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Dawn greys into focus. The wind is gentle and could quickly take us across the fjord and into the safety of the inland channels. But Laz still refuses to move, demanding more time to repair the kayaks. In our view they are perfectly suitable for the crossing and, as we urgently need to be gone, Graeme and I insist he simply cover the tiny cracks with repair tape. But in response he now insists he has to use fibreglass. I go soft, too soft, and allow him extra time, against my instincts.

I chance on some caves at the bottom of a gulch on the eastern tip and suggest he do his repair work in them, which probably sounds like *'Take your time. We've got all day'*. Even then, no repairs are begun. A few hours later the wind ramps itself up into fury mode. It's now too late to launch and sprint for it.

It's starting to snow heavily. We can't survive a snowstorm on open rocks. The caves are suddenly critical. Giorgio follows me down and we get to work moving rocks to make sleeping niches. The main rock platform inside is too exposed. Using a tent, climbing gear, rope and paddles, Graeme supervises the construction of a windbreak – really just a flat patch over an angled slit that looks like a red sail strapped to the rock. Yes Christo, behold in wonder!



An ingenious patch. It kept out the wind, but not the spindrift or the waves. We crawled in but swam out. Whilst inside the 'cave', we enjoyed a short respite and appreciated the illusion of safety.

We busy ourselves, setting up home in the darkened cave: stoves in this corner and food bags in that, spare clothes and all the equipment carefully arranged. Boots sit neatly beside stone pillows. Four tidy little cave rats, scraping out a sanctuary in the darkness of early Arctic winter, trapped 300 miles from nowhere.

Maybe it was something we ate, but I've now had two craps and am feeling rather flat. Lazza returns from having his crap saying the snow is knee

deep and you can't stand up in the wind. He went back to the kayak site and couldn't find two of them as they were totally buried.

This weather may last awhile. It looks like we're in for a long wait.

Time drags.

'I felt a wave'. Graeme shouts above the throbbing wind.

'You can't get water in here', Lazza laughs, *'We're too far from the sea.'*

'It bloody was. Right under my bag.'

His nest is fashioned on a pile of rocks at the back of the cave. Some yards away, slotted into a deep horizontal crack, I have elbowed out a hollow in the loose stones for my hip. Giorgio is somewhere near me, probably asleep. Lazza could be anywhere, curled up nursing his injuries. You wouldn't know in this black labyrinth. We are safely out of the storm's direct blast. Roughly comfortable. Spindrift is plastering the cave's interior walls and gently thickening over our bags. Outside, wind heaves and pulsates through the alleys: the sobbing of the Gods. This is quality opera: fully Wagnerian.

'There's another one. It's come right in. I could feel it.'

'Don't talk bullshit, Graeme. You're quite safe in here. We'd get it first and there's no water over our side.'

With a fading torch I charge the luminous numbers on my Rolex. It's well past seven thirty, with a long boring night ahead. I doze off.

Eight o'clock. Whoosh. I'm suddenly afloat. Graeme shouts again. I struggle for the zip to get out of my sleeping bag, and roll into two feet of freezing water. Bang. My head hits the cave roof. More water pumps through. Things are floating and thump against me. Giorgio's meagre stone wall, built to keep out snowdrift, hisses as another wave surges through. It's pitch black. We fumble about, confused. The sea recedes and I find my boots. I can't tell if I'm scared or thrilled, I'm so full of adrenaline. And then the full picture hits me.



Buried. A very close look may reveal two kayaks that urgently need to be moved uphill; a long way uphill. The other two kayaks cannot be seen under the snow. They also need to be moved.

'The kayaks', somebody shouts as we struggled about, *'Save the bloody kayaks'*.

Outside, what were walkways among the ravines, thick with snowdrift earlier, are now coursing white water. This is Venice on a very bad night. Stumbling,

I head for the kayaks. Wind and snow seem worse than ever with powerful gusts punching and pushing, jerking me about. My anorak flogs and cracks like a storm jib. The sea is lost in black with only the nearest waves visible, stark white and roaring. I am just in time.

The platform where yesterday our kayaks were anchored to steel pitons, is nearly under water. Two have ripped free and are rolling about, half full of sea. Only one small badly chafed cord appears to hold them. Alone, I am unable to haul them out of the surf. Then I see something twang taut.

A stern rope is anchored to rocks that are now submerged. I dash out in between waves, trying to unshackle them. As each wave slews the kayaks around I am being bashed in the legs, my trousers soaked. Lazza arrives and holds their bows against the surge. I left my gloves in the cave and my bare fingers are too cold and don't work. Graeme appears for a moment, but we are coping, just. He returns to help Giorgio. After many tries the snaplink comes free and we drag the boats up. They are emptied and shunted up to a higher resting position. But they are not safe.

