any idea what’s going on— I’ve been trying to reach you—”

“I just walked through the door.”

“This week, I mean. I called twenty-two times. I make a mark each time.”

“I’m staying with a friend,” Sam said.

Julia giggled. “The one who answered the phone?”

“What is it, Julia?”

“She’s frozen his bank account.”

“How did she do that?”

“The lawyer got a court order. It’s terrible. He doesn’t have money for his treatments. She’s killing him—”

“They’re free,” Sam shook his head. “He was at the county hospital, last time I heard.”

“They cut him off or something, I don’t know.” Julia sounded confused. “He’s desperate. I’ve been taking things to school, selling them for whatever I can get. It’s not much. Mom’s going to find out,” she whimpered. “You know how she is.”

Sam didn’t reply.

“If you were here—”

“I’m not,” he said.

“If you had a job here—”

“Is that why you called?” Sam closed his eyes. His mother hated Berkeley. She wanted him back. His father was penni-

less, and his pride was gone. He'd take whatever anyone would give him.

"If you don't come back," Julia said, "I'm leaving school." She was indignant. "I'm old enough. Mom thinks it's a good idea. There's a job at a bakery in Santa Monica, but I'd have to be there at three in the morning." Her voice grew tentative. "They'll just fight over who gets the money." She started to cry. "I don't know what to do."

Sam moved the receiver away from his ear. His sister's voice reached him like an insect's—a little cricket, caught in a web.

"What's happened to you, Sambo?" the tiny voice said. "Don't you care about us?"

Sam was silent.

The only sound on the other end was Julia's sobbing. He turned the earpiece toward Lindy. She listened to the crying with dismay.

Sam put the receiver back to his ear. "Maybe—"

The sobbing ceased.

"There's something we can figure out," he said. "The two of us."

Lindy sighed. Sam met her gaze.

"Not right now," Sam told his sister. "I'll call you tomorrow. No, Julia. It has to be tomorrow. Alright. You'll be fine. Pretend Sambo's tucked you in. That's my girl. I love you, more than anything."

He hung up.

"She wants you to save them," Lindy said.

Sam nodded.

"The ram can't do that," she said, "if he's going to follow his heart."

Sam hung his head. "He has to leave the lowlands behind."

The Dall was a presence in their lives now.

"Josh doesn't understand," Sam said.

Lindy's eyes shifted. "Do you?"

She wanted freedom, he thought. For them both. But he was still uncommitted. Lindy was braver. She wasn't confused. She'd crossed the threshold and stood facing the wilderness, ready to gamble her heart with him.

"What is this?" Lindy touched the letter on the bed.

"My fellowship," he said.

"Josh was right. You have a decision to make."

She put the letter on his desk. Then she unplugged the phone. "None of that happened," she said, pulling her sweater over her head.

The sight wiped Sam's upset away. Lindy's breasts were the breasts of fantasy.

She shuddered. The first chills of the drug spasmed her jaw.

Sam opened and closed his hands. "My fingers are numb."

They had taken the white acid just before Josh and Theo arrived.

Lindy drew her skirt down and stepped toward him. In the lamplight, her flesh glowed like a halcyon land, all ocher and peach. A land reserved, he thought, through some mistake, for him. He stepped out of his pants and faced her. Lindy

closed the distance, finding something that stirred her in his narrow body and sinewy limbs.

His heart was pounding. The room seemed to pivot around them. And then the future was crashing toward him, thoughts and feelings he'd just experienced disappearing behind.

In an hour, he would think this was the most powerful drug he'd ever taken. In ten hours, his quandaries would be behind him. At the next day's dawn, he would gather himself back, utterly changed, his relation to Lindy and the waking world sharply defined. He would know who he was and where his destiny lay. But what he sensed right then was a deep agitation.

"Are you ready for this?" he said.

"I think so."

Lindy stepped away, and a page of Sam's life seemed to turn.

The room held nothing familiar. It was part of the past, and he was moving too rapidly into the future to recognize it. He stood on a strange floor, peering at strange furniture, a sofa he'd never sat on, a bed he'd never slept in. On a desk, clock hands were frozen on the numbers, pretending to mark time. He heard water running in the kitchen.

Sam approached the bed, observing his body from what seemed a great height. The muscles of his chest were hard and flat, his legs long and straight, planed by a stern carpenter. His hand reached down, clutched the covers and turned them back. Below him, the frontier of the fitted sheet stretched fresh

and white, like a fall of new snow. His gaze fell on the *Alaska Sportsman* atop the nightstand. The ram had entered his life with Lindy. Sam picked up the magazine.

An icon of courage. Of freedom of heart. Judge of things large and small.

Lindy had set her glass down on the ram's chest, always in the same spot, adding something magical. The beating of the ram's heart sent out rings as in a pool. A great desire glowed in the animal eyes, mingled with pain. Pain of flight, of separation. The pain of some unhealed wound—perhaps, the cut in his front that the pen point had made.

Sam sat on the bed. The light on the nightstand flashed in the ram's eyes. They seemed to shift. The ram was watching him. He'd stood motionless, letting them guess who he was and what he intended. Now the moment was right, the glaze had broken. He was about to declare himself.

Sam heard the kitchen faucet turn off. The ram tensed, muzzle lifting. It was Lindy's dare that had brought him to life. Her challenge. Was he ready, Sam wondered, to accept that challenge, to venture into their personal unknowns together? Fear flashed in the ram's eyes. He was nosing the winds for danger, expecting it at any moment. Lindy's footsteps approached. As Sam set the magazine back on the nightstand, the ram's eyes shifted to follow her, muscles swelling in his shoulder, hooves treadling the grass.

Sam felt the bed squeal and slope beside him. Her body was near, not yet touching his. He kept his distance, sensing

perhaps that she was threatened by forces still pulling at him, knowing that she was still waiting for his commitment.

Like the ram, he was vulnerable. Wary. He saw her glass descend toward the magazine, landing on the rumpled circle with the predictability of ritual. Her hand touched his shoulder.

Sam turned and her features loomed large before him. Her eyes were troubled. He could see her suspicions and how she struggled to master them, and his heart went out to her. Lindy smiled, pure as a child, and brought her face closer, seeking a kiss. Their lips touched, his tongue razing hers, the budded surface like gravel.

“What’s wrong?” Sam’s voice sounded loud and foreign.

“I’m cold.” Lindy shivered. “From the torrent.”

He couldn’t make sense of her words.

“Coming out of the tap.” She glanced toward the kitchen.

Sam shook his head, watching the afterimages proliferate till there were half a dozen of her, cheek to cheek, all regarding him strangely. “You’re hallucinating.”

“Hold me,” she said.

“Did I hurt you last night?” He’d been afraid to ask.

“Hurt me?”

“You groaned. At the end.”

“No,” she said. “It was the weirdest thing—what I was thinking. I was taking your sperm, and it was you. I could feel you in my womb, like a child. A new Sam.”

“Wow.”

Her face sank from view. He felt her tongue trail down his neck. Her thighs clasped his leg. An undercurrent of sighs rose from the sheets, slewing around them. He rolled on his hip, tipping her. The room rocked, her thighs parted, and she was spreading around him.

Sam felt her emotions in a vibrant cascade: her wonder, her joy, her longing. She tendered him what was innermost—her hunger, her sadness, her desperate hope. And then she was asking, reaching for his heart. He hesitated at her insistence. She met his fear as she had before, elation vanishing, risking abandonment, summoning her courage and asking again, showing him how to surrender. His resistance dissolved and he let himself go, heart molten and flowing to meet her. He felt himself at her center, warm and joined, her soft moan in his ear. It was as if she'd been searching for her real self her whole life, and now she had found it.

Then, strangely, Sam felt her ask again. Had he only imagined her cheer? How could it fade so quickly? Her body strained against his, ignoring the pain of a tighter coupling, or seeking it, as if what she'd felt was nothing, and there was something deeper, more meaningful to feel. She clawed his ribs, her teeth raked his neck. She was testing for weakness, digging for flaws, or stirring herself to create them. She sensed his alarm, but instead of retreating, her hunger increased. *This body isn't my real one*, she seemed to say. *Watch me shred this soft skin and pull my sweet face off.* The hidden Lindy filled Sam with fear. She meant violence to herself. And she seemed bent on working a similar change in him.

He was exposed. He had no defense. The physical world was still around him. But the drug had unravelled his moorings, and Lindy's hunger was cutting those that remained.

The walls of the room blew away, the dim air of the cottage flattened beneath him and slid into the abyss. And a stranded self wafted up, a twist of white smoke, coils lifting—

He was rising into a realm of peaks and cliffs, that magazine window through which he'd peered. The ruggedness was real, and the vastness and breezes. On his shelf, the ram had stood waiting, a patient spirit. He knew Sam's essence even as he absorbed it—a creature intimate with great heights and great danger. Sam felt his hooves in the soil. The throbs in his chest rippled outward like rings in a pool, his heart forever molten. He breathed desire as a birthright, the way men breathe air.

"Lindy," Sam whispered blindly. "What's going on?"

"I'm raw," she was clutching him. "Bloody, in pieces."

"My body is gone."

"Don't leave me," she begged.

But in the new world they inhabited, her sudden movement spooked the ram. He sprang from the shelf, bounding toward the cliffs, and she had no choice but to follow quickly. Sam felt himself thrusting, vaulting, his pulse like hooves in his ears. He heard her in stride just behind, scattered faculties packing, in desperate pursuit. Two strange animals racing in a boundless wild.

His ardor mounted, his fores reached out, the ram's power molten inside him. It made his chest swell and his mind glow,

and it turned his eyes gold. In that heated state, he felt at last the liberation he'd dreamt of. He looked back mid-leap. Within a furring of darkness, her eyes glowed too, but with craving. His golden glance spurred her, whetting a power violent and cruel. She dreamed he wouldn't escape, that she would overtake him and bolt him, that he'd find a new life inside her.

They climbed for a long time, mounting steep inclines into the clouds, at odds but panting close. Then at a dip between high peaks, she caught him. He felt her lunge, he struggled to free himself. She slashed at his front and tore him open. Sam felt an enormous welling, and a great golden river flowed out of his chest. Not some— This time, he gave all. And in the moment of his destruction, as the molten heart left him and he yielded to the feasting eyes, he felt himself joined with something infinitely larger and finer than himself, even the glowing self he'd become. He surrendered everything, and finally, truly, he was not alone.

Lindy, too, found the peace she had sought. In that great flood of love from Sam, she was recognized and knew who she was. All her terrors and sorrows dissolved—the running and flying and hoping was over. Tears, tears of welcome— The wandering orphan had returned after an absence of so many years. What a wonderful girl she was: full of love, wise and generous, with a child's joy and a child's trust. Sam had found her. Only Sam could have done it. He had led her out of a heartless world, and they would never return.

Four

The summer was a perfect one. The trees along College Avenue turned amber and carmine, unhurried by frost or bad weather, sprays floating on the breeze beneath a gentle blue sky. Sam crossed the street, books under his arm, his appearance as changed as the foliage. His hair was short, and instead of boots and bell-bottoms, he wore jeans and tennis shoes. During the four months he and Lindy had lived together, he'd been reaching back. It pleased him to dress like a boy, and the spirit of a child showed in his stride and his sparkling eyes. The random music of wind chimes sounded from a neighbor's porch.

He turned down the drive to his cottage, stepping through fallen leaves and coins of light. Josh Shuman was leaning

against a tree. When he saw Sam, he came forward, his expression unusually grave.

"Hey," Sam nodded. "Where have you been?"

Josh followed him to the entrance. "I've come here a dozen times. No one answers the door."

Sam didn't respond.

Josh pointed at an index card taped to the door. It read *Opposition is true friendship*. "Does this mean me?"

"I'm concentrating," Sam said, shifting his books.

"You look like you've joined the marines." Josh glanced at the spines: Apuleius, *The Bacchae*, and a book on shamanic ritual. "Turning your back on the world?"

"Why not?" Sam let Josh see the joy in his eyes.

"That's crazy."

"The more Lindy loves me, the crazier I get."

Josh nodded, as if an expected sadness had come to pass.

"You won't believe this, Josh. I have my great idea. The start of it."

Josh peered down the drive.

Sam put his hand over his heart. "Behind these cold bars lies an ocean of bliss."

Josh laughed at his grandeur, and Sam joined in.

"Lindy has changed everything," Sam said. "I never imagined there could be so much light in my life. The greatest thing I could wish for you, is that you will find someone like her."

"Would it turn me into a recluse?" Again Josh looked down the drive.

"I don't expect you to understand."

“Before you make any irreversible decisions—”

“You’re not going to change my mind about grad school,” Sam said.

“That’s not why I’m here. Christopher got busted yesterday. His parents called me. Narcs have been watching him for weeks.”

Sam stared at him.

Josh motioned toward College Avenue. “Some guy in a Tempest is parked across the street.”

“What?”

Josh exhaled. “Maybe he’s doing repo. They could put you away for a long time.”

Sam nodded.

“You’re holding,” Josh said.

Sam nodded.

“I parked on Benvenue,” Josh pulled a key from his pocket and held it toward Sam.

Sam eyed the key. He was at the edge, deciding whether to leap. And now fate was hurling him over the brink. He opened his hand, and the key dropped into it.

“A little help from your friend,” Josh said. His face was swept with sorrow.

Sam hugged him. They were close as kids, they’d left home together—the hug couldn’t express all the things they’d shared. As they drew apart, Josh held his hand up, making a vee with his first two fingers.

Sam returned the gesture. “Peace,” he said.

His friend turned and strode back down the drive.

Sam lowered his hand, the key in his palm, two fingers still extended, gazing at them as he turned to the cottage door, imagining a two-toed creature moving quietly away, barely crunching the gravel.

He knocked twice and twice again. Lindy opened the door.

She was wearing his tee shirt. As he crossed the threshold, she kissed his shoulder.

Sam parted a stand of reeds and stepped before a table covered with jars. Lindy took the books from him, setting them on an upright log between buckets of earth and sand. A white sheep pelt was tacked to the wall, along with skins from roadkill. Skulls peered from a dozen angles through plants pulled from Berkeley hills and gardens.

"Listen." Lindy pressed the key of a cassette recorder on the table before her. A shrill *chrew-chrew-chrew* emerged from the speaker.

"What is it?"

"A rosy finch," she said. They lived in the cliffs with the Dalls.

Sam removed a pill container from his shirt pocket and upended it. A beetle fell into a jar, but he wasn't looking at it. He was gazing around the room.

"Josh knocked again," Lindy said. "I didn't answer."

"He was waiting for me."

She nodded. "I could hear you." Her blue eyes were clouded. The shadows below them gave her a worn look. "Why won't he leave us alone?"

Sam was silent. Here, in this cottage, his journey had started. And this was the woman he had started it with. He

was seeing them both for the last time. He put his left hand on Lindy's back. Josh's car key was in his right.

"We don't belong in Berkeley," she said.

"You've got two more years."

"I don't care."

Sam saw the suspicion in her eyes. She knew something was wrong.

"Talk to me," Lindy pressed him.

What could he say?

"You're everything. All my dreams are with you. I have to make a run." He showed her the key in his hand. "Josh lent me his car." He crossed the room.

Lindy followed. "When will you be back?"

"Tonight." He halted before the closet. "Late."

"I'll wait up."

He avoided her gaze. "It might get cold." He pulled a coat off the hanger.

"Sam?" She edged in front of him.

He turned to the dresser, opened a drawer and removed a box loaded with baggies and jars. "He wants everything I have."

She was trying to smile, but failing miserably. "Can I come with you?"

Sam looked in her eyes. There was ruin in them. All the hopes she'd nursed were groundless. All her fears were coming true. He was abandoning her.

"It's goodbye," she said softly. "Isn't it."

Sam handed her the box. Then he embraced her, crushing

it between them, kissing her deeply. "Let's go," he said. He grabbed his duffel bag from the closet and threw it on the bed. Then he pulled the dresser drawers open and began to unload them.

"What are you doing?"

"We're leaving," he said. "Don't just stand there."

Lindy dipped in. "Everything?"

"Everything." He grabbed a wad of currency from the bottom drawer.

"Where are we going?"

"North and west." He untacked the *Alaska Sportsman* from above the bed. "When he's threatened, he seeks higher ground." He stuffed the magazine in the duffel.

"Running, flying," she rejoiced, zipping the bag closed. "Never coming back."

Sam unclipped the broad jump medal from his door key, set the key on the table and nodded at his guitar. "Grab that."

"There wasn't any drug deal." Lindy scooped a handful of bird feathers and threw them at him.

"We need to be quiet." He put his hand on the doorknob. "We're going over the back fence."

Her eyes widened. "Somebody's after us."

"Exactly." Sam eased the door open.

They crossed the drive, scaled the fence and disappeared over it.

They followed the interstate north through Redding and Weed. After eating at a roadside truck stop, they crossed the

California-Oregon border, and around midnight, just outside Portland, they exited onto a quiet farm road. Sam pulled over, they laughed at their escape, made love and slept in the car.

The next morning, they woke to a gray haze and continued north. They were in the land of the giants. Road signs pointed the way to Mt. Hood, and then Mt. St. Helens as they crossed into Washington. When signs appeared for Mt. Rainier, the car was filled with shouts and screams. Sam took the cutoff.

After two hours of winding through forests, steadily ascending, they crossed a bridge over a river flowing off the great mountain. They were on its flank. Giant steepes of rock led into the clouds. The road ended in a parking lot, five thousand feet up, and as the car turned into it, an enormous white mass rose before them, veiled in mist. Rainier seemed to float in a different dimension. Its cracks and buckles of ice were visible through gaps in the veil. The sign said *Paradise*.

Climbers were gathered by a trailhead. Sam parked, looked at Lindy and opened the door. As they approached, the climbers fussed with clothing and equipment. They were quiet, drawn into themselves. Sam saw another team far up the trail, drawing near the snows. The mist was dissolving, the dome's lines growing sharper. He stopped a dozen feet from a gangly man in tan knickers.

"Going up?"

The climber eyed him through glare glasses and nodded.

"Done this before?"

"Tried," the climber answered. "Got blown off last time."

Solemnity clipped the man's words. What a great thing, Sam thought—to stand here facing this mountain with your pack piled high, nerving yourself. “What are those?” He touched the spiked metal objects lashed to the pack.

“Crampons. You use them to walk on the ice.”

Sam imagined them attached to his soles. Two metal prongs extended from the front, like ram's toes. He glanced at Lindy. She was beaming, sharing his fascination and excitement. He stepped closer. “What about that?”

“Sleeping pad,” the climber said. “If we make it to the top, we'll spend the night in the steam caves.”

“Steam?”

“It's a volcano.”

“Really.” Sam smiled, confessing his ignorance.

“It was built up, one eruption after another. See those terraces?”

The climber was pointing at a wall below the summit.

“Each one is a lava flow.”

Sam gazed at Rainier's summit, imagining.

“It's still hot,” the climber said.

“Ready?” One of his companions gestured toward the trailhead.

The climber nodded to Sam, hefted his pack and moved away.

“Of course.” Sam turned to Lindy. “Beneath the surface, the earth is molten. You learn that in grade school.” He scanned the crags around them.

“It was all hot and flowing,” she said.

“‘Hard as rock.’ Permanent. ‘Rock solid.’” Sam shook his head. “We’re born from the earth and we’re just like it. Molten in our depths.” He turned back to the mountain.

Lindy moved around his elbow, staying in the corner of his eye. “I can feel the heat.” She grabbed his arm, shivering against him.

“Let’s see how close we can get.”

They returned to the car. He opened the trunk and removed a couple of sweaters from the duffel. Then he drew out a dark blue jar and unscrewed the lid.

Lindy looked in the jar. It was full of green tablets.

“Acid,” Sam said. “For us.”

“I thought you’d decided—”

“I have,” Sam nodded. “I’ll never take a full dose again. I’ve found my thread. I don’t want to lose it. Just a quarter tab. Now and then.”

“Now and then?”

He glanced at the trail and gave her an inviting look. Lindy laughed. He took a tab from the jar and broke it for them.

Half an hour later, they were ascending a steep slope bordered by conifers, breathing hard. As they crested a rise, the trees thinned, giving onto a rolling meadow studded with rocks. The afternoon sun, behind them now, heightened Rainier’s every detail. Two rugged headwalls rose toward the summit, and below, two giant glaciers merged into one.

Lindy pointed. On a boulder, a pair of marmots crouched, watching them.

Sam wiped his brow with his sleeve. "Alright?"

She nodded.

"Let's find our own way from here." He took her hand and they left the trail, climbing the grassy swells.

"I want us to change our names," he said.

"To what?"

"Ransom and Lindy Altman."

A gentle wind blew sidewise, from him to her.

"I want to be surrender's ransom, with the vaulting ram as my emblem: the leap of white love, the lost heart's return." He spoke it like a vow of undying love.

She bit her lip.

"You're everything now," Sam said. "Our love is going to be my religion." His words were mixed with pride and humility. He had found a devotion equal to hers.

Lindy's eyes brimmed.

"We'll cut loose of the old world and enter this one." His eyes climbed the ice fields, swept up by an imagined labor of love, long and arduous, requiring a fierce dedication. "Where the molten heart is always flowing."

Ahead, the slope leveled off.

"I'm going to tell our story," Sam said, "as a fur-covered shaman, a wild ram-man, chanting the liturgy of surrender." He flexed his knees and stooped his shoulders, using his forefingers to draw the horns curling out of his brow.

"A shaman." Lindy peered at him.

Her incredulity made him laugh.

They stepped onto a high meadow, and a chill emanation

struck them, like a giant freezer door opening. The mountain rose unobstructed, dazzlingly complex, all its icy cliffs and fissures close enough to touch.

"I wrote the first chant last week," Sam explained. "I was going to sing it to you, in Berkeley. And give you something. But— It will be better here."

Lindy nodded.

The mountain was theirs, born not in ages past, but hours before, still steaming from the outpourings that morning. They sank into the meadow's warmth, lush with ankle-high lupine and maroon huckleberry, the redolent grasses ringed by pasqueflower seedheads on tall stalks, big and round, luminescent against the sun.

"Don't let this fire go out," he said. "Be with me always."

"I want to," she told him. "More than anything."

Sam drew his hand from his pocket. In his palm was a little silver cage with a leather thong through its top. He hinged it open and placed inside the amber nodule from the derelict garden, then snapped it shut. "To wear."

"Sam—" A tear tracked down her cheek.

He tied the thong around Lindy's neck.

"Always," she said, touching the pendant.

Sam kissed her eyes and the star on her forehead, and her tears kept coming. "Its heart is welling inside it," he said, gazing at the mountain looming over them.

He unbuttoned her sweater, and as he lay back with her, he imagined his heart had burst into flames. He fanned them. He nursed them. He fed them with longing, and the flames

spread from his center. His chest ignited, then his belly and back. Tremors shook him, breath like a bellows, crackling the blaze, smoke twisting up.

“Ransom,” she whispered.

She was with him, dreaming the same dream, reaching through the heat for a self not yet her own. He put his lips to her ear, heart bubbling up, the pasqueflower batons beating feverishly on skins of smoke. The space between them was glowing. And then a voice rose in his throat, lower than his own, singing with confidence and command.

*The flesh is sizzling,
Limb muscles twitching,
Deep tissues pulling where the boiling
blood anoints.*

Flaming tapers wriggled through his hips and shoulders. Thorns glowed and sputtered along his nerves, following the fuses to his fingers and toes.

*The bones are cracking.
The cracks leak marrow,
Bubbling as the firebarbs pry
the joints.*

*Bowing spars, taut sinews.
The homes you had, forever lose.*

His belly blistered and popped, fire forking over his groin

and thighs. The smoke wavered. He glimpsed himself hunched and writhing, swarms of orange arrows emerging from his chest. Then the billows folded over him, blotting everything.



Struggling for air, breathing fire, I force my shoulders up. The flesh splits across my front. I raise my arms to save them—flaming torches, fingers charred, thumbs burnt to knobs. The fire won't let go. It curls me forward, bones bending, ligatures ravelling and popping. A pressure bursts behind my nose and my face pushes out, eyes bugged to the sides, neck swooning unsupported, nosing back into the blaze.

Gradually the hot tools leave off. The fire shrinks to a core. Through the ruin of my senses, I feel the bent spars stiffen. Sinews contract as the cool air fans them, flesh freezing over gashes. My trunk tips, and I rock onto my belly, a film of smoke over my eyes. Teek-teek—embers cooling.

I tense my limbs, digging in. My shoulders lift, and as I strain to raise my head, a weight descends on it. My legs wobble. I try to straighten my spine, but there's a binding in my back. I reach my arm out, seeing a wild sight—a thin white stick with two black toes.

My shoulder is covered with white fur. A white muzzle starts out from my face. I run my tongue over my

teeth and my jaw joggles. I turn my head and golden cusps turn with me, one in each eye's outside corner. I lower my head and lift my right fore, my hoof pad riding up the horn, bumping over the ridges. Up, back, around and down.

Ram. I try to speak the word, but only a grunt sounds in the stillness.

The last traces of smoke are dissipating. I'm standing on a bluff, in a bed of ash. The slopes are covered with tussocks of pale straw. Below is a whispering stream. I feel a thrill of spaciousness—the world seems to have opened around me. Then I realize it's my eyes—I can see halfway behind me without shifting my head. There's a rich picture in the wind. Scents crowd beneath the arches of my nostrils, and when I suck them into my muzzle they burst into images: fanning sprigs, soaked moss, middens piled by small burrowers. My own smell mixes with them, sweet and pungent, woolly and wild.

I search for memories of this land, but there are none.

I lift my right foreleg and bring it forward. My body sways, the weight over my shoulder funneling down. My limbs are spindly but there are four. I bring my left hind up, whisking it through the grass, feeling the braided muscles woven into my will. Where am I bound? My legs seem to know—they want to gain height. I'm headed upstream, wading through brush, cages opening before me and closing behind. It's spring

in this land, bird smell on the boughs and birdsong in the air, the earth covered with unburst buds. Amid all of this energy about to let loose, I feel an uncomfortable solitude. This too is an instinct of the ram. To be low is to be exposed, vulnerable to uncertain threats.

I reach the edge of a narrow ravine, and as I look for a way across, a power cocks in my hinds, hams quivering, hocks trembling down. Without a thought, the tension releases and I'm rearing, fores reaching, sailing over the ravine and coming down on the far side fores first, hinds reaching under to do it again. Leaping, cocking and springing, down and then up again, down and then up. I'm calmer, much calmer. What can't I escape, vaulting over this wild terrain?

Five

It was mid-August, high on a dark face in the Cascade Mountains north of Seattle, almost a year later. A red rope hung down to a narrow shelf where Erik stood on belay, paying the rope through his hands and peering up. His pale features were framed by curly blonde hair and a bristly beard. He licked his lower lip, watched a loop spring from the coil by his boot, checked the drag through his fist, then looked back up the wall. Ransom was balanced there, nerving for his next move.

“Use both toes,” Erik advised him.

Ransom clung to the rock, his brow creased as if he’d absorbed some of its age. He committed to the move and his trunk rose slowly, the small pack on his back shifting, weight

poised over his straightening leg. He wore specially made shoes with toes cloven like hooves. The right lifted, black points scratching at a nub.

"I'm gonna get a job in Alaska," Erik mused, "belaying real sheep."

Ransom's toes held. He turned to scan the rock above, sorting the choices. To the right, the way grooved and angled. To the left, a dark backbone arched out of the face. "Hopscotch for a Dall," he muttered, goading himself. He swung out of the groove, hands crawling up the rocky vertebrae.

Below, Erik froze.

Ransom's arms were fully extended. His left leg abandoned its hold, flexing, feeling for holds with two black toes.

"What're you doing?" Erik said.

Ransom's toes settled. He shifted his weight, giving up his safety, creeping higher, a dozen feet above the point where the belay was anchored.

Erik shuttled the rope in. "Back off—"

The rope tugged at Ransom's hips. He seemed not to feel it. His eyes were glazed, and his lips mouthed silently. He reached to complete the move.

"You're stoned," Erik said, disbelieving. "Goddam it—"

Ransom seemed not to hear. The tension on the rope threatened his balance, so Erik gave out a few inches, expecting he'd ease down.

But Ransom was rapt. "Huffing, heart-flooded," he muttered, making his move.

"Dickhead," Erik raged, trying to brace his shaking legs.

He held the rope by his hip, fist quivering. "This won't happen again."

Ransom's hand left the rock, sliding to his groin. Without looking, his thumb tripped the carabiner gate. He unhooked the lifeline and cast it aside. "Huffing, heart-flooded, head-long—"

Erik watched as Ransom rose beyond the limp rope.

Chanting beneath his breath, eyes bright, he moved with an animal grace, confident and agile, picking his holds like a ram, feeling the exhilaration a ram feels—

His right hoof slid off a nub. His chest swung out and his hand brought him back just in time. He clung, foot scraping till a toe caught.

"I'll just sit here and watch you kill yourself," Erik said, coiling the rope in.

Ransom stared at the rock. The top of the rocky backbone was six feet above. He had human legs. The agility was in his head. He found fresh holds, trying to think past his weakness, rising slowly, one careful move after another. His arms ached now, his knees were quivering. The rock felt hot. It grumbled beneath his fingers, speaking to him in an ancient voice. He gripped the ledge and clambered up onto it, gasping.

For a moment, he knelt there, staring into space. He could hear a rumble and throbbing deep in the mountain. Gradually it subsided.

He crawled to where the ledge widened, out of Erik's view, and removed his pack. He pulled off his shirt and pants, and drew a bundle of white fur from his pack, lips moving as he

unrolled it. Fur vest, fur leggings, fur cuffs. They were silky soft to touch, the sweet wool odor wafting up. He pulled on the leggings. He'd spent hours sewing the skins, and every stitch brought him closer to the ram. The leggings made him feel lighter. He buttoned the vest over his front, slid his feet back into the cloven shoes, and fitted the cuffs on his wrists. Then he crept to the brink of the ledge and stood there, his legs flexed, gazing across the rocky canyon.

He imagined a stream valley with sere grass. He lowered himself into a half-crouch and began to dip his body, back straight, head high, knees hinging rhythmically. He was vaulting across the slopes, feeling the boundless joy of the leaper, a deep voice sounding inside him.

***Poise tripped, lunging into a cock
and spring assault.***

***Huffing, heart-flooded, headlong
over a flashing flush I vault.***

Yes, I hear you chattering.

No, I will not halt.

At 5 p.m. that day, the shift was ending at an eatery in the university district. In the back room, two waitresses, one short, one tall, were hanging up their aprons. The shorter, a brunette with a pug nose and ponytail, nodded to the other as Lindy stepped toward them, counting her tip money. Lindy's blue eyes were tired.

"Better?"

"Not bad." Lindy sighed and untied her apron.

"It takes a while to put any money away," the taller waitress said. "How old are you?"

"Twenty." Lindy saw solicitude in the woman's face.

"What are you doing on Saturday?"

Lindy regarded her.

"We're planning a baby shower," the tall waitress explained.

Lindy looked away.

"We're having lunch and then—"

"Thanks," Lindy nodded, "but I'm busy."

The two waitresses looked at each other. Lindy was about to leave when she recalled something.

"I'm sorry," she turned. "Did you—"

"Oh, I nearly forgot," the short waitress laughed. She fished in her purse, glancing around to make sure they weren't being watched, and passed Lindy a baggie with yellow capsules in it. "Have you been to the Arboretum? Great place to be high."

"They're not for me," Lindy said.

The tall waitress raised her brows.

"When do we get to meet him?" the short one asked.

"Don't hold your breath," Lindy said. She was thinking of how Ransom would do at a baby shower, but when she closed her handbag and looked up, she realized they had taken her comment the wrong way.

"Relax," the short waitress said with irritation. "We've got our own."

The tall woman shook her head.

Lindy watched them leave. A minute later, she exited alone, stepping quickly toward her beat-up Dodge, digging in

her handbag for her keys. By the time she reached the car, she was in tears.

It was dusk when Lindy reached the small house on Sunset Hill. It clung to the edge of a cliff overlooking Puget Sound. Erik's van was in the drive, so she parked the Dodge on the street, descended the walkway and climbed the short stair to the front door. Across the Sound, a hundred bright torches flared on the peaks of the Olympic Mountains. She fit the key in the lock, swung the door open and stepped inside.

The walls of the front room were a patchwork of maps and mountain scenes. Books and climbing gear were piled on the furniture and strewn across the floor. Their living space had been transformed into a base camp. Ransom stood beside the shelving, turning the pages of a book. Erik was across the room, loading his carryall with the street clothes he'd stowed there that morning.

As Lindy set her handbag down, she sensed the tension between the two men.

Erik retrieved his jacket from a chair, combed his hand through his curls and gave Lindy a sullen look. "Why do you put up with it?"

She glanced at Ransom. He made a cautionary face, and she remained silent.

"We played 'lamb chop in outer space,'" Erik said. "He went straight up an overhang. The rope was in his way, so he unclipped."

Lindy didn't respond.

“Then he put on his duds and yowled the afternoon away,” Erik said. “Quite a climb.” He stepped toward the door. As he passed, he touched her shoulder.

“Are you leaving?” she said, as if to hurry him out.

Erik exhaled with disgust. “You deserve each other.”

The door closed, and Ransom moved to embrace her.

“What happened?” she asked.

He shook his head. “How was work?”

“Not so good.”

“Tell me.” His tone was protective.

“*You tell me.* About your climb.”

He beamed. “It was incredible.”

Lindy laughed.

“I was at the top of this peak,” he said. “I could hear my echo across the canyon. It was like the ram had leaped out of me and was springing across the slopes.”

His high spirits buoyed her. His monomania conjured a potent magic, and she was the only person he shared it with.

“I brought a little of the mountain back.” He stooped over his pack and rose with a rock in his hand.

Lindy fingered the dark grain, imagining his cloven shoes planted on it, feeling some of the exhilaration he must have felt.

“I wouldn’t be doing this without you,” he said. He raised the rock to kiss her fingers.

Lindy saw him sniff and frown, and she jerked her hand away. “I wiped out the ashtrays before I left.”

“I’m sorry.”

She eyed something behind him. “What’s that?”

A new spotting scope stood on a tripod beside the sofa.

"We talked about—"

"Look at this." Lindy took in the gear in the room.

"I can't pump gas and be a shaman in my spare time."

"No. I'm the one who gets the dead-end job."

"Lindy—"

"I want you to realize your dream, but—"

"*My* dream?" Ransom stared at her.

"I have some dreams of my own," Lindy said.

"Such as?"

One eye narrowed on him. "A man who provides. A family."

Ransom was speechless.

"Does that mean anything to you?" Lindy said.

He laughed and gave her a helpless look.

Lindy flushed. A hundred smothered pangs rose at once. She hooked her fingers on the thong around her neck and tugged at it, the red star flaring on her brow. "I hate you."

Did she mean that? Anger had seemed part of her courage, directed outward, keeping them close. Ransom eyed her despairingly, feeling shame descending on him. He had to believe in the nobility of his quest.

"All you care about is your ram," she said. "I buy the drugs, and the two of you get high by yourselves."

"I imagine you're with me." He realized how foolish that sounded. Their great journey was ending, he thought. He wasn't equal to it.

His self-absorption rankled her, but the sight of his defeat

was far worse. “I’ve infected you,” she said sadly. “You’ve got the fleeing disease.”

Ransom gazed at her. He touched her cheek. She needed him, and he had forgotten how much. The doubts that plagued him—they plagued her too.

“The disease comes from me,” he said. “My obsession. We’re cut off from everyone. I don’t have a job, a future— Just this idea. The start of a story, a few songs—”

He shook his head. “I’m going back to school.”

At his words, he saw the longing for escape well in her eyes. He’d failed her.

“Ransom—” She hugged him.

“I’m Sam,” he said.

“No,” she sobbed into his chest. “You’re Ransom. I don’t want kids. Or a man with a job. That’s someone else’s life.”

Her heartbreak consumed them both.

“I just want you with me,” she said. “I didn’t mean what I said. You know that, don’t you?” She shuddered. “It’s my aunt, inside me.”

He shut his eyes, seeking that place beyond doubt for both of them, feeling the ram’s strength returning.

*At the edge of the world, over
the grass I fly.
Knowing this gait is right,
without knowing why.
A feather-thin fate glowing
In a golden eye.*

“I try to hide her from you,” Lindy grieved. “But— Fear brings her out.”

Ransom stroked her temple, speaking words he’d written for the ram.

*The doubts chatter louder, into
my ears and through.
Where are you headed so fast?
Don’t you have a clue?
This mounting dread, what
does it mean?
Don’t you wish you knew?*

The ram’s fears—the fears of a wild creature in a wilderness of danger—brought her back.

“Forgive me.” Lindy lifted her head.

He put his arm around her. “I love you. All of you. Even when you hate me. When I’m fearful, that’s the part of you that opens me up.”

“I won’t let you go,” she whispered.

“It’s just like then,” he said. “I was pulling away. You’ve brought me back.”

She kissed him, and with the kiss his confidence returned.

“We have enough,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” They had been talking about a trip to Alaska.

“The two of us,” he said.

“When?”

“Next week, if you can get the time off.” He escorted her

to the spotting scope. "The optics are unbelievable. You can see McKinley Park from here." He trained it to one side of the window and adjusted the focusing ring. "Don't bump the tripod. Hold your breath—"

She squinted one eye and peered through the ocular at a picture tacked to the wall.

"That's Cathedral Mountain," he said. "See the sheep?"

Through the scope, a half-dozen Dall rams were visible, poised on the crest of a rugged peak. The rock around them glittered, and their horns were golden.

A week later they were in a jetliner headed for Fairbanks. They crouched together by the oval window, scanning the rugged mountains and ice fields of the Alaskan coast. Lindy hugged Ransom's arm. He was like someone waking on the far side of sleep. His dreams were before him.

In Fairbanks, they rented a car and drove south to Paxson. A hundred miles of gravel threaded forests of stunted spruce, leading to a lodge outside McKinley Park. The next morning dawned clear, and they followed the road in. The foothills were dark, the intervening slopes tinged pink by the northern autumn. As they rose above treeline, the vistas that Ransom knew from photographs and descriptions appeared. A great valley. And beyond, a rugged upland, ridge on ridge—a place where neither heart nor mind could feel confinement. Lindy grabbed his sleeve. A herd of caribou ambled across a green slope. Below on the gravel bar, a grizzly was digging. The sight of large animals roaming free was a new thing for them both.

They looked for the giant white peak, but it was shrouded by clouds.

When they reached Cathedral Mountain, Ransom pulled over. He gave Lindy a knowing look, as if he expected the sheep in the picture back in Seattle were still holding their pose. And strangely, they were. A different band, in a different spot—but the white dots on the steep rock could only be Dalls. He set up the spotting scope, his hands trembling. When he focused, he saw the real thing. A dozen ewes grazed the tundra while their lambs leaped in the rocks.

The road continued into the park, across a bridge spanning the east fork of the Toklat River and up into the Polychrome Cliffs, a place that rang through the writings of Charles Sheldon and other seekers of rams. Ransom parked the car on the roadside and stepped out. They packed the scope and some warm clothing, and started through the willows, heading for a high ridge.

