

HIVE



TIM CURRAN

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HIVE

A Novel By Tim Curran

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This is for Elaine Lamkin

PART ONE

OUT OF THE ICE

“... there was one part of the ancient land... which had come to be shunned as vaguely and namelessly evil.”

— H.P. Lovecraft

Antarctica was a graveyard, of course.

A subzero cemetery of high frozen monoliths and leaning tombstones of exposed, ancient rock. A burial ground of sunless wastes and biting cold, snow plains and ragged mountains. Gale-force blizzards sucked the warmth from a man and tucked him down deep in frozen tombs and covered his tracks with shrieking windstorms of ice crystals that blew just as fine and white as crematory ash. Like the snow and the cold and the enveloping darkness of winter, the winds were a constant. Night after night, they screamed and wailed with the voices of lost souls. A communal death-rattle of all those interred in mass graves of coveting blue ice and sculpted into leering, frosted death angels.

Antarctica was dead and had been for millions of years.

A wasteland, some said, where God had buried those things he no longer wished to look upon. Nightmares and abominations of flesh and spirit. And if that were true, then whatever was entombed beneath the permafrost, locked-down cold and sightless in that eternal deep-freeze, was never meant to be exhumed.

Nothing stays buried forever at the Pole.

It was one of those sayings they tossed around down there. Sometimes you weren't sure what meant and other times you weren't sure you wanted to. But it was true, nonetheless: nothing stays buried forever at the South Pole. The glaciers are in constant motion, grinding and tearing at the primordial bedrock far below, and what they don't dig up, sooner or later the blizzard winds will blow clean like bones in the desert. So if Antarctica was a graveyard then, it was one in a process of perpetual resurrection, vomiting out those awful bits of its past it could no longer hold down in its belly.

This is how Hayes saw it on his darker days at Kharkhov Station when his poetic turn of mind began devouring itself one bite at a time. But he knew it to be true. He just tried not to think about it, was all.

"I can see 'em now," Lind said, his face pressed up to the frosted glass of Targa House, the place where all the personnel of the station ate, slept, and lived. "It's Gates, all right, coming in with the SnoCat. Must be bringing those mummies in from the high ridges."

Hayes set down his cup of coffee, scratched his beard, and went up to the window. What he saw out there was winter at the South Geomagnetic Pole . . . sheets of snow whipping and swirling and engulfing. The steeple of the drilling tower, the dome of the meteorology station, the power Quonset, half dozen other structures limned by electric lights and shrouded beneath blankets of white.

Kharkhov Station sat near-center of East Antarctica on the Polar Plateau, some 3500 meters above sea level in what had once been the Soviet sector of the continent. A desolate, godless place that was completely cut off from the world from March until October when spring finally returned. During the long, dark winter, only a small crew of contractors and technicians remained, the others got out before the planes stopped coming and winter set its teeth into that ancient continent.

A burial ground.

That's what it was.

The wind howled and the huts shook and day by day that immense bleak nothingness chewed a hole through your soul and blew through your numbed mind like an October gust through a deserted house. It was the third week of winter and you knew the sun would not rise and break that womb of blackness for another three months. Three long, bitter months that would eat at your belly and your brain, freezing something up inside you that wouldn't thaw until you saw civilization again in the spring. And until then, you waited and you listened and you were never really sure what for.

A graveyard indeed, Hayes thought.

The visibility returned for a few fleeting moments and he could see the lights of the SnoCat bobbing through the dimness. Yeah, it was Gates, all right. Gates and his cargo of goodies that had the entire station on edge. He had radioed in three days before from the tent camp about what he had found out there, what he was cutting from the ice.

And now just about everyone was beside themselves with excitement, just waiting for Gates' return like he was Jesus or Santa Claus.

But it was infectious.

Hayes had been seeing it for days now, that look of raw exhilaration and wonder on those usual dour, bored faces. The faces of children who were on the verge of some great discovery . . . wonder, awe and something just beneath it akin to superstitious terror. Because it didn't take too much to get the imagination rolling in that awful place and particularly when Gates promised he'd be rolling in with mummies from a pre-human civilization.

Jesus, the very idea was overwhelming.

"He's bringing the 'Cat over to Six," Lind said, fists clenched at his sides, something in his throat bobbing up and down. "Shit, Hayes, we're gonna be in the history books over this one. I was talking to Cutchen and Cutchen was saying that, come spring when they pull our asses out of here, we're all going to be famous, you know? Famous for discovering those mummies . . . he said this discovery will shake the world to its knees."

Hayes could just imagine Cutchen saying something like that. Cutchen's only pastimes seemed to be sarcasm and toying with lesser minds.

"Cutchen's full of shit," Hayes said.

"I thought you two were friends?"

"We are. That's why I know he's full of shit."

"Sure, but he's right about us being famous."

