

“The Dark Mile”

By Lauren Rivers

Snow collected on the windows as the train pushed through the Arctic Circle. Her destination was a waypoint somewhere in the distant north which according to their information represented a possible stockpile of resources. Limited to data stored in the computer before the Freeze, the records were often incomplete and limited to what was known to the company that built it. Nevertheless, it was deemed a significant enough possibility to warrant an expedition into the frozen landscape of the former region known as Alaska.

While cold was nothing new, it seemed to have tightened its grip on everything this far north, with no signs of life and even fewer signs of civilization. Even before the disaster there were few people who had chosen to live this far from the rest of the world. Yet perhaps that was why this location had been chosen for a surplus depot, someplace where the riches of the world before could be tucked away safely for when they were needed, although it was unlikely they ever anticipated what happened.

Everyone knew about the disaster that had turned the world into a gigantic snow globe. While there were competing theories as to its origin what was not in dispute was the fact that the world was held in the vice grip of perpetual winter. Those that had survived this long had learned to adapt or had the good fortune to be in one of the few safe zones, such as they were.

Ellie had been born in such a place, one of the few green spaces still known to exist. She had grown up on stories of what was out there and had the curiosity to want to see for herself. Adjusting her uniform in the windows' reflection, she suddenly became aware of approaching footsteps.

“Come to look at the snow angels?” he asked. The voice belonged to the train's head of security, Lieutenant Hall.

“Excuse me?” Her ears perked up in confusion.

He chuckled at himself. “It's a bit of an initiation of sorts around here. This is your first tour, isn't it?” The zebra tilted his head towards the shorter hare.

“It is,” she confirmed.

“I thought so. You had that look about you. Lieutenant Hall.” He reached out his hand.

Shaking it, she offered a slight smile. “Ensign Harper.” She glanced back out the window. “You were saying?”

He nodded. “Ah yes. Any time we get this far north there tends to be a phenomenon we call snow angels. Really, it's just snow blowing around out there but every so often you can see a wisp of something, but only for a second.”

Ellie leaned close to the glass, watching the flurries dance around in the inhospitable cold. Just when she was about to stop looking, she saw what for a moment, looked like a humanoid figure in the nothingness. And just like that, it was gone. Turning sharply towards him, she glanced back at the window but where there was that barely perceptible shape, now there was nothing.

“See?” He pointed towards the horizon. “No one knows what causes it or how to explain it. The first few times we were up here people thought folks were imagining things, but at this point enough of us have seen them that we kind of consider them our good luck charms.”

“Are they alive?” Ellie asked.

“Damned if I know. I’m not even sure they’re anything more than bored military officers looking for something to occupy their imaginations. It gets awfully quiet out here in the white sometimes.” Lieutenant Hall shrugged. “Anyway, whatever they are, they don’t show up on any detection equipment and they’re never there for more than an instant.”

Ellie looked back but no matter how hard she searched, they refused to appear. Giving up, she turned back to the zebra. “Has anyone ever gone looking?”

“Sure, plenty of times. But no matter what we do there’s never anything out there when we check. It’s like they’re ghosts.” Hall leaned against the window. “Some say they’re people that didn’t make it out of the freeze. Others think they’re our punishment for whatever caused the disaster. Me personally, I think they’re just interested in us.”

“For what?” the young snowshoe hare questioned.

Lieutenant Hall tossed up his hands. “Maybe they just want someone to talk to.” He gestured towards the front of the train. “Captain Mallory wants us in the engine. We’re approaching the Dark Mile.”

Again looking up at her superior, she tilted her head. “What’s the Dark Mile?”

“Up ahead is a sort of dead zone we pass through every time we take the tracks in this direction. Covering an area over five hundred miles square, electrical signals are unable to penetrate the bubble though any known technology we have.”

Ellie paused. “Then that means...”

“Exactly, once we get in there, we’re on our own.” He urged her forward. “Now come on, the captain is waiting.”

The two walked the rest of the way to the forward cars without comment. Ellie had heard there were a fair amount of legends that came from serving on the train, but now she was about to encounter two in as many hours. As they passed into the situation car she cast one more glance at the window looking to see if any snow angels traveled alongside the train. To her disappointment, there was nothing.

The forward cars were all assigned to train and mission operations. Having only served on the train for a matter of weeks she had never been this far forward before. Following Lieutenant Hall, she kept her head down as she walked past the various officers going about their duties. Entering the engine, she held her breath as she stepped inside for the first time.

