

The Mouth of the Yukon

by Bradley James Weber

I see no difficulty in a race of bears being rendered, by natural selection . . . with larger and larger mouths, till a creature was produced as monstrous as a whale.

— CHARLES DARWIN, ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES (1859)

I

To whoever finds this: please be kind enough to deliver the enclosed book and letter to the nearest Post Office. The letter is addressed to its respective recipient. The book should be sent to Dr. Richard Smith in care of the United States Zoological Survey, Chicago, Illinois. I have sewn two ten-dollar gold pieces into the book's cover. One is for postage; the other is for your trouble. Please keep any remaining change from the postage and have a drink on me.

You have my deepest appreciation for your assistance in this matter. It is my sincere wish that I were alive to thank you in person.

Most sincerely,

Dr. Adrian Vouvray
North American Zoological Survey

*

(From the field journal of Adrian Vouvray)

September 13th, 1884

Vladimir Kolokov's body is still burning.

I could see it if I wanted, see him, Vladimir, what is left of him, If I choose. The smoke makes him easy to spot. And the curious birds circling over his body.

Humid breezes blow over the Alaskan wastes. The pall of burning petrol, roasted man-fat, and singed animal hair fill the tiny windows of Professor Peale's ill-used Walking War House. What madness allowed us to dream of using this gangly iron wreck, this ambulatory grampus, to hunt the monster? THE BEHEMOTH, indeed! Is this Job's mighty beast? An animate example of God's Almighty Power? Hardly! Only the hand of man could fashion such a disaster. Ah, the hubris. It is to laugh — or would be were I not exhausted by terror and thirst.

Damnable machine! There was hardly enough room in here for the four of us, let alone our supplies, and the dogs, whom, now that they are gone, their company I begin to miss. With the others all dead or devoured, the belly of THE BEHEMOTH, though lacking the requisite gathered silk and tiny pillow, shall make a spacious coffin for one.

With any luck, this account will find its way to the Survey offices and prove valuable to the Esteemed Members in their attempts to either capture or kill the legendary Mouth of the Yukon. For what it is worth, gentlemen, I recommend the creature be blasted back to the Hell from which it crawled.

My preparations are complete and without a moment to spare. The beast has returned.

*

February 11, 1885

Dr. Richard Smith flipped closed the field journal lying on his desk. Something wet and dark had seeped into the fabriced boards, marking the boundary of some undiscovered country, its only inland feature being a line of jagged mountains appearing suspiciously like a tear that had been sewn and re-split. Though he knew the journal to be clean and dry, Smith suppressed an impulse to wipe his hands by pressing them palm-down on either side of the book.

He looked at the two men sitting in the chairs opposite his desk, Terrence Milk and François Baril, then swiveled his own chair to face the large, semi-circular window behind him. Snow-coated gusts blasted across Grant Park to slam against the double-paned glazing. Cold radiated through the glass. Smith wished Milk and Baril were elsewhere, wished he were in a different elsewhere from them — someplace verdant, tropical. Honduras. Tobago. Saint-Domingue. Chicago in February, with these men and this news, was becoming too much for Smith to bear.

The death of Adrian Vouvray and his expedition had shocked the North American Zoological Survey to its foundation. The young Vouvray had been generally regarded as the future of the Survey, it's Favorite Son — figuratively and literally.

As a child, Adrian had been allowed to roam the building, from the lecture halls to the animal enclosures, with nothing less than impunity. With his father, the legendary taxonomist Augustine Vouvray, presiding over the Survey's governing board, who, in his right mind, would have the temerity to tell the boy to go roll a hoop?

Though genealogy gained him access, it was Adrian's work ethic, talent, and obvious genius that held open the doors, indeed, propped them wider than for any other member. This in turn helped Adrian unlock many doors for the Survey as a whole, nationally and internationally. For, not only was Adrian Vouvray a brilliant scientist and a clever diplomat, he was genuinely likeable fellow, making him the Survey's *de facto* ambassador to the world. The members respected him; Society and the press adored him,

and at a mere twenty–six years old, he was leading the North American Zoological Survey to ever–greater acclaim.

This would have killed Augustine, though Smith. Thank God he’s already dead.

Smith recalled the report locked in his drawer, an account of the scene described by the prospector who found the wreckage, roughly thirty miles northeast of Nulato, Alaska.

You poor boy, Smith thought, then pushed it aside. He’d grieve for his apprentice, but later.

“Vouvray mentions a letter.”

“A love note,” said François Baril, “to his *wife*.”

“To whom he was very devoted.” Smith had noted a hint of distain from the Belgian, compelling Smith to defend his dead friend.

“Of course,” said Baril, and with two words managed to dismiss Smith’s statement, further question Vouvray’s marital fidelity, and close the matter to additional questions. He lit yet another cigarette.

Smith rubbed a fingertip along his graying widow’s peak and stared flaming cutlasses at Baril. This is the man they chose to follow Vouvray? This effete cosmopolitan — this, this *pseudo–scientist* — who researches the worst kind of popular gibberish and whose ghost–written articles undermine the pursuit of serious zoological study! Smith failed to see how a man who postulates the existence of pixies and gnomes is qualified to lead an expedition to hunt one of nature’s most lethal beasts. Why not Flaggler? Or Humberstone — or any of the dozen other Survey members proven in the pursuit of the mythic and monstrous?

What I wouldn’t give, Smith thought, to watch you being torn apart by that thing.

He shifted his gaze and raised an eyebrow at the other man, assistant *extraordinaire*, Terrence Milk. While perhaps not the most polished brass on the boat, Milk’s focus and tenacity, his equal facility with indigenous tribes, photographic equipment, and the Winchester Centennial, proved him an invaluable resource in the office and the field. Indeed, had it not been for his contracting smallpox, Milk would have undoubtedly been where he always seemed to be: on expedition with young Vouvray. Instead, Smith had been forced to send Vladimir Kolokov.

Smith could not help but look on Milk’s raw and cratered face and wonder whether the man’s presence could have yielded a happier outcome.

“Anything to add, Mr. Milk?”

“Let’s get the bastard.”

Smith nearly smiled. The man, in his imitable way, cut right to the heart of the matter. For the Survey, as a scientific body and entity of the Public Trust, “get the bastard” meant bringing home the beast and putting it on display. For Smith, various members of the Board of Governors, and apparently, Terrence Milk, there was an undeniable — and quite un-scientific — thirst for revenge.

“Well said, Mr. Milk. Thank you.”

Milk gave a curt nod then dropped his eyes to the hat in his lap.

Smith returned his attention to Baril and, with a bit of forced *bon ami*, said, “Well, François, you’ve got a real job ahead. My advice is to rely heavily on Mr. Milk, in whom I have every confidence. He helped plan Adrian’s trip from top to bottom — ”

“And still Vouvray managed to get himself killed.” Baril blew a jet of smoke. “Hm.”

He rose and tugged on his gloves. “*Merci*, Doctor Smith. I will give your suggestions the consideration they so richly deserve.” Baril brushed flecks of ash from his waistcoat as he strode across wide carpets to the office door.

Smith nearly chased the man, but to what end he was unsure. To beat some sense into him, perhaps.

The door thunked shut. Silence and cigarette smoke and winter daylight spread through the office.

Terrence Milk remained seated and still. Only the gentle tap of a finger on his hat belied the man’s extreme agitation.

“Speak your mind, Terrence.”

“I’m warning you, Dr. Smith: if that fairy chaser gets me killed, it’s you I’m coming to haunt.”

“I would expect nothing less. Anything else?”

Milk screwed his face in to a deeply troubled frown. “How in the name of all that’s Holy did Adrian wind up in a Walkin’ Coffin?”

Smith still wondered the same thing.

The machine had performed flawlessly on the West Point testing grounds, but in the heat of battle, Professor Peale’s Patented Walking War House had proven itself less-than-effective to Union Forces. Now, twenty years later, historians on both sides of The Line

were laying the North's loss of the War and the dis-uniting of the States at the feet of Peale's Folly. Despite what were reported to be excessive sums spent by the Confederate government building a fleet of Stampers to patrol their northern and southwestern borders, there had been little improvement in the machine's dangerously flawed designs.

To Smith, himself a former Major and surgeon in the Union Army, what was only slightly less disturbing than Adrian dying in a Walking War House was that one had somehow found its way into the Alaska Territory. The Confederates had gotten what they wanted from the War and were making a go of it, so a two-front attack from them was unlikely. But what about the Russians? Or the Chinese? Or the Hind? They had all been making expansionist strides the last few years, stringing together necklaces of Pacific islands and wresting African countries from ~~the clutches~~ of the British and French. Who was to say any one of them hadn't eyes on the Western Hemisphere as well?

Smith said, "Learn what you can about the Stampers."

Milk nodded, stood. "Anything else, sir?"

Several dozen things crowded Smith's mind: thoughts on hunting the monster, recommendations for equipment and travel, suggestions on how to discretely murder Baril, and, standing quietly to the side, an old adventurer's hopeless longing to pack his kit and return to the field. Beyond that loomed Smith's yearning to pass his hard-won wisdom to the next generation of explorer. But this was a different time and a different world — a dizzying place of telephones, computational devices, flying machines, and a hundred thousand other wonders in the works. This world belonged to men like Milk, Collinsworth, Surratt, Helling, and Adrian — the strong, wild, occasionally reckless young men that Smith remembered being but somehow was no longer. He envied them these days, and felt sad for the time when they, too, would envy the days of others.

For all that he wanted to tell Terrence Milk, there was no room left for what Smith felt was surely out-dated advice. Instead, he rose, walked around the desk and presented Milk with Adrian's blood-stained field journal.

"There are plenty of pages left here. Write us a happier ending."

Terrence Milk said, "I will, sir." The men shook hands as if on a promise.

Dr. Smith walked Terrence Milk to the office door and stood watching the younger man shrug on his down-filled topcoat. Snow and wind beat the windows. Neither said a word as Milk pulled down the ear flaps of his beaver-skin ushanka then flexed his fingers into double-lined mittens.

Smith smiled broadly and stuck out his hand one more time. "Happy hunting. And do come back alive."

Terrence Milk grinned and wrapped his weatherproofed hand around Smith's. "Or die trying."

