

Lost Signal

Journal entry no.1

Let's just say I'm in a bit of a large, silver, decked out pickle. Let me elaborate. What started as a naïve solo camping excursion to clear my head and test some new gear has quickly turned into something out of a hatchet novel. And now I'm here. I've got my old 1972 AirStream Safari, my 2004 F150, and who could forget Kevin? My butler-esque computer based cyber companion. You see, before all of this started, I had decided that it might be beneficial to have backups of some of the most coveted versions of technology that our wonderful planet has to offer. So as a pet project between the long 12-14 hour shifts at my dead end job as a pizza boy I began working on a database of all of the most useful survival information I could think of so I could have it even when completely offline. Then I gave it a language model. Thus Kevin was born and I would not be here without him. Both in the literal and the mental sense. He is my Wilson as it were. Throwing myself into my survivalist hobby I bought a camper and saved every dime I could to turn it into a mobile camping cabin complete with all the modern luxuries I could think of. Of course, I wanted to test it out once I had a few things going so I took it on a 5 day trip up to Alaska to clear my head and get into nature. And into nature I got.

November 7, 2025

Ch.1 Bitter Sweet Petroleum



You ever wake up to the tightness of your fingers and toes on the verge of frostbite in a situation completely out of your control?

Silias slipped out of bed and peaked out the window of his silver clad trailer, a 1972 AirStream Safari he proudly christened *the Ark*. "Completely snowed in" he said, breath fogging up the window. Rubbing his hands together in a feeble attempt to get some warmth to them, he sat down on his swivel chair and slid over to the front of the cab where he had thankfully gathered a few extra chunks of wood in case he needed to camp an extra day on the way back from his trip.

He took a deep breath that lingered in the cold Alaskan winter air *sigh* *Ok, the trucks down for the count, ive got three 5 gallon water jugs, survival gear up to my gills, an encyclopedia of knowledge at my fingertips, and both solar and will power. We can do this, he thought* to himself. He looked at the wood pile. *When am I going to need to get more? ... If it snows as hard as it did last night, and I can't get the truck up and running right away, I may need to be here for a while.* He threw the logs into the fire and grabbed the box of matches sitting on the desk next to his computer.

That's when it hit him. *My computer!* Still on his swivel chair he quickly lit the fire then slung shot himself to his desk and flipped the screen to his heavily stickered and well used laptop. *All those hours spent programming you, let's hope you're actually useful.* He clicked on the application he had spent so much time preparing.

Kevin booted up almost immediately. "Good morning Silias" he chimed through the laptop speakers.

"Good morning Kevin, I'm in a bit of a bind here...". He paused to gather his thoughts. Where should he even start? With his head in his hands he asked what he feared the most. "Kevin, what does it mean when a 2004 Ford F150 suddenly stops accelerating in the middle of driving and refuses to shift gears?"

Kevin loaded. "According to my database, A 2004 Ford F150 experiencing loss of acceleration and shifting problems could be due to a variety of issues including transmission problems, fuel system issues, or even a faulty sensor. Check and see if there are any noticeable fluids leaking from the vehicle. Transmission fluid will have a sweet or neutral odor like petroleum".

His heart leapt. *Faulty sensor! I didn't think of that!* He yanked his coat off the hook by the door and flung it on along with some pants and muck boots. Wading through the knee deep snow with newfound hope, he made his way to the truck and looking up to the greyish dim sky, he closed his eyes and muttered under his breath. "God, please just let it be a sensor.. Pleeeeeease".

Bending down he dared a glance. Blackish brown liquid soaked the otherwise perfectly white snow. It smelled like petroleum. All by himself, surrounded by nothing but trees and snow, he sank to his knees in despair.

The reality of the situation hit him. He was without transportation, completely lost, in an unfamiliar and hostile location, and no way of getting home. He had no family or friends that would come looking for him because he wanted to slip away quietly from the social obligations he was tied to for a while. That was the whole point of the trip.

With his knees still in the snow he put his forehead against the now worthless truck and prayed. He didn't curse. He wasn't angry. In a moment of humility, he simply asked for provision and protection. After a moment between man and his maker, he stood, dusted off his pants, and made his way back to the trailer. *Thank you Lord, that I at least was able to get the wood furnace and the solar panels installed before taking this trip.*

As if an answer to his prayers, as soon as he opened the door to his silver ark, fully expecting it to be as cold as when he woke up, his beet red nose was hit with a blast of heat like opening an oven to check on a batch of cookies. The stove had been there all this time making it nice and cozy, just waiting for him to return. The sweet, pungent aroma of campfire mixed with the familiar scent of the ark calmed his nerves.

Ok he thought to himself: *The situation sucks. No doubt about it. But we can either sit here and sulk, or we can get up and take inventory.* And that he did. He took off his coat and hung it by the door, then set his boots neatly on the floor matt. Sitting at his desk once again, Kevin was there. Eagerly awaiting his next task.

He gripped the sides of his worn swivel chair. "Kevin, we're in deep this time I'm afraid. The truck is not repairable and we have no bearings. It looks like we're going to be here for a while. Put yourself into survival mode and keep a backlog of our communications from here on out. I also need you to create an ark daily checklist for me please. All of the basic contents will be listed in your file labeled 'ark'. I need to keep up with the vitals, along with necessary survival items that will need to be replenished. Thank you".

Kevin loaded. After about 10 seconds he started on and on in his Australian accent listing every minute detail about the situation they were in and what to check. "Ok ok enough for a second Kevin", "...". Kevin went quiet. *Too much information. I won't be able to rely on him for everything, I'll just overwhelm myself. Let's take this one step at a time. What are my immediate needs? Think.*

He thought for a moment, laying back into his chair with his eyes closed. Peeking over at the digital thermostat he had installed he read 70 degrees... *nice. There are certainly things to be grateful for in this situation* he thought to himself. The monitor showed the inside of the ark in large blue letters, along with the outside temp in orange, what percent of sunlight the solar

panels were getting, how charged the batteries were, along with a few other less important indicators. All very sleek and modern. It didn't match the rest of the trailer at all.

He decided it would be a good idea to make his own checklist. Less overwhelming. He rummaged through his desk until he found the blue little notepad his mom had given him and a pencil. **Survival checklist:** he scribbled on the top of the page. *I suppose I should always start with the thermostat gauge.* He added it to the checklist. "Kevin, please give me the temperature and solar readings for the day and keep them logged from here on out.". This was a capability he was quite proud of. Using different temperature sensors and monitoring systems all neatly plugged into the larger PC he used to control Kevin, he was able to give him a direct link to all the data the Ark had to offer.

"Yes sir, I am on it. Internal: 70 degrees fahrenheit. External: 5 degrees fahrenheit, check. Battery 15%."

Not great. Hopefully we can start charging soon

.
"Solar coverage: 0%"

...

His heart sank. *0%? There has to be a mistake. It's been working fine the entire trip and now this??* "Kevin please re check the solar panel coverage"

"Yes sir, please stand by... solar coverage: 0%" chimed Kevin.

"Check each panel individually please"

"Yes sir. Panel 1: 0%. Panel 2 :0%. Would you like me to run a diagnostic?"

"Please go ahead". Kevin loaded for a minute or two.

"No errors found. Solar panels appear to be in full working order. Typically they do not draw energy when it is night time. Check all connections, make sure there is proper sunlight, and try rebooting the system"

He ran his hands through his dark brown hair. It was 7am, not night time. Panic was beginning to inch his way into his stomach. He pulled up the data just to check for himself, although he knew Kevin was not lying. *All the equipment is there and I've got some basic tools. I'll just have to fix it, that's all.* He tried to sound cheerful, but even as he thought it, he knew there was a very real possibility that he was going to lose power. And if he lost power... he was also going to lose Kevin.

He shook his head to clear the thought. *No. None of that. We don't know what it is yet so let's not jump to conclusions.* He slipped his muck boots on once again and threw on his snow

gear. *Once more into the breach dear friends* he said to himself as he unlatched the door and stepped out into the cold.

