

“Bedtime Story”

By Lauren Rivers

No matter how well the inhabitants of Coldhaven insulated their bodies from the bitter chill that marked every day, it always seemed that little hints of it found their way through even the greatest efforts at protection. Adjusting his scarf for the fortieth time it seemed that no matter how often he sealed one crack in his thermal armor the wind would find another. Soon it would not matter once he was safely inside the family home.

With a weary paw he pulled open the front door, sliding inside quickly so as not to allow the heat to escape. Still wearing his thick coat from a full day of working on maintaining the city’s eternally active heating system he was surprised to discover his wife still up with their daughter in the middle of the night. Offering a warm smile, he turned towards his youngest child. “And what are YOU doing up, young lady?” he asked her.

Answering on her behalf, her mother offered a wry grin. “Emily wouldn’t go to bed until her father came home. She said that she couldn’t sleep until all of us were together once more.”

“Is that so?” he asked her.

Clutching her favorite (and in fact only) doll, she avoided looking him straight in the eye as she knew she was up past her bedtime. It was a game with her, trying to negotiate with her mother to stay up until daddy came home. Tonight it would appear she had won, though the price of her victory was often a stern but loving admonishment from her father. “Yes, daddy.”

“You know how important it is that you get your sleep. The doctor says you need all your strength to be sure you grow up like your brother.” Joe smiled at her, touching her forehead gently. “Where is Lucas, anyway?”

“His sister was keeping him up. I told him to go sleep in our bed since I knew it would be a while before either of you two followed suit,” she said.

Joe pressed a paw to his chest in mock offense. “And just what are you implying?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, with an expression that clearly indicated she was well used to this sort of behavior from the other half of her family. “Just that Emily is her father’s daughter.”

“Uh huh,” he said.

Rising from her seat at the kitchen table, she planted a gentle lick on her husband’s cheek, placing her paws in her robe pockets. “Don’t stay up too late. You’ve got a lot of things to fix out there.” Saying nothing further, she walked through the door to the only other room in their home and closed the door. Soon after, the lights went out, leaving Joe and Emily alone in the kitchen that doubled as their children’s bedroom.

Joe shed his jacket on the back of the chair, the gentle steam from the small vent heating their home to a reasonable temperature. It was nowhere near as good as the larger quarters with much more insulation between the inside and the chill wind that permanently seemed to cut its way through the streets of their circular city. Nevertheless,

it was comfortable, and as long as one didn't leave the door open any longer than necessary, it was even pleasant.

Turning the chair around so he could lean on the backrest, he planted his muzzle atop his crossed arms and looked at his daughter. "What am I going to do with you?" he asked, not expecting an answer. "Your mother works hard to make sure we have a nice home and she needs you to go to bed when she tells you to."

"I know," Emily said, chastised. "But I wanted to see you." Setting her doll aside she met her father's eyes in an obvious attempt to avoid the fatherly lecture that usually came as a result of her being up past her bedtime.

"That's no excuse," he said, not taking the bait. "Your mother stands in the ration lines to get the food we eat and she works hard to make sure this family can have a nice place to stay so be a good girl and do as she says."

"Yes, daddy," she replied, defeated. "But since we're up anyway, can I have a story?"

"A story?" he asked, repeating the question. After a long day Joe was tired, but despite his weariness he could never decline a request from his daughter, especially not when she was being so adorable. Withholding his answer for a few moments so as not to appear to be giving in too easily, he relented. "All right, but just one, and you have to go to bed when I'm finished." He emphasized the point with a single claw held up in the air.

The young polar bear nodded excitedly, sitting up with her legs tucked underneath herself and the blanket wrapped around her chest. Collecting her doll from its place on the sofa where she had left it, she looked at her father expectantly.

Joe sat up slightly and made a face as if he was thinking. "What story would you like to hear?" Of course he already knew the answer, but it was part of the game they played to stretch out the moment as long as possible. Both Joe and Emily cherished every moment they had together, knowing that they were far too few for anyone's liking.

"Tell me the one about Coldhaven," she said.

"That one again?" he asked. "I've told you that story dozens of times." Her ears perked as he shrugged. "Wouldn't you rather have a different one?" He shrugged. "What about the one about the winter when we almost didn't have a harvest?"

Emily shook her head. "No. I want to hear the one about us. About how the city saved us."

