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THE FOREST AS WITNESS

IT WAS ELEVEN YEARS AGO that most of us made the decision to move out of the forest. We left our homes and retreated down into the valley, making sure to keep within reach of the ones who decided to remain. Most who stayed were elders who simply did not want to leave the homes they had known for decades. Their lives were intimately intertwined with the forest, and they felt it better to accept whatever consequences might come than to try and start over so late in life.

For a while, even after the first tangles appeared, the forest elders continued their lives without much interruption. After thinly carpeting the understory, the spindly, rootlike vines climbed tree trunks and knotted around branches, eventually congregating in sporadically placed clusters. They mostly clung to the immense old-growth trees that stood prominently throughout the wooded ecosystem, doing little to isolate the elders whose homes were scattered within. But once a cluster of the flaxen strands formed, it could mushroom overnight and quickly fortify into a virtually unbreakable mass, ranging in size from a small child to a full-grown adult. We soon realized that these snarled, hardened knots served as centralized points from which even more new tangles sprouted.

Over time, as more new strands shot from one cluster to another, a series of complex, asymmetric webs formed, disrupting the lives of the elders, cutting them off from each other.

Having spent the entirety of their lives in the woods, the elders knew how to be self-sufficient. They each had access to water and food sources. They could harvest materials from the native vegetation. This was vital once the tangles began to seriously restrict their movements. Blocked access routes in and out of the forest prevented the delivery of any supplies, while barriers between homes within the forest limited social interaction and the sharing of resources. Once established, the twisted networks became almost impenetrable, and those that could be breached would regenerate about as fast as we could remove them. It quickly became clear that the tangles were inevitable.

To prevent the elders from feeling too isolated, we ran communication lines from the edges of the forest to each of the remaining homes

within. The comm lines had connection ports on either end, allowing the elders to write messages they would send by plugging a small transmitter into the port. As the messenger, it's my job to access the connection ports at the forest perimeter, plugging in a transmitter of my own to retrieve the waiting communications and passing them along to recipients down in the valley.

There were originally twenty-two comm lines threaded through the forest. In some locations where the tangles had not yet overtaken the landscape, the lines could simply be placed along the ground, connecting an elder's home to the nearest point at the edge of the forest. In other places, where routes to a home were already restricted to some degree, the comm lines were negotiated carefully through the existing tangles, sometimes positioned high above the ground to avoid the growing obstructions below. Regardless of the efforts taken to keep the comm lines away from the worst of the tangles, most of us knew—whether we admitted it or not—that it would be only a matter of time before the lines became ensnared, damaged, and ultimately useless. Once that happened, running a new line or repairing the damaged one was usually impossible, meaning another elder would be completely on their own. When I took on the role of messenger over two years ago, only fourteen lines remained active. Today, we're down to just eight.

THIS MORNING, I would need to transmit and receive new messages from Lines 7 and 10, as well as document any damage or changes caused by the powerful lightning storm that had barreled over the mountain the night before. With each bout of extreme weather, there came the possibility of mangled trees that either complicated access to the comm lines or took them out altogether. And during the influx of any large amount of rain, tangles used the newly available water as an opportunity for rapid growth, often completely transforming some areas of the forest in a matter of hours.

I reached Line 10 by mid-morning. It was one of the lines that was run through an area of the forest that, at the time, was relatively unaffected by the tangles. Since then, various clusters and connecting offshoots had moved in to create an unnavigable mess, but the line itself remained intact. Its connection port was located within the hollowed-out remains of a tree that came down during a past storm. High winds had snapped the trunk at about my eye level, leaving a relatively protected structure in which to install the necessary hardware.

I removed the handheld transmitter from my pocket and attached it to Line 10's connection port. The elder on the opposite end of Line 10 rarely sent messages out other than to occasionally signal that he was still alive. However, he had requested that we send him regular updates about life outside of the forest. I clicked through the menu on the small display in my hand, selected the file entitled "Community Summary 56.28," and transmitted it down the comm line to the man's home.

Aside from me, no one living in the valley makes regular trips to the forest. As a result, I've become the person most experienced with observing the movements of the tangles and documenting their characteristics. As I stood next to the husk of the former tree housing the Line 10 connection port, I looked around for new effects of the tangles, scanning the edge of the tree line for signs of any infant strands. The area around the connection port was still without any sign of disturbance. However, I knew that with a short walk into the forest, I would be met with an impassable morass of hardened vines, some as wide as my legs.