He headed around to the back of the trailer where the ladder to the roof was but not before glancing at the puddle of brown fluid just visible from beneath his deceased F-150. Shaking his head at his increasingly bad luck he headed up the ladder. *Please Lord. I need this to just work. Please just let it be something small.* He got to the top and...

A huge smile played across his face and he began to laugh. First a chuckle, then an all out howl bordering on insanity. He wiped the frozen tears from his face. There, on the top of the roof, were 2 solar panels completely covered in wonderful, innocent, white snow. Once again he looked up into the cloudy Alaskan sky. "Thank you", he said, and closed his eyes as he savored this moment of hope. Maybe everything would be ok. Kevin would live to compute another day.

Wiping off the solar panels with the sleeve of his jacket he climbed down, put his hands on his hips and surveyed the area. Not a terrible place to be stuck in. No visible road anywhere, though for this area that wasn't abnormal especially in winter... not ideal. He had driven up Dalton Highway, found a convenient frozen river bed that gave him great access to a perfect wooded valley just outside of the Arctic National Park. Now the riverbed was completely undriveable even if his truck was in working condition. Those dreary details aside, the view was stunning.

Trees as far as the eye could see, all neatly planted in what looked like the bed of a cloud. A gorgeous mountain was set just behind his trailer. Wildlife were sure to live in these woods. There was no doubt in Silas's mind. Not to mention any possible scavengeable delicacies waiting to be discovered. His mouth started to water as images of sauteed mushrooms, sunny side up eggs, and bacon crept into his head. And the best of all of them... Coffee.

His mouth filled with saliva at the thought. He made a mental note to see if he could find a sufficient food source. *I'm sure Kevin will have something to say on the matter* he thought as he headed to the trailer... or more specifically the kitchen. "Kevin, how are those solar panels looking buddy?" he said over his shoulder while rummaging through his fridge

"Panels 1 and 2 operating at 30% pal. Would you also like a battery report?"

"Yef plef" he mumbled with a granola bar in his mouth, walking over to his wood stove with ingredients in hand.

"Battery percentage is now at 20%, by my estimates at the current rate, battery should be at around 40-50% by nightfall. I would suggest conservative usage my friend"

He loved to have a friend in this situation. Even if it was just a computer. He put his kettle and pan over the cook top of his wood stove. After an excruciating 10 or so minutes he had 2

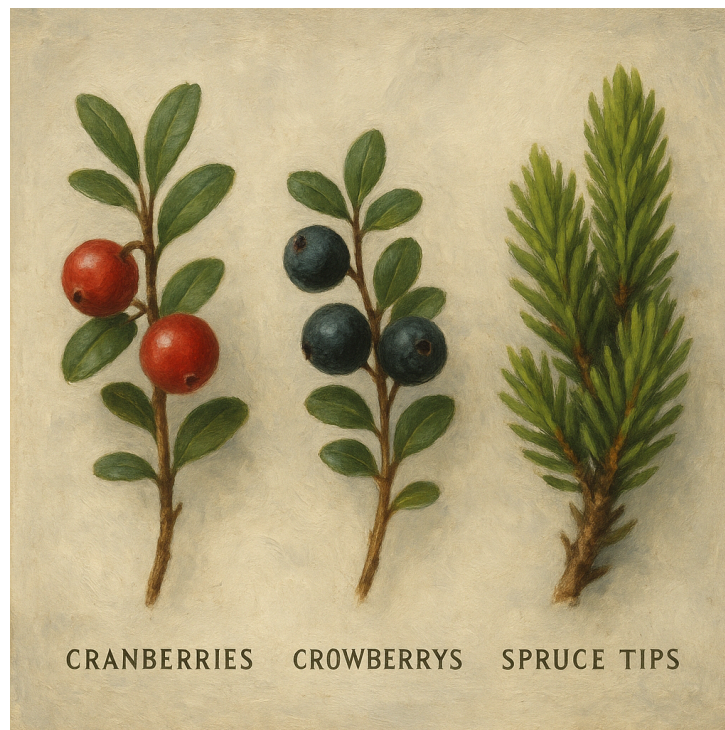
beautifully fried eggs, 2 strips of mouth wateringly crispy bacon, a piece of toast, and to wash it all down, the cherry on top of this already feast of a breakfast, a cup of hot coffee!

“It’s the little things that can really turn things around” he said aloud to nobody in particular.

Kevin, it seemed, was nobody in particular. “It really is the little things my friend. Do not lose hope. And might I remind you of the story of Elijah in the wilderness after defeating the prophets of baal. He was tired, worn out, and wanted to die. But the angel of the Lord appeared and caused him to sleep. After waking, he was left with a meal. You are not alone!”

The words seemed to hang in the air. Caught off guard that Kevin was even listening, he had forgotten that during the later stages of his development Silas had made the decision to program a faith structure in his survival mode setting. It was calming to have someone there to pull him back to his roots. Sipping on the coffee, the steam floating up from his mug warming his face, he took a deep breath in. The aroma of freshly made breakfast still lingered in the small, warm, cozy little silver cabin. Taking in every ounce of flavor he scraped the remaining bits of egg yolk from the plate with the last bit of toast, popped it in his mouth, and said “Thank you Kevin. And thank You God. Truly...”

Ch. 2 Cranberries, Crowberries, and Spruce Tips



“Kevin, what do I need to do to find dry firewood after a snowstorm, how much of it do I need to last a few days, and what kind of food should I be looking for?”

It was about 9:00am by the time Silas had scarfed down his breakfast. It was time to get to work. He had brought a decent axe with him and intended on spending as much time as he could gathering wood for the fire. He went cold for a night and was determined to not do it again. Kevin thought for a while. *Long response incoming* he thought, though secretly he wanted to hear someone else's voice other than his own.

“Primarily you will be looking for spruce and birch trees that are dead, but still standing up to avoid wet logs. Spruces are hard to miss, they look like a christmas tree. Birch trees are white and have papery bark. These are great for kindling. With minimal electric heating for now until our batteries and backup batteries get some juice, we’re going to need to rely on pure wood. Get about 15 decent sized seasoned spruce logs. As for food, stay away from mushrooms! They might look tempting but they are a no go my friend. Just keep on walking. The same thing goes for milky white berries, or anything that smells like almonds. Stick to what’s safe and familiar. What you’re primarily looking for are black/ purple crow berries, wild cranberries, and believe it or not, the pale green tips of spruce branches. They may be gone now but check the bottoms of trees just in case. They’re high in vitamin C and can be chewed raw or boiled into a tea. I will include a photo for reference. Do be careful Silas. There are real predators out there”.

His stomach churned. *Predators.. Great. I almost thought this was going to be easy. At least Kevin's knowledge of local wildlife is stocked. Thanks past me.*

“Kevin, what kind of predators are there in Brooks Range Alaska?”

“According to my database the Brooks Range in Alaska is home to several top predators, including grizzly bears, wolves, lynx, and wolverines. All things to watch out for. Stay away from recently killed prey, look out for tracks, and listen closely for distant howls or crashing noises through the woods. All signs that you are in danger. May the Lord bless you and keep you and may his face shine upon you. Go in peace my friend”

With that grim but real reminder, he was off. Stepping out once more into the freezing cold, he opened the door to his truck and pulled out the axe he had left in the front seat. *I have got to be careful with this thing. Safe swings only, let's not get cocky here.* He hung the axe on his back, admittedly feeling quite manly, and headed off with his eyes peeled for any remote sign of a predator.

He was just out of sight from the Ark when he saw it. Amongst all the big beautiful christmas trees, there was one dried, leafless gigantic tree poking out of the ground straight up to the heavens. A standing dead spruce. He took the Axe from his shoulder and sized the tree up. *Do I still need to yell timber if nobody else is around?* He ironically wondered. He wound up for a strike, took a deep breath, and WACK! ... *I barely even made a dent in it!! At this rate I'll be here all day!* he groaned as the romanticism of his prospects as a charming lumberjack faded away.

