

“Beyond The White”

By Lauren Rivers

Gauges covered the steam hub indicating the various levels of pressure being routed throughout the massive city. Stretching for miles, the pipes carried the heat and power essential to life in Coldhaven to every structure and home within its limits. Placed at regular intervals in every area of the massive habitat they ensured the survivability of its population. When operating correctly, they distributed necessary resources where they were most needed. Of course, this one was the reason they had been sent out here that particular morning.

Hefting his wrench, Joe looked at the piece of equipment with some disdain. “It’s broken,” he said.

“Obviously,” Mike replied. “Our job is to figure out why it’s broken.”

“Yes, but it would make it a lot easier if they would shut them down every once in a while for the proper maintenance,” Joe complained.

Mike squawked and looked at his partner. “I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

Joe pointed at the steam hub. “This equipment has been in near constant operation for over forty years. I’m amazed it’s lasted this long.”

“Yes, well, these things are the only thing keeping the city from joining the rest of the frozen wasteland out there so you may as well just accept the fact that this is as good as it’s going to get,” Mike replied.

The city of Coldhaven depended on the operation of a central heat source known colloquially as the Candle. A massive furnace, it provided enough warmth to keep the city within the range of survivability. Simple radiant heat kept the central core of the city relatively comfortable, but to ensure that it reached the outer rings it routed the excess heat through a massive network of tunnels underneath the surface. Sensors built throughout the system monitored any drops in pressure or temperature beyond a certain level. However, the limitations of the diagnostics could only narrow it down to the offending hub, not which specific component had failed.

Having confirmed that this was indeed the source of the pressure drop, Joe picked up his radio and sighed. “Kennedy to the workshop.”

“*Workshop here,*” a gruff canine voice replied.

Joe looked across at the king penguin, who simply shrugged. “We’ve found the problem. It’s at hub 46 Alpha. We need you to shut down the unit so we can diagnose and repair.”

“*Understood, Kennedy, rerouting the steam to the surrounding units. You have 45 minutes from cool down. Workshop out.*” The channel closed.

“Good morning to you too,” Joe said to the closed channel. Before they could conduct repairs, the first step was redirecting the heat from the entire unit. This would take a significant amount of time to dissipate, so until then there was little to do but wait. Joe sat down on a nearby crate and looked up in time to see one of the balloons launch into the sky.

Momentarily entranced by the sight, he watched the small craft float gracefully over the city on its journey out to the snowy wasteland in search of salvage. A regular sight over Coldhaven they traveled beyond the horizon in all directions, returning with treasures and mysteries of the world before the disaster. Their priority was food, supplies, and anything that could aid in survival. However, a certain amount of the cargo space was always reserved for items of a less essential nature, most of which were traded at the market to anyone who had something of value to offer.

Books, toys, and clothing were among the more popular items, often being the first to be snatched up after each expedition's return. From time to time Joe would peruse their offerings, if only to indulge his curiosity about the world not seen since his parents' generation. Indeed, his mother had been very young when the disaster occurred, but she had been old enough to remember the world before. Her stories of things she had witnessed as a young cub had fueled his imagination and filled his dreams for years.

Of course, it was as close as he would ever get to the wonders of that world. Team after team returned with stories of nothing but ice and snow as far as the eye could see. No matter how far out they traveled, all they found was frozen relics of a world long lost to the snow drifts. It had been decades since Coldhaven had seen any sign of life outside the edge of the city. With no evidence to the contrary, most people had long since stopped hoping.

The balloon hovered for a moment as it reoriented its course. Their speed was limited and their journeys often a week or more in duration, but they were easy to maintain and provided the city with an additional way to sustain itself. This particular one was number two. The identifier was painted on the side of the cabin in bold red numbers, and on a day like this it was clear enough to read it.

"You ever wonder about what's out there?" Joe asked his partner.

Mike paused for a moment, catching sight of the balloon as it accelerated out of view. "No. I have enough things to worry about right here, like how we're going to complete our rounds today with all the system failures we're getting." The king penguin pressed his webbed feet into the snow, taking a moment to stare at the powdery white substance covering everything in a thin layer. He sighed. "I stopped thinking about what was out there when..."