Joe nodded. "Okay." He threw his paws up in surrender. "But if you want me to tell that one, I'm going to need some supplies." He got up and walked to the small kitchen area, where he prepared a single cup of coffee on the small burner. Strictly speaking it was little more than brown water, but it was warm and it smelled like hazelnuts, so it was close enough. Once he had finished preparing his beverage he turned once more towards his young daughter and smiled. "All right. Now I'm ready."

In response she sat up a little bit straighter, and it was times like these he almost forgot her illness. Wiping the momentary sadness from his face, he smiled, with Emily apparently not noticing her father's ever so brief lapse in his courageous façade. "Tell me the story."

"A long time ago, people lived all over the world. They were in cold places, hot places, and places that were more water than land. They had machines that would take them from one point to another, and they had so many of them that they would clog up

the paths they used to carry people to their destinations.” He gestured with his paws in the way she always liked, providing her with a bit of a performance.

His daughter listened with rapt attention, always enjoying the tale no matter how many times he told it. Perhaps it was because it was one of the few times they got to be alone together, or maybe she just liked his company. Whatever the reason, it always did them both good to participate. He would tell the story, and she would listen and interject at the right moments. For with them it was not simply a father entertaining his daughter, but a shared experience.

“They even had machines that could soar through the sky.” He had only seen pictures of them, but from what he knew they were yet another way for people to travel great distances, far further than their fastest balloon. To Joe they looked uncomfortable and cramped, especially for a polar bear like himself. But the curiosity towards the experience was undeniable, having looked up more than once to watch the salvage teams head out into the frozen wasteland in search of supplies.

Leaning towards her again, he grew quiet. “One day the sky darkened, and snow began to fall.”

With both paws Emily clutched her doll ever tighter. Joe blew out all of the candles around them except one, creating a mood of ominous tension. He held it in front of his face for a moment. Her breath grew tense as she awaited what surely came next.

Few still alive had witnessed what happened, and fewer still spoke about it. The trauma of the event seemed to touch any survivors long after the world froze into a ball of ice and snow. Though no one knew the true cause of the disaster, whatever it was had covered the world, and for over forty years had never let it go, not even once.

“Daddy,” Emily said, clutching the blanket tighter. “Andre’s scared.”

Smiling gently, he nodded. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. The scary part doesn’t last long.” He paused a moment as she steeled herself once more, and continued. “Snow fell for days. Harder and harder, it kept falling with no end in sight. Though the people fought against it they were no match for the constant onslaught.” Joe posed heroically, as if he was fighting an entire blizzard by himself.

His daughter brightened at this. No doubt if anyone asked she would insist her father could fight an arctic storm all by himself. Though Joe never claimed to be anything more than a father and a solid member of the maintenance team, to his daughter he was unstoppable.

“You can do it, daddy,” she told him.

Joe chuckled. “I wasn’t actually there, sweetheart.”

“I know, but I bet if you had been things would have been a lot different.”

“Do you want me to tell the story, or what?” he asked.

Emily nodded.

“Okay then.” He resumed his heroic pose. “Despite their best efforts, it was clear after a while they were fighting a losing battle. So they developed a plan.” His eyes grew wide and he held up a single claw as if inspired by something. “They would build a city to protect as many people as they could from the coming disaster.”

The young ursine girl straightened up. “That’s Coldhaven, isn’t it?”

“That’s exactly right.” He nodded. “Coldhaven was built as a sanctuary to keep people safe.” He grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around himself, pretending to shiver. In reality this was not much of a stretch, as even though the walls of their small home

blocked the wind and the interior was heated by the city's steam it did not completely protect them from the chill. Emphasizing the cold for his daughter's benefit, he rubbed his arms with his large paws and pretended to be miserable. "The survivors of the initial disaster gathered together pleading for salvation. They knew that there was only a short time before the weather would become unsurvivable."

Accounts of this period of time were rare, with most of those alive during these events dying either in the initial disaster or from the subsequent efforts of the various nations to find ways to either fight or survive the effects. Some nations tried to save their populations from the bitter cold while others fell into anarchy. Still others abandoned their homes in search of someplace that had managed to escape the shift in weather.

No matter what course they chose, few were fortunate enough to escape the harsh and unforgiving cold.

"With their resources dwindling and limited options remaining, those who had escaped the initial cold had to act quickly. They just needed one more thing." Joe gave his daughter a knowing smile.

Emily brightened. "A signal," she declared, beaming.