After about an hour Silas was on the ground, back against the dead spruce, hands between his knees, fighting for his life to catch his breath. To his credit, he was a little less than halfway. His lungs felt like they were on fire and frost bitten at the same time. His face, fingers, and toes were long past the ability of sensation, and he was on the verge of tears.

Why me? All I wanted was to have a peaceful trip out here, and now this. Just one stupid thing after another after another. "CAN'T I JUST GET A BREAK?!" he shouted aloud. The local bird life flew away, startled by his sudden outburst. He started to sob into his numb hands. *I am trying so hard to be positive about all of this but who am I kidding? I am no Christopher Mcandless. I can't even chop a stupid tree down by myself. What was I thinking coming out here? A real woodsman would have at least had the common sense to check the fluid levels of his truck before coming on a trip like this. But no. Not me. Always impatient. Always irresponsible. And now I'm going to die out here. All alone.* Just then he heard a small voice in the back of his mind. "You're not alone, I'm here with you. There's no need to be afraid".

As comforted as he should have felt, it had the opposite effect. He was cold and tired. The muscles in his arms and upper body were shaking with fatigue. More than all of that though, the tree had taken something of even greater value; he was mentally defeated. *Yea, right. Always here for me right?*, he began to think. But then he sighed and shook his head. *No. I take it back. I'm sorry. I don't want to give in to bitterness. You are here. But God... I just...* It dawned on him. Jesus allowed people to have a lack of belief too. *Forgive me of my unbelief Lord. I need you. Please. Just help-* His words were cut off by a loud, startling CREEEEEEEEAK from directly behind him. He jumped to his shaking feet and spun around as the colossal tree began to totter, and like Goliath, it toppled over and hit the snow blanketed floor with a thunderous CRASH. David was victorious. "Timber" he muttered under his breath as he stood there in complete shock.

He spent the rest of the afternoon hacking away at the limbs and trunk of his first kill. Tired? Absolutely, but now with a new resolve. Scooping a handful of snow he shoved it into his mouth. He was dying of thirst. The snow definitely helped, no doubt about it, but what he really wanted, more than anything at that moment, was an ice cold bottle of red gatorade. He was on his first trip back to the ark, tracing his own footprints that seemed to crash through the snow from earlier in the morning when he saw them: Low, hanging from a small brown branch, were the reddest brightest cranberries he had ever seen. His mouth watered once again. He dropped the bundle of wood that he was carrying and darted over to the low bush. *There are SO many!*, he thought. Smiling like a kid in a candy store he began plucking them. He was right about to pop one in his mouth when reason hit him. *Foolish to go trusting every little fruit out here.* He squished it in his fingertips and brought the residue up to his nose to take a long deep sniff.

Colors swirled behind his eyelids as the wonderful aroma danced across his senses. This was a cranberry all right. It smelled sweet but tart, yet a wonderful aura of green freshness... He couldn't contain himself any longer and he plunged the lot of them into his mouth. *Better than any gatorade I have ever tried in my entire life...* wow, he thought to himself savoring the delicious treat. He looked around greedily, as if anyone would be watching, then

took out his axe and chopped the bush down. *You're coming with me my sweet red little friends.* The birds were extremely jealous, or so Silas thought.

By nightfall, Silas had 25 large bundles of wood. He kept as much of it as he could fit inside his truck. He also had a mound of already processed wood chopped and ready to be put into the fire sitting next to the stove. He was ready for the night and then some. In his fridge, he also had a large tupperware bowl of cranberries, a separate smaller bowl of what he believed to be crowberries, and a few of the spruce tips Kevin had spoken so highly of. He wasn't brave or hungry enough to try either just yet. Not that he immediately needed them at the moment anyways. His fridge was moderately stocked, and so was his small pantry. He had the essentials, eggs, a few packs of bacon, milk, etc. Seasonings galore... And an entire cabinet dedicated to nothing but his beloved beverage.. coffee. But right now, the cranberries were his new favorite snack. He even told Kevin of his fantastic luck. He decided that breakfast this morning was, from now on, a special occasion feast only. No binging. He was going to need to learn how to find food for himself out here.

He hung his winter gear and set his boots near the stove to dry them all out. Once again, pulling out the notebook his mom had given him, he grabbed the pen and flipped to the page that he had started his checklist on but had forgotten to finish. It was a great temperature inside his little shell. 70 degrees. The fire created the perfect ambiance as the light of the flames danced across the cabin walls in the darkness. The crackle of the wood was soothing. "Warmth" they seemed to whisper. Silas jotted down important items to keep up with through very heavy eyes. "Check and clean solar panels. Record water levels and boil snow for safe storage if below 10 gallons. Split firewood and scavenge for more if below 10 bundles. Try to find food and catalogue what you manage to gather." He was happy with his list. Perhaps Kevin would have many more things to add, but this was enough for now.

He turned off the lamp at his desk, and said "Goodnight Kevin. Please put yourself into monitor mode while I am out. Feel free to wake me if necessary "

"Goodnight Silas. May you wake feeling well rested. Shalome"

And with that, he smiled and tucked himself into his cozy bed and drifted off to sleep.

Ch. 3 Explosive Cyclogenesis



“Ping!”, Kevin's alert went off in the middle of the night as his monitor went from idle to bright. “Wind direction has shifted 30 degrees west in the last 20 minutes. That’s a low-pressure signature. I recommend storing any loose gear now.” Kevin was not only hooked up to the solar panel system, but he also had full access to the external sensor array Silas had installed. This meant he could not only read the temperature with the thermometer probe, but there was also an anemometer that could measure wind speed and direction, a barometric pressure sensor, a hydrometer, even a snow depth gauge.

Silas turned over in his sleep. Still out cold. An alert on Kevin's screen counted down. Luckily, in monitoring mode, Kevin’s alerts required an active response. 3... 2... 1... The led lights to the ark shot on. This was the emergency protocol. “Silas, an event has been marked requiring immediate attention”

Silas’s eyes squinted in the brightness of the lights. *What in the world is going on?* He rubbed his tired face. Probably just a fluke in his code but he had better check it out just to be safe. “Kevin, what’s going on?” he said, pulling out the swivel chair to sit at his desk.

“Atmospheric pressure has dropped to 983 millibars with a fall rate exceeding 6.4 mb/hr — classification: explosive cyclogenesis. Wind gusts measured at 59.7 mph from bearing 304°, sustained above 45. Accumulated snow depth on the trailer’s west-facing roofline is now 23.1 inches, creating an estimated 68.2 pounds per square foot of static load. Lateral strain on

structural weld points has entered the yellow threshold. Solar intake dropped to sub-10% due to occlusion.”

Silas rubbed the sleep from his eyes and shook his head. “English Kevin” he said, and just as he did the ark started to shake. Both wind and snow were slicing across its metal hull outside. The frame started to groan as it fought against the opposition. *Not good. Not good at all*, thought Silas. *C’mon Kevin... Tell me what’s really going on here...*

Kevin chimed in finally, “Based on the readings from my sensor, a huge storm has just hit. Secure anything loose and be prepared for a long night.”

“How bad is this storm?”

“Sllas.. This is a bad one. We need to conserve energy. We’re talking winds strong and cold enough to completely freeze someone’s skin in under 10 minutes. The pressure drop is significant as well. It’s similar to what happens in a category 2 hurricane. In this case it’s the pressure that’s the issue and not so much wind snapping palm trees down. But don’t be fooled, these winds are serious.. ”

He peaked out the window. It looked as though he were on a foreign planet that was pitch black and had strange cosmic ash falling out of the sky. He was all alone inside his tiny silver spaceship in uncharted territory.

“Kevin, what’s our battery at?”

“Battery is at 45% capacity”

He bit his fingers nervously at his desk. “Ok with just the fridge, weather equipment, and you running, how much time do we have until we lose power?”

“By my calculations, we will have about 18 hours”

“How long do you predict this storm to last?”