I moved slowly past the tree line, scanning my surroundings for new evidence of encroachment by the tangles. When individual strands first emerge, they are thin and wiry, using all available energy to quickly lengthen across the forest floor or up tree trunks. Once enough young tangles reach a given area and begin to intertwine with each other, they focus their energy toward rapidly thickening, which solidifies them into chaotic, snarled masses. When this process occurs, the once spindly strands become dense, layered, and progressively more rigid toward their cores. Meanwhile, the outer layers of the mature strands remain somewhat soft and mossy to the touch, harboring moisture and young tendrils that can continue to efficiently spread to new locations. I once spent hours sawing cross-sections of a mature strand, only to have the outer layers close the gap I created within a few minutes, protecting the exposed core while it regenerated in the hours and days to come.

I walked through spacious clearings between the old-growth trees, inspecting where their bark met the topsoil below. The sturdy trunks of these giants dominated the forest and were essential to the existence of the tangles, acting as support columns for the three-dimensional networks they formed. For the tangles to span the large open areas between trees, they first needed to generate fortified clusters on several sides of the open space, eventually connecting across the clearing via offshoots from those clusters. Once several offshoots were connected between these points, more large knots within the open space could

form. The process repeated until, eventually, the space was overtaken.

After confirming that there were no new signs of growth in the area and noting my observations, I packed up and hiked north toward Line 7, passing through a meadow I knew would soon be bursting with delicate wildflowers, busy pollinators, and a symphony of different smells, thriving in a way that now seemed impossible within the forest. The tangles made coexistence difficult for many species of plants and animals. Some of those species were ones that the elders had always relied on, which exacerbated many of the effects already complicating their ability to survive.

Line 7 was one of the comm lines installed high up into the trees to avoid a lower network of tangles. Upon reaching the area, I unloaded any unnecessary weight from my pack and stood in front of a mass of mature clusters over five times my height. My usual route was now inaccessible, so I slowly scanned upward to plan a safe way to the connection port affixed high on a nearby tree trunk. While the sturdiness of the tangles certainly caused problems if your goal was to get through them, it had its advantages when you needed to use them to climb.

I grabbed hold of one of the tangles and felt my fingers close around the fibrous outer coating, which was slightly spongy after absorbing the heavy rains from the night before. I climbed carefully up the network, taking a meandering route to avoid any dangerous maneuvers that could lead to a fall. The connection port for Line 7 was situated just above one of the higher clusters, which I was able to sit safely on while checking for messages.

Most of the messages I send and receive, aside from general community updates, are private. However, the forest elders have the option to communicate with the messenger as well, and the woman on the other end of Line 7 was one of the few elders who had corresponded with me over the past two years. She told me that, like many of those who stayed, she could not imagine leaving her longtime home so late in her life. She opted to live among the tangles and adapt to their presence but admitted she never envisioned the degree to which they would transform the forest and ultimately trap her within it.

She wasn't the only one who had underestimated the drastic effects of the tangles. She said that it was because of their confinement that the lines of communication were so important to the elders. It kept them connected and engaged when they would otherwise be isolated as the tangles closed in around them. It was her perspective that helped shed

the callous attitude I used to harbor toward the elders who chose to stay in the forest. She helped me grow a meaningful sense of pride in my role as messenger. That made it even more difficult when her line went silent after a storm a few months back.

Most people in the community gave up on Line 7 after a few weeks and began to move on, some pointing out that her messages had started to become confused and disjointed even before the storm, and that she had likely passed on. Messenger protocol dictates that I continue to check lines for two months after they go quiet, but I was still checking four months after the storm, hoping that whatever stopped the communication would remedy itself. I found it hard to believe that she stopped communicating of her own accord when it was more likely that a storm had disrupted her comm line or connection port. And I struggled to stomach the idea that she was now simply alone until her end.

I took my transmitter and plugged it into the Line 7 connection port just over my head. After a few seconds of searching, the transmitter indicated that no incoming signal was detected. I left it attached to the port for a few minutes while gazing out over the landscape from my perch. This spot provided a vantage point from which I could survey the effects of the storm, so I began peering through the bright morning sunlight to find areas where clusters had mushroomed in the previous night's rain or where tree limbs were left dangling from the trunks to which they were previously attached.