"Christ, Lind . . . listen to yourself. Gates is going to be famous. He's the man who found all that stuff up there. And maybe a couple of the other eggheads like Holm and Bryer who helped him . . . be you? Or me? Hell no, we're just contractors, were support personnel."

But Lind just shook his head. "No, what they found up there . . . we're part of it."

"Jesus Christ, Lind, you're a plumber. When the Discovery Channel or National Geographic start making their documentaries, they're not going to want to know how you bravely handled the Station shit or heat-taped two-hundred feet of piss-pipe. They'll be talking to the scientists, the techs, even the NSF hard-on LaHune. But not us. They'll tell you to keep the water running and me to run a couple extra two-twenty lines for all their equipment."

Of course, it was all lost on Lind.

He was so excited by it all he could barely contain himself. He was like a little kid waiting for trick-or-treating to start, tense and shaking, having a hell of a time just keeping his feet on the floor and not jumping for joy. And it was pretty funny to see, Hayes had to admit that. You took a guy like Lind - barely 5'5, just as round as a medicine ball and not much lighter, bad teeth, scraggly beard - and watched him hopping around like he was waiting for the candy store to open, it was absolutely priceless.

Damn, where was the camcorder when you needed it?

If Gates' mummies had been female, they would've wanted to keep their legs crossed in Lind's presence because he was that excited and that in love. Course, those mummies weren't male or female from what Gates said over the set. In fact, he was having a hell of a time deciding whether they were animal or vegetable.

Lind said, "They're unloading the sled now . . . must be bringing those mummies into the hut." Hayes shook his head. "And here I thought this winter was going to be a waste of time. How old he say those mummies were?"

"He's guessing two- to three-hundred million years. Back when dinosaurs ruled the earth."

Lind clucked his tongue. "Imagine that. I didn't even know there *were* mummies back then."

Hayes just looked at him, shook his head. It was a good thing Lind was some kind of plumber because when you came down to it, he wasn't much smarter than most dingleballs hanging off a camel's ass. A real natural with pipes and venting, but anything else? Forget it.

As Hayes watched, Lind began pulling on his fleece jacket and thermal pants, parka, boots, and wool mittens. "Well aren't you coming, Hayes?"

But Hayes just shook his head. Already he could see people spilling out of shacks and buildings, some of them still pulling on their ECW's even though the wind was shrieking and it was pushing seventy below out there.

"I'll wait until the groupies thin," he told Lind.

But Lind was already going out the door, the frigid breath of Antarctica blowing in until the heater swallowed it.

Hayes sat down, lit a cigarette and sipped coffee, staring at the game of solitaire on his laptop. Yeah, it was going to be a long goddamn winter. The thought of that set on him wrong for reasons even he wasn't sure of, made him feel like he was bleeding inside.

Outside the compound, the wind rose up, showing its teeth.

You had to love Lind, Hayes thought later as he got a look at the mummies over in Hut #6. He was really something, positively good to the last drop. Hayes was standing there with him and two other contractors that knew about as much about evolutionary biology as they did about menstrual cramps. . . and Lind? Oh, he was just going on and on while Gates and Bryer and Holm took notes and photographs, made measurements and scraped ice from one of the mummies.

“Yeah, that’s one ugly, prick, Professor,” Lind was saying, hovering around them, taking up their light while they continually, and politely, told him to step back. “Damn, look at that thing . . . enough to give you the cold sweats. I bet I have nightmares until spring just looking at it. But, you know, more you look at it, more I’m thinking that what you got there is one of those animals without a spine, you know, an un-vertebrate like a starfish or a jellyfish. Something like that.”

“You mean *invertebrate*,” Bryer, the paleoclimatologist corrected him.

“Isn’t that what I said?”

Bryer chuckled, as did a few of the others.

Outside, the wind pelted the walls with snow just as fine as blown sand. And inside, the air was greasy, warm, close. A funny, acrid stink beginning to make itself known as the thing continued to melt.

“We really made a find here, eh, Professor?” Lind said to Gates.

He looked up over his spectacles, a pencil hanging from his lips. “Yes, we certainly did. The find of the ages, Lind. What we have here is entirely new to science. I’m guessing it’s neither animal nor plant, but a sort of chimera.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” Lind said. “Boy, this is gonna make us famous.”

Hayes laughed low in his throat. “Sure, I can already see your picture on the cover of *Newsweek* and *Scientific American*. There’s a picture of Professor Gates, too, but it’s kind of small, stuck down in the corner.”

There were a few laughs over that.

Lind scowled. “You don’t have to be a smartass, Hayes. Jesus Christ.”

But Hayes figured he did. Here these guys were trying to figure out what this was all about while Lind circled them on his unicycle, pumping his red horn and shaking a rubber chicken at them.

So, *yes*, he had to be a smartass.

