

“People are supposed to fear the unknown, but ignorance is bliss when knowledge is so damn frightening.”

— Laurell K. Hamilton

I.

Day?

Night?

As Manila pondered the drizzling snow over the navy blue sky and aurora streaks that showed no definitive sign of time, she could not tell and she knew that ultimately, it did not matter.

All she knew for certain is that she was tired of this harsh, damned cold.

She walked alone, bundled tightly in a huge snowsuit that, if she hadn't been through this four dozen times over already, would hinder mobility greatly. She had gotten used to hulking around in it. Scanning the radar in her gloved hands, Manila then looked up from it and took in a deep inhale. Then she exhaled – observing her visible breath, a smile crossing her face. It never ceased to amuse her.

Thirty-four, hawk-faced and intense, Manila Bolio was known for being an intimidating woman. She wore her long hair in a braid that she hung over her shoulder and had nestled beneath an oversized knit cap. Manila was injured in combat training for the Navy SEALs program, and decided to go to school for something a little less intense. She studied at the University of Michigan, completing the school's prestigious Ecology, Evolutionary Biology & Behavior Program with honors. She met the love of her life, Anthony, on campus and they married, moved to Pennsylvania where his parents lived, and had two boys. The oldest, Asher, was seven, and little Gray was barely a year old yet. Manila left all of that behind for a six month investigation on the behavior of penguins in Antarctica, and she regretted it the moment she stepped off that plane.

She missed her family, she missed a pleasant, agreeable home, and a comfortable bed. But she always knew traveling would be a part of her job, and making a difference and furthering her research was worth it in her mind. She knew it would be, in the end. Manila, a self-proclaimed woman of God, had fallen behind on her daily devotions and felt her soul suffering for it. As she broke out of the trance she had fallen into watching her own breath become visible, travel through the air, then dissipate into nothingness again, she knew she'd set it on her mind and heart to jump back into that once she returned back to base.

The solid but paltry steel structure stood at one-story consisting of only four rooms, with two antennae on its peak, lights swirling and blinking slowly, almost hypnotically so. Her work for the day having been completed and her mind set on growing closer to God, Manila removed her gloves with gusto she hadn't seen from herself in quite a long time. It was very cool to have such a strong relationship with the Creator that she wanted nothing more than to return to some solid prayer time that she had missed out on for a while.

She punched in the code on the keypad with her naked fingers. She heard the click of the door's locking mechanism, pulled on the handle, and allowed herself inside.

The interior of the base was not any more attractive than its outside. It truly had a nightmarish quality to it – the entrance corridor was claustrophobic in nature, frozen, yet hypocritically steaming, pipes lined the ceiling, and a single light in the middle of the corridor flickered. The bulb was dying.

One of us ought to replace that, Manila thought to herself. *There I go again*. There was always something that would pop into her head and try to distract her from prayer time. She never knew if it was intentional or not. She didn't care this time though. The bulb would have to wait. She had priorities.

Although they were quite lonely and the isolation was daunting, Manila did enjoy the privacy of the small, one-man compartments they called "bedrooms". One door, four tiny walls, and a bed shoved in between them. That was their room. She shut the door behind her and knelt at her bedside, putting her hands in a folded position against her face. She learned this as a Catholic school graduate to be the designated prayer position.

Manila spent fifteen minutes in deep prayer and meditation before feeling groggy and tired. She gave in, and felt defeated by the end of it. She was not satisfied with the time she spent with God that day. She knew He required more, but she *also* knew she was too tired – had more pertinent things to do right now than building up her relationship with God, as ludicrous as that sounded. Manila had *work* to do, work that couldn't wait. She knew, on the other hand, that God would always be there. She also justified herself with the notion that God blessed her with this job opportunity, and thus, God would forgive her.

Manila stood up, pulling her laptop out from the gaping space between her mattress and the floor. She sat on the foot of her bed, laptop on her knees. Powering it on, she stared into the forward-facing camera, clicked a button, and began to record a message.

"I'm not sure if you're online," Manila started with a scoff. "But you'll see this at some point, I'm sure. I miss you all so much. This is day..."

