

CHAPTER ONE

Storm Front

46 YEARS LATER

Mornings always came too early for Joe's liking. With every sunrise it seemed to get harder to haul his bones out of bed, or maybe it was just the fact that it was the only time of the day he didn't feel the cold. With a grunt of protest he unwillingly removed the covers feeling the chill that always pierced his fur every day when the morning bell went off. Searching for his robe he wrapped it around himself before making his way down what could barely be called a hallway.

The Kennedy home was a small makeshift structure made mostly of metal welded onto a frame that blocked the wind but did little else. The only heat was primarily generated by the coal burning oven in the kitchen which radiated heat to the sleeping area when not cooking. The majority of the time it made the home just barely livable enough to sustain the family of four.

Rubbing his arms, he entered the combined kitchen and living room where his wife stood over the stove cooking a hearty breakfast. It was not much, especially for a full grown polar bear, but such things were at a premium, as was just about everything else here in Coldhaven. Supplies were limited and nowhere was this more the case than with the daily rations. Few lower species had survived The Freeze, and what livestock they had managed to save was carefully overseen by the food production facility. Every morning each family would be required to send one member to pick up the prescribed allotment for the entire day, no exceptions. Failure to do so would result in your allocation being given out late at night to those seeking extra rations so as not to let it go to waste. As a result, Laura was always up in time to receive their share.

"Good morning," she said, kissing him as he came close.

"That smells delicious," he replied, leaning in for a careful sniff. The smell filled the entire room with the tantalizing aroma of bacon and eggs. "You're spoiling us, Laura."

"I know, but it was our turn in the rotation for the good stuff and I wanted to cook them when we were all together. It's not often we get something more than the standard rations and I felt we should enjoy them, especially considering how hard you work." Laura smiled and flipped the eggs, being certain not to overcook anything.

The way the food ration system worked was that everyone got a turn with the premium items, but most of the time you got whatever they had. The law was very specific about what happened if you attempted to steal food, either from someone else or the food production facility. In general people obeyed the rules, if only so that when it was their turn they could enjoy a little bit of the good life. Those who could not wait were often cut out of the premium items entirely with no mechanism to work their way back into the rotation. It was remarkably effective.

Stepping back to allow her to focus on the meal, he spotted his daughter sitting on the couch underneath a blanket. Emily was young enough that she was not yet required to sign up for a work detail and was allowed to spend the day at home with her mother. Holding a small stuffed toy resembling a furless mammal save for the tiny bit at the top

of its head, she brightened at the sight of her father. "Papa!" she shouted, her arms reaching out to embrace him.

He held her close for several moments, wrapping his large arms around her enough to encircle her entire body. "Good Morning, little one!"

"Papa, you're holding me too tight!" she cried, giggling all the while.

"Oh, am I? Perhaps you're just getting bigger." He smiled, taking a seat beside her.

"Mamma says I'm an inch taller than I was last year," she proudly declared.

"She does, does she?" he asked.

Laura turned her attention away from the cooking for a moment. "Yes indeed. I measured her yesterday. Go see for yourself."

He rose and walked towards the front door of their home to see the marks in the frame. The latest was just a little bit taller than the last with 'Emily' etched in the metal. "My little girl is getting so big now. Pretty soon she'll be big enough to take on her older brother! Where is Lucas, anyway?" he asked.

Laura shrugged. "He's out with his friends."

"This early?" he asked.

"He's a teenager. Who can predict their routines? He has a few hours before he needs to be in class. Let him enjoy himself. At least he's not loafing in bed like some husbands I know," Laura said.

"Oh really? Well a certain wife doesn't seem to complain when I...", he began.

"Ah!" she said, interrupting.

Catching himself, he smiled at his daughter. "When I show mommy how much I love her."

"You guys are weird," Emily said.

"Weird, are we? Well, I'll have you know young lady that weirdness is the reason you and your brother exist. Did he say how long he'd be gone?" he asked, shaking his head.

Laura shrugged. "Who knows. He'll be back when he's back."

"He should be here, looking after his little sister and eating this wonderful bacon and eggs you've prepared," he said, gesturing at her work.