My mind wandered to the childhood memories I had of life inside the forest. The towering trees and their expansive canopies were both awe-inspiring and comforting, making me feel tiny but also protected. The hours playing in the clearing outside my family home are memories I still cherish. The forest back then was my own intimate universe, and the thought of how the tangles encroached on the space still stung. When my family packed up our lives and moved down into the valley, it felt like a piece of me was removed, and the space it left behind became filled with a mess of grief and confusion that hardened over time. For years, I resented the elders who stayed in the forest and were still able to experience what I had lost, but my time as messenger had given me a valuable perspective that steadily eroded that jealousy. Now what remained was mourning for the place I used to know and love and a deep sense of purpose in keeping those trapped inside connected with the rest of us.

The feeling of a new breeze on my face returned me to the present, carrying with it the music of a thousand rustling leaves. My eyes

gradually refocused on the scene in front of me, and I continued surveying the landscape, eventually spotting a concentrated patch of haze still hanging over an area of the forest farther down the mountain. It glowed in the late-morning sun and looked different from moisture evaporating up out of the trees. Occasionally during storms, a lightning strike would penetrate the forest canopy, doing what our tools could not and blasting a hole through the tangles that might last for only a few hours—maybe a day at most. If they were well-placed, the holes served as fleeting chances to access parts of the forest that had been unreachable for years. After noticing the haze, my eyes scanned across the top of the tree canopy for a few moments and found the source. Not wanting to miss the opportunity, I unplugged my transmitter, hastily stashed it away, and began my downclimb, rushing to go investigate while I had the chance.

WHEN I ARRIVED at the blast hole, I was met with a smoky odor emanating from the still-smoldering material within it. Although the opening wasn't visible from my vantage point on the ground, the faint, sunlit column of haze rising from just out of view told me I was in the right place. The hole was located at the edge of the tree canopy near Line 6, which went silent more than three years ago, before I took over as messenger. Since then, an imperviable wall of tangles had blocked access to the Line 6 transmitter, and given its dormant status, not much had been done to try to prevent it. However, there was now a fleeting access point to this area of the forest just a short climb above me, so I swiftly planned a safe route up and began to ascend.

After methodically scaling the vertical framework of interlocking tangles and tree limbs, I crested the edge of the tree canopy and maneuvered carefully toward the blast hole. Moving my feet across the network of hardened vines just below the foliage was both surreal and precarious. They provided a scaffolded roof to the forest where there shouldn't be one, allowing me to walk past treetops as if they were shrubs growing from a field. But that scaffolding came with hazardous gaps that could trap my legs, severely twisting ankles and knees, so I moved with caution.

I reached the edge of the blast hole and peered into it, midday sun illuminating the space inside. The hole formed a twisting tunnel that sloped at an angle deeper into the forest floor below and was able to fit at least three or four grown adults even at its narrowest point. Seeing

that it reached the understory, and grateful that it wasn't a sheer vertical shaft, I prepared to descend, tying a rope off to a sturdy knotting of tangles outside of the entrance in case I needed a rescue line to climb back out. I slung the coiled end of the rope over my shoulder and entered the blast hole, attentively unraveling it as I went.

After a few minutes, my feet reached the earth below and planted themselves on the soft soil. The air in the forest was cooler, carrying moisture trapped by the canopy overhead. It was also significantly darker—the towering trees and tangle clusters filtered out much of the sunlight before it reached this level of the ecosystem. However, the shaft of sunlight flowing down the blast channel provided plenty of illumination for the surrounding scene while my eyes adjusted. Singed tangle strands were already showing signs of regeneration, aided by the newly available water brought in by the previous night's storm. Although the area between me and the edge of the forest was completely blocked, the tangles appeared to thin out deeper into the trees.

Since it went dead before I started as the messenger, I had never tried to access Line 6, so I needed to check my maps for a description of where the connection port was installed. From the looks of it, the port was in a clearing roughly eighty paces from my current location. I dropped the remainder of my rope coil at the base of the blast tunnel and turned my back to the wide shaft of sunlight. With wisps of smoke gracefully dancing around me, I made my way toward the clearing, navigating a meandering route around several sprawling networks of clusters that complicated my path.