Shrouded in subdued light, the bridge was dark save for the lights emanating from the control consoles and a few accent lights along the ceiling. Standing behind her zebra superior officer she waited for someone to give her an order.

“Captain Mallory, Lieutenant Hall and Ensign Harper reporting as ordered,” he said without preamble.

“Take your stations,” the red panda commanded.

Seated on opposite sides of the engine, Ellie and Lieutenant Hall examined the readouts on their respective consoles. From what she could tell, the train was set to enter

the dead zone in a matter of minutes. Uncertain what to expect, she ran a systems diagnostic to confirm everything was operating at maximum efficiency.

Mallory observed from behind, placing a paw on her chair. "Prepare to send a status update back to the Garden." He glanced towards the forward window. "The moment we pass into the Dark Mile we'll be out of contact until we come out the other side."

"Yes, sir," she replied. Preparing the information packet, she collected all of the status reports and relevant information, compressing and encrypting the data for transmission. Once she was finished, she held her finger over the button. "Transmission ready."

"Send," he ordered.

A moment later the button was pressed and the information was on its way. It was the last message the train would send for quite a while. All the crew members in the engine looked up as the lights flickered and the train shook slightly upon passing into the dead zone.

Lieutenant Hall activated the timer. "Four point six hours until we emerge from the Dark Mile."

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, until then we're on our own. Monitor all sensors and report anything unusual." He paced the length of the engine, examining all of their consoles as he made his circuit around the command area.

The sensors continued to record data, but it appeared that whichever side of the dead zone it was on, it did not seem to be able to penetrate to the other. Moreover, it was almost as if the readings she was getting were not coherent at all. Ellie ran additional diagnostics, but no matter how many times she attempted to correct the output, it seemed to return the same anomalous results.

From the diagnostics the computer repeatedly insisted that all systems were operating normally. Perplexed, she attempted to conduct another scan. Once again, she could not explain what she was seeing.

"Lieutenant Hall, my console appears to be malfunctioning," she said, at a loss for any sort of explanation.

Turning around, he tilted his head. "What's wrong?"

"The sensors keep returning some unusual inputs. I can't explain it," she replied.

He nodded, understanding. "The sensors don't seem to work right in here. It's tough to rely on anything more than a few miles from the train. Don't worry. It's not your console."

Her question answered for the moment, she returned to her readings. Still perplexed, she continued to run regular sensor sweeps of the area around the train, but as he had suggested, the readings became more peculiar and unreliable the greater the distance from the train's location. Attempts to improve the sensor resolution failed to make much more than a marginal improvement in the readings she was getting no matter what she did to increase their effectiveness.

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The next hour or so passed slowly with very little worth reporting. Her sensors were practically useless as long as they were traveling within the Dark Mile, but even so

she continued to remain alert for potential threats. Yet every scan continued to return the same readings, with unusual anomalies she could only describe as sensor ghosts. Things would appear from time to time for a moment, and the next would be in a completely different location. Every time she would attempt to confirm her readings, they would never return the same results.

Ellie thought back to what Lieutenant Hall had told her earlier about the snow angels. Perhaps they were playing tricks on her. She imagined they were little more than sentient beings searching for patterns in the chaos, like how people found constellations in the stars, but nevertheless one could not deny the unusual phenomenon was captivating. When she had caught a glimpse of one, she had almost thought she could make out the shape of a muzzle, but it had come and gone so quickly she had dismissed it as little more than a random occurrence. From what she had found in the computer logs, some people believed they were actual spirits, while others dismissed the stories as superstition, but no matter what side you were on, the fact that they seemed to follow the train through areas such as this lent credence to some rather unusual theories.

Whatever they were, it was the only excuse she could provide at the moment for the confusing readings she was seeing. She was about to run yet another pointless sensor sweep when her console lit up indicating an incoming transmission. In her boredom she almost glossed over it, but the realization of the lit indicator snapped her back into focus. Ellie double checked her readings but could find no indication that this was anything other than what it appeared. Looking up to find the red panda over her shoulder, she offered her report. "Captain, we've detected a transmission."

"Here? In the middle of the dead zone?" Lieutenant Hall asked, turning around in surprise.

Captain Mallory folded his arms and gestured to Ellie. "Let's hear it."

Reaching for the flashing button, she activated the speaker. It crackled to life as a voice called out from the darkness.

"This is Ryan Parry reaching out on the emergency channel. My family and several others have taken refuge in a scientific research station somewhere in northern Alaska. Several of our group are ill and require medical attention. Our supplies are limited and we don't have a lot of time. If you're out there, we need your help. Please send your response on this same frequency," a male voice stated before dissolving into static.