His wife could only throw up her paws in mock surrender as she sat at the small table. For any other species it would probably be considered standard, but for a family of polar bears it was downright insufficient. With just enough room for their plates it barely fulfilled the task of being a table. There was no room for serving dishes. If you wanted anything it had to sit on the counter. With some effort Emily slid off of the couch and walked unsteadily towards the table. Taking her seat, her eyes widened at the feast.

"It looks so wonderful!" she shouted.

"Inside voices, little one," Laura replied.

"I'm sorry, Mama," the young polar bear girl responded.

"We'll let it go, this time." She placed two eggs and two strips of bacon on her plate. "Be sure to eat it all. We don't know when we'll get more." Doing the same to the other two plates she put her son's portion in the oven to keep it warm. "Now eat up, both of you. I won't have my cooking going to waste. You understand?"

Joe held up his paws, taking the fork and purposely making a show of separating part of the egg whites and putting it in his mouth. He savored the taste, and partly out of

pleasure and part out of a desire to tease his wife he moaned and took an exceptionally long time to chew his first bite of egg.

When she had clearly had enough, she smacked him on the chest with the back of her paw. "Don't play with your food."

"Sorry, love," he said, locking eyes with Emily as they both chuckled.

"And don't you two be ganging up on me. I know you're Daddy's little girl but I can still spank you both." She menaced her husband with a fork. "Now eat."

Putting another forkful of egg into his mouth he recalled his mother telling him about her youth when there were shelves of these things everywhere. When she was a little cub, her father would take her to the market and they would buy all sorts of delicious foods to fill their bellies with and take them home to her mother. One would take pieces of paper which were not actually paper to places lined as far as the eye could see with so much food you could not eat it if you tried.

Being one of the first generations to be born after The Freeze, Joe had always had a hard time picturing the things his mother described in her stories. Motorized vehicles that ran on liquid dinosaur bones, buildings tall enough to pierce the sky, and flying machines capable of crossing the planet in hours all seemed like mere fantasy. Yet enough of the older folks told similar stories so he knew it was true.

The world he had grown up in was one of harsh survival. A cold wasteland where there was nothing else beyond the city's borders other than long abandoned ruins. The world had become a frozen graveyard, save for Coldhaven, the last functioning city on Earth. It was here that the previous generation had built the generator, which provided the bulk of their heat and power. It was by far the most dangerous place to work, but necessary for survival in this harsh climate. Running twenty-four hours a day, the massive machine burned coal sourced from the vast underground deposits beneath and around the city, which had been the reason this location had been chosen.

Taking a bite of his bacon, it was no exaggeration when he savored the flavor of his first muzzlefur for a full minute before swallowing it. Fresh meat was rare in Coldhaven and so much of it was even more uncommon. Such luxuries were to be treasured. Emily had already eaten most of her breakfast, with only a small bite of egg left. Joe could not help but be glad to see she had regained her appetite enough to be so voracious. Smiling warmly he indicated her plate with his fork. "Had enough, sweetie?" he asked.

"It was so good, I wish I had more," Emily said.

Her mother held up her fork. "Now, now, don't be greedy, you know there isn't any more."

"She's a growing girl, Laura." He moved a piece of bacon from his plate to his daughter's. The young polar bear lit up with joy as her father continued to eat his egg. Emily looked at her mother for permission as she shot a mild reproving glare at her husband. When he ignored her and continued to eat his egg, she nodded and Emily gleefully bit into the bacon.

Once he finished his breakfast he rose to place his plate in the sink. As his wife walked past he felt a gentle brush on his arm fur, which he knew meant 'we need to talk'. It was a conversation he knew was coming but one he had hoped to delay as long as possible. He took his daughter's plate and deposited it in the basin while she herself

walked slowly back over to the sofa to resume her previous position. Certain she was all right he followed his wife into their bedroom.

The space was just large enough to contain their bed and room for each to stand, and nothing else. Once he had entered he had to turn in place to close the door behind him. With a deep breath he placed his back against the door and looked her in the eyes.

“I really wish you wouldn’t do that,” she said.

