

“Temperatures continue to drop, averaging 5 degrees a day, and there’s no signs of stopping.”

John Stevens stared wide-eyed at his television, drawn into the local weather.

“Honey, come here, you’ve got to see this.”

Linns had just finished boiling a pot of water for tea, her usual afternoon hobby.

Three weeks had passed since he'd seen the last body frozen over. John Stevens tightened the hood of his parka, bringing the warm fur close to his face to block the harsh sting of the wind. He brought out the picture of his wife, Linns, and daughter, Elly, from under his coat to try and give himself the strength to keep pressing forward. Conditions hadn't improved since he left New York about an hour ago, nothing but a frozen waste now.

"Seek Detroit: Find Shelter", sprayed on every highway mileage sign he'd come across. Once a booming metropolis, Detroit was considered one of the last colonies that actually had safe haven. John knew it was a long shot, but at this point most hope had left him along with the feeling in his hands and feet. The roads and highways were icy, so he had to stick to the medians and snowbanks next to them. The frigid gale overwhelmed him, yearning for access to his warm skin.

Every new day that John woke up was a new found sense of bewilderment at the world around him. "How did it happen so fast?" He thought as he trudged along knee deep in fresh, powdery snow. "No one could have seen this coming as quickly as it did. It just seemed like a colder winter... the bodies... I couldn't even do anything..it was just too late..too far gone..the cold came too quickly!" There was no one there to answer his thoughts, his questions, only the biting wind answered him with a cutting reply.

Six months had passed since it happened. At first it was just a few snowstorms across the country here and there. Nothing to talk about really, until the oceans started icing over. A cold hit so hard and so fast that no one had time to prepare. Everything and everyone started to freeze. People started calling it the Age of Ice, until there was no one left to say anything.

The sky grew darker by the second, and traveling at night wasn't an option. He lifted his gaze up the road and could make out a small structure in the distance. *Could it be? Actual human life?* John had learned to cope with the cold climate, but still couldn't cope with the bitter chill of loneliness that gripped him. His faith had been shattered too many times by the remains of encampments, signs that life used to be there. He shook the thought from his mind, but the setting of the sun forced onward toward the building.

As John was approaching what he now saw was an abandoned rest stop, a feeling of cold flooded him, the feeling that he was being watched, hunted. He slowly turned around, and before him was a large, white wolf. A brooding growl bellowed from his throat, and his pale blue eyes were fixated on John. He let out a howl that pierced the thrashing wind, calling two other wolves to his side. John slowly reached behind him to the baseball bat strapped to his back. Only a makeshift weapon, no match for the fangs and agility of wolves, but running would leave his back exposed. The wolves circled John, creating an inescapable perimeter, and he knew the next few seconds may be his last.

Just as the wolves were poised to strike, a loud BOOM rang out from the rest stop. Before John could react, two more BOOMS rang out. John fell on the ground prostrate, just in time to see two of the wolves rushing towards the woods. The large alpha let out a loud yelp and

fell to the ground, dead, now staining the snow red.

After a minute or so, John stood up straight, hand lifted high in surrender. He turned around to see three men approaching him.

"Hey stranger! Your ass trying to become wolf chow?" one of the three men called, the largest of the three. John could make out a ski mask and a large sniper rifle in the man's hand, still steaming from his well aimed shot. "We have to get inside, now! That shot will bring every wolf in the area here." *Potential Chapter 2*

John wasn't sure what to make of his savior. He was muscular with a large, unruly beard, probably ex-military judging by the precision of his shot.

"What's your name, friend?" he shouted through the gale, hand extended in greeting.

"John... John Stevens. And who do I have to thank for saving me from becoming dinner?"

"Francis Barter...Frank if you please. Now let's get a move back to safety. This storm is getting worse by the second."

Frank motioned back to the rest stop to the other two men, who quickly started heading back, guns still drawn, looking for any other potential threats. John followed closely behind, still shaken up from the attack. He glanced back toward where the alpha wolf laid to find the carcass had already been blanketed in white. There was something uneasy about Frank that John couldn't quite pinpoint. Was it his rushed welcoming of John into his hovel, his southern drawl, or perhaps it was the lack of human interaction John had had for the past three lonesome weeks. Whatever it was, John knew his options were limited, and his growling stomach objected to anything else other than a chance at food.

They reached the rest stop, but he didn't see any signs that other people occupied the building besides Frank and his two comrades. A large, rusted chain held the doors closed. "What could they be keeping out?" John pondered as Frank retrieved a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. "Or what could they be keeping in?"

The warmth received John like a cozy blanket as Frank motioned him inside. Thoughts flooded John's head of his past; cold winters when he and Linns would hold each other close in front of the fire. There was something to say about the feeling of coming in from the chill of winter to a warm home. Those long nights in front of the glowing logs, arms around Linns, warmed John's soul. A frosty tear fell from John's eye as he came back to reality.

John could tell Frank and his company had been in this rest stop for quite some time. There were crates on either side of the room labeled with things like "Perishables" and "Ammunition". Wolf skins layered the walls like trophies, and an american flag was folded and stored in a glass case. Frank was walking around checking the boxes, searching diligently for something.

"Ah! Here it is!" Frank brought out a large map of the United States, The areas around New York and Philadelphia had been marked with different colored circles. "Now, John, tell me where you're from." He motioned towards the map, almost with a certain desperation.

"Just north of New York City, right around here."

"New York," Frank's eyes widened in excitement, "So you must be a scout of some kind sent to look for other survivors. We were headed that way, heard there are thousands of survivors there!" The other two men leaned in eagerly, awaiting John's hopeful reply.

