



The
Silence
of
Snow

Annalise DeVito

ANNALISE DEVITO

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First edition

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Part 1

August 23rd

Every so often, I have a dream where I find myself looking out at the sea before the flood. Watching the sea churn back and forth as an incoming storm blew into the coast. As I watch the water, I see a sign of how climate change is getting out of hand, how the ice near Vancouver is melting faster and faster, and the weather getting more and more unpredictable. Then before I could move, I see the sea charge towards me, and then I know, that this is not a dream, it was a memory. A memory of the flood that took my parents, that took my friends. The water hits me, and I fall back as I land in a field of snow. I then look up at the sky and find myself wishing for more snow to come, as I watched the partials drift down from the sky. How I wished so hard.

But as they say; Be careful what you wish for.

A loud siren filled the air as Aspen's head shot up from his diary. The warning bell, something was coming. The door to the hut flew open as Nave poked his head in.

"Aspen, you need to look at this."

Aspen shut his book and grabbed his coat off the hook. He quickly stepped outside and followed his friend's gaze. Aspen let out a breath as he gripped his jacket.

“Snow.”

“More like a blizzard. Merek!” Nave yelled.

Merek poked his head out from the storage room.

“Lock everything up, this one’s going to be a big one. Meet us in the den when you’re done.”

Merek nodded and disappeared.

“Aspen, make sure all the windows are locked up. And then help me with the dogs.”

“On it!”

Nave ran down the stairs as people all around ran in and out of houses in a panic as the snow cloud came even closer. Nave opened the door to the kennel as all of the six dogs lunged at him, panicked by the environment around them.

“Hey hey, everyone stay calm, I’m going to get you out.”

Nave flicked out his switchblade and began to saw at the rope, as the wind blew violently. Nave held onto each dog as he cut them free and carefully led them to the den.

As he led the last dog out, a strong gust blew, as snow, and large chunks of debris flew through the air. Nave let out a yell as he lost his footing and fell to the ground.

Iggy let out a sharp bark as Merek helped Nave up.

“We’re out of time, we have to get inside!”

“Where’s Aspen?!” Nave yelled over the wind.

Merek looked over his shoulder. All he saw was white.

“Stay here, I’ll go get him!”

“Merek no!”

Nave’s eyes widened as a shingle flew at him as he crouched down to the ground.

Iggy barked again as he began to pull Nave’s coat towards the den.

“Merek, Aspen!” He yelled, his voice lost in the wind.

More debris flew through the air as Nave ran towards the den. He grabbed hold of the door as he took one last look.

Then, out of the whiteness of the snow, Nave saw a figure carrying a body.

“Aspen!” He yelled leaping out of the den. Nave shielded his eyes as he helped Merek into the den and grabbed hold of the door and sealed it shut.

“What happened?” Nave asked frantically

“One of the shutters knocked him out. He hit his head pretty hard.”

Nave gently took hold of Aspen’s face as he examined the large gash on his head.

“He’s going to need stitches. Get the med kit, let’s try to do this before he wakes up.”

As Merek grabbed the kit, all of the dogs started to whine and cry.

“Hey, it’s okay. He’ll be okay guys. We got him.”

Nave looked back as he heard a small groan. He looked back down and cursed.

“He’s waking up. Hurry,” He said to Merek.

Aspen slowly opened his eyes as Nave’s face came into view. His hearing was muffled as his vision blurred.

“Nave.....”

“You’re going to be alright,” Merek said, handing Nave the sutures.

Aspen let out another moan as his head pounded. His vision blurred and his hearing went mute.

Nave mouthed his name, as he felt him gently shake him.

Aspen let out a breath as Nave blurred into darkness.

Merek let out a grunt as he lifted a piece of the roof on the kennel as each dog trotted into the room.

“Don’t worry you’re; okay now,” he said as he knelt down to pet Barkley. “The storm’s done.”

Merek rose up and gently shut the door to the kennel as he spotted Aspen making his way out of the den.

“Aspen you need to rest.”