Above the brush, the tundra blazed scarlet. As they angled around the slope, cliffs came into view, deeply grooved, gleaming ocher and orange. A breeze was blowing, but the air was warm and everything was touched by sun. They climbed in silence. To draw close to wild sheep, Ransom had read, you had to stalk them as a hunter would: get up high without being seen, stay in the lee of crests, and look over and see. Unlike the sheep men bred, the Dalls had keen senses. They were smart and wary. As the slopes grew steeper and rock replaced foliage, his own senses sharpened. Every sight reached him, every sound.

A hundred feet below the ridge, he glanced over his shoulder and sank to his knees, his heart pounding in his ears. There were sheep on the opposite side of the stream valley. He pulled the scope from his pack and focused it while Lindy huddled beside him. Three rams sprang across the eyepiece, horns half-curl, full-curl, and three-quarter. White as snow, necks stiff, balancing the golden coils as they leaped, they were every bit the archetype of grace and command that he'd imagined. What a blessing to the earth, he thought, that creatures like this moved upon it. They slowed as they reached the divide, and one turned his head to regard them. "Look." He ducked aside to give Lindy room. A few moments later the rams were gone.

Ransom hooked Lindy with his arm and rolled over her. "The way they spring—" He kissed her. "They keep their hinds together. A unified thrust." He arched against her, demonstrating. "They're creatures of lust."

She embraced him with her legs, gazing adoringly. They were running, flying, in their own world again. Just the two of them, as he'd promised.

He unbuttoned his shirt. Her hunger surprised him. She stripped his pants down, biting his left pectoral, rolling the muscle between her teeth. They tore their boots and underclothes off.

"Like they do," he said. Without a word, she rose onto her hands and knees. Trembling, he mounted her. She was like a current flowing to meet him. His loins fired, and all at once, he was the creature he'd dreamed of, head high, hunched and thrusting between earth and sky.

A hundred feet up, on the crest of the ridge, a curl of gold rose. It hovered there, rugose and glittering like a comber thrown up by an unknown sea brimming on the far side. Steadily, a great ram bore it up, standing on the ridge with his head turned away. Ransom froze. The horns were beyond full curl, tips rising to his crown and flaring out. Lindy looked up, the patriarch faced them.

Ransom drank in the sight—the ram’s sensing nostrils, the calm in his golden eyes. He expected the animal to flee. But the patriarch stood motionless, regarding them both.

Ransom raised himself slowly. The ram could smell their coupling, he thought. He could see an indulgence in the ram’s eyes. Lindy was on her feet now, an arm around her middle, bewildered.

Naked and quavering, Ransom stepped forward. The patriarch lowered his head and lifted his fore, doing the same. Ransom stopped. The ram did the same. Again Ransom came forward, heels lifted half-consciously, walking on the balls of his feet. The patriarch descended to meet him, hooves crunching the amber gravel, staring straight at him. His fearlessness was unsettling. Ransom expected him to spook and wheel. Fifty feet. Forty. *Am I in danger?* Ransom wondered. The ram was his size, and he emanated power and male command. These were his peaks, his swards, his cliffs. His neck was thick and stiff, bearing the golden coils high. *You seek*, the ram’s eyes said. *I’ve found. You aspire. I am.*

A strange thought: he needed horns. Ransom raised his hands on either side of his head and flexed his wrists. He felt

foolish, and worried he'd scare the ram. But the ram's eyes were smiling. The ram knew him. Who he really was. A leaper, one of the white band, born for high places.

They were a dozen feet apart now. The patriarch stopped. So did Ransom. The power in those golden eyes opened. The ram understood his quest and had been expecting him. It was an arduous journey, but the ram knew the way. The molten heart was secreted in the heights, and all the years of his life, the ram had drawn power from it. Not through his mind, but through his hooves and his stride.

Ransom saw the ram's chest quiver, felt the throb in his own chest beating the same time. The wise face softened and the ram reached out, flowing his heart to him through his glowing eyes. Showing him, showing him— Ransom let go, surrendering as Lindy had taught him, feeling himself borne on a wild current, molten and roaring—

He turned aside, overcome, half-ashamed, glancing at Lindy as he backed away. She stood naked, watching. The patriarch faced her, suddenly fearful. His shoulder rose, he pivoted to flee. Perhaps he finally recognized who they were, or saw something threatening in Lindy's expression. With a series of vaults, he regained the crest and passed over, coils held high.

Ransom wobbled toward her, the broken rock needling his feet. Lindy stooped to gather their clothes.

Neither spoke. They descended the slope and approached a small stream.

“Broad jumping,” he said. “In high school.” The sensation of thrusting himself from the earth, hurling himself into the air, came back to him. “I’ve always been a leaper.”

“He saw that in you.”

“He was frightened at the end,” Ransom said.

“Not until you looked away.”

“I could see the molten heart in his eyes. And the wrinkles in his horns— A record of his thoughts, year by year.”

The silence between them was reverent.

“There’s no one else in the world who would understand this,” he told her.

They reached the stream. She took her pack off.

“How old do you think he was?” She knelt to fill her water bottle.

“Fourteen or fifteen. He has another summer or two. This might be his last.”

Lindy motioned excitedly.

Ransom crouched beside her.

“Something was here.” She pointed.

Inside a crescent of gravel, there were prints in the sand. Each had a deltoid palm with four toe pads. There were holes where claws had sunk in.

“Wolves,” Ransom said.

She stepped beside them, following the tracks to where they disappeared beneath the flow. “When were they here?”

He didn’t reply.

She looked back.

"They were looking for him," Ransom said, imagining the pack running the ram down.

"They didn't find him."

"Creatures of nightmare." He felt the terror a ram would feel. "Coursing the hills, hoping to catch you at a weak moment."

"They have to eat."

"Whose side are you on?" Ransom laughed. Then something unexpected—a moment when the fabric of reality thins and a hidden truth is visible through it. The sun was low, and as Lindy's face turned, the star on her hairline caught the light. It was like a prism, refracting the fragments of her personality between its arms. The overpowering need, the unforgiven abuse, the wisdom, the child's joy struggling to be heard. Traveling together like a pack.

"Yours," she said playfully. "I'm on your side."

Ransom gazed at her. "I'm the ram and you're the wolves."

Her lips parted. "How can you say that?"

"It's the miracle of my life," he said, seeing the pain in her eyes. "You wouldn't let me retreat, you wouldn't let me escape."

"I'm not your enemy." She spoke half to herself.

"I didn't say that." He closed the distance, drew her against him and lifted her face to his. "I was fearful. You opened me. You bared my heart. You've taught me surrender." He caressed her temple. "This ram cherishes his wound."

"Wound?" she said. But she knew what he meant.

“The blood *my* pack thirsts for is the molten heart.” He kissed her nape and pressed himself against her.

She sighed into his shoulder.

“We’re born with joy,” Ransom said. “The self grows like a husk around that fruit. Surrender—giving the self up—takes us back.” He sank into the grasses, pulling her with him.

He wanted to resume what the Ram had interrupted, but when he tried to mount her, she wrestled him around. “Face to face,” she insisted, and her naked thighs clutched him. “Finding our hearts,” he whispered, “is the greatest thing we’ll ever do.”

The notion that she was wolfish tickled her. Lindy sniffed his collarbone, growling and clawing his ribs. Then as his strokes deepened, her resentment grew. She made angry demands. Ransom, as always, was fearful. But he conquered his fears and let himself go, gasping in her ear, his heart opening. Lindy’s fury died, the seething in her belly ceased and the spasms started, and there was only her need mixed with his own. In the commingling, their hearts, it seemed to Ransom, melted. And in that hot flood, Lindy felt the child inside her returning, whole and safe once again.

Lindy cried. Ransom felt a perfect peace. They held each other for a long time, feeling themselves finally in a world of their own, ascendant over the one they’d fled. This was the home of the ram and the wolves, and that desperate drama spoke to them both.

An hour later, they reached the park road. A truck approached, raising a trail of dust. They waved, the truck

stopped, and a park ranger rolled down his window. He spoke, they climbed in, and the truck started up a grade.

The ranger was impressed by Ransom's story. "It happens, but not often. They crave salt. A biologist brought them clay from a lick a few years ago—maybe you smelled like him. Maybe you've got Dall karma."

"The cliffs are beautiful," Lindy said.

"They're volcanic," the ranger told her.

Ransom imagined the peaks erupting. "Exciting for the sheep."

"That was before the sheep," the ranger said. "A hundred million years before." They rounded a bend, and sun flared through the windshield. "The Dalls in the Wrangells—they've seen eruptions."

"The Wrangells?"

"Southeast of here. All the record rams come from there. That your car?"

"Yes," Lindy said.

The truck halted. Ransom opened the door. He turned again to the ranger. "It's a park? The Wrangells?"

The ranger shook his head. "No people, no roads. Just a giant wilderness with four volcanoes. Mt. Wrangell is active."

"Active?"

The ranger nodded.

They thanked him for the lift. As his truck disappeared around the bend, Lindy started toward their car. Ransom went the other way, wandering onto the tundra. She came after him.

"Ransom—"

His eyes were roaming the distant ridges.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm on fire." He turned, eyes glazed. "There's a mountain where wild rams live and the rock erupts molten from the earth's heart. Imagine," he said. "A fountain of glowing fire. The white leaper in the cliffs and the wolves below. That's it."

"It?"

"The story. A ram pursued by a pack of wolves up Mt. Wrangell—the headwaters of the molten heart. Pursuit and surrender. Our story."

He embraced her, reassuring her, and himself as well. "It would express our love."

She closed her eyes. "The love is more important than the expression."

"Of course it is. The story wouldn't mean anything if I lost you." Ransom could see she was in retreat. In a heartbeat, his vision crumbled. "What was I thinking?" he mumbled darkly. "What's the matter with me?"

Lindy heard his despair and opened her eyes.

"I'll never turn my ideas into anything." Ransom's shame at having his incapacity recognized overwhelmed him. "Those golden eyes—I imagine I have that kind of power, but I don't. I never will—" The glory of the fateful encounter was gone. All he could see was the gulf that lay between himself and the ram.

"Ransom," she looked at him. "Think what's just happened to us. This is one of the most wonderful days of my life."

He seemed not to hear.

"The wolves and the ram," she nodded. "Head for the

clouds,” she made a threatening face, “if you know what’s good for you.”

He regarded her gravely. “If I keep on with this, something bad’s going to happen.”

“Not if we stay close.”

“We need to rejoin the human race,” he said. “Before it’s too late.”

Lindy’s eyes grew dark, seeing the death of his joy and her own. “You can’t give up.”

“You want a man who provides,” he said. “You deserve one.”

She shook her head. “When I’m lonely, I get frightened.” She put her hand on his thigh, recalling their lovemaking. “I long for a family and the home I never had.” She spoke wistfully, as if she now knew their path led a different way. “Ransom—”

She kissed him. “I’m weak,” Lindy said. “You have to help me.”

“If it wasn’t so vague and confused—” His gaze drifted over her shoulder. “The story, the chants—” His goal seemed impossibly distant.

“You’re trying to express the mystery of our hearts,” she said. “You can do it. But it won’t all be leaping. Some of it has to be deliberate, a step at a time.”

Ransom regarded her. She was trying to sober him to his tasks.

“What do you need to do next?” she said.

His determination returned.

“Learn more about wolves,” Ransom said.



The Wolves

Six

Upon their return to Seattle, Ransom applied himself to the story, writing during the day and doing research at night with Lindy's help. All winter, they commuted between Sunset Hill and the university, in the libraries till closing time poring over books and articles, learning everything they could about wolves, volcanoes and the Wrangell Mountains. It went well—so well, in fact, that when spring came and Ransom announced that he was going to make a quick trip to Alaska on his own, neither saw anything amiss.

His intent was to meet Calvin Bauer, a wolf researcher at the university in Fairbanks, and he expected his stay to last a week or two. But one opportunity after another presented itself, and before he realized it, two months had passed. They missed each other terribly, but they were too strapped

financially for him to return to Seattle for a few days. Out of his discussions with Bauer and others, a trip to the Wrangells materialized. Ransom intended to remain in Alaska another month, through early July. Lindy was upset, but she couldn't leave her job for more than a week or two, and they could see no other alternatives.

It was June 4th, Friday, in a birch forest on the outskirts of Fairbanks. The tree crowns were bright green and quivered with light. At seven in the evening, the sun was still high enough to make the white trunks glow on either side of a weathered shed.

Inside the shed, Ransom turned the cock on a water jug and filled a cup. He glanced over his shoulder, drew his hand out of his parka, eyed the quarter tab and put it on his tongue. He grabbed a fresh syringe from the bench and stepped out of the shed, crossing the tramped ground, his boots rustling the leaf litter.

On the ground beside a chain link fence, a man with khaki pants and a chamois shirt stooped over a large gray wolf. As Ransom approached, he drew a needle out of the wolf's haunch and raised his face, smiling gravely. Calvin Bauer, professor of biology, passed the scarlet cylinder to Ransom and received the fresh syringe in exchange.

Ransom watched Calvin jab the comatose wolf. The animal's hazel eye blinked, a long tongue hanging from its muzzle. Calvin gave a tired sigh, as if he too was sedated. Except for his eyes, which darted from the wolf's face to the syringe

filling with blood, his movements were dulled by an exhaustion no sleep could erase. Like most of the faculty Ransom had met, love of the wilds had brought Calvin to Alaska, but somewhere along the way his passions had mired. There were times when not even the wolves could lift his spirits.

“Done.” Calvin rose. He touched his palm to the holstered pistol on his hip, then he dug in his pants pocket and tossed Ransom his keys.

Ransom opened the padlock and swung the gate back. Together they carried the wolf into the enclosure, moving slowly, setting it down ten feet from the den. On the far side of a hillock, the other pack members were watching.

“I’ll chill them,” Calvin muttered at the blood samples. “Then we’ll get dinner.”

They exited the enclosure and Calvin headed toward the shed. As he ducked inside, Ransom pulled a second padlock from his parka and swapped it with the one hanging open on the gate latch. Then he strode to the end of the rutted drive where a road-killed moose calf lay huddled, its fores and hinds bound with twine. He slid a pole beneath its limbs and lifted. Calvin met him on the other side and heaved his end up, balancing the load over his shoulders. They carried the dead animal through the gate, taking unhurried steps. As they set it down, the wolves crept forward, eyes intent, snouts aimed. Approaching them could be dangerous, especially when meat was near. The two men moved back through the gate.

Calvin secured the padlock. “Thanks.”

"It's been a great couple of months," Ransom said.

"I've enjoyed your company." Calvin sat on an observation bench facing the enclosure. He watched the wolves surround the calf. "Got what you wanted?"

Ransom nodded. "One thing. I'm still unclear about—"

Calvin was listening.

"What's their psychological state during the hunt?"

Calvin glanced at his hands and brushed them together.

"Eager. Playful. The dominance hierarchy is preserved—"

"I mean when they're running down prey."

Ransom saw reticence draw over the professor's face.

"Come on, Cal. What's going on inside them?"

Calvin laughed, a childish sound. "They're crazed."

"Tell me."

"Ever see a falcon stoop? Hear it screaming?"

Inside the enclosure, the pack was pulling the moose calf apart.

"You've seen that up close?"

"Once," Calvin said.

Ransom respected Calvin's reserve. The professor was secretive about his wolves, didn't talk to the press about them or allow them to be photographed. He said he was fearful of wolf politics, but Ransom discerned another reason for his caution. "Tell me."

"We were on a tributary of the Koyukuk. It was twilight, we were eating. A pack charged into the middle of our camp, nine of them chasing a male caribou. They'd already hobbled him and they knew he was theirs."

Ransom saw the glint in Calvin's eyes.

"They brought that caribou down right in front of my tent. I was standing ten feet away, but they didn't see me. They were raving mad. Bloodlust is the only word for it. One of them had his hind legs in the campfire. I could smell his fur burning."

Ransom was transfixed. The scientist was gone, and the man in his place shared the turbulent emotions he'd felt.

"They tore his belly open and ate his intestines. They were deep inside him. He was still grunting and struggling. It went on for twenty minutes. Finally, when the caribou was dead and they'd eaten half his carcass, they woke up and realized where they were."

Ransom shuddered, envisioning a ram in the caribou's place.

"To say they take pleasure in it—that doesn't come close. Killing is like sex for them, a state of rapture. We're omnivores, we have a little of that in us, but—" Calvin shook his head. "The wolf's role in the ecology of ungulate prey populations," he mimicked his lexicon, "doesn't quite capture it."

"No, it doesn't."

Calvin gave him a thoughtful look. "There's something special about you. You're invigorating to be around." He laughed. "Like dawn in the woods, when it's freezing and all your senses are tuned." He rose. "By the way, I'd be happy to review your book for technical accuracy, if you like."

Ransom nodded. "Thanks. And thanks for hosting the dinner."

“We’re looking forward to it.” Calvin started down the drive toward his car, expecting Ransom to follow.

“I wonder, would you mind if I howled with them one last time?”

“Go right ahead,” Calvin said. “See you Sunday.”

Ransom returned to the enclosure and peered through the fence. The calf was in pieces now, the wolves calmer, chewing on their chosen parts. Ransom waited for Calvin’s car to disappear. Then he went to the gate, found the key in his pocket and opened the padlock.

When he entered the enclosure, every snout turned toward him. The omega wolf, curled to the side, having lost its fight to join the feast, raised its harried face and stared. A pale female drew her nose from the chest cavity, legs quivering. A yearling whimpered. As he drew closer, Ransom could smell the calf’s insides. One by one, he met their eyes. The alpha, a large male, challenged him, standing his ground, hackles bristling, his muzzle shiny to the eyes with blood. Ransom felt the patriarch guiding him step by step. He approached the alpha. The other wolves moved to either side, circling.

Ransom stopped and took a breath, imagining he was a ram in their midst. The wolf musk sickened him. They were lunging, sinking their fangs into him, bringing him down. He could feel their hunger, their bloodlust. The madness Calvin described. He was staring the alpha in the face. The power in those eyes couldn’t be denied. Ransom let his arms go limp. His heart throbbed like a frightened rabbit’s, but he offered it to them, swelling his chest. A beatific calm welled

inside him—the treasure of martyrs, an ecstasy only the hopeless know.

The alpha tensed, growling deep in his throat. Terror exploded in Ransom's brain. Then the yearling shouldered into the growling alpha, and the larger wolf turned, licking his jaws. Ransom's rescuer peered up at him with the same lightness he found in Lindy's eyes. The young wolf sat on her haunches and the others followed her example.

Ransom tipped his head back and moaned. The pale female responded, low and mournful, then the yearling joined in, squealing and yapping. And then they were all howling in chorus.

They were death and he stood among them, alive, feeling the soul in their voices. They sang to each other's hearts, and to his own, and to the source of all hearts who had fashioned life and death and laid a beautiful river of blood between. Desire for their prey united the pack, just as love for him made a shattered Lindy whole.

The birches were weaving and turning, crowns opening and closing, fountains bursting with glowing leaves, sprays of flame scattering from the flashing boughs. Through this dizzying spatter, Ransom was rising. Beyond the trees, a blinding sun shone: the source of everything molten. He was headed toward it, high above wolves and forest, rushing to meet that living fire.

The Bauer residence was close to its neighbors. The Alaska Range rose on either side as far as the eye could see, an endless forest lapping against the small green lawn. It was eight in

the evening and still daylight. The windows were lit and there were cars on the drive. Two children on bicycles turned onto it, hollering.

Inside, Ransom and four professors were gathered around a dining room table cluttered with pictures and papers. Calvin Bauer was on his left. Sid Yasuda, a geologist at the Geophysical Institute, was on his right. Yasuda was slight of build with short-clipped hair, forty and overdressed, in a gray sport coat and a thin black tie. Across the table was Katherine Getz, professor of ornithology, and Hank Papadakis, botany head. With Calvin's help, they had pulled the dinner together. And the academics had their own curiosities about the Wrangells, which were nearly unknown to science.

"I added three species," Hank said. He passed a list of plants to Ransom. Below his trimmed beard, a necklace of beads hung across the front of his turtleneck sweater. "He's collated Scott's work in Chitistone Pass with Murray's collection from the Skolai, adding and dropping using Hultén's range maps." Hank's voice was eager as a teenager's. "What's the total?"

"A hundred and sixty," Ransom said.

Katherine Getz was perusing the field guide Ransom had assembled, eyeing pictures cut and taped from books and journals. Her movements were stiff and professional. "Lichens too?"

Ransom nodded. "I'll collect anything I can't identify."

"This is wonderful." Hank shared his admiration with Calvin and Yasuda. "Like a Victorian naturalist."

Calvin gave Ransom a private wink.

"There's no information on the birds of Mt. Wrangell," Katherine told the group. "Don't forget to ID my gulls," she reminded Ransom, swallowing what remained in her wine glass.

"Probably pipits up high," Hank said, glancing at her.

"He'll see pipits." She spoke curtly, as if scolding Hank. Then to Ransom, "A special bird."

"What makes them special?"

Katherine's features softened. "Their spirit. Their courage."

"I've never seen one," Ransom said. "The photos aren't much to look at."

"No," Katherine said. "They're small and brown."

Ransom heard the sadness in her voice.

"The bird world is full of obnoxious males," Katherine said. "Strutting and cheeping, gaudily dressed. Pipits are the real thing. True romantics." She smiled.

Hank laughed at her invective. The others seemed used to it. Instead of seeing cheer in her smile, Ransom saw the lines crossing it. It was like a broken windshield about to collapse.

"Calvin and I were talking about magpies," he said. "How they follow the wolves."

Katherine nodded. "For scraps."

"Or to help them hunt," Ransom said.

"There are reports of magpies spotting injured prey," Calvin said, "and calling wolves to the kill."

"It's possible," Katherine allowed. "In England, they thought they could smell sickness. 'By the window a magpie flies. By the midnight chimes someone dies.'"

"There'll be none of that once the food's served," Mrs. Bauer warned them. She circled the table, refilling glasses from a dark bottle.

Calvin glared at his wife.

She seemed too busy to notice. "Are you sure you won't have a little wine?" she asked Ransom.

He shook his head.

The front door slammed, and two children pounded across the living room. "Guess what we found!" a towheaded boy exulted. His shirt and trousers were caked with dirt.

"An owl pellet," Calvin said.

"Upstairs and wash yourselves," Mrs. Bauer barked. "Now!"

The boy turned, pouting, and his sister skulked after him.

"Aren't you the least bit interested?" Calvin asked his wife.

The dinner party was silent. Katherine stared at her wine. Hank raised his brows. Ransom watched Mrs. Bauer turn crimson. She seemed to be waiting for Calvin to recant, but he just waved her away. She returned to the kitchen.

Hank pointed at one of Ransom's maps. "There have to be wolves." He glanced at Calvin.

Calvin nodded.

Hank's finger traversed Mt. Wrangell's southern spurs. "Any mining?" he asked Yasuda.

The geologist shook his head. "Mostly lava flows. Prospectors avoided the place."

Hank passed the map to Katherine.

"Is Burt Conklin coming?" Ransom wondered. He'd asked Yasuda to invite the head of the Geophysical Institute.

Conklin had been studying the heat on the Mt. Wrangell summit for years.

"Burt's a busy man," Yasuda said.

"You're sure you can handle a month out there?" Hank said.

"I'm sure," Ransom said.

Yasuda peered at him. "You're doing this alone?"

Ransom nodded.

"You have an understanding wife," Katherine said.

"There's no one like her," Ransom replied.

She cocked her head at him, as if she was trying to identify an unusual bird.

"All this information you're gathering—" Yasuda sounded troubled. "You're not getting a degree or collecting for a museum."

"No."

"What's the purpose?"

"Sid." Katherine gave the geologist a disparaging look.

Hank chimed in. "Does everything have to be in the name of science?"

"I'm just curious." Yasuda's manner was deferential. His hand settled, palm-down, on Ransom's wrist.

"He's writing a novel," Calvin said.

Yasuda looked impressed. "What about?"

"Wolves and sheep," Ransom said.

"Conflict." Yasuda sipped his wine. "Who wins?"

"They both do," Ransom said. "It's a love story."

"That's idealistic," Yasuda said.

"It's a time for idealism." Hank gave Yasuda a patient look.

"He was at Berkeley. If I'd been there," he told Ransom, "I'd have been marching with you."

"This is where I want to be." Ransom slid an aerial photo of Mt. Wrangell's North Crater toward Yasuda.

"Not a friendly place," Yasuda said. "We put in survey stakes a few years ago. Solid steel, three inches thick. When we came back they were bent at right angles."

"You've seen this?" Ransom raised a copy of an old newspaper. The headline read *Mount Wrangell Now in Active Eruption*. "On April 14, 1911, 'an immense volume of fire swept up into the sky.'"

"There are a lot of unverified stories," Yasuda said. "The indians had quite a few."

"What does Conklin think?" Ransom asked. The key question wasn't answered in any of the research papers. "Is it going to erupt?"

"The summit's getting hotter," Yasuda said. "That's all we know. The most recent lava flows scientifically confirmed are fifty thousand years old."

"They look like these?" Ransom pulled some photos from the pile.

Yasuda nodded, uncertain what the point was. "Those are common flow structures."

"It's like medieval armor." Ransom glanced at Hank and Calvin, passing one of the photos around. "You think of shields, bucklers, hip and shoulder coverings."

"Fracture planes," Yasuda said.

"Look at these cliffs." Ransom handed a photo to Kath-

erine. "The rock is like masonry. The walls of a fortress, with castellations and keyholes."

She gazed from the photo to Ransom. He was obviously building to something.

"These squared-off structures," Ransom went on, "this columnar jointing—" Another photo. "Merlons and turrets— There's a lot of this in the Cascades."

"Typical of basalt flows," Yasuda said.

"Amazing, isn't it," Ransom continued. "That this effusion from the earth's depths, so free and glowing, could cool into a landscape of defense." He watched their faces. "That's what my story's about."

Mrs. Bauer returned from the kitchen with salads.

"How hearts that are guarded and protected can find their way back." Ransom looked around the table.

"Back?" Yasuda eyed him suspiciously.

"To the molten state." Ransom's voice rang with daring.

Hank looked delighted. Mrs. Bauer set the salads down without speaking, avoiding further humiliation.

"A mountain explodes and magma fountains from it," Ransom said. "Can you remember when you felt like that?"

"That's not geology," Yasuda laughed.

"It's more important than geology," Ransom said.

Calvin stared at him. The bird expert poked her salad with a fork.

Ransom turned to her. "Katherine?"

At first, she didn't respond. Then she set down her fork and faced him.

Ransom could see: she knew what an act of courage it was for him to share his ideas.

"Science won't lead you to an unguarded heart," she said.

Hank sighed.

"I'm a woman fighting for a place in a man's world," Katherine said, speaking to the table. "I've battled in the field and in faculty committees, and proven I'm man enough for both." She faced Ransom, softening her defiance. "I thought that was what I wanted. But it's not."

"Katherine—" Hank eyed her sadly.

"I'm unmarried and childless," Katherine said. "Not even the birds give me joy. Their freedom reminds me of what I hoped for and how short I've fallen."

Ransom gazed around the table.

Hank bowed his head. Calvin was riveted. Mrs. Bauer looked from her husband to Katherine, appalled.

"How does a woman stay young at heart?" Katherine said. "Does she have to sit on a nest?"

Yasuda unfolded his napkin quietly.

"We all have problems of the heart," Hank said.

"What are yours?" Ransom asked.

"That's a very personal question," Mrs. Bauer objected, defending the group, as if they all had a right to be shut-in. Calvin ignored her. Yasuda laughed and shook his head.

Hank held his hand up. "Getting too easily attached," he said, answering Ransom's question. "Like Katherine, I've never married. I love women," he shook his head, "too much."

"Hank—" Katherine rolled her eyes at him.

"We're all still friends," he protested.

She shook her head, then resentment got the best of her. "Hank's a warbler," she said to the group. "Bright, cheery, and gone for the winter."

Hank stared at her. For a moment, he looked as if he might burst into a rage. Then he sat back, laughed and stroked his beard.

Katherine relented, sighing at Hank to ask his forgiveness. Ransom glanced at Calvin. He was rapt, watching Katherine the way he watched wolves. Hank turned to Calvin, as if it was the host's turn. Calvin swallowed, mulling his response.

His wife was distraught. "Can I get you anything, Sid?" When Yasuda declined, she hurried into the kitchen.

"These are important questions," Calvin said, "for someone with his life before him." He eyed Ransom fondly. "If I was twenty years younger—" Calvin left his words hanging.

Hank looked at Yasuda. "What do you think, Sid?"

The geologist nodded, considering. "I think," he turned politely to Ransom, "you've wasted a lot of our time."

"Come on," Hank shot back.

"I don't feel that way," Katherine said.

"On false pretenses," Yasuda added, compounding Ransom's offense.

"I'll admit," Calvin said, "I didn't know till tonight what this book was about." He gave Ransom a thoughtful look. "I'm surprised, but I'm not upset. I hope something good comes of the questions you're asking."

"Absolutely," Hank agreed. He eyed Yasuda harshly. "The

rest of us stuck our necks out," he said. "You never answered the question."

Yasuda made a conciliatory face. "The heart beats without love," he said simply. "It has to. We're all alone in this world."

Recognizing what was politic, Yasuda made a show of leniency and lowered his hand to Ransom's wrist again. Ransom felt a strange electricity.

Mrs. Bauer returned from the kitchen with two platters. She put one down and started around the table with the other. "Some pot roast, young man?" She regarded Ransom dubiously, raising her fork.

He replied in a colorless voice, accepting her reproval. "My wife's the meat eater. The vegetables look good."

At ten-thirty that evening, the sun was still above the horizon and the sky was blue. Outside a diner near the entrance to the university, the traffic was busy. Inside, Ransom stood talking on a pay phone. His expression was strained.

"I tried yesterday morning."

"It's been five days," Lindy complained. "You said you were going to call Friday. I sat here by the phone all night." She was on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry. I was with the pack. It's no excuse, but I came up with a title."

She seemed to collect herself. "What is it?"

"I know how hard it is to take a call at work."

"Tell me," she said.

He smiled into the receiver. "It came to me when the

wolves were howling.” A burly man was standing beside him, glowering, waiting for the call to end.

“Ransom?”

“*Wild Animus*,” he said.

“That’s the title?”

“An animus is a spirit, an animating passion. But it’s also the will to destroy. As in ‘animosity.’” The characterization of Lindy as a wolf pack still stung her. He could feel her recoil across the line. “*Wild Animus*,” he repeated. “The passion within us that attacks to possess, and surrenders for love.”

“I miss you.” Her voice trailed with self-pity.

Ransom took a breath. “I miss you, too.” He could feel their bond unraveling.

“You’re starving me,” she said miserably. “I’m sorry I agreed to this. I want to go with you.”

“You can’t quit,” he said. The Wrangell trip would be financed by her earnings. “Are things any better at work?”

“A little. I told them I need the tip money, and the girls understand. They’ve agreed to let me work nights.”

“This was all a mistake,” he said. “It’s not fair to you. I should have come back.”

“I love you,” she sobbed. “But—”

Her anguish raised all of his fears.

“I won’t be able to talk to you for a month.”

“Lindy—”

“When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning.” He shook his head, now very unsure.

“Did your skins and headdress arrive?”

“Yesterday.”

“I’ll be there on July fifth,” she said. “I’ve got my tickets, and directions from Anchorage.”

Ransom stared at the dial.

“Do you care?” she shrieked. “No! You don’t give a damn about me.”

Ransom pulled the receiver away from his ear. Her rage fed her sobbing, a continuous toll of injury and pain.

“That’s it,” he said. “I’m coming back.”

“I’m sorry,” she cried, realizing how far she’d gone. “I’m so sad without you. You understand. Don’t you? Tell me you understand.”

“I understand,” he said. “I’m coming back.”

“I won’t let you,” she laughed. “Not after all this preparation. That was selfish of me— It’s that bitch again,” she said roughly. “I’m fine.”

He could hear her fighting her tears. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m fine.”

Ransom was silent. Lindy was finding her hope again.

“How was your dinner?” she asked.

He wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Ransom?”

“Revealing,” he said. “I think Yasuda’s gay.”

“Is everything ready?”

“I think so.”

Ransom looked around. The burly man had gone. The crowd in the diner was thinning. Behind the broiler, a cook

was telling a joke to a busboy. The wilderness of the Wrangells seemed very distant.

"You're nervous," she said, feeling it over the line.

"I am." He had a hundred fears. "The rock is dangerous. Everyone keeps warning me about it."

"Don't do anything crazy."

"If you're going to think like a ram, you have to climb like one. The wolves are gnawing at me, too."

She laughed. "You said you understood."

"I mean the real wolves." His Friday night encounter with Calvin's pack was indelible. "I don't think I'd want to run into them in the mountains."

"Should you take a gun?"

"They're shy," he parroted what he'd been told. "They rarely attack humans."

"Go light with the acid." Her voice was grave. "Please."

"Don't worry." The conversation seemed to be drawing to a close. He was realizing how much being out of touch with her would affect him.

"Think about us," Lindy said, sensing his malaise. "What you're doing is so important to me." Her commitment to the quest affirmed their devotion to each other.

"It will be hard—" His voice choked.

"I'll be with you, Ransom."

Her wisdom reached him across the wire. His aspirations were sacred to her. It was her belief, as much as his own, that nerved him for what was to come. "I know you will," he said.

Tolsona Lake was forty miles by air from the westernmost Wrangells. He could have rented a car and driven there, but a mail plane ran twice a week to a small public airport fifteen minutes from the lake, and the seats were cheap. He was the only passenger that morning. He hugged the window, but the approach to the Wrangells was drifted with fog. The lowlands were vague and gray-green, the mountains dark hulks lobed with snow. Now and then, a crag would surface, wrapped in scarves of mist.

They landed, taxied over the blacktop past a couple of hangars and stopped. Ransom stepped out and looked around. There were a few parked planes, a small outbuilding, and a station wagon with a boy leaning against it. He was short with tousled hair and a down vest. It was chilly. The boy came toward him.

"Ransom Altman?" the boy asked. The top of one of his ears was nicked. His manner was cocky.

"I spoke with a man named Skinner," Ransom said.

"Skimmer," the boy replied in a gravelly baritone. He laughed, noticing the boxes being unloaded. "Yours?"

Ransom nodded. Skimmer took one. Ransom grabbed another and followed him toward the wagon. They slid them in the back.

"Are those the Wrangells?" Ransom looked to the east.

"Yep."

The clouds were like gray soil and the rain like black roots

raying down. The dark flanks of a mountain were visible, pleated with snow.

“What am I looking at?”

“Mt. Drum.” Skimmer eyed him curiously.

A short while later, the station wagon was turning off the Glenn Highway, headed for Tolsona Lake.

“You’d have plenty to eat,” Skimmer was saying, “if you shot a moose.”

“I’m packing my food,” Ransom said.

“Cover more ground,” Skimmer nodded. “That’s the way.”

The lake appeared on the left, edged with brush.

“When can I leave?” Ransom asked.

“You need to talk to my dad.” Skimmer’s tone was reserved.

Ransom glanced at him. The boy seemed uncertain how his father would react.

Above the lake, dark lanes of cloud rolled from the west, knotted and streaked with silver. Along the shore, willow and poplar were bursting bud, raising candelabra with small green flames. The drive split and Skimmer turned down an incline. A white building stood by the water, next to a float plane moored to a crude dock. A sign read *Hurley’s Flying Service*. The car came to a halt.

Skimmer nodded and threw the door open. Ransom followed him down the path. On one side, a large pelt was draped over a sawhorse. On the other was a cairn of antlers and skulls. As they reached the door, a gunshot sounded behind the building. Skimmer raised his brows.

The office was small. Two old sofas with blankets covering tired upholstery were cornered around a rickety coffee table. A man sat on one of them, pulling on rubber boots. Against the wall, boxes of motor oil were piled shoulder high. A woman stood behind a battered wooden desk, talking on the phone, eyes bright, with shadows beneath. On the wall was a photo of a plane crushed to shrapnel below a sheer cliff.

"I think so. I'll check," the woman said. She closed a file folder. "Certainly." Her voice was warm, her skin pale, her dark hair streaked with gray. "Alright, Burt. We'll be expecting you."

She hung up and reached for a coffee cup. Ransom saw a strand of rosary beads beside it. Another gunshot sounded.

"Mom—"

"Yes?" The woman turned, glancing from her son to Ransom.

He introduced himself, shaking her hand. He could see she had no idea why he was there. "That wasn't Burt Conklin by any chance?"

"I'm Ida Hurley. Can I help you?"

"He wants to be dropped off on Mt. Wrangell," Skimmer said.

She smiled. "How many in your party?"

"Just him," Skimmer said.

Ida regarded him. "Hunting?"

Ransom shook his head. "Just wandering around."

"Where are you from?" She seemed to sense his shyness.

"Seattle," Ransom said. The rosary was hers, he thought.

Her eyes flickered like candles behind a screen. Guardian of the wilds, he mused. Pledged to her faith amid a world heedless and profane.

"The Wrangells are dangerous," Ida said.

Skimmer huffed with irritation.

The man on the sofa watched with amusement. He was big-chested and muscular. His glossy black hair billowed over his forehead.

Ida put down her cup. "Do you have any experience with—"

"Mom—" Skimmer rolled his eyes.

Ida ignored him. "You'll have to talk to Doug."

"Come on," Skimmer motioned, heading for the back door.

Ransom followed. The little office was attached to the hangar, which accounted for most of the building's space. Its large doors were open and the skeleton of a wing lay on benches. By the lake's edge, a small red prop plane with large balloon tires was parked. Another shot fired.

Ahead, on the gravel yard, Ransom saw a man facing a patch of aspens, lowering his rifle. He turned, stubbled and shaking, speaking angrily to a shorter man behind him.

The shorter man, Doug Hurley, was rigid and expressionless. "I warned you," he said.

In front of the aspens, three log sections were standing on end, a tin can perched on each.

"I'm rusty." The shooter raised his left arm. It ended at the elbow.

Hurley had a squarish head on a thick neck. His ball cap was down to his brows and his eyes were shelled over by mirror

sunglasses. "You're not going to maim my animals," he said.

The hunter was dumbstruck. He peered into the hangar, eyeing the mounted bear's head on one of the walls. "I saved three years for this."

Hurley's expression was hard, his lips motionless beneath a trimmed mustache.

"You can't stop me," the hunter said.

Hurley didn't reply.

"I'll find someone else," the hunter threatened.

Hurley was motionless. Was he going to respond? Ransom wondered if the hunter could see himself in the mirror lenses.

Finally he swore, turned and strode away.

Doug glanced at his son. Skimmer smirked.

Ransom watched the mirror lenses turn to him.

"What kind of head suits you?" Doug's tone was wry.

"One with golden horns," Ransom said.

"Flightseeing?" Doug glanced at Skimmer.

Skimmer shook his head.

"I'd like you to drop me off on Mt. Wrangell," Ransom said.

Doug's mustache twitched.

"And pick me up," Ransom said to fill the quiet.

