

Thick, heavy fog clung to the world, caressing his exposed skin with frigid droplets and choking off any and all sight beyond a few yards. His clothing drank greedily at the moisture, fibers wicking it away from the air to quickly turn themselves damp. His light stubble of beard soaked it up with equal fervor, bringing a chill along for the ride that quickly had the shivers embracing him once more. Hal took a few tentative steps into the dull grey miasma, holding his lantern aloft to give the light a better angle. The cheery glow fought valiantly, but made little progress even with the added height.

Halwen turned and took a few steps to his right, almost immediately coming upon a crooked, rough-hewn wooden fence leaning at a drunken angle over a steep drop. The doctor put a hand against it, pushing heavily before trusting the divider with his weight, then leaned forward to bring the light over. The cliff was steep, almost sheer, and continued down past what little sight the thick fog allowed him. He looked left, following the edge's course with his eyes, and caught sight of large rock with something much too bright for stone or snowy earth about it. A sudden, sharp creaking from the fence had Dr. Lear snatching his hand away and taking a step back.

"Son of a," he let the thought die and be carried to the earth with the falling crystals from his frozen breath.

A few steps had him at the rocky outcropping, and he knelt down quickly to inspect whatever it had hanging about it. The movement was tougher than he'd anticipated; the cold seemed to have seeped its way into his bones more quickly than he'd imagined possible.

"So cold."

The statement came out closer to two shaking sentences than the exclamation he'd meant it to be.

It was a rope that had caught his eye, thick, durable, and shockingly red. One for climbing, he assumed from the cord's toughness. The line was sturdily and expertly secured with a knot he might have been able to understand under better circumstances, but shifted little when pulled at. Halwen brought the lantern over near the edge once more to be rewarded with a view no better than earlier. He blew out a disappointed sigh, weighing options that he knew weren't really options at all. Even if he could secure the lantern, descending a line over a cliff of unknown size, in low visibility, with no climbing experience? And into an

uncertain landing, populated by animals that may view him as more prey than threat? He shivered, as much from the cold as from memories of the wolf in the mine.

The doctor turned around and began to walk, switching the lantern to his other hand and flexing the fingers of his recently unburdened one. The mountain stood tall to his left, but flattened out into a small copse on the other side. He began walking along the natural path, noting signs of manmade reinforcement to lessen the slope's descending grade. It took him on a gradual curve to his right, eventually running directly into a perpendicular wall. The new road ran up to his left and down the other direction, the fog allowing him to glimpse little of what lay at their ends.

He took a few steps to the left, noting a vague shape in the fog that he moved in on. The lantern's light caught something red, shining off it in a multi-faceted sparkling glow that was soon mirrored by a twin as the doctor took a few more steps. Brake lights, it turned out, belonging to a trailer that had spilled its cargo into the wall it leaned against. Unprocessed trunks from some logging camp, by the looks of them, they lay indecisively half on and half off the metal bed.

As he turned around to descend the road, hoping to find signs of something more promising, a howl rang out into the still night and shattered its relative silence. Long and low, the cry bounced off the mountainsides, using the fog to magnify its presence. The mournful voice was soon joined by another, and then a few more, the swirling fog deftly blocking his attempts to pinpoint a specific location. He took a stumbling step back, looking desperately about for eyes or shapes coming at him through the mist as the last howls faded to a faint echo before dying entirely. The dwindling day grew once again still, perturbed only by the heavy, hanging fog and comforting hiss of his lantern's flame.

But his feet betrayed him as he slowly backpedaled up the slope, head swiveling from side to side as he intently studied every direction save the one he was moving in. A fist-sized chunk of rock got itself directly under a heel as it came down and rolled out when his weight was applied, throwing the leg from underneath the doctor and sending him heavily to the ground. His lantern's hissing gave a few coughs, weakening the cone of light in its fit, and then abruptly plunged him into darkness as it died. Before Halwen had even the time to curse his luck, the loudest, and closest yet, howl split the night.

His heart turned up the pace on its activity, and once again Dr. Halwen Lear scrambled upright, turned, and ran.