Although it was overrun with native forest vegetation, the clearing had mostly been spared from the effects of the tangles. The Line 6 connection port was supposedly located low to the ground, nested between a boulder and a tree trunk, so I spent a few minutes clearing the undergrowth around several spots that might fit the description. Eventually, I caught sight of what looked like a comm line on the forest floor and traced it a few paces to a nearby tree. The edge of the port was just barely visible. Its outer covering was dented and weathered from years of exposure to the elements, but upon further inspection, I found the connections inside still in good shape.

Maybe it was the lingering combination of hope and denial that kept driving me to check for messages from the woman at Line 7 months after I was no longer required to. Maybe it was a feeling of responsibility during such a rare opportunity to access an area from which the tangles

had restricted us. Or maybe it was simple curiosity. Regardless of the cause, I pulled my transmitter out of my bag to check for any signals coming from the other end of the comm line that had gone silent over three years before.

Usually when I hook up my transmitter to a functioning connection port, one of two things happens: message files appear on the screen or, after a few seconds, the screen simply reads “No Comms Detected.” When I connected to Line 6, neither of those things happened. Instead, a single dot in the top left corner slowly blinked on and off. This went on for about ten minutes, and I almost disconnected the transmitter several times, but something about the device’s unique behavior kept me from doing so. Finally, batches of messages began populating the screen, which eventually culminated in a total of forty-four separate communication files being displayed, the oldest of which dated back almost four years.

When a messenger accesses a connection port, the messages awaiting retrieval can be read on the transmitter screen. However, when the messenger initiates a download of those messages, the files move from the lines onto the transmitter. Copies don’t remain in the lines, which meant that this connection port was holding almost four years’ worth of messages that had never been retrieved and delivered to the valley.

With a pit in my stomach, I examined the dates on the message files, the earliest of which was from months before the line was declared to have gone silent. Although the oldest ones were still marked with privacy privileges, all the messages sent in the previous three years had dropped that marker, meaning that as the messenger I was permitted to access the contents of the communications. Yet, even with the privacy restrictions removed, it felt invasive to read them. I hesitated, but such an uncommon situation caused me to feel like there was more I needed to understand. Reluctantly, I opened the oldest unprotected file and began to read.

The messages were written by a man who was slowly fading away. In the oldest messages his words were mostly intelligible but at times rearranged in such a way that their meaning was either difficult to decipher or lost altogether. When lucid, he talked with fondness about home in the forest—the place he built with his late partner, where they raised their children, and where he chose to stay when it was threatened by the encroachment of the tangles. But that fondness also seemed to be intermittently laced with uncertainty and regret.

Each message drifted a little further from coherence until they eventually became completely indecipherable. Reading through the man's one-sided dialogue from the past few years, I was rooted to the ground, feeling as though I was watching someone's existence vanish before me. I thought back to the woman from Line 7 and how quickly people in the valley seemed to move on after her communication stopped. I couldn't help but assume that the same attitude had led Line 6 to be written off prematurely. Which would mean that Line 6 hadn't gone silent. The man on the other end had been abandoned. For almost four years his words had been whispered into the forest and no one bothered to listen.

I leaned my head back against the moss-covered bark and looked around, surrounded by the towering trees at the edge of the clearing and the impenetrable labyrinth of tangles beyond. Up until that moment, I spent my adult life outside of the forest looking in. I knew what it was like beyond the tree line from my early memories—the species of vegetation, the sounds of branches and trunks creaking slowly in the wind, and the babble of gently flowing water that was never quite out of earshot. As a child, I found it peaceful—a place that filled me up. But I had never seen it from inside the confinement built by the tangles. The earnest serenity I used to associate with life inside the forest now felt tainted by finally experiencing what it was like to have its new inescapable walls closing in.

For the first time, I felt truly isolated. I felt empty.

I stared back down at the transmitter in my lap displaying the list of forty-four messages that had gone unread for years. They were the unwitting diary of a man floating out to sea, each ebb and flow of the tide taking him a bit farther from shore. Slowly, I continued scrolling through them, imagining the passage of time that came with each one until I reached the end. The final message consisted of a string of unintelligible characters.

The final message—sent just two weeks earlier.

I felt a jolt when I noticed the timestamp. It had been transmitted so recently. I reached for my map and traced my finger from my location at the Line 6 connection port to the man's home at the other end. There was no way of knowing if the tangles made accessing that area of the forest impossible, but I had to try. I downloaded the messages onto my transmitter and ran back to the end of the blast tunnel and examined the opening. While there were obvious signs of the tangles regenerat-

ing, it seemed I still had a few hours before needing to safely climb back through it, so I raced to the connection port, stashed my transmitter, and followed Line 6 deeper into the forest.

