

When he awoke, the fog had departed, leaving behind nothing but a thin frozen crust. Sunrays shone in through the roof's holes, lending a holy light to the skewed setup of pews that caught the rime of ice and threw them against the walls. The fire nearby popped and hissed, still chewing on last night's fuel, and Halwen stretched appreciatively before rolling toward it. The golden light bathed his shelter in warmth as it peeked inside, lending a cheeriness to the scene that even the body lain out on the church's stage couldn't quite dispel. He thought of his wife, of her ever-present smile and unflappable spirit. He would find Ellen today, the light told him. He would find her because she wanted him to, because he would never stop.

Exhaustion had urged him to neglect refilling the water bottle before laying down, and so he took his cup to the nearby window to scoop fresh snow for boiling. As he pulled it up, a set of tracks not more than a few feet beyond gave his task pause; the unmistakable pad-and-claw pattern of wolf paws were all over the exterior. The doctor quickly pulled himself back into the window, eyes darting around the exterior view. He set the cup to boil on the barrel's edge and then picked deftly through pews to scan the other side. The windows showed little more than scenery and a steep descent, he briefly considered heading out the back before his courage failed him.

The first cup boiled quickly when he set it to the barrel's edge, and he poured the contents carefully into his bottle to set aside for cooling. Something about the church's interior felt safer to him and he opted to return to the snowbank by the entrance for a refill in lieu of leaning back out the window. Visions of torn throats, of flesh and sinew laying raw and exposed quelled any courage he would have needed to consider leaning back outside and the doctor shuddered quietly as he turned around to the entrance.

He hoped that his cast-off bandage from the night before hadn't contaminated the snow. Or, well, any more than regular snow already was, that is to say; he hadn't been boiling it before drink simply for fun. Thoughts of bacterial contaminants and sicknesses filled his mind as he knelt to scoop the fallen flakes into the cup but something nagging at the edge of perception brought his attention back to bear. His bandage was no longer amongst the pile of snow, in its place bloodied streaks and more prints, these much larger than the ones outside. The steps were deep, unhurried, and led directly through the drift's center, paused not more than ten feet from where he'd lain, and then turned around to produce a matching set headed back out.

Fear reached down from somewhere in the primitive, subconscious areas of his mind to take a grip on his heart and squeeze. Halwen fled instinctively to the fire, seeking the warmth's comfort and perceived protection. But in the light of day it felt less efficacious, incapable of holding the frozen world's terrors at bay. The doctor made quick work of donning his jacket once more, scooping up and re-capping the water bottle for stowing in a pocket as he finished buttoning it up. A quick check of the barrel showed a healthy bed of coals and some merrily burning logs, but nothing of a size appropriate to make a torch.

He couldn't stay here, that much was certain, but neither did Hal have an idea of where to go. Or, more importantly, what may be waiting for him along the way. Nervous hands came up to rub at throbbing temples and he cast his eyes to the ground while pacing the small stone church's length. Something shiny beneath the pew he'd slept at caught his attention for a moment; the folding knife he'd used last night was still out and open, its blade catching whatever scattered sunlight the ill-kempt roof allowed.

Dr. Lear took hold of the polished handle, squeezing it until the leather of his gloves creaked against its wood, appreciating the feel of power that came with brandishing the blade. Wolves be damned; Ellen was out there, probably searching as desperately for him as he should be for her. He stepped around to the entrance once more, hugging the far wall to keep his back against something firm. The feel of a solid support at his back held panic that pounded through his heart at arm's length as he moved along the rough stones toward the church's foyer. The fire's quiet, irregular popping aside, straining his ears gave nothing more than the sounds one would expect from a crisp winter morning: sighing wind, creaking trees, and the occasional crow's harsh, cheerless call.

His boots called out a few dull thuds as they made their way across cold stone to the church's entrance. Halwen put a hand on the rough, uneven arch of the door frame, sucking in a deep breath while he built his courage. Before he could second-guess himself, he stepped quickly around the wall and out into the world beyond.

Despite being somewhat accustomed to the light, his vision still whited out in a painful display that had eyelids squeezing themselves shut without conscious thought. He spent a few, tense seconds waiting for his rods and cones to reset, ears once more on high alert for the slightest indication of the wolves already lurking in his imagination. When he opened them once more, the world had taken on a much more tolerable hue. The first thing to catch his

attention was a cheery conical red-and-white affair not far off in the distance. The tower rose atop an outcropping of rocks at the sea's edge, its summit affixed with a large glass structure that could serve few other purposes than casting light across the waters.

