

# 1

**O**ne eye open, the other frozen shut. He knows what an eye is, but that other “I” remains a mystery. Mind scooped out and left in ice. Words are hunted, slowly return. Blue sky, that’s what he sees. The sun twinkling like a diamond. Tundra, there’s another recalled word. Packed snow on all sides as if the world succumbed to white. The air a powerful whistle. A breeze blows, not a friend but a penance. It passes right through and chills to the core, this enemy wind. Limbs atrophied, no idea when they last moved. Boil of a sun thaws and prickles. Tiny spiders swinging from leg hairs, biting into flesh. He cries out but there is no sound. For it feels like he hasn’t spoken in centuries.

Back of throat tastes of metal. Blood trapped in phlegm. A cough sends a splatter of red against the stark land, a streak in the form of a smile. When was the last time he ate? His stomach growls in agony, a good sign. Organs working, or at least attempting to work. His one eye scans to the left and the right, no sign of anyone, not even an animal. No chance for a savior or sustenance.

He gums his jaw, the first inkling of movement. Aware of his scraggily beard coated in frost. Crystals spiral from his chin, collect in his lap. Now he sees his hands, luckily in gloves except they are a thin brown leather, rather useless. Bones crack as he maneuvers to remove the gloves. Fingers tremble once hit with fresh air and numbness subsides. Massages his legs, gets

the blood flowing, an injection of life. The spiders accelerate and then relent, toes wiggle, and he sits up. Around his neck rests a notebook and a fountain pen, the tip crusted in flakes. He feels an object in a front pocket and pulls out a silver compact mirror, the back embroidered with floral patterns, ladylike. *This is not my mirror*, he decides, but then has a more important realization. *Who am I?* With trembling hands, he brings the mirror up to his face for a glance.

The reflection of a stranger. All beard save for some features that emerge. A bulbous but authoritative nose, green eye flecked with gold, a mane of dark hair cascading to his shoulders. Handsome in a grizzled way. Shades of a bear in the roundness of his cheeks and a wolf in his stare.

“I am...,” his lips try to say, but there is no answer. Often one can wake from a dream and the dream seems real for a moment, but a sense of self never vanishes. Whoever he was has been long gone, unlikely to return anytime soon. At least while he remains freezing in the wilderness.

*I must make it out of here.*

It’s relieving that he thinks of himself as an “I”. Whoever he is, he *is* someone. A mother birthed and fed him from her breast. A father taught him...taught him what exactly? Survival skills? How to hunt? If he had a father worth his while, he’d know how to do this.

And then, a caterwauling from the depths of his soul, a fawn-in-distress call that plants a trap for curious predators. He knows this sound well, meaning he’s lured prey before. His daddy schooled him like a good man should.

The waiting game. Another call erupts, a coyote’s howl this time. He can recognize the difference. Then it comes to him that he needs to know what to do should an animal appear. He pats down his pockets, no weapon but his fists. And then, the clinking of sharp nails against the

ice sheet. A majestic wolf, eyes like the sky, shimmering coat the color of clouds. Its charcoal nose twitches; the blood he hacked up in plain sight. He and the wolf lock into a dueling stare, neither wanting to be the first to flinch. A vision of death with baring teeth, or the start of his new life if victorious. The wolf doesn't give him a chance to contemplate, lunging with a mouth full of saliva. He catches it in a brutal embrace and becomes knocked off his heels, slamming his back against the hard ground. They skitter down a slick snowcap, snapping at one another like angry lovers. The wolf is relentless, a worthy opponent, a test of wills. He gets the beast in a headlock, trying to crack its neck, but the wolf is too slippery. Breath fumes from other kills circle into his nostrils—this wolf has never lost a battle before. Blood splashes, no clue which of them has been wounded. They spin in the snow like a tornado. He makes a fist, jams it in the wolf's mouth. Teeth marks scrape against his knuckles as he rams his fist farther down the wolf's throat. The wolf heaves, chokes, attempting to chew off his hand but its strategy is futile. It has only come across other animals, never a human mind that can think steps ahead.

Now he attempts a headlock again with his left arm, squeezing off circulation. The wolf lets out a whimper that reverberates through his wrist. They lock into a dueling stare again, except this time he does not see the many kills of the wolf through its gaze. He visualizes its sadness, its inevitable end. And then, the sound of a heavy branch snapping, the wolf's neck broken, his blood-soaked fist removed from the back of its throat. Its dead tongue lolling out of its mouth against the icy bed. He pets its beautiful coat, this formidable foe, now a present wrapped with a bow. Delectable to quench his all-consuming hunger.

He needs the clearest block of ice he can find. Using the wolf's teeth to carve a fine translucent round piece, he creates a magnifying glass. He rubs the dirt away and keeps rubbing until enough moisture flecks off. There's a bed of whittled grass at the slope he and wolf ended

up in, and he holds the ice over the dry grass, propping it against two logs until a brilliant rainbow prism shoots through and ignites a fire. He rips off all the breakable branches he can locate to stoke the flames. While it continues to spread, he procures a rock to blunt out the wolf's teeth, then uses them for the painstaking task of skinning the fur. He does it carefully so a semblance of a coat remains, which he dips into a nearby brook to wash away any lingering blood and sinew. The sun has mostly dipped behind the mountains and he wears the wolf's coat to mask the chill, then roasts its carcass over the roaring fire, breaking off legs and gnawing while the true flesh still cooks.

The meat is a godsend to his empty stomach and also an immediate poison that his body rejects by throwing up. But he sucks on some ice and the queasiness diminishes. By the time it's fully cooked, darkness reigns and he feels more like a shell than anyone has before. Except with each chew, this lessens and soon he becomes human again. But the loneliness isn't as easy to fight off. There are souls that feel lonely, he assumes, but at least they have themselves for company. They can rely on memories to help them through cold nights. He searches his mind for a wisp of the past, any nugget, wading through a never-ending sea. The horizon seemingly attainable, but with every stroke just as far away. He'd cry but the tears are frozen in his ducts, and his one eye still sealed shut.

When enough of the wolf has been eaten so his belly distends like a newly pregnant woman, he feeds the fire with more broken limbs and curls up to its warmth, his only confident in this harsh wilderness, possibly his only companion forever—a lifetime of attempting to be caressed by flames and nothing more. He wraps himself tightly in the wolf's fur, hoping that when he wakes again he'll know who he is. The nightmare vanished along with the sun rising like a bride's pretty little hand on his grizzled cheek.