II

(From the field journal of Terrence Milk)

April 18th, 1885

On board the CONSTANCE STARR and underway at last. The team was ready to launch two weeks ago but have been grounded by weather. Discussions were had about traveling north as so many are these days — via train across the territories to Seattle and Vancouver, then by steamer up and around the Alaska coast to the mouth of the Yukon river, then another thousand miles by boat to Fort Yukon. Still, this route would have taken six weeks to cover instead of the two we've spent on our behinds and the other week we'll spend, more or less, in the air. Also, the STARR is comfortable, state-of-the-art, and we don't have to worry about supplies or equipment disappearing every time we change conveyance. Having said that, I admit the shipboard amenities of lighter-than-air-travel lose their appeal far more rapidly than on a steamer. I supposed it must have something to do with the necessity of thin walls and over-tight quarters.

All Survey equipment and crew accounted for, including a badly hung-over Stockton, who will likely be vomiting out the windows all the way from here to Calgary. The man is incorrigible. In the field, he is the best equipment manager the Survey's ever seen, but get him within running distance of civilization and he immediately . . . Well, suffice it to say the mind reels.

For the last several days, the team has been living in a hotel in sight of the Orchard Park Aerodrome, ready to go at a moment's notice should the weather clear. We thought we had our chance this early morning, but lift-off was delayed more than three hours by vicious winds. Lucky for us this gasbag was still in her hanger or the entire ship would have been blown to shreds. Lighter-than-air the STARR may be, but until Man is able to control the atmosphere instead of merely pushing himself through it, these feats of aeronautical engineering remain in thrall to the erratic moods of Mother Nature.

Yesterday morning, I risked some time away from the airfield for another visit to the Widow Vouvray. Two months after learning of Adrian's death, Justine still looks terrible in spite of her best efforts to face to the world. We've known each other long enough that she need not pretend with me, however, I fear any slip of her façade would cause it to collapse all together, so I held my tongue. I imagine the wives of fallen soldiers or firemen or miners find themselves bound in the same iron blanket of woe in which Justine is wrapped. The poor woman. Along with The Beast's hide, I hope to bring home at least something of Adrian for her to lay to rest. Not necessarily for his sake but for hers.

Of course, Justine knew of the Survey's plan to continue the hunt and approves it. She harbors the same ugly streak of Vengeance In The Name Of Science ringing the halls of the Survey. I understand the sentiment and shamefully admit anticipating dragging home the crated bones of Adrian's killer. However, seeking retribution from The Beast is futile. I may as well plot my revenge on smallpox, for all the good it would do. This last point I left tactfully unvoiced.

One topic reviewed at length was François Baril. Like me, Justine cannot fathom Baril being able to organize a snipe hunt let alone an expedition as obviously dangerous as this. Her outrage managed, for a time at least, to enliven her and lend her cheeks slight color. Then either of us said something which reminded her of Adrian and I witnessed her heart ~~go back~~ return to breaking.

During my other visits, I had hoped for an opening to ask about Adrian's letter: I needed to know if it had any information that he had not put in the field notes. Knowing Adrian's exacting method, I was certain his journal was a complete record and that any observations he might have made to Justine would have first been written in the book. Add to this that his last entry was logged after sealing her letter, and it was unlikely Adrian omitted anything about the beast. Still, I had to eliminate the letter as a possible material source.

Just as no opportunity presented itself previously, none had again that day. Feeling the longer I stayed, the more misery I brought, I was forced to indelicately salt Justine's unhealing wound.

She said it was a love letter. She said it was like nothing he'd ever written to her before. If not for some personal details and his astonishingly bad handwriting, she would have thought it had come from someone else. She said it was romantic. Then she asked if I wouldn't mind seeing myself out.

Terrence Milk closed his pencil in the book. He snapped an elasticized band around the cover then tossed the book onto the opposite seat. For him, keeping a clear field journal had always been the most difficult part of any expedition. The trekking, the bugs, the blisters, the occasional flesh-eating native — the things that made most men miserable were, for him, what turned mere exploring into adventure.

But the recordkeeping he loathed — mostly because he always felt he was doing it wrong. He could sketch tracks, log dates and weights and all the other minutiae the Survey wanted, but he'd never been able to stick exactly to the facts. Every entry he'd ever started devolved into a systemless record of impressions and sounds; descriptions of environment, foreign clothes, native words and food and behaviors and the team's interactions with people wholly unlike themselves. To him, the Survey's method often seemed more like accounting than exploring.

Adrian, on the other hand, had been a master at the task, something that Milk believed, in a way, compromised the young man's capacity as a naturalist. Cataloging creatures of the continent was an admirable goal, but to obscure with mere numbers the fascinating, humble, ferocious, ugly, majestic wildness of life was to bleach the wonder from these animals, and from the men observing them. True, as members of the Survey, a certain scientific detachment was necessary. But how could they expect people outside the Survey to care about sighting a previously unknown bird, or locating new nesting sites for the North American Sasquatch? No adventure existed in cold numbers.

Terrence Milk rose, bent at the waist to touch his toes, then put his compartment's tight quarters to work aiding him with exercise. Pushing and pulling against walls and doorframes, hanging from the brass-railed luggage racks, Milk thought about his younger brother, the submariner, from whom he'd learned the secret of isometrics. He hoped they could coordinate a visit when the Alaska business was done, possibly in San Francisco.

A light tap at the cabin door preceded the appearance on the floor of a buff-colored envelope bearing the ship's name wrapped around the Union, Pacific & Great Northwestern Airline Company's device. It was a message from Baril demanding, in French, that the entire team meet at 9:30 P.M. in the 2nd Class Lounge to discuss the expedition. Dress optional.

Milk knew only Eugene Simon could read French. He then had to calculate exactly how many, having learned that dress was 'optional', would arrive at 9:30 stark naked, just to wave it in Baril's face.

He guessed every one of them would show up wearing their best smiles and nothing else. He was tempted to do it himself, would have if Baril weren't such a humorless, albeit, well-connected, prig. Milk locked his cabin behind him and made his way into the belly of the ship in order to find his team and ask them to try and keep their shirts on.

*

Battling of spun glass thread and hemp fiber packed the gaps between the airship's foamed aluminum superstructure, insulating the interior spaces from chilling altitudes and soundproofing them from the eight, 22-cylinder Warnow Powerhouse diesel engines paddling the giant ship through the sky. Thin sheets of bamboo-backed maple veneer lined the curved walls of the 2nd Class Lounge. Thick carpets and comfortable furniture wrapped in rich upholstery lent the room a feeling similar to that of a university library or a fashionable Michigan Avenue restaurant.

Terrence Milk enjoyed the atmosphere almost as much as watching François Baril's growing discomfort at not being allowed to smoke during his presentation. The only place passengers could light up was in the Smoking Room, a negatively-pressurized room inconveniently located in the ship's tail, a ten minute walk away. Except for that one small room, smoking on the dirigible was strictly forbidden. Lighters, matches, flints, hobnails, metal cane tips — anything that might cause the slightest spark was confiscated

or secured prior to boarding. With eight million cubic feet of unforgiving hydrogen gas floating everything on board, no fire risk was allowed and no argument brooked from the passengers: if someone didn't like the measures, he could get out and walk.

Milk looked forward to the day the ships of the line were filled with something a bit more stable.

Beyond Baril's edginess and drift from topic, none of the men were taking him seriously. How could they? For half an hour, he had rambled on about *Inuarugligarsuit* — the Inuit name for the tiny race of people they claimed shared the wilds of Alaska. These men thought they'd been called together to learn about what they were really after. Instead, they were treated to Baril's pet theories on miniature Eskimaux and the teeny arctic beasties they hunted.

To Terrence Milk, things were starting to make a troubling sense. When the Belgian learned the Survey was outfitting another team for the Yukon, he must have called in favors to get himself named Expedition Chief. This would allow Baril, under the pretense of hunting the monster, to pursue his investigations of sub-diminutive, possibly magical, races. The man had struck-out in England and all over the Continent, and had met with similar failures in Florida, Louisiana, and Kentucky. What did he have to lose by heading North — especially on the Survey's dime?

Milk was bored. He had spent enough time with these men long enough to know when they'd had their fill, too: O'Riley's perpetually filthy fingernails were scraped clean, Stockton was trying to talk Simon into handing-over his flask, and the new kid, Lockwood, plucked at his right eyebrow.

When, for what seemed to be the fiftieth time, Baril patted his pockets for cigarettes, Terrence Milk had had enough. "I know you have a lot to discuss, but do you think there is time for a break?"

Condensed into the Belgian's sigh was all the patience and suffering of a staked martyr. Still, he practically ran to the door. "As you please, Monsieur Milk, but keep it short. In my cabin are some notes I require. If I am not back within, say, ten minutes, please resume without me."

They listened to Baril's footsteps hurry in the direction opposite that of the 1st Class stairs.

Per usual, Hap Lockwood was the first to say something; per usual, it was something snide and obvious. "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Baril is with me."

O'Riley warned the boy to watch his mouth then glanced Heavenward, just to remind them all Who was listening.

Simon wanted to know what would happen when Baril ran out of cigarettes.

“Mebbe,” slurred Stockton, “he can bum a few off the little people. Seriously, Terry, I thought I signed on for some big game.”

“You did,” Milk agreed. “We all did.”

“Well, if you ask me — and you didn’t, but I’m gonna tell you anyways — it sounds like Smokey Joe out there plans on comin’ home with a pocket full of Lilliputian penguins and charging admission to see ’em.”

“Tom,” Lockwood said, “Penguins come from the South Pole. We’re kind of headed the opposite direction.”

“Fat lot you know, Dr. Gerardus Mercador Smart Ass! Last time I checked, we lived on a *globe* — an *oblate spheroid*, to be precise. Keep going one way long enough and pretty soon you’re going the other way, whether you meant to or not. That’s a little something for when you’re old enough to explore beyond the dark and sticky chambers of your nose.”

Ignoring the snickers and hoots that came to him from around the room, Lockwood arranged his face into a look of mock concern. “Is that the best you’ve got? Booger jokes?”

Stockton said, “My apologies, Terrence,” and spread his arms in surrender. “Wise-assery is a fine and delicate art, not at all like the comedic mugging practiced by our young Master Lockwood Junior the Third over there. This up-in-the-airy-ness has put me off my form — and my food, for that matter.”

“You seem to be able to keep the whiskey down all right.”

The men went silent. Tension and engine drone filled the room.

Had it come from anyone else, Stockton would have laughed the comment away, turned it into a springboard for still another joke. But from Peter O’Riley — a man who took the Pledge for the sake of a woman, and, at her behest, actively recruited members into what Stockton derided as their Tea-Totalitarian Movement — it could not be countenanced.

Stockton’s flat gaze pinned O’Riley to his chair.