Halwen's grip on the knife tightened, his other hand pressing against the lighter in his coat's breast pocket like a child reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. He began to walk forward with determination, snow crunching underfoot in a regular cadence, breath freezing before his eyes in a cloud that quickly fell to earth. The doctor did his best to stay mindful of the path while hurrying, all nervousness from earlier replaced with a single-minded, undeniable drive.

The stone church's entrance led to a plateau that dropped off in a rolling kind of decline and dead-ended into a junction. The ascending portion led back up and around toward the broken rear wall, its opposite heading into what looked like a highway that ran above a parallel shoreline. In the distance, he could see the frozen water extending far off before it gave way to ocean waves.

Hal's toes pressed up against the front of his boots as he quickly descended, opting for speed over care, and he managed to make good time without a fall or injury. Soon the fresh, brisk crunching of snow and ice gave way to dull thuds of tread on concrete and the doctor took a moment to catch his bearings; his destination's height and the clear, shining sun making the task almost effortless.

The lighthouse stood maybe a quarter mile away, a column of white brick rising toward the sky, capped at the top with two sets of red tiling divided by a section of metal railing around a large glass bulb. A steep, uneven path ran from its door down toward him, the way cut in pieces by two sections of long rope bridges. Hal turned left and began to move along the highway, scanning for a cut into the safety railing that would signify the path's trailhead. He passed a small car pulled over on the road's edge, its grill and headlights barely peeking out from the snowdrifts piling around the frame. A brief scan through the windows didn't show much and the doors weren't keen on pulling open through the piled snow; Hal left it be and continued on, walking for a few dozen yards before coming across the offshoot he'd been hoping for.

The trail was set into a jutting succession of rising rocks that crept slowly from the mainland to stretch out across the frozen waters. They grew steadily bolder, he chuckled lightly at the pun, to peek ever higher up and out from the earth as they left the road behind. Dr.

Lear pulled the water bottle from his pocket and drained it while studying the path's setup, swishing the liquid around his mouth before capping the container and returning it to his jacket. The wind began to pick up again as he set out on the extruding rocks, starting from the lightest whisper to a more brisk whistle.

Still, the going was easy as he stepped out onto the snow-covered path. Beneath his feet, what felt like boards or long, evenly-placed stones gave support from under the fallen blanket of snow. He walked quickly up the ascending path, partially eager to be near what he hoped was his final destination, more so to be free of the wolves that he thought followed him. The wind gained a bit more insistency in rapid order, turning the volume up to something more conversational. He continued on, the knife in his hand all but forgotten through his revelry in the sun's bright light and the lighthouse's proximity.

It was the sound of heavy breathing that first put the hair on his neck standing on end. Though it was at first hard to discern through the wind's chipper conversation, he did eventually place the inconsistency. He felt a thick ball of dread drop low into his guts, sitting at the bottom like an iron weight that pinned him in place as he slowly turned his head. And there, walking without a care in the world down the path's center, was the wolf. The one he knew had been following him; the one he knew had been biding its time until its prey had nowhere to run. It stood perhaps a full foot taller than what any photograph had led him to believe the species was capable of. Its long, powerful limbs were capped with paws that would match his hands palm to pad. Shaggy grey fur heaved in time to its breath, rippled with each step, swayed in time to its swinging tail and the ever-present winds.

The old wolf paused on noticing his attention and squared its barrel chest toward his half-turned silhouette, seemingly taken aback that he had the audacity to even turn and face it. Large brown eyes from deep within the gray studied him head to foot as his own returned the favor, taking in the streaks of dull maroon that painted its snout and sides. A fresh kill, maybe? Or a wound from trying to make one?

The wolf opened the massive yaw of its mouth to expose too-white teeth set against a crimson cavern, the movement setting something free that fluttered to the ground to rest against the snow he'd so recently disturbed. It lay quietly atop the piled drifts and sunken steps, staining the drifts with a dark, deep red that stood out easily against the slightly dirty

white his footsteps had left behind. It didn't take any of his medical training to recognize the bandage, and none of his imagination to guess where the animal had picked it up.

"Oh shit."