“I’m fine. We need to have a group meeting.”

“Why?”

“Merek, winter came early. It wasn’t supposed to come for another month.”

“I know.”

“Then you know why we all need to talk. We were supposed to leave this week.”

“Well, you know the weather, it’s been crazy since-”

Merek stopped and let out a breath. “The country should have listened to the warning signs. Saving the ice. Because if we did half of the West Coast wouldn’t be underwater. The seasons are out of balance, they’re unpredictable and we never know what’s coming when. We could have prepared unlike-”

“Unlike last time. You think I’m not aware of the fact that the first flood wiped out almost half of this town. Our friends, our parents? So yes, they should have, but we need to focus on what’s happening now. Everyone’s home around here was not ready for the winter weather yet. We need to help ourselves and others before more people die from exposure.”

“And you need to rest,” Nave said, coming up behind them.

“We need to talk.”

“About our trip; yes, the car won’t be able to travel in the snow. It’s not built for it.”

“No duh,” Merek said.

“Hey now,” Aspen said.

“We can’t *walk* to Edmonton. It’s a month’s trek from Vancouver, longer since the trail is covered in snow. And with Aspen’s condition, we can’t walk.”

“Are we just going to skip over the fact that we don’t even know if Edmonton is better than here?” Merek asked

“They’re more inland than we are. I heard they have better resources and better food.”

“It’s too dangerous. The snow is the least of our problems, and it’s not a guarantee.”

“It’s better than here.”

“No. I’m not risking it, and I won’t let you take Aspen along with you.”

Nave crossed his arms and frowned. “Who said I was.”

“I know you,” Merek said getting closer. “You just do whatever the heck you want, and don’t ever consider anyone else’s option.”

“That’s a lie.”

“No it’s not and you know it. Aspen and I are just at the bottom of the totem pole! And you, self-appointed yourself as the leader.”

“I always listen to what everyone has to say, it’s just that sometimes you make the “right” choices but really, they’re benefiting you,” Nave said getting closer.

“Are you saying I’m selfish?!”

“Yes! Yes, you are!”

“Oh, you are *such* a hypocrite!!”

Nave let out a sharp breath as he lunged at Merek.

“Hey! Hey! Stop it both of you.” Aspen yelled as he pushed the two of them apart.

Aspen stumbled as he held his hand to his head.

“Aspen,” Nave said as he caught him.

“I’m okay. I’m just dizzy.”

“Here, I got you,” Nave said.

Merek let in a breath as he took a hold of Aspen before Nave could.

“Nave, get some food for dinner tonight.”

Nave glared at Merek as he stormed away towards the storage box. Nave snatched the can of beans and the leftover bag of rice. As much as Merek and he were friends, sometimes Merek got on his nerves. He hated it whenever he would try to go against him, or when he tried to save Aspen. Nave slammed the cooler shut and took a deep breath. Maybe it was just because he was jealous. He could see that Aspen and Merek were close, and he could see that Merek had feelings for Aspen. And while he had tried to deny his feelings for Aspen, he knew that those feelings were still buried deep. Hidden so well, that even Nave convinced himself for a bit that he didn’t have feelings for Aspen when in reality, he did.

As he entered the hut, Aspen looked over at him and smiled. Nave smiled back as he started to prepare dinner.

“So,” Merek started.

“Are we leaving or not?”

“I don’t know. You raise a good point, we don’t know what’s out there. But something else occurred to me. Aspen may be fine now, but we don’t know what internal damage that blow did. We need to get him to a hospital. And Edmonton is the closest one and has one that is running.”

Merek paused and looked over at Aspen.

“Guys, we don’t need to risk our lives getting me to a hospital.”

“Yes, we do,” Merek and Nave said.

Nave’s eyes drifted down back at the rice as he poured in the

beans.

“We need to get Aspen the proper treatment. Tomorrow I’ll be getting the supplies we need, along with the best route. Since we can’t walk, I’ll have to figure out a way to get us there the fastest.”

