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### **Frozen Solitude**

His aching feet were imploring for him to stop but this was out of the question. His frantic breath crashed against the silent surroundings but still he ran without looking back; the determination in his eyes was evident and no one would catch him. He was young, it was easy to tell as his skin was still tender under the dry and chipped parts from the constant exposure to a most bitter cold, his eyes were energetic and his hair was full grown with a bright light brown color.

He wore a torn coat over his fatigues and a coonskin cap on his head; his feet were shielded from the bitter cold by a pair of heavy boots but, by the time, they were probably covered in blood coming from the blisters between his toes. His lungs hurt with every gasp he took, his arms were swatting wildly in front of him as he pushed aside branches blocking his way.

He looked around quickly as though keeping an eye for anyone but, with such desperation, it was hardly effective. Suddenly, his feet collapsed; he fell to the ground, crashing chin first into a combination of snow, branches, rocks and dried leaves from months past. He closed his eyes in pain and tried to get up, if he stayed a minute too long, he wouldn't have the strength to get up for good.

After the shooting pain rushed through his jaw, neck and skull, he looked down into a small pool of blood and began to cry.

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He shook his head and screamed *never!* With newfound determination and seemingly inhuman power coursing through every fiber of his body, he got up and ran again. This time, he did look back with care but found nothing; that was good.

He dashed for another hundred yards before a treacherous rock, hidden beneath a thick blanket of the white powder, rendered his right foot useless and, once more, he painfully fell to the frigid ground. Powerful exhalations of frustration followed as he crawled but the frozen and pointy branches pierced through his already damaged coat and begin to slowly pierce the still tender skin of his elbows. With a final gasp, he grabbed a large rock ahead of him, pulled himself up and then, after discovering a small trench, rolled to a halt at the lowest part of his newfound shelter.

It was now safe enough for him to cry. He didn't want to do anything else but let out his fears and frustrations; he leaned his head against his rifle and let the tears roll down his face.

He looked up and the cold winter air dried the tears, causing him to blink rapidly. He had to squint to diminish the great discomfort perpetrated by the dryness around his eyes. No matter how horrific the pain in his feet or how frightening the pursuit was, the feeling of solitude calmed him down.

"HA!"

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He quickly turned around and aimed at the coming voice. His breath was racing, his heart was pounding and his hands shook nervously.

Nothing.

"What?" Now the voice came from his right. Before, it had been heard on his left.

He aimed again to where he thought the voice was heard but nothing could be seen. His vision was already too damaged from the constant battering coming from the sun rays being reflected on the large blanket of snow around him. He looked back at the forest but there was no movement, yet he was sure he had heard a voice. Such confusion sent feelings of surrender through his body and he placed his rifle next to him, quietly sobbing as he did so. He leaned back against the bitterly cold snow and looked around; certainly if anyone was nearby, he would be dead soon.

But there was no one around.

"HA! You are not so tough anymore, are you?" This voice seemed evil; it seemed potent and confident, strangely familiar though he did not have the slightest clue where he had heard it. "C'mon, fire your gun!"

He exhaled and dried a tear coming from his eyes.

"At what?" He said in a frail tone of voice. "There's nothing around."

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Silence again. It couldn't be; what was this voice?

"Are you scared?" He turned around and aimed in front of him. This was definitely a human voice and not a noise he could've confused.

Frightened, weak and confused, he leaned his head forward and began to pray. Only his incomprehensible mumble could be picked out against the heavy winds which came in from the vast horizon ahead of him. He had entrenched himself in a deep hole in the ground which separated a thick forest from the frozen lake in front; if anyone would come, he would do it with the aid of hundreds of trees to provide camouflage.

"HA! I laugh at you, you puny hypocrite!" The voice exclaimed loudly. This startled him and he bit his lips, continuing to pray desperately. He had run out tears to cry but the yearning was still inside. "One little prayer won't save you from what you have done!"

In a burst of rage he grabbed the rifle, cocked and aimed.