The Alpha, or he imagined it was, responded to the curse by throwing back its head and howling out a long, forlorn challenge into the midday sun. The call was met by the wind, which increased its own conversation to match the howling. Hal didn't wait to watch the gusts pick up snow and smudge out the view they shared. In the moment that the Alpha let its cry go, adrenaline surged into the doctor's mind and set him to turning on a heel and sprinting.

His arms pumped and legs pistoned up and down, eating the path before him with blind abandon, knife blade cutting through the swirling snow as it flashed past his face with every step. Halwen shifted focus for a brief moment, changing his grip on it to point the blade down and hold it flat against his forearm. The moment nearly cost him dearly, he was almost out of path when he looked up. His steps turned to a sharp, halting skid that slammed him painfully into a set of rising rock. He couldn't begrudge the stone too much, though, as it had saved him from tumbling down onto the frozen water.

To his left, the first bridge extended out over a chasm that looked to be at least sixty feet deep. The rickety, weathered slats were held precariously together with a rope he didn't have the luxury of examining. Behind him, the Alpha ate the distance between them with an appetite he could only hope it couldn't match if it won the coursing. He wrapped a gloved hand around one of the supporting ropes and grimly resumed his run, hoping against hope the old bridge would hold.

The doctor crossed to a fanfare of creaking, swaying protest that did little to alleviate the terror expanding within his chest. The wind did no favors either, quickly increasing its shout to an all-out scream that shook the bridge with an angry voice. Halwen slipped once, going down hard on a knee that sang out a song of pain he could hear clearly over the howling wind and his beating heart. His panic picked up cadence, however, and had him quickly scrambling up to continue on. Behind him, the bridge seemed to have given his pursuer pause, it yelped out a series of angry barks before leaping expertly down from rock to rock on the chasm's wall. The swirling gusts of snow were making it tough to discern, but he had no illusions it would manage a similar climb upon reaching the bottom. Halwen pressed on, trying to add a little speed to his flight.

If he'd had the breath to spare, the doctor would've used it to express relief when his feet hit solid ground at the bridge's end. But he didn't, couldn't, and the sight of another, longer, less stable set of slats suspended over an even deeper drop ahead had him deciding he wouldn't.

Dr. Lear moved on, clawing at the incline with his free hand in a half-hunched, pale mimicry of the wolf's sleek run. He'd hoped to make good time during its detour, but the sound of scattering rocks and heavy breath through the wind told him otherwise. Gasping and panting, he crested the incline's top and grabbed the next bridge's support post without hesitation.

This one was much longer, its end disappearing into the twisting world of white that pressed ever closer as the wind drove itself to a fever pitch. The slats were further apart, too, but not so much as to be dangerous. Still, care was required and the doctor had to force himself to slow momentarily. He couldn't see the drop below, but death by falling wasn't much improvement over death by wolf, he imagined. Especially if he survived the plummet and it simply broke him into immobility. The result didn't bear thinking, and he quickly pushed it aside to focus on the task at hand.

Behind him, another series of aggravated barks rang out, placing the Alpha at the bridge's mouth but a few feet behind him. The ropes creaked and slats squeaked as he jumped a few, sure that the wolf wouldn't follow but not keen on taking the chance anyhow. Which proved itself a valid precaution in short order: the bridge's sway went from erratic to outright violent as something heavy stepped onto the planks and resumed the chase.

"Oh shit, oh shit oh shit oh shit."

Dr. Lear punctuated every step with a curse, his feet sinking between gaps and gloves occasionally slipping from the frozen rope. The swing became more pronounced, almost rhythmic, and accompanied by a hefty thud before each bout. He hoped the old ropes would hold while desperately wishing the slats behind him would cave. He pressed on, squinting his eyes against the howling wind as its icy fingers took hold of his face in a numbing grasp. The scarf did much to keep the wind's chill at bay, but every inch of exposed skin burned at their touch, his fingers fought painful pinpricks of numbness even from inside the glove. He could feel every gap and tear in his clothing as the wind wormed its way inside and spread

a chill throughout his body. But the doctor kept moving and, eventually, was rewarded with the sight of two posts driven into solid ground that signified the bridge's end.