Same way Lind had to talk . . . even about things he knew nothing of. These were traits they both practiced month by dark month during the long, grim South Pole winters. But in the hut . . . with the defrosting mummy laid out like something spilled from a freakshow jar . . . well, maybe they were doing it because they had to do something. Had to say something. Make some noise, anything to disrupt the malignant sound of that nightmare melting, dripping and dripping like blood from a slit throat. Hayes couldn’t stand it . . . it made his scalp feel like it wanted to crawl off the back of his head.

And he kept thinking: *What the hell’s with you? It’s a goddamn fossil, it can’t do nothing but wait.*

Wait. Yeah, maybe that wasn't what he'd meant to think, but had thought it all the same. And the more you stared at that goddamn thing, more you started thinking it wasn't a fossil at all, just something ancient . . . *waiting*.

Christ, of all crazy things to be thinking.

The wind shook the hut and that was enough for the other two onlookers — a couple contractors named Rutkowski and St. Ours. They went out the door like something was biting their asses. And maybe something was.

"I'm starting to get the feeling that our friends here don't like what you've found," Holm said, running a hand through his white hair. "I think it's giving them the creeps."

Gates laughed thinly. "Is our pet here bothering you, Hayes?"

"Hell, no, I like it, big ugly sonofabitch," he said. "Got all I can do not to hug it and get it alone somewhere."

They all started laughing at that. But it didn't last long. Not very long at all. Like laughter in a mortuary, good cheer just did not belong in this place. Not now. Not with what was berthed in there.

Hayes did not envy Gates and his people.

Sure, they were scientists. Gates was a paleobiologist and Holm was a geologist, but the very idea of touching that monstrosity in the melting ice, well, it made something in his stomach roll over and then roll over again. He was trying desperately to catalog what it was he was feeling, but it was just beyond him. All he could say for sure is that that creature made his guts roll up like a dirty carpet, made something inside him run both hot and cold. Whatever that thing was, it revolted him on some unknown inner level and he just couldn't get a handle on it.

It was dead.

That's what Gates said, but looking at it, Christ and the saints, you really had to wonder. For the blue ice was getting very clear now and it was like looking through thick glass. It distorted things, but nowhere near enough for Hayes' liking.

The mummy was big. Probably an easy seven feet from end to end, shaped like some great flesh barrel that tapered at each end and was set with high vertical ridges that ran up and down its length. Its skin was an oily gunmetal gray like that of a shark, set with tiny fissures and minute scars. Midline, there was a pair of appendages that branched out like tree limbs and then branched out again into five tapering tendrils. At the bottom of the torso, there were five muscular tentacles, each an easy four feet in length. They looked oddly like the trunks of elephants . . . though not wrinkled, but smooth and firm and powerful. They ended in flat triangular spades that might have been called feet on another world.

And the ice kept melting and the water kept dripping and that weird rotten fish-stink began to come off the thing.

"What's that there?" Lind said. "That . . . that a head?"

"Yes," Gates said. "It would seem to meet the criteria."

Maybe for a biologist, but not for Hayes or Lind. They stood around like mourners, just wanting to throw dirt over it. At the top of the thing's torso was a flabby, blunt neck that almost looked like a wrinkled-up scarf or foreskin. On top of it was something like a great five-pointed starfish, dirty yellow

in color. The radial arms of the star were made of tapering, saggy tubes and at the end of each, a bulbous red eye.

Hayes thought that it looked like the creature had been frozen very quickly, flash-frozen like one of those mammoths up in Siberia you read about. Because it looked . . . well, almost *startled* like it had been caught by surprise. At least that's what he had been thinking, but the more the ice melted and the more of that head and those five leering red eyes he saw, the more he was thinking it looked pissed-off, arrogant, superior, something. And whatever that look was, it sure as hell was not friendly.

You wouldn't want to meet this fellah on a good day, Hayes thought, let alone with that evil look about it.

And thinking that, he just couldn't imagine how something like it could have walked. For it was debased and degenerate, the sort of thing made to crawl, not walk upright like a man. But according to what Gates told Bryer, it stood and walked, all right.

"That's some sort of wing there I'd bet," Holm said, indicating an arched tubular network like bones on the thing's left side that were folded-in on themselves like an oriental fan. Even folded, you could see the fine webbing of mesh between the tubes. "And another over here. Certainly."

"Jesus, you mean it could fly?" Lind said.

Gates scribbled something in his notebook. "Well, at this point we're opting for some sort of marine adaptation . . . maybe not wings, but possibly fins . . . though until we can actually examine them, I'm only guessing."

In his mind, Hayes could see that thing flying around like some sort of cylindrical gargoyle, dipping down over sharp-peaked roofs. That was the image he had and it was very clear in his mind for some reason as if it was something he had seen once or maybe dreamed about.

"Has LaHune see it yet?"

Gates said he hadn't, but that he was very excited about the prospects of the discovery. And Hayes could almost hear LaHune saying just that, *Gentlemen, I am most excited about the prospects of this monumental discovery*. Yeah, that's exactly how he would have said it. Hayes shook his head. LaHune was some kind of guy. Dennis LaHune was the NSF administrator who ran Kharkhov Station all summer and winter. It was his job to keep things running, make certain resources were not wasted, keep everything on the straight and narrow.