“We are wrapped in a giant bag of explosive gas strapped to eight internal *combustion* engines speeding over the Earth at something close to 34 knots, at an altitude of three nautical miles. At times like this, I find a stomach full of cold meat less comforting than a belly full of bourbon. Don’t kid yourself, boy-o: flying is a terror. If you’re not afraid of it, you’re either a fool, Fatalist, or a Christian.”

The Irishman's jaw unclenched, ready to bite, just as Stockton yanked the bait away.

"But, really," he slurred, "aren't they all the same thing? Now, can we please talk about what killed Adrian?"

(From the field journal of Adrian Vouvray)

August 31, 1884

It is natural that, among the array of fantastic creatures they believe populate the region, Netsilik mythozoology includes of a race of giant, man-eating bears. They report that the Nanorluk, as these beasts are known, grow, on average, to a size approximately that of a killer whale, putting the monster's length anywhere from 20ft. to 26ft long and roughly twelve feet high at the shoulder. The animals' dominant feature is a mouth large enough to swallow a man whole, their preferred method for consuming humans. Once swallowed, the unfortunate dinner guest quickly suffocates in the giant bear's impenetrable gullet. Unpleasant, yes — though significantly less agonizing than soaking to death in the beasts' gastric acids.

Terrence Milk stood to the far-right of a large mural depicting the airline's various routes over The Commonwealth of The United States Of America and The Provinces of Canada.

"About a year ago, Adrian led a six-man team here." His finger circled around a large area of the western Yukon and the neighboring Alaska territory, watershed of the Yukon River. "It was a standard first expedition: establish friendly contact with the natives, conduct a general survey, photograph and catalog as much animal life as possible, ship back significant specimens, scout areas for future large-scale outings.

"They were done by August 22nd and Adrian, being Adrian, deviated from Survey protocol. He decided to investigate deeper in the Alaskan interior."

"My eye!" crowed Lockwood. "The son-of-a-bitch was panning for gold!"

General laughter and rumors of gold strikes derailed Milk's recounting of events, but he let it go. This was a self-regulating group and, aside from the asides, returned quickly to the business at hand.

"You're not far off." Milk traced his finger farther west to central Alaska. "Adrian caught wind of several predatory bear attacks on prospectors, fairly vicious ones at that."

"Vicious prospectors? Ho, Ho! No wonder the bears went after them!"

Stockton cocked an eyebrow at Lockwood. “Shutcher gob, Hap, or I will tie you to that chair and jam my sock in your mouth.” After a few seconds of silence Stockton said, “Please, Terrence, proceed.”

“Something in the reports seemed wrong to Adrian. Bear attacks of this frequency and magnitude were unheard of. He wondered if it was a coincidence, or if somehow two bears were working together, which he admits in his notes is damned—near impossible.”

“Why is that?” asked Simon.

“Bears are loners. Grizzly Bears especially like their privacy. As far as we know, there are only two times that bears want anything to do with each other: when there’s food and when they’re mating. If there are two bears around something to eat, there is usually a fight. If there are bears looking to mate, there is usually a fight first.”

“Sounds like my third marriage,” mumbled Simon.

“Other than that, bears go out of their way to avoid confrontation. There are exceptions: sub-adult males trying to establish themselves among the seasoned boars; sows forced to protect her cubs from hungry or aggressive males. But the idea of bears working toward a common goal is completely against their nature. So, again, Adrian being Adrian, he had to see for himself.”

Terrence Milk proceeded to inform them of only the significant points of Vouvray’s trip: examining the attack sites, talking with the Netsilik elders, the street fight with Captain John Sounder and subsequent rental of his Walking War House, trailing the creature for nearly a week, the fatal encounter. When he finished the muted thrum, which was both sensation and sound, again filled the room, settling into the men’s bones and teeth and behind their eyes while each considered the facts before him. O’Riley was first to break the vibrating silence.

“This thing, monster, whatever-it-is, maybe it’s one of them short-face bears? Like maybe not all of ’em went extinct.”

Milk said, “Dr. Smith considered the same thing,” pulled a folder from the middle of his stack, opened it and handed it to O’Riley. “Here’s what the girls in Research dug up.”

O’Riley took in the detailed drawing of an oversized bear with a snout a little less than half the length of a modern Grizzly’s. Shown standing on all fours in both portrait and profile, the pre-historic bear’s size was marked at roughly five-feet three-inches at the shoulder and six-feet at the head. To further illustrate scale, silhouettes of two men — a fur-clad Neanderthal and a well-dressed *Homo Sapien* — were situated between the two versions of the bear. Another drawing had the bipeds flanking the short-face bear, dwarfed by its upright stance. O’Riley passed the sheets to Stockton and began to flip through the rest of the documents.

“Says they went extinct about twelve thousand years ago. Being dead’s a pretty tight alibi.”

“Yeah,” said Lockwood. “But are we sure they’re really dead?” Not sensing so much as a twitch from Stockton, Lockwood ventured on. “I mean, that’s a big chunk of land. Anything could be hiding up there, right?”

“Theoretically, yes. Which brings us to this.” Milk pulled a photo from another folder. “As far as can be determined, the paws of the short-faced bear were about the size of a large dinner plate, say, twelve inches across. This is . . . something else.”

He held the photo toward the room. The men leaned forward, gazed, shook their heads in disbelief, then leaned back, stunned. Milk tossed the photo on the stack of folders.

“The boot is Adrian’s. We know he had a size eleven foot, which is about eleven and three-quarters inches long, roughly the same length as the paw of the short-faced bear.”

“Where he’s standing — it’s the size of a manhole cover.”

“Nearly. Twenty-six inches across, if Merton’s math is right. And it’s never wrong.”

“How deep is that thing?”

“Merton says seven inches. Starikk said from the looks of it, the ground is damp but not wet, so any kind of distortion from the foot being stuck or slipping is negligible.”

“So, you’re saying that it’s the real deal.”

Milk shrugged. “It would appear.”

“What the hell does it belong to?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

IV

(From the Field Journal of Terrence Milk)

May 28, 1885

Fort Yukon. Those two words describe everything about the garrison town on the northern shore of Alaska’s longest river to nowhere. We are on the Frontier. Up here, civilization is either a pantomime or a thin social contract delicately held by all the residents for the sake of sanity. I cannot tell which guess is correct, or neither. Or both at the same time.

Having flown over most of the area, I was amazed at the number of Nature's near-misses in forming a Northwest Passage. So many dry canyons about glacier walls, so many rivers wind back and forth only to start and end in the most random places, all of them going to the same, yet different, nowhere as the Mighty Yukon. Geologic history fairly demands a time when the North Pacific or Arctic Seas connected to the Great Lakes, though when that was is, anyone's guess.

Must remember to thank Miss Duncan for her excellent and ingenious travel arrangements. As soon as the STARR touched-down in Juneau, we were met at the UP&GNA hangers by representatives of a new, local firm whose handlers transferred our equipment to their 'puddle jumper' — a lighter-than-aircraft suited for short, low altitude trips across the territory. Its thicker envelopes, more powerful engines, and the catamaran-hulled gondola is specifically designed to land on the countless miniature lakes and ponds dotting the landscape. That our latest conveyance, THE BIG DIPPER is managed by Savage Bear Cargo & Transport, complete with a giant silhouette of the animal painted on the silver hull, has been taken by the team as a good omen. Even Baril deigned to note the 'happy coincidence.' Granted, he was earthbound at the time and smoking furiously.

Speaking of Baril, how he will fare in the wild, with his short legs, gourmand's belly, and cigarette addiction, is something I cannot spend any more time contemplating. Realistically, Baril will drop dead from exhaustion or the men will kill him for his incessant complaining. Must worry about it only when it happens.

The captain of THE DIPPER is the wonderfully named Big John Savage. His brother, Ron, has the helm. Ron has generously demonstrated the basics of aeronautics and let me take the wheel for a time. Exciting stuff, this boating through the air.

In sharp contrast to the perpetual drone of the STARR's diesel engines, the smaller DIPPER is propelled by six Siemens Atlas III electric motors. The number and placement of these machines allow the Dipper supreme power and agility, something critical for a giant, metal-framed balloon attempting to navigate the North's unpredictable weather. And the motors are wonderfully quiet.

Which brings me to this: In addition to shuttling miners and researchers over vast distances, the enterprising Savage Brothers have started what they call 'aerial hunting parties'. For a ridiculously high fee, the brothers outfit wealthy sportsmen with food and camping gear necessary for a week in the wilderness then, based on their clients' taste in game, they take the hunters in search of moose, caribou, bison, wolves, or bear. Grizzlies in particular are coveted and the brothers charge a premium for these hunts. According to Ron, business booming.

While I appreciate their ingenuity and acumen, condoning their venture is out of the question. As a Hunter, to shoot a rifle from a (fairly) stable and elevated position at an

animal that cannot possibly escape is nothing short of cowardice. How can the men pulling the trigger take pride in such a kill? Where is the prize?

As a Naturalist, I foresee a terrible risk to the environment. There are now enough prospectors and pioneers to hunt these animals out of their natural habitats. Add to the fray any sportsman who can finance a week-long gun vacation and these trophy animals will be wiped from existence in staggeringly short order. Other enterprising souls will take to the skies and mimic the Savage Brothers, except that, instead of a side business, they will make these airborne expeditions their specialty. It is only a matter of time.

There is, however, a point to this digression: the Brothers describe seeing what may very well be the creature we seek.

En route to the site of Adrian's death, they flew us over the last place they saw the creature — a boggy, lowland area pocked with numerous, glittering mini-lakes. Less than two weeks ago, the beast was swimming, paddling back-and-forth with its giant mouth wide open, swallowing huge volumes of water. They report hovering over it for almost an hour, Mesmerized.

I asked what they thought it was doing. They had no guesses.

June 1, 1885

Yukon-Koyukuk Borough, District of Alaska

“Looks like somebody blasted bird shot through your map there, Ter.”

Clean stones and blue speckled coffee mugs held down the corners of four joined maps — aerial photographs courtesy of the Geological Society. Printed in waterproof inks on the finest-spun bleached hemp thread then enhanced with hand-painted notes, each map was, to Milk and several members of the Survey, a magnificent work of art, a beautifully rendered landscape in the term's truest sense, with the addition of towns, mountains, glaciers, elevations, swamps, a handful of rivers and countless lakes and ponds. Most of these bodies of water remained unidentified. There were too many to name, let alone try to fit their names on a map.

“This place has more lakes than Minnesota.”