Then, she paused. She placed her two pointer fingers on either temple, rubbing her head pointedly with a sigh.

She scoffed, truly embarrassed, "I've honestly forgotten. It's tough to keep track, you have no idea. Anthony, make sure the boys get to see this message. Especially Asher, I know he had a tough time processing my leave, but I want you – son – to know that the days are counting down and I'll be back home before you know it. I love you, baby boy, and I can't wait to see you again. And Gray, gosh, Gray, I wanna see that big old bald head of his."

A complex smile--one incredibly hard to read, mixed of jubilant pride and reflective longing--crossed Manila's face.

"Gray, keep doing your thing. I can't wait to see the kind of man your little self grows up to be. But you boys – when you find your calling, like I have mine – any sacrifices you make – and no matter what job you have, there'll be some – but I hope you'll find that they're worth it because

you're accomplishing something. You're both searching for a passion, a true drive for something. Reach for that, reach for your purpose, and you'll be a-okay. I love you all, see you soon."

She turned off her recorder and sighed. She had more to say, she was just so exhausted. *Can't talk to God today*, she thought to herself. *And I can't talk to my family. What am I good for?* Manila remembered the last time she spoke to her husband before leaving. It was an argument; a stupid one, a highly selfish one. It was a very worldly argument that left Manila extremely disappointed and unfulfilled. She felt the urge, a calling maybe, to leave another message.

"Anthony," she mumbled. Then, she picked up her tone and mustered the strength to continue confidently. "This one's for you, honey. I'm sorry about how I left. I'm sorry I dragged the boys into it, too. I've taken so long because at first I didn't see my own wrong in the situation, and I had to bring it forward to the Lord. I feel called just to tell you how much I love you, and that—"

The monitor flickered. Everything powered off. Manila scoffed, annoyed, but amused. *That's what I get*, she thought. *For not being upfront with him in the first place.* The argument bothered her since she left, since things between her and her husband were left unspoken. She did not like that. But it was something she knew she'd address another time. Like she thought before, she had a lot of work to do today, and part of that now required fixing the power.

Manila moved quickly to the room next door. The control center was where the group liked to relax and talk together; it was a makeshift community bedroom in a way. Old monitors with grainy, grayscale quality images displayed footage from the perimeter of the base itself. These monitors lined the walls of this room. She knew she'd find someone in there, and alas, as she entered the room, Manila found Adrian sitting at a chair in front of the console, legs propped up on top of it. He snored gently, comparable to a cat's peaceful purr. A porcelain cup balanced on the console, too. Manila dipped her pointer and index finger inside of the cup and felt its contents; chilled tea.

She shoved Adrian on the stomach, hard.

"Adrian, get up. Tea's cold."

"What?" Adrian snapped, groggy.

Adrian Stiles was a tall, thin, gaunt man in his twenties. A fresh undergraduate completing his program under the tutelage of the other scientists on base, he was a bit of a nuisance to them all and he knew and took advantage of that fact. He was undeniably brilliant, though. He definitely earned his place here. He glanced at Manila with the most curious expression, as if he'd never seen her before.

"Your tea?" Manila repeated. "It's cold."

"You finish it."

Adrian adjusted himself to get more comfortable in his chair, took a deep breath, and was ready to resume his sleep.

Manila pointed at the monitor in front of Adrian.

"Have you been looking at these?"

"...What is...?"

“They’re star coordinates. They seem to have shifted...”

“...As they always do,” Adrian grumbled half-heartedly.

“But the speed in which they did so has increased in vast amounts,” Manila began, a sense of urgency in her voice that she wished Adrian could have returned. “It’s almost unreal. When did you last update?”

“Er-um,” Adrian stammered, rubbing his eyes, still half-asleep. With uncertainty in his yawning voice, “Maybe ‘bout’s an hour ago?”

Manila looked over another monitor, watching two grayscale figures navigate through the snow. They stood outside of the penguin’s living area.

“I thought they’d be back by now,” Manila noted.

