

The air was damp and musty, though thankfully somewhat warmer than that outside. Though he could still see his breath, Halwen could already feel the few degrees of difference loosening the chill that had gripped his hands and feet so tightly. He stood still for a moment, listening to the sound of dripping snowmelt and shifting earth, studying the rubble-strewn ground and heavy wooden beams that shored the mine's ceiling. A faint, lonesome howl from behind had him turning quickly, heart rate speeding up and breath hitching in his chest. The doctor's boot struck something heavy with a loud metallic clanking; it skittered a few inches sideways in a serpentine twist and lay against the door. He bent down and felt along the floor, eventually finding the chain and exploring its length with his fingers, noting the busted padlock that dangled uselessly from one end. Hal dragged it to the door, threading the links through the grating and support post quickly, using the bolt from the ruined lock to hold the affair somewhat secure.

"Ought to at least work against wolves."

It was important to hear a voice, even his own. Or maybe the damage was already done, the doctor couldn't be entirely certain. In any case, he had far more pressing exigencies to handle, and the complete blackness of the mineshaft came before all else. Stumbling around in a lightless, abandoned tunnels didn't rate much higher than the dances with wolves he'd face outside, unfortunately.

Halwen thumbed open the lighter in his hand, closing his eyes and rolling the flint wheel quickly to the tune of a dry, rasping snap. He was instantly rewarded with the faintest of whooshing whispers and a distant, slight warmth. The doctor's eyes snapped open with grateful relief as the tiny orange flame flickered cheerily in the cavern's darkness. He turned his back to the entrance once more, stepping forward and looking about in the dancing illumination.

To his left sat an empty metal shelving structure next to two stand-alone lockers. Pulling the handle of the first gave him nothing but the rattle of a flimsy lock, but the second opened easily enough. Though empty at first glance, bringing his tiny torch a bit closer revealed a plastic water bottle hiding at the back of a shelf set near the top. He pulled it out, thankful for the weight that testified to its fill. The water inside was a slushy, semi-frozen that he hoped some time in an inside pocket of the coat he wore would rectify. Though not

parched yet, he knew that hydration should always be a concern when you aren't sure where your next clean drink is coming from.

To his right, a large wooden crate sat against the rough-hewn wall a few feet from what looked like a metal breaker-box. Hal flipped the cover open to be rewarded with the tightly set fuses of an electrical system, though his luck ran out when he toggled a few of them. The only result was a dry plastic snap; no lights, no hum of electricity, nothing. He pushed aside the disappointment, choosing to focus on his small victories, and turned his steps to the unknown, rapidly deepening dark that lay ahead.

A few feet into the mine and he encountered his first cave in. The large, sawhorse-like support beams had snapped in the middle and collapsed under the weight of the mountain above, almost completely sealing the path. Electrical wiring and steel reinforced glass bulbs went with them, throwing off the occasional reflective glare from the light of his flame as they peeked out of the rubble. There was a small crawlspace in the center, however, and Hal dropped down to his knees to get through, using his free hand to steady himself and allow the other to light the way.

The rock above shifted and grumbled, though thankfully remained intact, as he made his way through the cramped path and into air much more musty and dry. With the blockage, however, all semblance of sunlight from the outdoors disappeared completely, electing to remain in the entrance without him. Hal got a leg out in front of him and clear of the collapse, using it to slide forward and stand back up. He brushed some of the dirt from his pants, then laughed at himself as the triviality of the concern struck him. He began to move cautiously forward once again, this time with the faintest hint of a grin adorning his features.

Up ahead and to his right the tunnel branched off, but a brief glance with the lighter's cone of illumination revealed another, more complete cave-in sealing the side path off just a few feet in. Halwen continued, passing under the large supports as they whispered out creaks and groans to reverberate down the halls around him. Another collapse sealed off what looked to be a branch leading off left, and yet even more rock-fall half-choked the tunnel as it veered to his right. He pushed on, eventually stumbling upon an open room dotted with the faint outlines of shelving and workbenches.

More rockfall sealed a tunnel to his right, though if his internal compass was as well-calibrated as he hoped it would only lead back toward the entrance anyhow. Halwen turned to put it at his back, holding the lighter's flickering flame high and squinting against the dark to come up with a picture of the room he found himself in. To his right lay more wooden crates, kin of the one up front. Without a crowbar, axe, or some kind of tool the doctor doubted he could do much of anything with them.