“It’s just a piece of bacon, Laura.”

“No, it isn’t! You know they don’t give us enough as it is.” She frowned and sat on the bed. “Every time you give some more to Emily there’s that much less for you and you still have to work a full day in the workshop.”

“I know, but every time I see her smile it makes me forget about all this for a few minutes.” He gestured around himself to the city as a whole. “I start to feel like how my mother must have felt before The Freeze, when every day wasn’t a struggle to survive to the next. If I can give her a little more food in the process, then to me it’s worth it.” Joe reached out to hold his wife, joining her on the bed.

Laura looked away from him. “They’re cutting the rations again.”

“What?” he asked. “When?”

“Starting this Friday. The scouting teams haven’t found as much wildlife out there and the livestock we have isn’t enough to support everyone by themselves. They just don’t have enough land to raise them properly. What little they have barely sustains them enough to use them as food animals.” She sighed. “And that’s not all.” Laura rose and walked to the small nightstand on the side of the table. Opening the drawer she removed a small glass bottle with a medical label on it. “We’re almost out of her medicine.”

Joe sat up straight. “How much do we have left?” he asked.

“Maybe a few weeks worth at the most. I’ve been stretching it out, giving her smaller doses where I can, but I can only stretch it so far. We need more,” she said, placing it in his palm.

He held the small glass bottle in his paw, staring down at it and the precious clear liquid within. Most would not comprehend its value, to them it would be little more than something to be traded for booze or something else to make the days here a little easier, but to Joe and Laura Kennedy, it was the only thing keeping their youngest child alive.

As a young girl, Emily had caught an illness no one even remembered the name for. Before the cataclysm, treating it would be simple, but in Coldhaven medicines were rare and their value immeasurable. Drugs capable of treating the sicknesses that infected the people here were worth more than practically any other resource. It had been a minor miracle that one of the scouting teams had returned with a fairly good supply of assorted drugs. Through his friendship with the local doctor, he had gotten enough to find one that treated his daughter’s condition. After a few days, she had gotten better, strong enough to walk on her own.

But it would not last, it never did. After a few days of not taking it she would begin to weaken again, and her symptoms would return. With no cure, their only option was to continue to provide her with doses of the drug for as long as possible. To pay for this last bottle he had given the physician his wedding ring, a gift from his father when he married Laura. The bottle had lasted for several months, but with barely any of it left it would not hold out much longer.

"I'll talk to the doc after my shift," he promised. "Maybe I can get him to give me another supply."

"You have to get it, as much as you can," she begged. "Whatever it takes." Reaching around her neck, she removed her locket, containing pictures of her children and the only item of value the Kennedy family had left.

Unable to stand it any longer, he took her paws in his and pushed it gently back towards her. "No, I won't hear of it. I'll find a way."

"How?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied, taking her into his arms. "But I can't stand the thought of you without that locket. Promise me you'll keep it right where it belongs."

Laura held it between her paws for a moment, cracking it open with the gentle placement of a claw. Looking at the smiling faces of her children she began to cry, tears soaking into her fur as she smiled at their joyful expressions. After a moment, she regained her composure and nodded. "Okay."

"Now give it to me and turn around." He took it from her and waited until she faced away from him with her hair held up by her paw. With a practiced skill he returned the locket to its proper place adorning her neck and smiled. "Beautiful as the day I married you." Wrapping his arms around her he planted a kiss on her cheek.

"You honey tongued teddy bear," she said, blushing at the compliment. "You should get ready for work or they'll reassign you to waste extraction."

Joe let out a deep sigh and released his wife from his embrace but not before planting one more kiss on her nose. He smiled and allowed her to slide past him to open the door. "Yes, dear." He pulled out his work clothes. Well worn and deeply used, they did not insulate him from the cold as well as they once did, but they were comfortable and easy to move around in as well as fitting perfectly to his ursine frame. Pulling on his thick pants and warm shirt he tossed on a jacket and a black wool cap before emerging once more into the kitchen.

"All right, my love. I trust you can keep things running until I come back?" he asked.

"I'll do my best," she said. "Now say good bye to Emily before you go."