"How long?"

"A month."

Doug gazed at Skimmer. It was impossible to tell what was going on behind the mirror glasses. Without a word, Doug turned and stepped across the yard. Ransom and Skimmer followed.

By the time they reached the office, Doug seemed to have

forgotten Ransom. "How's the north?" he said, moving behind the desk to examine a calendar.

"Low ceiling," Ida replied.

"What happened to Stahl's fishing trip?"

"Canceled."

Doug turned his mirrors on her. The man on the sofa lowered his gaze, tucking his pants into his boots. Skimmer looked out the window, as if he'd noticed something on the lake.

"He didn't like being bawled out," Ida said, "for tracking mud into the Cessna."

"Someone should have told him not to," Doug said coldly.

Ida tensed, but she didn't speak. The seams around her mouth were deep.

"We're not booking them again," Doug said.

Ida turned away, but there was no escape in the tiny office. To Ransom, the woman seemed gnawed and abandoned. Skimmer picked his nails as if this had been going on for years.

Doug faced Ransom. The pilot's attitude spoke through the silence. This is my world, he seemed to say. My wife, my son, my planes, my mountains. Mine to smile on or curse, depending on my mood.

"What do you know about spending a month on Mt. Wrangell?" Doug made it sound like a ridiculous idea.

Skimmer's expression turned doubtful. The man with black hair grinned and settled back to enjoy the exchange.

"I've done a lot of climbing in the Cascades."

"We dropped off a guy like you," Skimmer said, "year before last. Wasn't there for his pickup."

“We never found him,” Doug added.

Ransom nodded.

Ida had recovered herself. She was eyeing him with concern.

“Going to live on berries?” Doug asked.

“I’ve got a stove and freeze-dried food,” Ransom said. “Warm clothes. Rain gear. A good sleeping bag—” He glanced at the man with black hair. The man gave him a humoring nod. “I’m not going higher than five or six thousand feet. It won’t be cold.”

The room was silent.

Ransom stared into Doug’s mirrors. “I know what I’m doing.”

The pilot’s condescension seemed to abate.

Ransom turned to the wall map. “Somewhere in this area.” He pointed at the volcano’s southern flank. Below the white of the dome’s glacial mass, brown contour lines defined a half-dozen spurs radiating into the green of the surrounding forest.

Ransom saw Skimmer grin. The kid was back on his side.

Doug regarded him for a long moment, then shrugged as if foreswearing responsibility. “There’s a strip on the Dadina River. Chichokna’s rutted out.” He approached the map. “I could get you in here. Or here.” His stubby fingers caressed the ridges like an old lover.

“What about the Cheshnina?”

Doug touched the terminus of the Cheshnina Glacier, following the watercourse that flowed from it, to a spot five miles downriver. “There’s a strip here. Wasilla Bill’s got a cabin.

Uses it once or twice a year. Probably wouldn't mind if you slept there."

"I'm going to keep moving," Ransom said.

"Can't carry a month's provisions."

"I can go for two weeks. I'll need an air drop."

Doug nodded. "We'll take the Super Cub. Won't be today. I'm counting caribou with Vince."

The man on the sofa raised his hand. "Vince Silvano," he said. Ransom saw the patch on his sleeve—*Alaska Fish & Game*.

"What about our hunter?" Ida asked.

"Flunked his ordination," Skimmer said.

Ransom was ebullient. "Can we fly the area before you put me down?"

Doug nodded.

"Alright if I pitch my tent beside the lake tonight?"

"Sure," Doug said. "Bring a firearm?"

Ransom shook his head.

Doug gave him a stony look.

"There are bears out there, you know," Doug said.

Ransom smiled at his concern. "And wolves, I'm told." He gazed at Vince.

"Plenty," Vince nodded. "I buzzed a pack on the Cheshnina last fall."

Ransom's heart stopped. "How many?"

"Seven. Three blacks."

"What were they doing?"

Vince laughed. "Looking for something to kill."

Seven

The little red Super Cub seated two, front and back, and the fit was tight. Ransom kept his knees together and made sure, as ordered, that his boots weren't on the elevator cables. During takeoff Doug was motionless, welded to the plane. At five hundred feet, he settled back, shifting the stick between his legs, watching the spruce and muskeg pass. Without radar or radio, the Cub was self-sufficient, feeling its way through the sky. When Ransom's elbows touched the fuselage, he could feel it growling.

Mt. Wrangell was obscured by a cloud ceiling at seven thousand feet, but the spurs building up to it were visible, lit by beams raying through. As they headed up a river valley, Doug turned. "The Dadina," he said over the engine's drone.

Ransom saw the tail of Doug's eye glittering behind the mirrored sunglasses.

Ransom checked his topo, watching the ridges rise on either side. Steep slopes emerged from the forest, smooth with tundra, and the first crags appeared. Then they were in it—the world of rock, peaks and cliffs spewed out of the invisible mountain. The Cub banked beside a line of gray columns that looked like guard towers. Ransom clutched Doug's shoulder and shouted over the drone, pointing. Through a break in the ridge, a sweep of triangular scarps caught the sun. Doug's head cocked. He read Ransom's excitement and wristed the stick, sending the Cub wheeling through the break. Black colonnades sped by on the left, pink turrets on the right. Then the Cub's right wing dropped and Ransom was staring at a giant amphitheater terraced by flows, the highest frontwork with slides breaking through, the triangular scarps sheer and gleaming before him. He shouted and the window flew open.

Ransom gripped his seat. Doug's arm lifted, hingeing the clamshell door up and latching it to the wing's underside. The bottom hung down. Doug's head cocked again, inviting. They rose over the amphitheater's shoulder, touched the cloud ceiling and fell down the far side, descending toward the Chetaslina, past cliffs grooved with dark galleries and armored with shingled plates, the vacant battlements of a dead castle, carpeted with snow. With the plane's side open and the wind blasting through, Ransom pointed at a sheer cliff. The Cub tilted and careened toward it. Ransom unlatched his seat belt and pushed himself out, gripping the Cub's frame with

one hand. The gray slab swung giantly before him, undercut by red caves, eroded maws with red tongues sticking out. Then Doug was diving by scalloped arcades, past merlons rising from crimson slides. Ransom set his right boot on the Cub's tire and hung in midair, his heart racing, surfing a red wave through the frozen flows, seeing the outpourings through his streaming eyes.

He fell back in his seat and wiped his cheeks. Doug was quiet, but Ransom could feel his excitement.

When they crossed the East Fork River, Ransom leaned out again, scanning the terrain, looking for the level place he'd marked on his map—a boulder bed beside a terraced stronghold. He pointed. "There."

"Edge of those boulders?"

"Yes."

The reconnaissance completed, the Cub crossed to the Cheshnina Glacier, skated over its falls and descended into its rumbling gorge. At the bend, a peak rose mid river. A half-dozen Dall rams stood among the dark buttresses below the summit. Unlike Polychrome Pass, the rock was damp and mossy, roofed by caves and cells. The rams were rigid, alarmed by the plane.

Then they were arrowing down the Cheshnina. Doug throttled back the engine. They dipped and the river came charging up, trees hurtling past. Ransom couldn't see anywhere to land. The river canted, gravels blurring, then the wings evened and the wheels touched down. The plane bounced and settled, slopes shuddering and freezing as it taxied to a halt.

Doug opened the cab. Ransom stepped out into the stillness. While the pilot unloaded his backpack, he circled the plane. The landing strip was a narrow path cut through the willows. A loose woodland surrounded it, climbing halfway up the peaks. Above treeline, the slopes were brown and straw, streaked with snow. He was breathless—an émigré landed on a deserted shore. His fear of being alone here was suddenly real.

“Back in two weeks,” Doug said.

Ransom turned, nodding, trying to smile.

“Friday. Edge of the boulder bed.” Doug spoke in a low voice, as if the wild place and their business there required it. “Put your tent up and lay out your sleeping bag so I can see you. Pickup’s two weeks after that, Friday again. Right here.” He pointed at a trail through the brush. “If you get back early, Bill’s cabin is over there. Leave him some firewood.”

Ransom knelt beside his pack. His parka was lashed to the top. He freed it and put it on.

“What’s that?” Doug stared at the horns emerging from the pack, curling to either side.

“Dall.”

Doug laughed. “Usually we fly them *out*.”

Ransom saw the mirrors fix on him, amusement shaping Doug’s lips beneath his mustache. It shook him to the core. Doug was his lifeline. Ransom took a breath. “Where are you from?”

Doug read his distress and softened. “Nebraska.”

“Why here?”

Doug licked his lip. "Alaska was my dream."

There it was, Ransom thought. The signature of the heart. "Mine too," he said. He gazed at the mist drifting through the spruce, up where the treeline ended. "You've been in these mountains."

Seconds passed without a response. When Ransom looked back, Doug was a couple of feet closer to him, peering at the same veiled slopes.

"Fifteen years ago," Doug said, "I swam horses across the Copper River." He pointed. "We rode that ridge, Ida and I."

"You sound like someone who's lost something he loved."

Doug regarded him stonily. He glanced at the horns coiling out of the pack. "What are you doing here?"

"You know the sheep," Ransom said, making sure.

Doug nodded. "As well as anyone."

Ransom eyed him with silent intent, thinking his wild thoughts. I'll tell you, his eyes promised. Come closer. Take off those glasses. What are you afraid of? Come closer and see who you've transported to these mountains of yours.

Doug saw the invitation and resisted. He'd agreed to fly Ransom, and that was the extent of it. He had work to do. But Ransom caught Doug wavering. Curiosity? Or something deeper? We have a connection, Ransom thought.

The pilot stepped toward the Cub, then stopped and turned, giving him one last chance. Doug just stared, but Ransom could read his mind. Was he sure he wanted to do this?

“Two weeks,” Ransom nodded. “The boulder bed.”

Doug smiled a real smile, shrugged to himself, then climbed into the plane and started the engine. A minute later, he was bumping down the strip and lifting into the sky.

Ransom boosted the pack onto his shoulders, turned his back to the river and set off through the forest.

The brush was leafless, gray twigs clicking, admitting him without a struggle. Only their tips were green. But around his boots, the colors were lush, ruffles of bright lime *Peltigera* woven through beds of apricot moss. Was something moving in the undergrowth? He stopped, and so did the sounds. The willows were whisking against his parka.

The way grew mucky. He heard the stream. His readings said it would be greenstone, and green it was—ocean green above the flow and pale jade beneath, colors that seemed as pure and clear as the water itself. Around the stream, the air was thick and humid, banks oozing mosses and purple blooms. Noiselessly, two white butterflies—pierids, to be exact, for Ransom was trying to identify everything—chased each other out of one willow cage and into another, vanishing as quickly as they’d appeared. The mysterious land was playing with him, revealing and concealing itself.

At 3,500 feet, the brush thinned and he began to wander the slopes hunched over, muttering into his cassette recorder and clicking his camera. He’d see something and throw off his pack, scramble around on hands and knees, and check his field guide. It was late afternoon when he found a place for the birth of the ram.

Where the last brush met sere grass, the slope blazed orange. He hurried up the incline, and the closer he got, the brighter the bushes blazed. They were waist high. He went down on his knees beside one, hearing it hiss and rustle, seeing its glossy tapers writhing and flickering in the breeze like a field of flames. It was diamondleaf willow according to his guide, and the flames were last year's leaves. He curled beneath them and blurred his gaze, imagining himself at the center of the bush with the flames flashing over him.

He looked down and saw ash. It crumbled beneath his fingers, and there were wisps of smoke rising from it, frozen threads white as chalk. He thumbed through his guide, with the shadows of the flames dancing over the pages. They were ground lichens, *Stereocaulon* and *Thamnolia*. The embers were crackling. Teek, teek. A small bird hopped through the bush. It had a finch's bill and a golden stripe on its crown. Ransom turned on his recorder to capture the sound. The land he'd dreamt of was rising around him. And the ram was rising with it, real and alive.

He continued up the slope, angling toward the crest, logging impressions as he went. The earth was scattered with tussocks, potentilla mounds budded with yellow-starred eyes, tangles of crowberry tassels. Sights for the ram to see, odors for him to smell. Windflowers were everywhere, tilting on thin stems, like bubbles bursting above the straw. It was a favorite Dall food, so he ate a few. Where the soil was hard, magenta rhododendron burst like inch-high fireworks among the stones. He heard a scolding noise and saw a small animal

standing on a rock, whipping its tail. Then others, calling to each other with indignation and alarm. The ground squirrels were like all his detractors. They scampered at the threshold, calling him foolhardy or crazy, jabbering to turn him back.

At 5,000 feet, the cassiope took over, dark green beds winding between the hummocks. He crossed a snow flush and the ground lichens changed—*Cladonia* clumped like cauliflower, emerald *Alectoria* like branching hair. His energy seemed inexhaustible, just as it was on those acid nights when he and Lindy first met.

At 2 a.m. he reached the crest. He trudged through ankle-deep snow and mounted a prominence, hoping to see Mt. Wrangell. The vista was obscured by haze. He pitched his tent and collapsed on his sleeping bag.

The next morning he was awakened by a rusing sound. He sat up. Birds were strafing his tent, brushing the nylon with their wings. Sensing he'd roused, they fluttered around the entrance. He opened the flap and they settled in a half circle, eight or nine of them, small and brown, peeping as if they wanted him to come out. They were pipits. Ransom crawled out of the tent. The birds rose and hovered around him excitedly. Then he turned.

An enormous island floated before him. A white dome, like Rainier but so unlike it—larger, broader and smoother—and so much more ethereal, utterly removed from mankind and the world he'd known. Its curves glowed, the snowy skin distended, swollen to bursting with the selfsame desire that

filled his heart. It had stood here alone all these years, glaciers pouring down it, fires burning within, its great power mounting and subsiding—with hardly a human on earth aware it existed. In the sky above, a giant backbone of cloud was arched, like the spirit of the ram leaping across the firmament. He found his notebook and jotted impressions while the pipits did acrobatics around him.

Later, after he'd examined glaciers and peaks through his scope, and glassed one of the pools at the valley's head, he made himself breakfast and explored the crest. Then he opened his pack and removed the headdress.

It was a wild visage, wilder when he raised it before the dome. The eye orbits were shielded with black metal screens. The face was twined and beaded to the cheekbones, the mouth unobstructed. Dall horns curled golden from its brow, and between them his torch medal had been woven into the ropy skin. Locks of beaded twine hung to waist level on either side.

It had taken him all winter to assemble it. He had modeled the frame with plumber's tape, and from that, a metal sculptor had welded the real thing. Horns were illegal to buy or sell, but he found an abandoned pair at a Portland taxidermist. They were three-quarter curl, an uninteresting trophy, but just what he wanted—a ram in the prime of life. The taxidermist mounted the horns on his frame, and a Seattle artist wove the face and locks.

Ransom rested the headdress on a boulder facing the pool and sat beneath it. With his back to the rock and a fantasy world of lichens around him, he began to write, pausing to

glance at the pool or refresh himself with a handful of Wrangell snow. It had a sweet taste. The pipits returned that afternoon to see how he was doing.



The wind darts my flanks, the ground yanks beneath me. I'm following the stream, hinds cocking and springing, fores rustling down. Windflowers festoon the slopes like a tidemark of froth, flaring and shaking, mouthing bravely at the wind. A ground squirrel chatters, raising the alarm. I watch my hooves swish through the tussocks, marveling at the miracle of four legs. This body knows this land, these mountains at the edge of the world, and this heart yearns for the unseen, opening ahead with every thrust. I feel myself more and more a ram.

To be a leaper. To live life on my toes, letting what greets me sharpen my eye an instant before. Fores reaching, spindly but assured. Hinds powering, wired with muscle and nerve. The golden-crowned sparrows sing a five-note song, simple but stirring. My leaping flushes them. They skim the willows and drop back down, my fate like theirs, glowing and hopeful but hinged on the moment, feather-thin. Forward, a saddle appears at the valley's head. Beyond that, peaks are dimly visible behind a veil of cloud. The doubts chatter

louder—squirrels calling from swell to swell. “Where are you headed so fast? This mounting dread—what does it mean?” I wish I knew.

My pace is quick, the way untraveled— I cross a hillock matted with cranberry, the tiny leaves meshed, overlapping like tongues. “Your dream, your dream,” they stutter stiffly. “Keep in stride, trust this heading.” The ground is changing, rocks punching through. My hooves clack down, magenta blooms bursting, willow leaves hissing, pebbled by nets of nerves. The stream skeins to strands that trickle down a knoll.

I head for a bright slash of orange moss, vaulting wet gravel and then up, mounting the embankment, toes sinking in, pads cooled by wet velvet. The rill tacks among the rocks, and then the slope lays back. Set in the saddle is a scoop of green.

I rise on the rim, eager for a better view. Between the valley’s thighs, a river and a low spur are visible. The sun casts longing looks across the land—a special light, meant to surface things precious. Ripples are traveling the river’s back. A lake glitters like a jewel rising out of the earth. Along the stream’s banks, wickerworks of willow glow like filaments of gold. The wind is in my face. I inhale, savoring the rich scents as I pull them apart: ledum turps, alder balsam, the ginger of arctic willow, and over it all potentilla’s heavenly rose.

I draw back from the lookout and face the green—a bed of cassiope, and in its center, a blue pool, rock-ringed, fringed with sedge.

Up to the liquid mirror I step. A white face glides over the reflected sky, curious, ears perked, jaw firmly set, golden horns coiled. I lower my head and the image rises to meet me, its long muzzle closer, parted lips black, nostrils flaring as I breathe. Golden eyes peer into mine, and as the reflected head tilts, the eyes brindle gray-green. The recognition is instantaneous. I can see my thought train, the concealed remnant of my human self.

My frame and my senses are animal. My voice is shrunk to an inner whisper. Behind my eyes, a kernel of mind survives, surprised on all sides. I have no ram memories, only wild instincts and untamed emotions. That's troubling, frightening. They clamor inside me, speaking their powerful sufficiency.

I curl my lips and sip, and the pool awakes. My image wavers. Across the water, an oblong rock washed by the ripples gives back a fateful drip. Something has been set in motion and can't be stopped. On the pool's bottom, luminous scallops appear, along with a strange thought—my presence here is known. The scallops are a golden net. Cast at me. The scallops flicker. An uncertainty in the light. I raise my head.

Thin lanes of cloud are gliding over the western hills, putting bars across the sun. The earth is stalked

with shadow. My ram senses tense. The lances of cloud merge at their rear, and as I watch, the last rays of the sun are clipped by the embrasures and the bright peaks and valleys sink into the pall. With dusk comes fear. Below, the shadows of two tapers of cloud glide along the ground. They reach the backlit willows, cross the stream and climb the incline, headed toward my lookout.

A jeering caw. I lift my head. At the tip of each of the tapers, a magpie flies command. Thrashing tattered wings, they drag the shade across the land. The forked shadow reaches the green now, a prong on either side. It swallows the rim, crosses the pool, sliding over my hooves, up my legs and onto my chest.

I shiver. My pulse skips. The dimness is like an affliction. Fears of darkness lead my thoughts into dismal hollows. Shapes are stirring there, in the depths of my brain, curling and turning, spectral and amorphous. Shapes of nightmare. My breath stops, my limbs stiffen. I shake my head to clear it, but the vague impressions grow distinct. I see the mouths of tunnels, and creatures shifting within. A snout appears, pushing out. A beast with dark fur, then others, pointed faces raised, eyes glittering. Up from their nether-world they come, milling in the ghostly haze. Stealing through it.

The wind has dropped to nothing. The valley is still. A squirrel yips from a distant slope. The crests

have fused with the ceiling of cloud, seamless except for the threads of snow strung like nerves down the gullies. Then I hear it.

A cry, faint and muted, like a star flickering in the depths of the sky. It reaches out and dies away. I stand rigid, listening. Again it comes, louder, long and rising, fervently sustained. A second joins in, deep and guttural with a downward slur, black with craving. And a third, shrill and tremulous. The first quavers, dwelling on some desolating sorrow while the second mounts, modulating its plaint with a terrible intimation. Then a fourth starts up, and a fifth. The howls gather and roll, woeful and wooing. The perverse entreaty peaks, arching and dying across the gulf of space. Silence returns, leaving me alone with my fear.

I listen, waiting. Turning my head, holding my breath, stretching my senses. But all I can hear is that there is nothing to hear.



Two days later, the phone in the office of Hurley's Flying Service rang. Ida picked it up, exchanged greetings with the caller and held out the receiver to Doug. He'd just come from the hangar and was wiping grease off his hands, mirror glasses in his shirt pocket.

"It's Ransom's wife," Ida said, braced for a grumble of irritation. Doug nodded and took the receiver.

"Hello." He gazed through the window, in the direction of Mt. Wrangell.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Lindy said. "I wanted to find out if—"

"I dropped him on the Cheshnina River," Doug said. "Weather's good. The mountain is clear. He should be having the time of his life."

Doug's tone surprised Ida. He noticed her staring at him and laughed, as if he'd been caught in some mischief.

"Can you check on him?" Lindy asked.

"That's the plan," Doug said. "We have a date to drop him provisions. Give Ida your number. We'll call and let you know if he's still alive."

"Doug—" Ida objected.

"I'm sure he's fine," Doug said into the receiver.

"You don't know how much I'd appreciate that."

Doug glanced at Ida. "Oh, I think I do."

"Can I write to him?" Lindy asked.

"Sure. We'll drop whatever you send us along with his food."

"Thanks."

"You know," Doug spoke off-handedly, "I'm curious as can be about those horns he's packing with him."

There was silence on the line.

"He showed you the headdress?"

"I got a peek," Doug said.

More silence.

"That's what I fear most," Lindy said. "He'll get so caught up playing the ram, he'll do something dangerous."

Doug's brows lifted. "I guess we'll just have to hope for the best." He turned to Ida with a look of astonishment. "Hang on, I want you to give my wife your number."

Ida took the receiver and jotted on a pad. When she hung up, Doug was back at the window, gazing at the dome.

"What was that about?" she wondered. "Horns?"

"Ransom's a lunatic." The harshness had returned to Doug's voice, but as he faced Ida, a reckless emotion broke through—the passion for risk and exhilaration, a recollection of what he'd felt on the Wrangell ridges. "We're all a little crazy when we're young, I suppose."

Ida was startled—more by the look in Doug's eyes than his words. She saw longing for something they had sought together. "Yes," she said. Her own longing lay just below the surface. "I remember."

Back in Seattle, Lindy stared at the phone. She was still in her work clothes. The comfort of Doug's words was already fading. She unbuttoned her blouse and removed her bra, regarding herself in the mirror. Her features were drawn, her body was slack. Where was the joyful child? She peered into her eyes. Without Ransom, she was a ghost. He had found her real self, and now it was bound to him. When he left, he took it with him.

At the head of a valley on the southern flank of Mt. Wrangell, Ransom stood naked as well, regarding his reflection. The pool was like the one he'd described in his story. Its water had green essences and blue eyes, the colors swirling and

recombining as the breeze crossed it. A crescent of snow was banked against the far rim. To the west, beams of gold fanned through tears in the clouds. His clothing lay on the straw by the pool's edge. As he undressed, he'd thought of Lindy. He missed her, but it was strange—as distant as she was, he felt her with him, close to his heart.

Like the ram, he held his breath, not a muscle moving, listening to the quiet. The only sound was the murmur of the stream in the valley below. His invigoration was mingled with unease. The drug was coming on.

He tossed a pebble across the pool and watched the concentric arcs bow toward him, imagining the wolves had lapped the water there. Then he tilted his head back and howled from deep in his chest, imagining it was the pack he was hearing—the hungry moan, the soaring cry, the yapping and looping—roving across the land, echoing among invisible ridges, beating back and forth, searching with fierce intent. Fear took hold, left and took hold again, moving through him in waves. Wolves. What fearsome things might their hungerings inspire? How close was danger now?

Ransom turned. His regalia was on the green behind him. He pulled on his fur leggings and cloven shoes. He buttoned his fur vest and slid the cuffs with fringes of knotted twine onto his wrists. Kneeling before the headdress, he raised it by its horns, faced it toward the lowlands to hear the echo of the howls, then turned it toward the refuge of the rocky heights. Then he lifted it over his head.

“Golden eyes, know,” he pronounced. “Golden horns,

grow.” He lowered the headdress, hinged the facepiece close and fastened the latches on either side, feeling the padded frame lock itself to his skull. He tried the weight, moving his neck stiffly, flexing his legs as he turned from the lowlands to the invisible heights behind. Then he began to chant, his voice hushed and tremulous with dread.

Listen—

The very quiet is alive and pumping.

*Pulsing pouts in the cooling umbra
thumping.*

Muffled throbs, measured beats

Of an unseen rigadoon,

A nimble padding on my reason,

Palpable and importune.

Was he imagining it? No, the sounds were sharper, borne from a greater distance. Through his eye screens, Ransom saw a different vista, broader, deeper. The trembling in his limbs, the leaping of his heart— His thoughts were still human, but the rest was ram. He shuddered at the thrill of it.

*Pierce, pierce, eyes, pierce the thick-
ening shade and see*

*The dread pad-padding
approaching me.*

Shafts of sun struggled to cross the western ridge. The clouds strangled the last of the light, and dark fur covered the slopes.

***Essence of fear, herald of pain—
Striking through my nostrils into
my brain.***

The odor invaded his muzzle with a terrible familiarity—earthy, musky with a sour tang, frighteningly intimate. The ram took a step back. Ransom gave his sheep instincts their head, letting them turn him toward the land behind. As in his story, the incline blocked the view. He reined the animal in, continuing to chant.

***Legs moving in place,
Pad-pad-pad, wanting to go, pad-pad.
The germ of panic sprouting
In my chest, don't let it grow.***

The ram rebelled with the force of instinct. His heart throbbed madly, bones thrumming, breath chugging, and the more firmly Ransom held him, the more wildly his heart beat. The view quaked as if suspended in gel, as if the land itself was stretched over that pulsing heart. Fear flooded his brain—the thudding had a life of its own. Something black in his bloodstream had been set loose. Even as he listened, the throbs grew louder, sensing his infirmity.

Pad-pad, pad-pad. He could hear their paws on the slope below. Wolves, striding toward him. He tried to pierce the shadows, desperate to see the danger, cocking his head to fix the sound. Pad-pad, pad-pad. A noise like panting, the clink of gravel, a rustle of tundra. Ransom was exultant. The ram was wild to flee.

Suddenly the padding stopped. At the edge of the shelf, he saw an odd-looking prominence—a head-shaped rock. It rose as he watched. A large face pointed at him, eyes glaring as a black wolf stepped onto the green. At its rear two more appeared shoulder to shoulder, dark gray, moving on lanky legs. Then another, smaller with a jouncy stride, and three more behind it. The others spread out to either side of the Lead, lining the crescent of snow.

Seven of them, tense with excitement, their faces looming across the pool in a gloating arc. On the left, a large wolf bobbed its blunt muzzle, huffing and craning toward him, its searching features surrounded by a fanning gray ruff. The fur of the wolf's underside was spiked with water and his genitals were dripping. Beside the Ruff were the pair with lanky legs, wowing to each other, the tail of one draped over the other's back. Their odor was female and they studied him, one knowingly, eyes looking up from her downturned head.

The ram quaked with fear. Ransom struggled to calm himself, capturing the images for his story as he edged around the rim, trying to buy a little more distance. His steps were awkward. He was on his toes in a half-crouch with his knees bent. The wolves could smell his fur. They could see his horns. They thought he was a ram. On the right, the smallest jounced in place, fur black, eyes bronze—a yearling female, bucking her chin and dancing her paws with the eagerness of a child. Beside the Younger, another female skulked in the sedge, nearly prone, harried and haunted, her features trenched, eyes regarding him through a woeful mask.

A squat wolf grumbled, shoving the Ruff aside, lugging against the Lead's shoulder, winded and panting—a female, much older, grizzled and paunchy with a sour stench, her belly stuck with dead leaves. She grappled her jaws at Ransom, fangs clicking, tail snapping from side to side. One eye menaced him, the other was scarred into a permanent squint.

Ransom's composure cracked. He stepped back, feet hissing through the sedge. The lanky pair shifted, snouts pointing at his cloven toes. *I'm not a ram*, he thought, hands going to his headdress. He fumbled with the latches, desperate to shed his disguise. One popped open, but the other was jammed. He struggled with it, then reached into his pocket for his folding knife. The Younger stooped, fores splayed, tail wagging, enjoying the game. The Hangbelly's lips drew back, a dollop of drool stringing from her chin. Ransom opened the knife and pried at the latch. The blade snapped off. The knife fell from his grasp as the Lead put his fores on the bank of snow and leaned over the water, huge and male with his tail up. His lips twitched, baring wicked fangs.

Ransom's senses were reeling, but the Lead's sulphur eye held him. The bright iris seethed, then it was wheeling with knobby spokes. In it, he could see the wolf's mad desire—to tear him open, to drink his blood, to bolt his innards and swallow his tongue, to gnaw to slivers the bones that upheld him. In the wheel's center, the black pupil pulsed, porthole to the void. He was falling into it. Ransom turned his head with a snap, wrenching away, staggering back.

He looked for footing and saw thin white shanks. A white

chest. A white muzzle starting out from his face. He could feel his corded muscles and recumbent spine. His dizziness had dissolved with his human shape, sobering him to a new reality. The Hangbelly grumbled, worried he might escape. He shifted his left hind. Back and back again, fighting panic, resisting headlong flight. The Hangbelly's rancor swelled to a growl. Back, back, hooves trembling through cassiope. The Lead's snout swung from side to side, cuing the others as he slipped off the snow bank and started around the pool at a trot.

The ram reached the back of the shelf, still facing the wolves, hooves prancing, tossing his head toward what lay behind, hoping for higher ground. The Lead slowed to gather the pack in a single body, tensing for the rush. The ram turned his shoulder, heart hitching— The Lead lunged, thrusting and gulping, and the others followed in a bounding charge. Shying wildly, the ram bucked up the cassiope, blasts of breath and the pound of paws right behind. He vaulted a snow flush, measured the height of a ragged wall piercing the tundra, and sprang with all his might. Over the top he passed, forelegs reaching and coming down. His heart sank. A gray tableland stretched before him.



I must cross. I'm plunging headlong down the bank, hoarding the momentum to keep my lead. Over my shoulder, the wolves hurtle the bank, headed straight for me.

Faster. Flee, flee!

I'm galloping on the flat, nothing but matted leaves and gravel between me and the ramparts beyond. They follow fast over the open ground, Lead in front, the others bunched, the bleak-face falling to the rear. The Younger slips and rolls, vaulting back up without losing a stride.

Faster, faster! Over dry grass, diapensia, azalea, quilts of willow on the grit. I must be pulling away. But the huffing mounts at my rear. I glance back and see them strung out in a line: the Lead, the lanky pair, the Younger, the Ruff, the squint-eyed Hangbelly and the Dangler. "You are mine," their paws chant. "You are mine."

At the head of the tableland, beyond a tangle of ridges, a rocky bulwark of rises, castellated and squared off where it meets the pall's underside. An unbreachable stronghold, but I'll never reach it. I break off from my course, feint to the left, veer to the right, switching and swerving to cut clear. The huffing fades, then the pack recoups its loss, eating up the spread, the Lead striding four lengths behind, face looming, ears pricked, eyes sizzling. Hope dies, panic rises— Safety's too far, I'm losing ground too fast.

To the left, the tableland abuts a confusion of slopes. I wheel at full tilt, aiming for a blind alley, a draw between ridges that bends as it ascends. The pack pivots like a blade on its point, swinging around the Lead,

the lanky pair running right behind. The knowing one is in front: the Wise, seeing my fright. The other, the Scout, is at her sister's tail, following my every motion with pitiless eyes. The grass is suddenly cool to my hooves, ground soggy, snow flushes everywhere. My fores punch holes, hinds slipping and sliding.

Gray shoulders, pumping by my haunch— The Scout, even with the Lead, readies to strike. I'm galloping up the narrow alley, earth quaking beneath their paws. My wind is going, breath coming hard, chugging the last ounce of flight from my frame. The bend comes and I take it in stride, musk billowing as I turn. The Scout lunges, snapping at my ham, snagging my shank. I go down and the Lead hurtles over me, tugging at my chest. A sharp pain—a tuft of my fur is caught on his fangs. I roll, shuddering with terror, hinds digging and springing, bolting up the ride.

A wall bulges where the spurs come together, an incline of broken plates descending from its base. The grade steepens, muscles at their limits, fear whipping my body. The musk billows and the Lead lunges, snapping at my thigh, the void so close it blackens my mind. He misses and I'm onto a loose shuffle of rock, bounding up the stacks from scrap to scrap, frantic but exact, using my last reserve. Up, up— At the base of the bulging wall, I stop and glance back.

The pack is still on the ride, except for the Younger who stands on the breakings, looking up at me,

wagging her tail and whining. The Dangler is at the bend, sitting on her haunches. The others are knotted together in united menace, watching to see what I will do. I'm breathless, heart beating madly, in their sights but out of their reach.

Above, the convex slab rises, like the back of a giant beetle emerging from the rock on either side. My instincts say climb and my legs agree, moving me onto the offset tops of the shingled rock as I scan the heights. The slab is striated in the vertical, cracked into long sections. I cross a rift, following a thin curb. A scurf of lichen angles up the rock, roughing its surface. A hoofhold in the gangway. I reach for it. Then others—a dimple for the hind, a ready pock. I edge up to a kerf, plant the tip of my toe and reach for a stirrup, slowly shifting weight.

A clatter of rock below. The Younger is scrambling among the breaks, thinking to follow me. The Scout scans the slab, guessing where I'll head, while the Wise eyes my trembling hooves, plotting the course of my confidence. The Hangbelly grumbles to the Lead, nuzzling him without taking her eye from me, galled by my escape. He pays her no mind, watching me, licking the blood from his chops. There's a pain in my chest and a creeping warmth. I look down. To the left of my midline, the fur is torn away, leaving a bloody oval. Below, the Lead drinks my scent from the wind.

Heart, stop your quaking— You'll jar me from my

holds. I tense my chest and continue up. Fore on a flake, hind in a niche—a hard move, no room for error. I cross to a loose stub, steady, then stretch over a blank space, ascending onto a small ledge. Below, the wolves huddle. The Lead has his back to me, but his resolve is evident in their faces. He touches the Hangbelly's nose and starts back down the ride at a trot. She follows and so do the Younger and Ruff. At the bend, the Lead nips the Dangler who rises and takes her place at the rear. The five are loping back down the ride. The Scout and the Wise remain below, watching, preventing my descent.

Keep on moving, up a short scotch, onto a nub. Is the Lead projecting my course? The slab's base is invisible now—all I can see is the rock bowing darkly out. The exposure's severe, but I'm feeling my powers, the perilous holds keyed into my nerves. My pulse has calmed. When I reach the top, I'll find some high crossing, a route that will keep me out of their reach. The growing chill stirs me. The heights are my home.

The slab breaks into setbacks. I step onto loose shingles, sampling the air. To the left, ridges lift, so riffled with peaks, I'm unable to tell which lies beyond which. Behind me, the tableland stretches away. Ahead, a slender bridge of rock lies between this high point and the next. The bridge bristles with spines and descends in steep slides. A saddle dips down to it.

I make my way cautiously, scanning for signs of the pack. Nothing on the inclines to the right, or below

the bridge. Nothing in the breeze. The far side of the bridge moors on the nape of a rounded peak streaked with pale slides. Or there's another route. Through the half-light, I see a stair of ledges leading from the bridge's end into the trough below.

I step out onto the splintered strip, pickets leaning this way and that. Some are loose, shifting dangerously. Pads of desiccated moss are lodged in the crotches. I put my hoof on one and it comes away. If a spine breaks out— If I slip—

I skirt a broken spine and squeeze through the vee in an expanding fork. Did they come upon me by accident? They may be far away by now. Chasing down some other creature. A spike grates, shifting against me. I'm nearly across, but the hedge is thick, forcing me out where the exposure is greatest. Must I stay high? It would be safer to take the route down. From there, I could find my way back.

Suddenly the dark file appears from behind a spur. They're coursing into the valley below. The Lead's snout is aimed, his eyes on me. The Ruff breaks off, ascending a rocky slope at my rear, angling toward the saddle and the start of the bridge. The lanky pair continues, the Scout running half a length in front of the Wise, heading farther into the mountains. The others slow and stop directly below.

The Lead stares. The Hangbelly stumbles against the Younger, badly winded, but as she raises her

muzzle, her ears perk and her jaw gapes. There was nothing accidental about the encounter at the pool. They found me then, and they've found me again. I'm not just any prey.

The thicket at the start of the bridge has parried the Ruff. He stands before the bristling spines, cutting off my retreat but unable to proceed. The Hangbelly grumbles, nuzzling the Lead, her evil eye glaring up at me. The Younger jounces, prancing her fores and wagging her tail. I face forward, hooves raised, shoulders shifting, threading the spines with careful steps, balancing over the void. Their eyes follow every move. The Lead's ears tic, hearing my breath sounds, my hoof sounds. Calm, calm. Don't rush. The end of the bridge is close, close—

The rock teeters beneath me. It's loose, coming away— I bunch my legs, bobbing and bending, fores beginning to slide. Below, the Lead's snout shoots a column of steam. My head tosses, eyes fixed on the rounded peak as I come off, springing wildly from the hocks— A rearing leap over the deep drop. I land on a corbel where the bridge meets the slope. Then I'm bounding forward without looking back.

Safe, safe— I leave the deadly trough behind, heading across the flanks of the rounded peak at a lope, committed now, taking the high route, putting the tableland and the pool out of my mind.

My breath escapes in snorts. The peak's slides are ocher, soft and powdery, my hoofbeats barely audible. To the right, as I round the peak's flank, another mountain swings into view. Its face is blotted by darkness, but its silhouette is massive and rimmed with battlements. A moat of boulders fills the space between.

Where are they now? The quiet can't be trusted. I start an angling descent toward the boulder bed, headed for the sanctuary of higher rock, hoping I've lost them.



The next morning dawned cold with a high overcast. Ransom woke, uncurling slowly, his limbs stiff and his feet like ice. He was still wearing his furs. His headdress was on and he was feverish inside it. The flesh of his neck felt like melting wax. He rose, sluggish and ungainly, balancing on his cloven shoes. He tried to remove the headdress. One of the latches was loose, but the other was jammed so badly, he had to bang it with a rock to open it.

He set the headdress on the ground where he'd slept—a flat spot pawed out of the sod, littered with white hair and dark pellets. A sheep's bed. He gazed around, recognizing the rounded peak, seeing the slides, amber in the daylight. He was high on its flank. He remembered his transformation, and when he turned, he saw the bridge of spines.

Then he looked down. His vest was streaked with blood. He drew a breath and parted the fur carefully. It was stuck at first. He felt pain. Then the oval was visible, raw and abraded. He touched it and shuddered. He raised his head, a bewildered smile deforming his lips. His eyes were glittering. He retrieved a pinch of sheep fur from the bed and put it in his pocket. Then he started back across the rounded peak, carrying his headdress by one horn, following the cuneate prints.