At that moment Joe felt incredibly insensitive. Mike's father had been one of the early members of the recon team. Long before they had a regular set of salvagers assigned to search for anything of use they had attempted to chart the wasteland with little more than a pair of balloons and some old maps. Of course the maps were useless, with once green fields covered in snow and ice so deep the landscape was almost unrecognizable. Indeed, the first attempts at recon almost resulted in disaster with the initial teams completely unprepared for the reality of the new world which they sought to explore.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry, man. I didn't mean to..." Joe started, but Mike had already begun shaking his head.

"It's okay. I guess I just gave up on out there a long time ago." He took a seat beside Joe. "I have his stuff stored in our home. I've never had the heart to go through it. I just can't. It takes up a lot of space, space we could use, but it's all I have left of him." Mike chirred sadly, having lost his father during one of the early expeditions out among the vast frozen wastes.

“You should keep it. You never know when it’ll come in handy. Besides, one day you may find you want it and given how hard it is to preserve anything in this world, some things are worth holding on to,” Joe said, placing his paw on his friend’s shoulder.

Mike nodded slowly. “Things were dangerous back in those days. Survival was problematic at best. Out there it was even more treacherous. Half the balloon teams died on almost every expedition until they figured out the heating systems.”

The early balloons were less efficient models, with more space devoted to heat and cargo and less for crew comfort. Though effective at generating heat and keeping the crew alive outside of the city, they were prone to malfunctions, and an inoperative heating system often could not be repaired until their return to the city. On top of that, snowstorms were common, threatening to throw balloons off course or overwhelming their meager countermeasures. All they could do was anchor down to the ground and deflate the balloon, hoping to ride out the storm with enough resources to return home. It was dangerous work, but in those days it was one of the few methods to gather essential resources.

“Yeah, but they kept the city alive. We wouldn’t have made it without them,” he said, and he meant it. The balloon teams provided essential knowledge for what was out there and what was coming in days when a few days warning could mean the difference between life and death. The city survived some close calls but had always managed to survive thanks to the combined efforts of her people and the strong leadership of the governor. Though Joe did not always agree with everything Governor Cole did, she and those who held the post before her had kept the city alive and thriving, such as it was.

The penguin agreed, pulling his coat tighter. “True enough.” He paused. “I’ll admit, I’ve wondered about it from time to time, who hasn’t?” he asked. “My dad always used to believe there was more out there than just us. He thought that with all the people out there before the Freeze that some of them had to have made it.”

Despite no evidence to the contrary, particularly in the early days of Coldhaven there were still rumors and whispers of other attempts by the rest of the world to survive the massive storm that enveloped the planet. Covering every inch of the globe the entire population found itself at the mercy of the most powerful cold that it had ever known. Whole cities froze in moments while others took days or weeks. Violent storms tore across the surface causing panic, widespread chaos, and desperate efforts to survive.

Nations enacted emergency plans to save as much of their population as possible. Martial law was declared. Barriers fell as things like nationality and territory ceased to matter. Whole countries disappeared overnight.

The United States built several underground habitats which were converted into long term emergency shelters. Many of them were positioned near major cities and were intended to hold the best and the brightest. Whether any of them had managed to get to the shelters in time was difficult to determine as news became almost impossible to obtain during the disaster, let alone verify. Rumors insisted they had been responsible for it, but like many things, the truth of what happened was lost along with those that had seen it. Whatever the cause, the information had not survived the disaster that it had created.

Many panicked citizens had begged to be let into the shelters but in the chaos of the final days more than a few of them had fallen victim to desperate people struggling to stay alive. One of the balloon teams had discovered one such facility with the doors

blown halfway open. No doubt during the final days someone had forced their way in with explosives, but it had been for nothing, as with the door unable to be sealed the habitat was no longer capable of protecting its people, and they died along with those it was meant to save.

Several others had been recorded as having critical equipment failures, as the extreme cold had overwhelmed their heating systems and with no ability to replace the necessary parts all they could do was broadcast their desperate plea for help out into the snow.

Most of those early days were filled with distress calls from people caught here and there during the initial temperature drop. People who had attempted to form their own survival plan or been left behind by a general evacuation, or sometimes even military units looking for orders. No matter who you were, the cold pressed down upon the world with a relentless fury.