Although overgrown with native vegetation from years of not being used, the path was—at least initially—largely clear of tangles. However, the farther I traveled the more clusters I noticed, and they eventually forced me to diverge from Line 6. I made the effort to return to the line each time a series of obstructions forced me to stray from it, but I eventually hit what seemed like a dead end in every direction aside from the one from which I came.

I checked my map and could see I wasn't far from the man's home. Up ahead the line appeared to turn north toward what I thought should be its terminus, so I began moving north as well, ducking into gaps and narrow pathways to get ever closer to the end of the line. After a precarious climb to bypass an area that was completely blocked at ground level, I caught sight of a well-worn trail that led to a clearing where the man's home was located. I downclimbed toward the trail, eventually finding myself with an unobstructed path I could use to reach the clearing.

I began pacing down the route the man had likely worn during his many years living in the forest. Just before the clearing, I saw Line 6 re-emerge from the dense undergrowth and cross the trail. When I reached it, I glanced to my right and saw where it met its connection port. While seemingly intact, access to the port was blocked. Several established clusters and even more younger tangles had ensnared it. I stepped over the comm line into the clearing and peered around the network obscuring the connection port only to find a much more harrowing scene.

The far side of the clearing was overtaken by the tangles. They formed an imposing web, caught within which were several mangled trees and the man's home. The tangles had climbed along one side of the wooden structure to form a sprawling network. They had grown down the chimney and several other offshoots had penetrated directly through the roof, completely indifferent to the life the man had built there over decades. The door to the home was left ajar, and as I approached, I could see that more young offshoots and small groupings had grown chaotically through the interior.

From the doorway, I peered around the single room that composed the inside of the small home. A bed was perilously tucked in the far corner beneath a cluster affixed to the intersection of the ceiling and exterior walls. Remnants of a table lay on its side opposite the doorway,

seemingly punctured and then splintered by several large vines. Given that the home was constructed using lumber from trees native to the surrounding woods, the space didn't look much different from other parts of the forest overrun by the tangles. Aside from the bed, table, and a few other assorted belongings and necessities, the scene resembled one that I had witnessed in countless other areas outside these walls—a horrifying depiction of how the tangles strangled the forest and its inhabitants with brutal indifference, ultimately making it unlivable. I called out to the man several times but was met with silence aside from the cry of creaking tree trunks high above me and the nearby babble of gently flowing water.

Dejected, I turned my back to the home and peered out at the scene the man would have witnessed each day upon leaving his front door. Between the tangles that had overtaken much of the surrounding woodland and the dense forest canopy above, only a fraction of the bright afternoon sun reached down to the understory. To my left, I could see the remnants of a vegetable garden, likely stifled by the lack of light reaching the plants. Beyond the garden, a well-worn path led toward the tangles that now enveloped the connection port. And at the base of one of the clusters, I saw the familiar black matte casing of a transmitter.

The routine path from the man's front door to his connection port now terminated at a dead end. As I moved along it, my footsteps were softened by the recent rains still held within the earthen ground. The transmitter had been taken as far down the familiar route as the barrier of tangles would allow, seemingly being dropped to the side of the small footpath when its usual destination could not be reached. I crouched down and linked my transmitter to the orphaned one. Before long, I was presented with two more messages written by the man, both with timestamps from a few days before and both entirely incomprehensible, probably even to their author.

Looking through the messages, my thoughts and emotions were racing, but I couldn't lock on to any of them. That hardened mass of grief that had lived in me since I left the forest as a child now felt swollen and ready to burst, renewed with a mourning of the place I used to call home and concern for what may have happened to the man who still did. I clasped my hands atop my head and closed my eyes before taking a few slow, deep breaths, doing my best to calm my mind and my body enough to move.

Upon opening my eyes, I tried to refocus my attention and began

scanning my surroundings for any indications of the man or where he may have gone. If he was as disoriented as the recent messages suggested, it was unlikely that he could have strayed too far. There were some gaps in the tangles to my left, so I moved in that direction, searching for possible signs of the man's prior movements. After hitting a couple of dead ends, I ducked through a space between two large clusters that loosely resembled a low, misshapen doorway. I let my eyes adjust to the dimly lit passageway, then took no more than a few steps before seeing him.