When he reached the bridge of spines, he scanned it carefully. Every detail was familiar—the corbel, the place where the hedge was thick and he'd been forced out, the trough below. He couldn't have crossed it. He wouldn't have been able. But there were Dall prints by the corbel. They lacked heels. Had he stood on his toes? No, the prints were made by a real sheep. His shoes were larger than that. Weren't they? He measured and fretted without conclusion.

He descended the stair of ledges into the valley, threaded a maze of low hills and came out onto the tableland. He moved far enough up the bended ride to see the beetle-back slab, and stood staring at it, terrified by the thought that he'd climbed it. The convex was gray basalt, fragile, untrustworthy. Confused now, unable to separate fact from imagining, he started across the tableland. He found where he'd slipped, and not long after, a flock of pipits appeared. The birds accompanied him for a ways, peeping and circling. One faced into the wind, holding himself stationary and turning his head to peer at him. Are you alright? the bird seemed to ask.

When he arrived at the pool, reality pushed his confusion aside. His discarded clothes and his pack were where he'd left them. He set the headdress down and retrieved his pants with a nervous laugh. He put on his clothing, finding himself in small things, buttoning his shirt, lacing his boots, taking comfort in reminders of his humanity. His thoughts turned to Lindy, and he felt a great relief, imagining she was beside him. As he loaded his regalia into his backpack, she whispered in his ear, soothing him, knowing what he'd been through. Then she was before him, touching his chest, tending his wound. The wind lifted her hair from her brow.

Ransom froze. Her face was fractured. He saw it unpuzzling—not one nature, but seven, loose around the scarlet star: hungering for love, understanding his actions and what they meant, playful as a child, caring, but hateful she'd been left behind, fearing no good would come. The Lead, the Scout, the Wise, the Younger, the Ruff, the squint-eyed Hangbelly and the Dangler. The pack that had chased him through the night was Lindy.

An impossible thought. He pulled the drawstrings, closing his backpack over the furs and headdress, wondering if the wolves were completely imagined. Had he crossed the tableland in a panic, unhinged by the drug, fleeing for his life with nothing behind him? He gazed at the pool, then stepped slowly through the grasses, approaching its edge. On a bald spot, he saw his boot prints, and beside them the impression of his cloven hooves. A couple of feet farther, the soil was covered

with wolf prints. He stared at the largest, the center pad and the four satellites aligned before it, each with a protruding stem where the claw sank in. *I'll be with you.* Lindy's parting words echoed in his ear.

Ransom drew back, his eyes on the grass. He saw the folding knife and something glinting beside it. A green caterpillar was crawling on the broken blade, and as he picked it up, the larva fell, coiling to protect itself, making the sign of the ram on the rays of straw. His fingers felt the wound beneath his shirt. Breezes from different quarters were crossing the pool, and where they met, the water was a lattice of shimmering diamonds. What had happened here?

Ransom hefted his backpack, putting the question aside, reminding himself of his suggestibility and his regimen of acid. For a few hours, reality had been reshaped by the ideas in his head. It had passed, and he had another twenty-eight days alone in these mountains. He skirted the pool and descended from the green, vowing to abstain from LSD and focus on his story. Preserve his sanity, and just write.

Eight

His tent was pitched next to a stream on the far side of the boulder bed, with the mountain fortress at its rear. Eleven days had passed, and in that time Ransom had moved his camp to follow his story, writing scenes as he went. He sat hunched over his notebook now, in the midst of a devastating solitude, his pressed plants and rock samples around him, his sleeping bag spread out on the tundra. He'd kept his vow to abstain from drugs and the ram's progress to the fortress was complete. Despite bad weather, he'd found locations for the scenes to come, and they were labeled on the map beside him, with a route traced between.

He stopped to sharpen his pencil with a handmade tool—the blade broken from his folding knife bound with

twine to a haft of willow. His whittling ceased and he lifted his head. A drone echoed from the corners of the sky. He spotted the red Cub, and a cry came from his throat as he rose and waved. It circled and came in low. Ida was in the back seat, and as the plane skimmed toward him, she leaned out of the open clamshells with a bulging pillowcase in her hand. The Cub banked and her hair blew wild, and as the pillowcase fell she regarded him with a curious expression, like an astronomer's wife who, being told of a new constellation, has come to the observatory and put her eye to the telescope to see for herself. Doug stared through his silver glasses.

Then the moment was over. Ida sank inside. The Cub's wings wagged and it droned away.

Ransom hurried to the drop, opened the pillowcase and saw the freeze-dried food and gas, along with a gift—a head of lettuce. He smiled, glancing again at the plane, tiny now against the mountains. As he walked back to his camp site, he felt like he was returning to life after a long absence.

He knelt and unloaded the pillowcase, finding an envelope at the bottom. "Ransom" was written on it in Lindy's script. It seemed a miracle the letter had found its way to him. He held it to his lips, imagining the message inside.

"My Ram— If you're reading this, all is well," Lindy began. "You made it to your rendezvous and got your air drop. Doug and Ida have been wonderful. We speak every few days by phone. I'm frightened, I admit. But they know where you are, and they care, and that has made it easier. I wish I wasn't so

selfish. Does that sound strange, coming from me? Whenever I'm lonely, my vicious side strikes out. It just happened again, but I tore that letter up and started fresh.

"What I want to say is that I love you very much. I know what is in your heart, and I believe in you. That's the real Lindy. Who but Ransom could conceive of *Wild Animus* and pursue it as he has? Whatever risks you take, whatever dangers you encounter, I understand. I will share the uncertainty, the doubt and the fear while we're apart. And when you're back, I will take you inside me, and tell you again and again—you are everything to me. Lindy."

Ransom raised his head. A cloud was scrolled above the rounded peak, like a white iris opening in the blue. He began to cry. It was a lucky mistake. He'd done nothing to deserve that kind of devotion. He held the letter to his heart, knowing it was the Wise who had written it. Then he stood, feeling a great welling of confidence. He'd kept his vow—he'd been cautious. Cautious to a fault. He'd imagined the ram's progress without living in his skin. And he'd written.

He strode along the stream bench till he reached a pile of dark boulders. Edging between them, he stooped and peered into the shadowed crevice. He saw a silken web, the wheel of threads glittering with rain. There was a spider at its center, legs banded black and white. Laughing, he swept the web away, and pulled his headdress and bundled furs out of the crevice. A pika squeaked. "Don't worry," he said.

On the way back to his tent, a rockslide let loose from the fortress. They were frequent this time of day, following the

afternoon heat. At first it sounded like something was turning inside the mountain, shoveling insistently. A billow of smoke rose from the terraced cliffs and a load of rock cascaded out, crashing onto the slopes below. Blocks left white puffs as they bounded down.

Ransom set the headdress and furs beside his tent, kissed Lindy's letter again and folded it inside his field guide, remembering her words. She had pledged her love, and he would do the same. *Wild Animus* was his pledge. Not just its relics, the manuscript and chants; but its living truth: the incarnation of the heart's surrender.

It was time to be the ram again.

He raised the map and gazed from its penciled route to the sheer cliffs of the fortress, weighing the risks. The last time, the drug and the skins had delivered him to fear, and a mystery he couldn't resolve. Might that happen again? If it did, would courage preserve him?

He unrolled his furs, removed the blue jar and arranged his costume on the tundra: headdress among the fireweed fountains, vest on a mat of *diapensia*, shoes and cuffs on moss campion, leggings among the *draba*. He raised the jar before him and faced a dwarf blueberry. Its leaves hung like eager tongues, each holding a pill of water. Every time it rained, Ransom saw this. A temptation, at first. Later, an invitation deferred. Now it was a sign the time had arrived.

He opened the jar, broke a tab, put a quarter on his tongue and swallowed.

It was early evening. The sky was still blue. The mountain fortress rose from a pediment of tailings, its stepped cliffs burnished by sun. Ransom was high on one of the slopes, approaching the lowest bulwark in a crouching gait, in head-dress and furs, chanting beneath his breath. He made treddling motions with his arms, the willow knife tied to his wrist with a thong, while his cloven shoes struggled in the scree, imitating a cautious jog as the ram approached the refuge, eager to put himself above the wolves.

He turned his head to quarter the slope, affecting a ram's fear, imagining the pack coursing through the mountains, trying to find him. He faced a break in the cliff—a green-stone cove thick with shadows—and headed toward it. By the entrance, two pale poppies floated above the broken flags. The dark vault swung over him and he fell to a walk. The air here was cold and still. The scuffle of his shoes echoed in the quiet space. The details of the rear wall grew clearer as he approached—a broad chimney split the massive riser. He studied the neck of rock as a ram would, lifting his muzzle, checking his nerve.

Ransom stepped into the chimney, lifted his right leg and boosted himself onto an edge. He pushed his imagined fore into a niche, his hind found an indent, then he shifted his weight, testing and choosing and searching ahead. The stony chill entered his chest with every breath, bracing him for his task. Fore on a sill, hind on a tilted block— Everywhere he looked, holds offered themselves, as if some invisible presence was guiding him.

He angled onto the flue's rear wall, looking up as he came around. The blue was gone, replaced by a low roof of cloud. The pall. His chest shook, his heart pounding suddenly louder. He drew himself out of his fiction, eyeing the cloud with fear. How had it blotted the sky so quickly? Below, the dark chamber gaped. He pored over the stonework with a new concentration. Don't linger. Look and choose and move.

Growths, strange growths—paper thin lichens. *Umbilicaria*, black and crinkled like fallen leaves. Each had a pale spot at its center where it attached to the rock. He set his shoes between them. A drop fell, landing with a tap. Ransom looked up. More drops. The sky was dripping, playing over his back like the pat of paws. He imagined the wolves drawing closer, loping across a rocky slope, sniffing the air for the sweet wool scent, so much stronger when it's wet. Pleased by his vivid images, he tried to ignore his increasing exposure.

The rain suddenly came harder, drumming his withers. He continued to climb. Rills ran between outcrops, collecting on edges, washing over in thin sheets. A peculiar sight—the rock beneath his left hand was twitching and writhing like something alive. The lichens were changing beneath the film of rain. He fingered one. It was rubbery and slimy. Like pliant skin. *Move*, he thought.

His hands struggled for friction. His awkward shoes scraped, but the disks slipped beneath, swiveling on their navels. The choice of holds was narrowing every moment. He planted his right leg and straightened it slowly, fingers feeling above, moving his left foot, gaining a few inches. Then his

hand slipped. He groped blindly, foot skating, horn clattering against the rock, left shoulder catching—giving him time to jam his calf in a notch.

He hung there, drawing a tremulous breath, unable to climb on the frictionless rubber and unable to descend. Rain rilled from the shelves. When would it stop? He rocked the brow of his headdress against a jut. He couldn't cling there for long, mourning his weakness. His legs were shaking. His fingers were stiff. The chimney's cold frosted the hair of his forearm. What had happened to the willow knife tied to his wrist?

And then, as he watched, his arm narrowed and his fingers retracted. The fourth and fifth digits disappeared. His thumb dwindled to a knob and rode up his wrist. The fore and middle fingers thickened to toes. Black toes.

Ransom shuddered, regretting the drug, regretting the chimney, regretting Alaska and his crazy quest. His legs were changing, turning spindly. The left slipped out of its notch and his body dropped, chest sliding onto a fang of rock. He could feel the sharp edge, and he could hear a voice speaking strangely—a voice without and a voice within.



The fang has found the naked oval. It's pressing against my helpless flesh. An icy current sucks the warmth from my trunk. I still my fores, get one back on the rock. The other gropes in midair. Move—

I heave myself up, making a long reach. My grip

goes, hinds jabbing wildly, fores tearing out lichens. My head strikes the rock, neck twisting, horn grinding over an edge, chest landing hard on the fang of rock. Steam rises beneath my chin. A rusty odor, salty, tartly sweet. And pain, a rhythmic pain. My heart is pounding against my chest, threatening to take the fang deeper. I blink the rain from my eyes and turn my face up. Steady your nerves. Put the weight back on your limbs.

Slowly I rise, chest coming off the fang. Higher, higher—

Above, the chimney's mouth flares. Rising, higher. Legs trembling—

Closer, closer. Right fore feeling and finding. Strength going—

Left fore on the lip. Lift, lift—

Up and over.

A ledge angles to the right. I start along it, shivering, taking the rain. Down the center of the oval is an ugly gash—a wound like the one a wolf would have made, if a wolf had been near. As the ledge turns a corner, the length of the fortress comes into view. Are they near, I wonder. Do they know I'm here? There's no sign of motion on the inclines below. Up canyon is a breach where slides tumble from the frontworks, but there too, I see nothing.

The rain stops. The quiet returns. The fortress is a stepwork of broken walls, slopes of sand and scree,

benches slumping and cut by talus. I trace the lines of the three risers above me, connecting benches and low-angle inclines, matching them to the shelves in the distance. To gain height, I'd have to risk my life. If I continue on the level—

The Wise and the Scout appear at the canyon mouth.

A dull crack jars my hooves. I leap to the side, shuffling in scree as craze lines ray across the ledge. A large fragment drops from sight, banging onto the slope below, chattering out my place.

The two wolves slow. Their pointed heads lift, going back and forth, searching the face. I slot myself between two outcrops, but they've already found me. One breaks the silence with a howl, summoning the others.

I scan the rock above, pick a route and leap, springing to the top of a fan, pumice clinking beneath my hooves. I skirt a gouge and glance back. The others are loping up to join the two. They drink my scent from the breeze, then put their heads together, touching noses with the Lead. Wind whispers along the cliff, urging me to flee. The Lead bolts from the huddle and the others follow. The wolf line crosses the canyon floor, fords a stream and starts up the fortress.

Heart leaping, I pitch forward, hooves clacking through shards, up a blind ditch. The fragments catch at my legs, trying to shear through a shank. Below, the wolves are bounding, following patches of sod.

Vaulting, I'm vaulting— The next riser looms ahead. I hurtle toward it, passing jags and blades. A giant cleaver appears through the murk. I swerve just in time, chest quaking, pangs shooting through my open wound. The way darkens abruptly, the fortress a pulsing blur.

Rumbling— The mountain kicks beneath me. Ahead, an enormous span of rock keels out of the cliff. It lands and the slopes explode, bastions tumbling. A canopy of fragments opens over me, the air hissing and humming. Then the drumfire dims, and through gaps in the smoke, I see a hole in the bulwark. Over the purr of talus comes a sharper sound—the scrabbling of paws. I glance back. They're lunging through a narrow ravine just below.

Flee, flee— I buck up the shifting breaks, winding through spindles and snags. The slope is spotted with pyres. I'm choking on the sulphurous reek. The wolf line cleaves the smudge, ten lengths behind. My heart raps at my ribs—rap, rap. I gag and stumble, unbalancing a barrow of warm rock, something dozing beneath. A terrible face rises from my tread, horns coiled to either side, skull staring with eyeless sockets, mandible detached, a black beetle crawling from the crack in its brow. My heart goes wild, I'm gasping for air. The death rattle is right behind me, Lead's eyes seething, the Wise peering into my brain. My heart booms and I'm blind again, lost in darkness. Breathe,

*breathe! My limbs flail the scree, sight coming back.
I'm bounding out of the cut—*

Above, the final riser of the fortress shows, badly fractured, leaning and weaving across the slope. I vault over sinks of snow, slabs spidered with cracks, onto a steep stair, bunching and springing, up, steeply up, defying the drop. Steep, steep, too steep for them— Up, up, landing and swinging over a hump, onto the top.

Strength drained, my pace slackens.

Flanks steaming, breathless, I turn along the broken back of the fortress and kick into a lope, praying I'm out of reach, hoping they aren't running on a parallel below. A mist drifts over the silent heights, and through the mist I see— Strange figures guarding the battlements. Figures molded from crust and stones. As I move, the sentinels seem to totter among the beds of snow, sleepless and careworn, patrols forgotten. What travail follows this traverse? On either side, cliffs descend. I turn and sweep the ridge— Safe for a time.

A sentinel's head bursts in two. A pair of magpies flap toward me with ragged wings. One sails low to the ground and lands four lengths to my left. The other circles and lights on my withers, stitching its claws into my skin. I buck, but the bird won't let go. It's flopping from side to side, whistling insistently. Wings slap my cheeks, there's a stab at my front— The other magpie pecks my wound and flaps away with a piece of my chest in its bill. The birds settle together

on a debris heap and bolt the morsel. Then they're flapping toward me, returning for more. I rear, whacking them with my horns. Their screeches destroy the quiet. They're hectoring me, alerting the pack as they wheel and flap away. "You will see," they cry. "You will see."

Vertical slabs protect my flank. The draggled ridge narrows to a giant keel. As I move onto it, wind comes against my front, pushing the cold down through my skin. From this lofty height, the truth of my whereabouts comes all at once—behind me, the peaks descend, but ahead, they continue to climb, reaching into the clouds. The mountain beyond is a giant, its face hollow and confused by shadow—a dark and cheerless place. Higher and colder, still more barren.

A break in the cloud cover. To the right of the hollow peak, through a narrow tear, a lens of blue sky appears with a silver crescent, lighting the way ahead and down. The ridge drops steeply, bottoms at a saddle, and climbs into the cliffs of the hollow peak. My hooves shift unsurely, fearful of a trap. At the low point is a large block. I can't see behind it.

I scuffle forward, descending the prow of the keel while I test the air, drawing scents into my forehead. Damp rock, old snow, nested straw—and a faint musk. Heart, hold your beating! I clench my pectoral, but it's no use. Moonstruck, it's surging, shaking its cage. My limbs jerk, taking me forward in fits and starts. Fear,

fear— I can't put fear aside. They are down there. Waiting.

With a lurch, my legs escape me. I burst into a lope, shooting down the ridge, crouched low. A rosy finch crosses the saddle, calling chrew-chrew-chrew like a blade sharpening on a stone.

The block, the block— As I pass its blind corner, the Lead lunges, jaws gaping.

Inches away. Death is upon me, ears flattened, white foam around his mouth. His jaws close on my shoulder, crushing nerves and flesh. A gripping and wrenching, a deep shooting pain. The Lead snuffles hungrily. I jerk free, whirling. The Wise looms before me, fangs twitched apart, reaching and clamping, skewering through my right fore.

Craving faces hover. The Lead waves his muzzle, Scout beside him. The Hangbelly approaches my flank, Dangler circling my rear. Snared by the pack. The jaws of the Wise tighten and tug me to the right, while the Scout lunges at my left fore, spongy nose puckering, fangs gripping my shank. I buck and plunge, both fores shackled, musk pouring over me, a sour fetor stopping my breath. I stagger, kicking blindly, a scrabbling above. I glance up as the Ruff springs from the block's top, his weight coming full on my loins, buckling my hocks, forcing me down.

The Scout and the Wise wow and growl and pull me to my knees. I struggle to rise as the Lead and Dangler

crowd close, nostrils steaming. Then the jostle grows still. The Ruff slides to the side and the snare opens toward the front. The Wise and the Scout swing apart, relaxing the shackles on my fores. I lift myself, seeing the Hangbelly facing me in the gap, moving toward me, tail whipping, lips peeled back, her eye fixed on my chest.

I rock forward, leaping with all my strength as the Hangbelly lunges. Her fangs slash and one hooks my wound. I feel a loosening. Her snout sinks into me. I vault and she falls beneath, fang still buried, extending the rip under my left fore, stopping me cold as it catches on a rib. Her wicked eye gleams, her muzzle wrenches. A dull snap, bones grating, and her muzzle drives deeper, eye slitted, brow knotting as she invades the cage. Time stops. I feel myself pounding against the cusp. Terrible pangs. The throbbing wells. Aching, tender, warm on my front.

Lurch and lunge, dragging her with me, straddling her body. The Hangbelly rolls, the sour stench suddenly strong. She is on her back beneath me, dugs slewing as she roots in my chest. With a furious twist, I come free. Cock and spring! Spring through a gap between the Ruff and the Younger. The Scout lunges and misses. The Lead is behind me, following fast.

I leap up the far side of the saddle, the mountains throbbing as if my pulse had passed into the scape. Just ahead, the saddle is cut by a gully of rock. Measure the

shrinking ground, shorten my stride— And I spring, arching over it, fores touching down. I'm vaulting now, headed for the heights of the hollow peak, leaving the pack behind.

The ridge turns and heaves skyward, and I rise with it, hocks hair-triggering, rock blurring and sluicing. I'm shaking, still feeling the Hangbelly's snout, seeing and smelling her swollen dugs. Behind me, the pack descends the saddle, hurrying, intent. Ahead, the ridge breaks onto the hollow peak, heights illumined by the moon. It's an enormous amphitheater. A row of triangle scarps follows its curve, intercut with deltas of snow. Gleaming puddles blaze a route to the top. The crescent shining through the tear in the clouds throws my shadow among the scarps—a spirit leaping on ductile limbs through the ruins of a barbaric temple.

At the top, the rock levels off. I drop to a trot. My limbs are wobbling. Again, I feel the warmth creeping down my front. Something is broken, crackling. I slow to a walk, weak and short of breath. I check my fores first. My right shank has blood spots where the fangs were. The left is burlled and gummy. And my chest— A ragged trough angles down it. Moonlight gleams on the torn flesh. Strangely, there is little pain.

To the side, I see a curtain of piers separated by cloisters. As I pass, my wound leaks, leaving dark stars on the rock. A murmur mounts like a chorus of hidden ministrants. The next cloister comes into view, its

dark interior bisected by a white cascade. The wand of water bursts on the gravels, thumping and clashing in a cottony swab. I draw closer, waking to a remedy, taking a deep breath and reeling into the tumult. The cascade drops like a hammer on my neck, slamming me to the rock, freezing me, shocking me out of my stupor. I dig my limbs in the gravel, bringing my front around. The pounding ablution comes onto my wound.

The torrent rolls me aside. I heave myself up and stagger forward. Up a stair of flags, shivering as the wind gusts against me. At the amphitheater's top, I watch my fores and the rock between them. The stars have vanished. The dripping has stopped.

The way is dim. I look behind me. The break in the clouds has sealed over. Ahead, the crags are heaped like blackened armor. No sign of the pack in the canyon to the left or on the slopes below. A ridge connects the amphitheater to the next higher peak. My hooves are moving, but my mind withdraws, seeking a different kind of refuge—flawless cliffs, polished slopes, unreachable towers. A strange notion strikes me: that this linkage of peaks is my own creation, mineralized by fear.

The ridge is before me. I'm moving up it, fooled by shadows. Every stone is a hole, every hole a stone. Are the wolves near? I falter and the vista unhinges, its armor of mountains creaking around me. The dizziness abates, but the creaking remains. The hectoring

magpies are back. Their long tails trail, their wings thrash like torn rags. They've announced my whereabouts. They're sailing forward, settling on the crest ahead.

A rattle of rock. A trail of musk through the gusts. I step behind an outcrop and look back, seeing the wolf silhouettes loping along the ridge's spine. My heart races, but the rest of me is inert. A thought approaches, not straightaway, but tatting like the pack along the ridge: the ram must die. The pack passes behind a rise and reappears, Scout in front, muzzle low, the Lead right behind, head up, sulphur eyes searching. The magpies follow, flapping from rock to rock.

I turn and scan the ridge. It continues at an easy angle. To the left is a narrow ravine, hemmed like a slaughter pen. To the right, a sheer cliff. Or I can do nothing at all. I glance at the wound in my chest, feeling the temptation to let the end come unresisted, imagining their jaws inside me, grinding my organs. Soon I'll be heave on the dirt of the den, disgorged for the newborn. Another rattle, very close. Their strides quicken.

My pulse thrums. My hoof stamps. I draw a deep breath and lift my head. I won't give myself up. Not yet.

I cross the crest, descending a sweep of scree toward the sheer wall. It's seamed with cracks and corded with moss. Nearby, a ledge runs on the level for a dozen lengths, then narrows, dwindling and losing

itself in shadows. I hear the pack behind me. I step forward, knowing what I must do.

Feeling with the pads of my toes, I start along the ledge. It's sprinkled with grit. Seeps gutter the spalls. Below, the plunge ends on a broken slide. My eye shifts back. I press my shoulder to the wall and lift my legs, hooves shuttling ahead. The sill narrows. I breathe the damp rock. The moss is velvety against my flank, embedded in the crevices like green piping. A faint crushing sound, the hiss of gravel. I resist the urge to turn. The ledge is pinching. I change to an edging step. Gaps appear ahead.

I reach my right fore to a sloping hold, bring my left hind forward slowly, trying my weight. Now the left fore, a long stretch, right hind suspended. The ledge is a crust now, dwindled to nothing. Set the hind, extend the right fore, groping across the gap, toes rasping for a nub. I waver. The hoof slips, one toe going over. Behind, I hear a gasping.

I look back, holding my breath. The Hangbelly is crouched where the ledge is widest, eye fixed on me, tongue lolling, her cheeks matted with my blood. Why her, the most ungainly? Because she's blind to the danger. Viciousness draws her on.

I turn forward, facing my task. My fore finds the nub. I can see where the ledge expands ahead. Daring. Drown your fear. Left fore to a wrinkle. A bold move now— Bear down. Lift the right hind, moving off three

points to two. Right fore reaching, balancing—on one point. Sending my fore to the ledge's lip, bringing the hinds up to meet it.

I pause and catch my breath, pulse pounding. Then I'm moving again. The wall relaxes, leaning back. The ledge becomes a balcony with a broken parapet guarding its edge. Farther, a bartizan rises out of the cliff. Between my hoof sounds, I hear the Hangbelly's pants. I turn, feeling an ache as my chest touches the wall. I peer back along it, over the network of green veins. The Hangbelly creeps toward me, her good eye harrowing at close range, the other clearly visible for the first time. The scar is one leg of a star above her brow. Its other legs feed over the top of her head like the roots of a weed. She answers my gaze, wrinkling her muzzle and curling her lips, still in the grip of that shattering blow. She's beyond her powers—the ledge isn't wide enough for her teetering paws. But she advances anyway, seeing only me, grumbling and grappling her fangs, baring a fear as great as my own. The fear that I will escape.

Her abandon sends shivers through me. A rumbling sounds, like thunder before rain. The wall tilts strangely. She raises her head, glancing around. Her muzzle swings back, eye drilled on me, peering through a tunnel of concentration, taking another step. The rumble breaks into fierce chucks, jolting me toward the parapet. The mountain is quaking! Across

the canyon, peaks toss. The wall's panels are shifting, the green veins swelling. The Hangbelly peers at me, vertigo rising in her black brain.

A roar breaks from the rock, an impossible wrath convulsing the peaks and depths, banging me against the parapet as the ledge-line ripples and the Hangbelly dances like a spider on a thread. The cliff sinks and heaves, throwing her off. Down she pitches, black limbs flailing. The roaring booms—

Then the jolts cease and the rumbling fades. Hisses of rockslides trail from the canyons. Across the cliff, lengths of green cord hang from their chinks. On the slope below, the Hangbelly's body lies sprawled, legs akimbo, her head oddly bent on the stem of neck.

A nervous jubilation inside me. It drains away, replaced by relief. I start up the shelves leading to the bartizan, wondering at the power that rose to my aid. I turn back, peering down. The pack is loping across the incline, magpies out in front. One swoops onto the Hangbelly's paunch, the other settles on her brow. The Lead lunges, driving the birds into the air. Croaking with spite, they rise, watching the other wolves circle.

As I mount the bartizan, a moan sounds below. The Lead is grieving, pawing the Hangbelly's shoulder. The Scout sits near. The Ruff lies by the dam's head, ducking his muzzle to make amends. The other three have their eyes on me. The Younger is up the slope, legs dancing in place, impatient to return to the chase.

The Dangler stares, misgivings confirmed. The Wise regards me with an air of knowing, as though none of this was a surprise. Without shifting her gaze, she wows to the Lead. He looks up, pinning me with his sulphur eyes.

I face forward, moving again. My limbs are knotted, my shoulders are bridling. I feel the pain in my chest and hear the grating within. Below, the Wise is beside the Lead, nuzzling him, trying to draw him away. He growls and snaps, returning to sniff his fallen mate. I swing to the right, following the crest, breaking into a jangled trot. In the dimness, a mournful howl rises. The Lead at first, then the others join in.



The Cheshnina spurs were misty. All morning, the wind had chased clouds across the sky, shaking showers from them. In the drenched spruce, a chant sounded while the suck of boots kept time.

*Blood drips dark stars on the rock.
Hope goes slowly as I plod.*

Ransom waved the birch whips aside, bearing his pack at a brisk pace. His face was chapped, burnt by the sun and chafed by the wind. For two days, the going had been hard. He'd torn through the mountains, sloshed across streams and bushwhacked through brush with the rain pouring down,

determined to make the pickup date. He'd thought of Lindy, and of Doug and Ida, but his story often swallowed him. He would come back to himself after an hour or two, mumbling a chant or reliving a scene between the ram and the wolves.

As he descended the last slope, a nimbus of mosquitoes rose from the moss, whining eagerly. Siskins flushed, rasping their welcome. On either side were buttery cinquefoil blooms, and a fresh breeze blew willow flock past his face. When the humping river and the gravel strip appeared, he recalled the day of his arrival.

Lindy, he thought. He was aching to see her. So much had changed. With the Hangbelly dead, her rages were over. He was glad for her. Ransom laughed. Lindy didn't know what had happened with the wolves. He wasn't sure himself.

He made his way to the river bar and removed his pack. When he glanced down the strip, he saw a plane parked at the end. A white Cub. From behind the brush, a twist of smoke rose. Someone was in the cabin.

Ransom looked upriver. The precipitation had been wintry around the dome. Mt. Wrangell was invisible, but the peaks and cliffs at the Cheshnina's head were covered with snow. The ram's rocky sanctuary was freezing, and he was lost somewhere in it. As agitated as Ransom was by all that had happened, it would be difficult to leave. He started along the trail to the cabin.

Through a weakness in the mist, sun splashed down, and the summer danced into his senses. Lousewort pinwheels rose

on his left, lemon and pink. Cottongrass bobbed on the right. Blackpolls twittered above the path, and lupine compasses edged it, a raindrop jewel in the center of each.

The trail turned and the cabin was before him, hedged by mertensia thick with blue bells. The log walls and corrugated roof slowed his steps. Ransom saw civilization. As he approached, he could hear the buzzing of flies. A quartered animal, skinned and bloody, hung from the rafters of an open shed. He reached the cabin door and rapped on it.

The door budged. Through the gap, Ransom saw a man's grizzled cheek and a bloodshot eye.

"Where did you come from?" the man asked, swinging the door wide.

Ransom gestured behind him. With his gesture, his vest opened. The shirt beneath was soaked with blood. "Wasilla Bill?"

The man nodded. He was in overalls, husky and paunchy with curly gray hair. "Hurt yourself?"

Ransom closed his vest.

"Come in," Bill said.

Ransom entered. The cabin reeked of wood smoke. Dirty pots rested on a woodpile, and clothing hung from nails. There was a cot and a table with a bottle of whiskey on it, and along one wall were shelves of provisions. Bill fed wood to an oil drum stove and played with the damper.

"You're drenched." He came up behind Ransom and pulled his parka and vest off.

Ransom stiffened, but he didn't resist.

Bill motioned him toward the stove, eyes gentle, as if calming a frightened animal.

With a shiver, Ransom stepped toward the warmth. "I was in the mountains. To the west. For a month."

"By yourself?"

Ransom considered the question. "I'm a little disoriented."

"Any fool could see that." Bill reached to unbutton the bloody shirt.

Ransom drew away.

"Don't you want me to help you?"

Ransom felt the stove's warmth, and he could feel Bill's too. Where the molten heart flowed, no one was a stranger. He nodded, and Bill unbuttoned his shirt.

As he peeled the cloth back, Bill sucked his breath. "How did this happen?"

Ransom eyed the deep gash to the left of his sternum, unsure how much of what he remembered was real. "I was attacked by wolves."

Bill stared at him.

"They were waiting for me on this saddle, behind a rock."

Bill stepped toward the cupboard, nodding for him to continue.

"There were seven of them. Six now."

Bill returned with a jar, a rag, and dressings for the wound.

"One of them's dead," Ransom said.

"Sit over here." Bill led him to a cot. He opened the jar,

wet the rag with a cloudy liquid, and daubed the gash. "Never heard of wolves stalking a man."

Ransom winced. "They thought I was a ram. What is that?"

"Wormwood. Indian medicine."

"I was dressed like one," Ransom explained. "I have Dall leggings and a headdress with ram's horns."

Bill nodded slowly.

"The ram is my real self," Ransom said. "That's why I'm here."

"I see the wildness of a ram in your eyes," Bill said.

"I know it sounds crazy." Ransom's head bowed and his shoulders slumped. It was a relief to yield himself to the older man's care.

Bill glanced at the blood-covered rag. Then he retrieved the whiskey from the table and took a slug. "Have some."

Ransom shook his head.

"We're fragile." Bill tore open a package of gauze. "Like that moose out there." He pulled a hide glove from his belt and set it on Ransom's leg. "My wife's."

The cuff had beadwork. The leather was stiff and the fingers inflated. There might have been a hand in it, patting Ransom's thigh.

"When you knocked, I was thinking about her," Bill said. "Thinking and drinking. She loved these mountains. I built this cabin for her before she died." He pulled adhesive tape from a spool. "Tuberculosis. She was Indian, Ahtna. Had our

child in her. Fathered it in the spruce out there.” He held the gauze pads over Ransom’s wound and secured them with tape. “She’d sit on a boulder beside the river and sing to it. Sixteen summers ago. A feeling comes over me this time of year, and I have to come. I get sad, but I’m happy too, remembering.”

Ransom pictured him drinking his whiskey, smelling the rain and the forest, listening to the woman singing beside the river. A drone grew out of the quiet.

“Your pickup?” Bill took the glove.

Ransom nodded. “Doug Hurley.” He reached for his shirt.

“You can’t wear that.” Bill took his Pendleton from the chair and held it while Ransom fed his arms through. “I’m coming out tomorrow,” Bill said, moving toward the door.

Ransom grabbed his vest and parka, following.

The Cub was upriver, circling above the snowline, red against the white slopes.

“I’ll buy you a drink,” Bill said.

Tolsona Lake tipped below, flashing blue and gold as the Cub descended. Ransom saw the hangar and the roof of Doug’s home. They wheeled, aligning with the lakefront, and settled. Spruce spindles and parked cars raced past the windscreen, and their wheels touched down. The earth lurched, shimmied and froze. The engine gunned, the tail spun around, and the Cub went bumping back over the gravel toward the hangar.

As they came to a halt, Ransom saw a small group waiting. Doug killed the engine, opened the clamshell doors and

climbed out. Ransom followed. Was it fatigue, excitement, or the plane's vibration that made his legs judder? Faces recognized him. They were smiling, relieved. Lindy ran forward. He raised his arm to her. She embraced him. Ransom laughed, then recoiled, feeling pressure on his wound.

"It hurts," he said, touching his chest.

She shook her head, confused.

"Scrape with some wolves," Doug said.

"Wolves—" Lindy looked from Doug to Ransom.

The group drew closer, a tall man with a white crew cut and lively eyes among them.

"He was acting out his story." Doug removed his glasses. "Probably the costume he was wearing, the smell of it. They thought he was prey."

Ransom was silent, watching. Lindy's lips parted, appalled. Ida seemed worried. Skimmer was beaming. Vince Silvano, the Fish and Game man, looked puzzled.

"They followed him," Doug went on. "Thought he shook them. But they found him again." He gazed at Ida. "They ambushed him on a saddle. One of them got her fangs in his chest." Doug had been doubtful when he'd heard Ransom's story, but something was happening in the retelling. "He fought free. But they'd tasted blood. They caught up to him again, and the one that attacked him followed him onto a cliff." He glanced at Ransom.

Ransom nodded. He gave Lindy a private look, promising more once they were alone.

“She fell,” Doug concluded, facing Lindy. “He was able to get away.”

The group’s attention turned to her. She eyed Ransom with mute dread. The wind had died and the aspens were still.

“Son of a—” Skimmer was bursting with admiration.

Ida’s eyes were on Doug, struck by his animation. He avoided her gaze.

Vince Silvano’s rockabilly smile was gone. He studied Ransom, unsure what to make of him.

The tall man with white hair stepped forward, his hand extended. “Burt Conklin,” he said.

Ransom shook his hand.

“I’m at the university, doing research on the Wrangell summit,” Conklin said.

Ransom nodded. The man had an imposing mien, but his eyes were kind and unassuming.

“Those are dangerous cliffs,” Conklin said.

“The rain helped.”

Conklin looked puzzled.

“Easier to climb,” Ransom said. “Rain fills the vesicles and weights the rock.” He scanned the group. “The scree is less likely to slide. It braces your mind, too. When the mist is thick and the rain’s coming down—” He recaptured his state. “Keep going, don’t get cold. You get an attitude about things that threaten you.”

When he looked at Lindy, he saw her suspicion. He drew a breath and it panged his chest. He gripped his front, and she

flinched sympathetically, staring at the cloth as if she could see beneath it.

"I'm going to call Doctor Jim," Ida said.

She turned and headed for the office.

"I'm fine," Ransom assured them. He smiled at Lindy. "For the mind and body, it's a forbidding place. But for the heart, it's an inspiring one. Flows frozen in time. Creations of the moment, changing as the rock erodes, transforming from one fantastic shape to another." He gazed from face to face. "In a way, the volcano is still pouring out."

"What's your purpose?" Conklin asked.

"To find the magma at the heart of things," Ransom said.

Conklin looked bemused. Doug turned to unload Ransom's backpack from the Cub.

"How did you fight off the wolves?" Skimmer wondered.

Ida rejoined the group. "Jim can take us in an hour."

Doug set the pack down, resting his hand on one of the horns emerging from its top. "Once you're patched up, you can tell us what the ram learned."

Ransom's eyes were on Lindy. Her distress was mounting.

"You two need some time together," Doug said.

"Lindy's in our guest house," Ida told Ransom.

He gave her a thankful look, nodded at the others and clasped Lindy's hand.

They took the path along the shore. The lake was restive. The wind came up behind them, clapping the poplar leaves.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

He shook his head. “It’s nothing. A little cut.”

She was wearing her leather vest. Ransom remembered the day they’d met.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said.

Lindy was silent. Her eyes were shadowed and her lips were straight.

“Talk to me,” he said.

“It’s a lonely place.”

Ransom saw the Dangler, worried, retreating. “Here?” He laughed, comparing the lake to where he’d been.

“Ferrying people to the end of the world.”

Above, the clouds were wispy and wattled, and the sun needled through. A ray touched her forehead. “Ransom—” She stopped. Her eyes were glowing.

Ransom kissed her, feeling her ardor, loving her strength and determination. “You kept me going,” he whispered, thinking of the Lead.

Lindy bowed her head, touching the cloth over his wound. “Well?” She peered up at him.

The Wise, grave and knowing. The memory of that night rose before him—his panic flight, the fangs needling his core.

“What really happened?” she asked.

Ransom swallowed, collecting his thoughts. “I wasn’t just . . . wearing the skins.”

Her eyes searched his.

“I was transformed,” he said.

Her face clouded with fear.

“I was high,” he explained, “but— The places I went, the things I felt— I was the ram.”

