

When the doctor awoke, it was to a growing blanket of snow and a dying fire. Hal rolled over slowly, trying to shake the cold's grip on his body and cursing his foolishness in falling asleep, his inability to help the woman he loved, and the world in general. Light slowly dimmed out as the fire flickered itself into nothing but a smoldering pile of coals. He gave vent to another set of curses aimed specifically at the dying flames as the cold gained more ground. Afterimages of the flames followed his sight as he cast his eyes around in the encroaching darkness for anything to keep the flames alive. Their silhouette shrank in on itself, blending its features into a faint resemblance of Dr. Ellen Lear that slowly faded as the flames flickered and died.

Desperation kicked in and Hal scrambled to throw what little fuel he'd thought to stockpile nearby onto the coals. The flames picked back up, slowly pushing back the dark pressing in from all sides. He shivered and moved closer to the warmth, removing his mackinaw to more easily slip into the now warm and dry sweater. The mackinaw went back on next, only slightly damp on the back, and he rolled the sleeves back down before throwing his coat back on top. The wind picked up a little, thankfully blowing against his cover and not into it, and began a moaning dirge that spoke of empty, lonely nights. Halwen did his best to ignore it as he cast about for his cup, taking time to clean the vessel out before packing the cleanest looking snow around into its open mouth. He set the whole affair in the hot coals to boil and leaned back, smacking cracked lips over a parched tongue.

"So. Thirsty."

The declaration was more to distract himself from the urgent exigencies of his situation than anything else. He'd also heard somewhere that going too long without the sound of a human voice can contribute to madness, though it was tough to remember where the claim had come from.

It took only a few minutes to bring the water to boil and Hal quickly snagged the cup with a gloved hand, setting it quickly into the snowbank to cool. He watched the fire's flames stoop ever lower, its fuel burned through and the cold pushing tongues of flame further back into their burning bed with each minute that passed. He'd have to leave soon, but that would be for the best anyway; Ellen was still out there somewhere. Halwen pulled the compass from his pocket and opened it once more, this time with far steadier fingers. He studied the face, hoping for answers that he knew it couldn't possibly give. The needle inside spun crazily on

its axis, mocking him with never-ending movement that he couldn't understand but knew wasn't close to ordinary. He tossed the compass aside, resigning himself to the idea that it would have been no help anyhow.

The fallen darkness would render his search useless, compass or not, without a light, though, so he set to work figuring the newest problem out while sipping the cooled water as slowly as thirst allowed. The remnants of Girard's jacket turned out to be the answer, but not before he'd trekked out briefly into the night to tear a branch from the first fallen tree limb he could find. Some kind of accelerant would have been useful, however with none around he'd simply have to make do. The coat caught after a good minute in the coals, though it gave off a foul smell and far too much smoke to keep close enough for warmth.

The torch was a pale imitation of his campfire's illumination, but would have to do. It did little to keep the dark and its mysteries at bay, but should at least allow him a bubble within which to navigate the endless black. He looked into the night sky, hoping for sympathy from the moon and stars. He got a few weak pins and the wan sliver of a waning moon's bracket as it dipped below the mountains in return. The disappointment was intimidating, but not insurmountable; he gripped the torch tightly and took a deep breath. Halwen set his teeth together and stepped out into the long dark, hoping the blustery wind would rob not him of the work he'd put into his torch.

Luck was with him, however, or else Girard's coat was as resistant to extinguishing as it had been to immolation. Dr. Lear exhaled a sigh of relief that turned to mist before the winds picked it up for dispersal amongst the night. With no real idea of what direction to head in, he opted to climb a nearby bank to the street above and see what the dark would allow his torch to show. The former Mr. Blanc's gloves proved their usefulness almost immediately as he dug the fingers of his free hand into the sloping ground for purchase.

Hal kicked the toes of his boots in hard, packing the fresh snowfall into a sort of airstep to aid in the climb. He must've put too much weight onto a rock or particularly unstable piece of the ground beneath the blanketing white, however, as he pitched forward and almost ended up faceplanting into the snowbank, managing to slide only a few feet back in the process. He got the free hand up and in front of him just in time to avoid a kiss from the cold ground but dropped his torch in the process. It survived the fall, barely, but as Hal

turned around to snatch it something almost outside the cone of flickering illumination caught his eye.