Joe looked towards his daughter, and as soon as he saw her grin his face lit up with a bright smile. "It is going to be so hard focusing on work knowing I have these two beautiful women at home to look forward to. I'm counting on you to help your mother around the house. She's got a lot to take care of and she needs a smart helper to get everything done. Can you do that for me?" he asked.

"I promise I'll do my best, Papa." She held her doll super tight.

Looking at it, he made a funny face. "You sure you don't want a better toy? It looks like a hairless monkey."

Squeezing it even tighter she opened her muzzle in offense. "Papa! You'll hurt his feelings. Apologize right now."

"You're right, you're right, I'm sorry. He's very handsome. Whatever his name is," the elder bear said.

"His name is Andre, and he's an actuary. He helps people find deductions in their insurance plans," she declared proudly.

Standing up, he looked at his wife. "Who's been teaching her words like that? I think she's reading too much of those fantasy books you have."

Putting her left fist on her hip she wagged a wooden spoon at him with the other. "They're history books, and I have to teach her something other than how to work at the factory. Now get to work before you're demoted."

"I love you too, dear," he said, saluting them both before pushing the door open. No matter what the temperature read, Coldhaven was always chilly. Perhaps that was to be expected in the world after The Freeze, but it always took him by surprise in those first few moments after leaving the house. Standing outside the small metal shack that was the Kennedy home, Joe turned to make certain the door was closed. Heat was a precious resource and not to be wasted, especially with his young daughter at home.

So focused was he on the task he almost did not notice his teenage son standing next to the door until he took his paw off the knob. "Lucas!" he shouted. Touching his paw to his chest he shook his head. "You're going to give me a heart attack." Taking stock of his presence he waited for his heart to slow to normal. "What are you doing standing around out here?" he asked.

The young male polar bear offered a shrug. "I just needed some fresh air," he said.

"Fresh air is cold air. You should go inside where it's warmer." He gestured towards the door. When his son did not move, the elder polar bear tilted his head. "Your mother has bacon and eggs. You should eat them before they're overcooked." The mention of food preceded a growl from his young son's stomach, at which his father smiled. "Look, I have to go to work. Just promise me you won't stay out here too long?" he asked.

No sooner had he turned to leave than he felt his son's paw on his arm. "Dad, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, but quickly, son. I only have a few moments." He turned to face him. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

"My birthday is in a few days." He said nothing more, but Joe already knew what was on his mind.

"I see," Joe replied. "You're worried about what assignment you might receive."

The younger polar bear nodded. "I don't want to leave school, Papa." He sighed. "I want to stay and learn and make my way into the engineering program, like you."

Every person in Coldhaven above the age of thirteen was required to perform some sort of function for the benefit of the city. If there were enough people to handle all of the essential tasks then the children were allowed to continue their schooling, but if not any openings would be filled with the eldest children. Given how many of the city's systems relied on people to keep them running, it was not uncommon to see more than a few teenagers pulled from their schooling to serve the greater needs of the population. This past season had been particularly hard with more than a dozen people succumbing to frostbite and other various injuries.

Hardest hit had been the furnace, which burned nonstop throughout the day. Holding a central location in the city it kept the buildings warm and made life in the frozen wasteland possible in the first place. Without it, there would be no final surviving city and no chance for sentient life in general. Even those species acclimated to the cold would not be able to continue to exist without the refuge of the warmth of the city.

In an effort to reassure his son, he squeezed his shoulder gently. "Hey, don't worry, okay? Even if they assign you a work detail which there is no guarantee they will,

you can still study. I will help you with your classes either way. We will get you into that program, I promise. Fair enough?"

His son nodded. "I trust you."

"Good. Now get inside before your bacon turns to charcoal." He nudged him towards the door. "And close the door quick, we don't want your sister getting sick."

"Okay, okay, I'm going." Lucas squeezed him for one more hug before disappearing inside the house. With a warmth that temporarily made him forget about the frozen wasteland beyond the city, he smiled and made his way to work.