“If they had, we haven’t heard from anyone in four decades,” Joe said. The last recorded signal was six years after the disaster and from that day forward they had heard no additional calls. Whether it was because they were simply too far out of range or some other reason they had not encountered any other survivors since then. Nevertheless it was not impossible that someone had managed to survive the initial disaster.

However, even the most insistent skeptic could not deny that after all that time the likelihood was remote. Most of the balloon teams had ceased even looking for survivors a long time ago. All that was left were questions.

“All right, Mister Know It All, then what do you think is out there?” he asked.

Joe paused for a long moment as he seriously considered his answer. “Something other than this.” He gestured at the city in which they stood. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful that we’re here. Coldhaven has kept us safe for over forty years. But before the Freeze we covered the world. Someone somewhere out there had to survive that.”

“Maybe. During the early expeditions they used to find survivors from time to time. Every now and then they’d find someone who’d been trying to survive out there but they’d always have the same story. They were caught in the snow and no one knew how or where it had started,” Mike said.

The origin of the Freeze had long been a matter of supposition. Early theories had suggested it was some sort of natural disaster. Some had blamed the early twenty first century and their industrial efforts causing climate change. Many had insisted that without significant efforts to reduce sentient life’s impact on the environment it would soon become irreparable.

Before the disaster protests had developed around the world as people attempted to scale back the methods people used to produce the products and energy the population demanded. More than a few factories and power plants had fallen victim to acts of sabotage in the days leading up to the Freeze.

To most it had seemed to come from everywhere at once. Snow had buried areas unaccustomed to such frigid weather. The global temperature dropped dramatically sending most countries into a desperate frenzy trying to keep their population alive. With few days rising above freezing, infrastructure collapsed within the first year for most developed nations.

Even those who were prepared for such dramatic weather conditions were overwhelmed by the fury of the storms that pounded the world. Relentless in its intensity,

all of their efforts were inadequate against the perpetual winter. Food became scarce, and it was not long before it was clear there was little they could do against the constant onslaught of ice and snow.

Theories quickly gave way to a desperate fight for survival. Some nations attempted to search for countermeasures, but as casualties mounted and more and more of the population died in the initial storms, soon their only goal was mitigating the damage.

“True, but the balloons were limited in their range back then. They can travel a lot further than they used to,” Joe said.

“And they still haven’t found anything more than frozen artifacts from the world that was.” Mike shrugged. “When I was a chick, my dad kept me awake with stories of the things he’d seen. He’d tell me about the places they discovered, anything the ice hadn’t buried beneath countless layers of snow.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small watch. It was gold, with a beautiful pattern on the polished surface. Quietly it ticked away the seconds as his penguin friend held it in his webbed palm. “He said they found this in a half buried place somewhere to the north. He told me that the building it was in used to be called a department store. People would go there and buy things like this with pieces of paper they carried in their pockets.”

“Why paper?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Mike said. “Maybe it was rare back then. He said it was a special kind of paper, not the type you would make books out of but that people would go through unbelievable amounts of effort just to get it.”

“And then what would they do with it?” Joe asked.

Mike shrugged. “I don’t know. Supposedly you could trade it for whatever you wanted, if you had the right ones.”

“How do you know if you have the right ones?”

The king penguin squawked. “I haven’t the slightest idea. All I know is that before the Freeze you wanted to make sure you had some.”

Joe shook his head, trying to understand the preposterousness of pursuing little slips of paper to get whatever you needed. “Sounds a little hard to believe.”

“Maybe so, but it’s true. Back then people thought those things had a lot of power. Some even said they had something to do with whatever froze the world. I don’t know how much I believe that, but before all this people thought you could do anything if you had enough of it. Some even probably thought it could protect them from this.”

Mike held out his palm, snowflakes falling on the membranes between his fingers. He shrugged. “Some of the teams found places out there filled with the stuff. Fat lot of good it did them,” he said, motioning with his pocket watch.