Blood, a trail of it, and the drops ran parallel to the road. It couldn't be his own; he'd approached the bridge head on. Hadn't he? Dr. Lear struggled briefly to remember before tossing his luck in with the moment.

"Sometimes you just need to take a chance, Dr. Lear."

Ellen's voice floated up to him, almost as if from the campsite he'd so recently left. He nodded, bringing the torch low to study the trail's direction. It seemed to lead back toward the snow-covered hardtop, though it was hard to tell how much may or may not have been obscured by the wind. After several frigid minutes of huddled-over, torch-waving search and no further signs, Hal began to follow the drops, moving with slightly more assurance than before. Without signs of struggle or carcasses to explain it, a blood trail out here had to lead somewhere better than an actual shot in the dark.

"Here's hoping for luck," he mumbled to himself as his feet crunched through the shell of lightly frozen snowfall toward the asphalt.

The road proved a welcome change of pace, its asphalt giving his steps the kind of stability no snowy hillside could ever offer. Hal followed the faint yellow lines beneath his torch past derelict, empty automobiles and a few burned-down huts until the sky grew light with the sun's promise to rise. He tossed aside the nearly useless torch, it was close enough to burning out anyhow, and began to move with more purpose. The road he followed bordered what appeared to be a vast, frozen lake that stretched beyond the little he could yet see. His footsteps picked up the pace of their ringing thuds as the light grew, their echoes sending a hidden rabbit skittering from underbrush by the bank and across ice into the dark.

As the light suffused the morning sky, Hal's heart seemed to swell ever so slightly. His wound's aches grew quiet in the sun's light, the shining reddish gold a paint swatch inspired by his wife's strawberry blonde hair that set worries somewhere a little bit further from the front of his mind.

"I'll find you, love. I promise."

If she had been walking next to him, which his mind helped him to see, she would've taken his hand.

Around a corner and past some trees, Halwen spotted what looked like a log sort; massive trunks laying half out of the water's frozen skin in a slightly less than chaotic jumble. On the small jut of land that stuck out toward them, the fire-gutted ruins of three structures that may have once been shacks, or maybe bunking, lay like unmarked graves. He turned his steps toward them, hoping to maybe find something amongst the wreckage, and noticed a jumble of burnt coals some distance away that seemed more, well, organized. Upon approach, it took on the unmistakable identity of a burnt-out campfire. And on the ground nearby, an object that glimmered faintly with the sun's first peek over the horizon. His breath caught as he knelt to dig it from the snowy cell that held it prisoner.

*To my love, Halwen, on our fifth anniversary. For when the lights go out, so you can find your way home to me.*

She'd given it to him after he'd almost fallen down the stairs during a power-outage; a gift both thoughtful and humorous, reflective of the one who had given it. Hal began to dig frantically in the snow, pushing aside the fresh drifts for any other sign, anything that would help him find her. After about a minute, he struck blood.

The snow and soil beneath the top layer was stained a black-cherry red too much like what he'd woken up in. But it held no familiarity in his mind, bequeathed no clues of its occurrence. Halwen leaned in ever closer, studying the minutae of each detail, noting the spots and larger splotches, but it was if the incident had happened to someone else. The doctor sat back, grinding his teeth in frustration as he struggled to remember, coming up only with the same screaming grind of shearing metal and snapping tree branches. He sat down near the long-dead coals, rubbing knuckles against his forehead and squeezing both eyes shut.

"Think, Halwen. Think," though for all its conviction the imperative did little.

"Blood! Come on, it doesn't just show up for no reason. Why? Why blood?"

His shouts were answered only by the distant caws of a circling murder of crows. Murder, a strange name under any circumstances, likely born from supersti-

Gnashing teeth, spittle dripping from them to the tune of a low, throaty growl. Pain, white hot and urgent as they sank into an arm he'd thrown up to cover the throat they'd aimed for. It's eyes weren't red, like the dream; more of a dark brown and heavily dilated. He'd sank his pocket knife into its haunches up to the hilt. The warm, bright blood had dripped from them both in equal measure as the wolf gave vent to a hoarse shriek before darting off at a quick limp as he rolled on the thick frozen ice.

"Get back here! Get back here and face me!"