Every eye was on her at the same time. Ellie silenced the volume as the message started over. "There's nothing else. The message keeps looping."

"Can you localize the source of the signal?" Mallory asked.

"I'm trying, but in this soup it's hard to tell much of anything," Ellie replied.

"Can you even get me a direction?" The red panda leaned forward.

Her ears perking up she gave a hesitant confirmation. "I can narrow it down to a general area but it's scattering every time I try to determine its point of origin."

Captain Mallory nodded. "Open a channel." He paused a moment and then spoke. "This is Captain Owen Mallory responding to your distress call. We are attempting to locate you but are unable to identify your precise location. Please respond with your current status. Over." Another moment of silence.

Ellie looked down to confirm her readings. "They are receiving, but I'm still not getting anything other than the same message over and over again."

The red panda rubbed his chin, his ears flattening in hesitation. “What’s our current position?”

Calling up the train’s coordinates, the map displayed on the largest of Lieutenant Hall’s screens. “Right smack in the middle of the dead zone.”

“Ensign Harper, what’s your best guess as to their current coordinates?” he asked.

“Based on records we have from before the disaster I do pick up a scientific research station somewhere north of our current position but we can’t reach it with the train. We’d have to get close and go the rest of the way on the snowmobiles.” She pointed at the indicated coordinates.

The station was deep in the upper regions of Alaska. While there was nothing in the records indicating its purpose it was large enough to support a small contingent of researchers for a prolonged period of time, likely just in case there was a delay in getting supplies up there. Most likely the station was equipped with several emergency power generators and other supplementary systems designed to last. While it was never intended to be any sort of lifeboat, if you were stranded out in Alaska and needed someplace to stay, a place like that would pretty much be heaven.

Captain Mallory lowered his muzzle in contemplation. “Opinions?”

Lieutenant Hall folded his arms. “I don’t know. The fact that we’re not getting a response could indicate there’s no one there to answer.”

“There could be any number of reasons why they didn’t reply to our hail,” Ellie said.

Seated at the front of the bridge was the only member of the group who hadn’t spoken yet. A blonde feline dressed in the train’s standard duty uniform she had been the primary pilot of the train for the last several years. Turning away from her controls, she looked at each member of the group. “Based on Ensign Harper’s coordinates I can probably get us close enough that we can pinpoint the exact location of the signal from the train, but we have no way of notifying the Garden of our delay.”

“If we go to investigate the signal, Captain, it’ll put us behind by at least twelve hours.” He shrugged. “It’s your call.”

Although their primary directive was for salvage operations it was always up to the Captain’s discretion for any other situations that were to arise. Given the distance and the time it often took to receive a response from the Garden it was deemed impractical to run every decision through command. While there would be some trepidation if the train was late emerging from the dead zone, distress calls were fairly rare events and more often than not a potential source for supplies, personnel, or information.

Indeed, most of the intelligence the train collected was from its own observations. On the rare occasions when they picked up refugees they sometimes had information on settlements, caches of supplies, or other things that the train logged in its journeys across the ice.

Finally, Captain Mallory nodded. “All right, I think it’s worth looking into. Lisa, change course. Harper, keep monitoring for any changes in the signal. Lieutenant Hall, I want you to lead the recovery team.”

“Aye, sir,” he replied.

Lisa pressed several controls, purring gently before she spoke. “We’ll be approaching the switching station in two minutes. Estimated arrival in two hours.”

“Notify me when we get close,” Mallory said.

“Understood.”

The captain returned his attention to Ellie’s station. “Continue to transmit our signal every fifteen minutes. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone there will notice.” He did not wait for a response, instead returning to his regular circuit of the engine.

Ellie listened to the distress signal again, knowing full well that there was little more to be gained from the act. Yet somehow she found it comforting to listen to the call for help, as if by doing so she was aiding the desperate Mister Parry and his group. And perhaps she was. There was little hope out on the ice that anyone would answer such a call, and even if it was received that they would have the will and the means to do something about it.

Most of those out there would be more likely to steal any supplies you had and kill you for your trouble, meaning it was a supreme act of faith to call for help when there were raiders and other groups roaming the ice fighting for their own survival with little concern for the plight of their fellow sentient creatures.

The vast frozen expanse was a dangerous place, with the very environment itself set against you. Those that had survived the intervening years since the disaster had done so with whatever resources were at their disposal. With limited options and supplies constantly at a premium, it tended to mean that those who lasted this long intended to continue doing so by any means necessary. Those who lacked the strength to defend themselves from larger more predatory groups tended to find themselves in an icy grave.