The other two boats are buried under deep snow. We dig with our bare hands and manhandle them up, away from the sea's reach. They have to be taken further west along the island. Without them we are dead men. Struggling with one kayak at a time, we fumble in the darkness and swirling snow, exploring the route as we go, shinning up a vertical rock face, tiptoeing over loose rocks around the back end of a lake, bridging a 20 foot deep double ravine and finally dropping into a small gulch beside a rock platform. Four heavy kayaks; four long wind-buffed journeys to get them to safety.

Amazingly, Graeme reappears out of the blackness, shouting from the rocks above. He helps lash down the kayaks, then leads us on hands and knees over a complex new route of rocky ridges. We get lost twice and can't really speak. Even the loudest shout is torn away by the hurricane. But in the blackness he somehow finds the flooded caves. Our hands are torn and completely numb.

While Laz and I saved the boats, Giorgio and Graeme tried to recover our equipment. On their bellies they crawled through narrow rock squeezes half under water to rescue stoves, fuel, food, cameras and clothing, stuffing it all into whatever bags they could find, dragging them high up the outside rocks and jamming them into crevices.

We find Giorgio on the rocks above, his 16 stone bulk holding down four bivvy bags against the pummelling wind. It's time to move. But where? Can we recognise anything from this morning to guide us to a safer place?

Across the flooded channel, on higher ground, there seems to be a small platform close to the kayaks. The waves draw back momentarily and two men clutching their bivvy bags dance across exposed rocks to make a new

camp on the next section of the island. Giorgio and I stay, believing the sea will not come any higher. We scramble to a ridge above the flooded caves and collapse, soaked and exhausted. Our sleeping ledge is barely two shoulders wide and slopes down towards the sea. We shake off loose snow caked to our clothing and crawl into the bags. A vague luminescence on my watchface shows 2 am. We've been working six hours straight. Surely the storm will have blown out by tomorrow.

Warmer inside my waterproof bivvy shell, I trace toggles and drawcords and rehearse a quick exit, then try to drift off to sleep. At last the rocky bed begins to feel much softer. Softer? How does rock get softer? Giorgio's muffled shout comes through his bivvy bag. I unzip and look around. The white froth of a wave gently washes under my bag and drains back over the cliff, into the cauldron 20 feet below. The next one, with more volume, will probably take us with it.

I am terrified by the thought, and rouse Giorgio. We bundle up the bags and crawl back down part of the rock wall. But below us a lake has formed and we are now confined to the ridgetop encircling it, with wild sea on both sides.

After half an hour of crawling in the dark, clinging to the rock face with wind ripping at our billowing bags, we emerge onto the windward ridge and find what would pass for a large birdbath. A narrow stone coffin. Our bed. I lie down first and, so that I don't blow away, Giorgio settles on top. Exhausted and numb, I cannot feel his weight. We doze fitfully.

A grey flickering predawn light reveals we are now completely cut off from the others. The rising sea is surging through the gully, into the lake that was yesterday's campsite, and right up to the stashed kitbags. One by one they are plucked off the wall and swept away. The last to go is Graeme's. Its bright green canvas bobs out towards centre stage in the channel, revolving slowly in the lull of the surge, then pirouettes twice and sails off, its lid flapping goodbye.

We have witnessed the loss of almost everything we need for survival. The scene strikes me as surreal, teasingly absurd, and I sit there laughing out loud. Food, tents, stoves and fuel, spare clothing; the lot. Gone. And remaining? Wet sleeping bags and the clothes we lie in: thermal jumper and trousers, a woollen cap and a raincoat. No underwear, no gloves and no socks. Just bare feet in sopping leather boots. And of course my grandfather's silk scarf, in case I'm invited to The Club. If the kayaks are still where we lashed them, we might find some emergency rations accidentally left inside: perhaps enough to feed the four of us for a day.

It has already been an uncommonly bad season for the dry pitoraqs, roaring down at 140 knots from the 10,000 foot icecap. But this wind is worse: a neqqajaaq, or snow-filled northeasterly of the same force, which could easily

continue for more than a week. If we survive the storm, if this island isn't submerged, we will be very weak and still at least four days by kayak from the nearest possible help.

No one will know where to find us, if in fact there is anybody left to look for us. If the crew can find it, our support vessel should be waiting further south at the little hunting village of Skjoldungen, the only human habitation on this section of the 500 mile coastline. If she hasn't run aground in the storm, or been holed by ice and sunk, her crew might come looking. And if she finds us, we might get lucky and reach the safety of the southern fjords before the sea finally freezes over.

But if the vessel has gone, sunk or blown away, our only hope is to try and locate the handful of hunting shacks and spend winter with any hunters who might be in them.

Beside us, from nowhere, a ghost white iceberg. Two stories high and silently swaying, almost within arm's reach. The storm is deepening. Its power and howling beauty are utterly awesome.

I have never felt so fully alive.