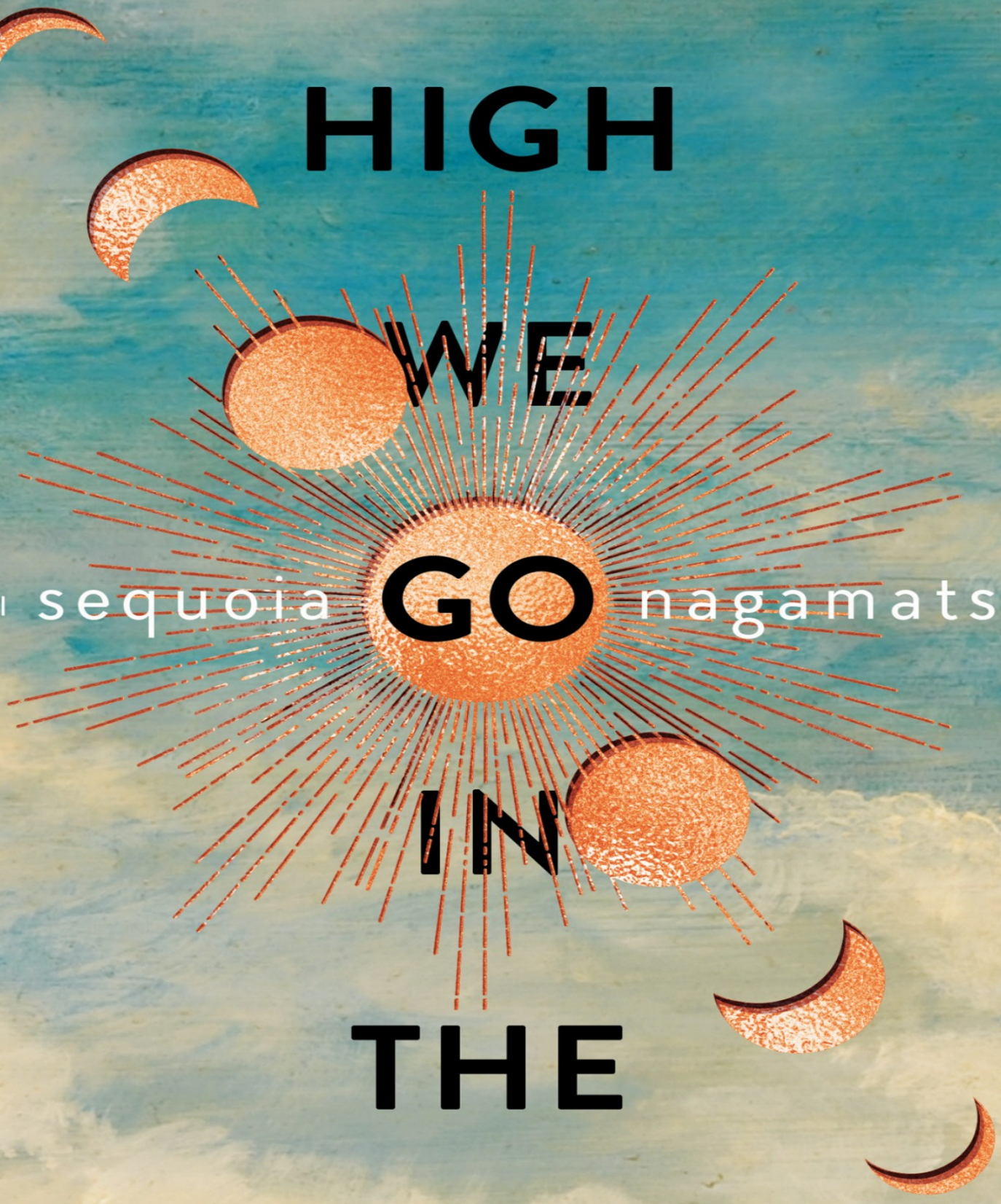
HOW HIGH WE GO IN THE DARK

a novel

sequoia nagamatsu



HOW HIGH WE GO IN THE DARK

A Novel

SEQUOIA NAGAMATSU

WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

IN MEMORY OF CRAIG NAGAMATSU

1958–2021

Contents

30,000 Years beneath a Eulogy

In Siberia, the thawing ground was a ceiling on the verge of collapse, sodden with ice melt and the mammoth detritus of prehistory. The kilometer-long Batagaika Crater had been widening with temperature rise like some god had unzipped the snow-topped marshlands, exposing woolly rhinos and other extinct beasts. Maksim, one of the biologists on staff and a helicopter pilot, pointed to the copper gash in the earth where my daughter had fallen shortly before discovering the thirty-thousand-year-old remains of a girl. We circled the research outpost, a network of red geodesic domes peeking right below the tree line, before landing in a clearing. Maksim helped me out of the chopper, grabbed my bags and a sack of mail from the back.

"Everybody loved Clara," he said. "Don't get weirded out if people don't talk about her, though. Most of us keep that kind of stuff to ourselves."

"I'm here to help," I said.

"Right, of course," Maksim said. "There is, of course, another matter . . ." I half listened as I studied the land, breathed air that, like the fossils beneath us, seemed trapped in time. He explained that a quarantine had been put into effect while we were in flight. No one had expected me to come finish Clara's work, let alone so soon.

Inside, the outpost's central dome looked and smelled like a dorm common room, with a big-screen television, worn recliners, and a stockpile of mac and cheese boxes. The walls were covered with a mixture of topographical maps and movie posters—everything from *Star Wars* to *Pretty Woman* to *Run Lola Run*. Down the accordion-like halls, I could see unkempt people emerging from their bunks or labs. A woman in a purple windbreaker and running leggings sprinted across the room.

"I'm Yulia. Welcome to the end of the world," she said, and disappeared into one of the eight tunnels radiating out from the central domes,

punctuated with bunks like cells in a beehive. The team emerged from their workstations, slowly enveloping me with the musty scent of more than a dozen researchers.

