

BLACK MARBLE

Written by

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[EXCERPT]

FADE IN:

A BLACK PINPOINT floating in a WHITE HAZE.

Echoing VOICES. Bottles CLINK.

The Pinpoint resolves into:

The back of a WOMAN'S HEAD.

FEMALE VOICE (V.O.)

Tyler?

INT. COMPUTER LAB - DAY

Bright circular room.

A DARK-HAIRED YOUNG WOMAN passes behind a concrete column, disappears.

MONIE (O.S.)

You okay, Ty?

TYLER POOLE (late 20s) snaps out of a trance. He rolls his broad shoulders and turns to MONIE (20s): Petite, freckled, retro glasses.

TYLER

Sure. Sorry.

They're near a makeshift bar. A banner stretched between two bookcases reads "Congratulations Grads!"

Clusters of GRAD STUDENTS grin and giggle at obscure jokes. Some foot shuffling. It's a nerd party -- and everyone's vibing.

Everyone but Tyler.

SERGE (20s) strides up, hands Tyler and Monie beers. He's lanky, sports a hipster goatee.

SERGE

Who needs Synthetic Intelligence?
All the socially awkward robots are
right here.

TYLER

When in Rome.

Tyler winks, raises his beer. Serge and Monie follow suit.

MONIE
Rome had wine. And snacks.

SERGE
(to Tyler)
She's making a list for the
Reception.

Tyler nods. Uncomfortable beat. Serge offers a guess, already knowing the answer:

SERGE (CONT'D)
You're not coming, are you?

Tyler purses his lips. Monie pats his arm.

MONIE
It's okay. For reals.

SERGE
You realize this means her
brother's my best man.

Tyler's about to make an excuse when he sees a shaggy, hatchet-faced GRAD approach.

TYLER
Could be worse.

The Grad's called RILEY (20s). The sort who's never met a button he didn't like to push. Serge groans.

RILEY
The Dream Team! Minus one.

SERGE
Riley.

RILEY
So, it's Tenure Track Roulette.
Where to from here, Serge?

Serge flings his arm around Monie. Proud.

SERGE
Wedding's first.

RILEY
That's funny. Didn't get my invite.

MONIE
It's a small event.

RILEY

Right. Marriage on a budget. Always a good move.

Riley scoffs. Turns to Tyler.

RILEY (CONT'D)

What about you, Poole? NASA? DARPA? Bicycle repair?

Daggers.

TYLER

I'm gonna finish this beer. Then we'll see.

RILEY

Sounds like a kick-ass resume-builder!

Riley brushes through them, on to the next victim.

SERGE

Douche.

TYLER

He's just jealous.

MONIE

Of what? No one even knows what we did.

TYLER

They know.

Tyler glances around the room. Oddly careful.

Serge spots a ruddy, heavysset GLAD-HANDER surrounded by sycophants. He's choking on his own LAUGHTER.

This is DEAN BECK (50s). Polyester three-piece tapering down to a pair of sad loafers.

SERGE

The Dean's glitching. Time to kiss the ring.

Serge and Monie veer off.

TYLER

Wait.

Tyler catches them. Fumbles in his pocket.

TYLER (CONT'D)
I can't afford your registry, so...

He produces a small black THUMB DRIVE. Hands it to Serge.

SERGE
Um, thanks?

TYLER
It's Gina's research. Top to bottom.

MONIE
(small frown)
Oh.

TYLER
She scrubbed her hard drive -- a week before it happened. Two days later I get that in the mail.

Serge fidgets.

SERGE
We can't accept. Can we? I mean--

TYLER
I'm too close. Maybe you'll... see something I missed. Y'know?

Monie snatches the thumb drive. Serge breaks a tolerant smile.

INT. COMPUTER LAB - HALLWAY - DAY

A burned-out corridor. Charred walls. Mold. Exposed wires dangling like fingers.