* * *

The Workshop was the nickname for the maintenance and repair facility responsible for the city's continued operation. A fairly large building close to the central furnace, it was here where the most mechanically minded members of the population were typically assigned. One of the few areas with practically universal access, its mechanics were regularly tasked with jobs all over the city ranging from repairing heaters to keeping the city's primary systems operational.

Dispatched in teams of two they would receive their assignments at the beginning of the day from the foreman before moving on to their various tasks. Those not assigned to external functions worked on the service floor repairing any malfunctioning equipment brought in by the general population.

So important was this service that all of the engineers and mechanics were highly paid, being given a home and larger rations than the general population as a reward for their perpetual hard work.

Arriving just a few minutes early for his scheduled shift, Joe entered through the main door into the lobby where his partner was already waiting for him. "Morning, Mike," he said with as much cheer as he could muster.

"Morning to you too," he replied, with a smile on his face. "I've already got our work assignments for the day. All you need to do is get your stuff and meet me out back."

"Sounds good. Just give me a minute to get my tools." He walked into the locker room where several mechanics were already dressed in their standard work clothes, getting ready to go out and do their part to keep the city running. Nodding to a few of them as he passed he made his way to the back where his locker waited. Written on a piece of tape was his name, Joe Kennedy, affixed to the metal at eye level. Pulling it open, he removed his tool kit from the locker and laid it on the bench, inspecting his equipment before declaring it satisfactory and closing the door with his elbow.

Carrying them in his right paw he made his way out of the back of the Workshop where his partner waited with his hard hat under his arm. Handing Joe his own he tapped the headgear with his knuckles. "Safety first," his friend said.

He accepted it with a grateful smile. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Mike."

"Probably freeze to death trying to figure out which end of the wrench to hold," the penguin joked.

"Hey. I'm a better mechanic than you are, and don't you forget it." He pointed a finger at him for emphasis. "So what have we got today?"

Looking at the clipboard, Mike cleared his throat. "To start, we've got a few faulty valves that need replacing, one heating unit in residence twenty-three that the residents can't bring in for service, and steam hub fourteen is malfunctioning again."

"You're kidding," he replied.

"Fraid not." He sighed. "See for yourself."

"I thought we fixed that thing two weeks ago," he said, taking the clipboard into his paws.

Mike shrugged. "We did, and the week before that, and two weeks before that. The problem is they're not willing to shut the equipment down any longer than absolutely necessary."

Joe rolled his eyes. "Don't they realize that if you don't shut the equipment down for regular maintenance and repairs, they're going to keep having problems like this?" he asked to no one in particular. "You need to shut these things down every week for at least a few hours to give them time to rest. This equipment was never designed to operate continuously like this."

"I know, but you try and tell three hundred people they're going to have to go without heat for a while. Instead of dealing with the complaints they'd rather just have us fix it every time it breaks," Mike said.

"Which is becoming more and more often, lately," Joe remarked. Handing the clipboard back he shook his head. "If they don't figure out something, they're going to have a bigger problem on their hands than a faulty steam hub."

Taking the clipboard back Mike nodded his agreement as the two walked out of the back area into the city at large. Designed and built around a single point, the massive furnace known in Coldhaven as The Candle burned coal twenty-four hours a day, putting out massive amounts of heat to combat the freezing temperatures that swept the planet's surface just outside the perimeter. Positioned in the middle of the central core, it allowed the heat to radiate equally in all directions keeping the center of the city as close to the world that was as they could get.

Most of the city's essential functions were placed here closest to the heat source. Food, engineering functions, and government were all located within the nexus of the circular city. Roads extended outward from there like spokes in a wheel traveling all the way to the rim where a ring of lights marked the outer edge of the habitable area.

Just outside of the central core was the residential area, where most of the city's population lived, Joe included. The houses here were of modest construction, functional, if not spacious, and more than enough to house a family. Shops and what little businesses remained shared this ring both for the comparatively sufficient heat level as well as proximity to the general population.

Outside the residential area was the industrial ring, where most of the resource gathering and storage of essential materials was held. It was here where the massive machines that provided the city with coal were positioned, working daily to extract the precious material from the ground below to be processed and delivered to The Candle to keep the city's population alive another day. Those not fortunate enough to be housed in the residential area lived here in tents, with barrels burning whatever they could to supplement the minimal heat that made it out that far.