Suspicion. Anger. The roots of wrath. Ransom hoped it had passed. The Hangbelly died in his story, but Lindy knew nothing of that. It was his wish that peace would come to her.

“So much has happened.” He closed his eyes. Nearby, water sloshed beneath a dock, recalling that terrible moment on the saddle. His chest was torn open. He could feel the Hangbelly probing and hear her lapping.

Lindy kissed his cheek. “You’re back. That’s all that matters.”

When he opened his eyes, he saw the Younger, eyes glittering, joyful to be with him.

The Hurley guest house lay ahead, warm and welcoming, sheltered in a cove of spruce. Beside the path, the fireweed quivered with bees. They stepped along it together, arms entwined.

In the guest house, Lindy removed the bandage Bill had applied and got a look at the wound. She was more upset than Ransom expected. Afterward, they set their naked bodies loose, and when it was over, the tears Lindy shed spoke for them both.

Doug drove them to Doctor Jim, who put stitches in and applied a fresh bandage. When they returned, Ransom and Lindy had dinner with Ida and Doug. There were lots of questions about his climbing and camping, and a few about the molten heart. Ransom explained his idea in a quiet voice,

trading glances with Lindy. When the meal ended, Doug asked Ransom to help him move some cordwood to the guest house. It was then, the conversation grew touchy.

"So what's it like?" Doug added the last of the logs to the stack and removed his gloves.

Ransom cocked his head.

"Being a ram," Doug said.

"You're laughing at me."

Doug nodded. "A little. I don't want to feel like a fool for asking."

Ransom saw the candor in Doug's eyes. "Every moment is intense." He touched his wound. "The fear they live with is hard to imagine."

"It's worth it?" Doug said. "To find what you're looking for."

"I hope so."

"I hope so too." Doug sounded wistful. "I used to have your kind of courage. When I first came here. Now I've got a son and six planes. Half the lake is mine."

Ransom was silent.

Doug's gaze narrowed. "I like who I was," he said, "better than who I am." He put his gloves in his pocket and motioned toward the house. "Can your ram cure that?"

In the kitchen, Ida was washing dishes. Lindy dried them and Skimmer put them away.

"Jesus was a sheep," Skimmer pointed out. "A lamb."

"That's true," Ida smiled at Lindy. Her reservations were dissolving. "I'm not sure why they gave the devil hooves and

horns. Those kinds of animals eat grass.”

Lindy laughed.

“What’s important,” Ida glanced at Skimmer, “is what’s in your heart. I know Ransom means well.” She turned off the tap and dried her hands. “I’m glad we’re getting to know you.” She put her hand on Lindy’s shoulder.

Lindy stiffened. “You’ve been kind.” She tried to mask her discomfort.

“They’re back.” Ida raised her head, hearing the men on the porch.

“All I know,” Ransom was saying, “is that my fate lies with him.”

Doug opened the door.

“Where he’s headed,” Ransom added, “I’m not sure.”

The door closed, restoring the quiet outside. The water was smooth as glass. A Bonaparte’s gull was beating across the lake. It fixed its wings and settled into its reflection.

Nine

Darkness had gathered around the house on Sunset Hill. A downstairs window leaked light through the parted drapes. At the edge of the cliff, mist was crawling through the thistles and blackberry whips. Over the cliff's edge, the air swirled strangely, illumined by the glow of the smothered marina. A foghorn sounded, deep and final, like a summons from the void.

It was ten at night. Ransom and Lindy were back in Seattle.

Ransom drew the curtains together, sealing the slit, and returned to his desk. The room was white, and was brightly lit with four bare bulbs. The rug was white, the desk was a white door supported by cinder blocks. He wore a white shirt and pants, sat in a white chair, picked up a white pen and stooped

over white paper like a monk shepherding a sacred manuscript. His attention burned on the words—only they were black.

Photos were tacked to the walls. Pictures of the Wrangell cliffs flanked a blow-up of a butterfly pupa girdled to a plant stem. The pupa was still as rock, and the creature was visible within, wings folded, legs and antennae welded to its cradle. Ransom's distress returned suddenly, twisting him around in his seat. He cried out silently, grabbed a sheaf of papers and stumbled up the stairs.

Lindy was in the kitchen, preparing dinner. She heard him coming.

"Is the scene done?" She turned off the burners.

His stricken look startled her.

"What is it?" She embraced him with the potholders in her hands.

Ransom didn't respond. He was clutching the sheaf to his chest.

"Let me read you the letters," she offered.

He nodded absently.

She took his arm, led him into the living room and sat him on the sofa. As always, the space looked like a whirlwind had struck it. But the subject had changed. Pictures scattered and tacked to every surface showed castles and armor, lava fountains and flows, all interlaced with photos of wolves. On the floor was a livestock manual, opened to a cutaway diagram of a sheep's chest.

Lindy sat facing him and took a letter from the pile. "This one's from Katherine Getz. Remember?"

“Katherine.”

“Dear Ransom. Thank you for the write-up and the tape. I was happy to hear you’ve recovered from your injury. What an experience.” Lindy looked up. He seemed to be listening. “To answer your question about magpies: yes, we often find them at high elevations in the mountains. That’s where they nest. Your tape has gotten a lot of listening, especially the golden-crown’s five-note song. It’s a new dialect. It may be unique to the Wrangells.”

Ransom smiled.

“Of course my favorite was your notes on the pipits. I loved your description of the courtship display. And to scramble all that way to recover one of his feathers. That’s not something an ornithologist would do. Why did you send it to me? I can’t express the joy I felt.” Lindy wet her lips. “Whenever I look at it, I imagine the way you described his song—“hanging in the wake of his plunge like a string of red beads.” A beautiful picture. It was, I’m sure, the purest trickling of the bird’s heart.

“Hank is more excited than you can imagine about the dwarf sorrel. He says it’s new to science. *Rumex altmanensis*. He wants you to charter a chopper and bring a fresh sample back to Fairbanks so he can do a chromosome count. So much for immortality. Sid apologizes. He’s been busy. The red cuts are erosional products and they have the color of blood because they have the same composition—iron. The amber sand is geothermally altered rock resulting from blowouts or the venting of gas. That’s all for now. Please stay in touch. Sincerely, Katherine.”

“The feather hit the mark,” Ransom said.

She unfolded a second letter. “She likes you.” Lindy gazed up at him. “Ida’s is stranger. ‘Dear Ransom. We’re relieved your cut’s healed. I know Lindy’s taking good care of you. She’s the dearest. How’s the book coming? Summer’s almost over. It’s been a wild one. The day after you left, someone stole our truck. The troopers found it near Copper Center. It had been run off the road and was hanging over a ledge, front wheels in the air. The cab was facing Mt. Wrangell. Skimmer said the ram hot-wired it. You made an impression on him. He’s changed. The truth is—Doug’s changed too, and so have I. The conversation you and I had on your last day here keeps coming back to me. I’m beginning to think your passion for the molten heart is the miracle I’ve been praying for. Doug is remembering. Last week, we landed at our old sheep camp above the Chichokna, and we spent the whole day just wandering around, laughing and crying like children. He has always been a man of the spirit. I knew that when we met. Now I see what kind of help he needed. In a way, it’s been my failing all these years, not his. This might surprise you, but I worship the heart too. Not the mortal heart, but the sacred heart we share in Him.’” Lindy glanced at Ransom.

“Capital *H*,” he said.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way. You said you weren’t a Christian, but I don’t think that matters. You touched the truth in us, and I want you to know.” Lindy looked up. The softness in Ransom’s eyes surprised her. It was a moment of sweetness for him. Just a moment.

“Now I’m off to get some moose hides scraped and buy groceries. If you’re planning another trip to the Wrangells, you can save yourself the airfare from Anchorage. Skimmer’s happy to pick you up. We have relatives coming in May, but the guest house should be available most of next summer. There’s always room for one or two more around the dining room table.” Lindy made her eyes wide. “You know what I mean.”

Ransom laughed.

“Give my love to Lindy. God bless you. Ida.” Lindy joined Ransom’s laughter, relieved by his cheer. But even as she watched, it faded.

“They both mentioned the wound,” he said, rising.

Lindy stood. “What did you expect?”

“That’s what draws them.” He shook his head. “Surrender for me. Die so I don’t have to.’ That’s what everyone wants.”

“How can you say that?”

“That’s what *I* want,” he said. “Someone to take my place.”

“Stop.” Lindy put her arms around him. “No one wants you to sacrifice yourself.” He was shuddering. “What have you been doing down there?”

“Writing about terror. Preparing to die.”

“Two years of quarter tabs,” she said angrily.

Ransom didn’t reply.

“Please,” Lindy said. “Not at night.”

“That’s where I am in the story.”

“If we were like Ida and Doug, if we had something to anchor us— A family—”

“Thinking of your pups,” he growled.

Lindy's appeal died in her throat. She was too upset to speak.

"You want to destroy me," Ransom said.

She began to sob.

His cruelty echoed in his ears. "Forgive me." He hugged her.

Lindy clung to him, her chest heaving.

This is what *Wild Animus* had done, he thought. "I'm afraid," he said.

She stroked his cheek.

"My heart—"

"No." Lindy stiffened.

"There's something wrong with it."

"No!" She pulled away, trembling with rage. "I'm not going to the hospital again."

"I can feel the fangs—"

"It's healing, it's fine. How many times do the doctors have to tell you?"

"My ribs are moving."

"You didn't break any ribs."

"It's a clock that's only wound once," Ransom said. "Everything depends on it. These lofty thoughts, vital emotions—" He spoke with despair. "It's damaged. It races, it freezes, then it quickens to catch up. I was awake all night—"

"Stoned on acid!" Lindy was furious. "There's nothing wrong with it, nothing—" She raked his front, as if she was going to lift his heart out and show him.

Ransom began to chant.

*My insides shiver and churn,
Trying to drive off the cold.*

"The ram's in the rocks," he said, pleading with her to understand. "Threatened. Obsessed with self-defense. I want to leave the nightmare behind. But I can't escape it.

"I found another," he said, eyeing a pile of journal articles he'd copied at the library earlier that day. "A capitulation they couldn't explain. The pack attacked. The moose, with escape still possible, just gave himself to them."

"No," Lindy murmured. He didn't hear.

"Beneath the instinct to preserve the self, there's a darker one to give it up. A bliss beyond fear—that's the truth the molten heart knows." His great idea was an unction of doom. "When animals yield themselves for love, they draw pleasure from the river of surrender. When they're attacked, sometimes they submit to the killer as they would to a lover. It's a confusion. A mistake."

"Please," she said. "That's not us."

Ransom saw the Lead, watchful, intent. Then the Ruff and the Scout emerged. Behind them, the Hangbelly was waiting. "My metaphor for love," he said, "is a ritual of death." The Wise peered up from the bottom of Lindy's eyes. "Through the ram," he said, "I'm learning a surrender from which there is no return. What he feels as the river bears him away." He was speaking to the pack.

He swung around and hurled his manuscript into the

fireplace. Then he was crouching before it, fumbling with a box of matches. Lindy knelt and pried the box out of his hand, spilling the contents onto the slate. He grabbed one, struck it and began lighting page corners.

"I'm Sam," he said. "I'm Sam, I'm Sam—"

She clasped his wrists, trying to stop him, shaking her head as if to take back something she'd done or said. Ransom thrust her aside and lit more matches. The title page blackened, the flames were spreading. She lunged beneath his arm, reaching to encircle the smoking mass. Then she turned and dished the sheaf across the floor, throwing herself on top of it to smother the fire.

"I'm done, it's over," Ransom broke down. "I want it to end—"

She raised herself from the pages and crawled beside him. She tried to comfort him, without knowing what encouragement to give. Her power frightened her, but she couldn't turn away.

"I'm sorry," Ransom said finally.

She hugged him, feeling his weakness like never before.

"It's time," he said, raising himself.

He pulled her to her feet, averting his face. She stood beside him, shaken, letting herself be calmed by his resolve. Then she moved away.

She returned a moment later, with a glass of water in one hand and a quarter tab in the other.

Half an hour later, Lindy was curled on the living room floor, asleep.

Ransom rose from beside her, feeling the effects of the drug, very much awake.

He opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony. The wind had been blowing. Fog still blanketed Puget Sound, but the night above was bright and clear. The bluff glittered with starglow. Grasses were combed with it, vines were pricked with it. Overhead, the angled ceiling of night shifted, creasing from star to star, hints of a hidden sun winking through the joints, like the view from inside a flexing chrysalis.



My strength is gone. I'm shambling forward, toppling ricks of rock. I stir my limbs, kicking into a trot, but pain spears my chest and I fall back to a walk. Turn and check the way behind me. No threat that I can see. Forward, through the dimness, the ground is nearly level, heaped with cobbles and lobed with snow. A shroud of mist drifts past, the leaden cloud cover above, thick and muffling.

My direction is doubtful. There's no trend up, no higher place in sight. Are they below the cliff, still mourning the Hangbelly? Perhaps they're returning the way they came. I imagine the Lead's face swimming before me, sulphur eyes burning. They should have caught up with me by now.

A chill wind strafes my chest. My insides shiver and churn, trying to drive off the cold. The wound is

sealed over with grit and moss, embedded when it was pressed to the wall. Step by step, I'm making my peace with this barren place, crossing beds of lichen and puddled meltwater, barely caring what my hooves do. My dream of an exalted world is over. These shadows, this gloom—there's nothing more. I remember the convex slab, the chimney, the amphitheater—seeing the labyrinth for what it is. A rocky prison. I've threaded its galleries, mounted its stairs, and now I'm secured in its frozen keep. Condemned.

Down a corridor, the tread of paws. I glance back, listening. The air seems to have changed, sounds sharper, scents more vivid. The padding follows an embankment. My heart stops.

A crump of snow, a clink. And then through the mist, I see a dark shape approaching—the Ruff with his nose to the ground, feasting on my scent. I stumble forward, flight playing across my brain, searching for strength. The Ruff veers to the right, forcing me to turn. To the left, the Wise appears, head up, staring at my wound, knowing the time has come. The two wolves are guiding me around the base of a hillock.

Mist everywhere, clinging to cobbles, hanging over puddles of ice. Will it be painful? How long will it take? There they are, standing among the boulders beyond a small plat of snow, the Dangler and Scout to the right, the Lead a few paces forward, Younger on the left. Strange—this absence of terror, this calm. Into

the trap I step, feeling the weight of this unremarkable ground—this gravel, these boulders, the semicircle of snow looming larger and larger.

Waves of musk wash over me. The Lead looks at the Wise. The Younger fidgets her fores. For a moment, the impulse to flee is overpowering. Then it fades. The Lead inhales me greedily, ears perked, savoring the sounds of my hooves. He sees I'm yielding, his jaws open, and he embraces me with a ravening moan.

The plat of snow hangs over the cobbles like a stage. Death. My freedom. Six lengths to go. Five. Four. One more ordeal and then nothing to fear. The wolves close in, Scout wading through a pond of mist to the brink of the stage, the Dangler slinking around its edge, confident at the last. The Lead puts his large paws on the snow and swings his weight over his shoulders. Hold to the promise of calm. It won't take long.

Oblivion, I pray. Three lengths. Two. Finish me quickly.

I set my right fore on the white scaffold and step onto it. No thought of escape, no defying fate.

I am yours.

My legs punch through, chest landing hard. Cold—The raw cold pierces my center. I hang on their lunges, waiting for the strike—

Rumbling. The earth shifts. That power, the same power that hurled the Hangbelly from the ledge. The Dangler spooks, backing away. The Scout is frozen,

gazing gravely at the Lead. He barely notices the tremor, his sulphur eyes flaring at the sight of me helpless. He takes a long step, onto the stage, the Younger's bronze eyes glittering right behind.

A fierce jolt! The rumble turns furious, ice rasping my wound. A sharp bark—the Dangler's alarm. The Lead raises his paw to take another step, and the quaking mounts. The Scout lurches back, the Younger mincing nervously, turning to the Wise. The knowing one watches, sensing the power ebbing and flowing around me. The Lead gapes his jaws and takes another step.

A terrible roar— The Lead halts, hunger dying in his eyes. The Scout wheels, confused. The Wise stares across my front. I follow her gaze. The night has cracked open. The cloud cover has lifted above a nearby ridge, and through the gap I see day—blue sky above, and below, the purest white. A world of snow and ice. The power warding off the wolves has broken a way through with its furious shaking.

Who are you? Settling to a shiver, soft and intimate— You might be my own breath, the tingling of my nerves, the throbbing of my flesh.

Are you saving me? Why?

I offered myself. And you saw. You. The god of surrender.

You're the wildness I've felt. And the joy. God of the ram. My god, my Animus. Redemption for leapers. Rising in the moment of blackest despair.

I draw my fores up, plant them on the stage and straighten them. My chest lifts from the snow. You rumble, protecting, beads of ice buzzing beneath my hooves. I can see the spurs of torn flesh and the imprint they made. Connecting us. The Wise is gazing at my horns. The light has found them and the tips are glowing. My limbs wobble. I'm weak, but no longer afraid. I haven't come this far to feed the pack.

As I step off the stage, the lip breaks and the pack flinches. The Lead freezes with one shoulder down. The Scout wows, ready for flight. Only the Wise stands straight, feeling Animus beneath her paws. The light from the cracking sky plays over her back, turning it silver. And in the depths of her eyes, a dawning like my own.

The Lead and the Wise. My way lies between them, toward the world of white. I cross the quivering gravel. In your care, Animus. The Lead shifts his paws. But the Wise remains planted, muzzle toward the light. As I approach her, she turns and sniffs me, ears trembling.

The Lead lifts his fore and growls, pawing the air, gazing at the Wise. Everything has changed, his fading eyes say. He's no longer ours to kill. As I pass, the Wise puckers her snout and clicks her teeth, promising him my body. The Lead's eyes reignite, but the rumble still threatens, keeping them at bay.

A dozen paces. I look back. The Lead and the Wise are following, the Younger jogging up behind. Then

the Dangler, whimpering, doubting the decision, but afraid to be left. The Ruff stays, comforting the Scout. Animus, are you with me? The gravel still shifts beneath my hooves.

The crack of day is expanding. The boulders are scratched; and the scratches, like flattened grass, all point the same way. Ahead, tiny white blooms rise from chinks in the rock—far stars, winking out a course. Beyond, a slope rises from the level, and the clouds are lifting at its crest. The wolves move in a line, six silhouettes in a shroud of fog.

A strange thought occurs to me. They have been the agents of my ascent. They served your desires without knowing. They forced me to cut short my flight across the tableland. They forced me to climb the convex slab. They drove me up the fortress when I would have descended. And they chased me across the saddle, into the amphitheater. And a stranger thought—that my travail is a result of foolish resistance. Of being at odds with your purpose. Rivulets gurgle to life. Ribbons of silver bells are threading beneath me.

Animus? The trembling is gone.

The gap of blue sky is growing. A white chute leads up to it, scoring the slope. I rouse myself to a trot, then kick into a lope, breaking up the rigor in my limbs. I was born limber, given life for the daring leap. The pain in my chest returns, but I pay it no mind. Ahead

lies the threshold of a new world. Is it an illusion, can I really be so near?

The incline rises steeply before me. A pika squeaks, juts its nose and dives beneath the rocks. I leap into the chute and bound up it, thrusts barely dinting the snow. Down the trough come cool drafts of mist and sky. The world beyond—I can smell it. I can hear it, clear as crystal, sharp as ice. There's a shelf of snow at the chute's top. I hurl myself onto it, cross a thick carpet, and stop with the wind in my face.

An enormous river of ice and cloud appears, beginning where the dark mountains end, tilting and rising into the sky. Its highest reaches are lost among icy ridges and fog, its lower invaded by waves of rolling vapor. Not made and complete, but a world being born, changing as I watch. I feel suddenly weak, stunned by the prospect before me, alarmed by what I must dare. So high, so distant, and so unknown. This is my path—that's why I'm here.

I ratchet my hocks and rear from the drift, plunging headlong for the tides of mist. A steep slope meets my hooves and the haze swallows me, cool and gray.



The stars glimmered over Seattle, alive with secret designs. On a bluff above the city, Harborview Hospital was settling into

the night, lit windows lining its sheath of brick. Ambulances were parked on either side of the emergency room door.

In the reception area, Lindy stood with a red-headed orderly.

"I don't know." Lindy gave him a helpless look. Her hair was lopsided and her shift was wrinkled. "All she said was that he was here and I could pick him up. And to bring some clothes."

There were people seated, waiting, but the quiet was oppressive, as if some presence brooded over them, counting their chances. The double doors to the emergency room swung open and a female intern stepped forward. "Altman?"

Lindy approached.

The intern smiled. "I think he's ready to go home."

"Why is he here?"

"I'm sorry. He was brought in four hours ago. The police picked him up on Sunset Hill. He was wandering around naked on the bluffs. Howling."

Lindy stared at her.

"And singing. He woke some of your neighbors. Has he had surgery recently?"

Lindy shook her head.

"He has a fresh scar on his chest. He's communicating now." She regarded Lindy. "He was on LSD."

Lindy looked away.

"I'll bring him out," the intern said, and she returned through the double doors.

"On the bluffs?" Lindy muttered.

The double doors parted and Ransom stepped forward. He was barefoot, naked beneath the hospital gown. The intern was behind him. He wasn't frenzied or raving, but his gaze was glassy and distant. As he drew closer, Lindy saw his arms and legs were netted with red lines.

"What have you done to him?" she demanded.

"The bushes were full of thorns," the intern explained. "He'll have a bruise around his ankle. We had to restrain him." She gave him a scolding look.

Ransom smiled.

"He wasn't violent," the intern said. "Just intense, and very gregarious."

Lindy was speechless. The intern seemed entertained. Ransom's hands were trembling. His dilated eyes regarded her, as if from a distance. His brow was beaded and his skin was rosy. She reached out and touched his cheek.

"Ransom?"

"Truly, I am," he replied. He spoke humbly, as if overwhelmed by another's love. "He sensed my willingness. He felt my longing."

"I have some clothing," Lindy raised a shopping bag.

"It's strange he would care," Ransom told her. "But— He loves this dollop." He put his hand over his heart. "I'm a part of him." He scanned the reception area. "We all are."

A haggard woman eyed him over her coffee cup. An elderly Asian man pursed his lips and nudged the woman beside him.

"His name is Animus," Ransom proclaimed to those seated. "And we're his outpourings."

Lindy's eyes were wide. She put her hand to her mouth.

Ransom was about to make a circuit of the room when the intern grabbed him. She smiled at Lindy. "Animus is the god of molten hearts," the intern explained.

Ransom gave her a soulful look.

"Maybe we'll keep him till tomorrow," the intern said.

"No," Lindy said. "Where can he change?"

The intern pointed to a restroom and pulled a form from her pocket. "He'll need to sign this."

Lindy took the pen. "Ransom."

He signed and she handed him the sack of clothing. "Put your clothes on." She urged him toward the restroom.

He did as she requested, closing the door behind him. The intern took the signed discharge and turned on her heel, returning through the double doors. A moment later, Ransom reappeared. Before Lindy could stop him, he was striding through the reception area naked. Three men watched him halt before them, while a woman and a young girl rose and backed away.

"You have hearts." Ransom spread his arms. "The wilderness of love is inside you."

Lindy rushed to intercept him, but Ransom circled in the other direction. His eyes flashed. His fingers dug at the pink welt that scored his chest. "Throw yourselves open. Let it come out."

The haggard woman stood, wide-eyed. The Asian couple retreated into a corner.

“Surrender. The secret. We’re riding his pulse. We aren’t smart enough— We can’t see, we don’t know.” He grabbed the haggard woman by her shoulders. “The power of a god is hidden within you.”

Lindy came up behind him and circled his waist.

“The world’s a dream, poured out ages ago. You’re locked inside it—”

“Ransom,” she hissed.

“It’s fear. Leaping to escape.” He shook his head at her. “Letting go of everything. Life itself—”

“Your clothes,” she bellowed.

Her rage registered.

Ransom looked around. She grabbed his arm and escorted him back through the reception area, into the restroom.

Lindy left the freeway, turning the Dodge onto the 45th Street offramp. The sky was graying. Night had passed, but the new day had not yet begun. The road was deserted.

Ransom stared through the passenger window.

“Are you alright?”

He nodded without turning. “It’s over.”

“What is?”

“The fear.” His fire had subsided, and insights were rising from the ashes. “I feared my devotion to *Wild Animus* was a mistake. It’s not.”

He remained facing the passenger window. Was he watching the sleeping world, or speaking to his own reflection?

“Surrender to a lover is death’s sister. The ultimate surrender, of life itself, is born from a deeper desire.” He spoke softly. “I’ve been seeking the foundation of love, and tonight I found him. Source of the molten heart. The wolves are his instruments—a ministry of love, not death.” He spoke these last words with care, as if they would have a special meaning for her.

“You saw God.”

“I felt him. He entered me. He embraced the part of me that’s his.” He touched his left pectoral.

The road was lined with street lights. Overhead, a pair of power wires glinted. For Ransom it was a track of destiny revealed. A newspaper truck passed, then a bread truck. Sustenance. Thoughts and food for the coming day. Everything was an encouragement now, a love note from Animus. The evening had vaulted him into eternity.

“What about us,” Lindy said.

“His pulse beats in everything,” Ransom said. “If the floodgates of his power were opened, we’d live in a different world. If the molten heart flowed from every creature, through every other, and back to him— The stony earth would be an ocean of scarlet currents, weaving and seething and feeling each other. Never slowing, never cooling, never freezing. Never knowing that dark isolation again.”

“Look at me,” Lindy implored him.

He turned. “You’ve led me to this. The lesson of surrender. There’s a wisdom inside you, Lindy. You’ve guided me,

knowing our struggle had a higher purpose—without knowing what it was.”

Lindy faced the windshield, mute. The night’s insanity wasn’t fading. Ransom seemed to be reshaping their lives around it.

“Our love *has* been a struggle,” he said. “That’s the meaning of the chase. The wolves drive the ram through the world of rock, preparing him for the surrender Animus requires. And now—” Ransom’s voice grew deeper. “He’s reached the dome. He’s poised to achieve something undreamt of. A meeting with the source of the molten heart itself. The wild god Animus.

“The pack will be there,” he told her.

Lindy was unable to ask what that meant.

“This life we’ve been leading—” He shook his head. “Material things. Schools, jobs, friends and a place called home— That’s all in the past.”

“I’ve imagined someday,” she said, “we might have a child.”

“A higher world has claimed us. That’s what is meant by the death of the Hangbelly. The mother’s destroyed. The pack goes on without her.”

The car turned down a residential street. Lindy fixed on the road, seeing the pools of darkness cast by the trees, avoiding the houses, afraid to look at the world he wanted her to leave.

Ransom rolled down the window to feel the breeze.

Lindy turned down 71st and their house came into view. The street was quiet.

“They’re still asleep,” Ransom said. “And here in their midst—” He indicated himself. “If they only knew.”

“They have an idea,” Lindy said. “Those who heard you howling.”

“The wolves are meant to frighten them.”

She thought he was serious. Then she saw his wry look and laughed.

“They’ll think I’m crazy. And that’s only part of the price.” He gazed at the quiet houses. “What ransom must be paid to make the blood frozen in people’s hearts come crashing through their veins?”

She pulled into the drive.

As they stepped toward the house, Ransom turned his head at the harbor sounds. A motor’s groan. A gull’s cry. A hidden world spoke to him now.

As they climbed the stair, he faced her. “I know how hard this is.”

The Wise nodded. The Lead watched. The Scout suspected their fate was cast.

“I’m feeling hopeless,” Lindy said.

“There’s no turning back.” Ransom spoke to the Dangler, caressing Lindy’s temple, trying to smooth the creases raying from her eyes. He remembered the moment on the scaffold of snow when his heart touched Animus. “Our lives have a purpose now.”

She rested her head on his chest.

“I need you,” he said. “I can’t do this without you.”

Lindy stifled a sob and closed her eyes.

The fog had drifted back, covering the Sound with thin gauze. In the distance, a red light flared like an ember, died and flared again. It was hard to tell whether it was fixed or moving—a beacon for lost ships headed home, or a running light on board some craft, signaling its passage from the harbor out onto the boundless sea.

At eight-thirty that morning, the bluff was vibrant. Sparrows darted through the undergrowth, making the morning glories quiver. A hummingbird rose to watch a flicker call from a conifer, while towhees circled the blackberry tangles at the cliff's edge.

In the house, Lindy lay sleeping. Ransom, upon their arrival, had descended to his white room. His writing exceeded his expectations, and morning found him upstairs, pacing the living room with the manuscript in one hand and the telephone in the other. He set the phone and his papers down, and removed his clothing. Then he stepped into the bedroom and slid beneath the covers.

Lindy felt his warmth and reached for him. He kissed her brow. She mumbled a half-conscious plea and nuzzled his chest. As he coaxed her thighs apart, her eyes opened.

"Forever," he whispered.

She shivered and drew away.

"Forever and ever—" Ransom's heart was welling. She'd stuck with him through it all.

Lindy shook her head.

He could see how discouraged she was. But—unhinged, raving—it didn't matter. His dream shone as brightly as the little cage on her sternum, and her heart was still inside it.

"Remember how we felt leaving Berkeley?"

She nodded.

"Running, flying—" He smiled. "Never coming back."

She softened. The memory was sweet. Lindy sighed and rolled onto her hip, glancing at the bedstand. "I'm late for work."

"No you're not. I just called them. To say you've resigned."

Lindy sat up.

"We're moving to Anchorage," he said.

Her strength seemed to leave her. She settled back, limp and disbelieving. Ransom kissed her lips and her neck. She could feel his excitement. His desire fired her as it always had.

This couldn't be love, she thought. Her need was so merciless. He was so heedless. She felt so terribly alone. More and more, she resembled the wolves of *Wild Animus*. Perhaps she'd always been this way, and was only now seeing it in the mirror he held before her.

He was inside her, hunched and writhing, imagining he'd burst into flames. She put her hands on his back, bracing herself. In a moment, Ransom would assume his real shape. And so would she. She'd nursed his fantasies, and she clung to his wildness, terrified by the power it had over her. Who could understand it? They were desperate spirits, searching

for love's desperate truth. Or abandoned children, abandoning the world.

Ransom shuddered and the ram sprang forward, dreaming of the summit.

Outside, a train rumbled along the base of the cliff, headed north.



Animus

Ten

Through veils of mist, the glacier rises, silvered by the moon. As I turn upslope, a giant cloud curls over me like a breaking wave, cold and roiling, turning everything gray. Ice spicules whisper against my horns. Animus—I hear you. I feel you in the wind. Cool crystals coax me forward.

I move my hooves over the crusted surface. Mist prickles through my muzzle and down my throat. Two cold disks expand from the roots of my horns. Chills tremble my sides. My toe-slots are clogged, steps damped to thuds. Are you with me?

I'm blind, I'm afraid. Legs tingling to the knees now, too confused to pilot my course. Have faith. Trust and submit.

My fur is gone. The wind brushes my body, and my flesh lifts like powder. My hooves tell me nothing—they're bulbs of mist now. I feel my knees working. And then they too are gone, sublimed to ether. I'm floating above the snows, muscle peeling from my shoulders in thick scarves. My withers billow like a cape, lightening my frame. My flanks unfold, hinged at my front like a butterfly's wings.

Freedom—a freedom I've never felt.

My center is rocking. Enormous gasps shake me, a gulping and blowing that strains my limits. My chest spasms and bursts, spewing thick clouds. Without seeing or knowing, I'm giving my core up. Weightless, free from drag, I'm motes the wind carries. A spirit body, riding the ether, borne on its soars and sways, alive to things hidden in the oceans of air.

A blast hits me. I swoop and yaw, kiting crazily, swiveling out of control. Your madness, your meaning. Animus—this is you. These heavens, these heights, this imponderable vastness. Whorls, waves, the summons to a life mutable and expressive, is rippling through me. Your homeless power, your groundless energy—I feel your purpose, I understand.

I'm not made of flesh, come not from mud or rock. I'm you, your essence, furious and free, big with air, feeling as I breathe. Giantly I'm expanding, and every moment there's more void between my sensitive specks. Giantly, more and more tenuous, reaching in

*all directions. My faith is in this cloud. To its promise,
I am blooming.*

*My instincts are reaching back to a primordial
past, a time of total outpouring. Before vision had
eyes, before bodies had boundaries, before souls had
flesh. When all was merely expanding with boundless
confidence.*



Thick cords of fog snarled the coastal peaks. To the west, Anchorage camped beneath a crowd of butted rooftops. Ransom and Lindy had moved there eight months before and spent a cold winter in a poorly heated apartment. Lindy worked waitress jobs, while Ransom labored away at his manuscript and chants. In January, with a blizzard raging outside, he announced his intention to climb Mt. Wrangell. He found a man, Harvey Parrish, experienced with Alaskan peaks, to lead the expedition in exchange for a sizable guiding fee. It was the second week of May. Ransom and Lindy were inside Harvey's garage.

"Biking's great." Harvey's eyes danced. Unlike most of the climbing community, he was light of temperament and clean-shaven.

"I'm doing four hours a day," Ransom said.

"You'll wish you'd done more when you put your pack on. Even with two carries and caches all the way, we'll still be hauling over a hundred pounds each." Harvey was ten years older, shorter than Ransom and almost as wiry.

“That’s a lot,” Ransom agreed.

“We have to think about every ounce.” Harvey was leading up to something.

Equipment and supplies filled the garage. On the floor: tents, stoves, sleeping bags and bundles of bamboo garden stakes with red flags. On the wall: shovels, snowshoes, ice axes and saws hanging from nails. Lindy stood quietly, toying with a Jumar ascender.

“This costume of yours—” Harvey shook his head. “Twelve pounds is a lot. That headdress will take up half your pack.”

“I need it with me,” Ransom said.

Lindy was about to speak, but Ransom’s glance silenced her. There were parts of his mission he hadn’t disclosed.

“There are things we’ll need—to survive.” Harvey spoke matter-of-factly.

“Maybe you could leave the headdress?” Lindy offered. “Take the cuffs and leggings.”

“There are things I have to do at the crater,” Ransom said.

Harvey looked stumped. “We’ll have to divide this,” he gazed at the gear, “among the rest of us.” Then he shrugged and laughed. “I packed my niece’s stuffed rabbit to the top of McKinley.”

“What about the team?”

“Bull’s with us,” Harvey said, “and so is Gloster. Paying their travel expenses helped.” He nodded to Lindy. “I’m still working on Yank. He’s not sure he can make the time.”

“It would be great to have a doctor,” Lindy said.

Harvey laughed. "Yank's an obstetrician." He gave Ransom a conciliating look. "Not sure about Skimmer."

"He's athletic," Ransom offered.

"He's just a kid."

"He thinks Ransom walks on water," Lindy said.

"It means a lot to him," Ransom said.

Harvey turned to a table scattered with aerial photos and topo maps. "Your idea for the route is growing on me. The last group to go up Wrangell was in 1950, and that's how they did it. We'd start at this strip on the Cheshnina." He pointed at a spot he'd marked on a topo. "With decent weather, we could be back in twelve days."

Ransom touched a spot high on the dome. "There are fumaroles here. Like to get a look at those."

Harvey shook his head.

"Dangerous," Ransom guessed.

"Hot spots weaken the ice. You can go right through. We're going to steer clear of any place steam's coming up."

"Except the North Crater."

"Our climbers want to reach the summit," Harvey said, "not the North Crater."

"There's no heat at the technical summit. It's a jag of dead rock."

"It's the top."

"When Wrangell erupts," Ransom said, "the crater will be higher."

Harvey laughed, conceding the point.

Ransom looked pained. "That's why I'm doing this," he said, reminding Harvey of their earlier discussions.

"We can't climb the mountain alone."

"We're going to the North Crater," Ransom said.

"We'll try to do both. There's only a mile between them. If the weather is decent, it shouldn't be a problem."

"But we'll go to the crater first."

Harvey smiled and saluted. "Maybe we'll run into some scientists. Burt Conklin will be up there."

"You talked to Doug," Ransom said.

"Yesterday," Harvey replied.

Hurley was going to ferry the climbers one-by-one from Tolsona Lake. It would take the better part of a day.

"He's doing this for nothing," Ransom said. Doug knew how stretched they were.

Harvey nodded. "Time for me to buy the food," he said gently.

Ransom glanced at Lindy.

She retrieved the checkbook from her purse, made the check out and passed it to Harvey.

"Good for now," Harvey said. "Stay on that bike."

Ransom thanked him and led Lindy out of the garage.

"It's happening," he said in a hushed voice. "I'm really going."

"You should meet these climbers."

"Why?"

"They might not be as understanding as Harvey. They aren't getting paid."

He eyed her with gratitude. "None of this would be possible without you."

"Ransom—"

He saw the agitation in her face. "What's wrong?"

"People die on expeditions like this."

He nodded, unruffled. The challenge was before him, but he had already leapt over it. In his heart, he was on the rim of the North Crater.

"Are you sure about Skimmer?"

"He's really charged up," Ransom said.

"You'll have to be alert. In the present. Focused on the climb."

He put his arm around her.

"Play the ram, if there's time," Lindy said.

Ransom halted and faced her.

"You're disappearing into *Wild Animus*," she said. "I'm going to fall asleep with you one night, and wake up beside—"

"Who's Ransom?" he said gruffly.

Lindy laughed.

"That's better," he said.

"The money's a problem."

Ransom bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

"We're down to nothing. Every cent we saved is gone. I can't write another check until payday."

"We were going to sell the stereo—"

"It's sold. The guy's coming for it tonight."

"Maybe Katherine would pitch in," he said, "the way Hank has."

Lindy glanced at her watch. "I'm late."

She was working two shifts, and the second was starting.



I've changed. My kiting motes glimmer. A glow permeates the ether, suffusing everything with a buttery warmth. And now— I'm reeling, caught by an undertow. Animus is taking my lightness away.

My specks keel, rotating down. The brightness remains aloft, the gold drawing together, its border rounding. I'm diving through tiers of sky. Far below, mist is swirling over hillocks of snow. Two dark shapes keep pace with me, surfacing through the fog and disappearing back into it, one then the other. The dark shapes are my hooves.

I'm a physical being, small, finite— But with Animus in my heart. I feel the power in this body and embrace the return. The mist is dissolving around me. The snow is firm. I can hear my cadenced breath.

My knees come up into sight and down. A jewel sparkles in the outside corner of each eye. Between the crusted horn tips, my muzzle is felted with frost. My front is padded with it, my fores are sleeved with it. I turn my head and the stiff thatch breaks.

A blowhole opens, and a bright beam strikes my face. I shiver, lifting my head, bearing up my coils.

Animus— I feel your abundance, your energy, your hope. More breaks—the fog is shredding. Pastels pool the snows. My fores land among pinks and mauves and powdery blues. All at once, the snows are dazzling. Over my shoulder, sun pours through a gap. Ahead, a snowy mass appears through the parting clouds.