And, just as his brain had time to process the relief, something colossal hit him dead center in the back and threw his body to the suspended wooden floor. Halwen cried out in a strangled tone of surprise and fear, whipping an elbow back into a soft cushion that easily absorbed the impact. Short rasping barks rang out against his left ear just moments before the Alpha bit down on his clavicle. His jacket did little, and even the wind couldn't cover the sound of its fabric shredding.

White hot pain lanced through his entire mind, matching the swirling snowfall that blotted out Hal's world to the tune of his agonized shouts. The wolf's saliva dripped in through the jacket's tears to mingle with his blood as it poured down chest and arms in torrents. The beast's oppressive weight was overwhelming, crushing him into the weathered wooden slats, threatening to send him through them and into the infinite white below. Halwen's shocked cry became a scream of denial as he felt the canines puncture muscle and drive themselves deeper. He flailed uselessly against the beast, the helplessness of his situation threatening to drown his consciousness in despair.

The alpha released its grip suddenly, maybe to get another angle, and its weight shifted ever so slightly as its muzzle moved closer to his neck. Halwen put everything he had into a roll, skewing the beast's balance enough for him to twist into a position that brought his knife into play. The wolf let out a few sharp, angry barks before rearing back for another bite. Purely on instinct, Dr. Lear threw his free arm up; the wolf's teeth came down on the forearm and slid perfectly into the wounds already there.

Halwen brought the knife around, burying it in the animal's chest to the hilt, yanked it free, and stabbed again. Hot, bright blood spurted from the wound and painted over the dried maroon stains in the alpha's coat. The doctor screamed once more, this time in fury, as he stabbed in a blind panic. The wolf yelped aloud, suddenly pushing at him with paws intent on escaping, and fell over backwards on the swaying wooden bridge. The wind tore away its balance, leaving the beast flailing dangerously on the precarious position.

Dr. Lear pushed himself painstakingly backwards, his wounds screaming at the effort, but soon reached terra firma once more. He stood with as much haste as the damage he'd taken allowed and began a stumbling limp toward the tower that rose through the storm's

whited-out palette. His surroundings ran in and out of focus, the ground seeming to leer at him drunkenly as he struggled to maintain a straight walk. Color began to bleed out from the edges of his vision, turning the world into flashes of a stubborn television program the antenna wouldn't negotiate with.

The arterial red accents on the door and windows stood out well enough and the flag nearby beat a ringing tattoo out on the pole that held it prisoner. He focused on putting one foot before the other, slowly making his way closer. All the while he imagined another blow to the back, this time the hot breath at his throat as the teeth closed on either side of his windpipe. But nothing hit him, and soon he was running into the cold, solid wood of the light house's entry. Operating purely on luck now, the doctor put a hand to the door's knob and turned. If it was locked, he mused, this would be the end of his road.

But it opened at the first try, and soon he'd tumbled through and onto a thin rug that covered part of the stone floor inside. Halwen managed to roll over with little difficulty, kicking the front door shut against the freezing elements and the dangers trying to ride them inside. He lay spread-eagled on the floor, panting heavily in a weak attempt to catch his runaway breath. With great difficulty and a little time, the doctor eventually managed to pull himself up on a wooden chair near an old, metal stove and sit down heavily.

"Have to stop this bleeding."

Talking was good, talking kept the blackness that was creeping in to replace his rapidly greying world at bay. The doctor set himself to stripping off the tatters of his ruined jacket, scavenging a few strips along the way to put some pressure on his brand-new wounds. But, one-handed, the going was difficult and slow; by the time he'd managed to stem the flow he'd already lost enough blood to have his medical mind sincerely worried.

"I don't know if I'm going to make it."

The words were thick, sluggish as his thoughts, and came from some place so far-off they could barely make it to his ears. Exhaustion came with them, or, more likely, the blood loss, and the cold stone floor began to seem more inviting than the hard wood of his chair. The act of simply staying upright was bothersome and this, more than anything, had a small jolt of terror shoot what little adrenaline he had left into his blood.

"I don't want to die here."

Dr. Halwen Lear pushed himself back to his feet, stumble stepping toward a set of stairs across the room, and leaned heavily against the wall they curled up against. The steps climbed the tower's interior steeply, circling the inside wall and quickly disappearing around the center support. He tried to turn toward them, hoping to hurry his way through the climb, but managed little more than a semi-controlled slump down the stone wall back to the floor below.