The last area was only habitable due to the supplemental steam hubs that were positioned throughout the city. Extending The Candle's reach to the edge of the crater,

they allowed the heat to elevate the temperature of the outermost section to a survivable level. Most of the time they functioned with little need for maintenance but when problems did occur they needed to be dealt with while they were still relatively minor. Since the task was the highest priority on their list, they made their way towards the outer ring.

Jobs out towards the edge of the city always made Joe grateful he was a polar bear. His thick fur added an extra layer of insulation some of the other species lacked. While the majority of those living in Coldhaven tended to be of species naturally inclined towards the cold, almost forty percent of them were species from other temperature zones. While he doubted there was anyone in the city who would call it comfortable, he did not know what he would do without the extra insulation.

Upon arrival it was immediately clear what the problem was. One of the components had broken causing an immediate shutdown. The temperature regulation system had burned out causing the steam hub to immediately route its load to other units in the system until it could be repaired. It was a common problem but one that despite its simple solution was getting harder and harder to implement. "It's the temperature control unit again," he said, indicating the damaged piece of equipment.

Mike frowned and wrote it down on the clipboard. "We can't keep replacing these things. We're going to run out of them pretty soon if this keeps happening." The penguin tapped his foot in frustration. "These units run half the systems in the city."

Joe frowned as he removed the faulty component. Holding it in his paw it did not seem like that much, but it represented perhaps the most valuable thing in Coldhaven. Heat. Without it the steam hubs could not warm the city nor would The Candle continue to provide its life sustaining warmth. They lasted forever, provided they were run at their expected level of use. Given the harsh environment the engineers regularly pushed their equipment at far higher levels than the specs recommended. "At least it wasn't something more serious."

"Still, sooner or later this won't be a problem we can fix." Mike pulled a replacement from his tool kit and the steam hub once again thrummed to life, suddenly making the area around it that much warmer. Stepping away, Mike nodded his approval. "That's probably the only time of the day I feel too hot."

"I thought only ladies got hot flashes," Joe said, earning himself a smack from his partner. "Hey, Mike, have you heard anything from central?" he asked.

"Like what?" The penguin tilted his head curiously.

Joe looked around to be certain no one was near before he continued. "Laura heard a rumor that they're cutting the rations."

"I haven't heard anything about that," Mike said.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"As far as I know. Central doesn't share everything with us but they usually keep the engineers in the loop and to my knowledge I haven't heard anything about a reduction in rations." He shrugged.

"Maybe it's nothing," Joe said.

Mike picked up his tool kit. "Do you know where she heard it?" he asked.

"Not really, she just mentioned it when I was leaving the house this morning," he said. "I suppose it might just be people making the usual complaints but she's usually right about these sorts of things."

“Well, I’m not aware of anything along those lines but I tell you what, if I hear anything I promise I will let you know, okay?” he asked.

“Thanks, Mike,” Joe replied.

The rest of the day passed without much fanfare. Once their tasks were completed and the day was done, he bid Mike farewell before making his way to his next stop on his way home to see his family.

Doctor Reed’s office was one of the few operating in the residential ring close to the border between it and the Nexus. It was just close enough to the primary heat zone that it still derived some benefit from the general proximity to The Candle. Most days the waiting area was about half full but today it seemed a little more crowded than usual. Consisting of a small rectangular area with a front desk and several chairs, he made his way up to the counter. “I need to see the doc.”

“Do you have an appointment?” she asked.

“It’s not for me, it’s about my daughter,” he replied.

“If you don’t have an appointment you’ll have to wait.” She gestured towards the chairs.

“Please, I just need to speak to him for a moment,” he said.

The blond koala shook her head. “I understand that, but as you can see the doctor has a lot of patients to see today and they were here first. Now if you’d like you can leave him a message, or I can put you in as a consultation and you can wait your turn.”

Thinking of Emily, he nodded. “Okay.” With a quiet sigh he turned around and scanned the waiting room for a place to sit. Examining the mismatched chairs, he found an empty one and sat down.