Tyler ducks under some criss-crossed CAUTION tape. Nearly drops his beer -- his fourth, or seventh.

He sniffs. Winces at the odor.

Takes it all in. Taps his stainless steel ENGAGEMENT RING against the bottle. DINK. DINK. DINK.

Something glints under the rubble. Tyler moves toward it. Bends down, fishes out a CANADIAN COIN.

Rubs his thumb over it. No idea where it came from.

DEAN BECK (O.S.)
She was every bit as smart as you.

Tyler palms the coin. Rises.

TYLER

Smarter.

DEAN BECK

Maybe. But you have a job, now.

Tyler stares at the Dean: "What the hell would that be?"

DEAN BECK (CONT'D)

It's to carry her. Be the guy she saw in you.

TYLER

My job's whatever I say it is.

DEAN BECK

And what do you say today?

Tyler chugs his beer, saunters over.

TYLER

I'm done with Mindstep. Done with robotics and op systems. And whatever fucked up utopia Abbas was selling.

Dean Beck worries a loose tile with his foot. Sighs.

DEAN BECK

We're gonna have to gut this floor. Renovate. Thank god it didn't spread.

Whatever moment Tyler was having, the Dean's punctured it. Tyler turns to go.

DEAN BECK (CONT'D)

I know you were close. Inches from a breakthrough. The cover of Time -- or whatever people read.

TYLER

So?

DEAN BECK

We think Abbas is still working on it.

That perks him up.

TYLER

The S.I.? Where?

DEAN BECK

North. Haven't heard from him in weeks.

TYLER

That's impossible. He wouldn't have the data. The processing power--

DEAN BECK

A risk. One I can't take. I need a soldier, Ty. Someone to go the hell up there and shut. It. Down. Kibosh another accident. You grok me?

Tyler gazes down the hall. Hears: Glass SHATTERING. An ALARM. His own voice, echoing:

TYLER (V.O.)

GINA!

Grinds his teeth. Nods.

TYLER

I do.

DEAN BECK

Enrollment's down twenty percent thanks to him. You people were pushing--

TYLER

I'm about the last asshole you wanna lecture on this.

DEAN BECK

Of course.

The Dean backs off. Tyler rubs his neck.

DEAN BECK (CONT'D)

We'll cover expenses. All you have to do is step in, hit delete, step out.

TYLER

When would I leave?

DEAN BECK

Soon as you're ready. You have a truck, I hope?

Tyler grins.

EXT. BLUE SKY - DAY

A two-seat CESSNA SKYHAWK cuts through a low-hanging cloud. Banks right, over:

Snow. Permafrost. The Alaskan Interior.

A pale sun glosses the tundra as the plane DIPS suddenly, then corrects.

INT. CESSNA (FLYING) - CONTINUOUS

Tyler's got one hand on the yoke and the other tipping a silver FLASK down his throat.

He caps the flask and trains a glassy eye on the horizon. Frowns.

Next to him: A black, overstuffed backpack.

Tyler fiddles with a dial on the radio panel and croaks into his mic.

TYLER

Paxson radio, Cessna Nine-Six-Two-Lima-Charlie on King Salmon V.O.R., over.

Static. The constant DRONE of the engine. He tries again.

TYLER (CONT'D)

Paxson radio, Cessna Nine-Six-Two-Lima-Charlie. Requesting weather report, over.

Static. Tyler squints, reaches for the dial. Then:

SERGE (V.O.)

Could be good, could be bad. Could be one hot mess of both. Over.

Beat. The voice is familiar. But it can't be.

TYLER

Serge?

SERGE (V.O.)

Naturlich.

Tyler shakes his head. Digs for something in his bomber jacket.

TYLER
Jesus. You hack this frequency?

SERGE (V.O.)
Kid's stuff. We figured you were
getting close.

Tyler twists his neck around and peers down.

TYLER
No visual yet.

He pulls out a small white bottle with a red label: CODEINE.
Flicks the cap.

