

The temperature was thirty degrees below zero. Her footprints sank well below the knee in the snow, and with each new step, she had to hoist her legs up to her chest, or wade through as if moving in quicksand. It was laborious to make such small progress, especially because the horizon kept its distance unmoving and barren, the unfamiliar land stretching and expanding like an achromatic void. Her breaths came out strenuous and deep from the long expedition. With each inhale she felt the cold air rush into her lungs—a stark contrast with the heat of her body.

She felt her lungs and organs chill, and her blood felt like ice in a lukewarm drink.

The tracks she had made getting to the forest were already disappearing behind her. The only things she saw on the ivory landscape were shadows, like blemishes on a face as pale as milk, or soot smudges. Up ahead she could see the birch trees. The white trunks with grey hints of peeling bark taunted the tundra with only the slightest hint of color.

She was somewhere in eastern Russia, in the 4 thousand kilometer woods: the largest protected area known as the Sikhote-Alin Biosphere Reserve. She was following the tracking devices of Siberian tigers, scattered in the area. Not surprisingly, she hadn't seen a single one, even from afar. The helicopter that dropped her off couldn't land in the densely wooded area, but did scout ahead reporting on any unusual sightings. Yet the only thing that lay ahead were miles and miles of snow. The absence of color felt synthetic, and almost factious. Nothing in nature could be so unnaturally white. Copy paper, bleached flour, newly purchased clothing—the chemically bleached substances made sense back in civilization. But here, in the hostile intemperate landscape, the emptiness, the vastness of nature was mesmerizing and hypnotic.

Once again she was reminded that she did not belong here. The air stung at any exposed skin like an angry wasp, and she felt the uncovered parts of her face grow taut, uncomfortably stretched by the unrelenting algid wind. She still had miles to go. She pulled her scarf higher around her face until only her eyes shone naked in the air.

Struck by a sudden nostalgia, she almost took off her thermal gloves and touched the snow. When did she begin to overlook the brilliance, the delicacy of each snowflake? But she knew that she might not be able to get her gloves back on again. She bent down to make a snowball anyway. The handful of ice clung to her gloves like soap flakes. Even through the

insulated fleece, she could feel her hands growing numb, but she didn't care. She picked up another handful and threw it into the air.

She felt claustrophobic in her many layers of synthetic coats and sweaters. Only the reindeer parka and boots she wore on top gave her a feeling of connection to the outside world. In her warm cocoon of clothes she could almost imagine being at home near the fireplace instead of the minus forty degrees Celsius tundra. The reindeer skin made her feel like one of the creatures of the forest-built to live in such beauty, not just a visitor.

"It's snowing," she thought, then fell backwards. The movement reminded her of a trust exercise she once did. A person stood behind her, and she had to tilt backward until firm hands stopped her fall. She was unwilling to do it at first, even when the person swore he would catch her. The few seconds of free fall petrified her, though in her mind she knew she wouldn't be allowed to hurt herself. But she trusted the snow. The descent was fast and while her backpack pressed uncomfortably into her spine, the fall didn't hurt her. The snow was deep enough. She gazed out of the woman-and-backpack- sized crater. The sky above her was a pale blue, without clouds, as barren as the snow; she felt the snow coat her like a blanket, light as feathers. Her face turned upward, she breathed in the silence. She felt as if she could sleep undisturbed until spring this way. Like the plants she could let the snow layer her body until she was preserved in the ice. She could almost imagine being warm now, lovingly caressed by winter. She closed her eyes. The falling snow tickled her face.

A crackle of static snapped her out of her reverie. With difficulty, she forced her lethargic limbs to grasp the communication device in her backpack pocket. The voice of one of the technicians asked her if she was alright. They saw her movement stop on the transmitter, and asked if she was going to take a break and build a fire. She shook her head "no" before realizing they couldn't see it. She then said out loud her plan: She was fine. She wanted to continue walking until she reached the part of the birch forest where the Siberian Tigers were sighted last spring. She double checked her equipment-rope, GPS, a thermos with water, rubbing alcohol, first aid, lantern, the communication device, and a tranquilizer gun-just in case she met a problem. But she wouldn't. The tigers had been fitted with radio collars a few years ago so that the research team could track their movement. The research team at home base would see the

smallest movement from a hundred miles away, and the helicopter also kept watch over her. She was protected.