The world slid in and out of focus, the tempo of his awareness slowing to match a struggling heartbeat as the doctor tried desperately to keep his eyes open. He looked around between the crashing waves of consciousness lapping at the shore of his mind, stubbornly trying to decipher his surroundings through the rolling combs of blackness. Stone, stone everywhere, and the chair atop the rug now balled up around its legs from his brief stay on it. The desk and wood-burning stove nearby, next to a set of what looked like drawers beside the doorway. And, on it's other side, more drawers below a-

Hal's vision sharpened quickly as his breath caught. Directly across from his spot, mounted about halfway up the wall, was a bright white cabinet with the universally recognizable red cross painted across a small drawer at its bottom. The doctor wasted no time burning what little energy he had left before the spike wore off, pushing himself to his feet and stumbling across the room. He tripped on the last step, managing to hook a hand in the cabinet that tore it from the wall as he came down hard on a knee. It hit the ground as hard as he did, popping its door open and sending the contents inside rolling across the floor.

Halwen slumped forward on his belly, hands snaking out to snatch up the precious cargo: a small, blue pill bottle and a long, thin cylinder with a red cap. He read the first's label, vaguely recalling the name as some kind of broad spectrum antibiotic before pocketing them. Not much help at the moment but better than nothing if his wounds became infected. The cylinder was much more interesting, however, as it turned out to be synthetic adrenaline. Dr. Lear hesitated only briefly while weighing the consequences against his situation's apparent dire exigencies before removing the cap with fumbling fingers. He rolled over and took a deep breath, jammed the needle at its end into the upper portion of his thigh, and depressed the plunger with a thumb.

The pain was immediate, but fleeting. He pulled the now useless apparatus from his leg and let it slip from weak fingers to roll around on the floor. Hal lay back, resting against the nearby wall and waiting for the effects to kick in, hoping against hope they would be

enough to get him back on his feet. He felt the blood seep slowly from his bandages, his heart beat with a rapid, weak insistency, his lungs fill with an uneven, staccato tempo. And then, earlier than he'd dared to hope, he felt the epinephrine kick in.

The soft, fuzzy edges of his world jumped into sharp, bright definition. His heart kicked itself into high gear and began working overtime to make up for the lost beats. His breathing took on an even regularity, filling his lungs and bringing order to his bodily rhythm. Within moments he'd pushed himself back to standing and crossed the room to stand at the stairs once more.

The metal clanked beneath the soles of his boots as he moved confidently up each one, quickly rounding the central support's bend and stepping onto the second floor. A small bed, more of a daycot, dominated most of the space from its position against the wall. An overhead wall shelf topped it, cluttered with random objects of little or no use to him. Next to the distressed, stained pillow at the cot's head sat an old set of shelves filled with discarded plastic wrappers and empty cans. Across the weathered, well-worn wooden floorboards sat another table, empty save for a dry water jug and ragged doily. Halwen stepped past it all and onto the next flight of stairs.

He moved at a slow, plodding pace with a hand against the central stone column to keep balance intact. Ellen would be around the next turn, he knew it. And if she wasn't, then the next, or the next, or however many it took for him to find her. Another step, then another, and another, and then a half-awkward stumble as he tried to mount a step that was no longer there. He had found the next floor.

Pale, muted light cut through the swirling white flakes outside and shone through the window, skirting around a small plastic cooler to bathe the room in ghostly light. Along the exterior wall sat an empty shelf assembly by a bank of four lockers in various stages of vandalization. The doors hung at an awkward skew, their locking mechanisms broken or hinges ripped apart. At the base of the set lay two broken halves of what may have been an old crowbar; flakes of rust coated the edges of a bright, clean snap through the tool's center.

Across the wooden flooring lay another collection of now-familiar crates, their heavy construction covered in chips and cuts that could have come from the discarded prybar. An old, half-rotted wooden pallet leaned against the largest of them, sitting at a drunken angle to the floor. Slats were torn from the frame's central pieces, their ends still held by twisted nails

barely seated in the frame. Beyond it all, a sturdy railing guarded a sudden drop to the second floor. To its right, the stairs became metal, descending up and around the exterior wall, sans support pillar, into the darkness above. He stepped onto the first of them, his boot ringing out with a hollow clank, and set his teeth before proceeding cautiously into the unknown.