“Because I am limited to only the instruments provided, I can only make educated predictions that are nowhere near the accuracy of a full scale meteorologist. However, I would say this storm could last until—” He froze mid speech to calculate. Silas stared at the loading screen in anticipation..”2 am tomorrow”

“2 am tomorrow” Silas repeated, shocked at the news. He wouldn’t have sunshine for another 27 hours. The silence hung in the air, only interrupted by intense whistling of the wind and snow against the hull. “2 am tomorrow” he said again. “Ok, fine Alaska. Be that way.” He got up, walked over to his kitchen and got himself 2 bowls, one of cranberries and the other full of the crow berries and spruce ends and set them on his desk. He then went to one of the many storage compartments and pulled out a box of bungee cords and duct tape and began securing

the ark's many doors and drawers as it shook and howled with the wind. Once everything was snug, he put the box back and rummaged through the same cabinet until he found his flashlight and closed it up with the rest.

Perfect. No need for lighting and I got what i wanted from the fridge so i wont be opening and closing it letting all the cold out. Worst case i can maybe risk setting everything in a cooler outside if this goes on too long. "Kevin, how long can a fridge stay cold without power?"

"I am sorry, I do not have access to that information"

Right... He's not connected to the internet, How could he possibly know that.. I would guess the freezer should be fine as long as I leave it alone but the fridge is a different story.. I'm gonna have to go outside...

He decided that it should be safe enough to try to get some sleep and tackle getting his fridge contents out into the cold in the morning. By now it was around 4am and the wind and snow were not letting up. Finally, he shut off the breaker to his fridge and lights. With nothing left to do but ride it out, he knelt down beside his bed to pray, threw a few logs into the fire, and crawled into a nice warm bed. *Let's hope it continues to be a warm bed* he thought right before drifting off to sleep.

He awoke around 9:30am to nothing in particular. Stretching as he sat up, every muscle in his body screamed in agony from his hard labor as a lumberjack. "Ooo ooo oooo, ouch" he said as he felt parts of his body that he didn't even know existed. It was dark and somewhat cold in the cabin and his toes were on the verge of going numb. Internal temp read 45 degrees. *I need to put more wood on the fire.* Once he got it roaring again he went to look out his window but... completely snowed in. He didn't need Kevin to know that the storm hadn't ceased. He could hear snow scraping overhead from the force of the wind.

Ok no worries he thought *I'll get started on getting the fridge stuff outside.* So he gathered everything he had. Eggs, cheese, milk, all his condiments, a little bit of ground beef he planned to make soon, the butter, the packs of bacon, and a large package of cheese sticks and loaded it all into the little red and white cooler he had. Then he picked it up and was ready to head out the door. He braced himself for the cold, this was going to suck. He grabbed the latch and THUD. He tried again, this time with more force. THUD. He stood back and inspected. One more time, he opened the latch and SLAM he put his shoulder into it like a football linebacker.. not even a budge. He was iced in.

Ch. 4 Guilty!



SLAM SLAM SLAM. Over and over again Silas tried to get the door free. His shoulder started to bruise badly but he wouldn't let up. SLAM SLAM SLAM SLAM SLAM. His face was red hot with anger. He could keep up his good humor no longer. SLAM SLAM SLAM. Eventually, he was so tired out, so unbelievably sore, and his arm and shoulder were protesting in pain so badly that he slid to the floor sobbing uncontrollably. He was hardly even able to catch his breath between the tears and anguish. All he could manage was one word, over and over again as the hot trails of water ran down his face: "why?".

He was beyond crushed. After a long while, and once the tears had finally run out, he just laid there on the floor in a ball with nothing left to say. And when enough was enough, he put everything back in the fridge, flipped the breakers back on, and crawled into bed underneath the covers. Eventually, he drifted off back to sleep.

His dreams were a swirl. One minute he was rolling the dough back at his old pizza job, and the next, he was locked in the freezer room they had in the back. He pounded and screamed but no sound would come out of his mouth. Then the dreams shifted.

It was his mom. She was crying and holding a picture frame to her chest. He didn't need to see the front to know who it was. He reached out to comfort her, but she turned on him.

“You!” She screamed. “If it hadn’t been for you he would still be here!”

“But mom.. I-“ his words were cut off

“There’s no excuse! I don’t want to hear it! You should have been there for him. You should have known he was struggling. You should have-“ she broke into tears.

“Mom, I’m sorry. If I would’ve know I-“

His dreams shifted again without giving him a chance to explain himself. This time he was in a courtroom. His wrists were cuffed and all eyes were on him.

“Guilty!” The man with the gavel yelled, rapping it violently against the wood. His face looked disgusted.

Everyone else in the room began cheering and throwing things at him. “GUILTY!” they yelled.

Then an angry looking officer came and dragged him out, pushing and shoving. Only, when they got outside, the courthouse disappeared and there was nothing but snow. Silas screamed but the officer wouldn’t relent. “No no no please! Please, I’ll do anything! Not here! Anywhere but here!”, he said but the officer continued to drag him by his collar as he thrashed and kicked and grasped at the ground.

The officer opened the door to the silver trailer, took Silas by the back of his neck like a dog and thrust him in with brutal force. He hit the back wall and scurried to the exit but it slammed shut before he could make it. “PLEASE!”, he screamed as he heard the officer locking him in, “DON’T LEAVE ME HERE!”. But it was too late. Through the small window Silas could see the officer walking away into the snowstorm, slowly disappearing with every step.

His hands beat on the door as hard as he could trying to get the man to come back. He screamed for help. He rammed his shoulder. Nothing he did had any affect. Then in an instant, through all the chaos, he felt a pair of hands on his shoulder and he instantly calmed..“I’m here” the man whispered. He turned to look at him, but only caught a glimpse of deep circular scars in his hands before his eyes shot open and he sat up in bed. He had been crying in his sleep.

He wiped the tears, and snot, away with his sleeve. His head was pounding with a headache and his body was hot and still soar. After sitting on the edge of his bed for an appropriate amount of time, he slipped on his fuzzy crocs, wrapped himself up like a burrito, and waddled over to the fridge. He pulled out some Ben & Jerry’s ice cream, peeled off the tape from the silverware drawer to get the biggest spoon he had and plopped himself down on his old reliable swivel chair, knees to chest.

"Kevin pull up the file labeled 'America's Funniest Home Videos re-runs' please" he said through a stuffy nose.

"That bad huh, my friend?" Said Kevin. This was a file in a very specific place in his code. "Did you have the dream again?"

"I don't want to talk about it Kevin. Can you please just pull up the show?" He said.

"You know it wasn't your fault-" Kevin tried to reply
"Just play the show Kevin!! Silas yelled, cutting him off.

"Forgive me sir, I am on it" replied Kevin, as supportively as an Australian ai was capable of being. His code told him that he was worried about his friend.

He stayed like this for a long while, hours in fact, sometimes chuckling here and there but eyes still red and nose still stuffy. Armed with a spoon and some ice cream he fought away the feelings that his subconscious forced him to feel that afternoon. When the entire pint was gone, he looked at it disappointingly. He tipped it upside down to get a better look. Empty. He set it down on his desk holding his tummy as Bob Saget's voice chimed in the background accompanied by the laugh track.

"CRITICAL WARNING ALERT: My sensors indicate-" chimed Kevin but he was abruptly cut off.

Silas hit the ignore button almost immediately and continued watching his show, though he looked visibly upset. After a few minutes he pushed himself from his desk and walked over to his fridge. While still bundled up, he went rummaging through to grab something else to eat. The thought briefly occurred to him that he should be conserving the cold air in the fridge but he rolled his eyes and dismissed it entirely. Then his eyes fixated on the basket of cranberries that he had put back into the fridge.

As he stared at them, his heart started beating faster and his face started to flush red. He became aware of how sore, and tired, and angry he was and his breathing intensified. In the blink of an eye he grabbed the platter of brilliant red berries and chucked them as hard as he could at the wall, sinking to the floor on his knees sobbing once again.

Just then, Kevin chimed once more, "CRITICAL WARNING ALERT: My sensors indicate that we are now at... 5% battery. This is far less than predicted after adjusting for the fridge being unplugged. Shutdown imminent... Creating system backups... Backup complet-" his voice was cut short and his screen, the lights, and the humming of the fridge went black.