"There's my smart girl." Joe looked up as if he could see something shining brightly in the sky above. "They heard the call coming from the city, offering safety and salvation. A radio signal beckoned to them, telling anyone who could hear it to follow." He held his paw to his ear, pretending to listen. "So they gathered everything they could and set out on the long journey to the source of the transmission. Many of them died. Some abandoned the group, losing faith that there was anything waiting for them at the other end, choosing to try to survive somewhere along the way. But a few of them made their way onward, putting all of their hopes on whatever they would find."

"That was grandma and grandpa, wasn't it?" the young polar bear asked.

"Yes, it was. They were younger then, and I hadn't even been born yet," Joe explained. "But they were determined to survive, and with the rest of their group walked the entire distance from their home to the coordinates listed in the message." He rocked his shoulders to pantomime walking, and spread his paws wide as he spoke about the journey. "It was a long trip in harsh conditions. But they stayed together, battling the elements on their long journey, never giving up. No matter how hard it came, they knew their only chance lay in the promise of the signal."

Emily clutched her doll closely. Sitting on her knees, it was moments like this he almost forgot her illness. Smiling brightly, hanging on his every word, it was these all too rare moments for which he sacrificed so much to keep her strong and healthy. He fought back the well of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him and reached forward to embrace his daughter in an all encompassing hug.

"Is everything okay, daddy?" she asked.

"Yeah, kiddo. Everything's fine. I just needed to hold you for a moment." He petted her gently on the head and continued. "You know daddy loves you, right?"

Emily touched her paw to her chest. "With all my heart."

Joe mimicked the gesture and the two touched paws together. "Always." He tilted his head. "Now where was I?" he asked. "Ah yes." He held his paw level above his eyes, pretending to shield himself from the bitter elements. "They arrived at the city, which stood tall in the frozen landscape, visible for miles in all directions. At last their prayers would be answered, or so they hoped."

She leaned closer, listening for every word. Although he had told her the story dozens of times, every time she pretended at least for him, that it was the first. “What did grandpa and grandma find?”

Joe leaned forward and tilted his head in contemplation. “Depends on who you ask. Some people say it was little more than the bare bones in those days. Others insist it was almost as big as it is now, but to your grandma and grandpa this place was paradise. Oh, of course it had its flaws, every place does. The point is, it provided them what it promised, a warm place to stay and a promise of a future, if they could survive the bitter cold.” He shrugged. “Now, the city had the benefit of a lot of natural resources. One of the reasons they built this place here was the large amounts of fuel sources underneath the surface. It came in handy too, as they burned it to push back the chill which constantly battered the city from all directions. Back in those days, it was even colder than it is now. The earth was freezing, and the only thing that was keeping it from taking the city was the flame in its center.”

Burning perpetually in the core of Coldhaven, the massive furnace that was its signature element stood tall providing heat and power to the circular city. Kept running at all times it was the sole line of defense between the inhabitants and the frozen wasteland that encompassed the rest of the world. In the early days the city fought to harvest enough fuel to keep it operational at the level demanded. With the punishing cold constantly threatening to extinguish the last city on Earth, it was a desperate struggle.

“Your grandpa was one of the first members of the burn team. His job was to keep the Candle running, doing his best to keep the heat flowing through the rest of the city,” he said.

“Because the people needed him,” she replied.

“That’s right, kiddo. Your grandpa had to keep the city warm no matter what. In the early days after the disaster, the cold roamed the planet like a wrathful storm. Some parts froze immediately, while others took weeks or months before the cold took them. No matter where you were it was getting colder, and sooner or later it would come after Coldhaven.” Joe got silent and lowered his muzzle.

Emily lowered her doll from her chest. “So they started gathering.”

“Yes. They gathered materials from beneath the city and prepared the storage facilities. They loaded them with as much fuel and supplies as they could, but they were running out of time. You see, they had a balloon or two but back then they weren’t worried about exploring like the teams do now, picking up salvage and mapping the ice around the city. They were doing everything they could to protect Coldhaven and her people. They scouted for supplies and searched for any travelers that survived the global disaster.

“At first they found many, more and more came back to the city thankful for the reprieve, however brief it might be. Your grandma was on the other end, keeping in touch with the earliest expeditions via radio.”

His young daughter pulled the blankets tighter around herself. “The cold was on its way.”