"Everybody, this is our guest of honor, Dr. Cliff Miyashiro from UCLA—archaeology and evolutionary genetics," Maksim said. "He'll be helping us out with Clara's discovery. I know all of us lab rats will get even weirder now that we're not allowed to leave the site, but try to be nice."

Maksim assured me the quarantine was precautionary since the team had successfully reanimated viruses and bacteria in the melting permafrost. He said government officials watch too many movies. Standard protocol. No one at the outpost seemed sick or concerned.

Unwanted orientations into how Clara lived her life here soon followed—where she drank her coffee and gazed up at the aurora; the route she jogged with Yulia, the botanist; the tabletop lotus aromatherapy fountain she and Dave, the epidemiologist, used for their morning yoga sessions; the cubby where she kept her snow gear, which would become my snow gear since we're about the same size—and how for birthdays, some of the team would make the trip to the nearest big city, Yakutsk, for karaoke, to forget for a moment that the buildings around them were slowly sinking into ancient mud.

"Can somebody take me to the girl?" I asked. There was a notable pause. A researcher in the kitchen put away the plastic cups and bottle of whiskey he was no doubt bringing over to welcome me. The cluster of disheveled scientists, most of them in flannel or fleece, felt like a repeat of Clara's memorial a month ago, a church filled with her friends and coworkers, most of whom we'd never met before. I'd shaken their hands as they lined up to tell me and my wife, Miki, how sorry they were—a man with spiky blue hair said he'd once tattooed a star system onto Clara's back, a purple planet orbiting three red dwarfs, and called her *a fucking trip*; our old neighbors reminisced about how Clara used to babysit their twin girls, helped them gain confidence in math; a bald gentleman, her project supervisor at the International Fund for Planetary Survival, gave me his card and invited me to continue my daughter's work in Siberia. After the crowd left, I held Miki as we rewatched the slideshow I'd prepared, pausing on a photo of three-year-old Clara at her foster facility. She held the purple crystal pendant she'd had when we adopted her. We both swore we saw her eyes light up with tiny stars whenever she gazed into it.

