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The Reigning Ice

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I sat, forlorn, on the unsympathetic ice shelf, thinking of how events had unfolded in the last few days. The bright light reflecting on that vast expanse of ice shone for hours, making it hard for me to tell the time. There was no night. My teeth and knees were composing a song too deafening to hear, with dismay written all over the melody of fear. I could do nothing but wonder if anyone would find me, rescuing me from a nightmare that knew no limits. In that part of the world, the winds are violent and unbearable, and for a tiny person like me, with nothing to hold on to, staying stable on that ice sheet was a mission reserved for those who have dared to reach the apex of Kilimanjaro. But I was at the core of the Antarctic.

I was shattered. I couldn't think straight. All my colleagues lay buried under the ice. With no one to comfort me, I stood shivering. That sturdy ship, trusted with its stability and technology, enabling my team and I to collect and catalogue our data, had sunken deep into the belly of the cold and calculating waters of the Southern Ocean. We had underestimated that part of the ice. And I would not allow their loss to have been in vain. For that data, I had to survive against odds, I thought, as I looked at the sun that seemed to be fading slowly, which meant the past five days were the last of summer, and

winter was approaching. Far away, the science community waited with bated breath for an outcome that could advance its efforts to untangle the consequences of global warming.

"The ice will be gone by 2042," I remember warning. "We must make haste and conclude all the tests and prepare for the rest."

That was before we set sail, enthusiastic and armed with the state-of-the-art equipment we had invested our scientific ideas in. We'd been there before. The expeditions had been successful, and the predictions had been close to accuracy. But there I was, alone. With only my thoughts keeping me company. I thought of home, the world I was likely to never return to, my children, and the colleagues I'd never see again and the projects we'd never realise.

I wondered how these dynamics could have failed with the optimisation of a cutting-edge icebreaker. The combined dynamics of bioprocessing, oceanography and precision engineering were carefully merged as disciplines that could help man man-up against the self-inflicted degradation of the planet. "But it's a marginal ice zone, and the margins run thinner against the sinner. Miracles must come to existence before persistence runs to negligence. Right, Oratile?" Those were Josh's last words. It was the second-last day of the expedition. How could such a good day have turned so bad?

I looked yonder, staring at nothing, thinking that there had to be something to carry me away. Otherwise, who would tell of the crew's heroism before tragedy struck? Two days had passed, and how I was still alive was anyone's guess. No water, no food, no sound, except for the howling wind and the intrusive voices in my head.

The echo of the screams as the ship went down still raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

Something violent had happened, something we had not been expecting. It started with the ship gaining speed, an unusual speed, pushing against the thick ice, and breaking it like it was mere glass. While we were trying to adjust to that phenomenon and frantically investigating it, the ship took a quick turn that hurled everybody sideways, up, then down. We were still startled and trying to launch the emergency protocol when suddenly the ship began to dive. Only one person was regurgitated by the steel ship's maw during

that commotion. And there I was still stranded. The thick ice sheet drifted with me, far away from the site of the disaster. My feet were getting colder, and colder still were the winds in these parts that knew no man.

There had to be an escape somewhere. I didn't think that I'd been spared only to die a lonely, slow and agonising death. The ice sheet seemed to be floating towards land. That gave me hope. As if I was on a calm river, the ice raft gently butted into the shoreline, coming to a halt, allowing me to jump off onto the next stop—land … or the next best thing in Antarctica, fast ice. Feeling somewhat safe, I began to feel the hunger pangs, and the unbearable dryness of my mouth.

Determined to survive, I thought I should explore my surrounds. Perhaps I could find something, anything, that could help me. So, despite the piercing pain in my legs, I dragged one foot in front of me, and then the other, and then the other. It was important that I kept moving if I was to survive. Someone had to tell the story, even if it was unpalatable, I told myself. "I am a woman, *imbokodo*, and I shall not stop until I drop," I willed myself to hope.

Even the wind began to understand the reasons forbidden by the nameless and faceless creature that pulled the ship down. It had to be a creature, otherwise what else could have sunk the gigantic ship so fiercely in the Antarctic where everything floats? Consolidated ice could attest to that without shame. Forward I went, carried by a gentle push of the wind that had become friendly, at least at that moment. I was still struggling to drag one foot at a time when I began to slide. I opened out my arms to regain balance, as the speedy yet gentle wind continued to propel me forward towards new horizons. For a while I forgot about the mechanics of nature and scientific principles and enjoyed the unusual and pleasant phenomenon that swept me across the surface with ease.

I was still enjoying the ride when my sudden skating stunt began to turn into yet another nightmare. The wind that had been propelling me forward was no longer gentle, instead it started to push me around erratically, causing me to lose balance. I wanted to scream but no sound came out of me. Off I skidded, and then fell,

hitting the frigid floor hard. Out of the clatter of clumsiness came darkness, numbness and then silence. Everything went dead quiet.

I must have been out for hours when I was awakened by the cold, and a vice grip on my leg. Something was pulling me. My eyelids were heavy with ice that had settled on my lashes. I couldn't see. I heard the snarl though. It was the whiskey noise that woke me up. Realising my imminent demise, I started to scream at the top of my lungs. Except no sound came out of me. It must be the creature, I thought, the hope in me dying. The creature was dragging me by the leg, and I could feel my head banging on bumpy terrain, my arms feebly outstretched against the pull. Then the thing began pulling me by both legs, and I could feel its heavy stomping on the thick sea ice. Its snarl becoming louder.

"Stop!" I screamed. My voice having chosen a convenient time to return. "What about the treaty? What about the treaty?"

But on the dumb creature dragged me, farther and farther away from the wreckage. "The Antarctic Treaty …" I muttered, helpless and hopeless. The sun and its beauty were a thing of the past now. It was dark, and all I could make out of my surroundings were silhouettes.

I thought about the pancakes that lay scattered afar, "If only I could free myself and cling to a nearby pancake," I wondered. Surely the brine would help steer me away from this creature. I was contemplating that escape plan when I heard human voices.

"Which way should we do this? Are we going to use the process lab or the simulation lab?"

"What?" I said faintly, frantically searching for the speakers.

"Agulhas II is tired of our night celebrations, we should consider using our German partners' vessel."

But there was no one but me and the creature dragging me to the unknown. These had just been voices in my head.