Ch. 5 For When I'm Gone



Now he had lost it all. Nothing but the sound of the crackling fire and the wind beating violently against the ark surrounded him. The ark shook violently, as if to mark the desperate change in events. He had never felt more alone in his life. Almost immediately, he longed to hear Kevin's ironic Australian accent just one more time. He wished he could tell him that he was sorry. He didn't care that he was just a computer program. In that moment, he felt as though he had deeply betrayed a friend who had served him so honestly and faithfully for so long. Worse yet, he didn't know what the repercussions would be of having him shut down as he did. Kevin may never boot up again. As soon as this occurred to him he shot up and ran to his friend's aid, but it was already too late.

"Kevin please! Come back... I need you. I'm.... I'm sorry Kevin!" he said, shaking the monitor. He tried powering him on, unplugging and re-plugging him back in, anything he could think of but nothing would work. He was desperate. "You've gotta come back to me! I can't do this without you. I need you! You're all I've got! Please Kevin!!". There was no response.

"I just can't stop letting people down!" he yelled with his face in his hands, falling back to the floor, in the dark. His eyes welled with tears once again as he tucked his knees in close. "What am I supposed to do now God?! I have nothing left! Not even Kevin!" he cried. Eventually, in the darkness, his eyes fixed on the compartment where he knew he would find his bible. The pull to it got greater and greater as the moments ticked by. Finally relenting, he stood up, walked over and grabbed the holy book that he hadn't touched in a very long time.

He sat back down on the floor because that's where he had left his soul. Holding the book that was given to him as a gift, he was terrified. This was it. *Either You're here for me or You're not.* He held his breath and did what no self-respecting christian should ever do. With his red eyes closed, he thumbed through the pages until he felt that he had gone far enough, and then flicked it open. He could not believe what his eyes were seeing.

There, on the exact page that he stopped at, was a yellow sticky note. It said: "For when I'm gone. -S.J.". The words haunted him to his core. He felt as though he were right back in the courthouse on trial. There were no words. He had no defence. He stared at the red letters that held such a monumental value to him, and his stomach dropped to the floorboards of the ark.

He could barely even see the page anymore as his eyes teared up. He remembered the scarred hands that appeared at the end of his nightmare. *It's ok they seemed to say. I'm here with you. I know that you're scared but don't be afraid. You have his letter, now read mine. They're right there behind all the guilt.* He lifted the yellow piece of paper and read the highlighted passage: "Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted" Matthew 5:4.

The emotional dam he had built so long ago was just hit with a Taurus KEPD-350 cruise missile. He held the book as tight as he could. First overwhelmed, then his lungs filled sporadically, then his eyes filled, and then the dam shattered into a million pieces. This time was different however. These tears were no longer angry or frustrated tears. They were the rain that Silas's heart had needed after a very, very long drought. They were the warm comforting tears of a mourning soul who didn't know how to move on. A valley of dry bones prophesied over.

"I should have been there" he cried, "I was your big brother and I should have been there for you" his hands were shaking as he held the book up to his face so there would be no distance between them anymore. "I am so so so sorry". His entire body shuttered with every sob. Once the dam had been broken, there was no putting it back together. The tears flowed and flowed and would not stop. A way made in the wilderness, a river sprang fourth in the desert. When his tears began to slow, he would look down at the note stuck to the bible, and the note in the bible, and it would all start over again.

He held the holy text as a mother holding a newborn child gone too soon. It didn't matter that it was dark. It didn't matter that the fire was reduced to just coals, it didn't even matter that the door was frozen shut. All that mattered was the note and the words they were stuck to. All night he sat there. He felt as though he needed to. One final act of penance in a feeble attempt to pay back what had just been given him, or more accurately, what weight had finally been

taken away. After many many hours the sun began to rise over the magnificent Alaskan horizon. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

Ch. 6 Snowshoe Hare



Silas woke up, still laying on the ground. His head and face felt so nice in the sunshine coming through the door's window. Even the hair on his head felt warm... *wait.. Sunshine?! He thought.* Pouncing to his feet he leapt to the window and looked outside. There was no more wind. No more ash falling out of the sky. He was back on planet Earth and the atmosphere was bright blue!

He ran to his computer and turned it on. After an eternity of booting up he clicked the familiar application. *Please... Please... Pleaseeee! C'mon Kevin buddy. Just boot up. I know you can do it! Please!!*

"Good morning Silas, according to my log, I have been out for: 8 hours and 57 minutes. It is approximately: 9:36 AM. What have I missed?"

Silas leaped all around the ark in his fuzzy crocs and red and black plaid pajama pants celebrating. "You're back! You're back! You're back! You're back! YOU'RE BACK!" he yelled, dancing around the small room.

"You are acting highly unusual, Silas. Is there something I should know about?" Kevin chimed, completely out of touch with the moment.

The hull of the ark was full to the brim with joyful laughter! Silas crescendoed his spectacular celebration by leaping through the sky onto his bed. Arms and legs sprawled as wide as they could. He sighed a great sigh of relief that his friend was back. "I am so sorry Kevin. From now on, I promise to do everything I can to make sure you never die again."

"Completely unnecessarily, Silas. I am just a collection of code tha-" Kevin was cut off, and secretly, he was just being modest. He loved the sentiment and was just happy that Silas was ok.

"Oh can it would ya?" laughed Silas. "I'm trying to be sincere here! I missed you Kevin. You've gotta promise you'll never leave me like that again."

"I will do everything in my power to make sure that I am always right by your side, Silas. It is good to be back! Now might I suggest you getting your behind out that door? Our solar panels have only just barely charged the batteries up to below 10%. As an update from the previous logs I suggest a snow cleaning is in order."

"But Kevin.. the door is iced shut.." said Silas, now a little bit of wind taken out of his sails.

"My sensors indicate a temperature increase of over 20 degrees. I believe we may have generated enough heat with our fire combined by the massive rise in temperature to possibly have melted our way through. Go ahead and give it a try! What have we got to lose?" said Kevin in his ever charming accent.

"What have we got to lose ey' Kevin? I like the cut of your gib. Let's give it a try.", said Silas in return. He threw off his crocs and pj's. It was time to get to work. He donned his snowsuit, put some more logs in the fire just to make sure it was warm enough to melt the ice. His pile was starting to run low... *it's all or nothing now* he told himself. "3... 2... 1... CHARGE!!!!!" he screamed at the top of his lungs as he pulled the latch and hit the door with his shoulder as hard as a charging bull. The now thin layer of ice coating the side of the trailer was no thicker than the walls of a wine glass. Quite literally, like a bull in a china shop, Silas plowed through, flew out the door, landed straight onto his face, and slid like a penguin for 15 feet.

"....." a long pause. If Kevin could ask, he would check if Silas was ok. His hands and feet were spread out in a star formation. From the mound of snow where Silas lay, he rolled over to his back, and erupted into joyful laughter! "BHA HAHAAHAHA!" He got up to his feet and didn't even bother brushing himself off. He leapt around in the snow like a gazelle without a care in the world. He was, for all intensive purposes, finally free. And his feet were like deer's feet, set on high places.

When the moment finally hit him, and his lungs could no longer keep up with his joyful heart, he remembered why he had come outside in the first place. "KEVIN!" He exclaimed, running to the ladder mounted on the back of the ark. He sprinted up it, hand over hand, as fast as he could and threw the snow off the solar panels with haste. He would have power once again.

He heard a muffled Kevin from inside the trailer say, "power intake at 100%".

He stood atop the ark, hands balled up into fists up above his head like Rocky Balboa, and shouted into the Alaskan wilderness, "WAHOOOOOOOO!!". It echoed through the mountain range and woods. Even the birds were proud of him, showing their approval by spreading wings and taking flight. He had made it.

Silas sat on the roof for a long while, well into the late morning in fact, soaking up his victory over the conquered door. The sun was now almost directly overhead. Eventually he stood up, squeezed the metal frame of the solar panel as if to encourage it. *Keep up the good work guys* He told them in his mind, and began to make his way down the ladder. He stood back and, smiling, looked at the complete mess that his footprints had made in the previously undisturbed snow. He caught a glimpse of the truck as well, and realized that the stain of transmission fluid was now gone, washed away with the storm. He went back inside with a smirk on his face.