Outside the funeral home, our granddaughter, Yumi, played with her cousin despite the heat waves rippling the street. I could smell the smoke from the burning Marin Headlands to the east beginning to creep over the neighborhood. “Our daughter never seemed to need us,” Miki said, her voice barely above a whisper. “But Yumi does.” I clutched the business card in my pocket.

At the research outpost, Maksim led me away from the awkward stares of the crew to the mummified remains Clara had found before she died.

“Annie’s in the clean lab,” Maksim said.

“Annie?” I asked.

“Yulia loves the Eurythmics—her parents are still living in the eighties. She named the body after Annie Lennox.”

The clean lab consisted of a plastic sheet duct-taped from floor to ceiling, separating one side of the bone lab from the other. He handed me a box of nitrile gloves and a respirator face mask. “We don’t have funding for anything else, but we try to be mindful of the pathogens we may bring back with us.

“Probably nothing to worry about ninety-nine percent of the time,” he added.

“Right,” I said, a little taken aback by his cowboy attitude.

“Some of our colleagues at Pleistocene Park, about a thousand kilometers east, have made progress reintroducing bison and native flora to the land. More vegetation, more large animals roaming the steppes packs the topsoil, preserves the ice below the surface—helps us keep the past in the past.”

I doubled up my gloves, pulled on my mask, and stepped through a slit in the plastic.

Annie rested on her side, fetal, on a metal table.

> PRELIMINARY EXTERNAL EXAMINATION NOTES: Preadolescent *H. s. sapiens* with possible Neanderthal characteristics——slight protruding brow ridge. Approximately seven or eight years old. 121 cm in length, 6 kg in weight (would have been approximately 22 kg in life). Remnants of reddish-brown hair remain at temples. Tattoo on left forearm——three black dots surrounded by a circle punctuated with another dot. Body is covered in stitched garment——likely a mixture of pelts. Seashells not endemic to the region woven into stitching——further study needed.

The tissue around her eyes had shriveled, as if she were staring into the sun. The skin around her mouth had begun to recede, revealing a pained cry. I couldn't help but picture Clara as a young girl, or Yumi, who was about this age, traversing barren plains in search of big game, stalked by giant steppe lions and wolves. I ran my hands over her clenched fists.

"Big fucking mystery," Maksim said, coming up behind me. "Most of our research here is funded, in partnership, with the International Fund for Planetary Survival. We keep busy with soil and ice core samples and the occasional ancient animal carcass, but I'd be lying if I said all of us haven't been distracted by Annie and the other bodies we recovered from the cavern. And of course, there's the unidentified virus that Dave found within them in our preliminary samples."

"Have you run any other scans, tested samples? The shells, for one thing . . ."

"From a small sea snail native to the Mediterranean. *Trivia monacha*. I mean, there's evidence of Neanderthals and early humans in Siberia near the Altai Mountains as early as sixty thousand years ago, but nothing this far north. The complexity of how the shells are woven into the fabric is highly unusual. Honestly, this needlework would put my grandmother to shame."

"It's strange that Annie's the only one with such clothing. The other bodies in the cavern showed evidence of simple fur cloaks. The station debrief file you guys sent over left me with more questions than answers," I said.

"We've been waiting for someone to take up the task, fill in Annie's story. Clara said she was here for the animals. She wanted to understand the Ice Age biome so we might re-create it. But it always seemed like she was searching for something else. She'd linger at the dig sites longer than any of us. And for someone whose job it was to study what was hidden in the earth, she spent a lot of time staring at the sky. I bet she would have seen Annie as part of her charge, too. She was always talking about how the unknown past would save us. For a scientist, she dreamed more like a poet or a philosopher."

"Got that from her artist mother," I said. As a child, Clara would spend entire afternoons in her tree house creating—her teachers called her a genius and we encouraged her as much as we could. She wrote reports on nebulae with crayons. We'd find lists of the constellations she'd spotted,

alongside mythologies of those she'd made up, the cousins of the Pleiades, the dipper that was neither big nor little but just right.

