

"I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO SAY THAT YOU HAD A SAY IN THE MATTER. GONE ARE THE DAYS THAT I DO NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE IN SNOW."



"WHEN YOU LEFT, YOU SAID YOU COULDN'T WAIT, THAT YOU DESERVED MORE. MAYBE YOU DID, BUT THE FINE LINE BETWEEN ENTITLEMENT AND CONSIDERATION IS HARD TO TREAD."



"I CLIMBED THIS MOUNTAIN JUST AS WE HAD EXPLORED EACH OTHER. MY ATTACHMENT IS JUSTIFIED."



"I LOVED YOU, YOU KNOW. IT WASN'T A MATTER OF ME LETTING YOU GO, OR A MATTER OF PREFERENCE. IT WAS THE PLAN, YOU SEE. I HAD IT ALL PLANNED."



"I HAVE NOW WALKED AWAY FROM TWO LOVERS IN MY LIFE. I CAN ONLY HOPE THAT I MYSELF WILL BE MY THIRD."

END

"THE MOUNTAIN WHISPERS SOFT LULLABIES. SHE WILL MISS ME."

END

"'LONG WAY DOWN,' I OBSERVED, PEERING OVER THE EDGE. MY CLIMBING PARTNER CHUCKLED: 'IT'S ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE,' HE SAID, WITH A SMILE BELYING HIS THOUGHTS."



"BASE CAMP III IS A WELCOME SIGHT. THE RIDGE IS THE MOST SHELTERED OF THE BASE CAMPS AND NOT EVEN MY CLIMBING PARTNER'S INCESSANT SNORING COULD SPOIL THIS WELL EARNED REPRISE."



"LOST IN THOUGHT, I MOMENTARILY LOSE MY BALANCE, BUT BEFORE I CAN FULLY COMPREHEND THE GRAVITY OF THE SITUATION, A STRONG HAND GRABS ME BY THE ARMPIT. I MUTTER THANKS; MY COLLEAGUE GRUNTS."





"MOUNTAINEERS DREAM ABOUT THE CRUNCH OF MOUNTAINTOP SNOW. A HEAVY CRUNCH AS YOUR WEIGHT HITS THE GROUND. A LIGHTER CRUNCH AS YOUR LATTER FOOT FOLLOWS. THIS MOUNTAIN HAD BEEN NO DIFFERENT."



"FOR THE FIRST TIME ON THIS TRIP, MY COLLEAGUE IS GRATEFUL TO ME AS I LIFT HIM TO SAFETY FROM A FALL: AS I WAS FASTENING HIS HARNESS, I RECEIVED WHAT COULD BE INTERPRETED AS A 'THANK YOU'."



"'CHILBLAINS?' ASKED MY HABITUALLY MUTE COLLEAGUE AT CAMP, AS I NURSED MY FEET. I NODDED. 'SALT OF THE EARTH,' HE CONTINUED, REMOVING A GLOVE TO REVEAL FIVE SWOLLEN FINGERS."



"'WHAT ELSE CAN WE DO?' I SHOUTED AT MY COLLEAGUE. HE LOOKED UP; HIS GOGGLES WERE CAKED IN FROST AND HIS FACE WAS MASKED, BUT I STILL KNEW HE DISAPPROVED OF MY QUESTION. 'WHAT?' HE ASKED, PRETENDING NOT TO HEAR ME. 'NEVER MIND,' I SAID."



"MY COLLEAGUE LOOKED AT ME INTENSELY. AT THAT POINT IT WAS EVIDENT THAT WE THOUGHT OF EACH OTHER IN THE SAME WAY."



"ANOTHER DISPARAGING COMMENT FROM MY COLLEAGUE. MY EYES WANDERED ONTO THE ROPE THAT FORMED HIS LIFELINE, MY GRIP TIGHTENING AROUND MY PICK."



"'LISTEN, WE'VE ALL SACRIFICED A LOT.' MY CLIMBING PARTNER SAID. 'JUST...' HE PAUSED, 'JUST TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.' I NODDED."



"MY CLIMBING PARTNER LOOKED AT ME AND GAVE ME A HALF-SMILE. HE SAID 'IT WILL GET BETTER, I PROMISE.'"

END

"I HAVE REACHED THE END OF MY JOURNEY ALONE. MY PARTNER WAS SPARED MY GUILT AND DESPAIR."