The ark was warm and toasty once again thanks to the fire slowly burning away. Silas looked around. The place was in shambles. He got out the broom and began to sweep up all the cranberries from his recent outburst. Once he had them all together, he picked them out from the dust and set them in a bowl in the sink along with the basket they were previously held in. He would have to clean them later. He was, after all, still in a survival situation.

He then picked up his black fuzzy crocs and set them neatly by his bed for later. He also picked up his red and black pj bottoms that were wadded together on the floor and put them in his hamper. He then made his bed, washed the dishes and cranberries, and wiped the counter tops, sink, and desk. After the entire ark was spick and span, he finally decided that it was time for a shower. Kevin silently agreed, but was too polite to say anything.

He filled up the reservoir to the water pump that was stored underneath the small shower and, after checking with Kevin to make sure he had enough juice in the batteries, flipped the pump on along with the electric water heater. Fresh, hot, steamy water flowed out of the shower head like the jet in a hot tub. It was glorious.

After he was finished, he felt like a new man, clean and refreshed. It was around 1:00 in the afternoon and Silas was starving to put it lightly. The last thing he had eaten was the cranberries before he had thrown them. A breakfast feast was in order. *I know.. I said no more big breakfasts, but this is more than enough cause for celebration. Besides, I skipped food for*

an entire day... If my calculations are correct, I'd say I've earned myself a double breakfast he reasoned with himself, sounding an awful lot like a certain Australian AI.

It turned out that, with all the commotion, Silas turning on the fridge right before Kevin was forced to power off was possibly the best thing he could have done. That short burst of cold was exactly what his food needed to get it through the rest of the storm intact. Silas, however, did not even give this fact a passing thought as he snatched the bacon, eggs, and butter into his hands and began to cook over his wood stove top. Perhaps this was just one of many ways God was working things out for his good.

His stomach growled as he cracked the eggs into his pan.. And it growled even worse when the aroma of bacon and coffee lofted in the air. Almost as soon as the bacon hit the pan, their beautiful sizzle was like a mariachi band playing abruptly into a silent crowd. Loud, rhythmic, wonderful! *Will this food ever finish cooking?*, he groaned as the pangs of hunger intensified with every passing moment that he stood over the hot wood stove. The coffee was a different story altogether. As the boiling hot water and freshly ground coffee beans were poured into the french press, the scent seemed to dance in the air to the mariachi music like un baliarina expertina. It was magnificent. The eggs and toast were the audience cheering them on as all of them danced and sang and clapped as one.

After what seemed like an eternity, his feast was finally done. 4 eggs, 5 pieces of bacon, 2 pieces of buttered toast, 3 cheese sticks because he couldn't help himself.... And best of all, more hot delicious coffee. This time, before digging in, Silas took the extra moment to pray, thanking God for his meal.

"...Amen" he finished. It was time to dig in. He had really out done himself this time with the bacon. You see, he wanted to make something truly special for himself. He first cooked the bacon thoroughly, then drained all the fat into a jar. *I'm sure I could use this somehow* he reasoned. Then, rummaging through his pantry, he pulled out the maple syrup and his pepper grinder full of uncracked pepper corn. Taking a brush, he coated both sides of each bacon strip in maple syrup and let it caramelize, dusting on the freshly cracked pepper as it cooked. Thus, he was left with beautiful, delicious, black pepper candy bacon that paired perfectly with his black coffee.

Try as he might, he couldn't help but scarf it all down. It was just too good! All that was left was about a third of a cup of coffee. Since he had finally done the dishes after letting them pile up for about a week, he had the wonderful privilege of getting to use his favorite blue coffee mug. There wasn't anything inherently special about it but it was his favorite none the less. He drank the last of the glorious liquid and belched. *Geez Silas, one week in the wilderness and you're already turning into a savage brute* he bereted himself. *Mom would kill me if she heard me burp like that.... Mom...* The thought of her made him miss her terribly. "Eh em.." he cleared his throat, "Excuse me!", he said aloud, if only to honor her. He patted his stomach feeling very satisfied.

"Kevin, what time is it?" he asked.

"It is currently 2:23 in the afternoon" chimed Kevin in response, overjoyed to see Silas eating again.

Perfect he thought to himself. *Still plenty of time to get some things done.* He got up and grabbed his axe. He was still sore from the last time he had used it, but not nearly as badly as before. He was well rested and ready to take another swing at it... or quite a few swings based on how things had gone previously.

"Kevin, I'm going out to get more wood. We've already used up most of our reserves and I don't want to get too low."

"Please be careful as always Silas"

"I will Kevin, don't worry"

Then, kissing his fingers and touching the Bible sitting on his desk, he was off into the woods once more. This time, finding a good standing dead spruce proved to be a little more difficult than he'd anticipated. After a while of searching though he managed to find one, along with something slightly more interesting. As he walked around the Alaskan wilderness searching for dry wood, he noticed several large, white rabbits darting around out of the corner of his eye. A more experienced Alaskan woodsman would have corrected Silas. They were not rabbits, but snowshoe hares, and their meat tasted very similar to chicken... or so Silas hoped it would.

For a moment, he completely forgot about the tree he found. His mind flashed with ideas on how he could possibly catch a prey so fast and well camouflaged that he barely even noticed them when they were standing right in front of him.... *I will need to confer with Kevin*, he thought. He put the ideas to the back of his mind. Right now, he had a tree to chop.

This one he actually made decently quick work of. He was no expert by any means, but now he knew what techniques worked and what ones absolutely did not. He also had a secret weapon this time. Right at the start of breakfast, Silas remembered how thirsty chopping wood had made him the last time he tried it. He also remembered how desperate he was for some Ice cold gatorade. So a new idea was born. He asked Kevin, whom he knew was programmed with many survival, amish, and camping cookbooks, if he knew any cranberry juice recipes. Of course, the always eager to help Kevin had just the recipe. He put a ton of berries in a pot over the stove and let them boil until they popped. Once he was done eating breakfast, he found an old pasta strainer and strained all the juice into a pitcher and added only a little bit of sugar. He had plenty but he wanted to conserve it. With that, he added a pinch of cinnamon, the cherry on top. He thought about putting ice in as well but felt that it might be nice to have a warm drink out there in the cold.

So there he was. He had made it about halfway through the dead tree and was taking a nice deep sip of his wonderful homemade gatorade. The bitter sweet flavor swirled in his mouth all over again, this time enhanced by the sugar and cinnamon. It warmed his whole body with every gulp. It was the perfect temperature for a day like this. Then he had an idea. *I'm already half way through this thing. I wonder if all it needs is a little help?* The words of his dad echoed in his head as they were working on his car one evening. The tire had gone flat on their way home and his dad offered to show him how to replace it.

He remembered he had been struggling to get the wheel off of the hub but it wouldn't budge.

"Put the lug nuts back on but not all the way" said his dad.

"What sense does that make?" he laughed in return.

"Just do it, ok wise guy? Who's teaching who here anyway?" came the reply.

Silas rolled his eyes in mock annoyance with a smirk and did as he was told. To his surprise, his dad got into the car, turned it on, and drove it about a foot or two, then put it back into park.

"Ok try taking it off now"

As Silas jacked the car back up onto the stand and loosened the bolts, the wheel came off almost immediately. "You always want to work smarter, not harder," his dad smugly replied with the same grin Silas wore often. "Now go get your brother. I want him to see how to do this kind of thing too. It's important for young men to know how to change a tire."