Most likely Ryan Parry and his family had been trying to reach a nearby settlement. At some point during their journey, one of their group must have fallen ill, necessitating the search for shelter in the hopes of keeping as many of them alive as possible. Out of options, they came across a research station with a functional radio. Likely he had passed out following his recording of the message. The odds of finding them were slim, and Ellie did not even want to contemplate the alternative. She continued the hail, hoping that someone would respond.

Traveling through the dead zone, the determined snowshoe hare continued to run sensor sweeps in between her efforts to establish communications. Examining the readouts, she looked at the screen again. The signal was steady, but the nature of the dead zone meant it was difficult to get more specific than that. Attempts to filter the results through the various capabilities the train had at its disposal proved similarly useless, as every new method she tried to narrow down its location seemed to only provide more inconclusive results.

A loud metal clack, muffled by the snow and wind and the hull of the train indicated they had switched tracks. Moments later Ellie felt the massive vehicle shift directions and continue closer towards their destination.

Thirty minutes passed taking them ever deeper into the dead zone. Though it always made Ellie nervous to be blind without even the sensors to warn them of danger she knew that sometimes one had little choice in the matter. While their technology was generally more than a match for most things they found out here, the train was not invulnerable. She ran another scan, pausing as she attempted to confirm her readings. “Captain, the signal’s getting weaker.”

“Any response from Mister Parry?” he asked.

“Negative, I’m still only getting the emergency signal.”

Lieutenant Hall spun around in his chair. "Captain, I'm picking up something else out there."

"Another distress call?" he asked.

"I don't think so. This one is more like a heat signature moving out there," the zebra declared.

"Analysis?" he asked, although Ellie did not expect he would have much information with the interference.

Her guess proved correct as Lieutenant Hall shrugged. "It keeps appearing and disappearing. I can't tell what it is but it's large enough to be a raider APC." The zebra indicated the intermittent signal on his display.

After the freeze, a number of groups had taken to surviving by commandeering armored personnel carriers and using them as mobile bases, attacking smaller convoys and those unfortunate enough to cross their paths. Though they tended to be around larger cities there were several that roamed the frozen wasteland in search of less well defended targets.

Though rarely more than twenty people they were often well armed and brutal. Encountering them had resulted in more than a fair amount of dead travelers. Though they presented no danger to the train on their own, where there was one there were often more, and a single drop of blood tended to encourage them to gather.

"Any idea as to its direction?" he asked.

The zebra shook his head and snorted. "Negative, sir. The signal keeps bouncing from place to place. Now it could be the Dark Mile, or..."

"Or there could be more than one of them," the captain finished. "Ellie, any luck narrowing down that signal?"

"I'm still having trouble locating its exact position." She ran another scan. "The signal is barely readable at present. I don't think I can narrow it down any further."

Captain Mallory frowned. If there were raiders hunting them it would make it that much more imperative they not remain in the area any longer than necessary. If it was just a ghost signal, they would be potentially running from nothing. Ellie knew if the danger was too significant, the captain might choose to abandon the mercy mission, but it was difficult to be certain of anything in the Dark Mile.

The red panda considered their situation. "Lisa, what's our best route if we need to get out of here?"

Purring, she shook her head. "Captain, at this point it's faster if we continue on our current course than trying to go back the way we came. If we attempt to reverse our direction it'll take significantly longer."

He wrinkled his muzzle. "Ellie, narrow down the source of that signal. I don't want to spend a second more in here than I have to."

You're not the only one.

Returning her attention to the readouts, she brought up the tactical overlay from Hall's station. Whatever was out there, it was getting closer. She nervously watched the red indicator as it faded in and out, always being in a different location every time it disappeared. She looked down at her screen noticing she had an incoming message. Bringing it up, she paused.

Help us, it said.

Typing in a response, she sent her reply. 'Where are you?'

The indicator reported she had a new message.

Nearby. Not sure where.

She looked up at the others. None of them had noticed the messages. She opened her mouth but then paused. Wherever they were coming from, it had to be from Ryan Parry's group. She knew that in the event the signal degraded, text messages took less than most other forms of transmission. She looked up as the hostile indicator moved again.

"Captain, the raider signal. We're picking up more of them from the west," Lieutenant Hall stated.

"Distance," he called out.

The zebra returned his attention to his display. "Estimated thirty minutes to intercept."

"I need a better estimate than that, Mister Hall."