Merek let out a sigh as he handed his bowl to Nave. He cared about Aspen, and while he did not agree that this trip would be the safest, he knew that it was better than staying here and having no access to a hospital at all.

“Look, I don’t want to leave you behind Merek. All three of us have been through a lot together. I’m not going to leave you.”

“You won’t have to. I have an idea of how to get there.”

Merek looked over at Aspen who was wrapped up in a blanket with a cup of water in his hand.

“I’m going to need Barkley and Iggy, along with your two dogs Nave, and mine.”

“Where are you going with this?” Aspen asked.

“We can dog sled our way to Edmonton. All I need to find is two sleds and we’ll be fine.”

“Woh, hold on. Dog sled?” Nave asked.

“Yeah.”

“Do you know how to drive a sled?”

“You know, you’re doing what you said you hate me doing.”

Nave lost his words as looked over at Aspen who shrugged.

“Sorry,” he said looking down at the pot of rice and beans.

“How do you plan on doing this?”

“Well, I would get two sleds. And I would have three dogs for you and Aspen, then I would have my dog for my sled. Since the main road will be down car-wise, we won’t have to worry about cars getting in the way. We have a set path to Edmonton.”

“How long would it take us?” Nave asked.

“Well, it’s about 720.3 miles to Edmonton. For every mile we run, we make sure we rest the same amount. Dogs can run about seven miles so if we run 28 miles each day, it would take us 26 days.”

Nave took a deep breath and looked over at Aspen.

“What do you think?”

Aspen looked down at his drink “Well, we could either spend another winter here and wait for the snow to melt, or we could give it a shot. I think that it’s worth trying though. Each day, we keep living the same lives. We survive through rice and beans, bread, and soup. It would be nice to have a better life. And while it’s not guaranteed, I think we should at least try.”

Nave looked down at his bowl and then back up at Merek and then at Aspen.

“Alright. I’ll start gathering supplies tomorrow. We’ll need lots of food, along with some bullets.”

“I have a fire starter as well.”

“Bring the med kit as well, and the gun. Just in case.”

As Nave and Merek chatted about the need for supplies, Aspen’s mind drifted. His head still hurt, and the pain was not going away. He felt quite dizzy when he woke up this morning, and his brain felt like it was in a fog. Something was wrong. But he didn’t want to worry Nave and Merek. He just hoped that they would be able to reach Edmonton in time before something happened to him.

“Aspen?” Nave asked.

“Sorry, I didn’t understand what you were saying, I zoned out for a second.”

“That’s okay. How many dog shoes do you have?”

“Enough for all of the dogs, they’re a bit old though.”

“That’s alright. It’s better than nothing,” Nave said.

Aspen nodded and continued to sip at his drink. Tomorrow they would leave everything they knew behind. A 720-mile run across snow, rivers, between mountains, and through forests. Who knew what would be waiting for them?

* * *

Merek slowly woke up as he felt something wet on his face. He slowly opened his eyes and a fuzzy white and gray dog came into view.

“Morning Cooper.”

Cooper backed up and hopped back and forth as Nave slowly got up across the room. Merek sat up and looked over at Aspen, who was still asleep.

“Nave,” Merek whispered.

Nave looked up and made his way over.

“What’s up?”

“Is Aspen okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“He was really quiet yesterday. And he didn’t eat much either. I’m worried about his health,” Merek whispered.

“He’s always been quiet. But, him not eating is unusual.”

“Do you think he’ll be able to steer?”

“I don’t know. I think he’ll try to play it off. Let’s just let him steer. I think he’s trying to not make us worry.”

“Okay,” Merek said. “Let’s just keep an eye on him.”

Nave nodded and stood up. “We should get going. If something is really wrong with him, we need to get to Edmonton, and fast.”

Merek nodded

He gave Cooper one last pet and started to get dressed. He

could tell that Nave had feelings for Aspen. He just hoped that his concern for Aspen didn't show Nave that he felt the same way.

