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The sun is bright and I am sweating but it is not hot outside. We have been wandering around the Alaska Native Heritage Center for almost an hour, reading and exploring all the indoor exhibits. Matthew and I are tailing another group of tourists. Olivia is still in the hut behind us. The lake is to our left and all the replica buildings and infographic signs are on our right. The paved pathway curves off to our right.

In front of us is another hut but it is different from the log-cabin-like housing the Athabascans lived in. This house would have belonged to the Yup’ik culture and is mostly underground. We step inside behind the other group and wait for our eyes to adjust to the lower light. The building is composed of only one room and is roughly 15 feet by 15 feet with a long hallway entrance. In the middle of the room is a bench covered with artifacts and it covers a door in the floor.

There are two employees inside, a young man and a teenager. Both of them look like they have native heritage but the young man looks like he might have more than just native blood. The group that entered before us had already started asking questions. The young man left the game he was playing and has been trying his best to answer every question the others ask him. The boy continued to play the game in front of him. The game consisted of two slanted wooden frames covered with animal skins and several small discs that would be thrown onto the box.

“Everything in here, you can touch. Except for us,” the young man informed us.

Olivia walked in as the other tourists were finishing their list of questions. The others leave slowly, admiring the building one last time. The three of us take the time to continue looking at the bottled plants and artifacts on the bench since we will not be interrupted by other people. I mentioned to Matthew and Olivia that I play a game at home that is very similar to the game the employees are playing.

Matthew decides now is the time to start a conversation with the young man. We all want answers to questions, but we cannot all ask at the same time. I find a bench next to the wall and sit down to fill in some holes my notebook and to record everything we passed outside. Olivia quietly moves to the corner of the room to wait for her turn. “What’s your name?” Matthew asked.

“My name is Christian,” he responds. He also informs us that he has a Yup’ik name and a Chinese name. Matthew and I exchange intrigued looks.

“Do you enjoy working out here?” Matthew asks.

“Yeah, I do. I mostly get to chill out and answer questions.”

Christian and the boy each grab a box and pull them further apart. “This is how we were playing this earlier,” he tells us. “Have you ever played? Do you guys want to try?”

We look at each other and decide who wants to go first. Olivia takes the first turn. The boy hands her five small, uneven discs. “Those are made of caribou antlers,” Christian informs us. Olivia starts to throw the antlers. She lands four of the five on the mat. The boy brings them back and hands them to Matthew. He lands three of them. Again, the boy walks them back over to us and hands them to me. The antlers are very light, almost weightless in my hand. I start throwing them and realize that they are strangely easy to throw given how light they are. I land four of them on the mat. I turn around and take my seat on the bench and continue filling in my notebook.

“Why are you guys here?” Christian asks us.

“We’re actually here for a class with our school,” Matthew tells him.

“We’re out here studying stewardship issues in south-central Alaska. Or all of Alaska, but we’re focusing on south-central,” Olivia continues.

“Well what exactly are you studying?” Christian asks.

The boy is still throwing the discs, remaining quiet and absent from the conversation, much like I am. One of the discs rolls under my feet and I reach down to pick it up and hand it back to him. When he takes it, I pick back up my notebook and continue writing. I am writing down quick notes about this encounter while I wait for my turn to ask questions.  
 “She and I are both studying extractive natural resources. She’s studying specifically the cultural side and I’m looking more at the Pebble Mine in Bristol Bay. Is there anything you can tell me about that?” Matthew inquires.

“I never really got into it but I hear the oil companies are trying to mine near rivers where salmon are spawning. I don’t know much about it, I haven’t paid much attention. Do you want to be environmental majors?” he asks us.

Looking at me, Matthew starts speaking. “Not really. The two of us are computer sciences majors.”

His eyes start to widen a bit. I start to nod in agreement when I notice that Olivia is still here. “Actually,” I say, “all three of us here are computer science majors.”

Since Matthew’s attempt to get answers was a failure, Olivia decides to try getting some answers of her own. I zone out for a second while I am writing in my notebook.

“The Yup’ik is the most strongest culture. It’s the biggest culture,” Christian starts. His mind seems to be working too fast for his mouth.

Another disc rolls under my feet and I lean down to pick it up. I grab the disc from behind the bench I was sitting on and hand it to the boy.