Yeah, Hayes thought, resident ballbuster, bean-counter, and NSF ramrod. That was LaHune. The headmaster lording over this clutch of unruly, free-thinking students as it were. LaHune had more personality than your average window dummy, but not much.

Lind said, "I can't believe he hasn't come to see what we have out here. You would think it was his job."

"C'mon, Lind," Hayes said. "He's got more important shit to be doing like counting pencils and making sure we're not using too many paperclips."

Gates chuckled.

The water that melted off that irregular block of ice was being collected in buckets, tagged for later study. Drip, drip, drip.

"Gets under your skin, don't it?" Lind said. "Just like that movie . . . you ever seen that movie Hayes? Up at the North Pole or maybe it was the South, they got this alien in a block of ice and some dumbfuck throws an electric blanket over it and it unthaws, runs around camp sucking everybody's blood. Think that guy from *Gunsmoke* was in it."

Hayes said, "Yeah, I saw it. Was kind of trying not to think about it."

Gates smiled, set his digital camera aside. With his big shaggy beard he looked more mountain man than paleontologist. "Oh, we're unthawing our friend here, boys, but it won't be by accident. And don't worry, this creature has been dead a long, long time."

"Famous last words," Hayes said and they all had a laugh over that.

Except Lind.

They'd lost him somewhere along the way.

He stood there staring at the thing in the ice, listening to the water dripping and it seemed to have the same effect on him as the call of a siren: his eyes were fixed and wide, his lips moving but no words coming out. He stood there like that for maybe five minutes before anyone seemed to notice and by then it looked much like he was in a trance.

Hayes said, "Lind . . . hey, Lind . . . you okay?"

He just shook his head, his upper lip pulled up into a snarl. "That fucking LaHune . . . thinks he's in charge, but doesn't have the balls to come and look at this . . . this *monster*. Bastard's probably on the line with NSF McMurdo, bragging about this, telling them all about it. But what does he know about it? Unless you stand here looking at it, feeling it looking *back* at you, how can you know about it?"

Hayes put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, chill out here, Lind, it's just a fossil."

Lind shrugged off his hand. "Oh, is that all it is? You telling me you don't feel that thing *looking* at you? Jesus, those eyes . . . those awful red eyes . . . they get right inside you, make you feel things, make you want to do things. You telling me you can't feel it up *here*?" He was rubbing his temples, kneading them roughly like dough. "Can't you feel what it's thinking? Can't you feel it getting inside your head wanting to steal your mind . . . wanting to make you something but what you are? *Oh Christ, Hayes, it's . . . those eyes . . . those fucking eyes . . . they unlock things in your head, they . . .*"

He paused there, breathing very hard now, gasping almost like a fish that was asphyxiating. There was sweat all over his face and his eyes were bulging from his head, cords straining at his neck. He looked to be on the verge of utter hysteria or maybe a good old-fashioned stroke.

"You better get him back to the compound," Gates said.

They were all staring at Lind, thinking things but not saying them. A clot of ice dropped from the mummy and Hayes stiffened at the sound. It was enough, by God, it was more than enough.

He helped Lind with his parka and led him to the door. As Hayes made to open it, Lind turned around and looked at the scientists. "I'm not crazy, I don't care what you think. But you better listen to me and you better listen good." He jabbed a shaking finger at the mummy. "Whatever you do, whatever any of you do . . . don't stay in here alone with it, if you know what's good for you, *don't stay in here alone with it* . . ."

Then they were out the door.

“Well,” Bryer said. “Well.”

The wind clutched the hut like a fist, shook it, made the overhead lights flicker and for barely second, they were in the dark with the thing.

And by the looks on their faces, they hadn't cared for it much.

There were a lot of camps at the South Pole. Collections of pitted bones scattered over the frozen slopes and lowlands like sores and contusions on the ancient hide of the beast. But only a handful of them were occupied when winter showed its cold, white teeth.

Kharkhov was one of the few.

Just another rawboned research station, its numerous buildings like meatless skeletons rising from the black ice, shivering beneath shrouds of blowing white. A desolate and godforsaken place where the sun never rose and the wind never stopped screaming. The sort of place that made you pull into yourself, roll up like a pillbug and hold on tight, waiting for the night to end and spring to begin. But until that time, there was nothing to do but wait and languish through the days that were nights and keep your mind occupied.

What you didn't want to do was to think about ancient, hideous things that had been exhumed from polar tombs. Things that pre-dated humanity by God knew how many millions of years. Things that would drive you mad if you saw them walk. Things with glaring red eyes that seemed to get inside you and whisper with malevolent voices, filling your mind with reaching, alien shadows.

Although he drank a pint of Jim Beam Rye before lights out, Hayes didn't sleep worth a damn that night. He had weird dreams from the moment he closed his eyes to the moment they snapped back open at four a.m. In the darkness he lay there, sweat beading his face.