"I think I can see that," Maksim said. "It's normally easy to get to know people around here, but Clara kept to herself. It took some sleuthing through her belongings to even find your contact information."

"She was always about the work," I said. Our eyes both fell to Annie, whose cry seemed to fill the silence of the lab.

Maksim nodded and said I should get some rest after the long trip. He told me Clara's belongings were in a box in her sleeping pod, waiting for me.

When I departed for Siberia, my granddaughter, Yumi, sobbed at the airport even though, at almost ten, she insisted she was fine. Miki asked me again if I was absolutely sure about doing this. At least wait a few months, she said, so you're not heading into winter. But I knew that if I stayed, I'd delay indefinitely, and the specter of my daughter would have faded from this faraway land.

I never could picture the place where Clara had chosen to disappear in her final years. When Yumi asked Miki and I where her mother was, we would point to a map, search Google Images for the Batagaika Crater and northern Siberia. My wife helped Yumi make papier-mâché dioramas of the region that they populated with tiny toy bison, dinosaurs, and 3D-printed facsimiles of our family, on an expedition where time didn't matter.

"Your mother loves you," I'd reassure Yumi. "Her work is important." And part of me believed this, but I'd also given Clara an ultimatum the last time we were all together, telling her she needed to come home, that it wasn't fair to Yumi or to us. Apart from the postcards and the occasional video calls with Yumi, I hadn't spoken directly to my daughter in over a year.

Before I realized her research outpost was an international effort, I'd imagined Clara roughing it in a yurt, falling asleep beneath animal fur, cradled by the light of the Milky Way. I saw now that her sleeping pod was a three-by-ten-meter cocoon, nested into the wall of one of the domes. Lined with thermal fleece, it had LED lighting, bookshelves, a fold-away worktable, and cargo netting for storage. I searched a duffel of her belongings that I found tucked into the netting—clothes, toiletries, one of her disaster journals, a personal diary, an old iPod, a few artifacts she'd

procured on her travels—but the item I'd most hoped to retrieve, Clara's crystal necklace, was nowhere to be found. I hoisted myself onto her bunk and removed my hiking boots, peeking under the mattress and inside a ventilation grate, anywhere she might have hidden her pendant for safekeeping. My feet had baked during the long journey, and the cheese-like odor filled the bunk, mixing with the stale scent of cigarettes and sweat that permeated the rest of the station. I lay back for the first time since leaving America and searched through Clara's iPod, stopping at the *Planets* suite by Gustav Holst. The triumphant horns of the Jupiter movement transported me to happier times when Clara's wonder was still caught up in the stars, like when she insisted her third-grade solar system project had to be at the correct scale or got into trouble at science camp for inventing a story about the lost star sister of the Pleiades that was once visible in the ancient African sky. What did Clara think of when she looked at the cosmos dancing above the gray of the tundra here? I grabbed her diary and began flipping through it, trying to hear her voice again.

Day 3: *It's amazing how the interior of the crater has already given birth to patches of green. Mammoth tusks protrude from the mud, while new plant life takes root. With the frequent landslides and ice melt creating temporary streams, the whole area has become a washing machine, mixing up the new and the ancient. Everybody here understands what's at stake. It's hard to ignore the Earth when it slowly destabilizes beneath you as you sleep, when it unlocks secrets you never asked for or wanted. On my first night, I stood outside and listened. And maybe it was my imagination, but I could have sworn I heard the soil churning, the dance of a million dead insects, early humans, and wolves.*

Day 27: *In the wild, most parents will fight to the death to protect their young. On some level, I know my parents understand this. I do not answer their messages because I've said all that's left to be said. I believe Yumi hears the song of the Earth when she sleeps. I have to believe she knows why I can't be there for her plays and soccer games and all the other things. She'll be okay. My colleagues here have children, too. They say their kids don't understand or that they aren't as close as they would like to be. But we're here to ensure that they and their children and their grandchildren can breathe and imagine—and so they don't have to deliver the eulogies of*

so many species. Happy birthday, Yumi. If you ever read this, know that I never stopped thinking of you.