“It's six times the size, Gene.”

“Yes, well, I'm just saying.”

They had been riding across the Koyukuk Flats more-or-less east-southeast for two days. The hours spent picking their way around lakes and ponds, and making countless fords across the lunatic meanders of what might have been the Nayuka River let them put only

thirty miles of wilderness between them and Husliakatna, the final group of shacks that could be called a town for a hundred map-miles. Who knew what that might mean on the ground.

Even with the short time and narrow distance between him and town, Terrence Milk could feel his system already purged of the last dregs of civilization. Whether it was the clean air, pure water, the fresh-caught grayling, or just being away from the city again, he couldn't say, but he felt free. More so than he'd felt in the Arizona desert or that time he and Adrian had been volunteered for swamp duty when the Confederate Geographic Society started taking a serious look at the southern Florida ecology. Alaska was different in some way besides the obvious. He didn't try to figure out right away; he knew it would come in time.

One thing felt identical to Florida, though: the bugs. Mosquitoes, black flies, no-see-ums, and any other number of as-yet unidentified, un-named flying, biting, blood-sucking insect filled the air, filled the lungs if one wasn't careful. He'd given up trying to keep them off his face and neck.

Milk looked up at Baril standing on the north end of the map so that it read upside-down. He caught the Belgian's eye, gave him a look that asked, *Shouldn't you be doing this?* Baril pushed out his lower lip, gave his head a slight shake, went back to smoking. Milk blew frustration through his nose and decided where to begin.

"Since we couldn't hire a guide for love nor money, we're going to have to make this up as we go." He ran his finger through a series of open areas surrounded by hundreds of lakes and ponds, only a few of which were large enough for names: Hadokhter, Hadotohedan, Hahanudan.

"We're here. According to the Savage Brothers and local scut, the creature seems to haunt these lakes at this time of the year. Nobody knows if this is a regular feeding spot or if it's just maintaining it's territory. We'll work around here, see if we can suss out a few clues — tracks, scat, day beds, snagged hair — and try to come up with a halfway decent guess.

"Other than eating garbage and dining on the occasional prospector or townie, there is nothing verifiably known about this thing."

"Except," said Lockwood, "that it's really big and likes to swim with its mouth open."

"Well," Milk smiled. "There is that."

He looked up at the faces of the men standing to either side of him — intent, thoughtful, professional, ready and hopeful for anything.

It was clear to Milk that the mind of the man supposedly leading their party was a hundred miles southeast, back toward Nulato with the Netsilik and their tales of sub-

arctic fairy folk. That he hadn't actually spoken with any of the tribesmen mattered little; they were to close for him to attend to anything else. Still, Milk felt he had to ask.

“Anything you want to add, *Monsieur* Baril?”

A word of encouragement, perhaps. A call to arms. Admonishments to bring home Adrian's killer. A prayer.

“No.” Baril stared though the map, picked a tobacco flake from the tip of his tongue.

The clap of Lockwood's hands was loud in the morning's quiet. “Alright, boys, Pharaoh hath spoken!” In his palms lay a squadron of dead bugs. He wiped them on Simon's shirt. “Saddle-up in ten.”

*

“Lockwood, what the hell're you doin'?”

Hap Lockwood dug in his saddlebag without bothering to get off or even stop his horse so he could see what he was after. Several minutes of blind searching yielded him a faded denim shirt, which he unrolled and started buttoning. Leaving the top two buttons undone, he fit the shirt over his head backward so the top wrapped his skull and the front draped over his neck and shoulders. He wound the sleeves in opposite directions like a scarf and tied them over his mouth and nose. Then he put back on his range hat.

“You look like a Bedouin.”

“You look like a goddamn retard.”

“Watch the language!”

Tom Stockton and Terrence Milk had been riding at the back of the line like a pair of cowhands — keeping a comfortable silence, a lazy eye on their pack horses and the landscape, and watching Lockwood's antics.

“You know?” Stockton said, “I liked O'Riley a whole lot better when he was drunk.”

“I think the feeling's mutual.”

“Meaning?”

“I think he liked you a whole lot better when was drunk, too.”

Finished with his new headgear, Lockwood wheeled his horse, trotted past the end of the line, then up again to the outside putting Stockton between himself and Milk.

“Looking good, Hap.”

“Does that thing work?”

They couldn't see his face, but Lockwood's boyish smile showed up past his eyes. “Hell, yes! All I need now's a pair of piloting goggles like the Savage Boys and I'd be set.”

Stockton laughed and shook his head. “You are crazy.”

Lockwood jabbed a gloved finger at his gift-wrapped skull. “Crazy like a fox. Know why the monster goes swimming.”

“Is this a joke?”

“Hmmm, no”

“Alright, let's hear it.”

“OK — figure an animal that size needs a lot to eat. Grizzlies go through something like ninety pounds of food a day, right? And this thing is three or four times bigger. So what's it going to eat? My guess is the same thing as a grizzly, meaning pretty much whatever it can get a hold of, but mostly it's going to need tons, and I mean, *tons* of meat. So, it hunts or lets wolves or coyotes do the hard work then takes away their kills, or for the sake of convenience, eats miners and their garbage, right? But think about it: how often is it going to get any of those meals. A couple-three times a week maybe? That's nowhere near enough for this thing. Which brings us to —.”

Lockwood slapped his hands together then held them palm-out, displaying a dozen dead insects. “Every one of these little fuckers is *pure protein*. Now do the math: How many bugs multiplied by how many eggs each lays at a time multiplied by how many puddles of water per square mile times how many square miles, times how often the cycle repeats.”

“That's a lot of bugs.”

“Correction: That's a lot of *food*.”

“Yeah, but enough to keep a handful of those things alive?”

Lockwood shrugged. “I guess we'll find out.”

The team camped where two quicksilver streams joined and forked, carving a crippled X in the tundra, about a mile south of Hadokhter Lake. Baril had wanted to set-up to the north, on top of an elevation next to Hadltohedan Lake, right in the heart of their search area. Milk refused. Baril's spot was too far from enough riverbank to allow them room to cook meals away from where they slept. Since they had started from Hussliakatna, Milk

demanded they maintain at least a mile of shoreline between any cooking site and camp, and to leave absolutely nothing on the shore. Since Baril exercised his prerogative as Expedition Chief to do none of the cooking, he apparently felt no need to pay attention to such details.

The plan was to maintain a location for seven days, then move on. One man would guard the camp and animals, freeing the others to scout a fan-shaped area to the southwest, roughly 90 degrees wide, with camp at the narrow end. Each man would hike for five days — two days out, three days back in a zig-zag return over their outbound trail, looking hard for any sign they might have missed the first time through. They would regroup on day six, have a hot meal, compare notes and, with any luck, get some sense of the animal's habits and direction. On day seven, they would relocate and start again.

The obvious choice to manage camp was Baril — only Milk was not convinced the delicate Belgian could control the horses, safeguard their gear, and keep from starting a wildfire in spite of the occasional rainfall. Someone had to stay with their Expedition Leader.

O'Riely got the short stick. Milk suspected the draw had been rigged, but there were some things he felt better about not knowing.

V

(From the Field Journal of Adrian Vouvray)

Tribesmen who report seeing the beasts indicate a range in coloring, from dark gold to near-black. Indeed, one of their holy men honored me with the display of a most sacred totem: a tanned caribou scrotum stuffed full of coarse brown fur, supposedly from one of the roving monsters. When asked how he obtained this great prize, he claimed to have collected it when he was a young man. He had been out hunting when, cresting a ridge, he surprised a Nanorluk getting ready to feed on an elk carcass. He knew a single elk would not fill the monster's stomach, which meant he was about to be devoured as well. He made ready to fight for his life when another Nanorluk attacked the first. Though somewhat smaller, the second beast, it seemed, was hungry enough to consider battle for the elk carcass. The Netsilik's appearance proved a distraction sufficient for the lesser beast to risk his attack.

The old man says he should have run as soon as the Nanorluk began fighting, but admits to being captivated by the terrible beauty of the warring giants. He said he saw how small he was next to the Nanorluk and he saw that, despite their great size and ferocity, their smallness in the valley and against the mountains and how tiny the mountains were under the sky and below the Greater Spirits that lit the day and night. The battle became mystical, a defining event for which he had to stay for the end.

June 18, 1885

Two weeks later the team was heading north to its third campsite: another confluence of creeks around the upper edge of Hahanudan Lake.

The clues so far were few but significant: giant footprints, enormous scat piles old enough to be full of tender sprouts and beetle larvae; daybeds of mashed grass; huge rocks overturned and licked clean of ants; tufts of dark gray hair that might have come from a bear, but didn't. The problem with the initial evidence was its age: everything was two weeks to a week old. Nothing proved to be recent enough for them to conclude the creature was in the immediate area. They felt like they were chasing a ghost.

Lockwood was proving to be a valuable addition to the team. Everyone, including Baril had quickly adopted the younger man's outré headgear, keeping their heads wrapped at all times. That, and the consistency of tracks leading into and out of numerous ponds validated Lockwood's hypothesis of the creature's feeding habits. Milk and Stockton decided the kid was worth teaching a few things and invited him to ride drag with them whenever he got tired of volunteering to be outrider, which was rarely.

His analysis of each finding's description, location and direction, lead Lockwood to conclude they were on the creature's trail, at this point probably just a day or so behind it. His surmise included the belief that, due to its seemingly lazy and erratic travel patters, the creature was completely unaware of their presence. He also showed they were coming from behind and downwind of the beast. While everyone agreed this was a distinct advantage it warranted even higher levels of vigilance.

*

Somehow, François Baril still had cigarettes.

Stockton and Milk watched the Belgian light the next in his never-ending chain with the ember of his previous, then drop the glowing butt.

"I warned him." Stockton growled.

"Yep."

They rode a few more feet, Stockton glaring, wanting to make eye contact but Milk was busy staring at the ground. The bright noon sun helped him pick out the wisp of smoke trailing from a scrap of burning white paper. Milk reigned his horse, swung to the ground, flicked the bridle leads around a scrubby branch.

"Well, Tommy, you can keep wagging your finger like a librarian or you can go do what you said you'd do. But for the next few minutes, I'll be having a piss. And, gentleman that I am, I'll turn my back — so's not to give you boys any cause for jealousy or personal embarrassment."

Stockton snorted, "You wish."

“And since I’ll have my hands full and my back will be turned, I will remain unaware of anything that may happen while I’m — what’s Lockwood say — *communing with nature*.”

