
leg sleds Snowdeath Chapter 4

Posted by Stacey Masia - 2010/01/28 09:19

Snowdeath Chapter 4: Aztec We skied back to the course, dragging a sled, and settled in to wait. Jack Craven rubbed me the wrong way. He rarely spoke to any of the patrollers except to scold. He kept his distance after hours, too. All the patrollers lived in cheap housing downvalley. Craven had a pricey house in town, and none of us had been inside the place. He was married, with kids, but our families never mixed. Craven seemed like one of those small-town natives who treats as a stranger anyone he hadn't known since elementary school. Marco had his own attitude toward Craven. This is not a mountain we work for, it is a large corporation, he said. We are not members of a climbing team, but employees of the corporation. We must expect the boss to behave the way bosses do in any bureaucracy. Give me, how you say, the break. As usual, Marco remained in motion as he lectured, gesturing, pumping his knees gently. Please have patience while the professor explains, he said. Craven has priorities. The first priority is to protect himself. The second is to protect the corporation. The third is to cultivate his own bosses. Way down the list is a priority that says hire and keep good people who know how to do their jobs well. The first priority implies that he must appear more knowledgeable and more competent than any of the people who work for him. What is this, guerrilla economics? Silence, please. What happens if tomorrow the accountants in Chicago tell our operations v.p. to fire half the executives earning over \$35,000 and replace them with promotable subordinates now earning less than \$25,000? It's simple. The ops v.p. then sits down with the personnel director and looks for departments with assistant supervisors who are ready to become department heads. A department head who imagines this could happen is frightened by any subordinate who knows a lot, and seeks to make that person an unlikely candidate for promotion. So if you want to be promoted, you have to act dull. Behave as if you are personally loyal to Jack Craven rather than to your job. But I don't want Craven's job, I said. I don't want to be an administrator. I just want to ski and rescue people, and not think about anything very complex. Sure, I could do his job, but I don't want to, and I've told him that. Certainly. You insulted him. How? Craven worked hard to become supervisor. I'll bet he really appreciated being told that you consider the job beneath your dignity. Of course, he cannot believe you don't want the job. So that makes you a treacherous liar. If you really want to climb in the organization, you must not only be dull and loyal, you must also admire and envy the boss. Shit. Yes. So that's what we're doing here. We've thrown our educations away to avoid the world's corporate assholes, and in fact they've followed us to the mountains. Actually, they were here first in our case. And why not? In every environment there is an ecological niche for the asshole. It is a very adaptive species.

There's also the possibility that he just doesn't like my face. A lot of these Western guys mistrust Easterners—they think we're all Ivy Leaguers, bankers, and real-estate criminals. You are, you know, a kind of low-rent Ivy Leaguer. I can get away with talking gibberish, because I'm a luger and I'm supposed to be incomprehensible. But you're just an overeducated wiseass. Also, you're astonishingly ugly. There's that, yes. Anyway, you've got your own vendetta, don't you? What's the story with you and Bester? Another asshole. We had a fight in Chile a couple of years ago. Remember when I was coaching one of his race camps? He fired me. Was it the drug problem? No, personalities. I thought he was a jerk and he knew I thought he was a jerk. Call it a religious issue. Bester has seen God, in his bathroom mirror. By this time the racers were arriving at the start in pairs, skating over from the top of the lift, riding their training skis and carrying waxed and polished soft-snow race skis over their shoulders. They milled around, stretching, getting their legs rubbed, their race skis cooling in the snow until it would be time to check the bindings. A couple of the local tech reps for ski equipment companies had set up small tents and were doing adjustments. Clipper Cobb, the Salomon bindings guy, had dug a waist-deep trench in the snow, so he could work on boots and bindings without kneeling. When he looked up from screwing down somebody's clamps, I waved at him. He saluted with a big screwdriver, and another racer shuffled into position in front of him. A top racer would normally take about two minutes to complete the Ruthie's Run downhill course. Today the course would be slower, and skiers would take it easy—this was only a practice day. With skiers leaving the starting gate every 30 seconds, we could expect to have four or even five racers somewhere on the course at any given moment. Because the morning's practice had been lost to the fresh snow, the race committee hoped to hold two practices during the afternoon, which meant 180 runs. The patrol had to be prepared for the chance that one skier in ten might crash. And an injured skier would have to be moved off the course within half a minute, before the next racer came rumbling through. We started with four men and two sleds to cover the course; if several skiers were injured early, the chief of course would have to ask Craven for reinforcements among the patrollers covering the civilians today. Marco and I stayed at the top of the course. Al took a sled to the top of Aztec, the fastest and most difficult section. A racer who crashed on Aztec might easily slide down into the netting at the bottom of Spring Pitch, where Fred waited to collect him. Gatekeepers finished hardening their little stretches of real estate, and course judges found their positions. At five to twelve, with workers yelling Course! in excited, holiday voices, the first of the fore-runners, local juniors not yet eligible for senior competition, skated out of the starting gate and accelerated slowly along the gradual ridge forming the upper section of Ruthie's. Today's speeds would not be awesome. Each of the forerunners left visible tracks in the snow. The first racer set off on schedule at noon sharp. We began picking up snippets of news on the course radio, which operated on a different frequency from the patrol units. Bib number three skied off the course at the bottom of Aztec but was okay, up and moving. Times improved raggedly but steadily as the loose snow was swept off and burnished in. Rusty Hillman set second-fastest time in the first seed. He was taking it easy. Everyone was cautious, and we were well into the second seed before the first crash. The course radio crackled: Racer off the course. Wreck on Aztec. A second later my own radio spoke. This is one-one-five, I've got it. It was Al. We sat tight as another couple of racers started, and then Al got on the horn again. I got another wreck here. Repeat, a second wreck on Aztec. This is a course-worker and he's not breathing. I thumbed my radio. This is one-one-two, I said, and here I come. Marco was already on his skis, horsing the sled to point downhill. I

grabbed his poles and my own and we skated onto the rolled snow alongside the racecourse, tracking straight down the fall line. Unhindered by the meatwagon, I pulled ahead quickly, gaining speed on the back of each roll. Courseworkers scrambled back out of our way. Just before the gradual left turn into Aztec one of the racers overtook us. As soon as he passed I crossed the course, carved a hard turn to check my speed, and swallowed the lip into the steep. I went airborne for a few feet, landed easily in the soft snow alongside the course, and made two more long turns to arrive at the little group gathered at the left side of the trail, near the trees. The patient was Art Conover, sixtyish, a former ski instructor. Art had owned the best bar in town and it had made him a fortune before he lost his lease. He was a raconteur, cocksman and alcoholic, a prime candidate for heart attack, and a good friend. Al had started CPR; he had opened Art's parka and shirt and was pumping on the breastbone, pausing every 15 beats to force a couple of mouth-to-mouth breaths. Close by, a courseworker cradled the helmeted head of a kid wearing a third-seed bib. The kid grimaced, but he wasn't groaning and was clearly conscious: he was watching Al work on Art. I twisted out of my bindings and knelt next to Art's head, grabbed his nose and gently tilted his head back. I pulled off my right glove and felt for a pulse in his throat—all I got was the sluggish throb whenever Al pumped the chest. What happened? I asked Al, then began mouth-to-mouth, timing the breaths to every fifth chest-pump. Art smelled of stale beer and mouthwash. Al was breathing hard from exertion and excitement. When the kid crashed

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