"Best I can do in the dead zone, sir," he replied.

Lisa hissed and bared her claws against the smooth surface of her console. "We can't even be sure that's what they are."

"No, but I'm not taking the chance. Options?" the red panda asked.

The Siamese cat shook her head. "We can change course at the next switching station."

"Do it," he ordered.

Ellie looked down at the display and saw yet another message.

Are you on your way?

"Captain, while I am still having trouble narrowing down the signal I may have a lead on Mister Parry. I think I'm picking up a transmission from somewhere, text only. It's stronger than the audio message and increasing." In other words, they were getting closer.

The red panda nodded. "Give all your data to Miss Turner and Lieutenant Hall. At least it'll guide us in the right direction."

Lieutenant Hall frowned. "Sir, I'm picking up more raider signals. They're trying to flank us."

"Any in our current path?" he asked.

"Not so far." He pressed a control on his console and changed the scan mode.

"Hold on, I'm picking up something approaching from thirty degrees port."

Lisa pressed the intercom switch. "All personnel, prepare for course correction." With that, she switched the train onto another track, and once again that same metal clank. She twitched her whiskers. "Course correction complete."

Ellie paused, sending another message in response. "We can't find you."

Another moment.

Follow the angels.

A moment of hesitation. Ellie activated the external cameras and paused as three snow angels appeared at once, dancing in a circle before dissipating. Another moment and a fourth formed just long enough to appear to gesture. Logic told her they were just tricks of the imagination, like a mirage or other illusion. Yet one could not deny that they seemed too close to alive to be just a simple natural phenomenon. Or maybe it was just the dead zone, playing tricks with her mind. After all, anything could happen in the Dark Mile.

She turned around to look at the others. No one else seemed to be interested in the wisps of snow that moved around them. Ellie looked again at the screen before her. As if calling to her, they pulled away from the train and darted off towards the northeast.

“Lieutenant Hall. Scan northeast of our position.” His tactical sensors were more likely to cut through the interference than her own. A moment later, he nodded.

“I’ve got something. It looks like a structure, small, but with an active power signature.” He brought it up on the other screens.

“That’s got to be our research station. Can you get us any closer?” he asked.

Lisa nodded. “I can get you within two miles of it.”

Captain Mallory looked to Lieutenant Hall. “Get going, and don’t waste any time. There and back, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We have less than fifteen minutes before those raiders catch up to us,” Captain Mallory said.

With that, Lieutenant Hall tapped Ellie on the shoulder as they made their way to the snowmobiles.

If she had thought it was hard to find their way in the Dark Mile it was even worse when you were outside the train. Pulling away it was not less than a minute before she lost sight of the massive vehicle. It was only due to her orientation in relation to the zebra she could stay on course.

Through the flurries she could almost swear she saw more of the snow angels dancing beside them. From the flakes of white, a shape of a person would appear just long enough to be recognizable by her brain before dissipating like a mote of dust. Ellie shook her head but every time one appeared it was gone a second or two later, but no matter how many she saw they never abandoned them all the way to the research station.

The team slowed as the four snowmobiles came to a stop just outside a small metal structure half buried in the snow. The door was clear having been on the opposite side of the wind. It was a few small modular compartments likely deposited here by helicopter some time before the freeze. Whatever their original purpose, it now served as a sanctuary for wayward travelers.

Ellie climbed off her snowmobile and drew her weapon. Cautiously she approached the door and waited for a nod from Lieutenant Hall before pulling it open to enter.

The hatch resisted, being partially frozen shut. With all of her strength she pulled the door open and took a step inside. The air was cold and still, with a thin layer of frost covering everything. Placing her booted foot paw inside the thin layer of cold crunched beneath her steps. Her ears perked up listening for sounds of life. Breathing, heartbeats, anything.

Lieutenant Hall’s hooves clacked gently on the frozen floor. Behind her he entered the room, which appeared to be little more than an airlock of sorts. Hooks and lockers for heavy winter gear lined the walls with a pair of benches inside. Moving beyond the room, he followed Ellie into the main habitation chamber.

The central node to the small research station, this section housed what appeared to be the living area. Couches, a few chairs, and assorted personal items on low tables made up the center of the space. The walls were lined with a pair of restrooms, a kitchen area, and doors leading off to the other compartments.

Identified by a small sign opposite from where they had just entered, the radio room stood just beyond the kitchen. “Mister Parry?” Ellie called out.

“Is anyone here?” Hall asked, while the other two members of their team kept watch by the entrance.

