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## The Metal Ladders and the Mountain

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## **The Metal Ladders and the Mountain**

I could feel the ice-cold metal through my padded gloves. I wouldn't be warm for much longer.

I've been climbing for hours now, and it was starting to get dark. The sky was an orange color as the sun sank behind the mountains behind me. The ladders next to me, and the ladders next to those, and even the ladders next to those, were empty. I haven't seen another person yet, not since the bottom.

I gripped the metal bar above me, trying to ease back into the rhythm to forget about the wind whipping my exposed face. Grip, step up, grip, step up. My arms were weak and shaky, my legs strained to make sure my shoes wouldn't slip on the wet rung. It had started lightly snowing a while ago, and as the sun set and the night winds picked up, the conditions were quickly turning worse.

"You're almost there, I'm sure of it," I said, my breath coming out in little, white puffs. "You're almost there, and once you're there, you can have a hot bath and you can sleep, maybe even have a grand feast."

As I continued to haul myself up this metal ladder on the side of this mountain, the only thing worse than the cold, my tired muscles, my growling stomach, and my parched lips were the complete and utter silence. The loneliness was expanding and overpowering.

The sun had officially set, covering my entire existence in darkness, making climbing for the next few minutes disorienting as my eyes adjusted to the lack of light. I knew that I needed to sleep, to rest my weary limbs, but I also couldn't tell if I was close to the top.

"Twenty more rungs," I said. "Twenty more rungs and you can be done for tonight."

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

Halfway done. I paused, taking a deep breath, trying to find the last bit of strength that was lodged deep down inside me. I climbed and climbed, fumbling around as I tried to locate each rung in the dark, my eyes increasingly getting heavy.

Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

I only had six more, I can do six, right? I've done so many already, what's four more?

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.

You know what? Seventeen rungs weren't too bad. Satisfied, I used the last of my arm strength to pull my legs into the gap between rungs, sitting down. I draped my arms over the rung above that, and, after pulling down my hat, I rested my forehead on the rung above that one. I closed my eyes. The cold and dampness was leaking into my clothes and finding its way to my skin, causing gooseflesh to rise and my teeth to begin chattering. I needed to rest, but the cold was torture.

I sat there for a long time. Eventually, I assumed my body ran out of energy, just like a battery runs out of juice. I fell asleep.



When I wake up, I'm almost certain that I would never be able to move. Not only were my muscles sore and tense from sleeping the way I did, but I could feel the cold down to my bones. The cold was in my tendons, my marrow, my blood. It was a part of me, and it wouldn't be leaving anytime soon.

"I don't want to move," I grumbled to myself.

"I'm glad to see that you're awake."

My eyes flew open and I jerked my head to the right, my sore neck muscles screaming in protest, to the origin of the mysterious voice.

It was a person on the ladder next to me, dressed in a giant coat, with gloves, a ski mask, and boots. In other words, this person looked exactly like I did, and also seemed to be on the same journey as I was. The only distinct feature were their eyes, which were a bright blue.

“I was climbing and I saw you huddled up,” the voice said with a sweet voice, probably female. “I was worried you were dead.”

I paused and just continued to look at her, too tired, too cold, and too confused to even respond, and I think she understood that.

“Do you want to start climbing?” she asked.

I nodded and started to untangle myself from in between the ladder rungs. My butt was either asleep from sitting on it too long, or it was developing frostbite. Hopefully it was the former.

We began to climb, even though I couldn't feel most of my body. My new companion was quiet, as was I. We listened to each other huffs and puffs as we pushed our bodies up this mountain. We had climbed about twenty rungs when I finally spoke to her.

“You're the first person I've seen,” I said. I looked over and saw her nodding, as if she expected this.

“I climbed through the night and I bet that I passed quite a few people,” she said. “But it was too dark to see them. You were the first person I came across that I could actually see.”

“You climbed all night? Why didn't you sleep?”

She shrugged. “I was never much for sleeping.” And left it at that.

We climbed in silence again. The snow had quit sometime during the night, but it started to rain down again, bringing the biting wind. The metal ladders creaked.

“Do you think we’re almost to the top?” she asked.

“I hope so,” I said. “I feel like I’ve been climbing for years.”

She laughed, which was a nice sound to my frosty ears.

“Maybe we have been,” she joked.

The sun behind the snow clouds continued to get higher and higher as the day advanced, until the clouds blocked it completely. It was going to be a cold day without the sun. Oh, who am I kidding? It’ll a cold day no matter what.

“What do you think is waiting for us at the top?” she asked.

“Whatever it is,” I replied. “I hope it has something to do with warmth.”

“Mmmmm,” she sang, sounding like she was caught in a daydream. “I hope there’s food, and possibly a hot bath.”

“Or someone to massage my aching shoulders,” I said, the thought bringing a smile to my face.

We left each other to our thoughts of food, baths, and shoulder rubs, and like always, continued to climb.



That whole time, we didn’t take a break once while we were climbing, even though my numb body wanted to very bad. It was pitch black by the time we spoke again, and it was me who broke the silence.

“Should we stop for the night?” I asked, hoping, praying she’d say yes.

However, she doesn’t say anything, and I remembered that she apparently doesn’t sleep.

We climb for a few more minutes before she replied.

“Yeah, we can stop.”

I breathed an audible sigh of relief as I hauled my legs into the space in between the rungs. I looked over to her and saw that she’s having difficulties getting herself in comfortable position.

“Is everything okay?”

With my night adjusted eyes, I saw her nod. She seemed to be somewhat smaller than me, and I started to wonder just how exhausting this climb must be for her, especially if she hadn’t slept in a while.