Stories of the world before the Freeze varied wildly, with most pieced together from the remnants left behind. The disaster killed most of the people who had seen it firsthand, and the harsh years after had taken most of the rest. Joe had learned bits and pieces from his mother, but she had only been a little girl when her family had fled their home for Coldhaven, and she did not like to speak about it much. He had asked her about it when he was a teenager once or twice, but her responses were evasive and answered few of his questions.

From time to time she would let something slip, referring to things she had heard her own parents say, but most of the time she would insist she had never said them at all.

The behavior was common among most of the older adults, who seemed to wish to forget there was a world before this at all.

Perhaps it was old age, burying the memories like a snow drift. Or maybe it was simply too painful to recall all they had lost. Whatever the world before had been like, it seemed much of it would remain a mystery.

Joe kicked a mound of snow with his booted paw. Though the heat from the steam pipes kept it from accumulating too much, the constant onslaught made it impossible for the city to ever be fully clear of it. Every time he kicked one away, he knew that it would be reformed before they'd even completed their repairs.

"It does make you curious though." He gestured at the snow. "About the world before."

Mike shrugged. "You could always ask the balloon teams." He tossed some snow against the steam hub to test its current temperature. It melted after a few seconds and dissipated into steam. Still too warm. "They go out there all the time."

"Yes, but they're not looking for the past. They're just out there searching for salvage," Joe said. While it was true that the balloon teams knew more about what was out there than anyone else in the city, their mission was salvage and salvage only. They would bring back what they found if they thought it was tradable, repairable, or otherwise useful. But they were not looking to find out how the world was before the Freeze, nor did they see any value in such an effort. Indeed, Coldhaven's leadership had told them to prioritize the survival of the city above all else. Yet still, Joe could not help but wonder.

The king penguin sighed. "I hear they're moving on to another sector soon." He turned to Joe. "Wouldn't it be something if they found something green out there?"

Plants had been all but wiped out with the exception of the greenhouses inside the city. Protecting the few surviving species they had cultivated as many of them as possible to provide food for the people of Coldhaven, but they were limited by the size of their hothouses and required constant attention to keep them healthy and growing. Most of them were in the residential ring to take best advantage of the heating and watering systems but their yields were often scarcely more than they needed, leaving the people constantly balancing on the knife's edge with their food supply.

Joe sighed, looking around at the layer of snow that covered the ground as far as the eye could see. The odds of plants still thriving out there somewhere were probably even lower than the likelihood of finding someone alive after all this time. And yet, if they did it would make such a difference for the struggling city. "It would be something," Joe agreed.

Mike held up his mittened hands. "It's unlikely, I'll admit, but something like that would be worth more than any slip of paper."

"No argument there," Joe said. "If you could, do you think you'd want to go out there?"

The king penguin paused for a moment, considering the question. After a short pause he shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Out there was my father's dream. Don't get me wrong, part of me is curious to know what he saw, but at the same time I'm not sure I'd want to see what's left of the old world." Another pause. "You?"

Joe stared once more at the disappearing shape of the balloon, growing ever smaller in the distance. In a few moments it would pass beyond the edge of the city and embark once more into the frozen wasteland. The polar bear looked away from it and

shook his head. "I don't know. I'm curious, but I wouldn't want to leave Laura and the kids for so long. Not to mention it's risky out there."

"It's not exactly safe around here, either," Mike said, gesturing towards the Candle. "We lost another couple of workers on the burn team last week."

Joe lowered his muzzle. The burn team was the colloquial term for the people assigned to the massive furnace at the city center. It was their job to keep it burning round the clock under any and all circumstances. It was dangerous and known to be one of the most hazardous jobs in the city, with the facility regularly needing replacement workers due to the significant number of accidents, malfunctions, and general demands of the job. Though some volunteered due to the significantly higher resource allocation to anyone who did, most often people needed to be assigned to fill vacancies among those charged with its operation and care.

By and large most did so willingly given that without the Candle to generate heat and power, Coldhaven would become as cold and lifeless as the frozen wasteland beyond the city's edge. Yet being assigned there meant that the odds of survival dropped significantly with few workers making it more than twenty years. It was hard, back breaking work that could not be done by anyone other than the young and strong, and even then it was difficult. But nevertheless Joe hoped to spare his children from that fate. He knew that Lucas was approaching the age of assignment, when a young citizen would be given his job by the governor herself.

