

1963 Excerpt

The students left Prof. De Long's dig site without approval to follow Qaya's trail. Having hiked several days across difficult terrain, they approach a stream on a rainy afternoon.

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August 20, 1963, oh-two hundred ZULU

Weather never gave us a break. Cold rain and mist became as much part of the rock plain as rocks, and after hiking all day we were hot and cold at the same time. But with every step the stream grew louder and more distinct, and within its steady rush you heard water breaking over rocks, splashing down on itself. If we were worn out at least we were getting somewhere.

You could finally see the stream up ahead when Gabby and Perry suddenly stopped. From a few steps back I heard the breath catch in their throats. That far from Providence Bay you wouldn't expect polar bears, but something had them spooked and I fumbled for the Remington. Slung over my shoulder, the strap caught under my pack and I was lucky to get squared away and pump a shell without shooting one of us. Feeling like a jerk, and with a pounding heart that wouldn't quit, I squinted into the mist.

There was a man, the shape of a man standing in the rain across the stream. It could have been De Long coming after us only that wouldn't knock the wind out of everybody, and the man was square more than round, too short and stocky for De Long. And he wasn't coming after us. The scary thing is he wasn't moving at all—like he never backs down, like he owns this place and you don't.

Nobody laughed when we realized our man was stone, a stone marker shaped like a man. Nobody moved closer either, and I set the safety without putting up the Remington. Pitched below water sounds, the four of us were breathing in unison trying to make sense of a stone marker that might have escaped from your worst nightmare. Magical thinking gets hold of you sometimes on Ellesmere so this may not sound like me, but I couldn't help wondering if being in the middle of nowhere with a stone man made us friends.

"Is that it?" Graham spoke in a hush so the stone man wouldn't hear. "That's what we came for?"

Gabby pulled out a cigarette, holding it between her teeth and breathing hard. She tried to light up but the match got wet, her hand was shaking with cold, and she threw down the matchstick. Letting go the cigarette too, she whispered back in a hoarse voice: "I don't know. What is it?"

"An inuksuk." Perry wasn't moving closer but his voice was calm: "Eskimos still make these things. Resolute says there's no Eskimos up here so this one must be awfully old."

Gabby started to pick up her cigarette. Then she started to pull a new one from the pack. She looked away biting on her lip, then turned toward Perry: "It looks like an idol. It's watching us."

"He marks a hunting trail, Gabby, maybe a food cache or supplies. Or else he gives directions. Whatever he looks like to you and me, he's a very practical little guy. Tunit believe in spirits, not idols; not even totems, like the Indians."

"I don't like it. We don't belong here."

"This . . . this inuksuk—" Graham had dropped his whisper since Perry knew all about stone men: "Does the Tunit girl make it so she can be followed?"

Gabby's face had gone white, her eyes were red, and she stared at the inuksuk as if she's hearing John Donne's infamous bell. A watchful idol wasn't what Gabby meant about Qaya, and it didn't help to have Graham reminding her she's the one who dragged us here.

"If the stone man is a Trek marker at all, he could have been made by any Tunit hunter at any time, even a different century. On the other hand," Perry said, "since we're following our Tunit girl's directions, it is a good bet Qaya crosses those rocks."

A dozen or so outsized rocks ranged across the stream. Gabby must have had me distracted, worried about her the first time all summer, because Mister Outdoor Guy never should have missed those rocks. Their dry tops made a stone bridge, probably the only way across for miles; anyone coming this way since the Ice Age, anyone in their right mind, was bound to come exactly here. "I doubt the place needs a marker, Perry. Tunit could never imagine someone missing this crossing."

Perry considered the inuksuk and stone bridge again. He turned my way and nodded. "Maybe we do need a closer look. How about we make camp on the other side and figure this out in the morning. And since Graham is so all-fired curious," Perry pointed to his roommate: "Lead the way."

"I don't like it," Gabby repeated. "Let's keep going."