Stockton snorted again. “More like having a toss.” He put gentle pressure to his horse. “Careful where you plant that stuff. Mandrakes’ll sprout.”

Stockton rode off. Milk settled himself southeast, unbuttoned, relaxed, and aimed for the heads of many, many flies. Soon he heard voices.

Stockton’s furious tirade.

Baril’s sputtering defense turned indignant. He yelled in French. Stockton bawled at him to speak American, goddamnit.

O’Riley’s shouts.

Gunshots.

Milk leapt in the saddle and dug in his heels, putting the horse into a dangerous charge across soft and treacherous ground. A hundred yards later, his mount flung itself to full stop, reared, tried to bolt in any direction away from the gigantic shadow trying to eat O’Riley.

Milk forced his animal to hold. The monster dropped O’Riley’s body and roared, deafening Milk, coating him and horse with foul breath and bloody foam. The horse’s eyes rolled white, desperate to flee. Milk kept it from running but could not quiet the animal’s terror-cries.

The monster reared back, hauled up to its full, massive, sun-blotting height, and roared again.

Milk gave the horse its head. It ran.

The monster followed.

Milk settled on the horse like a jockey, rode low and tight, his weight balanced for maximum ease on the panicked animal. He let the horse get some distance on the monster, resumed a measure control, then gave a backward peek under his left arm.

The monster had gotten a slow start but its long legs gathered speed. Milk realized, despite his horse’s terror stoked pace, it wouldn’t stay ahead of the thing long enough. He cut southeast toward a stand of lodgepole pine, hoping to ride through it then around to make a target of the monster’s flank.

Milk peeked back again. His quick turn had worked better than expected. The monster had to come to an almost complete stop before it could change direction. Running again, its long legs were piling on the speed, tearing up the ground it lost to its adversary. The only problem was that it had quit following Milk. Having chased away its competition, the monster was going back for O'Riley.

Milk slipped his Winchester from its case, wheeled his horse and kicked its flanks.

He heard nothing — the horse's terrified breath, its hooves pounding the tundra, the wind screaming in his face, the bullet being levered into the rifle's chamber — but he felt it all, and more, in body and mind, as he rode hard to close his distance to the monster.

Milk was an amazing shot — on the ground. Still, despite hundreds of hours and thousands of rounds of compensatory practice on the back of a charging horse, his aim from the saddle remained less true, even under the best conditions. Now, riding a panicked animal across questionable turf in pursuit of a man-eating monster complicated matters by several orders of magnitude. Milk thought about none of this. His mind was empty of everything but the enormous rear looming before him.

Milk didn't think about how to shoot right. There wasn't time. He raised himself in the stirrups, aligned his sights, adjusted for his bounce and the monster's, and fired. A spurt of blood might have come from the beast's left rump. The monster showed no sign of slowing.

Milk let loose two more quick bullets, certain that at least one found its mark. The monster slowed, glanced back, saw Milk, and put on another burst of speed.

Up ahead Baril, Simon, and Stockton guarded O'Riley's body, guns trained on the rampaging nightmare. They held fire, afraid of hitting Milk instead of the monster.

“Shoot!” he howled. “Shoot! Shoot! Goddamnit, shoot!”

Either they didn't hear him or couldn't take the risk. Milk cursed, raised his own rifle and fired, aiming at the creature and prepared for the consequences of missing.

The three men finally took the hint, blasting at the dark, implacable thing bearing down on them.

Milk knew the monster had only two choices: slow to turn or charge straight ahead. He made silent deals with God and the Devil for it to turn, to expose its organ-packed ribcage to their double assault, but it showed no sign of slowing. Heedless of the running it had done and the bullets it had taken, the beast managed another burst of speed, crashing through the meager defense as all guns clicked empty. The monstrous mouth made a last grab for O'Riley, missed, and continued its escape southwest across the sunny tundra.

VI

(From the Field Journal of Terrence Milk)

June 6, 1885

I remain uncertain how Adrian ever convinced himself to hunt that monster from the confines of a War House. His notes convey no thought of ordnance prior to his brawl with Captian Sounder. It is only after that he declares renting the machine from Sounder. Was it the artillery capabilities, the quantities of ammunition it could carry? It is impossible to think it might have been the machine's agility or speed. Its spindly legs sacrificed nearly all balance and control to reach a meager twenty miles per hour. Based on the morpho-mechanics of a camel, perhaps, but Professor Peale may as well have designed the thing based on a chicken-legged shack found in certain children's tales.

The only conclusion I can draw is Adrian hired Sounder's machine out of sheer desperation. The Survey archives are full of bound testimonies from men who, while on expedition, found themselves pressured by circumstance to commit acts that they would not otherwise consider. Those acts, as with most anything done out of desperation, never failed to end badly.

June 18, 1885

Milk and Simon each grabbed one of Lockwood's outstretched hands and hauled him back up the steep slope. Stockton walked over from where he had one of the tents unrolled on a patch of clean ground near what was left of O'Riley. The hope was, with careful lifting and minimal shift, to get his ruined body on the canvas in one piece, and soon. A hundred thousand flies were already stuck to O'Riley, his horse blanket shroud, the penumbra of blood baking into the ground. And more were on their way.

Lockwood shielded his eyes with one hand, pointed the other to where he'd just come from. Even though Milk knew where it was, could follow the monster's trail back to the branches that had broken when it charged out to attack O'Riley, he still had difficulty seeing the spot it was so well concealed.

“That scrubby stuff, that dwarfy kind of birch and willow there? Under that's this weird depression. Cool and shady, though. Perfect place for that thing to take a midday nap, which is probably what it was doing when you two assholes started screaming.”

Baril protests were cut short by Stockton playing a stream of urine over the large wad of cigarettes near his feet. “Keep goin', kid. I'm all ears.”

Lockwood looked at Milk. “Didn't find any scat or food remains around so I'd guess it's a regular day bed for this thing, whatever it is. I'm no expert, though.”

Stockton buttoned-up as he walked over. “Nobody’s an expert on this one.”

“I guess, maybe. Thing is though: we may not know what it is, but so far, its shown us lots of bear behavior. Why would we ignore all that and guess it’s something else? I’m not *saying* it’s a bear; I’m just asking’s all.”

Milk exchanged a glance with Stockton. “Keep going.”

“We’ve been chasing this thing like we’re not sure what it is, like we don’t want our expectations to influence the data, which, OK, is good science and all. But we’re so desperate to maintain objectivity that we haven’t bothered to pay attention and really think about what it could be.”

“But you have.”

“Shee-it, Tommy, we all have! Out there wandering around, back in camp comparing notes, we’re all *thinking* about it. Or should be. But,” he waved a dismissive hand toward Baril, “we haven’t been able to be what you’d call *forthcoming* with our conclusions.”

Lockwood’s eyes circled from face to face then stopped on Milk’s. “So, you want to know what I think, I’ll tell ya. I think it’s a giant fucking bear.”

The naming of something is a relief breaking an unacknowledged tension. The mysterious is given substance, is defined, made real — as if O’Riley’s dark gray killer hadn’t seemed real enough when they faced it half an hour earlier. But now, the thing they were after had a name: *Nanorluk*.

The Nesilik’s mythical, man-eating giant roamed the wilds of Alaska.

Identifying the creature stripped away some of its power, imbued it with others, traded nebulous fear for real knowledge and substantial threat.

Grizzly bears are some of the largest, most fearsome predators walking the American continents, quite possibly the world’s. An animal four times the size of a grizzly, with a grizzly’s instincts and appetites, was unthinkable.

But there they stood, thinking about it anyway.

*

“I got ’em.”

Stockton maintained a shaky focus two miles west, trying to keep Baril and Simon centered in the spyglass lens. Simon rode tense, and as tall as he was able while hugging his rifle. His head whipped around like a loose shutter in a gale. His wide eyes showed a

lot of white. His mouth opened and closed in erratic counterpoint to his labored breathing.

“Every hear Gene sing?”

“Nope.”

Stockton handed over the instrument. “Looks like his first time at it.” Milk sighted through the eyepiece, adjusted the outer barrel.

“Make out the words?”

Milk started at Simon’s lips for a few seconds. “Not with his head moving like that.”

Milk dragged the glass left, scouting the scrubby landscape ahead of the distant men. He watched a half-dozen grouse silently burst from a hump of grass. The glass slid back to catch Simon pry the gun from his shoulder, scan the area again and restart his horizon serenade.

“Seems a tad jumpy.”

“Blame him?”

“Nope.”

“How’s the Tabaccky Kid holding up?”

Simon’s packhorse moped across Milk’s lens, followed by Baril’s. The unhappy Belgian scrubbed a handkerchief at his chin then attacked the latest stain on his shirt.

“About the same.”

Stockton chuckled, swore. “Know where he got the plug from? Pete’s back pocket.”

Despite Baril’s feeble insistence to lead the hunt, he had clearly seen O’Riley’s dead body as his ticket out of this nightmare. Milk was happy to let him take it.

The permafrost prevented digging deep enough to properly bury a body and rocks piled over it would hardly delay large scavengers. The only place to go with Peter Donald O’Riely was to Husliakatna. The nightless days of summer would let Baril bee-line back to town — though no one could recall whether there was hallowed ground. If not, Baril would push south to Galena or, more than likely, make a run all the way to Nulato.

But, once again, Baril could never manage it alone. Simon needed to go with — leaving Milk, Stockton, and Lockwood to bird-dog the monster.

While Baril had been strapping the last of the supplies and gear to the packhorse, and Stockton and Lockwood lashed the canvas-wrapped body to O'Riley's mount, Milk had pulled Simon to the side to discuss the route and various aspects of the trip. The conversation had ended badly.

With a series of brassy clicks, Milk collapsed his spyglass and snapped it back into the battered case. From his shirt pocket he pulled a small piece of mirror in a tortoiseshell frame. He exposed his mouth long enough to breath on the mirror then began to polish it with a corner of the shirt wrapping his face and head. "Gene thinks we set him up as bait."

Stockton adjusted the hat on his own swaddled head. "Did he volunteer to stay and hunt this thing?"

"Nope."

"Then he's just bitching."

Milk gently angled the silvered glass against the blazing sunlight, flashing an all-clear to Lockwood who was scouting the direction the monster had fled after killing O'Riley. A few seconds later, the same message flashed back to Milk. He figured Lockwood rode five miles out. Milk signaled for Lockwood to stay in range. Lockwood repeated his all-clear, leaving Milk certain the youth had deliberately misread the second flash. He returned the mirror to his pocket.