The man was slumped at the base of a large tree trunk with tangles strapped across his thin legs and torso. The side of his head was resting against another larger tangle that must have grown up the trunk before the man's arrival. It looked as though he had sat down against the tree prior to the recent storm only to be imprisoned when the influx of new water gave the tangles a chance to quickly grow around him. His face was expressionless and weathered from his many decades in the forest; his chin, cheeks, and upper lip were stubbled with a few weeks' worth of gray and white facial hair. His mouth hung open slightly. I stared intently at his chest and saw what looked like signs of sporadic, shallow breathing but knew from the recent weather and size of the tangles pinning him to the tree that he had likely been there for a few days. He was alive, but barely.

With my heart pounding, I approached and slowly knelt before the man, addressing him several times in a soft voice. He didn't respond. He didn't make any acknowledgment that I was even present. Doing my best to keep my hand from shaking, I placed my middle and forefinger on the side of his neck and felt a weak indication of blood still moving through his body. His eyelids weren't closed, but they drooped as if the man could no longer open them fully. I examined the tangles confining him and instantly knew that I didn't have the tools to cut him free. And even if I did, I wouldn't have the ability or time to safely extract him from the forest before the blast hole closed.

I regarded the man. The adrenaline that had been coursing through me since I began my search for his home was dissipating, gradually eroding any armor protecting me from the surrounding devastation. Knowing that any kind of rescue would be impossible, I gently sat down next to the man and leaned against the massive tree trunk. His current situation was a death sentence, but I was going to do everything in my power to ensure he didn't continue to go through it alone.

Resting against the tree, I stared ahead of us at a dense thicket of

tangles. It was side-lit by the faint glow that was able to reach us from the clearing. At that angle, shadows cast by the light revealed the intricate surface texture of each tangle the same way a quarter moon reveals detail on the pockmarked lunar surface along the terminator between dark and light. I could barely see the edge of the man's cabin, the view heavily obstructed by the invasive obstacles that had grown sporadically across the clearing. The path I had just traversed was unrecognizable, and any level of disorientation could have made it equally possible to believe that we were stuck in a hopeless maze. Sitting in this spot, we were in a different world.

I tried to envision what led him to this point. There were no signs that anyone else had been near his cabin—no indications that he had been anything but isolated for years. It was clear the tangles had overtaken the area, likely hindering his ability to grow or gather food and preventing him from traveling elsewhere to acquire it. But given how quickly the tangles can spread in favorable conditions, it was impossible to discern how recently this area was overrun to the point of it being nearly uninhabitable. And without being able to ask him, it was inconceivable what ultimately reduced this man to a deteriorated echo of what he once was.

Was he aware of my presence? Was his brain decrepit to the point that he could no longer notice the sights, sounds, or smells that surrounded him? Or was his inner world more like the forest he inhabited? Still living, breathing, and functioning on some level, but hindered so that communication that originated inside of it could not be passed to those on the outside?

I hung my head and stared down at my lap, realizing at that moment that I was still clutching the transmitter that now contained four years of the man's messages. Although anything sent recently was incoherent, his earlier communications were lucid, so I opened them and began to read aloud to the man, just in case he could hear me. As I dictated them, I responded to each one as if I had written him a message in reply years ago, filling the gaps in his communications that were abandoned near the edge of the forest. I'm not sure if I was having this conversation—which straddled the past and present with each written call and spoken response—for his sake or my own, but it felt right to make sure that the man's messages didn't continue to go unanswered.

I told him of life outside the forest, sharing everything I could think of that would be completely unknown to someone who hadn't left this

place in years. I described the valley to him, the people who resided there, and what I had learned about the tangles. Since I now knew a bit about the man from what he shared in his messages, I told him about myself. I told him what brought me happiness and sadness. I explained to him why I became the messenger. I told him about the family member I had lost to the tangles after they decided to stay in the forest. I told him I was sorry I hadn't received his messages until that day.

I took a deep breath and glanced over at the man. The subtle rise and fall of his chest appeared to have stopped, his eyes still gazing off into nowhere. I gently reached a hand to his pulse but now felt only stillness. For a silent few moments after, I held his hand and gazed off into nowhere as well, wondering if he saw something that I could not. Eventually, I said softly to him, with the surrounding forest as witness, that he would not be forgotten. Then I slowly rose to my feet and, clutching the transmitter in my hand, made my way back toward the blast hole at the edge of the forest.