“You never know,” Olivia says.

“This generation is getting more modernized. Kids are not being taught their own language anymore. They are being taught English. They can’t even understand their grandparents and the elders. They need a translator now. The Eyak language has already completely diminished.”

“Do you think it could happen to the others?”

“Yeah, I think it’s possible. I’m a part of the English speaking generation. I was born and raised here in Anchorage.”

“Do you hunt at all?” Olivia asks him.

“Yes, I do. Everyone in the village is taught how to hunt.” Christian responds.

“Can you tell us anything about the corporations?”

“I don’t know much. I know each culture has its own corporation.”

I lean over to Matthew and whisper “strike two.”

He motions to Matthew and me. “So you two are computer majors?”

“All three of us are,” I reply.

“That’s so cool. I really like computers, but I don’t know a lot about them. It’s kinda like magic to me.”

“It seems that way to me too,” I tell him. “But it’s a kind of magic we’re learning to control.”

“We’ve been learning to program in a language called C++,” Matthew says.

“I don’t think I’ve heard of that. I’ve seen some Javascript on the internet but I can’t write it.”

“Java and Javascript are different languages. You might have also seen Java, most computers have it downloaded. Javascript is used on websites to make things interactive.”

His eyes lit up and his face formed a large grin. “Could you guys answer some questions?”

“We can try,” Matthew says. “He and I just finished our first year.”

“What is DNS?” he asks us.

“Oh we just learned this!” Matthew exclaims.

“Yeah we did.” I say. “So when you’re using the internet and you type in a website name and hit go, it doesn’t exactly go to that name. Each site has an IP address and DNS is a server that translates the name to an IP.”

“Yep, the server sends the IP back to your computer and it connects to the IP instead of the name,” Matthew continues.

“Hmmm, okay. What’s the difference between DHCP and NetBIOS?”

“Probably the way they interact and communicate with your computer,” Matthew says. “Like I said, we just finished our first year, we don’t know everything. We did say we would try to answer.”

“That’s alright. Well then what about binary?” he asks.

I notice that the boy has left and there are only four of us here now. Christian’s face has formed a mixture of confusion and intrigue. He does not quite understand what it is we are telling him, but he thinks it is interesting anyway. Olivia is staying silent.

Matthew starts to answer. “Everything on a computer is represented by 0’s and 1’s, right?” Christian nods. “Binary means a two-number system, the 0’s and 1’s. So then everything has to be represented as a series of 0’s and 1’s so it can be processed by the computer.”

“Mind if I ask a question?” I ask.

The smile drained from his face. “Yeah, go for it.”

I begin to ask questions, but his answers are not prompting any more questions nor are they guiding me in a direction with my research. I am starting to feel a bit frustrated and worried since I have not had many successful encounters regarding subsistence.

Olivia joins in on the conversation. “Do you feel that there’s any threat to subsistence living?”

“There was something that happened a few years back where the government was trying to restrict the amount of salmon you could catch. That didn’t go over well. Many of the elders stood up to the government and ended up winning their right to fish again.”

I remember reading an article about this event. The article mentioned that the natives did win the right to fish, but that the fish reserved the right to survive and that the residents still could not fish for the rest of that season. I decide not to debate with him.

As he was answering Olivia’s question, two older women stroll into the building. They patiently wait for Christian to finish answering Olivia’s question. As soon as he does, they start firing off questions.

“This is the men’s home? They were separate?”

“Yes, this building is where all the single men and boys would have lived.”

“What about married men?”

“When a man got married, he and his wife would build their own house together. You see this hole here?” he said motioning to the hole in the middle of the room. “You would think it’s the bathroom. It’s not. It’s actually the winter entrance. They would have a tunnel running under this building out to the front and then close those front doors to keep the heat in.”

“So is this the actual size of the building?”

“The actual building would have been about three to five times larger and all the single men would have lived in it.”

We realize that this is the end of our conversation with Christian. We politely wait for him to finish answering the question. We thank him for his time and leave. I now understand how he feels. He answers questions for his job and people must ask him the same questions every day. He seems to have the answers to the questions memorized. It must have been a nice change for him to have people answer questions about things he is interested in.

We step back out into the bright sun, not feeling very satisfied with the answers we received. On our way to the next building, I whisper to Matthew “strike three. We’re out.”