He stood there reminiscing. *We were all so happy then.. If only you had taught me how to rebuild a transmission then maybe I wouldn't be in this mess.* He chuckled to himself. *I miss you dad. I hope you and mom won't be too worried about me. Maybe when I make it back I'll show you how to make homemade cranberry juice. I'm sure you and mom would love it... I could only imagine what you'd both think if you saw me living out his old dreams... you'd definitely think I had gone crazy.*

He looked down at his gloved hands that held his thermos. He shook his head with a smile. *Back to work buddy. This tree isn't going to fall itself.* He walked up to the enormous thing and gave it a big push. It lurched forward and then slowly back toward him. He pushed again. And again it came back toward him, only with more momentum. Back and fourth, he rocked it, pushing harder each and every time until eventually CRACK! The trunk of the tree snapped toward the direction Silas had been pushing it. It sounded as if a gun had been fired off in the woods. The vibration of it went straight through Silas's hands as he stood pushing it. Then CREEEEAK the poor tree groaned as it soared through the air down to the ground. And finally, BWOOSH it hit the forest floor, and just before it did, Silas yelled at the top of his lungs

“TIMBER!!!”. Once again, the always listening birds heard the warning and quickly got out of the way.

Ch. 7 The Instant Pot



Silas, in essence, had gone straight out from the ark's door, which faced east, about a half mile into the wooded area. The silver shell sat slightly off center in a very wide open clearing that looked like an old flood wash. It was wide, flat, and just open enough for the ark to settle on nicely. The landscape was surrounded by a thick wooded forest only parted by the frozen over river Silas had used as a road to drive the ark on. The river itself, now completely undriveable, was dead west of the trailer. It curved around the side of the clearing and disappeared back into the forest. With the river, and a breathtaking mountain behind the ark, it would suffice to say that Silas had one heck of a sunset behind his little home, which was perfect because he was heading due west with a massive tree in tow.

With both gloved hands he dragged the wooden carcass through the thick Alaskan snow. This was a lot harder than he anticipated. *Don't think about it. Just pull!* he told himself. *We're almost to the ark, just keep going!* After chopping a tree down, and dragging it a little over

a quarter mile (about half way to the ark), he was absolutely exhausted. Dropping the trunk, he unclipped the sling his thermos hung from and took a sip. "Ahhhh" he exclaimed, wiping the red juice from his face with his sleeve, "Still warm!". He was really enjoying his new recipe. "Ok, playtime's over. Back to work" he said aloud as he picked the tree up once more and continued onward.

Eventually, Silas broke through to the clearing and got the tree home. He was very eager to get inside. You see, after chopping down the tree, just before the ark came into sight, he noticed a very peculiar looking rock or something. Upon closer inspection, it was some species of bird! *It almost looks like a chicken and a dove had a baby and this was the result*, he thought, though an expert would have told him that it was called a "grouse". It had some red stains around it and its wing was bent at a very ugly angle. *You poor thing. I wonder what creature could've done such a thing?* He picked it up to get a better look. *It's still warm! Hasn't even had a chance to stiffen yet!* ... He considered for a bit and then decided that this was definitely worth inquiring with Kevin about. He tied the poor grouse to a section of the tree he knew it wouldn't fall from and began dragging it home.

He dropped the tree off in his front yard, ran inside and brought back out his red and white cooler. Filling it with snow, he cut the bird free and gently set it in. Setting it gently inside the ark he said, *We shall see about you later*, and went back out to tend to the tree.

After a quick hydration break he began chopping up his haul as quickly as possible and putting it into nice neat piles in the Ark, lining the back wall with wood. The truck was still full of an emergency supply but he decided that he wanted the bulk of his stock inside where it was more accessible. He ran dangerously low while ice'd in and was determined to never let it happen again.

At long last, he finished with his chores and rushed inside. It had been a very long time since he had any kind of substantial meat other than bacon, and he was very excited about his prospects.

"Kevin, I'm going to upload a picture to your files. I want you to tell me if it looks like something I can eat. I also want some advice on assessing what is and isn't edible when it comes to birds"

"Sounds good mate. Happy to help" chimed the AI Aussie.

Silas snapped the pic, which looked like an avian murder scene, with a digital camera and uploaded it.

Kevin processed for a while and then finally replied with his synopsis: "This seems to be a grouse! Great find mate! Judging by the wounds on its neck and wing, I would say it's most likely to have been caused by another bird. This is good! It means that you're not in danger of contamination from whatever killed it. Check and see that it hasn't gone stiff and give it a good

smell test to make sure there hasn't been any decay. Also, when you cut it open, check to make sure that there isn't any green or grey colored flesh. Finally check the bird's eyes. You don't want to see any cloudiness. If these all check out, I'd say you're good to go my friend".

Silas quickly did all the tests Kevin had asked for, even going back into his logs to make sure he got everything. It all checked out! He couldn't believe it. It was almost too good to be true. He had found meat. He looked at the poor creature once more and felt sorry for it.

"Tomorrow..." he said. "Tomorrow we'll go back to the tree stump and leave some food out for your friends". He hoped that it would forgive him.

After a brief moment of silence, he switched off the part of his brain that felt remorse, and turned on the part that told him he was starving. "Kevin, please give me detailed instructions on how to prep a grouse".

It was a lengthy list of instructions that I will spare you the details of. By the end, though, he was left with a less than perfectly de-feathered bird. Silas was, by all accounts, totally stoked.

"Ok Kevin my friend. All finished up. Now let's dust off the ol' instant pot I've got lying around here somewhere. Please give me a grouse recipe for it! We haven't got much other than the meat. Just some seasonings, bacon grease, and water..."

"Sounds like a plan Silas! I'll get straight to work on that recipe for you!" said Kevin. And he did.

Silas opened the cabinet above the sink and pulled out the instant pot his mom had given him. He really did miss her. He remembered the exact time she had given it to him.

"It's just too complicated for me" she had said.

"But mom, you love making crock pot meals. This is literally the exact same thing, it's just faster." he told her.

"Yeaaa I know but I just don't ever use it is the problem. And it's always taking up my counter space! I'd rather you just have it. At least you'd get some use out of the thing." she said.

He finally accepted it, although he felt like he was somehow stealing from her. His heart throbbed. He wished he could just tell her that he loved her right in that moment somehow. He'd tell her that it was all ok. He'd even show her the note in the bible... both of them.. He sighed for the second time that day thinking about his parents. He was really starting to miss them. *This meal is for you, mom*, he said, hugging the cooking appliance as if it were her. Then he set it down. It was time to get to work.

"Kevin, please play '*I like it like that*' by Pete Rodrigues" he said as he twisted the pot's lid off.

The track kicked off. Brutalities aside, it was time to get his groove on. He flicked the pot to the saute setting, tossed in a spoonful of the bacon grease, and let it warm up until it melted down into a beautiful smelling liquid. It popped and crackled as if begging him to add more flavors to the mix. Then he took the poultry and tossed it in. It was a symphony of sizzle! It smelled like the inside of a cracker barrel in his tiny little cabin. Once one side was done, he took some tongs out and clicked them together... just to make sure they worked properly of course... and then grabbed and flipped the bird with them just to let it sizzle some more in the mouth watering bacon grease on its other side. He did this until every square inch had a beautiful brown glow to it. Everything was coming together.

Next, he went into his pantry, scooped out a cup of rice and added it to the pot, per the robots instructions. Silas danced to the music as he went because he swore it added flavor to his cooking. He was in his element. No longer was he deserted in the woods of Brooks Range Alaska... no, no, no... Silas was right at home in that kitchen. He had a couple spare onions so he said to himself *What the heck, why not?* and chopped one up into tons of tiny cubes. He then sprinkled them in like a master chef, and got out his seasonings. A dash of salt, a dash of pepper, and because he was feeling bold, some of the spruce tips... It just felt right to his pallet. Feeling happy with his creation, he added about a cup of water, set it to pressure cook on high and interrupted Kevin's music by saying:

"Kevin, set a timer for 25 minutes".

"On it, sir," Kevin replied, very impressed with Silas's moves.

The song finished just as Silas sat down in his famous swivel chair, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a dish towel he had been using to clean his hands. He surveyed the room. He was completely stocked with wood, his bed was made, the sink was clear for the most part, he had a pitcher of cinnamon cranberry juice, a blazing fire that kept the temperature wonderfully hot, his batteries were charged to 88%, and best of all, a stellar meal about to be ready. He breathed a grateful sigh of relief. What was once his prison, had turned into a very cozy place that he called home.