To his left, a large, red barrel sat next to another metal shelf. This one, however, was dotted with various things and sundry that he hurried to inspect. Empty cardboard boxes and chunks of rock, mostly, though he did find a half-full plastic flask labeled 'lantern oil' that he was only too happy to pocket. He brought the lighter in close to inspect one of the rocks, noting that they sat atop a piece of paper that read 'coal samples' and bore various identifying numbers. He pocketed several of them, also, before turning back to the room and moving on.

Up ahead, past an empty workbench, he found an open path. He moved slowly, sweeping the light from side to side and carefully kicking aside the larger rocks that tried to trip up his steps. The tunnels continued on for a while and he followed them along a slight but ever-steepening downslope, pushing against the toes of his boots to keep a better sense of balance as his weight slid forward. A short path appeared to his left, and the faint glint of metal caught his eye from a little way beyond the sight line.

Large metal bars, each about the size of a fist, crossed the tunnel ahead from wall to wall. He tried to discern a purpose before giving up entirely and accepting that the intricacies of mining might forever be outside his grasp. Halwen started to turn around when something else caught his eye: a metal storm lantern, partially obscured by rubble, lying on the ground up against the divider. He approached and moved the lighter close, revealing a mitten, arm, and eventually corpse on the other side.

Whoever it was, they hadn't been gifted so easy a death as Mssr. Blanc; a painful grimace contorted the gaunt, sunken features of the body's face far worse than the obvious signs of starvation could. Blood painted the area, splashed haphazardly across rocks and bars alike in a sickening impression of the worst kind of modern art. The corpse's clothes were completely ruined; tufts of down and blood-soaked cloth were scattered in much the same manner as the deceased's vital fluids.

Halwen murmured a quick apology before relieving the corpse of its storm lantern, taking a moment to familiarize himself with it. He found a button on the side marked 'ignition', and put a finger to it before snapping his lighter shut and plunging the world into total blackness. He watched greenish after-images from his adjusting eyes dance across the dark while he fumbled with a pocket to stow the lighter. Rocks continued to break the silence, shifting somewhere off in the caverns. The sounds of lightly dripping water floated down to him from the direction he'd come, and something else that he couldn't quite put his finger on. A sort of sliding, chuffing noise that the doctor had absolutely no reference to compare against but left him unnerved all the same.

With the lighter safely stored, he reached toward the hand he held against the lantern's ignition and located the carry handle. He took up a firm grasp on it, sucked in a breath, and pushed the button in. The loud snap of a metal striker rang out as blinding sparks jumped into his vision and briefly whited out the darkness. The wick caught with a much louder whooshing than his lighter had managed and light erupted from the lantern to fill the tunnel around him with a merry warmth.

A pair of bright glowing eyes caught the illumination and threw it back at him. Before he'd managed the breath for a surprised shout, the wolf threw itself against the metal bars with a ringing clang that bounced off the walls up and down the short off-shoot. Its jaws yawned wide to reveal a bright red maw studded with angry yellow-white teeth. A snarl rolled across him, carrying hot breath that reeked of fresh blood and old decay. The bright eyes peeked out from dull grey fur, locked on him with singular purpose.

Halwen screamed.

The doctor did not wait to see if the bars would give or hold, protect or betray him. He scrambled backwards, death grip on the lantern all that saved him from dropping it in his panic. He turned around and regained his feet in smooth motion that was graceful despite the frantic circumstances, and beat a hasty retreat back toward the main tunnel. When he regained the path, he turned away from the large room and ran, stumbling over loose rubble and blundering into the occasional low-hanging wire. His steps eventually took him to another low semi cave-in and the man practically slid into it face first. He pushed the lantern ahead, scrambling on all fours and scraping his back painfully against the low rock above. Pebbles and dirt dislodged at the contact, finding their way down the coat's collar to mix with the

sweat on his back into a grimy, chafing paste. Halwen pushed on, fear completely overwhelming his capacity for discomfort or rational thought.

On the other side, light began to return, and he pushed frantically onward as his heart beat against his ribs and lungs pushed fire through his chest. Ahead, another chain-link door signaled the mine's exit, though a substantially reduced amount of light shone through it than had graced his entry into the mining tunnels. Dr. Lear didn't pause to consider it, running past the identical chain and busted lock laying before it, throwing the metal divider open and bursting out into the world beyond.