"Believe it or not," Stockton yawned, "it's getting late."

The last sunrise on the Koyukuk Flats was sometime on June 3rd. The next sunset would be July 10th. Until then, the roof of the world would have twenty-four hours of light. Still, a man had to sleep and eat and try to remain sane in the glare of a relentless sun.

Milk stared at the bright landscape, compared it to the waterproof map in his head. "Let's give it another hour. That should put them about half-way to town. Then we'll ride in and eat, maybe try to get some sleep."

"If we can find some shade. Which reminds me: all this sun can't be doing Pete any favors."

"It'll make him easy to find, though. The stinkier the bait, the bigger the fish."

"OK," said Stockton. "So what if we get back and don't have a fish?"

"I'm working on it."

Milk was still working on it two hours later when Lockwood rode into the makeshift camp dragging a half-dozen lodgepole pines. Anywhere else on the continent,

Lockwood's trees would have been saplings but at their current latitude, these fourteen-footers were considered old growth.

Lockwood cut the ropes tying the trees to his saddle, hauled the leather from his horse, and looped the animal to a stringer someone had tied next to the stream, making sure his horse could easily reach the chill water and sweet grass growing around the banks. Then he dragged one of his trees over to the men huddling around the maps. Lockwood tugged a small hand axe from his belt and began stripping the pine.

"That where we are? Holy crap, boys, we're back where we started from."

The rest of the team had been watching Lockwood like he'd fallen from the sky. The heavy breeze, whispering grass, a fire burning, sharp steel on green wood, the drone of swarming insects, songbirds: these were the only sounds for many seconds while they waited for an undelivered explanation. That Lockwood took so much pleasure prolonging the odd moment, and that he concealed his amusement so well, impressed and amused Stockton to no end. Stockton dragged a tree from the pile, drew his Bowie knife and started slicing away branches. Milk returned to the maps.

"We're here, near as I can tell." Milk's finger rested in the middle of the Koykuk Flats, next to what appeared to be a mangled pitchfork with three twisted tines jabbing at the face of Dulbatna Mountain and the Korkrines Hills. "Even if we keep pushing it hard, we're still another half-day back to Husliakatna."

Simon groaned. Baril swore in French.

"The bad news is we're in for some more weather."

Milk pointed northwest at the Purcell Mountains, at the tall, dark-faced clouds and their flat heads crowning the peaks. Beyond the Purcells lay the Brooks Range and the Arctic Ocean: North America's great, wide womb for storms. Just inside the western edge of the birth canal lay the Koykuk Flats.

Thunderheads had passed though many times since the team had arrived, their biggest threats being high winds, lightning, and flashfloods. The men had taken precautions, gotten soaked, dried off, then resumed their searches. But lately, thanks to the higher temperatures from the unremitting sun, the storms were growing severe.

Lockwood knelt, propped his stripped tree on a rock and began chipping the narrow end into a strong, sharp point. "Well then, I guess it's a good thing I brought enough of these for everybody."

VII

Once Stockton had them on higher ground, he set each to a task: secure the animals and tack, build a fire, get some food going, stockpile dry wood, and for Christ's sake get

O'Riley's body the hell away from camp. They moved quickly and, at last, ate where they set-up, allowing the downpour and corpse rot to cover any other smells.

The first rain hit almost an hour later, then the wind and lightning, hammering the Flats like a three-armed blacksmith. The horses whinnied, mashed the turf, yanked against the reigns binding them to the trunk of a fallen hemlock. A few yards above the horses, the men of the North American Zoological Survey crowded around a low fire built in the hollow of a south-facing ridge. Buried in the low embers were the sharpened tips of six limbless pines. A dozen or so yards below the unsaddled horses, O'Riley's bent body was lashed around a jutting rock, his canvas shroud and rotting flesh thoroughly soaked.

Three hours on, black clouds still spanned the horizons. There was no telling when the storm might let up. Milk didn't want to think about what O'Riley would smell like by the time they got back on the trail.

Lockwood wove another layer of seasoned twigs on top of the fire. "You pick this place, Tommy?"

"You don't like it?"

"It's the perfect size for our monster. What's not to like?"

Even by the light of embers they could see Baril's color drain. "What do you mean?"

Stockton shook his head at Lockwood while the kid looked chastened, panicked, apologetic. Simon slept against his saddle in the back of the hollow. Milk went back to staring into the storm.

"Sorry, fellas."

Believing he was still in charge, Baril demanded to know what they were talking about.

Lockwood looked Milk who didn't need to look back. "Might as well tell him."

"Our room at the Ritz here is a den for one of those things, or was."

"What?"

"This is not what you'd call a natural rock formation. It's been dug out, especially back where Gene is there's a kind of sleeping platform."

"W-what?"

"It's elevated, see? So if some water gets in here while the thing is hibernating, it won't get wet. Pretty slick, huh?"

“What?”

“Listen, pal, I know I’m speaking English —”

Stockton said, “Ease off, kid. He’s scared.”

Now that Lockwood had stopped talking and started paying attention, he could see Baril’s eyes dart around the inside their shelter, searching the deep shadows again and again for the giant terror.

“Hey, it’s OK. Hey.” Lockwood waved his hand in front of Baril’s face, gained the Belgian’s twitchy attention. “We’re OK here. We’re safe. This den is *old*. I’d say two winters at least. And it’s not like these things climb back in for an afternoon nap, right? We already know they like to sleep in the open.”

“Where does it go during such storms?”

Lockwood smiled, shrugged. “I don’t know. But if it was going to hole-up here, it’d’ve done it by now, don’t you think?”

Baril considered the question, admitted he had no idea what the monster might do.

Stockton told Baril, “Like I said before: nobody’s an expert on this one, no matter what Grizzly Adams, here says.”

Lockwood shrugged. “Though that didn’t stop anybody from whittling his own pig-sticker.”

Stockton smiled. “You know kid, Terry thinks you’re an arrogant prick, but you’re starting growing on me — kind of like shingles, but worse.”

Milk dumped a double-handful of dirt on the orange-rimmed coals, wiped his hands on his pants and quietly levered a round into the breach of his Winchester. Baril began a panicked keen. Milk signaled someone to silence it. Stockton poked the tip of his knife against Baril’s chin and whispered dire threats.

Outside the den, soggy gray light permeated the Koykuk Flats. Despite the heavy rain and low clouds, the area caught about as much daylight as it would from an overcast October afternoon. Still, heavy rain cut visibility. Known objects became shapes; unknown shapes turned to threats.

Milk swept the lens of his spyglass downhill, past the silent horses and slightly below the outcrop supporting O’Riley’s corpse. Had they not been tethered upwind and otherwise numbed by the storm, the horses would have sensed trouble long before it had climbed so close.

“Bear,” whispered Milk. “Strike that. Bears.”

A honey-colored grizzly cautiously sniffed and padded her way toward the smelly lump of canvas and rope. Behind her, Milk picked out a pair of slightly darker cubs. He handed the instrument to Stockton who sighted, threw a sour glance at Milk, then passed the glass to Lockwood.

“How old?”

“The cubs? Two, maybe. No guess on the mother. She’s a big’un, though.”

“What do we do?” Lockwood gave Milk the spyglass. “What should we do?”

“Shoot ’em.”

“All of them?”

“Shoot one,” Stockton murmured, “shoot ’em all. That’s the way it works with sows and young’uns.”

“So let them eat O’Riley.”

“He’s not going to feed three whole bears. But throw in a couple of horses”

“Scare them off *after* they eat O’Riley?”

“You sure have a soft spot for these bears, kid.”

Milk focused back down the hill. The sow pawed at the canvas and knots. A terror-filled whinny made her head jerk up and left. The horses and bears had spotted each other.

Well, he thought, that took long enough.

Milk slid another round into Winchester, checked the loads in his revolver and added a sixth, giving himself the maximum number of shots. He hoped he wouldn’t need to reload. He told Lockwood to wake-up Simon, warned Stockton to cover him, tugged his hat brim down, then waded into the storm.

The only sound outside the cave was hard rain pounding the wide brim of Milk’s oiled canvas hat. Without the hat, he would have been blind. He belly-crawled to the hemlock. The tree had fallen downhill, toward the Flats; Milk crouched on the uphill side behind the roots, using the torn semicircle of gnarled sticks and soil to hide him from the tethered horses and the bears below.

Milk had his right palm clamped over the rifle breech, his left tight over the ejection port, doing his best to keep water out of his gun. He slowly raised his head until his eyes cleared the lattice of roots.

A dozen yards below, the sow roared at the plunging, screaming animals that could not give an inch of ground. The angry mother raised to her full height, came forward, bellowed again. One of the reigns slipped its knot. The freed horse leapt the hemlock and bolted clear of the furious animal. The remaining horses were on the verge of breaking their own necks when the tree ripped free. Broken roots sliced Milk's right arm and shoulder.

Not trained for teamwork, the horses fought the loose tree and each other, nearly failing to drag themselves out of range of the rampant bear. Sensing they were far enough, the exhausted horses stopped and herded close, trying to make themselves look small. With the threat at bay, the bear quit her pursuit. Back on all-fours she held her ground, menacing them a few seconds longer in the torrential rain. She started a cautious turn toward her cubs, caught sight of Milk, and charged.

Terrence Milk raised the rifle to his shredded shoulder, clamped his jaw, and fired. He pressed the stock in place, ground teeth against the pain, drove the lever, fired, did it again.

And again. And again.

Thirty yards is not enough space between a wounded man and an angry grizzly. The animal covered it in seconds. Milk put five quick shots into the bear's shoulders, legs, and paws, hoping to slow it enough for solid aim at an eye — the only place a bullet could pierce the animal's skull.

Milk lost feeling his shoulder. He jammed the stock home, chambered a round, exhaled, waited in the rain for the bear to show him her eye.

From behind him came shouts and gunshots.

Stockton, Lockwood, Simon, and Baril piled from the den. The front pair charged straight downhill; the others moved right to grab the tangled horses. They fired in the air, trying to drive the bear away from Milk and keep it from making another run at the livestock. She neither slowed, nor turned, nor showed Milk her eye.

He fired anyway.

The stock recoiled against his numb shoulder — then slammed through it when five hundred pounds of bear plowed into the rifle. He'd had no time to drop the gun. Fingers broke. Something snapped in his wrist. His dislocated shoulder wrenched up, back and away as her body rammed him to the ground. Sharp claws sunk into his thigh, dug at the meat, went still.