"Do it! DO IT! Do it and see how the enemies around you all know where you are!" The voice was clearly enjoying this and it was evident in his jester like tone. "This is the way to end it, c'mon!"

His frail arms began to lose strength until the rifle was again landed in the snow. He clinched his fists against his forehead and closed his eyes with such pressure than tiny white

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dots appeared in the blackness ahead of him. He opened them and exhaled with determination.

"Who are you?" He said in a weakened voice.

A humorous exhalation followed.

"Does it really matter?"

"Are you here to...?" He paused and cursed to himself, "Are you here to kill me?"

"You still haven't gotten it, have you?" The voice quickly replied, "There's no one around. You ran for so long they're miles away."

"Then who the fuck are you?!" He punched the snow and pulled his legs closed to him, turning his body into a ball. It seemed childish and he was embarrassed but this was the only way he felt slightly secure.

"C'mon man," The voice replied after laughing, "It really doesn't matter. But, if you want, you can call me Hank." He looked up towards the direction of the voice and gazed with anger and hatred then shook his head and looked back down.

"Fine, then you can call me Elizabeth," Hank replied. "But I prefer Hank."

"Hank..." he uttered with disgust, "Who the fuck are you, Hank?"

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"You really don't get it," He replied seriously. To the young man's confusion, he heard as Hank walked next to him and sat down but he still saw nothing.

"Dear Lord..." He began to say but was, once again, interrupted by his newfound companion.

"Stop being such a hypocrite and I'm being dead serious about it, Jonah," Instantly, the battered man looked up. "What? Are you impressed that I know your middle name, Andrew Jonah Smithson?"

"Why?" Andrew breathed deep and shrugged his lips in anger. "Why are you doing this?"

"It's actually quite simple, but I'm not just going to tell you, am I? That's too easy. He replied. "Wouldn't it be boring?"

"Why do you say I'm a hypocrite?"

"HA!" The jester voice returned after it having a subtle and serious tone, "Please! Look at what you have in your arms! You have spent your life, as young as it may be, hunting those who believe other things, were born different or just look a bit odd! You and your peers, out of whom no one is alive may I remind you, have pillaged towns, raped women and devastated people far beyond any possible recovery and you think a disgusting prayer in moments of desperation will save you?"

"I didn't rape anyone..." He said, looking straight ahead with his red and tearful eyes.

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"But did you stop them?! Did you do anything when you heard those cries for help, when they locked their eyes into yours and begged for the rest to stop? No!"

"What is that you want?"

"You have to find that answer, not me."

"But you are here, so tell me!" Andrew replied in desperation with a shrieking scream.

"If they catch you, what is the worst that could happen to you?" Hank replied with a quick change in subject. "What do you think is the worse that could happen?"

He shook his head and turned his back on the direction of the voice. He realized this was of no use but still chose to do so as a last attempt to drive the mysterious voice away. As expected, it was useless, for he heard the mocking laughter come from Hank and it strangely shifted directions. Hank was now facing him.

"I die." He said.

"Exactly," Hank was no longer mocking the young man. "Now, is that really the worst thing that can happen? I ask you again."

"What do you m...?"

"Don't interrupt me," He replied. "Is this really the best thing you can go through? Will you live the rest of your days, if it is that you get to survive, with peace inside yourself? Will

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your heart remain calm in the darkness of the night when your mind decides to bring the darkest of memories and play them back with such detail, you think you're reliving them?"

Andrew looked up at Hank, though he did not see him.

"That got you thinking, didn't it?"

"Are you saying I kill myself?" He said nervously.

"No." Hank's voice was now a whisper. "Your past, it can't be erased. Your future is only but a day a way, a second away, and that future is for you to decide. The blood on your feet, keeping them warm while wrecking your nerves, the cramps on your muscles, and the pain on your shoulders, all of that you went through to be here."

Silence followed for a mere moment.

"Is it all worth it?" Hank said. "We all make mistakes, some more than others and it is up to you decide. And you better hurry, because they're getting close."

The young soldier looked down at the snow beneath him. He then looked up and realized Hank was already gone.