“Oh, Charlotte asked for an extension with the penguins.”

“And you just gave it to her?” Manila asked, her pitch getting high. And then she scoffed, shaking her head in pure annoyance, “You’re barely conscious, hardly in the shape to be making calls like that. Why not consult your superior? Why not consult *me*?”

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Manila swung around, her attention snatched by the monitor. Her eyes fell to the radar on the opposite end of Adrian’s chair, where a single green circle was being picked up on the signal. And with every swing of the radar, it got closer and closer. Manila’s eyes perked up to the radar’s top, reading the Courier font that bulged out from the aging label:

AERIAL ANTENNA

“What is *wrong* with that thing?” Adrian asked, annoyed with the incessant beeping.

“Give me all monitors to the skies,” Manila demanded.

Clearing his throat and sitting up with an under-his-breath grouse, Adrian expertly drove the controls so that all of the surrounding screens gave a view of the skies. Adrian stared at the screens, looking for what his colleague was so invested in. Then he turned to Manila, confused:

“What exactly are we looking for?”

“The aerial radar picked up an unidentified object,” Manila said, softly. “Look... carefully...”

And then it happened.

Something was tearing through the skies like paper.

“Oh, shit,” Adrian muttered. He must have repeated it several times in the course of a few seconds as he leapt out of his chair with unexpected energy. He grabbed for his coat and yelled back at Manila, “Charlotte and Darwin are still out there. I’m taking a sled up there to reel ‘em in. Call them, Manila! Call them NOW!”

Penguins waded through the soft snow at the edge of base camp’s perimeter. Charlotte Procter’s wavy red hair stood out in the vast landscape of pure white snow. She was alongside her

colleague and boyfriend Darwin Davison. Charlotte held ratty old binoculars in one hand, and a very outdated tape recorder in the other, while Darwin held on tightly to a state of the art video camera dual-handedly. Ever the opposites, per usual.

Charlotte spoke into a tape recorder, “After the sixth cycle, they seemed to have dispersed. It is as if they’re growing impatient at the non-arrival of their spouse.”

Her child-like enthusiasm caught Darwin’s eye from day one. She simply enjoyed the world, and Darwin simply enjoyed her. He found himself distracted in this moment, watching her work and admiring it. The way she took her work so seriously was so cute to him. They were just dumb birds in his eyes, but he couldn’t help but convey the same sense of excitement Charlotte had when he saw how jubilant these things made her. He was brought along as a camera guy for these scientists, as a productive way to document the scientists’ discoveries and perhaps make a documentary out of it, so he didn’t have the same sense of awe or wonder for their discoveries.

“Are you getting this?” she asked, turning to Darwin with a glint of excitement in her eyes, “Look at their body movement!”

Darwin adjusted his camera work, while Charlotte continued brightly, “It’s more stern, more... annoyed! These creatures are a sight for the eyes, aren’t they? They’re almost human in the way that they convey emotion!”

There was a noise, something began to crackle, and it caused Darwin to turn his attention. It was coming from inside Charlotte’s satchel, which was discarded hastily in the snow by Charlotte upon their initial arrival in this area. She was so excited to rifle through her belongings for her recorder and binoculars that she tossed the satchel aside to dig within its contents and just left it there. As Charlotte took oral notes through her tape recorder, Darwin walked over to her satchel, reached inside and pulled out her walkie talkie.

“Tony? I hear you – over,” Darwin spoke into it.

“Coordinates 45 and 46,” Manila’s voice spoke back. And then her voice erupted from the walkie, “SKIES!”

“Oh my god,” Darwin heard Charlotte say from behind him. A fast-approaching, high-pitched whistle interrupted her words. The whistle grew louder and louder.

He turned, instinctively reaching out for her. He grabbed her arm before he even saw it: a meteor hurtled toward them, advancing closer, howling as it rippled through the sky. They bolted through the snow. Difficult as that may have seemed, they made it as far away as they could. Strangely enough, the meteor got silent as it was about to make contact with the ground and then it made an impact with an explosive bang, throwing snow up in a swirl of white slush.