It was forty-five minutes before he was called back into the treatment area to speak with the red panda. Dressed in his white coat and beige shirt, the handsome physician had neatly arranged dark brown hair and glasses that sat upon his muzzle. The frames were thin and metal, a perk of his position as one of the skilled physicians in Coldhaven. “Chris,” the polar bear said.

“Joe! How are you? I haven’t seen you in a few weeks. Everything okay with Emily?” he asked.

“That’s why I’m here,” he said.

Holding his finger up for silence, he walked over to the door and closed it with his paw. The red panda turned around and looked at his ursine visitor. “Is everything okay? Has her condition worsened?” he asked.

Joe kept his gaze on the floor. “No, doc, but we’re running out of medicine. She’s only got a little left and we’ve been doing all we can to make it last, but she needs it or she’s going to die,” he said.

“I know, and I’ve given you all I can. You know that resources are limited and I have to make sure there’s enough of what we have for everyone,” he said.

“They don’t need it. I do.” He gestured towards the shelves. “I know you have more. I don’t have a lot to offer, but I’ll give you what I can.” He pulled out his toolkit and held it out for him to take.

“That’s not the point,” he said, holding up his paws. “You know that I take my job very seriously, and I have a responsibility of making sure that the next Joe Kennedy that comes in here can get the medicine he needs to keep his daughter alive.” He looked into his eyes. “Do you think I enjoy telling people no?” he asked. “I have to make

choices every day to save as many as possible, all the while answering to the government for every resource I use. If I give you what you're asking for then they'll demand answers."

"So we don't tell them," he said. "Chris, look, I know I'm asking a lot, but this is my little girl here. If we don't do something she's going to get sicker and she won't make it through the year." The polar bear leaned against one of the cabinets. "I'm sorry. I know it's not fair. But I don't care about some hypothetical case that may or may not happen. My daughter is sick and she needs this medicine now." He threw up his paws in frustration. "There's got to be something you can do."

Doctor Reed stared at him for a few moments and then cursed. Getting up, he opened one of the cabinets and removed two small glass bottles. One of which was empty and the other containing the lifesaving medication that kept Emily alive a little while longer. He removed a syringe from the drawer and used it to fill the second with the same level of water. Handing him the first bottle he held his paw in his own. "Joe, I'm putting both of our lives on the line with this. If anyone finds out that that stuff is missing, I can't help you anymore."

"Thank you, Chris," he replied.

The red panda picked up the second bottle. "This will keep them from asking questions for a little while, but it's going to have to be replaced eventually. And as you know it's not exactly easy to come by." He replaced it in the cabinet and closed the door. "With any luck no one will come in needing any but if they do..." he started.

"If they do I promise I'll take full responsibility," Joe said.

"I appreciate the thought but if they find out I gave that to you I doubt it'll matter. You know the rules, and you know what'll happen if we get caught," he said.

Joe looked at the precious bottle, gripping it carefully in his paw. "Then why give it to me in the first place?"

"Because I'm a doctor, and if I can keep one more person from dying for another few days then it's worth it. It may not matter in the long run but if I have to go to my grave for something like this I'd rather it be because I chose to help rather than the alternative." Joe embraced the red panda gratefully before placing the bottle in his pocket and making his way out of the office.

He walked the short distance towards his home in the light of the city's streetlamps. Examining the bottle in his paw he frowned. There was practically nothing there, just enough to buy him a few days, even with his wife rationing out the supply. For this he had convinced the doctor to leverage his entire career against the hope that he could find more before the subterfuge was discovered. It was a temporary solution at best, but it bought him precious time needed to figure out a way to keep Emily alive, and for that he would do anything, including give his life to keep her warm and safe a few days longer.

Returning home, his wife and daughter were eating dinner in the kitchen while his son could be seen in their bedroom studying for his classes. Standing in the doorway, he made every effort to burn the image into his memory, fearful that it would not last for long.

His wife looked up and gestured for him to come inside. "Close the door before all the heat gets out."

He obliged, quickly entering and shutting the door behind him, removing his jacket and hanging it on the hook. "Sorry I'm late," he said, exchanging a knowing glance with Laura.