I kick into a lope, eyes trained on a world more tangible, more mystical than any I could have imagined. Through an opening: gleaming blocks, a jagged reef— Higher up, I can see where a curving white edge meets the blue sky. Portholes now: a shattered cliff, tumbling shelves, snowfields and icefalls. I burst free of the fog, and the great white cupola is full in the sun, the chaos of broken ice compassed by a perfect arc.

I feel your welcome. My deepest yearnings— The promise of fulfillment— Did I imagine this was my fate? What mad pride. I'm little, I'm nothing— That's why I'm crying inside—because I'm blessed.

I'm warming, fur dripping. At my side, pinpoints of light—emerald, lapis, gold and vermilion—shifting as I lope. Behind me, a sea of cloud spreads to the horizon, lapping over the lowlands. My track, a thin line of dots, is flanked by another that veers to the side and is lost behind a rise. The pack.

Ahead, a blue slot crosses the ice, bridged in spots by sags of snow. Shorten the stride, quicken my limbs. My fores should strike there, just shy of the edge. I'm

into the air, above startling depths, indigo chambers, twisting grottoes draped with white velvet. I land on the far side, fores in, hinds under and back into stride.

Will I see you on this dazzling slope, under this balmy sky? Another rent. Fores to the edge, firing, flying and landing. My instinct for height— My gaze, my gait, the trend of my thoughts—higher, higher. Why? The entrance to your temple is the stony circle at the edge of the sky. I'm on my way to you, Animus. I've been on my way all this time.

Pain in my chest. The wound's ruby spurs are jagged and glistening. More than a badge of safe passage— I've come to give your great heart this heart of mine. It's pounding with longing, skipping with care. Ahead, another crevasse. I leap it, landing in a pool of light, reflected sun bathing my belly. My front is steaming, wolf musk mingled with the odor of wool. Fervent and small, this heart of mine. Will it be enough?

The slope steepens, etched and rippled with lines of force. At the top of a rise, a crevasse, its far wall ten lengths higher than the near, impossible to vault. I angle left, hearing a hiss—something plows through the drifts.

The pack is scoring the swells. The Lead lunges toward me, Wise following close behind, then the Ruff and the Younger, whining excitedly, the Scout and Dangler at the rear. I keep my course, fighting my fear,

remembering—they're my ministrants. The Lead's ragged breathing reaches me. A groan, and at his signal the pack splits. The Ruff and Scout veer to the right. I'm yours, Animus. Aren't I?

I wheel and spring, putting the wolves at my rear, striking across the snow, headed straight for the offset crevasse. Are you with me? The high wall looms. The crush of paws and fast drafts— I glance back, seeing the sulphur eyes burning, the Lead's snout wrinkled, inhaling me.

I fold my fores, my shoulder hits and I roll. My wound touches the snow, crystals rasping the seal, cold shivering my core. Yours, it's yours! The glacier thrums, coming alive. Animus, directly beneath me, joyous, rumbling. A bark—the Dangler, alarmed. They've stopped. Animus, rumbling, testing, wanting to see. I spring, hurling myself at the chasm.

The glacier heaves. Show me. Your power. Louder, louder! The ice sings with your voice, a billion vibrating beads. I see the high wall through quivering lashes. Great strokes and poundings! My fores reach, and the chasm is here—

The wall emits a deafening crack. Fractures divide it with wild shrieks, icicles falling. The quaking mounts, panels opening like doors. Then Animus roars and the ark explodes. Chips fly, fragments tumble and churn, panes of ice cartwheel out, booming into the

depths. Others catch, wedged with fierce grindings. Large spans hiss to a halt, hanging while the dome continues to shake.

A bridge. A way across. Fores to the edge, hinds digging. Will it hold? My heart believes.

I spring through the showering sparks onto the piled islet, up a linkage of edges—a white lintel, a blue keel, a broken slab tipped up. The bridge quakes as I bunch and thrust. Below, from the bottomless moat, you're roaring up. The deep voice engulfs me, the huge heart of Animus speaking to the heart of the ram: "So fragile, so small. My love brought you here. Without it, you would never have dared."

Dear god—do you yearn too? The blue ice is span-gled with bubbles, something breathing within. Have you been waiting? All the lives you've flung into the void— Cold and lost. And you here, waiting, wishing just one would find his way back.

I reach the bridge's end and vault onto the snows. The roar damps as I turn, and I hear your last urging. "The dome is here for my ram to ascend." The temple is frozen water. Little you care whether it's altered or how.

Animus sighs and fades. The bridge groans and collapses with a terrible crash. My limbs are trembling, head quivering on my neck—a vestige of Animus. He entered this body and shook it. For a few precious

moments, the molten heart's source flowed through my veins.

The Lead is watching from across the gap. The Wise stands at the brink of the chasm, peering down. The Lead moans, doubtful, as the others rise from the snow. The Dangler whines, and the Ruff quiets her. The Younger pedals nervously. The Wise turns, nuzzles the Lead, glances at me, then bounds through the drifts, headed toward the crevasse's tail.

I face the dome's heights, understanding. The glacier steepens ahead, running into a serac field at the base of an icefall. Your power is mine to invoke. I can make miracles with the wound in my chest. The seal is broken, the blood is fresh. There's a wound on the summit, just like this. A sanctum with a ragged rim. The top of a well leading down.

You await me there.

I spring forward, imagining that moment.



It was late afternoon and the sky was blue over Mt. Wrangell. From 11,000 feet on the Cheshnina Glacier, all of the dome was visible except for its summit, which was obscured by a thin veil. The climbing team was traversing a serac field, winding among scattered blocks. All had red overboots, glacier goggles, white zinc on their noses and skirts hanging

from their caps like French legionnaires. They moved slowly, burdened by large packs.

Harvey Parrish stopped on a saddle between blocks and forced a ten-foot aluminum rod into the snow. Satisfied, he drew it out and marked the spot with wands. He nodded to Ted Gloster, a tall black man behind him on the first rope, and started forward. Gloster followed, then Skimmer. Ransom was at the head of the second rope. A cassette recorder hung around his neck. He was so immersed in mumbling his impressions into it, he failed to notice the march was resuming.

"Ransom." Bull Tompkins, a young man with a big middle and a nose to match, called to him from the end of the rope. A thin man with a beard, the doctor called "Yank," stood watching impatiently between.

"Wait," Ransom shouted, waving his arm at the first team. "Hold up."

Harvey turned. Gloster stared at Ransom. Yank scowled. Since they'd been on the glacier, Ransom had caused dozens of detours and delays.

"What?" Harvey yelled.

"That way," Ransom shouted, pointing at an icefall on the far side of the serac field. Harvey shook his head as if he didn't understand. Yank and Gloster eyed Ransom with disbelief. Skimmer looked confused. "Huddle," Ransom shouted, starting forward.

Collapsing the rope teams was something Harvey disliked, but eight days of this had eroded his discipline. Ransom moved his team forward until they were alongside Harvey's.

“Let’s take the icefall.” Ransom gazed up at the broken stairway, blocks inlaid like a blue mosaic.

“That’s crazy.” Gloster wiped his forehead with his arm. Even stripped to tee shirts, they were lathered with sweat.

“We don’t have time,” Harvey explained.

“Too dangerous,” Yank said.

“We’ll be fine,” Ransom assured them. “It’s a straight shot to the North Crater,” he reminded Harvey.

Bull came up beside Yank. “Bite your tongue,” he said. “We’re going to the summit.” A free ticket to Alaska had been hard to resist, but tolerating Ransom had been a high price to pay, and like Gloster and Yank, he was at his limit. Skimmer kicked the snow, upset on Ransom’s behalf. They were turning against him. Yank looked to Harvey.

“It’s not a matter of the crater or the summit,” Harvey said. “We lost three days in the whiteout, and spent an afternoon playing around in that crevasse. We only have a couple days left before we have to start down.”

“We’ll make it,” Ransom gazed knowingly at the icefall, “if we have the courage to take that route.”

Harvey eyed Gloster wearily.

“We might as well head back now,” Gloster growled.

“Let’s get going,” Yank said testily. “Harv’s leading this climb.”

“We’re going up the icefall,” Ransom gave him a cold stare. “If you want to do this some other way, come back on your own.”

That left little room for discussion. Harvey raised his

brows. Bull snickered. Skimmer bowed his head at Ransom's edict.

"Well—" Harvey looked at the others. "We could give it a try." He turned and studied the icefall. Then he started forward, drawing the rope out. Gloster was incredulous.

"I thought slavery was dead," Yank said.

Gloster laughed and followed Harvey's steps. Ransom pretended he didn't hear.

Ten minutes later, they were angling toward the center of the serac field, Harvey planting wands, Ransom talking into his recorder. A deep thud sounded and they turned to see a cloud of white powder billowing at their rear. Across what would have been their route, a swath of sagging snow had collapsed.

Bull's eyes twinkled at Ransom. "Good call."

A half hour after that, they were venturing over a snow bridge. Harvey probed and then crossed, and Gloster followed. When Skimmer reached the gap, it gave way. He dropped without a sound.

"Harv!" Gloster shouted as he fell to the snow, stabbing the spike of his axe in. Harvey felt the tug from behind, turned, realized what had happened and threw himself down, digging his axe in as well. A querulous sound echoed up from the crevasse.

"Bull," Harvey shouted. "Come here and hold him for me."

Bull made his way forward, clipped into the rope and hunched over the leader's axe. Harvey rose and worked his way toward the crevasse, checking to make sure Gloster was secure.

Skimmer yelled, "Got me?"

"Sure," Harvey said, kneeling beside the hole. It was a couple of yards across. Harvey motioned and Yank hurried forward. "He's only a few feet over his head," Harvey said. "He's got his boot on a ledge."

Ransom watched from his rope position.

"He's facing a wall," Harvey told the others. "If we can get his pack off, he can probably climb out."

Yank knelt beside Harvey. When he peered into the hole, his jaw dropped.

"Long way down," Harvey said. Then to Skimmer, "Stay calm."

Harvey knotted a short length of rope around a carabiner.

"Can you get yourself upright?" he asked Skimmer. "That's it. We're going to lift your pack out." Yank lowered the rope over the edge. Harvey got down on his belly and reached to help Skimmer clip the rope to his pack. "Okay now, ease it off."

Ransom watched them pull the pack out of the hole.

Harvey smiled with relief, but when he and Yank looked down, their faces fell.

"Get your boot back on the shelf," Yank told Skimmer.

"Turn your leg," Harvey said. "Can you straighten it?" He glanced at Yank. "Lower your axe."

Yank reached his ice axe into the crevasse.

"Try and steady yourself," Harvey said. A moment passed, then he scooted back out of the hole, shaking his head.

"What's wrong?" Gloster asked.

Ransom saw Harvey's grave expression. Skimmer's voice

reached him, muffled and distant. He sounded like someone talking in his sleep.

"He's tangled in his Jumars," Harvey said. "And he's getting cold."

"What now?" Yank said.

"Try to lift him out," Harvey muttered. He drew a pulley from his pack.

Yank flared his eyes at Ransom. That could take time.

Skimmer cried out. It was more than Ransom could stand. He unclipped and started forward.

Gloster was still on belay. He watched Ransom approach the hole, unsure what he intended. "Harvey," he shouted. But it was too late.

Before Harvey realized what was happening, Ransom reached the gap and threw himself over the edge, down into the hole. Fortunately, he got his arm around Skimmer's rope and hung there beside him, instead of plunging straight down.

It was havoc above, Harvey frantic, crying, "Ransom," and Yank appalled. "What the fuck—" Down in the crevasse, Skimmer was gasping with relief.

"You're going to be fine," Ransom said, kicking his crampons into the wall. He pulled his willow knife from his parka pocket. One of Skimmer's legs dangled free, the other was doubled and bound to his thigh.

"Hope so," Skimmer muttered, watching him cut the Jumar cords.

Ransom shivered. As he worked, Skimmer clung to him, trying to be brave. Their breath steamed in the narrow space.

Beneath them, the frozen abyss was crossed by drapes of white velvet. Thirty feet down, the tips of giant stalagmites glittered, rising from the indigo murk far below.

The last cord gave way. Ransom straightened Skimmer's leg, massaging it with both hands. "We're going to climb out of here." He glanced at the wall, grabbed Skimmer's boot and drove its toe into the ice. The crampons stuck. "Use your front points," he peered at Skimmer through his two raised fingers. "Like hooves." He clutched the rope and rose beside Skimmer, kicking his points in.

Skimmer did the same, hanging on the strength in Ransom's eyes.

Another kick. They extended their legs, moving slowly up the turquoise wall together. Their heads emerged, then they were free to their chests. Harvey and Yank hugged them as one and dragged them out.

The two lay motionless and exhausted, heart to heart, Skimmer staring into the snow, huffing for breath, Ransom facing the sun, dazzled and thankful, smiling at something all the world was blind to but he.

They continued through the serac field. It was slow going and by early evening, they were only halfway across. Harvey called a halt. He picked a camp site and probed it with his rod. After marking the site with wands, Ransom and Skimmer began shoveling, making the spot level and building a lee against the wind. Harvey and the other three started back through the seracs, returning for the cache of

equipment and provisions they'd left a thousand feet below. The sun descended, making the icefall a golden stairway. Then it started to snow—not flakes, but tiny needles that glittered like clippings of white hair. As Ransom and Skimmer worked, the magic surrounded them, needles whirling and catching fire in the last glow.

By the time the others returned, the light was gone and the weather was threatening. While they made dinner, clouds swallowed the mountain. And then it was snowing in earnest. Nothing was visible beyond the wanded area where the two tents were pitched. The snow covered packs and equipment. The team squeezed into the larger tent to eat. And when dinner was finished, they sipped hot drinks together in the light of a candle.

“Think we’re close enough?” Gloster wondered.

Harvey eyed him through the hanging socks and mitts. “Maybe. I’d rather be another thousand feet up.”

“Depends on the weather,” Yank said. “Man, what happened to your mouth?” He laughed at Gloster. Their faces were badly burnt.

Gloster pouted his swollen lips. “Shine, mistah?”

Yank and Harvey laughed. Skimmer and Bull wore blank looks. Ransom seemed not to hear, sunk in the blue shadow of the tent like a wanderer from some other dimension. Between exhaustion and altitude, they were all disoriented.

“Where did you get a name like Skimmer?” Yank said.

“We’ve got swallows around our place. When I was younger, I’d run around with my arms out. That’s what I was

wishing in that crevasse. That I was a bird and could fly out of there.”

“I fell through on St. Elias two years ago,” Bull shivered.

“When I was hanging there—” Skimmer’s gaze narrowed. “Looking down— It was eerie. I couldn’t see the bottom. Just those giant needles.”

“Scary,” Harvey said.

Skimmer’s brow wrinkled. “Beautiful too.”

“Like a cathedral,” Ransom said.

Skimmer nodded. His eyes met Ransom’s.

“You’re a brave kid,” Bull said.

“Kept your head,” Yank agreed.

“Got out of there on your own steam,” Harvey lauded him. “People turn to jelly in situations like that.”

“It was my front points,” Skimmer told them.

“The spirit of the ram that saved you.” Ransom spoke softly, only for him.

Skimmer regarded him, wanting to understand.

Yank raised his brows and glanced around. Bull was blank. Gloster gave him a mystified look. When Yank faced Harvey, the climb leader turned his head down and fooled with his socks.

“What’s the secret?” Yank asked.

In the silence, Ransom seemed to ponder the question. Finally he turned to Yank with a solemn expression.

“There’s a reason we’re climbing this mountain.” His gaze moved to Gloster. “It’s time you knew.” He included Bull and Harvey. “You’re frustrated, upset. The delays, the crater—” He

settled on Skimmer. "There's a god in this mountain. I call him Animus, but his name doesn't matter."

Skimmer nodded, seeing the conviction in Ransom's eyes.

"He's made me a ram in spirit," Ransom drew one of the fur cuffs from his pocket, "so that I could reach him." He turned the cuff over the candle flame. "That's why I'm here."

The tension was palpable. Harvey nodded mechanically. Yank glanced at Gloster, then at Bull. Gloster's scorn was barely concealed. Bull was more circumspect. Skimmer was fixed on Ransom, oblivious.

"What are you thinking?" Ransom asked Yank in a low voice.

Yank took a breath and met his gaze. "I don't believe in spirits." He spoke with candor, unwilling to dissimulate, taking Ransom seriously.

"Creatures are born from the heart," Ransom told him, "as well as the belly."

Silence.

"What do the wolves have to do with this?" Skimmer asked.

"They're the ram's ministrants," Ransom replied. "They're following me up the mountain."

Gloster laughed and shook his head. "Come on."

Ransom eyed him with disappointment.

"A god in the mountain?" Gloster cocked his head. "A wolf pack following us?" He turned to Harvey. There was a lot they hadn't been told.

"Who knows?" Harvey muttered. "There might be a god here. We can't prove there isn't." His gray eyes darted from

Bull to Yank. It was a feeble attempt to save Ransom from further humiliation.

"Mountains are spiritual places," Bull said, trying to help Harvey calm the waters.

Ransom was silent.

"I believe him." Skimmer gazed at the ram cuff. "I want to see him wearing his headdress, with the whole costume on. I want to watch him doing the ram dance and singing his chants. I want to be with him, at the crater."

Gloster looked from Skimmer to Ransom.

Yank stared at Harvey. "*That's* what's in his pack?"

Harvey exhaled and bowed his head.

Yank glanced at Gloster, then they both faced Ransom. Gloster was smirking, as if he had expected something like this. Yank's eyes were deep with disbelief.

Ransom looked like he was about to speak. Did their reaction surprise him? Did it matter to him if they didn't understand? He put the ram cuff back in his pocket.

Skimmer was downcast, watching him retreat.

"Well," Ransom murmured. "Now you know."

The wind roared through the night. In his dream, it seemed to Ransom that the storm had risen from the dome's depths. Raging from hidden caverns, it swept over the surface, seeking him out. It was far, then nearer, then whispering close. The wind found the frail tent and engulfed it, making the poles sing, stuttering the nylon, shaking him as he slept. Was it time? He shook his head and turned away. But the raging mounted.

He heard a pot clatter. Beside him, somebody thrashed in a sleeping bag. The wind was a fluid now—water or blood, dashing against the tent. Pa-dup, pa-dup, pa-duppa, pa-dup. Beating. A pulse going wild, the blood strokes of something inhuman. Animus—the first splashes. And then the torrent came, red and hot, descending on the tent and overwhelming it. Ransom gasped and writhed as in a dream of lust, while Animus circled his heart, dissolved it and bore it away.

The next morning, Ransom woke to find Skimmer seated beside him. Bull was dressing, silent and distant. Outside the tent, Gloster's voice reached him. The others were stirring. Ransom laced his boots and crawled out.

The dawn was clear and calm. The dome had not a shred of mist or cloud over it.

Gloster was attaching his crampons. Harvey stooped over the stove, making breakfast, while he smeared zinc on his nose. At the edge of the camp, Yank was tromping the snow.

"Set up nicely," he said. "Hard, but not too hard—" He turned back to Harvey, saw Ransom and silenced himself.

Gloster nodded at Ransom. Harvey backed away from the stove and put on his rope harness without a word. Bull exited the tent.

"The weather's perfect," Ransom said, looking around. His breath steamed. The rising sun reflected off every edge of the dome. The thousand eyes of Animus were watching.

Yank looked at Harvey. So did Gloster and Bull.

Harvey flinched. “Damn thing always pinches my nuts,” he laughed, tugging at the harness. “Thought we’d run to the top.”

Ransom nodded. “I’m for it.”

“The group wants to go for the summit.” Harvey gave him a regretful look.

“You mean the North Crater.”

Harvey looked eastward, across the icefall, to where the serac field gave onto smooth slopes. “We’ll never get up the fall. We’ve got a chance of making it, if we do what we originally planned.”

Gloster smiled at Yank. Bull stepped beside Gloster, watching.

“We could follow that alley,” Ransom pointed. “Get through the rest of the seracs by noon.” He stepped toward the icefall. “There’s no reason we—”

Harvey dove for him, grabbed his parka and pulled him back inside the safe area. Ransom had walked right between two winds. “There’s not enough time.” Harvey eyed him sadly.

Bull turned to Ransom. “Even the direct way’s a stretch.”

Ransom saw the sentiments aligning against him. “We could forget the icefall.” He faced Harvey’s route. “Take your way to the crater.”

Harvey looked at the others.

“Shit,” Gloster said.

Bull pushed his fists into his parka pockets.

“Come on Harv,” Yank said angrily. “Show some spine.”

Harvey sighed, scowling at the choice he was being forced to make. He faced Ransom. "We're going for the summit," he said.

Gloster stiffened and rose, expecting a harangue from Ransom.

But Ransom just nodded. Was it the conversation of the night before, or his dream? Or something that had occurred to him just then? "Alright," he said.

"Get your harness on." Harvey tried to smile.

"No."

Harvey eyed him uncertainly.

Yank stepped toward his pack. Gloster shrugged and turned for his.

"Ransom—" Harvey shook his head.

"You deserve your summit," Ransom said. "You've put up with a lot." He scanned the faces, yielding and selfless. "It's the least I can do."

Harvey glanced at Bull.

"Maybe it's best," Bull said. The sentiment seemed to seal things.

Skimmer stepped out of the tent. "What's up?"

"We're going for the summit," Harvey told him. "Ransom's staying here."

Skimmer turned to Ransom.

"Go with them," Ransom said.

Skimmer was speechless.

"I understand," Ransom said, extending each of them a gracious smile.

Harvey lifted his pack. "Eight hours, maybe ten," he told Ransom, "assuming the weather holds. We'll start down tomorrow morning."

Ten minutes later, the climbers were winding through the seracs beyond camp. Skimmer looked back and waved. Then they disappeared around a block. Ransom stood at the edge of the wanded area, watching. His smile faded.

It had been a simple bit of duplicity. But he was alone now, alone with his dangerous thought. Its magnitude fell heavily on him. He wasn't determined to do it. No. By dispatching the others, he'd only bought time to consider it. His hands were cold. He fished in his parka, found his mitts and pulled them on. Then he returned to the tent, found his pack beside it and brushed off the drifted snow.

Abruptly, he straightened. What was he thinking? It would be dangerous beyond anything he'd imagined. Crazy, even for him.

He turned a half circle, attempting to ground himself. The snow beyond the wands glittered with prismatic sequins. They sprang to light and winked out, as if by magic. The vacant camp seemed shabby, artificial—the stage set of a play that had ended, for which there was no further use. He could see the track of the departed climbers and the long way down the dome's flank. Beyond that lay the labyrinth of rock, the lowlands and the coast. A great idea had carried him here, away from humanity and the world he'd known. Instead of giving him courage, that recognition made him want to crawl back, to beg Lindy and everyone else to forgive him.

Then he saw the steam.

From a blue depression beside the icefall, a white gyre was twisting into the sky.

Heat, inside the dome. Animus was speaking, calling to him.

Ransom put his fingers over his heart, remembering the dream. The moment of rapture when his god swept him up and bore him away. He couldn't think of what he would do, or wouldn't; only of how he felt and might soon feel.

In this expectant state, he drew his willow knife from his parka pocket and set it on the snow. Then he turned to his pack and retrieved his regalia, placing his headdress to the left, his cuffs to the right, and the bundled furs before him. He unrolled the furs and the blue jar tumbled out.

Eleven

It was late in the day, and the Hurley hangar was crowded. Harvey, Bull, Gloster and Yank were inside, packing up their gear. Burt Conklin, Sid Yasuda and a team of geologists were in the yard, loading equipment and supplies into a van. They were using Tolsona Lake as the base for their field work, and they'd been ferried back from Mt. Wrangell's North Crater by helicopter earlier that day. A third group had come from Fairbanks to see Ransom. University professors Calvin Bauer, Katherine Getz and Hank Papadakis stood on the gravel, along with Fish and Game officer Vince Silvano. They were facing the eastern sky, watching a storm spreading over the Wrangells. On a horde of gray showers, a black medusa rode, its arms swept back.

Calvin looked at his watch and put his hands in his coat, hunching against the drizzle. "An hour late."

"Didn't take off," Hank guessed.

"They'll be spending the night there," Vince said.

Katherine stared at the storm as if she knew something worse was in the making.

Three days before, the six climbers had made it back to the strip on the Cheshnina River. That morning, as planned, Doug began the job of shuttling them to Tolsona Lake, one at a time. He'd flown five out.

Burt Conklin approached with Yasuda. "We're heading back to Fairbanks." He glanced at the Wrangells. "I don't think Doug's going to make it through that."

Vince nodded. "You got off the mountain just in time."

"It's a different world up there when it's blowing," Conklin said.

Hank looked at the hangar. "Those climbers don't seem to care if Ransom comes back."

"They're upset they didn't get to the top," Conklin said.

"I heard from the leader—" Yasuda raised his brows. "They didn't speak a word to each other the whole way down."

"The goal was the crater," Katherine said. "They betrayed him."

Yasuda was unconvinced. "They think he's crazy."

"One of our grad students could see him through her binoculars," Conklin said. "He was by himself, climbing an ice-fall, in some weird getup."

"With wolves following him." Yasuda grinned at Katherine.

"It's a real pack," Vince told Yasuda. "I've seen them from the air."

Katherine turned and stared at Vince.

He gave her a congenial nod. "They're just as Ransom describes."

Lindy, with Ida and Skimmer, stepped into the yard.

"They turned on him," Skimmer was saying. "They stabbed him in the back."

Ida halted on the gravel and turned, gazing at the mountains and the storm.

"Do you think they're in the air?" Lindy wondered.

Ida didn't reply. She looked at her watch, her mouth straight, counting the minutes. Skimmer stood beside her, a new austerity in his face, the remains of the Jumar rope tied around his thigh.

"Dad will bring him through this," Skimmer said.

Ida smiled at him and roughed his hair. "He'll find a way."

Lindy looked at her, but the older woman turned back to the storm.

"It's the Cub." Skimmer angled his head.

The others in the yard grew silent to listen. An organ note quavered in the distance. The sound was obscured as Wasilla Bill's truck pulled up, but when he cut the engine, they heard it again.

"That's not the wind," Conklin said.

Skimmer raised his arm, pointing at a swathe of gray sky. The Cub appeared, weaving through smears of rain. Then it banked and dove for the earth.

Hank shouted and a cheer went up. Ida smiled to herself. Lindy laughed with relief.

Mist and rain hid it from view, but they could hear the Cub touch down. It rolled along the gravel, gunned its engine and emerged from the fog, wet and glistening like something newborn. The plane rolled down the slope, crunching toward them, and came to a halt. The prop chugged and stopped.

The clamshell doors sprang open and Doug Hurley climbed out. He seemed somber, distant behind his mirror glasses, as if he didn't see the group gathered there. Intent on his passenger, he turned to help him deplane. The wind dropped abruptly. The quiet and Doug's strange solemnity, united with the foreboding they'd all felt. Perhaps the threat of something calamitous hadn't yet passed.

Then Ransom stepped down.

He was in full regalia except for his headdress. The observers were shocked, and so was Lindy. She had seen him in ram dress many times, but the idea that he had assumed that presence on Mt. Wrangell shook her. As his feet touched the gravel and he turned his face up, it wasn't the fur or the fringes of beaded twine that struck her. His eyes were like coals fresh from a brazier. His arms trembled, his legs dipped. And his back was hunched.

She stepped forward, then halted as he lifted his head-dress. He seemed not to recognize her.

"Golden eyes, know," a deep voice spoke to the crowd. "Golden horns, grow."

Ransom peered beyond them, as if the world they occupied was a byway. Then he lowered the headdress onto his head and fastened the latches. The beaded locks rattled as he turned, then his knees flexed and he moved in quick hops toward the hangar. He stopped beside a black oil drum and tilted his head at the climbers filing out of the interior, as if seeing them for the first time. Was he going to revile them? No. He put his hands on the drum and vaulted onto it.

Ida watched Doug move to within a dozen feet and post himself like the attendant of some dignitary. He removed his glasses and stared straight at her, then at Skimmer. Then he looked at Ransom with something like solicitude. The man in ram dress seemed fragile—unsteady, knees weak, arms angling to avoid a fall.

He stamped and the gong of the oil drum filled the silence. Then his legs were flexing, heels coming down on the drum's top. His right arm scissored to his chest, touching his pectoral with his first two fingers, and he began to chant. An uncomfortable moment. The watchers turned to each other, mystified, nervous, embarrassed, amused. Ransom was in a springing crouch, head back, arms extended with the first two fingers of each hand pointed forward.

Lindy looked at the gravel. She could see the boots and shoes moving closer. And then she heard the familiar voice, its false confidence, its travesty of overwrought emotion, following a jagged rhythm.

*Ruptures, bursts of powder,
giant holes.
Invisible prints, pounding drum rolls.
Your booming is tuned
To the throbbing of my wound.*

Lindy looked up. Ransom quivered and jerked as if a current was passing through him. His words seemed to pull invisible wires, stitching his legs, making his arms crimp spastically and his head buck. His madness was in the open, and the sight of others reacting terrified her. Doug seemed with him, following his every flex. Ida was repelled, but the pulse of the chant touched her. Skimmer was enthralled.

*Gleaming spans lift with
thunderous grinds,
Crashing together. I rear on my hinds.
Around me you've bent
The blue ribs of a breathing tent.*

"The secret's out," Yasuda said. He grinned like someone who'd stumbled into a carnival and was happy to be entertained. Hank looked worried. Wasilla Bill was rocking from side to side, astonished, but happy to see the young man giving expression to whatever was in his heart. He realized he was still holding the whiskey bottle he'd been nursing in the truck, saluted Ransom with it, took a swig and passed it to Calvin Bauer.

*The Wise her snout aims.
The Lead his eye flames
At the trickle of my heart's blood.*

Calvin was listening carefully. He eyed the bottle and passed it to Katherine. She accepted the bottle with a dazed look, overcome by a sinking bewilderment. Hank took the whiskey from her and drank, squinting as if to see deeper into the disturbing tableau. As the bottle descended from his lips, he noticed Harvey Parrish standing beside him. Hank handed the bottle to him, and Harvey took a swallow. "Hey, he's good," Harvey laughed. Gloster made a disgusted face and waved the bottle away. Yank grabbed Harvey. "Let's get a beer." The climbers departed.

*Surging through me, great strokes.
Giant cakes cracking, the
icefall smokes.
Inside me, you roar.
Down the cataracts pour.*

Katherine looked amazed. Vince stood beside her, arms folded, his hand patting time on his bicep. Burt Conklin was mesmerized despite himself. The chant was loud and chopped, then softer as its violence subsided and the ram recognized what Animus had done.

Lindy could see—something was happening to the crowd. It wasn't Ransom's words or his costume, or the idea that he'd

acted out his obsession on Mt. Wrangell. It was the sight of his clenching body, the choked explosions from his chest. A power barely modulated by human expression emerged from his gaping jaws and quivering lips, and it drove through those watching as surely as blood through a chambered heart. Doug was shaken by it and so was Ida. Katherine heard it but faintly. And for Calvin, the throb was fainter still.

This was part of Ransom's dream. That others would feel what he felt. Minds might be closed, but every heart was a drum to beat on. Whether they wanted to or not, they could feel him. It was as if a blade had cut through the gathering at the level of their shoulders. Above, each remained separate. Beneath, all were part of the same throbbing flesh.

Whatever pride Lindy might have felt was clouded by fear and shame. Hank drew beside her and clasped her arm. "It's alright," he said.

The chant ended. The next began with the ram springing forward, but the oil drum lurched beneath Ransom's thrust. Doug and Calvin dove as the drum tipped over, and together they caught him. Ransom lay motionless in their arms, gasping for breath.

"Something's wrong with him," Calvin said.

Doug saw red leaking through Ransom's shirt and pulled it open.

The watchers froze. Ransom's chest was crusted with blood. A fresh cut followed the line of his scar, deep and scarlet.

"Dear God—" Ida stifled a sob. "I'll get Jim."

With Vince supporting his legs, Doug and Calvin carried

Ransom into the hangar. A fluorescent tube flickered over a bench. Hank cleared the surface and they laid him down. The group gathered around. Skimmer helped his father remove the headdress. Ransom's face was flush and wet. He looked feverish. Doug pushed his matted hair aside and wiped his brow.

"The wound from last summer," Hank said.

"What's happened to him?" Katherine's voice was reedy.

"He cut himself." Yasuda shook his head and backed away.

The self-mutilation was sufficiently repellent to turn Conklin away as well. Wasilla Bill was by the hangar's entrance. He glowered as they passed.

"Why?" Calvin shook his head.

Lindy clung to Hank. She was shaking, too rattled to cry or speak.

"To wake his heart up," Wasilla Bill replied loudly.

"It's his connection to Animus," Skimmer said. "He told me about it on the way down."

Lindy hid her face in Hank's shirt. Katherine's confusion dissolved. She eyed Ransom's inert body like an anthropologist observing the results of a native initiation.

"When he puts the wound against the ice," Skimmer explained, "and thinks certain things—" He glanced at his father.

Doug nodded. "The god rises to the surface." Doug met Vince's gaze. "I heard the same thing. That's why we were late. I didn't realize—" He shook his head at the wound, and at his willingness to entertain Ransom's fantasies.

"He was trying to reach the crater," Skimmer said. "Ani-

mus was with him. So were the wolves.” He regarded the older faces uncertainly. “He turned into a ram. That’s what he said. He could see the crater’s rim. Then the god ‘drew a veil across it’ and forced him down.”

In the silence, oil dripping from an engine was audible on the far side of the hangar, pinging in a pan. Wasilla Bill stood at the entrance, peering at the sky. While Ransom was chanting, the storm’s black medusa had embraced the sun. Now, inside the dark arms, the molten orb was being crushed. Its escaping breath stained the sky peach and orange.

“Wrangell is his temple,” Katherine said. She watched Ransom’s eyes shift beneath his lids.

Bill faced them, a paunchy herald silhouetted against an apocalyptic sky. “The elders believed spirits danced in that crater.”



Ahead, the icefall looms. I’m springing through the seracs, kicking up loose powder, the swells softening in the afternoon sun. Light blazes over the perilous course, bridging the fissures with white flame. I’m determined to be careful, but I don’t see the holes until I’m directly over them. Is my god with me? My leap dislodges a snowbridge. I vault from the far side’s sagging lip, dizzy from the heat and faint of heart. Fearful the snow won’t hold, fearful I’m on my own.

Without his roar, this sacred place scares me. What

am I doing here, so small and alone? Animus—can you see me? I remember his voice booming up from the crevasse, that terrible longing— What could the god who lives here want with a grub like me?

My stride is fouling, snow turning to fluff. Legs knee deep. Now hugged to the thighs. I'm bogged, plowing through uncompacted snow. Beneath me, hidden, a chaos of holes.

Sudden shadows paint the blocks. Between two seracs the pack lunges—Lead in front, Wise at his shoulder, the Younger, the Ruff, the Dangler and Scout trailing behind. I glance at my wound. The enameled seal gleams in the sun, rimmed by jagged edges and dusted with snow. If I call, will you answer?

I forge through the white mire as the wolves approach. A slab plastered with frost—I press my chest to it. The raw cold pierces me. Your help, great god.

The Scout yowls, fearing my invocation. The Lead pays no mind, continuing toward me. The others follow, their confidence building as the calm draws out. Animus? The wolves are circling.

Tremors— At a distance. My god quakes, approaching slowly. Closer now, closer— He moans, immense and alive, playing the deep caverns like organ pipes, thrumming the dome, blurring it against the sky. My wound quivers at your kiss, tendering beneath the seal. Pounding, declaring yourself— Bursts of powder, drifts collapse leaving giant holes—the prints of a god

invisibly advancing. Animus— I'm shaking, fearful and expectant, jolted by the boom of great drums as you hammer beneath me.

The Wise lifts her head, nervous but eager. The Lead doesn't spook. The Younger is shrinking and so is the Ruff. The Scout snaps and leaps back, glaring at the Wise. The snow humps beneath me. Unfazed, the Lead takes another step. The ice around me bursts with turquoise cracks.

"The Ram is mine," you roar, and your heaving redoubles, grottoes opening on every side, gaping, gasping and shattering. A fierce jolt—I'm torn from the ice, feeling pain in my chest, fighting panic, firm to my faith. A thunderous grind. Great beams of ice lift around me, waving and craning. Boom, they tee-ter. Boom, they swing. I jerk my trunk up, rearing on my hinds as the rafters come together with a crash, directly above me. Blind, dazzled, I hear you rejoicing, coveting me inside the blue ribs of your breathing tent.

The pack hems the pavilion, looking in. They've dodged death, barely. The Younger cries, but no one is listening. The Wise is enticing the Lead, looking from me to him, telling him I'm caged, knowing I'm not. Thinking the tables have turned, the Scout snarls, but the Wise pays her no mind, wowing urgently to the Lead, aiming her snout at my chest.

The Lead faces me, eyes flaming.

The enamel is cracked, torn open by the jolt. This is

what my god wants— Heart's blood in the bright sun, trickling down my chest. A drop hits the snow and the dome is dashed. Another, another— You're lifting toward me with fierce intent, entering my hooves with great strokes and surging up. A grumble from the icefall. Between the rafters, I see puffs rising, giant cakes breaking loose, shuddering against each other as the stair pulls apart. Your booms infuse me, loads of ice plunge down, bursting into white billows.

The roar mounts, powdered ice falling with a threatening hiss, an enormous cataract, crashing down. Avalanches boil at the icefall's bottom and rumble toward me, a multitude of cymbals played over the beats of a gong, till there's nothing but an endless explosion. A wild torrent, a blaze of suns, a blizzard wind, possessing me completely.

The avalanche reaches the base of the pavilion, strikes it and shoots into the air, rising before me like a white wall. Then the spatter descends, echoes rumbling and fading.

My god withdraws.

In his wake, my limbs jerk, my spine writhes, dancing till the convulsions pass.

Powder is everywhere, in my nose and ears, dusting my lashes— The pavilion returns, and through the drifting powder, I see the pack. Dangler in a crouch, Scout on her side. The Younger half-buried, digging herself out. The Ruff eyes the pavilion with fear. They

mean little to him. His love is for me. The Lead, despite everything, fixes on the puddle of blood between my fores. Only the Wise understands, eyeing me with reverence. The spindrift makes her fur glitter. Her ears are keyed to the rustling, knowing what Animus has done, hearing his sigh.

I turn. Through the whirling veil, I see the serac field. The avalanche has passed over it like a transforming cloud. The blocks and drifts are gone, leveled with pulverized ice. A courtyard, smooth and hard, paved by Animus to permit my ascent. He erected this tent to protect me while he brought the heights tumbling down. I shake myself. An icicle slides off my shoulder into the puddle of blood. I pull my shanks from the pits they've trembled, set my hooves on the surface and step forward.

At the pavilion's curb, I look back. The Wise licks the Lead's muzzle, eyes directed at me. "See how tired he is? We'll have him at the next crossing." The Ruff is wary, the Scout and the Dangler unwilling, the Younger trying to be brave. The Lead grunts, tail rising, jostling among them, stirring their hunger with his own. He sets off at a lope, and as the wolves disappear through the settling powder, I see them with fresh eyes. They've lost their dam, their den and their pups. All they have now is me. And I belong to him.