The dorm room was dark, the readout of a digital clock over on the wall casting a grainy green illumination. There were two beds in there. If you fell out of yours, you stood a good chance of falling into your partner's. They were crowded places, the dorms, but space was limited at the stations. Tonight the other bed was empty. Lind was sleeping on a cot in the infirmary, shot full of Seconal by Doc Sharkey.

Hayes was alone.

Dreams, just dreams. Nothing to get worked up about.

Maybe it had been what happened to Lind and maybe it was something else, but the dreams had been bad. Real bad. Even now, Hayes was all fuzzy-headed and he couldn't be sure they *were* dreams. He couldn't remember them all, just some tangled skein of nightmares where he was pursued, hiding from terrible shapes with burning eyes.

He could only remember the last one with any clarity.

And that's the one that had yanked him out of sleep, made him sit right up, teeth chattering. In the dream, some grotesque freezing black shadow had fallen over him, bathing him with the cold of tombs and crypts. It had been standing at the foot of his bed, that seething amorphous shape, looking at him. . . and that had done it. He'd woken up, fighting back a scream.

Nerves.

Jesus, that's all it was. Too much weird shit happening lately, his imagination had been cranked. And when you lost control of your imagination during the long Antarctic winter, you could be in real trouble.

Hayes settled back in, deciding to lay off the microwave lasagna before bedtime. Because that was probably the real culprit.

Couldn't be anything else.

By the next afternoon, everyone in camp had heard about Lind's little episode.

At a research station like Kharkhov, there were no secrets. Stories — whether real, imagined, or grossly exaggerated — made the rounds like clap at a convention. Everything was passed around, re-told, re-invented, blown out of proportion until it bore little resemblance to the incident that had inspired it.

In the mess hall, trying to eat his grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup in peace, they were all over Hayes like birds on roadkill, all pecking away to see if there was any good red meat left on the carcass.

“Heard Lind tried to slit his wrists,” Meiner, one of the heavy equipment operators was saying, smelling like diesel fuel and hydraulic grease and not doing much for Hayes' appetite. “Sumbitch just went crazy, they're saying, crazier than a red-headed shitbug. Just lost it staring down at that mummy in the ice.”

Hayes sighed, set his sandwich down. “He -”

“It's true enough,” St. Ours said. “I was there with him for awhile. He was getting a funny look in his eyes the whole time, just staring at the ugly bastard in the ice, that monster just thawing out and the face swimming up clear . . . and it weren't no sort of face I'd want to see again.”

Rutkowski jumped in at that point, started saying how Lind had gotten a funny gleam in his eye like a man ready to jump off a bridge. That none of it surprised him because there was something funny about Lind and something even funnier about those dead things Gates had dragged back from the camp in the foothills.

They talked on and on non-stop.

Didn't let Hayes get a word in edgewise about any of it. Other than Gates, Holm, and Bryer, he'd been the only one to see Lind's breakdown, if that's what it had been. Both Rutkowski and St. Ours had left the hut maybe fifteen minutes before. Not that the lack of firsthand experience in the matter was slowing them down any.

Meiner was saying how he'd been at the Palmer Station on Anvers Island one lean winter and that three people had committed suicide one week, slit their wrists to a man, one after the other. It was spooky shit, he said. Got so people at Palmer thought there was some sort of insanity bug making the rounds. But that was the Antarctic winter, sometimes people just couldn't take the isolation, the desolation, it got under their skins like scabies. And when that happened, when something slipped a cog upstairs, then that left a person wide open to bad “influences.”

“Don't surprise me, not one cunt-hair,” St. Ours confessed to them. “We had this man and wife team at McMurdo one winter, funny ducks they were, geologists, studying rocks and corings, always looking for something but real vague as to what it was when you put a question to 'em. Anyway, they were up on Mount Erebus for maybe a week, doing some digging. They come down, come back, and they got this funny look in their eyes . . . kind of a shellshocked look, you know?”

Rutkowski nodded. “Seen it plenty of times.”

“Sure enough,” St. Ours said. “Sure enough. Only this time it was worse, savvy? They had all these rocks they found up there, but real flat with weird carvings on ‘em like hieroglyphics or some of the Egyptian gobbledegook. They was acting damn freaky, hoarding those rocks, getting really scary about ‘em. So one day, I was over at their shack and I says to ‘em, I ast ‘em what in Christ were those rocks about? They said they were artifacts from some ancient civilization, wouldn’t let me touch ‘em. Said once you touched ‘em, your mind went one drop at a time and something else filled it. What? I ast ‘em. But they wouldn’t say, just grinning and staring like a couple pitch-and-throw carnie dolls. Two days later, yessir, two days later, hand in hand they wandered off into a blizzard, left a note that they was following the ‘old voices from under the mountain.’ Jesus Christ. But that just goes to show you the kind of horseshitty things that happen down here.”