The path ascended at an ever-steepening angle until it hit another chain link door set into the mountain. Massive gears lay strewn about, their teeth half-submerged in snowfall and entirely covered with flaking, frozen rust. Bits of broken crate and fallen branches littered the empty spaces between the outcast machinery; the doctor's feet kicked them aside or stumbled over them as he reached out for the door. A solid push, however, did not have it swing open as the others had. Despite the heavy padlock holding together the equally hefty chain that kept it shut, Halwen's panicked mind had him fruitlessly shaking the gate in a blind panic. Until another, brief howl called out from behind him, this time ending with the unmistakable sound of padding feet and panting breaths.

To his left was nothing but sheer rock face, but the right had a short, steep incline that ended in a plateau topped by an upended tree. Dr. Lear used one of the nearby gears and a fist-sized root to steady his sliding steps as he powered through the snowfall and made quick work of the ascension. It ended in what almost seemed a kind of path and, despite his hot, ragged breath, he summoned the energy to continue the flight at a decent pace.

The mountain climbed far beyond sight into the fog as he ran down the path, keeping close to its wall to avoid the menacing downward slope at the path's opposing edge. The lantern squeaked and cried in a tinny voice as it swung back and forth against the handle with each step, loudly broadcasting his fleeing steps to the fog's menacing quiet. He dared not pause, neither to catch his rapidly failing breath nor listen for whatever approaching doom nipped at his heels. His tired mind idly wondered if this was all some sort of fever dream, though he dared not test the theory.

Just as he began to feel he had nothing left, a vaguely squared shape began to emerge from the thick mists around him. A new surge of desperate energy suffused his flagging body and he pushed on at a quicker clip, revealing what looked like another rough fence line. Beyond it, as the shape cleared up, Halwen saw windows, maybe; the few grateful tears that slipped out quickly froze against his cheeks. He hit the fence at, considering the circumstances, a relatively graceful hurdle and found himself amongst a scattered row of tombstones.

The doctor paused only momentarily before plunging through the short rows, making a mental note to apologize when he wasn't on the dinner menu. His steps took him along the stone-built wall, gloved hands running across the strangely pleasant texture of the rocks, and around a bend. The wall cut in and then back out, reminiscent of a jutting entrance that he hoped it would turn out to be. As he swung around, he passed an empty window that allowed him a handhold to slow his steps more easily.

The entrance still held a divider for double doors, but no wooden partitions hung from its frame any longer. A look at the other windows set about showed them all empty, as well. His heart sank as the futility of its defenses became more apparent. The back wall had caved in at the far corner, spilling stones across the stage at its rear and leaving a gaping hole large enough to admit a truck with room to spare. Atop it all, centered at the rear near the ceiling's peak, a stained-glass window let in what muted light the surrounding fog allowed. He stepped over a large snowdrift and into the church toward it, hoping to at least find a side room or any kind of protection, breath slowing but heart refusing to calm down. In his desperation the doctor found himself considering a fort made from the scattered wooden pews and an intact corner, something more apropos of childhood games than desperate survival.

Passing beneath the exposed wooden skeleton of a shelved partition put him in the main room and the area opened up considerably, though gave him little more to work with. Splintered wooden boards lay amongst the haphazardly placed pews, their origin a mystery until he thought to take a glance at the ceiling. Grey sky peeked in through long, even holes amongst the roof; many of the boards above looked as if preparing themselves for the plunge to come. A stage at the room's rear sported several sections of broken railing and lonesome bannisters. Piles of what looked like fresh lumber lay in the intact corner. Perhaps intended for repairs, now they served little purpose beyond giving the doctor faint hopes of a fire.

He quickly mounted the stage to take a look and the idea died, however, as he found them far too unwieldy to be of any use. There was a collection of tattered, ragged books at the foot of an old set of shelves in the corner behind them, however. The first two were damp beyond any kind of use, but the third he found seemed dry enough to be helpful. Halwen took it in a gloved hand and rose to see what else may be lying about.

