

Chapter VIII

In April 1848, Commander Gore, presumed dead for eight months, is engulfed in a vivid imagination of what has unfolded during his absence. He studies accounts of the dreadful Arctic expedition by Franklin's crew, who endured a harrowing winter aboard the ships **Erebus** and **Terror**. The expedition's best sportsman has succumbed, and as temperatures plunge, a single storm obliterates another hunting party of officers and men. Isolation drives some mad, while others starve, plagued by scurvy and a desperate longing for warmth and food amid the suffocating darkness. The air around the ships smells of decay, reflecting the despair within.

As spring arrives, casualties rise sharply, with nine officers and fifteen men dead—the highest mortality rate of any polar expedition to date. Faced with this calamity, Crozier, physically deteriorating yet resolute, orders the abandonment of their ships. Franklin's venture—still only referred to as “Franklin's expedition” and not yet a “lost expedition”—prepares to march 800 miles toward the promise of safety, carrying supplies insufficient for halfway.

Whaleboats are loaded with essential items: tents, sealskin sleeping bags, primarily canned provisions, spare clothing, and hunting rifles. Overloaded, the men suffer as they drag the boats through the icy terrain. The ordeal transforms from a voyage of hope to one of grim survival as frostbite, dysentery, and death become constant companions. With their strength waning, marines guard medical supplies against desperate sailors, undertaking responsibility for policing dwindling rations. Goodsir is one of the surviving surgeons but ultimately loses his battle with a tooth infection.

As they struggle onward, makeshift burial practices begin, but soon the dead lie where they fall, a grim testament to the expedition's tragedy. They abandon gear, creating bizarre scenes of civilization amidst the frozen wasteland. Their hope wanes, and they trudge forth, lost in exhaustion and despair, as they become more lost to the landscape.

Gore learns that around thirty survivors eventually reach a camp dubbed “Starvation Cove,” far from civilization. In dreams, he confronts haunting memories of his friends, including a visceral vision of Le Vesconte in a state of dismemberment. These dreams blur the lines of life and death, reflecting the grim reality of survival when faced with cannibalistic instincts.

While surviving Inuit offer assistance, the expedition's poor preparation leaves them vulnerable in a harsh land. Gore wrestles with the burden of memory and guilt, determined to reach safety before darkness claims him, haunted by the faces of those lost and a profound sense of responsibility for their fate.