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On the body of a Neanderthal woman discovered in the permafrost, Soviet scientists found ancient human semen, 31,000 years old. Sperm rapidly cooled to subzero temperatures in the sterile environment of pure ice, as well preserved as it would be in a modern sperm bank. Nine months later, with the help of some courageous Dolgan women, four brothers who should have been born during the Pleistocene burst into modern life.

Human, and a citizen of modern Siberia, he didn't belong on display with woolly mammoths. Neither did his three brothers, and now that he'd drawn the short straw from the hand that held four he had the chance to do something about it.

As he tore along on his snowmobile, a strong gust of wind flipped the hood of his reindeer parka back down on his shoulders. The challenge of the chase, he loved it. Choosing the short straw had started a tremor that ran down his throat to his innards. Uneasiness didn't plague him, or any form of fear. They had never been his weaknesses. He banged his knuckles into his chest, feeling strong and solid. A tight throat and knotted stomach muscles were his reaction to pure excitement.

He had experienced the feeling of unyielding strength before, when he'd unleashed the power of his arms and legs streaking ahead in a cross-country ski race. This time, the mere thought of being able to strike a blow to prevent the leaking of his prehistoric past by a nosy intruder triggered it off.

Narrowing his eyes, he stared at endless snow and ice, mounds and shallow dips, a rugged white landscape broken only by occasional stands of stunted trees, all of it glittering in the afternoon sun. He'd dressed Dolgan style all the way down to the boots, not an uncommon outfit for traveling in northern Siberia's Taimyr wilderness, inconspicuous, precisely what he needed.

He remembered being a child when he only had a faint awareness that he came from the raw beginnings of mankind. But the pain of it, and the threat to his freedom, struck deeper as he grew. Now even his innards hurt like hell. He had to do something or there would be no end to his struggle for existence.

Siberia had always closed its eyes to him and his brothers, but greedy westerners and the Russians assisting them had involved the police and were upsetting the balance by burrowing into the secrets of the permafrost. Scientists, moviemakers and owners of freak shows, they'd never trap him. He'd rather die than have people gawk at him through the bars of a cage. As long as he could hurl a spear or fire a gun, he'd make sure it wouldn't happen.

He didn't look huge and hairy like brother Alyosha, and he could stroll down the street unnoticed. But he had the strength of several men, as did chimpanzees, although he shuddered to draw such comparisons. Once, he made the mistake of showing off in the exercise yard at the army barracks, bending an iron bar with his hands, and afterwards his comrades shied away. Never again would he reveal his true strength, unless hard pressed. He didn't want to look different.

When people laughed and poked fun, he hid his bitterness and stayed cold and clear, yet he had nothing but smoldering hatred for those who would end his freedom.

One such man, the Chief of Police, rode a snow machine ahead and should soon be running out of petrol. He smiled to himself, recalling that he, a novice at equipment sabotage, had risen to the occasion and drained a lot from the policeman's tank. A screwdriver and wire cutters were the only tools he'd needed to disable the radio.

Soon the hunt would begin in earnest. He flitting from one icy mound or stunted tree to the next, the quarry slogging along the trail miles from help and out of their element.

As he reached the top of a mound, he saw the snowmobile he'd been following a few hundred yards away near a stand of larch, its dead two-stroke engine refusing to run on fumes and air. The man he sought stood over it, peering into the fuel tank.

Veering left, he skidded his machine into a dip out of sight, and when he switched off its engine no sound other than whistling wind reached his ears. To strike true blows for the past, the four of them had agreed to use primitive weapons, so he must leave his rifle behind. Bullets were for killing polar bears; spears were for putting to death those who would lock him, and his brothers, in cages.

He leapt out of the saddle and grabbed a spear from the sled he'd towed behind, a weapon that he'd fashioned with a larch shaft and a point of mammoth-bone that his forefathers would have approved. He had his hunting knife with him if he needed it to finish the quarry off, although it went against his grain to kill with cold steel.

Facing a rifle wouldn't be a problem, but his using this spear instead of a gun would make it a more even match, and he welcomed the challenge of that.

His father had been a hunter; he could feel it in the beat of his heart. Thirty thousand years ago, such a fine man would have been gliding across the tundra, smooth of skin and but for bearskin as naked as the wind. A true father of stealthy presence, iron will and muscular power, a man of the prehistoric past whose blood rushed through him now.

Disgusted with himself, Popov kicked the snowmobile. Its fuel tank must have leaked, although he hadn't smelled petrol fumes on the ride from Khatanga, and that wouldn't explain why he'd found the reserve tank and the spare petrol can empty.

Nothing happened when he switched on the radio. It could be the battery? He snapped the terminals onto the backup, yet heard no familiar cracking sound. The wireless set sounded deader than a mammoth.

He cursed not checking everything this morning before he took off from Khatanga. But the mechanic at the police garage had always proved reliable. The fellow kept the machines topped up, in perfect order, and hadn't reported in sick.

Let this be a lesson, he should never trust anyone. Being busy didn't qualify as an excuse, yet he couldn't oversee every detail of Khatanga's department of police and protect the people, too. But someone could have tampered with the equipment, although he hadn't noticed any signs of a break-in at the garage.

He'd made a large mistake not looking the machine over. No, two mistakes; he should have taken a helicopter flight to the Dolgan camp. Not far enough to justify spending the money, he had reasoned. He'd set his sights on buying one of those portable American CPR units for the town, and traveling by snowmobile would conserve the police department's rubles.