Milk heard muffled shouts. He tried to signal from beneath the bear's crushing weight, then tried to keep perfectly still against the agony. He tried to breathe, but found himself buried chest-deep in the stinking undercoat of a quarter-ton bear. He tried to remain calm, and failed at that as well.

Someone gripped his left hand. "Sit tight," Stockton yelled. "We'll have you out in a second." Milk squeezed hard, trying to let Stockton know to hurry.

Seconds later, the bear shifted left and a long wooden pole slid in from the right. It shifted again and another pole scraped along the ground, grazing his mangled arm. Twice the dead bear rocked back and forth, using Milk's chest and broken face and shoulder to build momentum. Then he had a face full of rain and fresh air and a body wracked by a sampler of agony as the pressure holding his shoulder together was lost and the muscles began to seize. His breath came in gulps, went in gasps. He prayed he would just black-out.

Milk squinted against the rain, seeing only gray until Lockwood appeared, upside-down. "I need to get your fingers out of your gun. It's going to hurt." He held a gnarled stick toward Milk's mouth. "Bite."

"Wait!" Stockton yelled, "Where'd you get that?"

Lockwood pointed someplace near Milk's feet.

"That's *hemlock*, dumb ass. It's poison."

"I thought that was only the plant."

"A tree's a plant, right? You want to risk it?"

Lockwood tossed the stick and wiped his fingers on his rain-soaked pants. He drew his belt, folded it, and eased it between Milk's back teeth. "How's that?"

Milk, eyes closed, tried to nod, felt his shoulder spasm again and bit hard into the leather. Lockwood seized the moment to pry Milk's twisted fingers off the gun. He waited for the next wave to straighten and bind the fingers together with strips cut from one of the waterproof maps.

"You need something hard against this wrist to keep it from flopping around." He tore the rest of map into wider strips. "I don't know what we're going to do with that shoulder."

Milk tongued the belt from his mouth. "Gun belt. Make a sling. Saddle cinch around my arm and chest. Left arm free for reins. Quit tearing up my maps. Where is everybody?"

"Baril and Gene saddled-up and hauled-ass to town. Tommy went after the cubs."

Milk sighed against the rain. He felt his hat angled over his face, breathed old hair oil and skull sweat, listened to the drum of water on oiled-canvas. He wondered just how long it had been since he last heard that sound. A short time later, Lockwood returned with the saddle cinch, morphine, and a pint of bourbon from the medical kit.

VIII

(From the Field Journal of Adrain Vouvray)

Suppose we do, in fact, bag the beast. How will we get it home? Dead is, of course, one way, but alive is preferable, is it not? How on Earth could we manage it? Using Captain Sounder's machine, we might —

No, it is quite impossible. Loath as I am to pronounce it, dead the monster must be.

Then what trophies to keep? Is there a way to field-dress the creature? Or to scrape clean the skeleton for delivery to the Survey? Unlike fossilized remains, we need only number and crate the bones for they are fresh, rugged — demanding neither plaster nor burlap prior to shipment. The smell, however, may become a concern.

Careful consideration is required, for, whatever is done, 'tis best done quickly. A wise man once told me, "Up here, anything or anybody, soon as he's dead, turns into bear food." I believed him to be joking at the time, trying to put one over on the greenhorn from The Big City. Now, having seen what I have seen, I can say there are monsters up here too ravenous to wait for a man to die before turning him into a meal.

But to the point: Trying to clean and crate a massive carcass under Alaska's summer sun will doubtless become the main attraction of the region's larger, typically hyperphagic, inhabitants. We would be wise to quickly study the beast's remains, take only what is necessary, and abandon the rest to the wild.

Terrence Milk's prayers had finally been answered: he blacked-out. Whether from the booze or drugs, from Lockwood's attempts to immobilize the wounded shoulder, or the hell-trek back to the den, Milk couldn't trouble to guess.

He was glad for the opiates and alcohol, thankful to be out of the rain and drying off near another small fire. The pain had never left him, though the morphine had let him stop caring about it for a while and sleep. Awake now, he noticed the pain was making him care again. Soon he would be caring deeply.

He looked around for someone to take the edge off but his cavalcade of forgotten friends, dead relatives and old sweethearts seemed to have gone. Milk spied waterproof maps bound to his gouged arm and his raked thigh, thought he should be angry but couldn't bother to remember why.

Endless rain diffused perpetual daylight over the Flats, lighting but not brightening the mouth of the cave. Lockwood perched a few feet in from the weather. He stroked a large knife over a stone, thumb-tested the blade, held the stone out to the rain, flicked off the excess water, then worked for a finer edge.

Milk tried to form a series of cogent questions but they came out together in a dry croak. Lockwood reached beyond the lip of the cave, retrieved a porcelain cup brimming with rainwater. Milk managed to wear slightly less than he wound up drinking.

“You’ve been out for probably four hours. I don’t know what time it is and nobody is back yet. Anything else you want to know?”

“No.”

Lockwood brought in a second cupful of water, drank half, splashed in some clear liquid from a label-less brown bottle. “Laudanum. You’re about due.”

They worked together to ease the mix down Milk’s throat, careful not to spill a drop.

Lockwood returned to his post. He put the cup back in the rain, clacked open Milk’s spyglass and scanned the Flats.

“Been looking over your bear. She’s a beaut, no doubt about it. You got her in the eye. In the eye! Not *right* in the eye — it’s still in the socket, but there’s a furrow runs along her snout and disappears right in the corner. It’s the damnedest thing I’ve ever seen. No exit wound, either. You’re one hell of a shot.”

Milk wanted to tell Lockwood he was wrong, that he, Milk, was one hell of a failure. He should have put a bullet in the mother’s heart while she was upright then pumped a few more in the panic-stricken cubs; he should have ended it when he’d had the chance — but things had happened so fast there’d been no time to do it right.

Milk had thought he wanted to say these things, but the drugs took away his will to even try.

Lockwood collapsed the spyglass and cased it. He wiped his knife clean, sheathed it, and settled his hat tight to his head. Milk asked where he was going.

“Collect you some trophies.”

“ . . . no, don’t . . . ”

“The head and paws, for sure. I’m going to try stripping the hide. Never done it before, but I’ve got a pretty good idea how. Go for the gallbladder. Get some fat, make us some bear grease. Ever waterproof boots with that stuff? I hear it’s the real deal.”

“ . . . wait . . . leave the . . . ”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll thank me when you can think straight. Besides, it’ll kill some time. Save you some meat!”

Milk let Lockwood go because he had to help his father.

He stood in the fallow field where they were trying to train Chief, their new English Pointer. He was a sweet dog with a soft mouth, but, despite everything from careful training to severe beatings, the damned mutt still ranged too far ahead, flushing birds not even Terrence could hit. The senior Milk was determined to break Chief before the season opened next week.

Chief sat, panting lightly with that big, dumb smile spread across his doggy face and a tremor in his right foreleg, ready to charge over the old stalks and chase some game. At a nod from his father, Terrence clicked the leash from Chief’s collar, told him to range. Even before the word was formed, the dog hit full sprint. The elder Milk started a slow ten–count. On *four*, a pair of pheasants exploded into the air. Terrence set his gun’s sights ahead and a little above a male’s flashing plumage, whispered *bang* to the escaping bird, then silently tracked the female.

Terrence’s father finished his count, called Chief to return, called him again, swore, called again. The dog never slowed. Terrence watched his father level his best shotgun, roar *Chief, SIT!* and blast the dog with both barrels. A hundred yards away, Chief sat, his rump stung by a few pellets of #9 birdshot, and eyed his master with a look that wondered, *How in hell did you smack me from way back there?*

Milk thought he remembered his father calling *return* and rewarding the dog with lavish praise and raw meat. This time, though, he was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Chief. But there was plenty of yelling. And lots of gunfire.

Not again, he thought, but didn’t know why.

Milk somehow got himself on his knees and to the front of the cave. Outside, two midgets were trying to fight a big, black dog. Baril had been right; the Netsilik legends were true: there really were tiny hunters running around the Yukon. And they looked just like Stockton and Lockwood

Milk searched for a tiny version of himself but couldn’t find it. He wondered if it was hurt, too. Milk wanted to go downhill to help the little guys but wasn’t sure whether they were trying to chase off the dog or kill it. What if he did the wrong thing and got them mad? So he stayed where he was and watched.

Having had a chance to really see it, the animal seemed not so much like a dog as bear — old and battle–hardened, by the looks of him. Deep gouges lined his snout and lip; most

of one ear was missing, and it had been burned once, either caught in something burning or set on fire. The fur up its left foreleg and neck and part of its face had been replaced by a shiny mass of melted skin and scars. The eye in that part of his head could have had a milky cast, but it was hard to see through the rain.

This bear had come to the Flats for the same thing the mother and cubs had, the same thing drawing a dozen other carnivores and scavengers from miles around: O'Riley's stinking corpse. Lockwood had been right — let them eat it. What difference did it make? O'Riley reaching heaven didn't depend on his being buried in a churchyard. What about everybody that died at sea or fell down a glacier? Were they out of luck because God willed they die where they did? No, He would know what happened and be able to figure out where to find them and how to put them back together again, no matter how many pieces they were in. Before, the team had the time and could take the trouble to get O'Riley into a real grave, but now, it was dust-to-dust and save your own skin.

The tiny Stockton quit shooting into the air, slowly tossed his tiny rifle and, head down, walked backward up the rain-slicked hill. He tried to move slowly, never risking eye contact with the bear, but talking to it like it was an upset, partially deaf child. The bear seemed to be listening but was not lulled. Its head swung back and forth. It huffed through its nose, watched the tiny Stockton stop, squat, and ease from the ground a long stick, sharpened and char-hardened at both ends, just like the one held by tiny Lockwood.

To Milk they looked like twigs. To the littles, they were almost the length and weight of a lance or an outsized pikestaff, reminding Milk of the full-sized one laying next to him on the cave floor.

The bear and Milk watched the small men manipulate the spears with widely spaced hands, working out how to wield their weapons before trying to back up the hill. Milk was shocked to see the tiny Lockwood's hands, arms, legs and chest covered in blood. Before he could hope the little guy wasn't hurt, Milk spied a hump of raw meat uphill from Lockwood, spied a gut pile, a stack of paws, a honey brown hide, a severed bear's head with a bullet-gouged snout.

Milk tried to shake his head, to clear it. Hot pain ripped through his crushed shoulder, his torn back and chest, up his neck and face, and behind his eyes. Reflex made him grind teeth against the pain, which only caused him more. He stopped, tried to regain himself with ragged, shallow breaths and figure a way to help Stockton and Lockwood escape the monster without getting any or all of them killed.