SERGE (V.O.)
You behaving yourself up there?

Tyler struggles with the bottle. Spills a couple of pills.

TYLER
Personal calls are for personal
phones. Respect the aircraft.

He rolls a pill into his palm. Pops it in his mouth and
swallows hard.

SERGE (V.O.)
Listen. Monie and I just wanna say
thanks.

TYLER
For what?

SERGE (V.O.)
For taking the bullet. Making sure
it's dead.

TYLER
Machines can't die. They expire.

SERGE (V.O.)
Tell that to Abbas.

TYLER
Plan to.

SERGE (V.O.)
Think he's pulling a Howard Hughes,
or what?

Tyler studies the pill bottle. Squeezes.

TYLER

I think maybe we didn't know him at all.

The plane JOLTS suddenly.

SERGE (V.O.)

Well, I hate to sound like a nervous mom, but--

And just like that: The power DIES. Complete system failure. A terrible SILENCE.

TYLER

Serge?

Tyler's eyes widen. Shock, followed by a barely contained PANIC.

All the gauges drop to zero. Icy winds whip around the tiny cabin. Then -- the inevitable, as the plane PITCHES DOWN.

Tyler yanks the throttle and scans the white wasteland. Hunting for a makeshift landing strip. He finds one, nestled between two massive snow dunes.

He hits switches, slaps the radio panel. Nothing.

EXT. CESSNA (FLYING) - CONTINUOUS

The plane's now a 1,500-pound glider. Losing altitude, buffeted by air currents.

To the east: A COMPOUND of two or three pitched-roof buildings.

The Skyhawk speeds past them. Makes for a flat acre of snow.

INT. CESSNA (FLYING) - CONTINUOUS

Tyler wipes sweat from his eyes. Grips the yoke -- forces the nose up.

He blinks. His shoulders relax. A weird calm descends on him like a soft sheet.

Tops of dunes and distant hills race along the window.

The horizon rises... rises... rises...

KA-THUMP! Touchdown. Tyler's expression doesn't change as his body absorbs the impact.

EXT. LANDING AREA - CONTINUOUS

The Cessna BRAKES, rubber wheels churning up chunks of snow.

It reaches a patch of black ice and SKIDS left. The starboard wing tips down, scraping the ground.

Too fast. Not enough real estate. Then:

CRUNCH! The plane spins into a drift -- and stops.

Quiet. Almost peaceful. Snow falls from the drift and gently bounces off the cockpit.

The cabin door kicks open. Tyler appears, dragging his backpack and parka. He slides out. Heavy brown boots meeting the earth at last.

He puts a hand on the plane's nose. Draws a deep breath. Then doubles over and PUKES his guts out.

EXT. TUNDRA - LATER

Tyler trudges through a desolate tract. Checks his phone: NO SIGNAL.

He crams the phone into a pocket and adjusts his backpack.

Slows. Gazes at his shadow, stretching away from the setting sun. He follows its line up from the ground to...

A single-story BUILDING. Some three hundred yards ahead. It glints.

Behind him, something SNORTS. Tyler turns, sees: An enormous Black MOOSE. Standing on a snow dune -- the one with a Cessna wedged in it.

The Moose stares at him. Quite still.

EXT. COMPOUND - MAIN BUILDING - DAY

A sloped metal roof covers a wood-paneled RESEARCH FACILITY. A bent RADIO ANTENNA pokes out near the roof's peak. One rectangular window with the shade drawn.

A dark blue door -- half-buried by snow.

Tyler peeks around the side of the building, looking for another entrance. No luck. He spots a STORAGE SHED and adjacent GARAGE.

He hikes up to the window and taps.

TYLER
Professor?

Silence. Tomb-like. Tyler's mind reels. Suddenly, everything depends on getting in.

He stumbles to the door and claws at the slab of snow. Sees a plastic shovel tucked along the jamb, frosted with icicles. He grabs the handle and unsticks it from the wall.