“Aren’t you tired?” I yawned, trying my best to huddle up and keep the ever pressing cold at bay.

“I guess,” she said as she finally settled into her sleeping position. “I just don’t like sleeping, especially when I’m not sure how close we are to the top.” She paused as her voice grew shaky. “What if we could make it to the top if we climbed all night? I wouldn’t want to stop now.”

“But we don’t know that,” I insisted.

“But we don’t *don’t* know that,” she countered.

“We won’t ever know how close we are,” I said, closing my eyes, this conversation exhausting me even more. “But we’ve got to take care of ourselves. There’s no point of a finish line if we aren’t able to cross it.”

I heard her giggle, the warmth of the sound bringing a smile to my face.

“I guess you’re right, Shakespeare,” she mocked.



In the morning, when I woke up, I realized that I was right, just not in the way that I wanted to be.

The sun was out and not hiding beneath the clouds. In fact, it was so bright that it was causing me to sweat profusely in my multiple layers of clothing. I pulled my legs out of the space and removed my large parka, trying my best to tie it around my waist. I looked over to my companion, but she wasn’t moving. I decided to let her sleep for a while longer.

However, when the sun started to climb higher and higher, and finally reached its peak, we still hadn’t even moved.

“Hey,” I yelled, trying to get her attention. “We’ve got to go.” But when she still didn’t move, dread began to replace annoyance.

“Hey! Wake up!” I pleaded, my heart beating louder, my breaths getting louder, my fear getting louder.

I pushed down my fear and tried to think rationally. She was just sleeping heavily, that’s all. She was just tired, and she just needed to sleep a little more. Maybe I should try to nudge her awake, but can I even reach her?

I took off my gloves for a better grip, shoving them into my pockets. I placed my left hand on the right side of the ladder and stretched my other arm as far as I could, hanging on to

the ladder by a thread. My muscles protested, but there was nothing I could do. Luckily, I could slightly nudge her, and when I did, she slumped to the side and remained silent.

My breath caught in my throat and my eyes started to burn as I made my way back to my ladder. Just as sudden as I had company, I was suddenly alone once more. With nothing else to do except say a silent goodbye to my late companion, I began my ascent late into the afternoon.



I thought that I would be alone for the rest of the time. I thought I deserved it. It was my fault that she was dead, that she had frozen to death in the middle of the night. She didn't want to sleep, but I made her. Would she still be alive if we had climbed through the night?

This time, I was the one who saw him first. In fact, I heard him. The ladder next to me started to creak from a force stronger than the winter wind. I spoke first.

"Hello," I said.

The person, who is still a few feet below me, looked up, jerking back slightly, as though he saw a ghost. He was wearing the same thing as me, the same thing as my old companion, but I noticed that he didn't have gloves on.

"Hello," he echoed in a deep, gravelly voice, climbing the rest of the way up to sit evenly with me. I waited for him to say more, but he didn't.

"Why don't you have any gloves?" I inquired after a second.

He sighed. "I took them off last night and they fell. I'm about to get bloody frostbite."

With the sun still out, and with my mind still foggy from the events of this morning, I had an idea. I could let this stranger use my gloves for a little bit, right? Especially if we were going



to be keeping each other company. We could just trade off and on. I pulled my gloves off my hands and reached them out to him. He looked at me with surprise.

“You can borrow them,” I said as he took them from me. “Let your hands warm up for a bit.”

He smiled, slipping them on. Without missing another beat, he began climbing again. Startled, I followed his lead.

“So,” I said after a few moments of silence. “What do you think is waiting for us at the top?”

He doesn't answer. At that moment, as the sun began its descent, the fear I felt earlier this morning started to creep back. Why wouldn't he talk to me? Wasn't he just as lonely as I was?

“Hey,” I yelled, trying to get his attention. “Why won't you answer my question?”

Still, he doesn't answer, and suddenly, I knew exactly what was happening.

“Hey!” I screamed, my voice breaking. “Give me back my gloves!”

He doesn't look back as he started climbing faster, widening the distance between me and my gloves. He was faster than I was, but I didn't care, I kept up with him as long as I could. I couldn't survive without my gloves, I needed them. However, eventually, when the sun was completely gone, so was my thief with my gloves.



Not only was my body frozen, but so was my mind. Frozen on the thoughts of my companion and my thief, both climbers, both very different outcomes.

Instead of sleeping that night, I took the advice of my late companion and continued to climb up into the darkness. My hands no longer felt the raw metal biting into them, and I was afraid that if I did sleep, I'd wake up to find that my hands had frozen off.

What was the point of this, then? I knew that I wouldn't be able to survive much longer without gloves, and I certainly didn't know if I was close to the top. And when I did reach the top, what would be up there waiting for me? Is it another challenge, another mountain that must be conquered? How did I not know that I was climbing to my death?

The uncertainty scared me. I didn't want to continue into the unknown. I thought that, if I threw myself off the ladder, at least I knew my outcome. I'd be taken by gravity and be thrown into the ground, thrown into the spot where I began my journey. After all this time, if I threw myself off this ladder, I would have made no progress.

Luckily, before I could make that decision, there were lights above me. I actually screamed, terrified and blinded. When I calmed myself down, I could hear the distinct sound of human voices. I was near the top.

I scrambled up the ladder, pulling my dead body farther and farther up. I could feel tears streaming down my face, my breaths coming out in fast, short puffs. This was it, this was it.

As I got closer to the lights, I saw gloved hands reaching down, grabbing at the air around me, trying to pull me up. At first, I'm scared of what these hands will do to me, but then I realized that I didn't care. I had made it to the top, and I was done with this part of the adventure.

The hands grabbed onto me and pulled me into the light.

