

The Terror

I. The Expedition

In the summer of **1881**, twenty-five men of the United States Army Signal Corps boarded the *Proteus* in St. John's, Newfoundland. Their leader, **Lieutenant Adolphus Greely**, carried with him the ambition of empire and the curiosity of science. Their destination: the frozen limits of the world — **Ellesmere Island**, high in the Arctic, where they would establish **Fort Conger** as part of the first **International Polar Year**.

They were to study magnetism, weather, and astronomy, gathering data that would chart the mysteries of the polar regions. Theirs was a mission of reason — of numbers, instruments, and recorded truth. But reason has little power in a place that seems untouched by God.

For the first year, they worked with military precision. They built their timbered station on the shore, recorded wind speeds, and took readings from the instruments that glittered in the moonlight like small altars to science. When the sun disappeared for winter, they marked the date — **October 15th, 1881** — and consoled themselves with the thought that it would rise again in the spring. They did not yet know how long the darkness would last.

II. The Abandonment

By the second winter, the cold had seeped into every part of their lives — into their bones, their food, their sleep. The relief ships sent in **1882** and again in **1883** never arrived. The sea ice held fast, and the channels that might have saved them were sealed by the hand of winter.

When the last stores ran out, they boiled candle wax and chewed their boot leather. Men began to argue over scraps, over imagined promises of food hidden by others. Greely's discipline, once iron, began to crack. One morning a man was found dead in his bunk — no mark on him save the frost that rimed his lips. Another vanished into the white while fetching ice for water, his footprints ending abruptly as though swallowed whole.

Desperation forced Greely's order: **abandon Fort Conger**. They would journey south across the floes to **Cape Sabine**, where an emergency cache had been buried by earlier explorers. To carry the expedition's logs and instruments — the evidence of three years of work — they built crude sledges from dismantled bunks and floorboards. The records were packed in **tin boxes**, lashed with rope, and hauled by hand.

They would not leave their legacy behind. It was, after all, all they had left. The march was hell. The snow blinded them by day and the cold burned them by night. Frostbite blackened fingers and noses. Men fell and could not be lifted. Some froze where they lay; others slipped beneath the ice and were gone before a cry could leave their mouths. One shot himself in the head rather than face another night.

Each death made the group lighter in body but heavier in spirit. The sledges

grew fewer, but the burden of what they carried — those sealed boxes of numbers and maps — seemed to grow heavier with every step. And then, one evening, when the aurora flickered overhead like a slow, green fire, **they heard laughter.**

III. The Presence

At first, they believed it was delirium.

Men who starve and freeze begin to see things, hear things — shapes in the snow, whispers in the wind. But this was different.

On the third night after another man had died, **footprints** were found circling the tents. Not the square boots of soldiers, but long, narrow impressions with a strange bend in the heel — deep, deliberate, as though something heavy had walked the perimeter.

Sergeant **David Brainard** took note of it in his journal, describing the prints as *“neither man nor animal.”* By the next night, the whispers began — faint at first, then clearer. Voices speaking their names.

Sometimes, they were the voices of the dead.

Private Rice swore that he heard Lieutenant Kislingbury — who had frozen to death days before — calling to him from beyond the ridge. Greely ordered silence, but the men began to mutter that they were being followed.

When the wind rose, they claimed to hear something beneath it: **laughter**, soft and human, but muffled — as though trapped under the ice. Brainard’s next entry contained a single sentence before it was struck out:

“The air listens. The dead are walking with us.”

That line was later erased with thick black ink, but when the journal was recovered, the pressure marks could still be read beneath the smudge.

IV. Cape Sabine

By the time they reached **Cape Sabine**, only six of the original twenty-five still drew breath.

They found the supply cache half-buried and ruined. **There were scarce rations that were still edible — little more than a few tins spared by the frost.** There would be no salvation here.

They knew they could not all survive. But the records — the very purpose of their suffering — must. They decided that one of them would stay behind with the boxes, guarding the proof of what had been achieved. The others would attempt to reach **Littleton Island**, over a hundred miles to the south, to summon rescue.

No man wished to volunteer.

So they turned to chance.

Among their few possessions was a small **wooden box** containing **three black dice**, once used for games in the early days at Fort Conger — games that had kept them sane through the endless dark. Each survivor was assigned a number. One by one, they rolled.

When the final cast came to rest, the name that remained was **Francis Long**. He did not protest. He simply nodded, as if he had known all along that the dice

would choose him.

The five remaining men packed what rations they had and set off into the white void, dragging their sledges behind them until the wind swallowed them from view.

V. The Rescue

Four days later, the relief ship **Thetis** forced its way through the ice fields to Cape Sabine. What they found was a scene of stillness — the small cabin half-buried in snow, its door hanging open. Inside, seated beside a guttering lamp, was a man wrapped in frozen blankets. His eyes were open but unfocused. His face was white with frost.

It was **Francis Long**.

He was alive — barely — his hands locked around the expedition's tin boxes and the small wooden dice case. Inside were the logs, preserved perfectly — the work of three lost years.

When they carried him aboard the ship, Long was incoherent, whispering to himself in half sentences. He slept for two days straight before waking, asking again and again if the others had returned.

In time, he recovered enough to speak. But when questioned about the final days at Cape Sabine, he would not — or could not — describe them in full. He only said the others had gone south and never returned.

The official report to Washington made no mention of whispers, nor of the footprints found around the camp. It spoke only of tragedy, courage, and the harshness of nature.