Tyler stabs the crusted snow pile. Frantic digging.

INT. FOYER - LATER

Dark. Close. A rim of daylight surrounds a shaded window.

Muffled GRUNTS as Tyler finishes his work. The shovel SCRAPES along the ground and drops there.

He presses the latch. The door doesn't budge. Another press. Several more.

CREEEAK. The wood complains as Tyler pushes his full weight against it. Then he pounds -- a desperate battering, one shoulder blow after another.

KA-BAMF! KA-BAMF! KA-BAMF!

The door flies open and Tyler tumbles in.

Panting and purblind, he tries to focus on what's in front of him. Two columns support a low arch. Empty shelves. Dusty bear rug.

A cold breeze kisses his cheek. He slams the door. Creeps toward:

INT. LOUNGE/KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

The room opens out into a large common area. Dense cedar beams. Coffee table. A Formica counter with a molding piece of bread on a dinner plate.

Tyler bumps into a rocking chair. Looks for a light switch. Finds one.

CLICK. Nothing.

Now he hears it: MUSIC drifting in from a back room. The Band or The Animals. Big electric folk.

TYLER
Professor Abbas?

He steps lightly toward a long hallway. Passes a framed photo tacked to the wall -- a middle-aged MAN in a pressed white shirt surrounded by four GRAD STUDENTS:

Tyler, Serge, Monie, and a dark-haired young WOMAN. Tyler's arm is around the Woman.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

The MUSIC grows louder. A florescent light pops on, illuminating a snake of computer cables. They disappear around the bend.

A RIFLE rests on a wall mount. Classic bolt action. And sitting on the barrel --

An oddly charming, translucent SNOWMAN. About 10 inches high. Coal-black eyes. Candy-red nose.

Tyler halts, intrigued. He examines the thing from different angles. Isn't sure what he's looking at, until it hits him.

A HOLOGRAM.

He raises a hand, about to poke it, when:

SKRRRCH! An electrical surge, causing the song to slow down and speed up at absurd rates.

Tyler continues on. The Snowman TURNS ITS HEAD and watches him go...

INT. WORKROOM - CONTINUOUS

Rows of steel cabinets stacked with computer ware. Monitors, keyboards, motherboards, hard drives. Mad scrambles of wires. Pulsing lights.

The heart of a very complex and lonely operation.

A record spins on a phonograph, circa 1975. The song winds down into single-digit RPMs until it dies completely.

That's when Tyler sees him. A MAN, sitting at small screen, his back to him. Focused.

Tyler moves closer. Ready for almost anything.

TYLER
Profess--

ABBAS
AH!

The Man leaps up, spins around. Mid-forties. Wild-eyed, but polished and clean-cut. Button-down shirt. Shock of white hair.

He's Professor LEM ABBAS -- we saw him in the photo.

TYLER
It's okay! I'm Tyler! Tyler Poole!
Remember?

Tyler takes off his watch cap. Abbas tilts his head.
Processing.

ABBAS
Tyler. Of course.
(scratches chin)
By god, you look like hammered
shit.

INT. LOUNGE/KITCHEN - NIGHT

Tyler fishes through the pantry. Abbas leans against the counter.

TYLER
Still don't know what happened.
Fuel was good. Engine was good.
Then:

He whistles and gives a thumbs-down.

ABBAS
I didn't know you flew.

TYLER
Flying's easy. Crashing's hard.

ABBAS
You're lucky to be alive.

TYLER
That's what I tell myself.

Tyler closes a drawer. Turns to ask Abbas something.

ABBAS
Top right.

He gives Abbas a funny look. Goes to the top right cabinet and finds a mug. Huh.

TYLER

When's the last time you were outside?

ABBAS

Couple of days. Why?

TYLER

Because I had to dig my way in. Past a five-foot snow drift.

ABBAS

The weather in this region is... boisterous. It can turn on a dime.

TYLER

How about transport?