I set the notebook aside and returned the iPod to the duffel bag, noticed another item wedged in the corner, wrapped in a pair of fleece socks: a worn photo and a carved figurine. The picture was taken three years ago, when we'd met up with Clara in southern Alaska. Yumi had just turned seven, and I was excavating a four-hundred-year-old Yupik village that was slowly washing out to sea.

I recognized the squat brown dig site trailer in the background. I used to sit inside and watch over my grad students while I finished my morning paperwork and coffee. The day this photo was taken, Miki and I looked on as Clara fit Yumi into a pair of oversized waders. Whenever Yumi saw her mother, on average every three or four months, for a week or two at most, it was as if Clara could do no wrong. "We only have the week," Miki told me that morning, when it seemed like I was about to go lecture our daughter. "Don't cause trouble."

I walked from the excavation office to the edge of what my assistants called the mosh pit and watched as my daughter and granddaughter sifted through the sludge. Clara was telling Yumi a story about seal hunts.

"I think I'm going to start a painting of Clara and Yumi together like this, knee-deep in the mud," my wife said from behind me. "For my next gallery show. Maybe it'll remind Clara that the two of them need each other."

"It's almost too perfect," I said.

"Look, Grandpa. I'm a big poop!" Yumi yelled.

Afterward, Miki took Yumi back to the motel to get cleaned up and I urged Clara to stay behind so we could talk.

"Your mother says you're coming home for a while once we finish here," I said.

"A week at most. I told you about the opportunity in Siberia," she said.

"You see how much Yumi misses you, though."

Clara stood next to one of the folding tables that overlooked the lip of the mosh pit. It was strewn with artifacts. She was focused on a wooden doll we'd found at the site, no larger than a soda can.

"I'm doing this for her," she said.

“Sure, I get that,” I said. I’ve always been proud of how much my daughter cared about the world. After school she’d study the news, comb the internet for disasters, wars and hate and injustice, write it all down in these color-coded journals. Once, I asked her what she was doing, and she said she was just trying to keep track of it all because it didn’t seem like anybody else noticed or cared that we kept making the same mistakes, that hate in a neighborhood or injustice in a state ran like poison through veins, until another ice shelf collapsed or another animal went extinct. *Everything is connected*, she’d say. And I’d tell her, *You’re only one person and you only have one life.*

“You’d rather I come home, wouldn’t you, and maybe teach in your department? Pick up Yumi every day after school and pretend like everything is going to be fine.” She waved the wooden doll in the air, studied its simplistic carved smile. “Whoever played with this had a hard life, you know. Probably a really short one.”

“I just want Yumi to have a childhood with her mother,” I said.

“You and Mom are in no position to talk about being there for your child.”

“That’s not entirely fair,” I said. Every time Clara made this accusation, I felt like a pill bug curling in on itself. Once she had her own money, she’d wasted no time escaping to the farthest corners of the planet with only postcards and photos to let us know she was alive. Clara turned and left me standing there, grabbed her messenger bag, walked toward the ocean, still holding the wooden doll. By the time I caught up to her, she’d pulled out another one of her journals.

“Have you seen the new sea rise projections?” she said, reading off a list of cities that might be submerged within Yumi’s lifetime—most of southern Florida, nearly all the major cities in Japan, New York City turned into Venice. “Are you watching the news of Appalachia burning? Brain-eating amoeba population explosions at summer camp lakes?”

“Things are bad in every generation.” I looked at the opened pages of her notebook, each one covered in disaster. “But we still have to live our life.”

“Your research here wouldn’t be possible if it weren’t for climate change,” she said.

“I know,” I said.