Halwen's head snapped up, half expecting the memory to be alive and stalking him now. The inexplicable hatred burned intensely within his chest but further straining of his memory produced little more on the animal. It had tried to take something of his, maybe, he couldn't be sure, but their fight here had decided nothing. The doctor slowed his breathing, concentrating with everything he could on the elusive whisps of the fog that lay thick over memory. He had chased it here, making camp to catch his breath before tracking it up the mountain, and-

All he could pull was more of the same: a loud, body-wrenching impact before darkness and, no. Something else. Fire? Light?

A bright light, topping some tower on an unknown hill. A signal fire?

No, a light house; it was a coastal lighthouse.

Halwen looked out along the frozen waters, clutching the wheel lighter tightly in a gloved fist, but glimpsed no sign of a similar structure. Further down, though, along the bank, lay a collection of buildings. And some of them seemed to be standing. Bereft of options and overburdened with hunger, the doctor reluctantly stood back up and began to shuffle toward the shelters.

The quickest route would have him cut across the ice, but the sunlight had begun to cast illumination on the lake, though he now thought it more resembled an inland sea or lagoon. In the distance, black shapes wandered along the crust of ice as it gave way to the waters lapping at it. He couldn't be sure what they were, but the light throbbing in his arm held him back from any notions of finding out. The doctor opted to head back toward the road and take advantage of its sparsely visible blacktop in lieu of trekking along the ice. Nothing good could come of tenably frozen water anyway, he suspected.

The going was long and once again lonely, whatever the shapes before had been now far enough in the distance that his only company was the slowly climbing sun. Its hesitant orange fingers reached out across the waters, shedding light on more and more features that caution and urgency disallowed him much time to study. He walked doggedly on, trying to ignore the cold's first touches as it wormed its way into the cracks between layers of clothes. On his left, the ground sloped rapidly up into mountainous foothills, the grade growing steeper as it stretched out to skirt the coast. To his right, the waters reached for the horizon and the sea beyond; his bearings weren't exactly GPS quality at the moment but the doctor thought he had to be on the northern coast somewhere.

Halwen trudged onward, humming softly to keep the uncomfortably still silence at bay. Every so often he would look about, partly to keep his bearings, more due to an uneasy sense of *je ne sais quoi*, but he thought that maybe something was watching him. His steps paused momentarily as he stared out across the ice to try and place whatever had been moving before. After a moment, though, he was forced to concede on the effort; their absence did little to ease his sense of disquiet.

The doctor continued along the road, taking in the rising sun's beauty as it stepped more confidently up into the sky to shine down on the frozen stillness below. Angles in the ice sparkled and danced as they caught its rays, some shining so bright that Hal's eyes were forced shut against their piercing beauty. Snow hitched a ride on the lightly whispering wind and skittered across the water's frozen crust, gathering into the occasional drift and mulling over whether it would stay or move along with the next breeze. In the distance, several fishing huts spaced out across the frozen waters were clearly defined by the mottled grey and orange-red horizon.

The cold had now worked its way back in deep as he walked along despite the newest additions to his wardrobe. Luck was with him in the lulling wind, but the sun's warmth just didn't seem capable of making it quite this far, at least yet. He broke into gooseflesh beneath jacket and bandage alike, stretching the skin around his wounds slightly; a flavor of pain with which he was entirely unfamiliar and would rather not become any further. The chill settled quickly into his muscles, turning his path insidiously more laborious with each step. He gritted his teeth and upped the pace, hoping increased blood flow would at least ameliorate the difficulty.

Hal began to cast his eyes left and right along the road as he pushed on, pausing to step across slush in various states of freezing and collect the occasional stick where it poked out from snowfall by the wayside. Though their mournful corpses broke surface only sparsely at first, as he approached the collection of buildings the supply grew more plentiful and he soon had a nice armful. Nice, but ultimately useless; without some source of flame they would serve little purpose other than to burden him further. There were no guarantees his lighter would still function, either; hopefully he'd figure something out soon. He pushed doggedly on with his possibly precious cargo anyhow, hoping against hope that at least one of the structures ahead housed a friendly face and a fireplace to serve as respite from the cold.

Another fallen tree leaned out across the road and he stepped quickly beneath it, ducking his head and hugging the bundle of future firewood close to the chest. As he straightened up his eyes fell across another abandoned automobile, its tires not simply flat but completely blown out, its trunk not simply open but entirely agape and slowly rocking back and forth in the light breeze. A quick look into the windows showed the glove box and console in similar states of ransacked; Hal turned away with a sigh and moved on.