“I believe it,” Meiner said.

Hayes pushed his plate away, wondering why they had to choose him as their totem pole to dance around. “Listen, you guys, I was there when Lind dropped his deck. None of *you* were, only me. He didn’t try to slit his wrists or anything like that, he just had a bad time of it is all.”

They listened intently, nodded, then Rutkowski got that conspiratorial look in his eyes and said, “Shit, both his wrists, that’s what they’re saying. Probably would’ve made a go of his throat if there were time.”

“I don’t like it,” St. Ours said.

“Listen - “ Hayes attempted, but they shut him off like a leaky tap.

“I don’t like the idea of three more months up here with a crazy man,” Rutkowski said. “They better lock his ass up. That’s all I gotta say on the matter.”

Meiner said, “It ain’t that crazy shit you got to worry about, it’s what Gates brought back here. Jesus and Mary, go out there and look at that one he’s defrosting . . . it’ll make you want to piss down your leg. Looks like some kind of crazy gray cucumber with these yellow worms growing out of the top of his head and big, staring red eyes at the end of each one . . . nothing that looks like that thing can be up for any good. Believe you me.”

Gradually, as the shit got deeper and it got difficult to find leg room or draw a breath with the stink, they moved off and Lind was pretty much forgotten. Now it was just the mummies and how word had it they weren’t even from this planet. Ghost stories and campfire tales and those three big, seasoned men trying to out-do one another, scaring the shit out of each other in the process.

Hayes ignored it all and sipped his soup, listened to the wind trying to strip Targa House off the frozen tundra as it did day after day, reaching and clawing and howling like something hungry coming down out of the mountains to the west.

“Join you?” a voice said.

Hayes looked up and it was Doc Sharkey, the station’s physician, a short pretty redhead with bright blue eyes. She was the only woman in camp and all the men were saying how she was too heavy for their liking, but by spring they’d all be trying to get into her pants.

Thing was, she wasn’t heavy, not in Hayes’ worldview. She was wide in the hips, nicely rounded in that way he’d always found blatantly sexual. No, the men kept their distance (at least for the time being) because she intimidated them. It wasn’t anything she actually said or did, but her face more than anything. Those upturned Nordic eyes of hers gave her a cold, detached look that was enhanced by her

mouth which had a sort of cruel lilt to it.

Hayes liked her right away when he met her and the reason for that was downright silly and he didn't even like to admit it to himself: she reminded him of Carla Jean Rasper from the third grade, his first serious crush. Same hair, same eyes, same mouth. When he'd first caught sight of Sharkey, he'd been instantly transported back to grade school, speechless and stupid just like he'd been around Carla Jean. *Good Morning, little schoolgirl . . .*

"Earth to Jimmy Hayes . . . what's your frequency?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, Doc, sit down. Please do," Hayes said.

What's your frequency? He liked that. Hadn't that nut who attacked Dan Rather on his way to CBS that time said something like that? Sure. *What's your frequency, Kenneth?* REM had done a song by the same name.

Sharkey sat down and Hayes found himself staring into her eyes a little too long. He wasn't married but she was. Her husband was an anthropologist on a grant somewhere in Borneo studying monkey semen or something like that.

"How goes it?" Sharkey asked, pouring some dressing on her salad.

Hayes laughed without meaning to do so. "Well, I been thinking that they better take a chance and send a plane down here before all these people go completely mad."

She smiled. "We won't see a plane until September at the earliest and mid-October wouldn't surprise me. Sorry, Jimmy, what we got is what we got and we'll have to live with it."

"They're talking some pretty crazy shit, Doc," Hayes told her. "And not just the contractors either, it's what I'm hearing is correct."

The building shook and the lights dimmed momentarily.

Sharkey sighed. "No, it's not just the contractors, it's the scientists, too. I think this is going to be a long winter. Should make for an interesting psychological profile by spring."

"Sure, I don't doubt it a bit. Maybe Gates ought to ship his mummies back up to those caves."

"That won't happen," she laughed.

"I'm serious, Doc. Those goddamn things are like catalysts. These people are already acting goddamn loony and I hate to see what another month will bring."

"I've spent three winters at the Pole, Jimmy, and most of them are just lonely and quiet and boring. But I don't think we'll see that this year. What Gates found has everyone worked up. I'm hoping it'll die down in a week or so, but I have to wonder. Even I have to wonder."

"Why's that?"

She looked at him, her eyes sparkling. "You saw those mummies, Jimmy, and you can't deny that there's something . . . *peculiar* about them. Don't look at me like that, you felt it same as I did. They have to be the most alien-looking creatures I've ever seen, but I don't know if that's what's eating people around here. I'm only going to say, from a very safe medical pedestal, that those . . . *remains* seem to be having a very unusual psychological impact on whoever looks at them."