“That’s right. While they already knew it had gotten colder, the worst was yet to come. While on an excursion to bring back more refugees one group told of a snowstorm they had barely escaped, which froze an entire city in a day and a half. Sending their only other balloon to verify, what they saw shocked them. A massive storm, one that

crossed the entire horizon, moved across the frozen landscape. And it was headed right here.”

“What did they do?” she asked.

Joe took on his best brave face. “They knew they were operating on borrowed time. They kept up the efforts to store fuel and gather resources, hardening the city against the cold they knew was coming. Powerless to prevent it, they did what they could to prepare for the worst.” The city was designed to handle the cold, but even they had never anticipated something as all consuming as this. The Candle could generate impressive amounts of heat, but whether it could withstand the prolonged punishment the storm would unleash was far from a certainty. The engineers had built it well, with the central core and residential ring prepared should they have to retreat from the outer layers, but should the storm take the temperatures down low enough to snuff out the flame that burned at the city’s core, no power on the planet would be enough to get it going again. “The balloons kept bringing people back as long as they could, but no matter how fast they moved they knew that it was not fast enough.”

The massive cold front marched towards the city, wiping out any life that was not already someplace safe. Those who had chosen to stick it out or refused to leave, or anyone caught out in the open would soon find themselves a permanent addition to the landscape. Those that had made it to the city felt little comfort, as many feared they had simply delayed the inevitable.

“With time running out, the Governor ordered the burn team to set the furnace to its highest setting. Round the clock they fueled the flames within it, but whether it would be enough, they could only guess. Desperately your grandpa filled the furnace with fuel, but the more he used, the faster it depleted. The storm struck a few weeks after they had first received news of its existence, and it punished the people of Coldhaven with a powerful will.”

Emily had tucked her blanket over herself like a tent, she and her doll ensconced safely within its protection. Joe placed his paw just beside it, and after a moment hers gingerly emerged to take his.

“The storm was brutal, with every moment seeming like it might be the one that broke the city. Steam vents shut down and equipment failed, forcing the outer ring to be abandoned. But your grandpa could do little else, as they were already burning their fuel as hard as she would go. All he could do was stretch out their supply as long as possible. Now that the massive cold had settled upon us he could not gather more until it had passed, as the heat in the lower levels were simply unsurvivable.

“The cold barreled down on us for weeks, with no end in sight. Rations were passed out to try to stretch our food supply as far as it would go, but as the storm moved into the fourth week, the cold forced us to close ranks even more, with the residential ring becoming barely habitable. Everyone retreated to the central core, where the formerly unbearable heat soon became our last chance to weather the storm.”

“But grandpa didn’t give up,” Emily said.

“No, he didn’t,” Joe confirmed. “The city was running out of food, fuel, and everything else. If the storm lasted much longer there wouldn’t be anything left but ice. Our people huddled together and prayed, hoping that this was not the end. Your grandpa stayed at the Candle, burning everything he could to keep it going throughout the long

days and colder nights.” He closed his eyes as he remembered his mother telling him this story as a cub, to honor his father and his valiant struggle.

Peering out from underneath the blanket, Emily clutched his paw tighter. “But no matter what the storm threw at us, the Candle never went out.”

Taking a deep breath, Joe continued. “Coldhaven’s first trial was also proving to be one of its most dangerous. Barely operational, the city stood against the cold for the longest and deadliest storm seen since the disaster began. But finally, after five long weeks, the storm broke. People emerged and looked up at the sky, clear for the first time since they could remember. The city warmed, and in time they were able to repair the damage and make their way back into the outer rings.” He paused briefly. “And ever since that day, they have kept the Candle burning.” With a gentle sigh of relief, he smiled. “And with that, young lady, our agreement is complete. Time for bed.”

“But Andre isn’t tired,” she said, negotiating as she always did, though they both knew that the result was inevitable.

“To bed,” he said, pointing towards her pillow with finality. “There will be more stories tomorrow.”

She gave one last huff of protest, and then covered herself with her sheets. “You promise?”

“I promise.” Joe walked over and planted a gentle kiss on her forehead. “I love you kiddo.”

“Love you too, dad.”

Taking off his coat, he turned towards the door remembering that his space on the bed was occupied by his other child, Lucas. Removing his boots and setting them by the door, he tossed his coat onto the chair and gently pressed up against his daughter. Wrapped in her blanket, she stirred just enough to allow him onto the couch, already fast asleep. Kissing her on the cheek, he closed his eyes and began to dream.