

## The UnderArk

Frank plodded through the woods, mud threatening to suck his boots off with every step. The mask he wore was close to unbearable, stifling his every breath. Without it, he'd suffocate, but his face was sweaty under the thick rubber. The oxygen tank on his back was heavy, so besides the rifle and a few rounds, all he could carry was a map, a compass, and a cattle prod. Surface Comms were inoperable from radiation interference and he only had three rounds. Frank knew the rounds were too precious to waste on his defense and it took a lot to shake him after he witnessed the fall.

Kneeling, Frank traced the rim of a paw print in the mud. He held up his gloved hand and looked at the inch-wide, round marker stitched into the top for reference. The print was canine with four clawed toes that made deep marks in the dirt. Over three inches wide and four inches long. It had to be her. The print was fresh, within the hour, if Frank was right. The lenses of his mask were a little foggy, but she wasn't far. Frank took the rifle off his shoulder and loaded a round into the gun. Snapping the chamber shut, Frank raised the gun to his chest and prowled.

The years had made Frank an expert at prowling. Prowling meant he could survive in the new world. It was the difference between eating or being dinner. In the new wilds, the line between predator and prey was blurred. Humans had been apex predators for their technology. It was technology that blurred the line between predator and prey. Frank considered it a good day to walk that line.

Walking through the woods, Frank stepped on the roots of big trees to keep his footing. The plants were still familiar, though somewhat different. They had almost been completely wiped out, save for a few hardy oaks and a rumored patch of redwoods out west. People's grass had been the first to go. The once proud lawns turned out to be the canaries of impending disaster. The new saying became 'Once it's brown, get outta town!' It worked well for a while, but people ran out of towns. The trees, at least, were safe.

The trail was clearer as Frank urged on. It was getting easier to find a clear path

and Frank picked up speed. His feet punched from tree root to tree root, letting the trees be his guide. They were all dead, but the branches still offered a sliver of merciful shade. Even if it was night, the moon was as vicious as the sun at this point. Frank spared a glance up and saw her.

The lone wolf. She'd been wandering the woods for a few days, shaggy and covered in matted patches. There was a starved look to her, so thin that Frank could count the ribs from his hiding place. Her mouth was covered in blood and Frank could see the remains of what had been a bird. Frank felt a little jealous that she'd eaten today.

Raising the rifle to his shoulder, Frank checked his sights and let out a slow breath. He fired a shot and heard the wolf yelp. With a snarl, the wolf ran off into the trees, limping a little on her hind right leg. With a sly grin, he rushed after where the wolf had run. Frank was always impressed with how well his aim had gotten over the years.

Frank wished he didn't have to be proud. He missed being proud of things like changing his own oil or building a bookcase, even if it did come to his house in a box. He didn't feel much pride these days. A job well done was all he could look forward to anymore.

The wolf had collapsed after about ten minutes of running. It was tough for Frank's lungs to run that fast, but he couldn't afford to lose her. This had been day three of tracking this wolf and he couldn't afford to let her get away again. Frank touched the wolf's flank and felt the slow rise and fall of her chest. She was still alive. It was almost done.

Frank picked up the wolf and held her legs as he walked with the wolf on his shoulders. She barely weighed anything, but between her and the oxygen tank, it was more than Frank usually carried over long distances. He'd wished he'd caught the wolf sooner when he was stronger and younger. Still, late was better than never.

The door to the UnderArk was an unassuming barn. The complex had been built underneath it for the cover. When everyone went rabid, the last place people wanted

to be was the farms. During the day, the metal roof of the barn made it over a hundred degrees inside. It was the last place anyone wanted to be, but Frank had called it home for the last three years.

Gently setting the wolf down, Frank pulled the tarp off the floor and exposed the chained-up cellar. He undid the metal lock and opened the doors. The stairs went deep and were barely shallow enough for his heel. Frank hoped he wouldn't slip and die with the wolf after everything. Hefting the weight in his arms, Frank carefully descended the steps until he got to the lower door. Amy was inside.