"Frank i'm sorry, but I scoured almost every inch of the city for the past three weeks.

There's no one left. Not a single soul. Just the frozen remains of buildings and the echo of your own voice." John had noticed Frank mark the map on New York City with a red circle.

"What are those markings all over the map? Some kind of a code?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Frank sank down in a chair with a despondency in his eyes, "The red circles mean no one living, a dead end. The green circles mean food, places we can travel to and from and stock up food. The blue circles are deserted army bases, for ammunition when we run low." He patted the rifle propped next to his chair. "In times like these, as you have learned the hard way, you can't ever be too close to your gun. It's the one thing that separates us from the beasts. This is their world now, John, and you can become bear or wolf grub before you turn around twice."

"How long have you been here at this rest stop?" John asked.

"Longer than I would have liked to be. We've been making our way from Harrisburg, and were planning on seeking relief in New York until now. We found our way here, and decided to make camp for a couple of days until the blizzard settled. As you probably know firsthand, it did not settle. In fact we've been holed up here for the past week. I'm surprised you weren't a human popsicle by the time the wolves got to you." Frank folded up the map and started pacing back and forth, mumbling to himself as he did.

"Can I really trust this guy?" John thought to himself, "He did save me from certain death, and... well... I could use the protection on the way to Detroit. Still, there's something I just can't pin on this guy."

"Frank listen I-"

"We need to head West!" Frank cut John off before he could get a word in. "There's a few

food storages we left back in Cleveland a few weeks ago. No telling if there are more people there, we left as soon as the storm hit, no time to look for anyone. If anything, it beats staying here. I can't speak for you John, but if I were you I'd come with us, at least until we're in Cleveland. Isolation is as bad for a man's life as it is for his sanity these days."

"Sure, I could use the safety, as well as the company. I'm in no state to go it alone out there anyways. When do we leave?"

"First thing in the morning, when the sun peeks over the horizon. Thank God we can still see that. Now let's get some dinner and rest, we'll need it tomorrow. No signs that Mother Nature is going to get any easier out there."

After dinner, which consisted of stale bread and a few pieces of fruit, John wrapped himself in an extra sleeping bag Frank had, pulling the end of it close to himself, as if to block out the dim, white world. Thoughts ran through his mind in the eery silence. Making pancakes with Elly early on a warm Saturday morning. She liked to try and flip one or two, always leaving a mess on the counter, but John didn't mind. Fall when the leaves would crunch under his shoes while on a family hike at the local reserve. A life so perfect, so indescribably beautiful that it seemed nothing could change it. Then the cold, the sheer panic in people's faces as they flooded the streets, the resounding crack of the glaciers as they sprang from below like an icy eruption.

Detroit. He had to get to Detroit. There was a refuge there, he knew there had to be. *Who knows how old those words on the mileage signs were. Cleveland is on the way, but how will we ever even make it there, we'll be buried in snow before we make it a mile.* As his thoughts whirled about like a psychological hurricane, John sank into sleep, exhausted.

John woke the next morning to find Frank packing up rations and ammunition into a large, military grade backpack.

“What time is it?” asked John, “How long have I been out?”

“8:30 a.m.” Frank said as he zipped up his backpack, “You were in and out most of the night, mumbling something about your family, seemed like nightmares, didn’t want to disturb your rest.”

John got up and walked over to the window, still groggy, and noticed it had stopped snowing. “Look! Can you believe it Frank, the snow’s stopped.” John started to open the door to the rest stop when Frank grabbed his shoulder.

“John stop! Just because the weather’s eased up doesn’t mean you won’t get frostbite in an instant. Here.” Frank handed John a thermal shirt and pants, “Put these on under your clothes and parka. We’ll head out in the next few minutes, got to take advantage of the good weather.” As John slipped on the layers Frank handed him a small handgun. “It’s time that you had better protection than that old bat of yours.” John holstered the pistol, but kept his bat at his side. Frank put on his ski mask, walked towards the door, and motioned to the others. “Alright, let’s go! We need to leave while the weather is still on our side. We’ll keep traveling west until we hit Pittsburgh, then make our way north to Cleveland. Hopefully we can find a few small towns in between to restock and rest, maybe even come across some transportation.” Frank opened the front door, and John passed through the warm veil into the harsh cold that awaited them.

A cold so intense that John had forgotten how the bite felt, but it had not forgotten him, the wind howling in his face. “We need to move quickly, but stay together,” shouted Frank

against the screeching gale. “We’ll stay to the highway as long as we can, then journey off and find shelter after a while. Our chances of survival fall with each passing hour.”

After an hour or so of hiking through the snow, the wind had died down to a small breeze, making it possible to communicate. John trudged along next to Frank in the snow, his boots and pants covered with a fresh layer with each step. He thought now would be a chance to learn more about Frank.

“So Frank, I assume by your marksman skills you’re in the military?”

Frank stared ahead into the distance, as if stuck in thought. “I was in the military John, yes, but I’d say everyone is ex-military now, considering there’s no military to be in anymore.”

“Army, Marines, Air Force? I’m assuming you were a sniper?”

“Marines, two tours in Iraq, and nothing to show for it. Fifteen confirmed kills, and a serious case of PTSD for a while as a reward. Sniping isn’t like some damn Call of Duty game that kids play these days, John. It’s a whole ‘nother world, and it’s not a pretty one. The only thing I’m thankful for is the skills it gave me to survive in this new world of ours.”