The chaos of the whirling white cyclone caused the hurtling squeal of a snowmobile to sound like a person to Darwin. Instinctively, though he gripped her arm tightly and knew she was beside him, he cried out, “Charlotte?!”

“I’m okay, I’m fine,” she insisted, through labored breath. Darwin whipped his head around to face her, and felt the sick feeling in his stomach finally go away. He just needed to see her face, look into those blue eyes of hers, to feel that sense of comfort return to him. Charlotte repeated her

words, as if to remind herself, as he wrapped her in an embrace that would have been warm in a different climate.

The sound of Adrian's snowmobile drew closer, louder. Charlotte, through her coughing, turned to the direction of it and yelled, "Over here!" Something came over Darwin, though. The curiosity that spiked in his mind and heart was disconcerting, he knew that for a fact. Something large and unidentified just fell out of the sky, but he had to get a closer look. He let go of Charlotte's arm and moved toward it, navigating between the fog and in nearer proximity to the crater.

He heard a strange and narrow fizzle emerge from its direction. It was indescribable, as if a small creature purred and then squealed at him. Darwin fumbled with his camera—he knew he just had to capture this. Charlotte watched this all happen in pure terror, frozen in captivated fear.

Darwin recorded his entrance to the rock. The fizzling grew louder, and louder, with each second.

"This space rock," he narrated the footage. Catching his poor terminology in the heat of the moment, he quickly corrected himself, "*Asteroid* – It's shaking, almost like there's some—"

The rock cracked open on its own, and suddenly a release of rapid smoke sprayed out of it, like spit from a child blowing a raspberry, splashing Darwin directly into his eye and mouth mid-sentence. He fell back from the shock of it, not initially feeling a thing.

But not long after that, he felt an excruciating stabbing pain behind his eyes, as if tiny little people lived behind them and were spiking the back of his eyes with sharpened soccer cleats. Darwin squeezed his eyes shut and gasped from the intensity of this pain, his breath coming in wheezing whistles. He collapsed to his knees and, from his gaping mouth and trembling lips, Darwin finally let out an unearthly shriek.

Charlotte could barely see through the fog, but she heard his cries.

She waved her arms in an attempt to duel with the fog, as if it were to wipe the cloudy substance away. Out of the fog, she saw his figure. He was not standing, but crawling. A frown crossing her face, one that conveyed discomfort, she approached cautiously. As he became more visible, Charlotte saw that Darwin's eyes were shut.

The veins on his eyelids bulged out inhumanly, disturbingly so. His hands were outreached and shaking. She noticed the tips of his fingers were hanging off with little support, as if the skin were peeled away like the top layer of an onion. He was still able to scream, though, but it was more of a howl. His face terrified her and was nearly unrecognizable. Particularly, his cheeks were melting away slowly, subtly-so, but still noticeable enough for her to compare it in that moment like hot molasses dripping from a silver spoon.

Entranced by his horrific appearance, Charlotte had barely enough time to react to his arm grabbing her right leg and his mouth moving forward and his jaws closing on her skin.

She cried out immediately, "HELP! HELP!"

Wriggling about in the grip of Darwin's clamped bite, Charlotte felt heat -- unbearable, indescribable -- overcoming her entire right leg. One thing that was immediately obvious and

unsettling to her was the contrast of the pure white snow and her scarlet blood that splattered onto it.

The heat turned to pain and the pain overcame the entire right side of her body. Suddenly, all feeling seized. Numbness overcame her body and the pain became strikingly prominent in one specific spot -- her head. Charlotte's vision became blurry, and her screaming halted. Her mouth was wide open, but no sound was able to come out. As the pain gripped her, Charlotte fell face first into the snow and blackness overcame her.

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Charlotte's screams gripped Adrian's attention. They shattered the sky around him, and his heart started to pound against his chest. He stopped the snowmobile at the very edge of the fog, swinging a strapped rifle from its place on his back. He followed her screams, which grew fainter and fainter. He had no idea what to expect. An alien? There's no way. Probably just a downed plane. Charlotte probably saw something she didn't want to see. She was probably alright, just panicking. *Probably.*

By the time he reached Charlotte, she was silent, sprawled in the blood-stained snow with her ankle chewed away by a figure that appeared to be Darwin.