The light grew dim as the windows became sparse; Halwen patted at his pockets for the lighter before remembering the ruins of his jacket down on the ground floor. He fought a brief moment of hollow, panicked emptiness at the loss, feeling as if the looming tower had somehow grown taller. The distance between him and Ellen had never felt so vast, his assurances of her presence in the lighthouse notwithstanding. The bottom floor seemed hours away, further even than the small copse where he'd first woken up. Without his light, he feared the darkness would overwhelm.

Memories of his wife stepped into the forefront of his mind, pulling his thoughts from the cold void of despair they teetered so precariously over, wrapping his fear in the warm embrace of her love. He held tight to the comfort that suffused itself throughout him, ashamed at how easily the encroaching terror had nearly taken over. Dr. Ellen Lear smiled from inside his thoughts, beckoning to him encouragingly and Halwen moved on. She was here; he would find her.

Around a final bend, the stairs hit a hard dead-end into a hatch set against the textured metal ceiling. Hal put a hand against the cold trap door, sucking in a deep breath before pushing heavily against it. His reward was a screeching metal cry as the rusty old hinges ground against themselves and opened a portal to the cold, windy world outside.

The storm had abated somewhat since he'd sought shelter inside. Dr. Lear shook his head in slight bewilderment; the weather out here had a fickleness that almost suggested intent. This land was like nowhere else in the world, but he would have time to reflect on that later. More pressing matters required his attention, clearly, and he sucked in a breath to give them voice.

"Ellen!"

The wind immediately picked his cry up, deftly shuffling it far out to float over the ocean coastline.

“Ellen!”

Longer this time, the words tearing at his throat as they clawed their way out to quickly follow the first's journey across the frozen shores. He stepped forward to the light's railing, putting his hands to the cold metal and leaning out across it. The bridge of one hand made a makeshift shade against the sun's glare as it bounced off the ice to beam itself back into his eyes. The view was gorgeous, its beauty so overwhelming that he almost forgot himself as he took in the scene.

The land crept steadily downward to the road he'd so recently traveled, ending in a metal railing to protect from the sudden sharp drop it took down to the coast. The water stretching out was frozen in a solid, opaque white sheet. The dark patches of rock jutting through the snow gave some depth to the short cliff between the two, its palette matched by large juts of earth that thrust themselves defiantly from the waters. A deer grazed atop the nearest between the few trees hardy enough to eke out a living on the thin soil of the structure's crown, its neck bent gracefully as it snuffed out whatever meager fare the earth offered.

Beyond them, stretching as far as he could see, the greyish-blue waters shifted peacefully across the horizon. They lapped against the thinning crust of ice, singing the soft sounds of the ocean as they cycled through their tides. The winds droned on, adding their dirge as accompaniment to the melodious march while the doctor frantically searched the horizon for clues. Something, anything that would lead him to his other half, to the most important piece of his life.

“I love you, Halwen.”

Her words had rung hollow for the first time since he'd met her; he suspected it was because the Ellen he loved was no longer there.

“Please don't do this.”

“We don't belong here anymore.”

The conviction in her final words had cut through his heart with an ease no surgical blade could ever aspire to.

“El-” but his breath caught in his throat, unable to finish the cry as despair overtook him.

Halwen fell to his knees, hands still hooked around the algid metal railing as his head fell in defeat. The spark of recollection caught in his mind and cast illumination on the final piece of his memory; on the reason the lighthouse had survived everything else he'd pushed away. He opened his eyes and finally found his wife.

“Ellen.”

The winds never gave his whisper a chance to be heard, snatching the prize away and sending it out to live amongst the ocean waves with its kin. Bitter tears formed at the corners of his eyes as the depth of his failure made itself known to him. He had failed her, he had failed his wife when she needed him most.

“Oh gods.”

She lay below, her body amongst the rocks at the shores edge directly beneath. When she'd let go of the rail, falling gracefully backward, he'd only been able to catch the edge of her coat's sleeve for the briefest of moments. The second had stretched into an eternity, its peaceful calm painting Dr. Ellen Lear's features a direct contrast to the terror that he knew twisted his own. As it had always been: her, so calm and assured and he, so uncertain and scared.

“You said we'd never be apart.”