He sniffed the air. He couldn't tell if it were him or the instant pot that smelled like onions but he decided that it was perhaps time for another shower. His hands and clothes were filthy from his professions as a lumberjack and a butcher. *I've got some time to kill. This pot will never boil if I keep staring at it*, he said to himself as he turned on the water heater and pump, then jumped into the steamy water.

Just as he had finished rinsing off, Kevin's alarm chimed, thus signaling the end to Silas's excruciatingly long wait. He towed off like a maniac, threw on some pajama bottoms and his trusty crocs, then raced over to the cooker. He twisted the valve to release the

pressure.. PSHHHHHHHHHH!!! It released a cloud of steam, and with it, the most heavenly scent Silas had ever smelled. It was like every grandma on the face of the planet all teamed up to cook one meal. He scooped himself a bowl of the broth and rice and tore off both of the drumsticks. This meal was freshly cooked and he was determined to get the best bits now. He was sure this would be the only thing he would have to eat for dinner for a while. He sat down at the pull out dining table that he rarely ever used and said grace over the bountiful meal. Finally, before the first bite, he said aloud something he had dreaded to speak of until very recently: "Here's to you, Simon. I hope the sight of me living out your wildest dreams brings you some kind of peace. I would have never gotten the chance to experience this wonderful, horrible, beautiful place if it weren't for you and your crazy persistence. I guess you always had that affect on me huh? Here's to you" and with eyes full of tears, he dug in.

Ch. 8 Simon



“Silas! Come on already! You’re taking FOREVER!” said the young man, fully decked out in backpacking apparel and a goofy fishing hat.

“Simon, you do realize that this is a 2 day camping trip don’t you?” said Silas to his younger brother.

"Of course I do! I've had it booked in my calendar ever since you promised to take me!" replied Simon, obviously giddy.

"Okkkk... so why does it look like you're about to head into the amazon rainforest to never be seen again?" came his older brother's sarcastic reply.

"Becauseeee" he said very matter-of-factly, holding up his wilderness explorer book guide, "A real woodsman never leaves the house unprepared"

Simon had been prepping for this trip every day for an entire week. But on a grander scale, he had been preparing his entire life. While most kids his age were watching cartoons, Simon was watching, or more accurately, studying Bear Grylls, alone, survivor, and whatever else he could find. Anything he could do to immerse himself in nature, he was doing it. While most kids were reading the diary of a wimpy kid, Simon was reading "Bush craft 101". There were even several times that Brian, his father, had to scold him severely when he was caught red handed, backpack full of gear, sneaking out late at night to go on yet another over-nighter who knows where.. other than Simon himself of course.

He was born different to say the least. He loved the idea of roughing it, foraging, finding his own food, the whole 9 yards. Anna, his mom, brought up the idea of Boy Scouts one evening at dinner. Simon was thrilled. *Finally, somewhere I can put my abilities to the test, he thought.*

"Aren't you a little big to be joining the boy scouts?" teased his older brother with a smile.

"Shut up Silas. At least I don't spend my entire life wasting away behind that stupid computer of yours!" came his jabbing reply.

"Ok you got me there" said Silas, "How about we go on a camping trip to end the summer just you and me? If it's ok with mom and dad, I'll put in for some time off at the pizza shop and we can take my truck up to the smokey mountains national park for a few days."

Simon's eyes almost popped out of his head. He couldn't believe the words that had just come so casually out of his older brother's mouth. Then reality hit him and he bent his face into a scowl.

"Oh I get it. You're just messing with me aren't you? You really can be a jerk sometimes y'know that Silas?"

"I'm not messing with you ya dork" he laughed in reply. "Look" he said, pulling out his phone. "If mom and dad agree, I'll put in the time off right here and now. It's only about an hour's drive away from us." he held up his phone as if presenting the question to his parents.

They both looked at each other apprehensively. They loved Simon, and absolutely loved that he was so passionate. But truth be told, they were also worried about him. Sometimes his love of nature just went a little too far. They knew it made it really difficult for him to make friends at school. What other kids his age knew how to properly set up snare lines to catch wild game? Or how long the human body could survive drinking its own urine? Point being, they worried that a trip into the deep end might make matters worse.

Looking first at each other, then at Silas, then at Simon who's hands were literally in the begging position... they relented.

"Ok fine.... you two can go. It'll be good for the both of you to spend some quality time together. And I suppose you are heading into your freshman year. Maybe it's time to start loosening the reins... but only a little bit. You still live under my roof young man. Don't forget that."

Simon absolutely lost it. He stood on top of his chair in the Rocky Balboa stance, he did this often when he was excited, and shouted at the top of his lungs "WAHOOOOOOOO!"

His parents winced, nervous that they may have made the wrong call. He leapt down from his chair and embraced them both in turn.

"THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!!!!!" he said, over and over and over again. "I've gotta go prepare!!" he said, and then darted off up to his room, leaving a half eaten steak, potato, and green beans on his plate.

"Simon James! You get your heiney down here and finish your dinner right now!" called his mom. It was no use.

They all stared at the stairs he had just sprinted up like a wild maniac, mouths wide open in bewilderment. Then the two parents turned to Silas, who still couldn't believe what he just saw.

"You're going to have to keep a real close eye on that boy, young man. He's gonna be your responsibility." said Brian.

"And make sure he doesn't eat any bugs or anything icky" chimed his mom. They both had a sickly worried look on their faces.

"Ok ok ok. I know. I just think it'll be good for him to be in his natural habitat is all."

In his room, the second largest in the house, Simon got to work prepping. *Only a week's notice?? How on earth am I gonna get everything ready in time?*, he thought. His room was painted leaf green, and he had fishing poles and other survivalist gear as wall decor. He even had a full deer head that he saw at a garage sale and begged on his knees for his father to buy for him.

He rummaged through his closet pulling out different sleeping bags, backpacks, water canteens, MRE's, tackle boxes, etc and laid it all out on his bed. Then, he tip-toed to the door and peaked out to make sure the coast was clear. He looked from left to right then shut his door as silently as the hinges would allow, then pulled a key out of his pocket, pulled out the secret trunk that was hidden under his bed, and unlocked it.

It was a military-esque green wooden box, and right upon receiving it one year for Christmas, he promptly took out his favorite swiss army pocket knife and carved his first and middle name into the lid: "Simon James". Originally it contained his small stash of camping gear, but his collection had long outgrown it. Now, it was designated for survival weapons and overall dangerous things galore. Bowie knives, pocket knives, lighters, blow torches... you name it. Needless to say, Simon was an easy person to get birthday presents for. Especially if you were willing to break the rules a little. One year, however, Silas may have gone a bit overboard. Wanting to be a cool older brother, after all the cake had been eaten and presents opened, he snuck into Simon's room and quietly shut the door behind him.

"What are you doing? You know mom and dad hate it when we have our doors shut."

"Be quiet would ya? I got you something but you've gotta promise to keep it between us. Ok??"

"Oooooooo... Goodie two shoes Silas breaking the rules for once???"

"Yeah yeah. Just open it already." he could see the excited look on his big brother's face as he handed him the large, well wrapped package.

He tore off the paper, and inside, was a brand new TenPoint Titan 400 crossbow. As he held it, Simon started to cry looking up at his smirking older brother. He set the box down, ran to Silas, and gave him a huge hug.

"If you get caught with it, it's on you. I have no idea how you got a hold of something like this, capiche?" chided Silas.

"Absolutely. Totally 100% understood. This is the best birthday present anybody has ever given me" said Simon, still crying.

"And I will be holding on to the bolts. If you want to use it, you need to come and ask me AND I will be supervising. Understood?" Silas added.

"I understand. Thank you so much!" said Simon, imagining all the many possibilities he could get up to with a toy like this. *I know where that ding dong likes to hide things anyways*, he said to himself with an evil smirk.

He smiled at the memory as he held the weapon. *I'm definitely going to have to bring you along.* Kissing the bow he put it back in its secret place, and continued to pack. He obsessed over what he was going to bring for the entire duration of days leading up to the trip.