He rounded the blacktop's next bend and cracked his first smile of the new day. Just past a dirt and slush-strewn gravel road that sloped up into the mountains, a cozy-looking wooden home stood out against the surrounding white. Without the mountains to shield him, the wind picked up a little and began the lowest of moans, stirring up a few drifts along the asphalt as he walked toward the home's patio. His feet crushed down through the outer shell of freshly fallen snow, plunging deep to the ground beneath with a crisp, crunching report. The wind gained strength, taking on a howling quality that almost resembled a canine howl.

Another structure sat just beyond, one whose exterior propane tank seemed to have ruptured and set fire to whatever it had been. Jagged, fire-blackened teeth of wood rose from the corpse and reached for the sky to tear hungrily at the passing wind; the empty mouths that had presumably once been doors and windows greedily swallowed driving snow with gluttonous abandon. Part of its roof had slid off the building, presumably as it collapsed, and destroyed a green automobile that sat near what may have been the front door.

Tufts of snowfall began to break loose from the smooth skein of powdery white all about him as he trudged on, hitching a ride on the wind to destinations unknown. Slowly, at first, but as his steps grew nearer to the homestead and its surrounding buildings the world

began to smudge and fade behind a whirling white curtain. His path took him to an angle that allowed a view past the vehicle, revealing another house in much the same condition. It's burnt corpse's ashen wood standing clearly out against the surrounding white whenever the increasingly violent wind allowed.

Hal put an arm up to his face, losing a few sticks in the process but managing to keep the bundle's majority, and ducked behind it to escape the stinging wind's needles as they aimed maliciously for his eyes.

"I have to get-," Halwen's sentence caught in his throat as a lumbering black shape stepped from behind the closest burnt home.

It moved with purpose, dark eyes locked on his own, darker paws cutting through the snowfall, blackish-grey coat standing out in contrast to the powder whirling about. The lumbering growl began again as it moved closer, almost matching the wind's growing dirge for a moment before quickly diverting into much lower octaves.

Suddenly it wasn't the cold he breathed that chilled Halwen's lungs, wrapped an algid fist around his heart, and stuck frigid fingers into his veins. It wasn't the wind's teeth that chewed on his numb fingers and sent shivers into his spine. The wolf raised its head and gave vent to a long, mournful howl, almost as if lamenting what was to follow. And as Halwen contemplated what exactly that promised, his body recalled locomotion and began to scramble away from the massive grey-black beast.

His firewood fell to earthward to drown in the snow, first by the few and then all at once, leaving a small number jutting out of the surface like shipwrecks in a frozen sea. His steps became confused, stumbling over one another and slowing escape as the wolf's charge became more sure, quick, and deliberate. Its muzzle lowered to the ground, puffing hot breaths of steam the whipping winds picked up and quickly dispersed. Its forelegs dipped deep beneath the powdery crust, making room for powerful back feet to propel it across the dwindling distance. Hal tried to cry out, to puff himself up and project aggression, but managed only to trip over his own legs and land in a jagged, dead bush.

An explosion of snow that couldn't be plausibly blamed on the wind sent a small, brown blur darting out toward the road behind him. Light tufts of powder kicked out by its flight dissipated quickly in the now howling winds as it made a beeline for the shore's frozen



edge. A light screeching cry of startled fear, almost lost to the wind's moaning complaint, floated back as it tore pell-mell across the snow from where Hal had fallen.

In the space of the breath it took for Hal to place the object as a rabbit, the wolf had launched its long, lithe body past him and begun pursuit. Halwen was treated to the dubious honor of the merest glimpse into the fate that had so recently aimed itself for him; hot, slaverling jowls pulled back across jaws filled with lightly yellowed teeth. Powerful, rippling muscles pushing at the fur around them as they churned claws and paws through the snow toward their prey. A lethargic sense of shock knelt down beside him to pull his body into an awkward embrace, but the nearness of death dealt him a surge of adrenaline to counter its insistent lethargy.

He rolled over onto his belly, thrusting hands into the ground and pushing himself up before his mind could put together enough coherency to issue the command consciously. Before he was completely aware of it, the doctor had hit the paved road again and begun a full-on sprint away from the coursing duo, arms pumping and footsteps hitting the pavement with solid thuds that couldn't quite drown out the rabbit's desperate, dying screech.