Charlotte's flesh hung from his teeth and her bone was visible on her lower leg. She was unconscious at this point, Adrian assumed from the shock. Adrian had only seen him for a few seconds at this point, but he knew that Darwin wasn't himself anymore. He lunged at Adrian, giving another deafening howl. But Adrian wasn't going to screw around.

With a single pull of a trigger, Adrian blasted a quick round into Darwin's head. He collapsed like a ton of bricks -- still, unmoving. Scooping Charlotte into his arms, Adrian bolted for the snowmobile. He wisely followed his own footprints back to the snowmobile, placed Charlotte tentatively on its back, climbed into his seat, and whizzed away from the fog.

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Manila and Adrian didn't know what to do, or how to even discuss what just happened. Manila didn't need a recap: she saw the whole thing from the cameras inside, and Adrian wouldn't have known how to describe what he had seen in the first place. All they knew is that they wanted to lock themselves inside their base camp, the uncomfortable prison they'd wanted to escape for what seemed like an eternity, because it felt like the only safe place in the world in that moment. What was outside was unknown. And the unknown terrified them. Rightfully so.

Charlotte lay on a bed in front of them, shaky and pale. Manila tended to her leg wound. Adrian handed a steaming mug of coffee to Manila, who accepted gravely, "Thanks."

"She speaking yet?"

"No. Her body is absolutely exhausted."

“I shot him in the head.”

“I know. I saw.”

“His skin was dripping from his skull, I didn’t know—“

“I saw, I saw, I saw. I don’t want to talk about this right now. We need to worry about keeping Charlotte stable. He tore through her foot, Adrian, right to the *bone*... she’s already lost a lot of blood.”

Adrian ran his fingers through his hair and gave a shudder.

“Whatever that thing was that dropped from the sky, it’s the bringer of death, Manila. I don’t know what’s going on, but I just – I just want to get out of here.”

Manila understood that what Adrian witnessed was terrifying, and she couldn’t wrap her brain around it either, but she couldn’t quite stand to hear any more of his chaotic rambling. She wanted to send him to get painkillers from the armory, but she figured she’d be better off doing it herself, just to get some time to think.

“I’ll be back, I need to get her more pills. Stay here with her, please?”

Manila left briskly, walking down the hallway. She just had to get out of there. Her bedside manner was never the best, her husband Anthony always told her so but now that it was being put to the test, she was able to finally admit that he was right all along. Manila wanted nothing more than for Adrian just to stop talking about the horror that took place outside, she wanted nothing more than to never mention or think about the situation they were in ever again, and most of all she just wanted to be home with her family. Throwing open the armory door, she softly whispered to herself, “God, please, get me out of this in one piece.”

Grabbing whatever she could out of the cabinet, Manila shut the door behind her. She walked back toward the room, and as she heard a blood-curdling scream, her stomach gave a sick turn. Manila had no idea what to expect behind the steel door, and she wasn’t sure if she wanted to know for sure. Whipping the door open, what she found inside was more horrifying than even her expectations could have imagined. Charlotte’s jaws were clamped onto Adrian’s neck. He was struggling to scream, choking and gurgling on his own blood.

“CHARLOTTE!” Manila bellowed instinctively.

Charlotte ripped away from Adrian, taking a chunk of his flesh with her. He fell backward, his hands going for his neck. She bit deep. Adrian collapsed to the floor, convulsing. He was definitely in shock. She gave a cruel hiss, and from what Manila could see, her eyes were now colored a sickly pale hue of yellow. Manila reached for the rifle on the table, grabbed it, and pressed it directly against Charlotte’s head.

“I’m sorry,” Manila whispered through tears as her finger prepared to squeeze the trigger.

All she could think of was seeing her boys: Asher and Gray. If doing this meant that could be a distinct possibility, she knew she hadn’t really a choice. “I’m so sorry.”