* * *

Aspen pushed back Barkley's fur as he strapped into the sled. Barkley let out a light yap as he pushed against Aspen, who let out a small giggle.

"Hi, buddy. You ready to run?"

Barkley stood still and looked at Aspen, and let out a sneeze.

"I'll take that as yes."

Aspen stood up and looked over Iggy, and Nave's two dogs, Ollie and Axle.

"Alright, they're all ready to go," Aspen said.

Nave took a deep breath and looked over at Merek.

"You ready? Once we leave, there's no turning back."

"You ready Cooper?" Merek said.

Cooper looked up at Merek and let out a yap and jumped up and down.

"Ready."

"Alright. Aspen? You want to steer first?"

"I would but, I'm actually pretty tired. Can I take the second shift?"

"Yeah sure. No problem."

As Aspen crawled into the base of the sled, Nave looked over to Merek with a concerned look.

"Let's just make the most of our time out there. While we have a plan, if we have to change it, we can," he said without breaking eye contact.

Nave nodded and looked forward as he took a deep breath.

They were really doing this. Nave gripped the sled and yelled out.

“Mush!”

All of the dog’s ears pricked up as all five dogs started to pull the sled as the boys started their journey across Canada.

Part 2

September 1st.

It's been just over a week and we're making good time. Nave says we have just over three weeks left on our trip. Food is scarce as most of it has either been washed away by the flood or has frozen over. But one thing is for sure, the abundance of wildlife is still very prevalent. Nave says we need to be careful where we camp, as Merek has picked up wolf and bear tracks, especially since the polar bears' ice homes have all but disappeared. Ever since the world drastically changed, every living being has been fighting for food. We are a bit behind schedule as many roads have been flooded over by the overflowing rivers. The ice from the arctic has made things worse and our group has had to find a different trail many times. Of course, Nave and Merek argue about which trail to pick. I wish they would stop fighting. I've done my best to hide my headaches and vomiting, but it's getting harder each day. I just hope I can make it. I don't want to worry-

Aspen stopped as he felt a wave of dizziness as his vision blurred in and out. He closed his diary and pulled his blanket over himself as he lay next to Barkley, and closed his eyes as he tried to suppress the feeling. *Just act normal. Just act normal.* He took a deep breath and slowly opened his eyes as the headache

subsided. Aspen pulled the blanket closer to him as Nave came over to him.

“Hey. How are you feeling?”

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

“Better.” He lied. “I think I was just nervous about the trip, my head feels a lot better.

“That’s good, but once we get to Edmonton, we’ll get you the proper care you need.”

“Alright. Just don’t worry yourself silly over me.”

Nave let out a laugh and placed his hand on Aspen’s shoulder.

“Get some rest. We leave at first light.”

Aspen nodded as he noticed Nave’s hand linger on his shoulder.

Nave got up and crossed over to the campfire, as he added more wood.

“Hey,” Merek said.

“Hey.”

“We need to find more food. We’re almost out of our rations. We have three more weeks to go, and we only have food for one and a half.”

“Do you think we could make a fishing rod? We need to save our bullets,” Merek said putting more fire on the wood.

“But we also need to hunt any caribou that come along. And we need bullets.”

“We *need* bullets to protect ourselves. You said it yourself, there are bear and wolf tracks. We need to be prepared to protect ourselves and Aspen. Otherwise, none of us will be getting to Edmonton.”

“You’re really going to *shoot* at a bear? Are you insane??”

“If I have to, yes!”

“Okay, one, keep your voice down, and two, you clearly have

no idea what you're doing out here. You don't shoot at a bear, you throw food at it so you have a chance to run," Merek said.

"Oh, so it can come after you after you distract it."

"It could do a number of things. But shooting it is not one of them, it will just provoke it. An injured bear is worse than a healthy one."

"Whatever, just remember who carries the gun on this trip."

Merek let out a breath and sat back. "Wow. Seriously?"

"Yes seriously. Anything to protect Aspen."

Merek paused, "And you...and me."