Trees and sheer rock faces whipped by on either side to the tune of his increasingly ragged breathing. As the adrenaline in his blood began to thin out, he felt his steps flag commensurately. The doctor dared not chance a look to the rear, instead pushing stubbornly on with fear and panic fueling his flight. He rounded a bend, his body nearly at what he thought its limits, before the sight of an automobile parked between rising cliff faces ahead gave new speed to his failing feet and enabled a final sprint. Exhaustion stuck itself between his legs, however, and his last few steps before laying hands on the car became stumbling half-leaps that would have pitched him to the asphalt were he unable to lay a hand on the auto's hood first. He sucked in a loud, terrified gasp of air while pawing blindly at the door until fingers hit the handle. With a quick, surprisingly deft movement the handle turned and let him in; he wasted no time collapsing into the passenger seat and pulling the door of his refuge shut.

After depressing the plastic lock button atop the door's body, Hal spent the better part of ten minutes simply lain back against the seat catching his breath. The spongy cushioning was an unexpected comfort; he struggled against settling in and allowing his eyes to close.

*Eleanor.*

The doctor sat up, only physically reluctantly, and began to rummage through the layer of detritus covering the floorboards in hopes of finding something useful. Old food wrappers, empty cigarette packs, broken lighters, and a few dried-out water bottles were picked and tossed unceremoniously into the rear seat. The cup holders offered nothing beyond loose change and the general collection of grime one expects to find. His heart grew briefly light at the sight of a cheap plastic cigarette lighter, but while the wheel sparked, the plunger gave no hiss of fuel when depressed. He tossed it in the rear also, though perhaps with a bit more vehemence than the earlier discoveries, and turned his attention to the dash. The glove box told a story much the same as the console, though he folded some of the papers in it up for tinder and stuffed them into a pocket.

Hal twisted around, using the passenger seat's leg room to turn all the way over and allow easier access to the backseat. Amongst the collection of old food wrappers and other typical detritus, he finally found something of use: a half-empty water bottle that took exactly three gulps to completely clear out. His hopes for a candy bar or something of the like went unrewarded, though he did manage to salvage some crumbs from the bottom of an old beef jerky bag. He briefly considered eating the granola bar in his pocket, but couldn't overcome the reluctance of completely depleting his food stores.

Before exiting, the doctor leaned over and pulled the trunk release, listening for the satisfying pop that came with its breach. Hal pushed the door open against the still-howling winds, struggling slightly against its growing violence, and turned toward the car's rear. He approached the trunk with hope bordering upon elation, entirely prepared to discover food or something equally useful in the garbage it was sure to hold. The thrill was short lived, however; as cluttered as the interior had been, the trunk was conversely barren. He lifted the false bottom to check the spare beneath, finding the well below concomitantly empty. A growing ball of desperate disappointment plummeted to his stomach and he shut the trunk slowly before turning around and heading away.

But as he moved deeper into the growing trench, a massive rockfall awaited him just around the closest bend. The road simply disappeared, eaten almost entirely by a haphazard collection of boulders and root-ridden landslide. Trunks lay skewn in strange angles, their naked branches brushing against the upheaved concrete. Thick cups of snow collected in whatever

divots would agree to hold them, but the occasional shift of dirt gave voice to why the fall hadn't managed to blanket the scene's entirety, yet. Rocks and dirt whispered to one another as gravity pried them loose and sent them on the rest of their journey to the ground, passing savaged earth and torn trees along the way.

"No, no, no, oh no."

Halwen could barely manage more in his frustrated desperation. As he scanned the fallen rubble, his mind racing, he noticed an oddity at its bottom. Snow crunched beneath hesitant feet as he stepped forward for a better view, kneeling down to bring his line of sight closer to the frozen earth. The cave-in, or rockfall, whichever it was, didn't quite reach to the ground all the way across. On one side, a sort of accidental tunnel had formed like an air pocket in an overturned canoe. Hal leaned a little further down, pressing his cheek to the cold ground once again and, for a second, caught a glimpse of sunlight on the other end. The contact had him shivering all the harder as the cold seeped a little deeper into his bones, but he gritted teeth and held against it while surveying the route ahead.