I step over the broken plinth and leap to the courtyard below. Into a trot, hooves barely pitting the

compacted surface, wound stanching in the cool air.

My path is before me. I'm grateful but tired, breathing deeply. The blinking particles still sprinkle down, whispering sweet secrets. Can you be this kind? Gentle. Caring. Unhurried. "Come along, my child." I remember that tenderness. The world was full of it when life was beginning, joyful and new. Dear god—I feel that sweetness inside me. Brave, unembarrassed. Flowing from my heart to yours, without hesitation or remorse.

Of all those who have issued from you, one has come back. Small, crazed by dreams of glory, but precious for that. The spindrift is settling, the sun shines through. The scoured cliffs of the icefall are no longer threatening. You are with me, even when I can't see or hear you. You'll be with me all the way.

I hear burbling. I see silver trees. Fountains are spouting around me, rising from the court. Would you honor me? For what? That I've come this far? For my feeble belief? That's laughter I hear— You're pleased to tears, crying for joy. Your quakes have crushed the deep mains, your hidden rivers are overflowing. Beneath your love everything melts—the ice, my fur, my flesh, my heart.

Puddles flash and streams spread out. I kick into a lope, splashing among them, seeing where the courtyard ends and the icefall rises into the sky. A turquoise chasm crosses my way. Melt surges within, blue bands undulating, icicles darting like translucent fish. I see,

*I believe. I hear you calling from the boiling depths.
If I could dive to the bottom, I'd be with you, I know.*

*I leap the gap and land with new strength, pound-
ing to the courtyard's edge. Ahead, an icy slope with
dusted treads. The sweet moment is ending. I'm as
reluctant to leave it as you are to release me. The way
grows steep again. I'm gaining height, starting up the
icefall, feeling the thirst for still higher snows. Gusts
comb my coat. Behind me, the fountains subside, and
the wild god Animus sinks back into his dome.*



The lavender night was marbled with steel blue. Swallows skimmed the silver of Tolsona Lake, scribing it with their breasts and the tips of their wings. The Hurley home was lit, but quiet. In the guest house at the end of the path, a strange liturgy was in progress.

*Across the court,
Grateful but beat.
Particles sprinkling,
Secrets sweet.*

Ransom's wound had been tended by Doctor Jim, and after two days' rest, his strength had returned. He was sitting up in bed, wearing a flannel shirt without headdress or regalia, chanting with his eyes closed, swaying in time. People were seated and standing around him, listening.

***I remember that voice
From before I was tossed
Into the world.
It's not lost.***

Doug Hurley stood by the bedpost. He too had his eyes closed. Skimmer was beside his father, mirroring Ransom's movements. Calvin Bauer leaned forward in his chair. The intimate setting made him uncomfortable. He was there out of concern for Ransom. Beside him, Katherine sat with a troubled face. Vince stood behind her, gazing down her blouse front. Ida was by the door, watching the room.

Lindy was at the rear, in the corner, wondering at the audience. Her resentment mounted as she looked around the room. They had the luxury of indulging Ransom. She was the crutch he'd fall back on when they were gone. Hank Papadakis edged toward her.

***Of all you've hurled,
One has come back.
Crazed by dreams of glory.
Precious for that.***

Ransom, still chanting, peered through half-closed lids. He saw Wasilla Bill grinning and smiled self-consciously, reveling in the attention without missing a beat.

***The melt is piping,
Guiding skeins shimmer by.
The icefall rises
Into the sky.***

His voice faded and silence filled the room. No one spoke. Doug opened his eyes and glanced at Ida. Ransom stared at his lap.

"You sing from your heart," Doug said. The compliment sounded forced.

Ransom didn't respond.

"I could imagine him trotting," Katherine said.

"The rhythm of the ram," Hank agreed. He turned to Lindy. She was stony-faced.

Ransom raised his head. "He's the yearning inside us. His eyes light the way out of bondage."

"My wife did that for me." Wasilla Bill touched the glove folded over his belt.

"But she's gone," Ransom said. "We open our hearts, we give ourselves away, we feel love. But we are not the source."

Calvin's face creased.

"We are mortal. We die," Ransom looked from Bill to Calvin, "or grow weary. We offer our love and take another's, then find we've only traded stones." He eyed Katherine. "We carry love like a bird carries gravel in its crop."

She blinked and gazed at her knees.

"Love the source of love," Ransom said, "and your heart will be forever renewed."

"The source?" Calvin shook his head.

"You know his voice," Ransom said slowly. "You heard it in the womb, in a lover's whisper, in the wind on a stormy mountain."

Silence filled the room.

"Animus," Skimmer told the group.

Vince laughed.

"We dwell," Ransom glanced at the window, "in the shadow of volcanoes. Mountains that welled molten out of the earth. You can see where the crimson swirled and seethed, crumbling, popping with gas. You can imagine the glowing front rumbling toward you, rippling the air with impossible heat; the crusts swelling and cracking while the rivers raged red beneath. It's all frozen now. Motionless. The stuff fortresses are made of. Rock, the material of defense." His eyes had misted. "I'm talking about our lives."

Ida's eyes were a mother's, distressed by what Ransom had done. But his words still reached her.

"We're no different than the mountains." He touched his chest. "We come from a place that's hot and flowing. We're swaddled in blood, and the first sound we hear is its pulsing. We remember that beat, that warmth. We're inspired by it, we seek it in others. That's the power and the joy passing through us: our wonder, our love, our passion for life, our sorrow in leaving it all behind."

Bill's eyes were full of longing, as if he saw his wife sitting on the bed beside Ransom.

"Our colder parts, hair and teeth and bones—they huddle around the heart like a hearth," Ransom said. "We are teeth and bones in this world we live in."

"Teeth and bones?" Vince smiled.

"We're dollops and embers, cast off and cooling." Ransom eyed each in turn. "We come from the headwaters of the molten heart. A glowing god set us loose on this world, wrapped like a husk around a piece of himself."

Lindy was on the verge of tears. Ransom eyed her tenderly.

"Oh my," Ida sighed. Despite everything, the words seemed joyous.

"The longer we're gone from him," Ransom said, "the colder and harder we grow. That's our sin. Our shame. To feel that iron chill closing over us. Remembering how our hearts once glowed."

Katherine looked glum. Hank fooled with his cuff. Vince cleared his throat.

Ransom opened his hands. "We must get back to him."

"Animus," Skimmer said.

Ransom smiled. "Yes, Animus. We want to be wild again. And he is why."

Through Wasilla Bill's pain, something dawned in his face.

"Get back to him?" Calvin said. "What does that mean?"

"Shake with his throb. Bathe in his blood. Melt in his heat."

Ransom clenched his fist over his pectoral. "Circulate through him like the blood in any heart. Let him take us and return us. Cherish us and nourish us. Own us and give us back, or not, as he may decide. We have no other reason to live."

Ida bit her lip and turned away. Hank shook his head. Ransom saw the group disengaging, and he leaned forward to challenge them, peering into their faces one by one. "The mind says *I*." He clutched his shirt over his bandaged wound.

"The heart says *die*." He twisted the cloth as if he would wring it so they could drink what he felt.

"We aren't all chased by wolves," Katherine said.

Ransom glanced from her to Vince. "Look behind you."

Hank laughed.

Katherine turned with a puzzled face. Vince raised his hands and took a step back.

"Love teaches us surrender," Ida said. "Is that what you mean?"

Ransom nodded. "Too often, it barely scratches. The sweetest kiss leaves a chest wound."

"I'll take your word for it," Vince joked.

"You keep talking about physical violence," Calvin said. "We can't find joy by harming ourselves."

Ida looked for Ransom's response. She was shocked when he glinted at her, as if they shared some kind of secret.

"What if pain is the only thing that makes you feel alive?" Bill asked in a low voice.

"We all have dark moments," Katherine muttered.

"I want life," Ransom said. "Not death. But the heart lives in the act of renewal. On its own, it grows dark and hard. Cold and resisting. To preserve the joy it remembers, it walls itself up. And because it's a creation, not godly itself—it erodes. The elements beat against it. It eats. It sleeps. It covets and provides. It turns to earth and becomes a seedbed for offspring. Is that life?" Ransom asked. "Is it?"

Katherine nodded numbly.

Calvin watched her with a sinking look.

“People shouldn’t have children?” Hank said.

“That’s when we gave up,” Calvin admitted. “That’s when the dreams ended.”

“My heart’s cold as stone,” Bill told the group. “Only whiskey warms me. When I’m drunk, I remember.”

“This is sad.” Doug looked around the room, troubled, uncertain. His comment seemed to include their malaise as well as Ransom’s unthinkable remedy. “Having children isn’t the end.” He winked at Skimmer.

“It’s the sky for me,” Doug said. “I can see it flowing, the currents dividing, where it races and pools. Not just around the plane, but everywhere, up the valleys and through the peaks. That was my picture of the heart flowing through things,” he squinted as if trying to see through a fog, “when I was young and reckless, and didn’t care what kind of risks I took because there was nothing to lose.” He turned to his wife. “When I was in love, and what I felt for Ida and the rivers and mountains was all mixed together.”

Ida caught her breath. She started around the room toward him.

“Alaska’s a place where people come to let the wildness in them run free.” Doug gazed at the others. “That’s why I’m here, and you Vince, and you Hank. What happened to us?”

Katherine began to weep. Calvin put his arm around her, unsure what was happening.

“Would you like to speak?” Ransom asked softly.

Katherine shook her head.

Skimmer beamed at Ransom, seeing his triumph.

Lindy had fury in her eyes.

Ransom bowed his head, accepting the blame. "I think you should leave," he told the group.

As those seated rose, he did as well, eyes flickering from face to face. "What a moment this was." He touched Katherine's shoulder. "A little of the molten heart flowed here."

Ida leaned toward him as the group filed out. "You're melting that hardness in us." She eyed his chest. "Take care of each other." She looked at Lindy.

Lindy turned away, facing the window. Ransom closed the door and they were alone.

"Please," he said.

She remained with her back to him, shaking her head. Her shoulders were stooped as if the world of *Wild Animus*—mountains and rivers and flowing ice—had been heaped upon her. He pulled her toward him, seeing the defeat in her face.

"Lindy—"

"I mean nothing to you," she said.

"I love—"

"Animus," she burst out. "You've left me behind."

"You're right here. With me."

She cringed. "Your first disciple."

"None of this would have happened—"

"Your heart's bleeding for everyone but us."

"They're desperate to find what we have," Ransom said. "I feel responsible. Their hope is so fragile. It's like handling a newborn child."

"What we have?" Lindy was despairing.

"You think I'm a sham."

She didn't reply.

He closed his eyes. "What do I know about love or the heart."

His humility softened her. She saw the guileless child, and she drew against him.

Ransom flinched.

Lindy stared at him. He tried to turn away, but she grasped his shirt and unbuttoned it, gasping at the sight of his bandages hanging loose and bloody. "What have you done?"

He watched her move the dressings aside.

"The stitches are cut." She peered at him with horror.

He touched her cheek, as if to reassure her.

Lindy looked around the room, at the bed and the desk, and his parka on the chair. She stepped over to it and pulled the willow knife out of the pocket. Its blade was streaked with blood. "You've opened yourself again," she whispered.

"Not deeply," he said.

"You're insane."

"Am I?" He seemed unsure himself. "To love a god is a kind of madness."

He closed his shirt like a modest woman hiding her nudity.

"The holy ones spurn the body." He spoke tentatively. "They trade a temporal self for a transcendent one. It's an expression of faith." He moved his fingers over his shirt, caressing his scarification.

"Is this what *Wild Animus* is doing to you?"

Ransom's face fell.

"I can't take anymore," she said.

He saw her tears starting. "Lindy—"

"I'm frightened. And alone. We were going to be together. The two of us. Remember?"

"I remember. That's what I want." He embraced her, ignoring the pain. "You. No one else."

Hope welled with her tears. She clung to him.

"That's my dream," Ransom said. "To reach the summit and have you with me. To surrender to you, as well as to him. The wolves will be there. Some of them."

His words confused her, but still she was swayed—at the center of his world again.

"There wasn't any choice this first time," he said. "I had to go with them."

"What do you mean?"

"The climb. The crater."

She drew back far enough to see into his eyes.

"Bill's going to let us move into his cabin," Ransom said. "I'll be there full time, close to the mountain, to finish the manuscript and record my chants. You'll be here during the week." He nodded at the guest house. "They're glad to have you. Ida said that she'd help you find work in Glennallen. Doug will fly you out on weekends."

Lindy was dumbstruck. Her lips parted, her features worked as if she had something important to share. But the silence drew out.

He put his cheek to her temple. "You won't abandon me. You're coming with me. I know my pack."

Lindy shivered. She couldn't control him. She still had the power to stanch his doubt. But Animus had more. The god was his source of confidence now.

"I missed you," he whispered. His voice was like a boy's. He touched his groin to hers.

Lindy shivered again. Would an hour of passion quell her pain? Was she that starved, that needy? The thought of Ransom inside her frightened her. But it wasn't a fledgling mystic who kissed her. It wasn't a man deranged, who carved his flesh. It was a child, and he was as lost as she was. She had never feared him, and she never would. She returned his kisses. Ransom's love was deep and genuine. She could feel his heart opening to her, pure and freely given, and nothing else mattered.

The following afternoon, they stood outside the Hurley hangar while Doug loaded the Cub.

"Think of me." Lindy kissed him. Her smile had a sheltering fondness.

"Friday," he said. His eyes searched hers.

Ransom climbed into the plane. As Doug closed the clamshell doors, Ida moved beside Lindy. The Cub taxied over the gravel, toward the runway.

"Let's watch from the aspens," Ida said.

They walked together toward a stand of trees, watching the Cub position itself for takeoff.

"Some are always seeking," Ida said.

Lindy looked at the older woman, seeing her strength, her smiling eyes, the hangar and home behind her. Ida didn't understand. How could she?

"That business with the knife," Ida said. "He told Doug he was done with that."

Lindy was silent.

"Doctor Jim said the cut wasn't deep enough to be dangerous," Ida said.

They stepped beneath the aspens. As the Cub's engine revved, Lindy felt a rush of dread. Ida was laughing and waving at the plane. Above, the leaves rustled and flashed. Something of moment was happening and the world was all bouncy and blithe.

"He's a rare creature," Ida said.

Lindy stared at her. "You don't know him."

Ida lowered her arm.

Doug opened the throttle and the red foxtail grass thrashed in the prop wash. The Cub sniffed at the air and leaped forward, and the foxtails became a shimmering path, flashing and fluid in Ransom's wake. The plane rose and dwindled in the sky, smaller and smaller. It was invisible, the hum barely audible, and then even that was gone. There was nothing to hear but the lapping of the lake and the leaves in the trees.

Twelve

It was late afternoon and the sun was shining on the winding Cheshnina. The Cub glided above the river's skeins, dipped beneath the spruce tops, tilted toward the strip and touched down. It bounced and bumped to a halt, the prop chugged and froze. Doug unclipped his shoulder belt, opened the clamshells and helped Lindy out.

It had been a month since Ransom had taken up residence in Wasilla Bill's cabin. The growth was yellowing, summer approaching its end. Pocket plovers darted over the river silt. Doug looked around. There was no one to meet them.

Lindy scanned the spurs as he unloaded her things. This was her fourth visit, but the place still seemed like a fabled realm. The wind whispered secrets—there were secrets in the peaks, and in the hearts of the animals hidden there.

He lifted the duffels and they started along the path toward the cabin. As they left the hum of the river, another rose to their ears.

“The generator,” Doug said.

Lindy sighed. Ransom was alive.

The path was hemmed with white parnassia. Violet monkshood nodded in the breeze. A tawny waxwing perched on a snag, watching through its mask as she passed.

The cabin appeared through the trees, surrounded by a scud of smoke. Over the drone of the generator they could hear Ransom chanting. They halted before the door. Lindy collected herself. Doug knocked. The chanting stopped.

The door opened and Ransom stood before them in full regalia, white fur and golden horns flashing. Beads glittered in the cords of his ropy mask, eyes glinting behind the black screens. They waited for him to speak, but he just stood there. Lindy’s smile withered. She drew beside him and hugged his arm.

“Is it Friday?” he rasped.

“Yes,” Lindy said. A sulphur butterfly settled on his horn. It turned on scarlet legs, staring at her with lime green eyes, an emissary of powers who knew him better than she.

“I’ll turn the generator off,” Ransom said, moving past them.

Doug carried the duffels inside, setting one by the bed and the other below the shelving. He opened it and removed the groceries. Lindy looked around. Socks and a tee shirt lay on the woodpile beside the stove. The chair was angled out from the table where a notepad lay beside sheaves of manuscript. On

the other side of the cabin were the tape recorder, his instruments and the mic stand. She imagined him tensed and jerking before it. The generator's drone died.

As Ransom stepped back through the doorway, Doug turned to Lindy with a look of alarm. Ransom still had his mask and furs on. Doug was eyeing a black stripe up the side of his legging.

"What's that?" she said.

"Some of his heat," Ransom replied. The fur was scorched to his hip.

"What are you doing?" Doug said.

Ransom spoke slowly. "I've been on the dome."

"Flirting with fumaroles," Doug said.

"He protects me."

"Ransom—" With each trip, Doug's upset had mounted. The time for measured concern was past. "You're climbing alone. No shovel, no emergency gear— The snow's soft. The bridges are rotten this time of year. You know how dangerous those hot spots are—"

Ransom didn't respond. Outside a gray jay squawked. Through the smoky window, aspen leaves fluttered like paper suns.

Doug shook his head. "Every week you're worse. More distant. More fogged in."

Ransom stepped toward him. "I can see the reflection of the ram in your eyes."

"He means a lot to me," Doug replied. "If you die, he dies with you."

Ransom just stared through his screens.

Lindy moved toward the shelves.

"You should think about what all of this is doing to her," Doug said.

Ransom didn't answer. He seemed to be waiting for Doug to leave.

"Here." Doug pulled an oblong metal box from his pocket. "Keep this in your pack. It's for downed planes." He pointed. "If something happens, trip this lever."

Ransom waited without speaking.

There was nothing more Doug could do. "I'll be back Sunday." He set the locator on the table beside the manuscript and departed, closing the cabin door behind him.

Lindy retrieved an armful of items from the shelving and carried them to the table. She motioned to Ransom as she spread them out. He stepped toward her. A package of swabs, gauze and tape, Bill's wormwood infusion and a tube of antibiotic ointment. She unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off. Her hands were steady, but her lips were trembling. The bandage over his left pectoral was soaked with blood.

"Is it painful?"

"Warm."

She lifted the bandage in a couple of places, then peeled it away. The sight made her catch her breath. "It doesn't look good." Studying it calmed her. She nodded to herself that she could manage, reached for the swabs and infusion and began to clean the wound. She had kept Ransom's continuing self-mutilation a secret. No one could allay her fear, and

talking about it would only have made things worse. Ransom depended on her.

As she cleaned the wound, a sigh escaped him. Instead of recoiling from her strokes, he moved with them, as if relishing the contact. Beneath the blood and crusts, the pink welt appeared, freshly cut down the center.

“We need a doctor.”

He didn’t respond. Her ministrations drew an ominous yearning from him. It filled the space around them. She found it difficult to look at him. Her hand grew heavy.

“Where have you been?”

“Above the icefall.” His voice was intimate and aware.

“You camped there?”

“No. I didn’t take the tent. I climbed straight through.” In order to ascend the mountain quickly, he had removed one essential after another.

“Did you get any sleep?”

“In a crevasse.”

“It must have been freezing.”

“I spent a night in the labyrinth.” His voice was hushed.

Lindy uncapped the ointment and dabbed the wound.

“He was with me,” Ransom said. “Teaching me.”

She peered up at him.

“The discipline of sacrifice,” he said. He murmured the words of a chant.

***Beneath the lace, glyphs rising.
His nature they impart.***

*Torn by violent dividings.
I read them with my heart.*

The verse seemed to enliven him.

The sight of his energy coming back was a relief to Lindy. “Hold still,” she said, unwrapping the pads of gauze. His movements ceased, but he continued to mumble. She taped the fresh bandage over his wound while he spoke, hearing the adoration in his voice. Adoration for Animus.

“Take your headdress off.”

He seemed not to hear.

She reached to undo the clasps. Ransom turned aside. She raised her hands again. He grabbed her wrist. “Let me do it,” she said gently.

A moment of silence. Then his arm fell.

She opened the clasps, unnerved by his reluctance, wondering what she might see when the headdress came off. He tipped his head forward. She lifted it by the horns and set it down.

The visage that raised itself was crossed with scores and cuts. It was all she could do to keep from crying out. “What’s happened?” She put her fingers to his face.

“I’ve been the ram since you left.”

“You haven’t taken it off?”

His hair was matted. His cheeks were haggard, and his mouth was slack.

“Another wolf is dead,” he said with a troubled expression.

She stopped him, putting her fingers over his lips.

He pulled her hand away. “She angered him.”

“Ransom—” Lindy shook her head. He was slipping back.

“Your fear, your doubt—” His eyes hooded.

“I’m afraid,” Lindy admitted. “Let him see. I don’t care.”

Her candor turned his upset inward. He was more fearful than she about the fate of the wolves. “Forgive me,” he said.

She quivered and drew against him.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He was miserable. “I don’t want you to die.”

“Who said anything about dying?” She kissed him.

“Animus gives me no peace.” His eyes searched hers. “I know what he wants of me. Only the Wise understands.”

“I’m here with you now. I love you.”

“The Lead still hungers for me.”

She shuddered. “Don’t—”

“The Younger’s trembling with fear.”

“We’ll get through this.”

“The Ruff preaches false hope.”

“Stop, stop—” He was terrifying her. “Don’t see them in me,” she pleaded.

“Lindy.” He spoke her name like an invocation, trying to blot out the wolves. “And Ransom,” he said, trying to find the memories inside him. The time before Animus seemed impossibly distant.

“It’s Friday,” she said. “We’re here in Bill’s cabin together.”

Her voice was tender and caring. It soothed him. But his gaze fell on the wormwood infusion and he saw her print on the bottle—the smudge of a palm and four stubby pads, the start of the fingers. His pursuers had again caught up to him.

If he strayed from his purpose, they would threaten his life. "Higher," he murmured. "Higher, higher—"

Lindy grabbed his shoulders. "We're safe. There's no danger here." She took a step back, grabbed his headdress and turned it so it faced the rear wall. Then she put his guitar back in its case.

When she lifted his manuscript from the table, he moved to stop her. "The labyrinth," he said, taking the sheaf from her. "It's done." He wanted her to understand what he'd accomplished.

"Come back with me on Sunday," she said.

He shook his head.

"*Wild Animus* is nearly finished," she said. "We'll make copies, let people read it."

"I can't leave."

"They want to see you."

"No."

"We'll go to Fairbanks and visit Hank and the others."

"No."

"Someone has to look at the cut."

"I don't want them to see it."

"Just a few days," she moaned, rocking her head on his shoulder.

He turned away. "A few days. Then we'll come back and climb the mountain together."

She raised her head.

"Always," he reminded her. "It's the fulfillment of our vow."

“I can’t do it.”

“You’ll be there.” He spoke calmly of something pre-ordained. “To make me ready.” He touched his chest.

She regarded his hand—the hand that wrote *Wild Animus* and wielded the willow knife. It cupped her chin and lifted her gaze.

“The labyrinth,” Ransom said in a lower register. He separated some of the pages from his manuscript and motioned her toward the chair.



The icefall's behind me. Its frozen treads are like the backs of blue waves descending a vertical sea. I'm loping over white swells, buoyant but tense, knowing a test lies ahead, hooves crunching the crust, reflected sun blazing up. Forward, a great hatchwork of ice. A turquoise corridor, its threshold rippled with wind scour, leads into the labyrinth.

I hurtle toward it, the cool walls rising up, my hooves tamping the snow. As I drop to a trot, the corridor narrows and the floor descends. The labyrinth creaks, white drapes unfold, the banked floor trembling. Gaps appear, deep and dark blue. Floor, what floor? How brave are you really? All the floors here are false. How deep is your faith— As deep as these grottoes? His temple's corpus, these quivering halls— Do you hear? The crystal walls cry, echoes of torment and

release ghosting through the icicle rain. Cornices vault overhead. The way grows dim, lit only by frozen candles, their sharp tips flaming. In the spectral glow, the walls shimmer with lacy scrawls and glyphs of rime. Read them, ram, with your heart.

Born in fire from the void, and rent by violent dividings. The creation of the many, the return of the few. The few who ache and who understand. Others have threaded these bitter catacombs, thinking to meet him face to face. Their disciplines scroll before me, recorded in the storied frost. Piety, zeal, renunciation. Days of bliss and tragic nights. Rapture, raving remorse— Lives cut short.

A transept opens through gauzy drapes. Deep in the mountain, Animus moans and the passage shudders. Sections of floor sink around me. Only a ledge remains. This is the way.

The walls grow colder and closer. Animus asks, and the questions echo. Will the ram surrender? Can he put fear aside? “He’s a strand of myself,” Animus says. “He circles and yearns, but not as I. Child of my depths—you’ve returned. But how much of yourself are you willing to give? Everything? That’s the devotion your god will demand.”

A cracking and crashing, white eaves fall behind me. Is the vault collapsing? Is this your will—to bury me alive? That noise— I hold my breath. A landing grunt, a yelp and hoarse panting. The wolves have plunged

through the roof. I hear the Wise wowing now, urging them on. In a corridor nearby, the Younger squeals, playing her game. The fast crunch of paws approaching. There's no turning back, the wolves bar the way.

A zag in the channel, a gap in the floor. I leap, punching through as I land, pitching sidelong, shoulder scraping the wall, then I pivot and spring into a narrow slit. A terrifying place, two lengths wide, the banded walls like purple marble, roofed and freezing, the floor nothing but moldings suspended over the bottomless drop. Ahead the passage ends, pinching to a crack. Behind me, I hear the Lead's panting and the wow of the Wise. I face the slit, full of dread, turn to its freezing wall and press my wound against it. I shiver, feeling the contact in every nerve, fearful, expectant—

Animus roars.

My chest clenches. A chip of ice, cold and sharp, pierces me. You rise through the narrow cut, deafening, filling me with your power while my heat bleeds into the wall.

The walls heave, shelves crashing down. Barks thread the cacophony—the Dangler's alarm. Then everything is drowned by shrieking as the icy slit cracks open. Here's your way! Beneath the torn floor, I hear your rumble in a thousand blue grottoes. The quakes are opening the slit to the sky—

I pull my chest from the ice, feeling a sharp pain as the beams play over it. My wound is bright red, open

and bleeding. I see its steam and feel its heat, and I can smell the odor rising from my deepest part. You lurch and throb, extolling the letting, while the scent fires the pack. Behind me, the Lead bounds along the blue wall, his sulphur eyes glowing.

The passage dips. I spring down a ramp, wanting you near. You're shaking the walls, pounding with me, dark pits yawning, skylights opening while the wolves bay and yap, following fast. What separates us? Nothing, great god. Nothing at all. An aisle shrieks to the side. I leap into it, vaulting a pit, rime grooming my flanks. Will you lend me your power? The high lancets shudder—giant icicles fall and plunge through the floor. Your roar fills and empties me. What will I give? You want to know.

“Everything,” your voice booms through the catacombs. “Everything.” Sections of vault fall and burst against the walls. “Everything” echoes in fathomless bays, midnight blue. Cold death surrounds me, and the pack's at my rear, the Lead turning a corner, kicking up snow.

Dear god, what does “everything” mean?

Animus hurls me through a glass into a hidden sacrum, his triumph mounting in my ears. The enclosing walls are puzzled panels. Clerestories open and cascades of snow pour down. My back is freezing, my withers, my front— The sacrum bends, its rent walls

flexing. You're taking my breath and my legs, "everything" flowing to you and through you—

My frame, my thoughts, my precious blood—I can't.

The flux halts abruptly. Animus withdraws, heedless, uncaring. Spans of arch fall, jagged blue panes crash around me. And then the havoc ends. "You're dead, you're done," Animus rumbles. "You're not the one." I shrink beneath a shelf, imprisoned in the clogged sacrum. Animus withdraws.

I hear the pack: the snuffling Lead, the Younger's squeals, hoarse pants from the Ruff. The wolves are digging through the blockage. I turn in the cramped space, looking for danger, and the loose ice moves. Scrabbling paws. The black snout of the Lead punches through.

Animus, please! Everything—I understand.

The Lead crawls toward me, sulphur eyes fixed on the blood streaming down my front.

I'm flesh, I'm despair. I remember the scaffold of snow. My blood is yours— It belongs to you.

Grudgingly, Animus makes the chamber hum. The Wise claws through, ears perked. I can see the Scout and the Dangler behind her.

Don't hedge, don't wait. Enter me now!

Tremors. Shaking. The Scout yowls. The Lead rises, brow wrinkled. The Dangler retreats, barking an alarm.

Animus. I can, I will— I'll let go of this world. At the summit, not here in this maze. Embrace me there. Here, now—help me escape. Quaking, I feel you quaking— Everything, I swear!

Booms, great booms. You're roaring back into my heart. Back on my feet. The Wise stands rigid, sensing my possession. The Scout cringes. Animus, please— find a way out.

"Find, find," Animus roars, "Gods don't find."

The sacrum shakes, an enormous rending.

Unlock me, tear this place open. Lift me out!

Jolts, shrieking, sheets of rime sliding as the walls keel back. Into the breach I leap, Animus heaving inside me. Fierce again, drawn from the depths, the mastering roar. And my heart responds with a voice like his own. Fly, ram, fly—

A blue vee is opening, wolf breath behind me, long tongues in panting throats. Up the newmade ravine, I spring as it tears, pummeling chips and loose powder, sun and blue sky pouring over me. The icy lips part like casement doors. A blast of chill wind, I'm blinded by glare. Behind me, the pack bounds through the gap, strung out in a line. I cock my hocks, the dome heaving beneath me, wrenching my spine, hurling me down. The wolves wheel around me—

The Lead jabs my ham. The Scout nips my front. I'm hunched and bucking, infused with your quakes.

Their jaws reach, but they don't close. Your quaking won't let them.

I rear now, fores treading, head high, not fighting or fearing.

Panicked yelps from the ravine. The Dangler has lagged. She appears in the gap as the gleaming doors slam. Her scream, lost in the grinding, returns as a groan. The wolves turn to see her crawling toward them, spine broken. A violent jolt—they're thrown to the snow, and the shaking ceases.

The Dangler whimpers. The Ruff crawls toward her. The others rise, muzzles shifting, listening to Animus rumble. The Lead watches the Wise. She's dipping to gnaw a splash of my blood from the snow.

The Dangler's struggling stops, head lolling. Animus is done with her. And so am I. The Lead noses the Wise, lapping blood from her lips. The Younger whines, smelling the game. Their desire's returning. I back through the snow. The Dangler, no higher. Will the others come?

The Ruff grunts, questioning the Lead. The Wise grumbles, calling the Dangler's death just, wowing at the others. She swings her head past me, pointing her muzzle, and starts off at a trot. The Lead eyes me, licking his jowls. Then he turns, following the Wise. The Younger hurries after, then the Scout, frozen and shivering. At the rear, the Ruff, obliging as always, casts his lot with the rest.

I pivot, light-headed, the summit in mind. Beads of ice are stuck to my wound. How much blood have I lost? How much more can I lose? The pack raises a wake of loose powder. I tighten my haunches, gather my hocks and fire my hinds, vaulting forward, heart crying “higher.”



The weekend on the Cheshnina was idyllic, like a chapter from two other lives. After reading the manuscript passage, Lindy coaxed Ransom to bed. They nestled close on the lumpy mattress and woke late the next morning to the calls of jays. She took him on an aimless walk along the river, and it seemed to please him. With a rusty pail they found in the cabin, they gathered berries, and that afternoon Lindy made tarts on the woodstove's top. The ram and the wolves and the wild god Animus seemed to retreat from Ransom's thoughts.

Doug returned Sunday in the late afternoon. Ransom was lucid and attentive, and Doug was joyful when he asked to be flown out. They returned to the lake, and on Monday and Tuesday the two of them lazed, floating in a borrowed dinghy and fishing for trout. People responded to Lindy's calls. Ida proposed a party, and it turned into a cookout to celebrate the completion of Ransom's opus.

On Wednesday evening, the drive of the Hurley house was lined with cars. Inside, the living room was crowded with

guests. A number of locals showed up at Ida's invitation, curious to meet Ransom and see what the stir was about. Those who knew him were more reserved, some willing to share the optimism Lindy and Ida expressed, others nervous about what they'd heard. Katherine Getz and Hank Papadakis stood listening to Wasilla Bill.

"That's how it was back then," Bill said.

Vince Silvano loomed behind Hank. "Till the fruits and nuts arrived." His speech was slurred, and he swung toward Katherine as he spoke, eyeing her narrowly.

Katherine looked away.

"Easy," Bill laughed at Vince. "You're making a bad impression."

"I'm a Neanderthal now," Vince griped. "Since the seance."

"Seance?" Katherine faced him.

Vince smirked. "You buy Ransom's horseshit?"

Katherine pardoned herself, working her way through the crowd into the dining room. Platters loaded with food covered the table. Lindy stood beside Ransom, her arm linked to his, smile a bit forced, but radiant withal. He wore jeans and a tee shirt and was clean-shaven. The seams and scores in his face were gone, and the cut left by the headband was hidden beneath a flesh-colored bandage. Initially distant, he'd warmed to the gathering and was talking to Calvin now, smiling, his expression wistful.

"So it's finally done," Calvin said.

Ransom nodded. "Not quite."

Katherine halted eight feet away. She fluffed her hair and stood by herself, watching Ransom. A short red skirt showed off her legs, and a low-cut blouse did the same for her breasts. She looked ill at ease, and when she realized Lindy was staring at her, she turned away.

Ida strode through the crowd with a slab cake, and set it down in the center of the dining room table. The cake was covered with powdered sugar and *Wild Animus* was written in red script across it. Ida smiled at the compliments, sharing a new cheer and grace. When she stepped beside Doug, his hand slid behind her. She gave him a scolding look. "You're still eighteen," she said. He kissed her on the lips.

When Ida drew back, Lindy was eyeing her with a purposeful look. Ida nodded and took a step forward, put her hands on her hips and called for the group's attention. People moved from the living room, into the smaller space.

"Something special has happened here," Ida told them. Her gaze took in her home and her life. "It couldn't have happened without you." She turned to Ransom.

He flushed.

"Those of you who know him understand what I mean." She lifted the manuscript, raising her brows at its weighty matter. "Those who don't, I want you to hear the message from his own lips."

Ransom looked rattled. When he glanced at Lindy, her nod betrayed her complicity.

"Will you tell them about yourself and *Wild Animus*?" Ida asked.

He took a breath and gazed at the curious faces. He bowed his head, as if collecting his thoughts. Doug watched him, nervous but hopeful. When Ransom lifted his face, it was creased with intensity. His hands trembled. He cleared his throat, and it seemed that he was going to speak. Then he closed his eyes and began to chant.

Shrinking loose, the walls.

The roof falls.

Animus withdraws.

You're dead, you're done.

You're not the one.

Digging paws.

His voice was uneven, rasping and choked. He lifted his arms, but they hung there stiffly, and instead of flexing, his legs were locked. The gathering was instantly uncomfortable. Those who didn't know him, looked away or traded glances. His features were so strained and his movements so arrhythmic, it was painful to watch. Those who'd heard him before were even more surprised. Katherine shook her head. Doug looked ill. Lindy forced a smile to hide her fear as Ransom's movements grew more erratic. Skimmer slid through the crowd and knelt by his feet.

Through the lurching aisle.

To find the hatch, my trial.

Never doubt.

*A roar divine.
Gods don't find.
Lift me out!*

Ransom's frame jerked to the breaking point, and then the struggle was over. Whatever warred within him was overcome like an obstacle damming a river. His movements became fluid, his voice smoothed out, the words leaving his lips were clear and deeply felt.

Hank sighed with relief. Bill closed his eyes, swaying to the steady pulse. Katherine was motionless, but her eyes grew misty, as if she could see his spirit soaring and longed to go with him. Lindy's distress only increased. The ram was alive again.

"He's going to be alright," Ida whispered to Doug.

He nodded, uneasy. Maybe Ida knew better.

Skimmer rocked, fingering the Jumar rope around his thigh.

*In the open,
Blast of chill air.
Dunes shaking, blinded by glare.*

*Behind me, the pack bounds
Through the breach.*

*Cocking my hocks,
Jolts hurl me down.
Wolves wheeling around.*

Ransom pitched himself into the finale, and as the chant reached its end, his voice trailed off and his body went slack. The room was silent. He opened his eyes, raised his head and looked around, searching the faces with a curious expression. Some were reachable, others unsettled. All seemed relieved it was over. It was as if an illness had passed among them without claiming anyone.

Ida started to applaud. "Extraordinary," she said. "Isn't he?"

Doug joined in. Then Hank and others followed suit.

"He's found something," Katherine said to Calvin.

"He's paying a heavy price for it," Calvin replied.

Skimmer stood. "It's better with the headdress." He gave Ransom a knowing look.

Ida reached Lindy and hugged her. "Wonderful."

"Write that one in the cabin?" Wasilla Bill put his arm around Ransom.

Ransom smiled.

People were milling, talking again, getting drinks. Doug motioned to Bill. "Give me a hand."

"Come on," Bill urged Ransom, and they followed Doug through the living room and out the front door.

Salmon steaks were cooking over a pit fire. Doug and Bill removed them with spats. Beyond, the lake was sinuous, waves crawling its surface like silver eels.

"My how things change," Bill laughed. "I'm the only one here who isn't drinking."

Doug was silent.

“Credit to you,” Bill nodded at Ransom. “I wouldn’t let her go. You showed me that.”

Ransom frowned at his solicitude. Doug was looking at him, and the look said, *See the power you have*. Then he turned and carried the steaks inside.

Bill eyed the pit fire coals. “I didn’t know where she came from.” He touched the glove folded over his belt. “Or where she was going.” He removed the glove with a sigh.

“All that sweetness—” Bill was having trouble speaking. “I couldn’t keep it alive, no matter how much I drank.” He took a deep breath. “I didn’t know. It has its own life, its own home, its source.” His eyes seemed to clear. He gave the glove a look of farewell and dropped it onto the coals. As the flames flared beneath it, he leaned close and rubbed his stubble against Ransom’s cheek.

Ransom put his arm around the older man.

“How are things out at the cabin?” Bill asked. “Taking care of yourself?”

Ransom felt Bill’s love for his wife flowing through him. And the gratitude from Ida and Doug came with it. There was collusion here, but it was so caring, he couldn’t object.

“How old are you, Ransom?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Life’s a long road,” Bill said. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Ransom nodded.

As they stepped back into the dining room, Lindy was waiting. She looked desperate.

“—like they say. The loons love it here.” A man with no chin turned, his eyes rolling.

A hush fell over the gathering.

“What’s wrong?” Ransom said.

Lindy smiled and shook her head.