"You knew what I meant."

Merek let out a breath and tossed another stick onto the fire. "You have feelings for Aspen."

"I do not!"

"Yes. You do. I see you two, you're always by his side, trying to get near him, protecting him. I'm not blind."

"We'll I'm not blind either, you like him too."

Merek twisted his mouth and sighed. "Okay, I do too." But Aspen clearly likes you more."

"I beg to differ."

"Okay," Merek said shrugging. "Maybe he doesn't like *either* of us. Have you ever thought that he may just see us both as friends?"

Nave stopped cleaning the gun and sighed. "I thought about it, but I guess-"

"You were focused on me. Nave..."

Merek got up and shifted closer to him. "You are... such a good friend."

"Oh boy."

"Just... hear me out," Merek said.

Nave put the gun aside and nodded.

“You are such a good friend, but sometimes, you push away and ignore others’ ideas and just tend to focus on yours. Without accepting anyone else. Maybe you couldn’t see that Aspen just wants to be friends, because you were so wrapped up in your feelings, and being threatened by my relationship.”

Nave let out a sharp breath and picked up the gun. “You know, maybe you’re the one who’s wrapped up in other people’s business. Because you always seem to think that you and Aspen are at the bottom of the pole, and you’re always complaining to me

“Because I’m sick and tired of your leadership of just you. Yes, I will admit that I do that, but can’t you see that we both have things to work on?”

“No, I don’t. Just you Merek. So before you criticize me, think about yourself first and how you need to fix it.”

Merek let out a frustrated breath as Nave stormed off towards the sled. He shook his head and poked at the fire. While Nave was a good friend, he was selfish and only thought about himself. Never others, always on him, and always his choice first.

Merek let out another sigh as he tossed the stick onto the fire.

“Do you mind taking the first watch?” He asked. “Let Aspen sleep through the night.”

“No. What about you do it? Wouldn’t want you to complain about being woken up.”

“Pettiness does not look good on you Nave.”

Nave let out a hump as he walked over to his tent and proceeded to lie down.

Merek sighed and made his way over to the wood pile. He and Nave had to make this right, being at odds with each other out here was dangerous. Togetherness was key to making it through.

* * *

Aspen stirred awake as the light of the sun peaked just over the horizon. He closed his eyes as he snuggled up more under his blanket. His head pounded, and his body felt weak. Today would be rough, physically and mentally. He had heard the fight between Merek and Nave. How petty Nave was to Merek, and how both of them had feelings for him. Aspen knew that he would have to address that later. But for now, their focus was getting further to their destination.

Aspen slowly took off his blanket and made his way over to the fire, where Merek sat.

“Morning.”

“Hey. How are you feeling.”

“Fine. Look, last night.”

Merek sighed. “You heard us fighting.”

Aspen nodded.

“I’m sorry, I... he just gets on my nerve.”

“I’m not excusing his behavior, but Nave has lost a lot of people he’s loved. His family and I were close before all of *this* happened. They looked out for me when my parents were away for work. Nave loved them so much. Especially his brother, they were so close, they never left each other’s side. So when the first flood came to Vancouver, he tried his hardest to protect his brother. But.. somewhere between the flood hitting the house, Nave got separated from his brother.”

Merek look up and then dropped his head. “He found his name on the list.”

“Yeah. Like a lot of us did. Bodies were never found, just names. So, as much as he’s annoying, he’s just trying to be protective. I think personally, he sees you as his little brother.”

Merek poked at the fire and shook his head. “But if he looks out for me so much, that doesn’t excuse being a corrupt leader and not listening to anyone,” Merek said.

“I don’t know, I just know that all of his losses have changed something in him. He was never like this. Nave may never change. But don’t ever stoop down to his level. Shower him with kindness. Not anger.”

“I don’t know, if he can’t see his problems, he’s not growing as a person. He sees nothing wrong with how he acts. He thinks it’s my problem.”

Aspen perked his head up as he heard someone clearing his throat.