“Tell Yumi I’ll take her out for breakfast tomorrow. We can talk later if you want.” She turned and walked toward the research tent, flagged down one of my assistants, asked for a ride into town. While she was waiting for her lift, she came back to the dig site and found me in the mosh pit, half sucked into the earth.

“By the way, don’t think I don’t want to be with my daughter,” she said. “You’re dead wrong if you think that.”

But the next day, when Miki and I went to meet Clara and Yumi for breakfast, we found Yumi in tears. Clara had changed her plans, said something about travel being too difficult to the site in Siberia, things were out of her control. She hugged Yumi, who was sniffling over her banana split, and then her mother, who told her to be safe. But I didn’t say anything. I drank my coffee and ordered chocolate chip pancakes.

“Cliff,” Miki said.

I peered through the blinds of the roadside diner, watched Clara climb into her rental. She didn’t start the engine, though. She sat there for a long while until I finally got up from the table, went outside, and knocked on her car window.

“I love you,” I said, cracking open the door. “Stay safe.”

“I’m sorry this is the way things need to be,” she said.

Back in Clara’s sleeping pod, I tucked the photo in my wallet and picked up the two-inch dogū figurine I’d found wrapped in the sock. It was a squat stone humanoid with a bulbous torso and globular eyes occupying most of its head. I had bought her this replica as a junior high graduation gift at a museum of ancient Japanese history, explained that it was likely a form of magic for the Jōmon people, capable of absorbing negative energy, evil, and illness. I told her to keep it close, that it would keep her safe in the world. I ran my fingers across the crevices and contours, feeling for some last shred of my daughter—a bad day at work, the distance between her and Yumi, a final breath.

From across the dome, I heard someone sprinting closer, their footsteps echoing through the aluminum halls. I slipped the dogū into my pants pocket as Yulia entered the room, glancing at her wrist health tracker.

“Phew. Moscow Marathon, here I come. So, I’m not sure if you’re hungry or just want to rest,” she said, still catching her breath. Yulia had changed from workout clothes to the unofficial uniform of the station: faded

jeans and a hoodie. “But we made fish tacos and we’re about to watch *The Princess Bride*.”

“So, you’re the one who named Annie,” I said. “The Eurythmics fan.”

“Maksim wanted to name her after a Beatles song,” Yulia said. “Like how Lucy was named after ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ when they found her in Ethiopia. Our girl would have been Jude or Penny. I beat him at chess for the naming rights.”

I followed Yulia to the main area and made myself at home on a recliner that was patched in several places with duct tape. The aroma of grilled trout filled the facility, and I realized I hadn’t eaten a real meal since my first layover in Vladivostok nearly ten hours ago. Four of the researchers huddled on the sofa. Another used a supply chest as a stool. They all formally introduced themselves and the one on the chest, Dave, offered me a glass of vodka, which he said was mandatory for initiation. He lingered on the edges of his words and wore an Occidental College shirt, so I assumed he, too, was from California.

“Santa Cruz,” he said. The bottle he tipped over my glass looked like a mammoth tusk. One of the other researchers noted this particular vodka was a true Siberian drink from the oldest distillery, made with local water, wheat, and cedar nuts. “You’ll learn to hold your own soon enough,” Dave continued. “Keeps us warm, keeps things interesting. Helps us forget that we’re flying by the seat of our pants here.” My face began to flush after the first few sips.

I sat on my pleather perch like a gargoyle, cradling my shot glass, observing the room like an awkward schoolboy, figuring out how I might fit in here. A few researchers clustered in the halls, dancing; most crammed onto torn furniture, either heckling the movie or asking me questions, including my thoughts on live-action role-playing games. Eventually I let Maksim create a *Dungeons & Dragons* character for me, an elf rogue named Kalask, a name that sounded like IKEA furniture. Dave snatched the character sheet away from him.

“This nerd has been trying to get a game started for over a year,” Dave said.

“I’m building the perfect campaign,” Maksim said.

“Forget that shit. I know a good initiation game,” one of the mechanics said. His name was Alexei. He was a frequent staffer at Bellingshausen