"Is she alright?" Amy asked, pulling the door open. She wasn't going out for a long time, so she could get by with a rag over her mouth to let Frank in. As he walked by with the wolf in his arms, she pressed a button on the wall and Frank heard the overhead doors close behind him.

"She's alive if that's what you're asking," Frank confirmed. "I'm fine, too, thanks for asking."

"Yes, yes, I'm happy you're alive, too," Amy smirked. "Bring her in quick."

Frank struggled with the weight a little and followed the younger woman down the hallways, spiraling down and down until they were in front of a row of enclosures. Amy opened the door and Frank brought the female wolf in.

"There you go, Arlo," Amy said, looking up. "We got you a new friend!"

The other wolf was standing on a raised platform. He'd even perked up from his dinner to look at the new arrival. The wolves would be separated by the metal bars for a few days to get used to one another, but Frank hoped they would get along. It would take years to track down another wolf like this one.

"We'll do a full physical when she's had a chance to eat," Frank said, closing the door after Amy. "I don't want you sticking your hands anywhere near her until she's got a full stomach and a few less rads."

"Agreed," Amy said. "Though the same can be said of you. Don't think I didn't notice you skipped breakfast."

"You're as bad as your mother," Frank said, taking off his mask. His hair was grey

now and he knew he had more wrinkles than he deserved. The sores around his face were getting worse, but he convinced Amy that it was nothing to worry about. He could take it, if only so that she didn't have to.

"Come on," Amy said, waving him in. "We'll get you some food and a shower. Then you won't be as grumpy."

Frank took off the rest of his gear, feeling a wave of relief as he left the burdens of traveling outside on the floor behind him. He and Amy walked down into the UnderArk, passing by a trio of black bears, two bobcats with their kittens, and a lone grizzly bear. The grizzly was another animal that Frank wished he'd caught when he was younger.

Amy walked them through the lab and Frank walked into the radiation shower. He knew it was a hopeless endeavor to try and clear the radiation completely, but it was unconscious practice. The damage was already done, but he could stand a radiation shower for Amy's sake. When he was clean, Frank changed into a pair of comfortable pajamas. He was done for the day and it was time for rest.

"Hope you have an appetite," Amy said. "I know how you get after hunting all night."

"I could stand to eat, but only if you'll join me."

"Dinner with my uncle? Joy of joys..." Amy smirked. "Come on, let's go eat in the garden."

With a pair of plates, Frank and Amy served themselves what Amy had cooked. Scrambled eggs from the chickens, vegetables, and the last of Amy's experiment at 'bread'. She was a better veterinarian than a chef, for better or worse. Sitting in one of the two patio chairs, Frank let out a long breath. It had been a long day, so Frank was happy to be off his feet. Amy sat next to him and they looked up at the garden.

Four trees towered overhead, littered with hundreds of birds and small woodland herbivores. The bugs had been easy to get and even most of the birds were simple catches. After thirty days of radiation, healthy deer were the first challenging find. Now, the last four deer grazed in the pen that Frank had built for

them. Sunlight was piped in from above, tunes of water bringing the light down and growing the variety of plants, both for eating and for the ecology they were creating down below.

The UnderArk was Amy's last hope. Its success was her success. Survival was easy. If they hurt enough people and took enough things, even those least equipped for it could survive. Amy hadn't wanted to survive. She wanted to thrive. It took Frank to help her. In the final hours, some billionaires grew enough of a conscious to try and save what remained. Amy had been hand-picked for the program and she had picked Frank. One day, the UnderArk would open again. The world would be ready to grow. If Frank was lucky, he might live long enough to see it realized.

"I got in touch with the PNW Ark today," Amy said. "They caught a moose today. Even Ontario doesn't have a moose yet. This one might even be healthy enough to breed."

"You ready to tell them about our new friend for Arlo?"

"I don't wanna pressure them too much," Amy shrugged. "It takes a long time for breeding to be effective and I haven't given Luna an exam yet."

"Luna, huh?"

"Yeah, I think it sounds pretty."

"It does. I'm just surprised you already had a name. I didn't even know if I'd catch her today."

"I knew you would," Amy said. "You always come through."

The UnderArk was Amy's hope, but Amy was Frank's.