"I kept some soup warm for you, it's there on the stove," she said, a bowl already waiting for him at his spot on the table. Walking around the table, he squeezed her shoulder as he passed, picking up his bowl and pouring the soup into it. It was warm and delicious tomato basil soup, one of the more popular varieties given its comparative simplicity to produce due to the limited ingredients. He inhaled the aroma letting it fill his nostrils with the wonderful smell while the warmth suffused through his paws. Carrying it to the table, he ate a few spoonfuls, feeling the pleasant sensation of the soup heating him gradually from the inside.

"How was work today, Papa?" Emily asked, bright and cheerful.

"Work was good, sweetheart. Daddy and Uncle Mike went all over the city fixing anything that needed fixing." He looked at her doll. "And how was Andre, did he find lots of deductions for his clients?"

"Daddy, he can't tell you that. He's subject to confident... Confident..." she began.

"Confidentiality," he finished for her.

"That's right," she said. "He can't discuss his clients, it'd be unprofessional."

After sharing a look with his wife, she smirked. "Eat your soup."

Joe finished the small bowl far faster than he would have liked. Even taking his time the rations were barely enough to fill his stomach. It kept him and his family fed but they were never quite sufficient to make him forget about the constant struggle to keep the city running. Every day they would fight to survive and every day they would stave off freezing for one more sunrise.

For forty-six years Coldhaven had waged this constant battle against the harsh and unforgiving environment just outside the perimeter of the city, and in all of that time the city had never suffered a catastrophic systems failure. According to the powers that be there were multiple redundancies built into all the critical systems to prevent any such occurrence, but a part of Joe wondered just how close to constant frozen Armageddon they truly were.

Maybe nothing he did mattered, but as long as he had Emily, Lucas, and Laura, he would fight like hell to buy them every second he could. Smiling at his precious little girl he felt his wife's paw on his shoulder as she took his empty bowl. Always her subtle signal she wanted to talk, he knew it must have taken every ounce of her self control to keep from pouncing on him the moment he got home for news of his daughter's medicine. Even though the entire family knew she was ill, Joe and Laura did all they could to shield their children from the worst of it. Such things were for adults to worry about, not for a teenage boy and a young girl.

Rising, he gave Emily a kiss on the cheek and squeezed his son's shoulder with a muscular paw before holding a digit in front of his muzzle for silence. Following his wife into the bedroom he closed the door behind him.

Moving close to him, she pressed up into his arms. "Please tell me you got it."

"I got some. Not much, but he gave me all he could spare." He reached into his pocket and presented the small bottle.

Three quarters empty, she shook the clear liquid as if that would somehow produce more within the tiny container. “This isn’t enough,” she said. “Not nearly enough.”

“It’s all I could get,” he said. “The doc switched it with another bottle, but I have to replace it eventually or we’ll both be brought up on charges.”

Laura pressed her head against his chest. “What are we going to do? This won’t last more than a few days. Maybe a week if I stretch it. Then we’ll be right back where we started.”

“I don’t know. It was risky even getting us that much. But it does buy us time,” he said.

“To do what?” she asked. “What can we do in a week?” she asked.

“I’m working on that.” He sighed, squeezing her free paw gently as she held the precious bottle. “In the meantime, you give her that and don’t tell her anything’s wrong. I’ll figure something out. I’ve got no idea where I’m going to find more of that stuff, but I swear to you I will not let our daughter die.”

Laura nodded, taking the bottle and holding it close to her chest. Turning around, she placed it inside the nightstand where she kept the rest of the medicine and composed herself. Once she was calm once more, she kissed him. “We’d better go back before the kids start to worry.”

Joe gave her one last squeeze before opening the door and coming back out. “I don’t want you kids staying up too late tonight, okay? You need your rest, and so do I.”

“Yes, Daddy.” Emily smiled, hugging her plush toy. Seeing his wistful smile, she looked at him with those pure innocent eyes. “Is everything okay, Papa?”

Shaking his head to hide the fear resting just beneath the surface, he smiled. “Everything’s fine, kiddo.”