“Nave, I-”

“Talking behind my back. Wow.”

“Nave I never-”

“We need to get going. Merek, you’re in the back.”

Merek let out a sharp breath as he picked up a chunk of snow and threw it at Nave.

Nave stopped and spun around.

“So childish.”

“I am not. You are, how can you not see that you are the problem?!”

“I am not the problem here. You are, talking behind my back? You can’t even say it to my face.”

“Because I know how you will act.”

“You don’t know how I act. You know *nothing* about me.”

Merek stepped closer to Nave. “I know how loyal you are, I know how protective you are. But it does not excuse the need to always be right!”

“Well, most of the time I am right. And you aren’t. You call *me* petty, well talking behind my back is pretty petty Merek.”

Merek opened his mouth but Nave stopped him.

“We leave *now*.”

Nave walked towards the dogs and started to hook them up.

Aspen placed his hand on Merek and squeezed his shoulder.

“He’ll see it one day.”

“I hope.”

* * *

Merek looked around as Cooper followed Nave and Aspen down the trail. It had been three days and Nave still didn’t apologize. Which was no surprise.

“How are we doing back there Merek?” Aspen asked.

“Fine. We should break soon. We’re coming up on an hour and a half. ”

“We’re fine,” Nave said turning around. We need to keep going.”

“We need to break Nave. Otherwise, we’ll be cutting our trip time for today short.”

“We keep moving Merek!”

Aspen looked up at Nave, whose stern face focused on the trail.

“Nave-”

“Not you too Aspen.”

“I agree with Merek. We should break, and we need to scout ahead too.”

“Don’t worry. You just rest. You’ll be driving next.”

As the boys continued through the forested trail, they came to a large opening. Nave looked ahead and saw the blanket of snow covering the large opening. Nave stopped midway across the flat land and stepped off.

“Why are we stopped?” Merek asked.

“Shh,” Nave said.

Nave slowly picked up the gun and waited as the sound of the wind pushed through the land. Then, out of nowhere, a group of caribou walked out from the forest.

“And for once I thought you were taking my advice,” Merek mumbled.

Nave hid his gun behind his back and slowly crept towards them.

“It’s a far shot, but I think I can make it,” He whispered.

Nave crept towards the caribou as they slowly stood in the middle of the land.

Merek stood and watched as the caribou moved along the stretch. But as he studied them more carefully, he noticed they were not eating.

“Somethings not right.”

“What do you mean?” Aspen asked.

“The caribou, they’re not eating the grass. They’re just standing there.”

Merek followed the tracks Nave had made, bent down, and cleared the snow away. As he did, he felt his hand glide across as a crack in the ice showed itself.

“No...”

The ice cracked more and more as Merek’s head shot up.

“Nave lay down!”

The caribou heard Merek’s cry and bolted off.

“Merek what the heck!!!”

Merek looked down at the cracking ice and turned to Aspen.

“Aspen the sled!!”

Aspen jumped out and called Cooper as he yelled mush.

“Merek-”

“Nave, lay down, we’re on a lake!”

Merek heard more cracking as Cooper let out a sharp cry as the one sled started to fall through the ice.

“Cooper!”

Merek ran to the sled just as he heard another yell.

He turned his head just in time to see Nave disappear beneath the surface.

“Merek! I got Cooper, get Nave out of there!”

Merek felt the ice shift below his feet as he dropped to the ice and crawled towards the hole.

“Nave!” He yelled.

Merek’s eyes darted back and forth as he started to clear the snow around him as he yelled Nave’s name over and over.

Suddenly, Merek heard a mute banging as he spotted Nave under the ice.

“Nave, hold on!”

Merek grabbed the gun and started to bang the butt of the gun on the hard ice. The ice cracked around the impact as small cracks became larger ones. Nave was not going to die, none of them were. Not on his watch.

Merek let out a breath and raised the gun and let out a yell as he broke through. He threw the gun aside and pulled Nave out of the water. Nave let out several coughs as Merek held him close.

“You’re alright, you’re okay, I got you.”

