



A dark cloud looms over you, obscuring your sight. The ice-cold rain pours down from the heavens, shards of the sky falling on you. Run, run, run as fast as your feet will take you; you're almost there, to your haven. You finally arrive, surprisingly alive. You quickly strip off all your clothes and start desperately attempting to warm your abdomen. Your internal organs feel like they have been submerged in antifreeze, your skin creates a million dots of goosebumps all over your body, your nipples perk up, and your teeth chatter. You really should have moved before the storm came. The temperature outside is what? -20 Celsius? Yeah, around that, and that's without the rainstorm. Ah, wait, the heater—it should still have some power in it. If not, well, then this is the end of the line. You desperately clatter over the small black box; you can feel the heat. A feeling you have not known in over five years. With no regard for your chafing skin, you desperately hold on to the heater. It

warms you slightly, but only slightly. You can feel yourself shutting down. Can you resist this temptation? No. You've gone too long without food; your cells are practically freezing by the minute, and you cannot even exhale warmth anymore. The only thing you can hope for is that you're simply falling unconscious and not dying, but that isn't up to you anymore. As your consciousness fades, the soothing blow of the snow outside still remains. If you do go, at least you died with a bit of heat near you and not out there.

The snow really never stops, does it? It's hard to even call it snow at this point; it's just the weather now. You keep walking, careful not to slip on the frozen ground; the boots help, but only a bit. The abandoned apartment complexes litter this area, all of them empty and frozen over. Is anybody else still alive? Was everyone killed that day? Hopefully not. Though the chances of meeting anybody, friend or foe, are slim, Besides your lantern, there is no light at all in the streets, and it's eleven in the goddamn morning! Yeah, the sun dimly shines above you, Barley, but besides that, all you have is yourself. Even worse, you've been walking for about six hours, and nothing has changed. It's all been the same: ice covers everything, the snowstorm never ends, corpses are glazed over in a chrysalis of frost and dust, and the remaining hope is palpable in the air.

God, the air is... disgusting. This stupid mask allows you to breathe, again, somewhat. It's always somewhat vague, never concrete. It's always wavering; there hasn't been a yes or no in five years. Just maybe, Is that all your dull existence is now? Wandering through ghost cities while feeling bad about yourself? Maybe. Aw, hell, see? You're doing it now. Regardless, scratch Tucson off the map of possible traces of life. This is the tenth state. You

might actually be all alone. At least the snow is here to comfort you. If you really wanted to, you could just end it all, strip naked, and run around until your body freezes from the inside. Naw, that's not how it's going to end. It'll take more than this perpetual winter to wear you down. You've walked twenty miles this morning, and still, nothing has changed. It's still dark, cold, and lonely. The world around you, still a perpetual graveyard for everybody else but you, is still there. It's all the same: the same buildings, colored gray and brown and coated in a thick sheen of frost. Your clock, your first line of defense against the cold, keeps flapping in the wind. On the bright side, you've found six tiny sticks. Maybe, maybe, maybe, if you're lucky, it'll be wood... God, a fire, a flame, warmth First, you'd have to find a shelter, a safe haven, a place of reprieve—if those even exist anymore. Wait... of course they do; you've been walking past abandoned buildings for fucking four years! Holy hell, the snow really is affecting you! Or maybe you're just really, really dim.

Focus; try to find a building. A singular, concrete goal—finally. A goal. Just keep walking, keep listening to the snow crunch under your feet, keep wandering, and you'll find it. Another ten miles, and no suitable place. Admittedly, it shouldn't be this easy; you want the challenge. Also, three more sticks, hopefully wood. Just keep walking. You'll find it.

Walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk.. Finally, you see it: a unique building, a ruin, but still. A church of sorts, no, a mausoleum of memories and doctrines before the world ended. You take a walk inside. still cold—yes. No, there are no holes in the walls. That is all that matters. No wind can blow in and extinguish your glory—the flame. You count about thirteen little sticks. You retrieve one of your spare shoelaces and make a home-made contraption using friction and motion to create a spark. It's like one's in the movies. Wow, the movies. I haven't thought about that in a while. Regardless, the motion continues, and your hand desperately rubs the two sticks together, hoping to create a tiny burst of life. After trying for what seems like an eternity... "fshhhh" The tiniest whimper of life Immediately, you take the flame and align it with the other sticks. Slowly, the small candlelight flame turns into an actual fire.

A feeling of rejuvenation washes over you, and it takes all of your willpower not to throw yourself into the flame. You have to deal with simply basking in the dim heat it creates. And, oh, it IS glorious; a feeling of rebirth stretches throughout every atom of your body; your cells start to move, move, move; kinetic energy flows through your nervous system. Warmth washes over your body; the ongoing war the frost has waged against you is healing bit by bit, defrosting and thawing. The outside remains; the cold remains; death and frost remain... But here, in a tiny mausoleum in the ruins of a destroyed world, there is a glint, a spark, a dribble of life... a small flame; that's all you really need.