A light smattering of dust from above falling to his neck quickly brought him back up to kneeling. The landslide shifted once more, this time grumbling a little louder and sending a few ominous stones down that could easily be taken for a warning. If he was to do it, hesitation would be unwise. However, his mind was filled with images of suffocating to death under fallen ground and hesitate he did.

That is until the mournful lowing of a wolf's howl floated on the wind from behind him, raising the hairs on his neck in its passing. Without further thought, Halwen dropped down on hands and knees, flattening out to his belly, and began to scramble into the confined space.

He'd never struggled with claustrophobia before, though even the few, brief minutes it took him to scramble through left him with a faint impression of its panicking terror. Roots and rocks alike reached from the dirt like corpse fingers to tug at his clothes. The air was damp and musty, somehow conversely colder than the outside world. His breath puffed out in small cloudbursts ahead, catching what little light made it in to stand out against the surrounding dark. All about him he felt phantom pressure and malice, as if the walls had teeth and meant to grind his body between them.

But even as the fear peaked to real terror, the sunlight grew stronger and he felt wind on his face. His panic subsiding, Halwen made better time to the tunnel's outlet and was soon standing in the cold outside once again. He took a deep breath, feeling the chill in his lungs and reveling in the passing terror. For the moment, at least, he felt he could breathe a sigh of relief.

High walls of sheer rock rose on either side of him, slowly widening up into a kind of shallow, thin valley. The geography offered him what he'd so sorely lacked before: protection from the wind. As he cast eyes about for more fallen branches, he noticed that the shivers from earlier had passed. Strangely enough, he felt somewhat warmer for the time crawling through the dark and set out with new purpose in his steps along the crumbling highway. The road took him over a small culvert before opening up to an ocean view on the right and charred shells of more burnt houses looking out over it from across the damaged road.

"What in the gods is going on in this place?"

Well, at least he could still enjoy relative shelter from the wind.

Halwen walked past the row of destroyed homes, pausing idly to flip open a solitary mailbox that stood sentinel at the end of a ruined driveway. To his surprise, the half-rolled, glossy pages of a magazine peeked out at him from its semi-darkened interior. 'Survive the Outdoors!'; the title was blazoned across the front in what he had trouble not seeing as a dry mockery of his current situation. Halwen pushed the hinged door closed, forcing a chuckle out over the desperate lump growing in his throat.

A soft growling from behind the furthest structure did little to ease his nerves, and without giving the idea much thought he was back on the cracking pavement. His boots pounded out heavy, thudding footsteps as the doctor once again sprinted at full-tilt around drifts of snow atop cracked concrete. His panicked flight did not end until the road did, feet skidding to a stop a few feet before a total collapse that cut the road in twain and sank the severed section a solid ten feet.

The missing portion wasn't particularly wide, however, and easily skirted by using the downhill slope overlooking the sea to his left. Hal descended cautiously, with heavy breath in his ears and crunching snow beneath his feet. A section of twisted metal guard rail hung low

into the collapse and made good holds for his ascension back to the road. Once on the other side, he took a moment to ascertain his next move.

Which would certainly not involve the crumbling highway, any longer. Up ahead another sort of valley between sheer cliffs formed, this one utterly impassable with fallen stone and earth blocking the route completely. With naught but the sea to his right, Dr. Lear turned left toward a truck parked atop the faintest traces of a dirt road peeking from beneath fresh snow. Heavy logs shored the earth on either side, eventually leading to a small, elevated path that ended with a lamp post and section of chain-link fencing set into the cliff's face.

On closer inspection, the metal grating turned out to be a door. Hal used a glove to brush grime and ice from a sign set into the wall near the door, only able to make out 'min-' and some numbers. He shrugged, pushed on the fencing's center, and was relieved to discover that it opened without protest. Halwen took a final look around at the quiet, undisturbed calm of the snow-covered clearing and ocean view. He looked down to the collapse in the ruined highway, to the fallen trees that lay around it, and at the truck not so far away. He turned back and contemplated the darkness beyond the door ahead, hesitation at the unknown suffusing itself throughout his mind.

"We won't always know what lay ahead, but we'll always walk into it together."

His voice, Ellen's words.

Halwen took a deep breath, pulled the lighter from his pocket, and stepped into the blackness of the unlit mine.