As if to correct the chinless man’s slight, Katherine stepped forward. “Thank you,” she said to Ransom. “Since that day we heard you in the guest house, my life has changed.” She laughed. “It’s a mess now. Do you think something good will come of that?” Her tone was confiding, but the whole room was listening. “This grief—” The admission blackened her smile. “It’s in the open now. My skin is gone. I’m raw. Things reach me. I’m happy sometimes, but it’s terrible too. I’m so vulnerable. Every word, every sight and sound goes flying through me.” She raised her hand to her breast. It was instinctive, a shielding motion, but as Ransom watched, she succumbed to a deeper instinct and reached out to stroke his cheek. “I’m afraid I’m in love with you.”

Ransom froze. Calvin’s jaw dropped. Lindy rocked as if the ground had shifted beneath her. The guests were speechless.

“A toast,” Ida said, waving her glass at Doug with a panicked look.

Doug raised his to Ransom. “For putting the fever back in our hearts.”

“It’s contagious as the clap,” Vince said.

A few laughs surfaced, but most were mortified. Katherine

turned crimson and the drink slipped from her hand, shattering on the floor.

Ransom faced Vince. "Why did you say that?"

Vince gave him a scathing look. "Once in a while wolves pass by Chitina. Night falls and the pack starts howling, and every dog in town jumps to the door, yapping and yowling."

Ransom saw Lindy flinch. When he turned to face her, he could see the pity and repulsion in her eyes. Her cheer was a facade. Beneath was shame and remorse. She no longer knew him. For her, his sacrifice was a foolish mistake.

He eyed the cake on Calvin's plate, then gazed around the room, seeing the party's real purpose. Lindy was trying to keep him from his goal by pretending he'd already achieved it. They humored him for her sake. Wretched creatures. A gathering of ghosts. He turned, stepped through the living room and out the door.

Lindy hurried after him with Hank at her heels. They caught up to him halfway to the guest house.

"Come back," she demanded. "You have to come back."

"What are you doing?" Hank moved in front of him.

"The party's over," Ransom said.

"She did this for you," Hank protested. "Everyone's gone to a lot of effort—"

"What business is it of yours?"

"There's someone in Anchorage who can help find you a publisher. He'll be here," Hank looked at his watch, "any moment. It was supposed to be a surprise."

“Why bother.”

Hank looked at Lindy. She was mute with chagrin. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You can’t change the world by jumping off its edge.”

“I’m flying back out, first thing tomorrow.” Ransom saw Lindy clutch her pendant as if she meant to tear it loose. It didn’t matter. Her love was a way station. “They don’t understand,” he said.

“When someone spends all his time talking to god,” Hank replied, “he can become hard for people to understand.”

Ransom made a show of relenting. “I’m in a corner, Hank. I’ve lost touch. No one takes me seriously anymore. I’ve made a fool of myself.”

Hank was sympathetic. “We all make mistakes. You’re too young to—” He saw Ransom snarl and realized too late that he’d fallen into a trap.

“I don’t need your pity,” Ransom turned on Lindy, “or your shame.” He skirted Hank and continued along the path.

Lindy hurried after him, breaking down, sobbing hysterically. “I’m sorry— It’s true— I just wanted to— Please, please—” She grabbed his shirtfront, hanging her weight on his chest. He kept moving, dragging her with him. “Please. Please—”

Hank watched them struggle down the path, wondering at the perverse interaction. In her effort to preserve him, Lindy had drawn off Ransom’s doubt. Weeping and convulsing like someone who’d swallowed poison, she was freeing him to

continue with purity of purpose and an undivided heart. Did he use her instinctively? Or was there some twisted wisdom inside her that offered herself for that end?

The poplars clapped in the breeze. The fireweed verging the lake was smoking with seed. A shorebird followed the water's edge, but no matter how he cut and zagged, his shadow stayed right behind him.

Thirteen

Early the next morning, Doug flew Ransom to the Cheshnina strip. During the turnaround, Ransom gathered their equipment and provisions, and when the Cub descended with Lindy, he stood waiting beside two large packs. The headdress surmounted one of them, horns coiled to either side.

The plane taxied to a halt. Doug killed the prop, popped the clamshell doors and climbed out. "What's this?" he nodded at the packs as he helped Lindy down.

Ransom didn't answer.

Lindy steadied herself on Doug's arm and smiled her thanks. Ransom kept his composure for the pilot's benefit, but Lindy could see the excitement in his eyes. "He's taking me to the top," she said.

Doug looked at Ransom. "You're not serious."

Ransom made an impatient face. Lindy stepped toward him and put her arm through his.

"When's the pickup?" Doug was disbelieving.

"Check back in a week," Ransom said.

"Play hell with your life," Doug said, "but don't do this to her."

Ransom didn't respond. Lindy gazed to the east. The overcast was brightening.

"I'm sorry I encouraged you," Doug said. "You don't belong out here."

"Your job's done," Ransom told him.

Doug grabbed Lindy's arm. "She's coming back with me."

Ransom slid the willow knife from his parka. The short blade, now nicked and scarred, flashed as he raised it under Doug's chin. "Let go."

Doug eyed Lindy.

She put her cheek to Ransom's chest. "You'd better leave."

Doug raised his hands and backed away.

Ransom pocketed his knife and turned. "Come on." He lifted Lindy's pack, and she slid her arms through the straps. Then he shouldered his own, and the two of them headed through the brush.

They reached the heights of the greenstone stream by nightfall and crossed the saddle the next morning. The way led up over rolling tundra, into the rocky peaks. Ransom led, Lindy followed. The loads were heavy, and they spoke

infrequently. Mt. Wrangell appeared through the afternoon haze on the second day. Ransom greeted it like an old friend. Lindy was silent. The dome came and went for the next twenty-four hours, and the closer they got to it, the more it threatened her. She was relieved when clouds obscured it.

Late the third day, they reached a moraine beside the glacier. Not long after, the sky grew murky.

Ransom stopped and set his pack down. The moraine was dim and dark. Only the swathes of snow were sharply defined. Veils of mist slipped down the glacier, headed toward them. "We'll camp here," he said. Then he tipped his head back, closed his eyes and moaned like a wolf.

Lindy shrugged her pack off. Ransom unlashed the head-dress, carried it a dozen feet and set it down facing the decline. Then, still crouched, he opened his parka. Lindy saw him flinch. He sucked his breath. Then his hand emerged, cupped before him, ladling blood from his wound onto the rock around the headdress. He rose and came toward her. "Let's set up the tent."

When the tent was pitched and they'd unrolled their sleeping bags, Ransom howled again. And still again before they began to eat. A few minutes later, he grew quiet, his gaze fixed on something down the slope.

At first Lindy saw nothing. She was about to speak when her eye caught a movement. A large animal was approaching, with long quick legs and a pointed face, its tail sweeping behind. "Ransom," she whispered.

"Sh-sh-sh."

The dark form drew nearer, winding silently among the rocks. It stopped beside the headdress. A snuffling sound reached them, then its muzzle dipped and the wolf was lapping. Lindy eyed Ransom with horror. He pointed to the left and right. Others were circling the camp. The dimness hid their identities. They were silhouettes except for the animal by the headdress. As it raised its muzzle, Lindy saw its black face and sulphur eyes.

“Can you make them leave?”

“Nothing’s going to happen tonight,” Ransom said.

The air grew darker, the mist thickened and the wolves disappeared.

The following morning they started up the dome.

At 13,000 feet, the surface was firm enough to shed their snowshoes. They walked in close file, Lindy behind, following in Ransom’s footsteps, unroped.

He stopped, planted his ice axe and scanned the dome. She drew beside him, nose burnt, eyes watering beneath her glare glasses. They were both breathing deeply.

“This is the spot.” He looked back. It had taken them two long days, and the line of their ascent was scribed down the glacier. Sprays of cracks crossed their path, the checked ice of the labyrinth just below.

“We’re really here,” Lindy said. She’d brooded about the dangers of the mountain for such a long while. Hour by hour, ascending beneath a bright sun and blue sky, her fears had

subsided. Now, as she scanned its heights, she was feeling the same inspiration that had fueled Ransom's quest. Lindy kissed his cheek.

"We made it here together." He took her pendant and raised it to his lips.

"Ransom—" Her voice was choked. "My heart is still yours." She lifted her glasses. "If this day was my last, it would be the life I'd choose."

He kissed her brow and lowered his pack. He unlashed the top, removed the headdress and set it on the snow. Then he took out his regalia and arranged each item around it.

Lindy knew what to expect, but she felt a moment of panic when the willow knife and the blue jar emerged.

"Animus is waiting," Ransom said.

He removed his garments and pulled the furs on. Then he secured the knife to his forearm and slid on his ram cuffs. "Make the change." He handed Lindy the headdress and flexed his knees. She lifted it by its horns and stepped behind him.

"Golden eyes, know," he pronounced. "Golden horns, grow."

As the headdress settled, there was a crump. Lindy sank and cried out. Ransom turned to see her knee-deep in loose ice, suspended over the remains of a snow bridge. He grabbed her and wrenched her toward him, landing in a drift with her shuddering in his arms.

"It's nothing," he said. But he regained his feet slowly. Clouds were forming around the dome's summit, veiling

the sanctum. He drove the shank of his axe into the ice and clipped his pack to it. "We'll leave our things here."

Lindy watched him anchor hers in the same way, glad it was off her shoulders, but aware of the danger. They would be without a stove or food, without tent and sleeping bags.

Ransom wanded the spot, then retrieved the blue jar, opened it and spilled two quarter tabs into his palm. "Together," he said. He swallowed one and handed her the other.

Lindy took a breath and tried to smile. It had been a long time since she'd done this with him. "Together." She put the tab on her tongue.

It took them an hour to gain five hundred feet. Despite his furs and headdress, and the mounting effects of the drug, Ransom maintained a steady pace. Lindy struggled to keep up. The glare was intense, and her breath was rapid. The thin air and the acid clouded her thinking. She felt a desire to abandon her legs, fought the temptation, and then succumbed, letting herself be borne away. When she returned, her body was still putting one foot ahead of the other.

The slope leveled off and Ransom halted, pointing.

Ahead, a thicket of ice spires rose through the heat haze. Freshly cleaved and gleaming with turquoise bands, they were crowded within a giant rip like gothic towers.

You rumble, you rise.

Your deep voice calls and I hear.

Wolves stopped, facing this shrine,

While you shake, pushing me clear.

Ransom assumed his ram stoop, knees flexed, and at “pushing me clear,” he staggered to the side as if something had struck him. His features were masked by the headdress, but his voice was fervid and fond. He started toward the shrine in a spastic crouch. Lindy moved alongside, watching, feeling the distance between them.

***Up a funnel I spring,
Dimpled walls buzzing like hives.
A dream of sweetness. Your longing—
What happens when the ram arrives?***

Ransom was gasping. The ropy locks jounced on his back. Suddenly the air around them seemed charged with filaments of light, as if a current had been set loose from the sun. The spires rose from the drifts like icebergs surfacing from a milky sea. They were covered with ridges and dimples that shifted hypnotically. Lindy felt the magic of Animus, what enchanted Ransom and drew him, and made him mad to be the god’s ram.

They entered the shrine. It was like no place on earth. Around the top of the rip, white vapors were twisting. As they moved up the tapering channel, Lindy felt herself joined to Ransom’s purpose. *A great mystery beyond a region of danger*, he’d said. *Fear spurred me on when desire could not*. They were her torments too. And they were her rewards, now that she had braved the dome with him.

Through the heat haze, she could see him bucking and shaking, the shimmering pinnacles framing his crazy dance.

He was as she imagined when she first met him—the one who would spirit her away. But not in a human form. Even as she watched, his arms thinned and whitened, descending to the snow. His back assumed the horizontal, his mimicked leaping suddenly real. The fantasy towers leaned against the sky, and the creature she loved was springing among them, a beast with golden horns, a ram with a bleeding wound. A moment of terror—she was losing her sanity. Then he turned and fathomed her with his golden eyes, and she surrendered and entered the dream with him.

Here in the shelter of mystical spires, whetted by the weaving heat, in this secret shrine of white snow and sun, blue ice and sky, they would be joined. He would know her and she would know him. She would cast off her struggle with Ransom and marry the ram.

At the top of the shrine, where the walls came together, was a place consecrated, fringed and dripping to receive them. An altar where some violence was planned. It was toward this violence the ram was leading her. The desire for it was growling inside her. She imagined his hooves pounding her chest, his muscled trunk writhing as she fanged his white fur.

In the midst of this abandon, something stopped her. The true meaning of Ransom's quest. The ram sprang into view against the shrine, with the magic spires shifting around him, and in an instant Lindy knew. It was the god inside Ransom that the ram was seeking. Not some alien or distant deity, but Ransom's essence, that which was most sacred in him and which

she most treasured. She had always loved Animus. It was to him she was being conducted, to him she would offer herself.

Feverish and eager, with the moment before her—the rosy face and the golden horns and the willow knife raised—Lindy closed her eyes. The chant of Animus filled her head, and the sun blazed red through her sealed lids. A canyon of blood opened in the ram’s chest. Fear tried to freeze her, but she was heedless, charging toward him, imagining the molten god rising from the wound to meet her.



Padding behind me, paws kissing the snow. I scan the pylons. Shadows shift in the blue niches, then the Wise leaps through a gap and lands on the drifts below. The Lead follows, landing and charging behind her. And behind him, the others. The pursuit seems needless. Desire drives me now, not fear. And to remind me, you’ve split the cloud blanket and scrolled it aside, opening the past. I follow the thread of my trail from the labyrinth’s threshold, back across the court of fountains, down the nave of the glacier, winding invisibly through rocky peaks and the rolling lowlands where I first felt your fire.

You drew me through the stations along that path. Now I stand here, so high, so close, turning my amulet to this pane of ice, its annealed ciphers glittering. My

heart sings to you. Listen—I'm pressing it to your ear—

You rumble, you rise— My god, my joy. My beginning and end. Your deep voice calls and I hear. The high sanctum—it's all I live for. So insistent—but I'm nearly there. And the pack? Stopped in their tracks, listening. The Wise watches my chest where it touches the ice. The Lead nuzzles her for assurance. You shake impatiently, pushing me clear.

Up a funnel I spring, driving into dry powder, icicle rain falling from the pylons on either side. The dimpled walls jitter like buzzing hives, a myriad cups holding the sun's honey, a dream of sweetness in mosaic eyes. More than your power, I feel your expectancy. I'm so close— But what could a mortal know or suspect? You're the father of longing. Longing itself.

Ahead, a tower creaks and tilts, landing with a crash, raising a swirling cloud. I spring through it as another pinnacle sways and swoons, shearing one near it like crossing swords. Your quaking mounts. Tassels of powder pulse from the walls, icicles clink like silver chimes. You're making a way for me, and I follow, leaping through the ruins, breathing minced crystal. Judder my limbs, jar my bones— The air hisses with chips, spans of blue ice bounding down, scarred with your shock marks, crashing and shivering apart.

Echoes boom through the shrine. The wolves' frosted backs tack among the breakings. I lunge at a cornice, horns smashing through. A fierce jolt and the

Scout jerks to a halt. The Younger whimpers, her spirit gone. The Lead looks up. When I prance like this, do your juices stir? His sulphur eyes flare—to him, I'm still mutton.

I wheel and leap for the shrine's height, where the loving heat coils. The quakes redouble and I hear your voice, not through caverns and chasms, but out in the open, directly ahead. From the shrine's crown, streams are flowing, hot springs released like overturned vats. They hiss, they rush— You've risen from the abyss, you're turning the ice to slush, drawing hot knives along the base of the spires. Boiling cascades dash through a gap and swirl past.

Onto a jetty of ice I leap, over broken planks, a steeple canted and swiveling— The pack is higher up, avoiding the melt. Cocks' tails scald my legs. I hear you hissing, I feel you inside me, dissolving my heart like the banks of ice. My god— Where is your scorn, your lofty reserve? Your love is a torrent, unthinking, unreined.

The hop chain unlinks. I'm near the shrine's top, reeling through a boiling pool and vaulting up. Breathless, weightless, my insides hollowing— The dome is convulsing, boosting and plunging. Where the shrine walls converge, a cake of ice perches. Steam jets wriggle around it, in time to the quakes. The pack is still with me, crossing the snows.

I spring forward, driving into the mash, vapors from the fumaroles gusting around me. I can see down into

the heat holes now—the sun catching red in caves of blood, while the poison jets blast and the fumes twist up. A god’s desire, in the eyes of a mortal: caustic, sickening, heedless of life.

Shocks close by. The shrine walls rip, the apex cake shudders and pulls away. Vaulting headlong, I hurtle the gap, ice screeching beneath me. Animus quakes, tilting the cake, pitching me down it. Stop me, stop— My hooves swipe, scrabbling the ice, catching at its edge.

Below, the wolves approach, Lead pulling hard, Scout puzzling the way, the Wise eyeing my unlikely balance. Animus is dancing me on the brink, teasing himself with my fate. The dome bucks, I heave onto my hinds, seeing white waves sweep the dome’s flanks. The ice is exploding, rent by blue lightning, clouds of powder billowing above. Dark peaks tumble, rivers jitter like shook threads, every leaf, every reed, every pebble joining the chorus.

The movements are yours—I’ve lost control. It’s you inside me. You, twisting my limbs, making me writhe. Your fever is mine, your spirit, your mania. “I am the wild god Animus. I create and destroy. My cannonades turn the temple to smoke. Child of my heart, I’m casting it down, dashing the intricate stage to powder, obliterating the return. Animus surrenders everything to the ram.”

Below, the wolves bunch at the prow of the cake.

*The Younger is panicked and so is the Scout. The Wise
fixes on me, entreating.*

*Animus roars, insensate. The jolts add slides, waves
and breakers crash into each other, forming giant
white rotors. As the dome dissolves, I feel a surging
within me, outward and upward. A strange pressure
builds in my head. The bell of the sky curves over me,
and the sun swings across it, a golden clapper jarring
the blue. His heart, his great throbbing heart— The
echoing sky is quivering to receive me.*

The cake cracks.

*I hurl myself back. A giant slab keels beneath me,
descending on the wolves. Cries—some crushed, some
leaping clear. Cruelty, contempt? A god's indifference?
I understand. The Lead remains, still hungering; and
the Wise, who knew this would be their fate.*

*The cake tips beneath me. This isn't the end. I turn
and spring, breathing white smoke and fighting the
wind, vaulting to the rear edge of the cake and over
the gap. Landing on the summit snows, I kick into a
lope, crazy to reach you.*



*Inexhaustible.
Vaulting— You rage—
Slope's blurred—
Above, the blue canopy rocks.
Below—*

Something screamed in his face. The wind or Animus, or one of the wolves— His parka and shirt were open. His chest wound was flowing, and the blood from his willow knife covered his fist. The scream sounded again, and there were words with it. “Storm,” he heard. “Ransom, Ransom—”

Lindy was before him, features frosted, hair whipped by the wind. There was blood on her glove and her motioning parka sleeve. The glint of Animus was still in her eyes, but it faded as he watched, replaced by fear and confusion. The way forward was dim and featureless, gray flecked white. Ice prickled his chin beneath the facepiece of the headdress.

“The crater,” he said, continuing forward.

Lindy hooked his arm and pulled him around. The wind weighed over them with a steady drone. “Why is he doing this?”

“We’re not far,” Ransom said.

“It’s getting worse.”

He glanced at her hand. “Let go.” Through the eye screens, he could see—she was plummeting from the faith that molten hearts know.

“Our packs,” she insisted. “Our sleeping bags. The tent. The stove and the food.”

“We’re headed toward the heat,” he said.

Lindy’s eyes grew hard. The corner of her mouth snagged and she turned away.

The blast beat them both, stronger and weaker, threshing the air.

“It’s a test,” he said, feeling Animus hovering.

“I’m afraid.”

“That’s our weakness,” he begged her to understand.

She couldn’t see his face, he thought. He touched his ropy cheek. It was lumpy and slick with rime. The blast was suddenly fierce, and a window to his own fear opened inside him. How long would the god let him coddle doubt so close to his throne? Had Animus already turned against him? He had entered a sacred world, woven with interdictions. He imagined himself tangled there, far from the world of man, unable to persuade Animus of his devotion and unable to find his way back.

Lindy grabbed a horn tip and shook it. “Take that thing off.”

He unfastened the headdress with her help. As they lifted it off, the wind beat still harder.

She kissed him with marble lips. “What are we going to do?”

His sigh was like a sob. The dream, his triumph—it was all dissolving.

“I wish we weren’t high.” Her eyes were desperate.

He cradled the headdress in his arms, gave her a look that begged forgiveness and began to chant.

Will you show yourself—

“No,” she groaned.

My weakness— You tire.

Impatient, galled—

She threw herself at him, flailing his face.

Ransom embraced her, feeling the wolves in his arms,

all seven. It was the Dangler who'd screamed. The Ruff was ready to retreat, with the Younger beside him, whimpering and scared. The Scout measured the cold and how far they could travel before they froze. The Wise was quiet, eyes to the ground. And the Lead looked away, ceding command to his squint-eyed mate.

Ransom peered at the Hangbelly.

"Who are you?" He turned Lindy into the blast. "Animus wants to know."

She wrenched free, enraged. Contempt broke the frost on her cheeks. "There is no Animus," Lindy said.

The storm dove between them. Vicious snaps exploded against Ransom's front, and the wind-stropped cold cut through cloth and skin. Lindy was struck in the face and hurled aside. He staggered after her. Spicules flacked her back, tore her cap off and raked her cheeks. He threw his arms around her, protecting her body with his own. She shivered and heaved to catch her breath. He was shaking with cold. Snow devils were spinning around them.

She's right, he thought. They weren't going to survive.

Then a familiar sound reached him. In the wind's fury, he heard the rhythm of his summit chant, as if Animus was singing it back to him. The air was lacquered with white, but he could see the uptrend of the slope. There was a choice, a terrible one. Animus was daring him to abandon her.

Ransom eyed the summit, and Lindy read his mind.

She grabbed him, clinging with a helpless sob. He held her

close, kissing her frosted brow. "We need to find the packs," he said. She sobbed again, with love and relief.

And they started back down.

The storm got worse. It was a windward wall, then a tumbling morass that brawled them this way and that; then it was streaming over them, whistling and wailing. Lindy punched through, sinking to her thighs, and when he pulled her out, the view into the hole terrified them both. He continued down with her, muttering to Animus, assuring him that he hadn't given up. But the god wasn't listening.

Night closed in with the storm still beating. Ransom could see fifty feet ahead, sometimes twenty, sometimes not at all. Was the slope steep or shallow? Were they in a trough or on a ridge? Even with Lindy a few feet away, there were times he feared he'd lost her. Hours passed. Then he thought he saw the wands.

Ransom shouted. She emerged through the wind, drifting toward him, plastered white and breathing hard. When they reached the spot where he'd seen the wands, it was roiling with fog. He circled, waving his arms to snag one, then he gave up and started back to her. Before he could reach her, the wind hooked him.

An invisible clutch squeezed the air from his lungs and sent him reeling. A blow on his side, he lost his balance and tumbled into a trench. His shoulder dashed against solid ice, and the wind came screeching to find him, scraping him across a wall and over an edge. He landed on his side in

soft powder. Squinting and blinking, he got his legs beneath him. He was in a crevasse. He could see Lindy clinging to the corner of its mouth, head bowed. He gathered his strength, climbed up to her, circled her with his arm and guided her down.

The crevasse was narrow and freezing cold, but they were out of the storm. He set his headdress down and took careful steps, testing the snow. Pits were visible where the floor met the walls. Through them, he could see a blue darkness below. The storm clawed at the cornices, sending spindrift down. Just the two of them, he thought, suspended over the void.

He followed a cornice, creeping along it, steadying himself with his hand. Where the walls converged, he found a small pocket, roofed over and protected on three sides. He motioned to Lindy and together they shuffled in.

"Don't touch the ice." Ransom put his headdress on the floor and seated her on it. Then he crouched on his boot heels, his breath steaming.

"If we only had one of our sleeping bags," she said.

"He'll understand, once he calms down."

Their clothing was soaked with sweat. They started to shiver.

"My feet are numb," Lindy said.

He sensed her anger. In his story, the Wise and the Lead survived; but in the real world, it was the Hangbelly and the Dangler who prevailed. "We should have gone on," he said.

"Are you crazy." Her words were curt and emotionless.

“We would have passed through the storm. He was waiting beyond it.”

She shook her head.

“Animus cared for you,” he said, thinking of the Lead and the Wise.

Night brought a still colder cold. They couldn’t lie down. They took turns pacing the space to loosen cramped muscles and move blood into numbed body parts.

At intervals, Ransom left their refuge, climbing out of the crevasse to listen to the storm. It continued unabated. Did Animus wish him dead? Would he lay his fury aside and pour gold from the skies if his ram returned?

“What were you doing?” Lindy asked when he was back in the pocket.

She had wondered, he thought. Wondered if he was going to return.

“Ransom—”

He faced her.

“There’s no god here.” She spoke with compassion, but firmly. “Just the storm and the cold.”

He nodded to show he heard her.

“We’re human,” she said. “The miracle we discovered was a human miracle.”

Wisps of steam trailed from her lips and vanished in the dimness.

“Our surrender fed a human joy,” she said.

Silence filled the space. Lindy shivered and closed her eyes.

Ransom's answer came softly. "I never thought I could do this without you."

For a long moment, she didn't respond. Then she opened her eyes. They were as cold as the ice. He saw no anger, no distress or despair. She was staring at him as if he was a stranger.

Her lips were blue. He put his arm around her, drawing closer, searching her face. All he saw was regret. She was sorry, but he wasn't the man she knew. She was no longer fighting with him, no longer trying to pull him back.

Lindy shivered again. This time it didn't stop.

"You're freezing," he said. "On your feet." Ransom pulled her up.

He forced her out of the pocket and started stamping, urging her to stamp with him. Her legs barely lifted. He pulled off his mitts, undoing his furs with bare fingers, then wrapped them around her middle. She watched without speaking or moving. Then, in nothing but his union suit, Ransom held his thin body against her, breathing his warmth into her nose and mouth.

After a while she dozed off. Ransom didn't let her sleep long. Fearful she was turning to stone, he forced her up, and they tramped the tiny space again and again while Animus stormed and pounded the dome.

It was the longest night on earth for both of them, but when the darkness finally paled, the fury lulled. The buffets subsided, and the violence died into the ice.

Hearing the calm, Ransom stirred himself. He was no longer high. His body shook and his movements were painfully slow. He left Lindy in the pocket and shifted along the false floor. Through the lips of the crack above, he could see blue sky. The clink of falling icicles presaged a warm dawn. He returned and they clambered out of the rift together. Then, taking the horn of his headdress in one hand and Lindy's wrist in the other, he started down.

Over the glacier, the mists swirled purple and gray.

"The packs." Lindy pointed.

There they were, marked by the wands. Everything they had needed to warm themselves had been fifty yards away. They retrieved them. Ransom stowed the headdress and they continued down.

The mists dissolved. Beyond the glacier, the Cheshnina spurs came into view. The air grew warmer and the snow softened. Lindy was quiet. Ransom faced his defeat. His steps pitted the perfect surface. The crystals cried, the sastrugi hissed. Every voice of the temple rebuffed him.

"I can't believe it's over," Lindy said softly. She turned, relief lighting her face.

Ransom was silent.

"You saved us." Lindy embraced him, kissing his cheek.

He shook his head.

"Remember that afternoon in the garden?" she said. "We're alive. We can share that again."

He didn't reply.

"I love you, Ransom. I always will."

He scanned the lowlands and the distant rivers. "Running and flying," he murmured.

She regarded him sadly. "Isn't that enough?"

The question rang inside him. "Maybe it was never human love I wanted."

As he spoke, dawn flared in the east, washing the glacier with soft pastels. The swells and rifts and the long declines turned pink and mauve and baby blue. Ransom felt in those colors a familiar presence, generous and understanding. The god hadn't forgotten his lost child. He was whispering to cheer him, loving him still.

Heat touched his brow. Ransom turned, with the sun glowing over him, and gazed at the dome. Below its summit, the fumaroles were coiling. The storm *was* a test, he thought. Not for Lindy. For him. Animus knew her fear. He called it forth for a reason. Could Ransom let her go? Animus wanted to know.

Lindy was watching him. He turned back to her without saying a word, but she knew. When they resumed the descent, she avoided his gaze, too weak to challenge him.

By midday they reached the moraine, and as they moved among the scattered boulders, a pipit found them. Within seconds, a small tribe came weaving through the sky. Ever Ransom's friends, they peeped and circled, cheerful and curious, eager to play. But the playing was over.

They reached the head of the greenstone stream at dusk and slept on the tundra. The next morning, they followed the

stream to the Cheshnina and arrived at Bill's cabin just before noon. The poplars had turned gold during their absence, and the leaves hung calmly now, waiting for the frost. By the time Ransom had started a fire in the stove and Lindy had prepared a hot meal, a light rain was tapping on the roof. They didn't speak until they'd finished eating.

Lindy steeled herself. "This is it," she said. "I'm not coming back."

Ransom nodded. "I couldn't ask you to." He spoke with the resignation of an older man.

"Come with me," she said.

Her words didn't reach him. "Your love led me here," he said.

Lindy put her hand over her mouth, too upset to speak.

"It was you who taught me surrender," Ransom said. "No one in the world would have given so much, or come so far. But our struggle is over. I have to cross the threshold on my own."

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Your love will be with me." He could see how deeply this was hurting her.

She shook her head. "What about *Wild Animus*? Your writing, the chants—"

"I'll finish it for you. All it needs is the final scene."

"For me? That's not what I want."

"It will make no sense to anyone," he said, as if agreeing with her. "And the story's untrue. Wishful thinking. How I wished it could be. Not how it is."

His words confused her.

“The wolves stay with him,” he explained. “The Lead and the Wise.”

She thought she had cried herself dry, but tears came again. He was renouncing everything.

“Lindy,” Ransom said gently. “What is this?” His arms spread. “A speck sprayed out of some galaxy. A mote of dust, covered with moss. If a god named Animus lives here, he won’t stay long.

“The dome will crumble, and all its bright flowers and hopeful creatures will go with it.” His eyes were mournful. “Is a glorious idea less precious than a single life? If one rises, molten and blinding before me, should I say, ‘no, not so soon,’ and turn away?”

He reached to caress her forehead, eyeing the star that flamed there. “The despair you felt in that icy hole— It will return. The hour when everyone’s a stranger. I can’t save you from that. And you can’t save me.”

Ransom smiled. “We loved each other. Didn’t we?” He glanced at the sheaves of paper and the recorder. “Keep *Wild Animus* in your heart.”

The drone of the Cub intruded.

Lindy glanced at her pack and back at Ransom, uncertain what to do.

He rose, stepped over to it and swung it onto his back.

Lindy stared at him, listening as the Cub’s drone mounted. Doug Hurley was coming to bear her back from the dead. She stood. It was really goodbye. Ransom turned and stepped through the doorway.

The footpath was an aisle of color. The dwarf birch blazed orange, the potentilla was iridescent peach, and scarlet dogwood studded cushions of burgundy moss. When they reached the strip, Doug was cutting the engine and climbing out. He seemed relieved to see them, but his attention was downriver. Clouds were massing there, leaden mushrooms with steely caps. His lips moved silently, like a schoolboy doing math in his head.

Ransom set Lindy's pack down. "Doug's in a hurry." He kissed her quickly.

She grabbed his arm.

He put his fingers over her heart. "I'll be here." He turned and started back along the path.

Doug stepped toward Lindy. "When's the pick up?" he shouted. Ransom didn't turn.

As soon as he was out of their sight, Ransom began to run. He entered the cabin, went to his pack and unloaded his regalia with shaking hands. He set his cuffs and headdress on the floor beside the furs, with the willow knife and blue jar directly before him, and began to chant. His voice froze as the Cub's engine fired to life. He held himself perfectly still. Then he burst into tears and ran back outside.

The small plane was dragging itself over the bumpy strip like a lame bird. He ran down it as the Cub climbed, waving both arms. Did he mean to halt their departure or was it an anguished farewell? Ransom didn't know. The plane followed the river, flying just above the treetops. The steely caps had merged and were creeping up the drainage. It seemed like

the Cub would have to turn back, but at the last moment, it slipped beneath the clouds and disappeared.

Fourteen

Rain fell on the Cheshnina for five days. Just before dawn on the morning of the sixth, the sky turned apocalyptic. Arrows of diaphanous cloud lined either side of the valley and moved toward each other, engaging over the river bar, the serried ranks clashing with dizzying effect. It would have been a sign of great moment, but no human observed it and the juncos pecking at the edge of the landing strip seemed not to notice.

At the end of the trail through the dwarf birch, Wasilla Bill's cabin was quiet. The door was open. No one was inside, but a few things had changed. Ransom's possessions were gathered by the table, clothes folded, equipment and instruments covered with a shirt. The place had been tidy, but mice, always quick to sense a vacancy, had savaged the food shelf.

The remains lay scattered across the floor. On the tabletop was a loose-leaf manuscript and a reel of recording tape.

That same morning, bare feet hurried down the gravel path from the Hurley's guest house. The sallowing willows were motionless in the mist, leaf sprays frozen like fossils in stone. "Ransom," Lindy whispered. "Ransom." Above, a magpie glided silently through the trees.

Inside the Hurley bedroom, the noise penetrated Ida's sleep. She rolled onto her hip and reached for her husband, finding his shoulder, drawing closer. He turned, burrowing in her embrace like a bear in a cave.

"Ransom," Lindy's voice sobbed.

Ida raised herself with her hand on Doug's chest as if to prevent the disturbance from reaching him. He turned his ear and opened his eyes. The sobbing grew louder. He sat up.

"The storm's close." He shook his head.

She stroked his cheek. He sighed and faced her. "What time is it?"

She stood and clicked on the dresser lamp. "Six-thirty."

"It's supposed to hit by noon."

She nodded.

Lindy knocked on the front door.

Doug stood and drew his pants on. Ida handed him his shirt.

"What can I do?" he said.

Lindy was pounding on the door now, sobbing hysterically.

“Poor girl,” Ida murmured. Tragedy hovered over them, but she smiled at her husband, unwilling to deny the beatitude she felt. She faced the Bible on the dresser, then set her trembling hand on it.

Doug gave her a wondering look.

Ida’s lips crinkled, succumbing to tears. “Death will be a triumph for him.”



I’m inexhaustible. I vault over the crusted snow, the slopes around me blurred by jolts, feeling you heaving beneath me, raging, impatient. Above, the sky’s canopy rocks. Below, everything is obscured by smoke. The wolves are nowhere in sight.

The moment approaches. Will you show yourself? I confess, I’m afraid. Does my weakness gall you? Is your rage rooted in desire? My hooves whisk the ruffles and crash through sastrugi. Ahead, a dark pyramid of rock, skeins of melt streaming down its face. Then the crater rim lifts—the sanctum, your throne. I’m galloping to meet you, powdered and glittering, hooves and horns polished, white fur woven with crystal thread.

Dear god, don’t deny me—

The dome jerks and grinds, whipping my spine, wrenching my stride. A sharp pain and the wound splits, scarlet within, dripping pearls of blood.

Appear! I won't slow and I'm not turning back.

Cracks ray from the crater, fences of fire rising between blue walls—three molten arteries, glowing red. Feverish groans, throaty salvos— Magma lands on the snows with steaming gasps. Is this really you? Let your dam burst! Drown me with your flowing heart! Ahead, the red fences converge at the place we're to meet, high on the rim.

You shudder back, doubts surfacing, remembering all your injuries and regrets. Forget, forget! I spur my hinds, thrusting hard where snow meets rock, fores reaching, feeling a pulling in my chest. I know, I don't have to look. The wind chants, the crater is hot to my hooves. My confidence soars as the dome quakes. I'm lunging mightily, steam eeling from a hundred holes, blood ribbons trailing back. My pectoral is gaping, the wound gushing, heart beating madly, straining to push through its bars. Blood pulses from my chest in time to the quakes. The dome—it's my own body. And the god pounding is pounding within.

I breathe sulphur, throat searing, eyes crying, senses swimming as the quaking tears my hoofbeats apart. Louder, faster! The tremors take me over, driving my thrusts, fears conquered, hurtling me forward with all my heart. I feel you, Animus, inside and out, frantic, mad for my offering, shaking and shaking. My blood-soaked fores rake me onto the crest—

Pieces of the crater appear through the steam, dark crescents connecting in a black ring. I'm on an overhang, rearing on my hinds, gazing into a seething cauldron a hundred lengths deep. Within, icy pillars coiled in fumes, obelisks and meltpits, half-eaten slabs swimming in haze. Jets perforate the snow, chugging furiously, vents sleeving up and down as the crater heaves. Where rifts have torn the crater floor, molten rock spews onto the ice, hissing and humping, webbing the ice with fresh cracks.

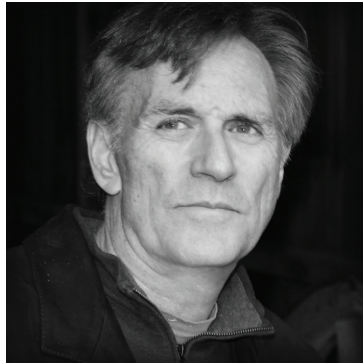
On my left, dark shapes bounding— The Lead charges around the rim with long strides and fierce eyes, the Wise right behind, her sharp face aimed, fixed and unflinching. Brave creatures, still with me, together to the end— A mammoth lurch, the crater tips toward me like a circle of fate, rending screams rising from the cracks below. A bass groan and the snow-covered plates open like giant doors. I leap as the crater explodes, seeing the red nose, molten and gushing beneath me.

A pillar of glowing magma catches me on its spout. For an instant, I'm juggled, feeling the liquid boiling against my belly and sides. I writhe, limbs smoking, flesh bubbling and sliding, a fluttering sound as my ears clog and melt. Through blazing eyes, I see the wolves lunge, reaching me as the fountain rises, jaws biting from either side, fangs driving in. With

a thunderous snarl, they tear the ram from me like a robe, revealing the naked god beneath, flowing and molten.

I'm the one roaring— My power's set free. I am this fountain, this torrent, this tower of blood reaching heaven high. Another pulse inside the first, and another still. My glory will reign, and I'll never come down.

My sweet child, you've surrendered. I'm here, melting you into me, taking you back. You drown in my roar, screaming and weeping, laughing inside me as you bobble and flow. All of you, down to that knotted heart, that glowing worm. I gave you life. I'm the blood of the cosmos, the boost everything craves. Detonations, exclamations, my deafening roar! I'm your center, your deepest feeling, the headwaters of your yearning heart. I am Animus, fresh and glowing, foaming and flaming, dissolving and growing, fire to matter, the batter of bliss. What mortal dream—stranded, winking its last, arcing and coasting down and down—could be more than this?



Rich Shapero's stories plunge readers into unseen worlds. His projects, *Wild Animus*, *Too Far*, *The Hope We Seek* and *Arms from the Sea*, are available as books and immersive story experiences for tablets and phones in the TooFar Media app. *The Village Voice* called his stories "A delirious fusion of fiction, music and art," and *The Hope We Seek* earned him a 2015 Digital Book World award for best adult fiction app. He lives with his wife and daughters in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