While the rate at which she did this was largely dependent on the demands of the city's various industries, the loss of two additional workers seemed to indicate that the Candle was headed towards a major event, and if so, who knows what might happen to the city and its inhabitants.

Joe hoped that his son would instead make it through all of his classes and be chosen to join the maintenance team, like he had been. It was by no means a guarantee of safety, but it was steady work with a much less significant risk of injury. It was not one of the more valued jobs, despite its necessity, but it came with a modest dwelling in the residential ring and food for up to a family of four. It was enough to live on.

His daughter, on the other paw, was another matter. She had been ill since she was a baby, causing him to stay up many nights carrying her in his arms, hoping against hope that she would overcome the chronic condition from which she suffered. In the world that was there had been a cure, or so he had heard, but it had been hard to find in the world after the Freeze. Whether it was true or not didn't matter, he supposed. There was none to be found in the city.

The doctors had treated her with something designed to manage her symptoms. His position on the maintenance team had been high enough to warrant the drug, but it was just enough to keep her alive and reasonably strong, albeit constantly weak and tired. Yet you would never know she suffered, for her spirit was so bright and her heart so open he warmed every time he saw her.

But no matter what job she was assigned she would never be able to survive, not if she stayed in her current condition. Yet unless there was a miracle, there was little he could do.

Regardless he would never give up on her. As long as she lived he would do everything in his power to protect her and see her grow up, and maybe one day she would

be free of the burdens that had plagued her since she was a cub. But for now, such things were little more than dreams of something he might never see.

“Do you think we’re going to make it?” Joe asked. “Sentient life, I mean.”

Mike shrugged his shoulders, his beak opening slightly as he answered. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s our destiny to freeze to death out here.”

“I weep at your optimism,” Joe replied dryly.

“I wasn’t finished.” He gave his friend a smack on the arm. “We lost a lot when the world froze. But we survived it. And that’s got to count for something, right?” he asked, rhetorically. “Maybe this is the way it’s always going to be. Maybe we never find out what’s beyond the edge of the city. But until we know for sure, there’s always the possibility, isn’t there?”

Joe conceded the point with a gesture of his paw. “Yeah, I suppose.”

“And who knows, maybe one of these days you and I will see for ourselves.”

Mike looked up in the direction of the balloon, now long disappeared from their vision.

Whether his penguin companion was being serious or not he could not say, but Joe nevertheless offered his agreement. “Well, anyway, the hub should be cool enough for us to work on it now.”

Mike tossed another mound of snow on the steam pipes, and this time they did not melt. With a light touch of his gloved hand he nodded, looking at the equipment with a mild chirp of consternation. “It looks like the regulator needs to be replaced.” Pulling out his tools, he opened the panel and set about removing the damaged component.

“You know, one of these days we’re going to run out of those,” Joe mused, noting that their ability to replace parts was largely dependent on the supply of natural resources around the city along with whatever was retrieved from out there. While the supply was never what Joe would like it to be, so far there had always been enough to meet the city’s need. Nevertheless, only those in the city government knew how much of each respective resource they had.

“Maybe. But if we do we’re going to have a bigger problem than spare parts,” Mike pointed out. “Hand me that tool, would you?”

Joe did as requested and shrugged. “What do you think you’d do if you ever had to leave the city?”

Mike tilted his head, clearly surprised by the question. “You mean like if I had no choice?” Joe nodded. “I don’t know. I guess I’d head the same direction my father thought he should go. He always used to think there was something out there besides this.” After a moment he shrugged. “Odds are there’s nothing, but it beats giving up.”

Joe agreed with a firm nod. “I’ll never give up. Not as long as I have people to fight for.”

Mike finished the repair and closed the steam hub. “Rush to the Workshop.”

“Workshop here.”

“Hub 46 Alpha is back online.”

“Understood, good work you two. Head on out to the Industrial Ring. There’s an issue with one of the heating units in building 14.” The canine voice then closed the channel.

Joe smirked. “So much for an easy morning.”

“Come on. Let’s take the long way. I feel like talking some more.” Mike gestured for him to come along, and together they walked towards the outer ring.