Tyler opens the fridge and pokes his head in. Some rotten fruit. Jar of pickles.

ABBAS

In the garage. A fully fueled Snow Cat.

(beat)

I guess I owe you my life.

TYLER

Wouldn't want it.

He grabs a half-empty carton of milk. Uncaps, sniffs it. Recoils.

ABBAS

Sorry. I've had to conserve power. But the water's drinkable.

Tyler shuts the fridge and goes to the sink. Fills his mug.

TYLER

What do you eat?

ABBAS

Rice. Grains. Pasta. I've become a regular monk.

Tyler pulls out his flask and spikes his water. Moves to a leather couch.

TYLER

Looks like you're busy. With the project and all.

Abbas stiffens.

ABBAS

Is that why you're here?

TYLER

Dean Beck sent me.

ABBAS

I've had problems with the antenna--

TYLER

Are you shutting it down?

Tense beat. Abbas walks carefully to a side window. Studies the pitch black outside.

ABBAS

Sun sets at three-thirty this time of year. Wreaks havoc with the old bio-clock. But you'll adjust.

Tyler sips from his mug. Thinks he just got his answer.

TYLER

I'd like to call in.

ABBAS

Soon as the radio's fixed, yes?

INT. SHORT HALL - NIGHT

Abbas leads Tyler to the sleeping quarters. Two doors on either wall, one at the end. Side table with some back issues of Scientific American.

ABBAS

I know it's remote. But I'm not the most popular fellow these days. Also, computers don't overheat here.

Tyler catches something out the corner of the eye: The Snowman. On the table, now. Facing Abbas.

They stop. Abbas smiles warmly.

ABBAS (CONT'D)

This is Walden. He's--

TYLER

A hologram.

Abbas raises an eyebrow.

ABBAS

Yes. Quite basic, but he's the perfect anthropomorphism.

(to Walden)

Wave to our friend, Walden.

WALDEN turns to Tyler and waves one of its twig arms. Adorable -- but Tyler's all business.

TYLER

It senses me?

ABBAS

He recognizes shapes. Basic commands. Just don't expect him to sing holiday tunes.

Abbas gestures to a door on Tyler's left.

ABBAS (CONT'D)

After you.

Tyler twists the knob and taps the door with his boot. Enters slowly.

Abbas hovers just outside.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Full-size bed with quilt and headboard. Electric heater. A curtained window. Spare but cozy; almost quaint.

Tyler drops his backpack on the bed.

ABBAS

Nights get deeply cold, as you can guess. There's an extra--

TYLER

I'll be fine.

His duties exhausted, Abbas turns to leave. But something's gnawing at him.

ABBAS

The Dean's an ass. I'm sorry, but it's not a matter of flicking a switch. There's data to preserve.

(MORE)

ABBAS (CONT'D)
Coding to render. We designed a
very delicate box, and--

Tyler steps toward Abbas. Abbas instinctively steps back,
maintaining the distance between them.

TYLER
I wanna help.

ABBAS
Pardon?

TYLER
It trapped her. It made a choice. I
need to know why.

A surprised smile. Then, warmly:

ABBAS
Gina was a remarkable student. I
don't imagine she'd settle for
less.

Abbas retreats like a servant leaving a royal.

Slipping out, he reveals Walden -- still sitting on the hall
table. It cocks its head.

Tyler closes the door.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Tyler flings himself on the bed. Wearing a T-shirt and
thermal leggings. Flask in hand.

Drinks. We notice a BURN SCAR on his forearm, long and ugly.

He reaches for his phone and checks the display: NO SIGNAL.
And the battery's in the red.

He scrolls through his photos. Lands on one of the dark-
haired Woman we saw earlier. Laughing at some wicked joke.
Pint of beer nearing her lips.

TYLER
(a whisper)
What's so funny, honey?

The phone DIES. Tyler's looking at his reflection, now.

He guzzles the last of the booze and lets the flask fall with
a hollow CLUNK.