Her ears raised, she could hear the faintest sound of a voice coming from up ahead. Her heart raced as she approached the door, pulling it open with the crack of shattering ice, with bits of snow falling onto the ground. Ellie stood in the doorway, motionless, as she beheld the sight in front of her. Her breath caught in her throat. With the door open, she could now hear what the voice was saying.

“This is Ryan Parry reaching out on the emergency channel. My family and several others have taken refuge in a scientific research station somewhere in northern Alaska. Several of our group are ill and require medical attention. Our supplies are limited and we don’t have a lot of time. If you’re out there, we need your help. Please send your response on this same frequency,” a male voice stated before dissolving into static. The message began again.

Lieutenant Hall walked up to where she stood and whinnied curiously. “Any survivors?”

Ellie shook her head. “No. All that’s here are ghosts.” She stepped forward and flipped the switch, shutting the radio transmission off and ending the decades old call for help that would never come. “They never survived the Freeze.” Dressed in a heavy blue coat, his left arm wrapped around his son, the wolf lay frozen in his final position. Ice frosted his exposed fur making him seem so brittle she feared he might shatter if she touched him. His other arm lay inches away from the switch that had since the days of their arrival sent his pleading voice into the frozen wasteland. Strapped around his wrist was a wristwatch, frozen forever with the date it had stopped. “Your long night has ended.”

A small collection of bodies huddled nearby, their clothes indicating they had been here for decades. Frightened and desperate, they had fled a world gone mad in the hopes that someone would come to save them in their darkest hour. It was a call that would never be answered.

Lieutenant Hall’s radio sprung to life. “*Hall, we need you back on the train. Those signals are closing in on us,*” Captain Mallory’s voice stated.

“We need to go.” The zebra touched her arm.

Ellie nodded. She turned to leave, pausing as she felt a paw on her arm. Turning back she saw no signs of life, but an object on the floor caught her eye. Reaching down, she picked up a small journal, brown and beautifully bound, one of the few items carried by its once loving owner.

“Harper, move your tail!” Hall shouted, shattering her reverie. With a nod, she tucked it into her pocket and followed.

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With the team on board, the train surged forward carrying them towards the edge of the dead zone and out of the Dark Mile.

Seated in the mess hall, Ellie flipped through the journal looking at the handwritten words once recorded during days long past. They told the story of a wolf

once living happily with his friends and neighbors and the dreams he had for his children. He wrote of the day the snow started, and his journey to seek salvation. His last entry told of his hope that one day the snow would end, and that someone would bring back the world as it used to be. Her paw on the cover, she was so engrossed in her reflection upon its contents, she did not notice when Lieutenant Hall approached from behind.

“Cocoa for your thoughts,” he said, offering her a saucer with a steaming cup of hot brown liquid.

Ellie shook her head. “I don’t know what to think.” She accepted the drink, setting it on the table between them. “I talked to him. I did.”

“The chief engineer checked the system inside and out. There was absolutely no record of any messages other than that initial transmission,” he said.

“I’m not imagining things. I saw those messages.” She flattened her ears.

Hall held up a hand. “I believe you. But the computer has no evidence that we ever received them. Diagnostics showed nothing wrong with any of the equipment so whatever it was...”

“What? Are you telling me that those were ghosts back there talking to us?” she asked.

The zebra shook his head. “I have no idea. All I know is somehow we picked up a forty year old distress call in the middle of the dead zone and it led us to that,” he said, pointing at the journal. “What’s in it?”

“Stories. Hopes. Dreams.” She shrugged. “It’s everything he wanted to take with him from the world before... this.” Ellie gestured at the frozen landscape outside the window. “He didn’t deserve to be forgotten.”

Hall shook his head. “He wasn’t. Not anymore. Thanks to you.” He shrugged. “I don’t know if this was ghosts or the snow angels or anything else, but whatever it was, it was more than just coincidence.”

Ellie took a sip of the hot cocoa. “What about those raider signals that were chasing us?”

Offering a shrug, he threw up his hands in surrender. “Gone, just like the messages. The moment we left the Dark Mile behind, it was as if they’d never been out there in the first place. Funny thing is, we probably never would have found the station without them guiding us in the right direction.” He shrugged again. “Get some sleep. We’ve got a long way to go before our job’s done.” Patting her on the shoulder, he nodded and walked away.

Looking down at Ryan Parry’s last thoughts, she ran her hand across the journal and imagined him standing before her. With a nod, he disappeared through the wall of the train.

Keep searching. As long as you keep looking, you never know what you will find.