

Chapter 9: Life in the Freeze

The retaining wall that held Colavar aloft served as a detractor for anyone who might want to invade the citadel. Standing at its base, I couldn't help but feel like a speck of dust before its size, even knowing that induced feeling was one of its primary purposes. I'd stared at it for several minutes, which had my neck aching.

With its solid black color, I had no clue what composed the wall. I knew it wasn't a metal, having risked touching it in the freezing cold. The wall had felt almost spongy, like living coral, but it seemed solid. Stable. Knocking a hole in it would require a powerful explosion.

In any case, anyone who wanted to keep the citadel for themselves after an invasion would never do something like that. A breach in the retaining wall would lead to an outpouring of the packed snow and many other things it surely contained, and with it would come the fall of the towers hovering above.

To take this city intact, an enemy army would not only have to climb this wall while contending with Colavar's defenses but also breach the second wall that circled the citadel at its apex. Again, while resisting the defenses that its citizens would use to repel the invaders.

After that would come the arduous task of taking the city itself, and although I hadn't seen much of it while on the inside, my view from here told me that only tight quarters with multiple levels would await them. With its skyscrapers shooting upward like an icy future-scape, Colavar was quite pretty, but it would be hell to conquer.

All of which told me that my chances of once more getting inside it were close to zero. The lift, guided along its mag track, that had taken me and Deirdre here was guarded by two Armachd, the citadel's soldiers, and I wouldn't be able to convince them to let me ride it once more, considering Deirdre had given strict orders for them to never allow it. I couldn't climb either of the walls with my toes and fingers, and since they had *no* handholds on them, I'd need a pickaxe to pull my way up, which I didn't have. I was stuck outside. In the cold and snow.

Again.

At least I was better prepared this time. My thermal coating made Brighde's subzero temperatures merely chilly, and the weight of the pack on my shoulders reminded me of the many rations and the minimal survival gear it contained.

"I'm not supposed to do this," Deirdre had said as she'd filled it. "I'm supposed to immediately escort you outside the walls, but I won't let you starve, not when I can help it. Even if you're a *coigreach*."

So helpful. Give me what I need to survive for a few days and then, cast me out with a weak, 'Good luck!'

But that wasn't fair. Deirdre had done her best for me. She'd done her best to correct her son's mistake. Oo, I badly wanted to kick Ellair's ass right now, but I couldn't, and I was supposed to *enjoy* my time stuck here.

So, while I might have been banished from the only source of civilization that I'd found on Brighde, I'd also gotten a chance to explore this world without interference. Perhaps I'd find another hub for humanity, hopefully one that was a bit less strange. Perhaps I wouldn't, instead finding the solitude I'd always craved for my writing. Either way, I should have asked Deirdre for directions before she'd left.

Before I started exploring, though, I should find a place that could serve as a base of operations, preferably one that was far from here. Maybe somewhere in the mountains to my back? They'd at least make for a pretty setting.

"Well, boys, I'd say it's been fun, but all you've done is stand and stare at me," I said to the guards. "See you never."

Spinning, I left them in my dust. At a snail's pace.

Reaching the forest at the mountains' base took me hours. I'd learned from my last journey in the cold, insisting on better shoes along with my rations. The boots I was wearing conformed to my feet, sucking to my skin like my thermal suit did. They also had thin plates that shot from their soles at the touch of my heel to their cuffs. With them, I sank far less deeply into snow drifts, allowing a faster pace.

I also kept a close eye on the sky above. I wouldn't get caught in another storm, a *doineann* as they called them here, if I could help it.

Taking breaks every half hour, I reached the forest and a fast-rising incline as Brighde's star painted the sky orange and purple. Since I had no relevant skills or the knowledge needed to find shelter, I relied on a time-honored technique that I'd learned from video games: wander until stumbling on what I needed.

Fortunately, luck decided to be my friend in this endeavor. As two moons lit the forest more brightly than Brighde's star could, I found a small cave tucked between some outcroppings. It was so cozy that I was instantly in love, and that wasn't just because the silence I'd enjoyed all day had broken into... other noises with the moonrise. I scurried into my hole to wait for daylight.

Weeks passed with most of my activities in this time enough to drive someone up the wall with boredom. I'll only share a few events of note.

Exploring wasn't nearly as fun as I'd expected. Brighde presented me with a canvas of snow, rock, and frozen trees. Ice coated everything so thickly that dead foliage failed to fall from dead branches. What could have flash frozen these trees so that they remained standing even after

rotting?

Besides that one mystery, I found nothing of interest. I definitely didn't find signs of other civilizations.

Then again, I didn't get much time to look for them. If I learned one thing from my time in the wild, it was that video games lie. Surviving was much more difficult and *much* more of a pain than they portrayed.

For instance, I'd thought catching food would be a simple task. Throw rock at bunny until it's dead, right? No. Those jumpy little fuckers are much smarter in real life than in a game, and I, in turn, had to be smarter than them, which was harder than it should have been. Fortunately, Deirdre's rations lasted long enough to get me through my initial learning curve.

I must admit. I was surprised to find rabbits or anything else alive in this dead forest. I never saw plants uncoated by frost, so what on earth could the rabbits here be eating? How did they survive?

When I had spare time, I tried to track them to their homes, but I quickly learned I was just as *abysmal* with this as I was with most aspects of survival.

Thankfully, I did have some of the basics under my belt from the many camping trips I'd taken with my parents while growing up. So, I knew how to start a fire—when I had the proper materials to do that, of course—which trust me. That's a lot harder to do than you might think, especially here.

Dethawing enough twigs for kindling took much longer than I'd have liked. Considering I only had a small—if still futuristic looking—lighter from Deirdre on hand for that, I ended up burning through those tiny scraps of wood half the time, even after I'd gotten their icy coverings to melt away, and that task wasn't nearly as difficult as gathering the rest of the wood I needed for a fire.

I found myself often revisiting one of my original questions about this world while struggling with these particular problems. The forest I gathered my fuel from looked quite literally flash frozen, as if its seemingly crystallized state had come as a surprise. Sure, the trees beneath that icy layer looked nothing like what we had back home, but I could tell that they'd been in nearly full bloom when a sudden drop in temperature had killed them. What could have caused such a strange thing, especially over such a large area?

My many questions didn't start bothering me until I reached a point where every day wasn't a struggle to feed myself or keep warm. A few weeks after I'd gained a steady supply of food and wood, I established a routine for myself, getting comfortable. I had a swiftly improving home, one that grew on me every day, and I had the time to again mess with the demon box, left to quiescently sit while its owner had starved, slept, and fought to survive. Life began to look up for me.

And that was, of course, when disaster struck. Again.

Revision #1

Created 14 September 2025 16:45:58 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 September 2025 16:52:28 by FatalisticFable