

## Drifter in the Snow

Martin Lausa (2022)

The crackling of a fire echoes in my ear. Prying open my eyes from a deep sleep, a silhouette, stirring a can above a fire, looks over at me. I blink some more, and the silhouette becomes clearer. *A woman?*

Everything but her mouth is a blurry mess, a faint smile spreads across her face as she says something that I can't hear.

Turning over I peek out of my sleeping bag. *I'm in a Warehouse?* The doors are rusted, exposing us to the harsh winter cold, a feeling I will never get used to.

She waves a Can in front of me, it rattles. *It's time to head back out.*

My sight flickers black and white. I find myself treading on snow, leaving a trail of my footsteps behind.

The world has been cursed to snow ever since the 'Great Collapse', the fall of a star, rumoured to '...shine rays of warmth that bring blissful days and life in its wake', or so *they* say. I wish I could've seen it, a warm, peaceful world—sounds like something that only happens in fairy tales. Overseeing the abandoned buildings on the verge of collapsing, only feeds my curiosity. *Sometimes I wonder, what was the world like back then? Better, or worse?*

I feel a light tap on the shoulder; it's the woman from before. She's saying something again, but I can't hear her. She smiles, skipping beside me without a care in the world. Our little walk comes to a halt when she stops in front of me, pointing at something. *A store?*

The same flickering sensation occurs. Looking around, I see that the store has been completely run dry, the shelves are tipped over and the aisles deserted—if there's anything remaining it's probably outdated. I peek around the corner of the shelves to see *them* again, wearing rough dark cloaks, horned masks and wielding any weapons they could get their hands on. Shifting my gaze, I watch the woman stuff her bag with Cans. Her hands shake from the cold wind sweeping in every now and then, causing all but one Can to hit the floor.

Once again, my sight flickers. I'm standing in a pool of blood. *What have I done? I never wanted this to happen. A massacred corpse. I'm sorry—I'm sorry—I'm sorry.*

I look at the window, a reflection of someone else, a murderer, a monster. A stranger within my own flesh. My arm looks deformed, with muscles that spiral into a sharp tip; it slowly retracts.

A sudden gunshot erupts from the next aisle. Rushing around the corner, leaning against a shelf with a gun in her hand, my heart skips a beat.

*No—no—no.* Trembling as I rip a rag from my clothes, wrapping it around her waist, I hear muffled voices from outside. I tug on her arm but she swipes my hand away, shaking her head. A high-pitched sound rings in my ears; she tucks a crumpled piece of paper in my pocket, then whispers something under her breath.

I zip up her backpack, slipping on shrapnel as I rush to the nearest exit. Vaulting over a broken window, I crash into the soft snow; I pause to see the ground littered in debris and blood. Then there's a bang. Covering my head, I see my arm is deformed again and a dull bullet falls to the ground. Without hesitating I leap into a sprint. Screams and curses darting in the back of my mind as I resist *their* calling.

Looking back at the store, I notice her fading smile.

*Why are you smiling?*

The sound of bullets whizz past my ear, with each bullet edging closer to my head. I can't dodge them in the open snow. I can hear the beat of my heart, pulsating as I struggle to steady my breath.

'Vital signs critical, seek medical attention immediately,' a pre-recorded voice says.

Looking down, I see blood leaking from my stomach. *I've been shot?*

Waking up gasping for air, pain stabs through the sides of my body, and layers of bandages cover my waist and arms.

*I'm back at the Warehouse?* Swiping for supplies that were within my reach, the containers are all empty. My senses sharpen from the searing pain in my stomach and the cold at my fingertips. Every breath feels heavy as I press a hand to my chest.

A voice plays from a device on my wrist. 'The Storm is approaching.'

The Warehouse falls silent, snow piling in through the entrance. The only thing I can hear is the wind whistling in my ear. I scrape my hand across the rough pavement; the air is growing colder, and it's only a matter of time before *they* show.

Slowly lifting myself up, patting down my pockets, I feel something, it's a piece of paper. Slowly unfolding it, the paper glimmers revealing a picture of me and someone else—it's her.

My sight flickers once more—there she is again, I can finally see her face. Her wavy beige blonde hair, her porcelain skin, her crystal violet eyes.

In a soft, melancholy voice, she whispers, ‘May it be the people or even the whole world against you, I’ll be waiting for you—’ tears stream down her face, ‘on the other side of this winter—’

I’m then again reminded of her beautiful smile.

Her smile is something I can never forget, like a flame, warming up my once cold and dark world.

I regain my senses and feel that my cheeks are wet. *I’m crying?* I can’t hold them back. *It hurts.* My heart aches as if it were twisting and choking, the world became ever duller. This is reality.

The howling winds of the storm echo throughout the entrance of the base as fog wisps in on the Warehouse. The cold air sweeps into my dry throat, and my joints ache from fatigue.

‘Hostile readings detected,’ a voice plays.

Gazing into the winter’s fog, the blizzard calms for a brief moment. The night has never seemed this peaceful—I wish I’d noticed it sooner.

I tuck the paper back in my pocket and close my eyes, her sweet voice playing in my mind, easing my heart, steadying my breath, and soothing my pain.

*There’ll be an end to this winter. I’ll be sure of it.*

My arm twists into a spike, shredding the bandages to bits.

In the distance, red flickering lights glitter in the dark. I hear the clanking and grating of metal and the crushing of snow.

*They’re finally here.*

Wiping the tears from my face, I clench my fist as I draw a breath.

*I enter into the fray.*