END



**"THE SUN WAS
DEVASTATINGLY
BRIGHT. ABOVE THE
CLOUDS, THERE WAS
NO REPRIEVE FROM
HER RAYS, THOUGH
THEY DID LITTLE FOR
THE BLOODY COLD."**



**"FROM THIS PEAK,
I COULD SEE LIFE
IN THE FAR
DISTANCE. YET I
HAVE GROWN TO
DESPISE IT."**



**"I FOUND A SKULL TODAY.
CLIMBING DEATHS WERE NOT
UNCOMMON, THOUGH A
SKULL WITHOUT A BODY
WAS UNUSUAL. 'IS MY
DESTINY TO BE A LONELY
DISEMBODED HEAD?' I
ASKED THE SKULL AS I
STOWED IT AWAY. IT DID NOT
ANSWER."**



**"I PAUSE MID-STEP
AND PEER BELOW.
WHY IS IT SO EASY
TO REMOVE MY
HARNESS AND LET
GO?"**



**"I THOUGHT I WOULD
NEVER COME DOWN.
IT'S A BIGGER EFFORT.
NOT FOR THE BODY,
BUT FOR MY WEARY
SOUL. I HAVE TO FIND
SOME OTHER PLACE
TO REST NOW."**



**"I READY MYSELF
TO LEAP INTO
DEATH'S ARMS. I
COUNT TO TEN,
HOWEVER, I ONLY
EVER REACHED
EIGHT."**



**"THE THOUGHT OF
TURNING BACK
FLOATS WITHIN MY
HEAD. IT SPROUTS
WINGS AND
SPREADS TO MY
ENTIRE BEING."**

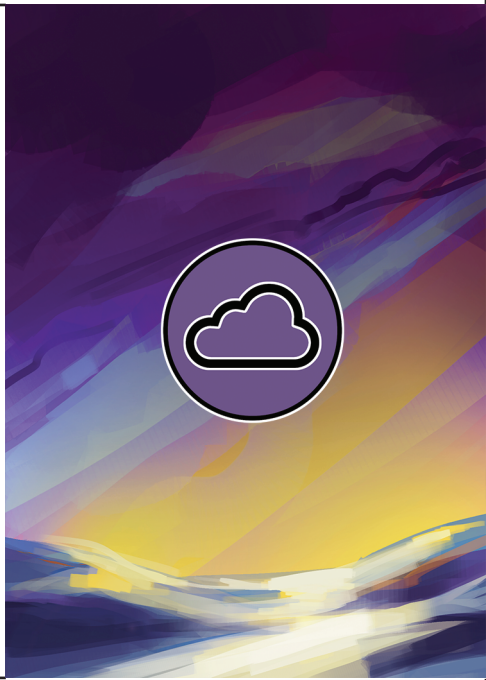
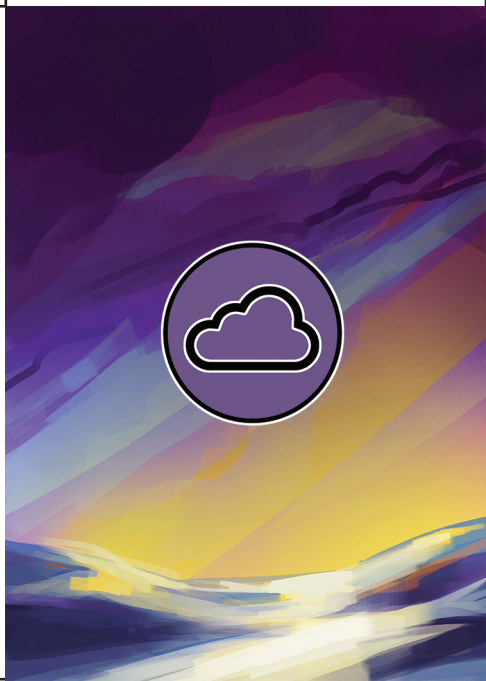


**"I USED TO SAY I
HAVE IT ALL
PLANNED, AND I
DID... UP UNTIL
NOW."**



**"I DO NOT WANT
TO GIVE IN TO
PRIDE. BUT THIS
DESCENT IS A
PAINFUL BOW."**





**"I AM FRAGMENTED.
MY MIND WANDERS
BACK TO THE PEAK.
MY LEGS TRY TO
PROTECT ME. I,
HOWEVER, FEEL
EMPTY."**



**"I STEP ONTO
GRASS. WHAT A
FOREIGN
SENSATION. I DO
NOT LOOK BACK - I
HAVE LEFT A PART
OF ME BEHIND."**

END

**"I HAD IT ALL
PLANNED."**

END



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