These days, the trail that ran north to the Dolgan camp kept busy by Siberian standards. Though that meant a few snow machines a week and the occasional helicopter. He could make camp here and wait for someone to come along. The sled he'd been towing carried a pack, tent, sleeping bag, food and stove, everything he needed to survive a few nights outside, and he had a flare pistol to fire if a helicopter flew over. But Police chiefs didn't bed down and wait, not when they were made of sterner fiber. He'd march forward and trust that someone showed up. If they didn't, he could handle the distance, ten hours of tramping at worst.

Popov stuffed the sleeping bag and tent into the pack with other necessities and slipped his arms through the shoulder straps. Assault rifle in one hand, flare pistol strapped to his waist, he trudged toward the trees ahead. He passed a small clump of larches, sentinels of the stand that stretched before him, all bent to one side by the polar wind, their frosty branches pointing to the right, reaching out to grasp anything like famished men. Nothing stood upright here. He had to keep his weight forward to balance the load on his back.

While among the trees, he would have to move fast if a helicopter did approach. It would be difficult for them to spot him from above, and these government-issue flare pistols often misfired. Getting back into the open would be his best bet, where he would be a dark figure against white and could wave his arms.

More leaning soldiers, he thought, realizing that he'd soon be into the thick of the trees. They stood only an arm's length taller than he, but it had taken them many years to reach their peak, whereas he achieved his in forty.

"Keep swinging one leg in front of the other," he said aloud, wishing that something other than the trees could hear. Perhaps he should count the number of strides he took to pace himself along.

Larches surrounded him now, except for the narrow path ahead, the trail to the Dolgan camp. He needed to be careful in these woods, because the snow would be soft and deep among the trunks where the wind couldn't pack it hard. Pretty with sunbeams shafting between the branches although he'd better not waste his thoughts and breath admiring it.

He stopped, thinking that he'd heard something. It quickly grew from a faint rumble to the whomping of helicopter blades. He sprinted forward as the sound grew louder, the pack thumping on his back. Skidding, he dragged the flare pistol from its holster. His lungs hurt. His knees began to buckle under the strain of running with a heavy load.

With the helicopter almost overhead, he threw up an arm and fired a flare through the branches into blue sky above.

As the chopper shook the trees and thundered past, he missed his footing and fell off the trail, plunging up to his crotch in clinging white.

Shaken, half on his side and weighed down by the pack, Popov groveled in his parka pocket for another flare cartridge. He'd slipped one into the pocket, but couldn't find it. It must have fallen out. He snatched off a glove and raked his fingers through the snow, yet came up with nothing. The helicopter would circle back. They must have seen the flare. Yes, it would have burst in front

of the aircraft, he decided, trying to reassure himself. But he didn't know whether he fired before or after the flyover.

The helicopter didn't sound as loud anymore, it wouldn't come back, and every second the whomping noise of its blades became more distant. He fired several rounds from the Kalashnikov, scattering twigs and bark around. Hell, the pilot couldn't have seen the flare and didn't hear him fire the gun. "Get back here!" he shouted.

Panting, he slipped his arms out of the pack straps and climbed up onto the path. He pulled the load up with him, sat on the snow and leaned back against it. He'd run into a string of bad luck, and now he would have to march to the Dolgan camp. Head down, rifle between his knees, he sat motionless and tried to catch his breath, his throat sore from gulping frigid air.

He stayed as still as stone, afraid to move, feeling something or someone watching him. But he could only hear his heart thudding in his chest, not a whisper of anything else. A bear watching him, maybe, yet there wouldn't be any polar bears around here. They roamed farther north on the coast of the Laptev Sea where they could find fish and seals to eat. Some bears raided inland garbage dumps, but in these woods nothing would attract them.

The glare from sunbeams dazzled him and he had to narrow his eyes to peer among the trees. He spotted nothing, but a strange presence still lurked there. Then he saw a raven sitting on a branch in the shadows, head cocked, glaring at him. Frustrated, he fired a shot in the air. The bird took off through the branches, making a sound like laundry flapping in the wind.

An uneasy silence settled on him again. He turned his head to the right and to the left, looking, searching.

The snapping of a twig rang out like a pistol shot. Frantic, he rammed a fresh magazine into the gun and swung its muzzle around.

A man of medium height wearing a reindeer parka with its hood up appeared in the woods, plowing through thigh-deep snow. The fellow sprang onto the path, fifty paces to the north, carrying a spear. Popov tightened his finger on the trigger. He had to be careful, didn't want to make the mistake of killing someone coming to help.

He stared at the spear, recognizing the type with a slender wooden shaft, one that he'd seen the Dolgans use to hunt seals. The man wore trousers and boots that matched the parka. One of the Dolgans must have found him.

Help at last, and as he thought it, he relaxed his grip on the Kalashnikov. The man's smile did seem to light up the woods, but something familiar about the fellow puzzled him.

The man glided toward him, still smiling, then launched the spear with a fluid motion of his arm, too fast.

Unable to get up in time to dodge it, Popov watched the spear fly through the air. He fired the Kalashnikov a split second before the weapon lanced into his side and through to the pack. Waves of agony stabbed into his guts.

No sign of the attacker now, he'd missed him, and only the sound of the Kalashnikov rang in his ears. Desperate, he tried to pull the spear out, but its barbed point hung up inside the pack. His vision blurring, he sprayed bullets around until the rifle ran out of ammo.

Someone grabbed hold of his leather helmet from behind, ripped it off, seized his hair and jerked his head back.

Then he saw the flash of a hunter's knife . . .

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