The tears rolled down into the stubble on his jaw, quickly freezing before they'd journeyed far enough to fall. He allowed himself a moment longer before using the rail to rise once more. Halwen turned back to the open hatch and descended the tower stairs, picking up his ruined jacket and slipping back into its single sleeve before exiting the lighthouse. The wolf was nowhere in sight, though he doubted if it's presence would have mattered much to him anymore.

Halwen ignored the bridge in favor of skirting around the building's exterior, running a gloved hand across the patches of brick that weather's wear had revealed through the heavy paint. He walked around to the rear, back to where he'd faced the breathtaking view of the sea and coastal highway. Below him, the cliff dropped off sharply, but careful navigation

allowed him to slide down with little more than a few cuts and scrapes. At its bottom, he approached his wife.

She lay peacefully, arms folded across her chest, body carefully positioned on the ground in the best shelter the cliff face could offer. He'd done this earlier, of course; the doctor vaguely recalled pulling her from where the cliff had brought the fall to an end. He paused, turning around to look for the crimson patch he knew would be nearby. It lay a few feet back, frozen atop the ice where he'd first battled the Alpha when it had come for her.

Almost as if on cue, the long, lonely dirge rose from somewhere near the shore, and Halwen turned toward the sound to scan for his adversary. The old wolf was up on the road, its long, shaggy body standing out against the mountainside's blanket of wind-swept snow. Dr. Lear thought briefly of the knife that he'd lost somewhere above before pushing the idea aside. He wouldn't need it anymore now, anyway. The wolf held no more fear for him; only Ellen mattered.

"We'll always be together."

Hal pulled the lighter from his coat pocket, placing it in the frozen embrace of her long-cold hands.

"I love you, Ellen."

He placed an arm beneath her back, the other under her legs, and lifted his wife one final time. He imagined the Alpha would be picking its way down toward the frozen shoreline, maybe looking for a route that would go easy on its wounds. Wolves didn't act this way, sure, but neither had Ellen before the crash. Something had happened, something he would never understand and maybe didn't want to. Maybe it had happened to him, too.

The doctor turned around and began to walk toward the ocean. Stepping with quiet assurance, never looking back. He suspected the old wolf would have its paws on the frozen coastline now, that it would be padding toward him at a half run, its wounds still slowly bleeding with the movement. Ellen made no sound, of course she didn't, but her voice played clearly in his mind as he thought of their life together.

"I love you, Ellen."

She would have told him that she loved him too, would have given him the smile that had first caught his heart so long ago. He thought about the Alpha's grin, about its long white teeth standing out from the gray muzzle, of the flecks of blood that decorated it. He felt no fear any longer, though. He had found Ellen. He could finish what he'd started.

The ice cracked beneath his feet, suddenly, sending up a loud, popping complaint that turned into a grumble of shifting plates rubbing against one another. Halwen smiled and walked on, knowing that the old wolf would follow. They would all be together.

He heard the panting behind him now, growing closer as the Alpha gained on them. He continued walking, waiting until another loud pop broke the sea's restless sighing and nearly threw him off balance. He looked at his feet, saw the cracks forming as they raced out from the weight they could barely contain. Beneath its translucence, the blue-grey waters shifted excitedly. He turned around slowly, wanting to welcome the old wolf properly.

It stood not ten feet behind him and paused momentarily as their eyes met, the large paws hesitating only briefly before resuming their walk. It padded toward him slowly, placing each foot carefully, favoring the uninjured side. Halwen watched the blood fall from its wounds, a bright red spot of spilled paint on the ice's perfect, clean canvas. A mirror to the trail he'd already left behind; he wondered what else they shared.

"Come now, old friend. You didn't mean to try and take her from me, did you?"

It answered with an uncertain growl, the low rumble carrying hints of a whimper.

"You're as tired as I am, aren't you?"

The old wolf took another step, its large brown eyes flitting between the two doctors. Halwen slowly, carefully sat down, feeling water seep up from beneath the shifting, cracking ice.

"You can come with us, if you like."

The old wolf stepped closer, sinking slowly into a crouch as its lips pulled back across long, white teeth.

"Come on then."

Halwen turned his attention back to Ellen one last time, letting the beauty of her face fill his sight, the beauty of her entire being fill his mind. As he closed his eyes for the last time, the old wolf sprung from its crouch and hit him dead center in the chest. The ice gave way instantly, sending them all into the long dark waiting eagerly below. Dr. Lear smiled one last time before slipping slowly into the blackness that embraced them.