Hayes didn't doubt that a bit. He'd felt it right away when he'd been in Hut #6 with Lind and the others. He hadn't been able to put a finger on what it was about the thing and still really couldn't, other than to say that there was something extremely *unsettling* about it. Something that got inside you, dug deep like a burrowing worm looking for a hot, moist place to lay its eggs.

And what had Lind said?

Can't you feel it getting inside your head, wanting to steal your mind...?

Hayes swallowed, something caught in his throat. "There's something . . . *bad* about those things, Doc. We're all feeling it. Maybe not Gates and those other eggheads, but the rest of us are feeling it just fine, thank you. I don't know what to make of it."

"Lind seemed to think it was trying to steal his mind or something?"

Hayes nodded. "That's what he said. It was getting inside his head, unlocking things. You want to take a stab at that?"

She shook her head. "I'm not a therapist, Jimmy. I've given you my learned G.P. speculation, that's all I can do."

"How about off the record?"

She set her fork down. "Off the record? Off the record you couldn't pay me a million dollars to spend the night alone out there with that horror."

That evening after dinner, Gates finally left the side of his lover out in Hut #6, and joined the others in the community room at Targa House. At what seemed a prearranged moment — the entire winter crew in attendance, some 20 scientists and contractors — he stood up and tapped a spoon against his water glass. It drew everyone’s attention right away, because to a man, they’d been waiting for it.

Waiting patiently.

Now, it was rare to find everyone in the community room. Usually some of the contractors would be out at the power station or working on the vehicles and snowmobiles, maybe down in the shafts checking lines. And the scientists were usually out at the drilling tower or in one of their improvised labs or at their laptops, tapping away.

But not tonight.

Everyone was there, gathered around just waiting for Gates to say something because he hadn’t exactly been a social butterfly since he came down from the tent camp. So everyone was in attendance like spooks hanging around the War Room wondering if the president was going to bomb some country.

Hayes was sitting with Doc Sharkey and Cutchen, the meteorologist, playing poker. Rutkowski and most of the other contractors were at the table opposite playing cribbage . . . now and again, one of them would look over at Elaine Sharkey, nod their heads as if to say, yup, she’s a woman, all right, knew her the first time I saw her.

“I think Dr. Gates would like to say a word or two,” LaHune said. He was sitting alone at a table in the corner looking . . . efficient. Sitting there in his fancy *L.L. Bean* sweater and windpants, straight and tall like he had an iron bar shoved up his ass and he wanted to keep it there.

“Ah, the plot thickens,” Cutchen said.

Gates smiled to everyone. His eyes were bloodshot with brown half-moons under them. He’d been busy and hadn’t been sleeping much. “Hello, everyone,” he said. “Tomorrow afternoon I’m going back up to the excavation, but before I do that, I’d like to touch base and tell you what all this is about and what it might mean.”

Everyone was watching him now.

“I’m not going to waste a lot of your time talking about the mummies themselves as we’ve only just completed a preliminary dissection of one of the intact specimens and it’ll take time to correlate and interpret all the data Dr. Holm, Dr. Bryer, and myself have compiled. But I don’t think I’d be going out on *too* shaky of a limb by saying what we’ve found out there will certainly revolutionize the field of biology. The creature . . . creatures . . . are of a completely new variety, composed of characteristics of both plant and animal and a few that fit neither pantheon. Let me just say that, in regards to its basic anatomy, it seems to fit nowhere in the fossil record. I’m guessing what we’ve uncovered up here will keep comparative anatomists and physiologists alike busy for decades to come.

“Anyway . . . let me just mention its nervous system briefly. I have made a pretty extensive examination here and . . . well, I think I can safely say that this creature was almost certainly intelligent. Possibly far in advance of ourselves. I don’t want to bore you with anatomy, but I want you to

understand a few things. Now, the human brain is double-lobed, as you I'm sure know, left and right hemispheres controlling a variety of functions, depending on whether you are left or right handed. The hemispheres communicate via bundles of axons. Now, let me say that our creature . . . we have, as you no good name for it . . . has a five-lobed brain which hints at an incredible level of neurophysiological sophistication. Whereas our brains have but two main types of cells, the creature's brain has no less than five. Microscopic examination of its neurons, brain cells, also indicate a staggering degree of neuronal specialization and complexity. Human neurons are basically made up of a central cell body, the soma, and branched fibers called dendrites and axons. Neurons share information with other neurons via electrical impulses gathered by the dendrites at connection points which are called synapses. The information is processed by the soma and its output travels down the axons to the synapses of other neurons. Boring? I suppose it is. Regardless, I tell you this only in comparison for the creature's neurons are totally alien, though, I would assume, operate in roughly the same manner. You see, the creature's neurons are not made up of a single cell body, but a sort of triple soma connected to a highly sophisticated network of dendrites, axons, and a mysterious third plexus of branching fibers that has simply baffled.