There were two guns in the cave: the mangled Winchester and his revolver. The only other weapon was the lodgepole pike Lockwood had carved in case one of the monsters showed up. Milk didn't even bother trying to lift it. He remembered the sticks of dynamite Stockton picked up in Hussliakatna. If he could get to the packhorses, find the dynamite, manage to get it and some fire down to someone with two working arms —

The horses were gone.

Milk knew that anything short of a deathblow to the creature would guarantee getting them all killed. The best action he could take to help Stockton and Lockwood was to do exactly nothing. Still, he sat in the dry mouth of the cave looking for an opportunity.

No longer addled by opiates and not yet crippled by pain, the naturalist in Milk resurfaced. He pulled out the spyglass, propped it between his knees and began to study the animal. Even at that distance, the thing overflowed his lens. It was huge, bigger than he remembered. He tried to dredge up an image of the thing that killed O'Riley. Did it have those scars? Was this the same monster? He didn't think so, but couldn't be sure. He'd have to check with Stockton.

Midway down the hill, Stockton's monolog and their careful retreat mollified the creature to the point where it turned back to eat O'Riley — rope, canvas, and all. It kept a wary eye while it licked the outcrop clean, then turned its full attention on the men shuffling away. It tensed and sent a growling *wuff* up the hill.

Milk heard Stockton tell Lockwood to stop. He talked to the kid like he talked to the bear, though his words were anything but soothing.

“Move to your left. Waaay to your left, OK? You're too close to the carcass. You gotta move. That thing thinks you're trying to take its lunch. But you're not, are you?”

“Hell, no, big fella. I'm not even hungry. Look at me walking away. Look at me all the way over here, nowhere near your food. Look at me talking to a giant bear. Do you believe it? I sure don't. It's all yours, pal. Just look at that pile of guts all covered with flies. Mmm-mm, yummy! Yeah, I hope you choke on it you son of a bitch.”

The rain-slicked grade was too steep for them to keep walking uphill and backwards while toting oversized spears, so they spread along the hillside, out and away from the flayed carcass. The monster plodded forward, swinging its massive head, scenting the air and ground all the way to the dead bear. It crunched down the butchered animal and its parts, consuming everything including the bloody grass. Then it charged at Stockton.

Milk watched Stockton do exactly what he would have done: throw himself face-down in the grass, clamp gloved hands over his neck and lay perfectly still. Milk spared a glance at Lockwood. Either terror or courage kept the kid rooted and silent. Whichever gripped him, Milk hoped it would hold for a while.

The monster pounded to a stop, its huge forepaws on either side of Stockton. It eyed Lockwood, blasted the hillside with a few open-mouthed huffs of aggression and drool before shoving its gigantic nose into the middle of Stockton's back. It sniffed hard twice, eyed Lockwood again, lowered its face and bit Stockton in half.

Milk saw Lockwood survey the area and find it lacking. There was nothing to hide under, behind or in, and outrunning the thing was out of the question. The only defensible position was the cave. Milk waved to Lockwood, hoping to get him up and in before the monster had time to finish Stockton and charge again.

The kid had quit trying to talk nice to the creature; he'd quit talking all together. His face, pinched and white with fury, showed not an ounce of panic. Hefting his pikestaff, he moved up the hill, faster than before but not fast enough for Milk. Not wanting to give away his presence, Milk mimed for Lockwood to leave the stick, that he had another one in the cave.

The monster was starting on Stockton's legs and eyeing Lockwood's blood-soaked shirt.

Milk bit at the strips of map knotted around his broken fingers, quitting just long enough to bark, "Drop that thing and get your ass get up here!" Lockwood clung to the pole. Milk swore at the kid and the pain slashing the right half of his body as he yanked some fingers free. Milk pried the cork from the bourbon bottle, soaked the bandage, and jammed it down the neck until it swam in six inches of alcohol. He set the bomb aside to feed thin sticks into the fire and blow on the coals.

This will never work, he thought, but kept working. He didn't know what else to do.

Lockwood was closer, though still not close enough to make a break over wet grass, especially with the pike. Milk risked another look at the monster. It ignored everything except the patch of ground, licking and chewing the grass until Stockton was completely gone. Then, gazing at Lockwood, it started across the hill.

It came, not in a run like at Stockton, but slowly, swinging its massive head again and scenting the air, actions which now seemed all the more menacing to Milk.

Lockwood stopped fifteen feet from the cave and held his ground. He made eye contact with the beast, jeered at it, sneered at it, taunted it with double-dares, foul language, and vicious threats. The monster loomed, unimpressed. Lockwood grew louder and more aggressive with his shoulders, legs and head, finally dropping the chunk of tree to shake his arms in the air and roar.

Lockwood stopped. So did the monster. It eyed him — head low, ears flat. Curtians of bloody drool hung from its open mouth. Lockwood lowered himself to a four-point crouch, barred his teeth and hissed like a panther. The monster charged.

Milk grabbed the bourbon bottle, touched the boozy wick to fresh embers and stepped into the rain.

Lockwood stayed on the ground, loose but ready, like a sprinter waiting for the gun. Unblinking in the rain he stared at the monster. He spoke to it again, sweet-talked it this time, whispered for it to come on, hurry up, come closer.

The torched bottle seared Milk's one good hand. Still he held it, held it, picking his target, waiting to make the most of an underhand toss from his weak side, held it, then lobbed the bomb at the monster's head. A jab of opiate-free agony spun the bottle high and wide and over the creature's hindquarter.

The monster never noticed, never slowed — not even when Lockwood ripped his homemade pikestaff off the ground, its rear tip buried to the permafrost and flame-cured point tilted at the creature's cloudy eye.

Bourboned thunder ripped along the hillside. Blue flame scorched the monster's hide. Glass shrapnel raked its back. The thing's giant head whipped toward the pain, its massive body following to confront and consume this new attacker. Braced for a claw-dragging turn, the monster's left foreleg shattered and collapsed. Splintered bone rammed through hairless, gnarled skin. The beast's terrible momentum drove its body forward — forward and down and onto Lockwood's waiting spear, the char-hardened tip punching through hide, rib, lung, and heart as the crippled juggernaut slammed onto Lockwood.

There was no noise but the rain. Everything was still but the rain. The monster lay dead, giant and immobile, neither twitching nor breathing. There was no sign of Lockwood.

Milk skidded down the hill, shouted as loud as he could while circling the monster, searching — for a boot or an arm or a finger — for any part of Lockwood that would show where he was trapped. On his second time around, Milk spied the pike's bloody tip jutting out the monster's back. Praying the shaft wasn't skewed by a break, he did his best to judge its angle and trace where it might be grounded.

He crawled up to the cave, wrapped a saddle cinch around the last lodgepole pike, dragged it down the hill, and slipped it under the creature, just behind its left armpit. Hoping to use gravity and the dead body's unnatural angle to roll it downhill, Milk got under the pole, braced it on his good shoulder, clamped the dangling chinch between his teeth, and counted to three.

He put all his legs and what was left of his back into the lift, being sure to push the weight, not throw himself against it. The body didn't budge. He pushed harder. The pole cut his shoulder. He gritted his teeth and pushed harder. One of his molars exploded. He pushed harder. Something popped in his hip and he pushed harder, kept pushing harder knowing that if he couldn't pry the monster off of Lockwood now, there wouldn't be second shot at it for either of them.

IX

(From the Field Journal of Terrence Milk)

Fort Yukon, Alaska Territory

July 10th (?), 1885

The only reason I suppose today is the 10th is that I awoke in darkness — or should I say, as close to darkness as the waning summer gets at the Arctic Circle. It is possible though that I slept for another 24-hours again. No one is yet around for me to ask the exact date. Not that it matters. I will find out when my meal and newspaper are delivered.

For a frontier hospital, the Fort Yukon facilities are surprisingly comfortable and well-equipped. I lack nothing these days, especially company. Now that I'm awake and coherent, a steady stream of soldiers, officers, doctors, and members of the janitorial staff keep finding excuses to visit my room to speak with the man who killed the Yukon Monster. Some of them, despite the obvious array of bandages and slings, even try to shake my hand. I keep having to tell them it was Lockwood; he is the hero, not me. None of them seem to want to hear it, though. They want the story, not the truth. Instead I tell them lies, tell them I don't remember what happened or how I got out of there. Obviously, news of my condition has leaked beyond the hospital and, besides friendly well-wishers, I find myself fending-off the intrepid gentlemen of the press, several of whom have been arrested for posing as soldiers. I imagine counterfeit officers, doctors, and members of the janitorial staff should also be expected. I shall have to keep this journal close at all times or find it reprinted in the pages of the TRIBUNE.

This is the first day I have been able to write. Holding a pencil is one thing; controlling its movements across a page is something else. Being awake, un-medicated, and pain-free enough to put words together with some kind of sense is another thing entirely.

Speaking of newspapers, the delay in getting them from the States is not that long — a few days or a week at most. The other day I saw, for the first time, a photograph reprinted in a newspaper: Eugene Simon, Dr. Smith, and Baril on the tarmac at Orchard Park standing near a pile of crates, the center one open to display the Monster's giant head. Dead as it was, Baril still looked terrified of the thing.

The article said Lockwood's body was going back to his parents in Whitewater, Wisconsin. Beyond noting O'Riley or Stockton being killed by the creature, there was nothing about the disposition of their remains, not that I'm surprised. Dr. Smith will be sure to get them sorted and properly interred, and their families taken care of.

A burning ache is radiating though my good arm and my handwriting is getting as bad as Adrian's. The first time back to writing and I've already pushed myself too far. Some new limits will have to be learned, I'm sure. With luck, they will be temporary. But before I quit, there are thoughts I need out of my head and onto paper:

We tangled two of those things, each differing in size and color — and gender, for all I know. Logic dictates there are more than those two, but how many more? How many of those things can the territory support? Are they roaming across Canada as well? What are the implications of the existence of these creatures? If they are survivors of a previous geological period, how did they manage where other species failed, specifically the short-faced bear? Are these a species of bear — or are bears a species of it? And as with their ostensibly ursine relatives, have these creatures evolved into more than one type?

So many questions, some of which I hope to have answered as soon as I get back to Chicago. The rest would seem to require another trip to the field.

There is more — there is always more — but I really must stop. I am saved from myself by Corporal Barnes's unmistakable tromp. And, joy of joys, he's brought visitor.