Dr. Lear turned around and had to keep from shouting in surprise as he found himself staring at the third corpse of his day. Not unheard of, so far as his work had shown, but

certainly unexpected for a day outside the hospital. He briefly considered checking whoever the poor soul was for anything that could help, but another howl, though thankfully further away, had him return his focus to the task at hand.

He scanned the room once more, taking note of a barrel in the corner over the corpse's shoulder. The doctor's heart leapt, hoping against hope, and he stepped through a break in the stage's railing down to the floor. His boots rang out against the stone floor while moving around the skewed pews to come upon the fire-blackened barrel. One of the long benches was stood on end to rest against the wall; the barrel sat just beneath it amongst a collection of roughly chopped wooden branches.

Without hesitation Halwen tossed the book into the barrel to lay amongst a pile of ash and half-burnt fuel from some fire long gone cold. He picked the other pieces up, stacking them at random atop the open volume and soaking the entire pile down with half the lantern fuel he'd pocketed earlier. One spin of the lighter's wheel and flames begin to lick hungrily at the accelerant, throwing flickering light out into the rapidly darkening day's end. Shadows danced across the church's wall and the temperature began to quickly climb. Hal instinctively understood that he would need more if the fire were to last the approaching night, but elected to take moment to pull the standing pew down and push it flush with the wall. He sat heavily in it, exhaling deeply with relief. The wolves may be acting strangely, but he didn't think they'd be so eager to come after him with a fire nearby.

Or fervently hoped, at least, with a passion bordering on utter denial.

Halwen dug in the pockets of his jacket, producing the granola bar and now-melted bottle of water. He took his time finishing them both, chewing the granola slowly between sips of water. When he was done eating, he took the metal cup from where he'd stowed it and used the snowdrift from the entrance to melt and boil more water. He transferred the hot contents over to his bottle and set it a short distance from the fire to cool. By the time he'd finished, the coals in his campfire seemed hot enough for the samples he'd snagged in the mine. Unsure of exactly what to do the doctor settled on tossing them in the open flames and hoping for the best. It seemed to work well enough; the ambient temperature picked up several degrees in short order. Halwen soon found feeling returned to his extremities and he curled his fingers and toes appreciatively.

A look through the windows showed no evidence of the sun in any direction, it having dipped below the horizon some little time ago. He'd forgotten how short the days, and resultantly long the nights, could be in these parts of the world. The doctor sat down on the bench once more, using the fire's flickering light to guide refueling his lantern with what little kerosene remained in the flask he'd found. His warmed fingers made quick, deft work of the task, and soon he'd depressed the starter's plunger. In a set of crisp, staccato snaps he had a nice, pale light to guide the search.

Hal stepped out cautiously through the hole in the back wall, holding the lantern high and looking both ways for a different set of lights than his city life had him usually associating the action with. The fog still curled up around him like a damp scarf, though, and he was forced to resign himself to the venture's necessity. If he were to kip here for the night, the fire could not be allowed to die. Wind wouldn't be an issue with the barrel to protect it; he just had to stockpile the fuel it needed to keep roaring.

Once more his boots crushed fresh snow underfoot as he stepped out onto the pristine canvas. Fog seemed to have gifted the powder with an icy crust, however, and each step cut through it with a crisp snap. He cringed at the sound as it rang out like shattered glass through the distorted acoustics of the misty world, but lack of response eventually eased the tension in his shoulders and mind. He made his way around the building's side with some small difficulty and the occasional shiver as the hanging moisture set to work cooling him beyond comfort once more. A low stone wall separated the church's courtyard from the world beyond and he stepped through a convenient break in the rocks.

On it's other side, the mountain descended into a slope-and-plateau combination of varying degrees and dispersion. Trees dotted the downhill wherever the grade allowed them, and it was from beneath these that the doctor gathered an armful of cast off branches and sticks to carry back and dump at the foot of his merrily popping barrel of flame. The coal seemed to have taken well to the blaze he'd built, raising the area's temperature past basic necessity and into downright comfortable.