"Why do I tell you all this?" Gates smiled thinly, then frowned. "Because you need to understand the nature of what we're dealing with here, the level of intellect this creature must have possessed in life which must have been limitless. I doubt the human brain will be anywhere near this level of development for several million years. Maybe not even then. So now you know . . . this creature was possessed of something of a hyper-intellect and appears to have sensory adaptations that hint at senses beyond the normal five."

Hayes looked over at Sharkey and she whistled silently. Which was pretty much what he'd been doing in his head. Sure, some of what Gates said was a little heady, but the impact of it was shocking. What he was saying was that these creatures — apparently million of years gone — were intellectual above man as man was above your average toad. Jesus, it was enough to suck the wind out of you.

Gates took a drink of water. "Now I know that there's been a lot of talk about our mummies . . . I'm not sure if that word even applies such is the state of their preservation . . . and a lot of it has been pretty wild. What I keep hearing is that people are saying these creatures might be alien, as in *extraterrestrial*. I won't even hazard a guess as to that, but I will say that, given their level of development and culture, I suppose it's not impossible. We won't even be able to speculate much on things like that until we begin a comprehensive analysis of the creatures' DNA and proteins. As you know, I'm sure, all life on Earth shares the same DNA . . . we're only different from a spider or a fungus because of *how* our DNA synthesizes and replicates proteins. If, say, the DNA breakdown of the creature was to show marked irregularities from our own . . . or even a completely alien structure . . . then, my friends, we would have some very tough questions to ask ourselves."

Hayes wasn't liking any of this.

Gates wasn't definitively saying that those things were from Mars or Altair-6, but he sure as hell wasn't ruling it out either. Christ, Rutkowski and the boys were going to have a field day with this.

Gates took another drink of water. "Okay, time for your history lesson now that you've had your biology lecture." There were a few stifled laughs at that. "*Aliens*. It's sort of a word that's pretty much been worn out, but it's one you hear about from time to time if you've spent any time down here in Antarctica. For years there's been crazy stories circulating about some great pre-human civilization under

the ice. I'm sure most of you vets have heard your share of horror stories. But how did all that start? Well, I'll tell you — ~~the Pabodie Expedition and the Starkweather-Moore Expedition~~. Ah, I saw a few eyes light up at the mention of those names. Some of you might be familiar with them . . . “

He went on to say that both of these expeditions had taken on the characteristics of urban myth over the years to such an extent that most people — even most scientists — were of the mind neither expedition had ever taken place, that it was all some great hoax dredged up by conspiracists and Antarctic field workers with too much damn time on their hands. But, in truth, the expeditions had not only been very real, but serious in intent and staffed by some very bright people. It was all a matter of historical fact.

“The Pabodie expedition of 1930-31 was the first,” Gates said. “It was led by William Dyer, a geology professor from Miskatonic University . . . where, heh, heh, I did my undergrad work. Anyway, the purpose of the expedition was to do coring work with a newly-designed drill and shed a little light on the geologic and paleontologic history of the Antarctic continent. Well, the results, at first, were mixed. The team's biologist, a fellow named Lake, discovered what appeared to be fossilized prints in Precambrian rock that Lake surmised was from the Archeozoic era . . . “

As it turned out, Gates said, it was the beginning of the end. More prints were discovered and Lake had no doubt by that point that what he was seeing was the fossil evidence of some unknown, but apparently advanced organism that walked upright eons before such a thing could have been possible. It was startling. The fossil record was implicit on the fact that nothing beyond simple algae or very rudimentary worms were extant at the time, roughly 700 million years ago.

Then, drilling northwest of the main camp, Lake and his associates broke into a subterranean cave.

“Now, people, this is where things get strange. Lake discovered the remains of creatures that were, yes, exactly like the ones my team has uncovered. He broadcast some fairly detailed information back to Dyer at the main camp, telling Dyer that he had found more fossilized prints and that he was of the opinion that the specimens he found were, in fact, the individuals that had *made* those prints. Fascinating stuff . . . “

Through the years, he explained, the controversy surrounding Lake's discoveries had become something of a battleground for scientists. No actual specimens were taken back for further study, so all they had was Lake's word on it and some corroborative testimony from Dyer, a few blurry snapshots that were not exactly undeniable proof of anything.

“It seems that at this point, things went bad for the Pabodie Expedition. After they had not heard from Lake for several days, Dyer and a few others flew up into the mountains to Lake's temporary camp. What they found was utter destruction . . . tents flattened, machinery destroyed, sleds gone, and, worse, all eleven men were missing. As were the specimens Lake had found. Curious. Anyway, this is the point where most people believe that Dyer and his people went mad, *dementia Antarctica*, they called it, that he imagined all the awful things that he later freely admitted to . . . “

Dyer apparently radioed back to the world a censored version of what he saw at the devastated camp, saying that a freak wind storm had wiped out the entire party. But he wrote a completely different version that was pretty much kept from the public at large and with good reason. For it wasn't a wind storm, he claimed, that destroyed that camp but something much worse. Something Gates wouldn't even comment on.