That winter the Siberian Tigers had migrated more than a thousand miles away- only slightly unusual. The helicopter couldn't land into the forest where they were first seen and somebody had to volunteer to make the rest of the voyage by foot to scout for any potential problems. Nobody but her agreed to make the journey.. It was commonplace work, recording the temperature, gathering samples of plant life. The biologists and scientists dealing with the endangered species were content with staying inside the facility or working with the actual animals. Without the living specimen to study, they weren't interested in walking over twenty miles in snow just to gather common data.

She was willing to do it. Being the youngest in the research team always carried the brunt work with it, but if anything, she was securing her position among them through her dedication and selflessness. In hindsight, she knew they probably wouldn't notice her effort. She was only a helping hand, straight out of college with a heart full of good intentions and a handful of experience.

She stood up again, her joints groaning with the effort. Adjusting the straps on the pack, and carrying the communication device in her gloved hand, she resumed her slow trudge a bit more enthusiastically. At least her expedition had been breathtaking.

The birch trees gathered closer together now, as the forest got denser. She was almost at the place, when in the distance she saw a glimpse of color. A mirage of orange. She chuckled at her mind's trick. She thought that her eyes were suffering from color withdrawal. But the illusion darted in the birches again. Orange with black stripes. The cold left her body in a whimper. Fear clashed with doubt. But the elegant figure moved closer and panic heated her body. Like iron she alternately melted with sweaty terror, and then stiffened with the rigorous cold. Sweat stuck to her, immobile beneath her many coats. She couldn't run now. Her mind dictated facts: the Siberian Tiger, extremely territorial, can reach speeds of fifty miles per hour in the snow; active mostly at night; the largest living felid, ranking among the biggest felids to ever exist; mostly

doesn't attack humans. She trembled and her grip on the communication device tightened. She reached for the tranquilizer gun.

Slowly, with a calm that shocked her, she spoke to the technician. "Do you see any tigers on the radar?"

"No, of course not," he said. "You're at least a thousand miles away. Why?"

"Well, I just spotted one. It must be a rogue, without a collar."

"Are you kidding me? Stay right there! Don't move—it'll just track you like prey." He replied, as panicked as she was. "Keep the connection open. Don't lose touch with base!"

Then she heard him address the scouting group in the helicopter: "What the fuck are you guys doing in that helicopter? Get your heads out of your asses! I sent you there to keep watch for rouge`s. If we lose this girl our program will go under because of your crap. I'll try to fix this mess. But so help me when you get back I'll scalp you."

He assured her it would be o.k. And told her to stay put.

She agreed wordlessly, hearing him start giving instructions already. She knew that the tranquilizer gun was in her backpack. She tried reaching for it.

The tiger patrolled the area; he smelled not only her presence but her fear. The small movement of her arm agitated him, provoking him to attack. She knew even her breathing was being scrutinized by the beast.

There was no chance of controlling the situation. Her sole advantage was the gun, but without it she was helpless.

She wouldn't risk grabbing it. At this distance, the tiger would be on her before she could pull the trigger.

The tiger paced. The cold pressed into her bones. She stopped listening to the transmitter, the voices frustrated and searching for a way to save her. The helicopter, at its fastest, would be there in twenty minutes. She didn't know if the tiger would wait.

Almost at the thought, the beast stepped into her view and lifted its head as if asking her what she was doing there. She wanted to tell him she'd leave if he would let her. Patiently, he stepped closer, his paws crunching in the snow, deceptively light. She knew they could crush bones. He stared back at her with unnerving calm and intelligence. She closed her eyes in apprehension.

In the distance, she heard the noise of a chopper smacking the brutal arctic air. She risked glancing once again at the brightly colored ghost of the tundra, but he was long gone. His footprints were already being filled in by the falling snow. She didn't notice the change in the weather, nor did she feel hands lift her up into the chopper. She didn't even remember the screaming wind of the storm that accompanied her back to the facility.

Later on they would tell her she survived an encounter with a Siberian Tiger. They tell her she rode the helicopter through a snowstorm. They would ask her if she was frightened. But every time she answered that the scariest part had been the tundra, lacking noise, deceptively hiding any sign of life.