Halwen made the trip once more, setting another pile of sticks and branches next to the first and finally relaxing at the pew for a moment to catch his breath. Now practically sweating inside his jacket, he removed it carefully and draped the garment across the pew with its interior facing the barrel to warm. The doctor rolled up his mackinaw and sweater

sleeves slowly to take a look at the bandage he'd set, gritting his teeth as the dried coagulation bit at his skin before relenting their grip.

The cloth wasn't soaked entirely through with blood, but it had taken enough to want removal. His wounds seemed to be doing the best they could, all things considered, and smelled no worse than an old penny when he went sniffing for infection. He tossed the blood-soaked rag away in mild disgust, wishing for a pair of sterile gloves, and it landed next to the church's entry door. The wound suppurated but a little blood that rolled slowly around to the bottom of his arm. He took the bottle of water and poured some of its contents into the metal cup, hooking the handle on the barrel's edge to heat the contents as he stood up and turned back to the corpse from earlier. He picked up his lantern and stepped around the makeshift campsite, heading toward the poor soul to see what he had missed before.

Accepting the necessity of becoming a grave robber seemed to get easier each time it was done, as there was little hesitation in his walk to the front pew. Halwen stepped around the body and sat down at a small break in the stage's railing, squeezing between broken banisters and leaning forward to study the remains. The slow leak from his wound changed directions, leaving trails of itself behind as the drops struggled to figure out which way was down. He wiped at them absentmindedly while looking over the corpse.

It was a woman, her dark hair hanging long at either side of the face from beneath a tight-fitting, dull grey knit cap. His heart skipped a beat and the world's light seemed to dim as he pulled down a snug scarf wrapped about her face and studied the terrified features. Her mouth was twisted in a grimace, brown eyes open so wide as to stretch the skin around the orbital sockets. But it was not his wife and Hal sat up, letting the relief course through his body with an almost palpable rush. He savored the moment until the guilt hit him; a life had ended. It was no less tragic for not being dear to him personally.

"I'm so sorry," he said to maybe her and maybe the world in general.

"What the hell is going on here?"

It wasn't the first time he'd asked the question, and the doctor had little faith an answer would ever come. He began the disdainful task of patting down her jacket and pants pockets, finding nothing of any particular use outside of the scarf, and no identification to take with him whatsoever. Still he hesitated, pausing at the thought of taking what little she had

left before practicality set in. The dead have no needs beyond reverence and remembrance; the living are beset by exigencies on all sides.

The scarf was of some hefty, thick fiber that felt more like wool than anything synthetic. It wrapped around his neck twice, easily covering the shoulders and cinching snugly just beneath his eyes so that, with the hat pulled low on his brow, little of his face was left for the elements to ravage. He tugged at the bit beneath his nose, pulling it down to a more comfortable position until it would be needed.

Halwen began to turn toward the fire but hesitated, opting instead to lean down and put an arm beneath the corpse's legs and the other behind her shoulders. Lifting the body was much easier than he'd expected, as if her departed soul had left the corpse much lighter for its absence. He carried her over to the stage, laying the woman down beneath the stained-glass window's center and fighting rigor mortis to arrange her in a more peaceful, supine position.

With no words to say, Dr. Lear opted for simply closing her eyes and returning to the pew by his fire. The contents of his cup were at a merry boil, and he pulled it from the flames with a gloved hand before adding the rest of the scavenged fuel. The folding knife in his jacket pocket easily cut away a strip from his undershirt, and he used it with the boiling water to clean the semi-circle of punctures for the next few minutes. Coagulation was good for more than sealing the bandage painfully to his skin; they bled but a little after he'd cleaned away all the filth and seemed to have scabbed over nicely. He rolled his sweater sleeve back down, then repeated the same exercise as best he could with the wound beneath his knit cap, discarding its bandage as well.

Exhaustion overtook him, and the doctor barely managed to drink the contents of his water bottle. He took the now-warmed jacket and folded it up, laying down on his back and tucking the makeshift pillow beneath his head. Within minutes all concerns fell away as his consciousness was dragged into a deep, exhausted sleep.