Nave shivered violently as Merek grabbed the gun and slowly made their way over to Aspen.

“Here, wrap him up in this. We need to get him new clothes. He’ll freeze,” Aspen said.

“And where are we going to find that?”

“I found a cabin just over there. It seems empty.”

“Nave, what do you think?”

Nave looked at Merek and nodded. “I trust you.”

Merek let out a breath and nodded.

“Alright, show us.”

* * *

Merek placed more wood into the stove as he closed it shut. He looked over his shoulder as Nave sat, bundled up in a blanket and new clothes they had found in the cabin. Merek stood up and walked towards Nave.

“You warm enough?”

“Yeah. I’m good.”

“Alright. Just stay wrapped up and let me know if anything changes.”

“Merek?”

“Yeah?”

Nave sighed and looked Merek straight in the eye.

“I’m sorry. I should have scouted out, I should have taken a break. I pushed us too hard, and we all almost died for it.”

“Don’t beat yourself up.”

“Yeah well, I thought about what you said, and I’m sorry that I overreacted.”

“I shouldn’t have talked behind your back,” Merek said.

“And I shouldn’t have yelled at you, or called you petty. Because you weren’t. It was me, and I know I need to work on some things.

“Aspen told me about your past.”

“That doesn’t excuse my behavior. The words I said and how I acted were truly childish.”

Merek glanced down and then back up at Nave and smiled.

“Thank you for the apology. I’m sorry for complaining so much.”

“No no. It was quite warranted.”

“I beg to differ.”

“As you said, we both have things to work on.”

“Agreed.”

As the door to the cabin opened, Aspen came tumbling in and shut the door.

“Wow. It is windy out there. I managed to get some wood for the fire.”

“Thank you, Aspen,” Nave said.

“Sure. How are you doing?”

“Fine. Hungry.”

“Making demands already.” Merek joked. “He’s already back to his fun old self.”

Nave let out a laugh and gave Merek a playful shove.

Aspen smiled. He was glad Merek and Nave seemed to be getting along. Finally, the two of them could agree on something. Aspen stood up and let out a groan as he wavered back and forth, his vision blurred, and his head pounded with pain. *Something’s wrong, this pain is different.*

“Aspen?” Merek asked.

Aspen’s vision went black and then came back as he tried to walk toward Merek.

“Merek, something’s wrong,” Nave said.

Aspen tried to speak but his words came out in gibberish.

Edmonton, go. Don’t go back go for me, go...

“Guys...”

“Aspen!!”

Aspen collapsed as Nave shot up out of the chair and Merek ran towards him.

Nave stood in silence as the wind blew across the lake, the loose bits of snow gliding across the top of the snow. He took a deep breath as another tear went down his cheek. How did he not know? How were they so blind?

Nave blinked as Merek stood up from the stone they had placed for Aspen. Both of them stood in silence as they stared at the carvings on the rock that sat beside the small twigs that had a few leaves left on them. Merek wiped his face as he walked towards Nave.

“I um.. found a note from Aspen to the both of us. He wants us to keep going, and find a better home for both of us, and for the dogs.”

Nave didn't say a word as Merek looked back at the grave.

“How did we not see it? The dizziness, the headaches, how he got hit in the head before we left.”

“Brain bleeds can go undiagnosed for weeks. If you don't know the symptoms, you don't know.”

“I just feel like I didn't do enough for him. We should have ridden faster or maybe if I weren't so focused on the right way, we wouldn't be in this situation.”

“Nave you can't beat yourself up. Even if we did everything right, Aspen could have still died. We can focus on the what-ifs, we need to focus on here and now otherwise we'll get stuck in the future or past.”

Nave's lip trembled as Merek let out a breath and wrapped his arms around him. Nave shook as he broke down. Merek placed his head on Nave's shoulder as he too let out a few silent tears. His eyes drifted over to Barkley and Iggy who sat together, as the two cried out and began to howl, as all of the other dogs

joined in on the solemn call.