The snow was coming down in heavy, fat flakes, adding to the three feet already on the ground. It would most likely add another two feet before the sun broke upon the horizon. Colonel Huang Xu Lin of the New Imperial Asian army looked once more to the sky and cursed silently. He hated this godless country. He had been fighting here for the last three years and had yet to see the eastern side of these mountains. Three years of trying to bring a glorious new civilization to these barbarians. Things had started off so well. First the surprise invasion of all the western states. Hawaii was cut off and conquered within a day. San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland were all sights of the invasion forces. The surprise attack of these major cities had left the American scrambling to the defense. The armies pushed as deep as they could before a concentrated resistance rose up. Once they realized that they had already lost the coast, the Americans order all forces to fall back to the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains and set up a line of defense. Like so many other great conquerors throughout history, it was a line that the imperial army was having an impossible time breaking through. Hundreds of flights had been sent in pursuit of the retreating American forces, hoping to cripple any bases in the Midwest before the ground assault made its way through the mountains.

Every flight was surprised when an invincible line of anti-aircraft weapons opened fire the second the flights cleared the range. Every flight since had failed as well. To slow the empire down further, the treacherous Americans had destroyed every major road and rail way through the mountains, forcing the empire’s forces to blaze trails through. The generals were hoping to clear the ranges within a month. Then the worst snow storm in over a century rolled in, covering the entire range in a heavy blanket of snow and ice. Avalanches and fallen trees were common. Huang looked up the trail, past the line of armored vehicles idling in the snow and slush, their exhausts creating a hanging screen of steam in the air. A recent avalanche had blocked the path ahead with very large trees and rocks, further delaying the battalion from their rendezvous with the rest of the division. As Huang watched several of his engineers move between the block and the convoy, he heard the muted crunch of boots approaching from behind him. It signaled the return of one of his reconnaissance squads. He had sent several on ahead to get the lay of the land.

“Report,” Huang ordered.

“Sir, advanced reconnaissance shows no signs of American forces within five miles of our position,” a male voice said from behind Huang. “There is, however, a small farm eight miles to the northeast. Three structures: a two story house, a large barn, and a smaller outbuilding. Three occupants were observed: two males and one female. We can easily slip by them without ever exposing the battalion.”

Huang allowed the report to circle his mind before setting upon a course of action.

“Kill them. Take another squad and kill the family. Search the buildings and the home, take anything of value and any weapons you find. Once that is complete, burn it all.” Huang ordered. He could sense the officer behind him stiffen with hesitation.

“Sir, they are harmless to us. They do not know we are here,” The officer said. “Why is it necessary to kill those who pose us no harm?”

“Are you refusing to follow my orders lieutenant?” Huang asked. “Shall I remind you what happens to officers that question the orders of their betters?

“No, sir. Your will shall be done.” The officer replied dejectedly. Huang heard the officer turn and begin to walk away. He turned slightly to watch the white and gray clad troops disappear within the flying snow. A set of muted explosions signaled that the way ahead was clear. The vehicles of his convoy throttled their engines like the roars of many bloodthirsty war beasts. Huang looked towards the east, envisioning his enemies huddling in their bases, hiding from the cold. Further east he could see his ultimate victory shining upon the horizon. He could see his name in the history books now, hear it sung from the Forbidden City itself.

The clearing was wide, flat, and calm, the snow had lightened slightly, allowing one to see the entire spans. Nothing seemed to move amongst the many trees that encircled it. Almost nothing. A small puff of steam rose from the southern section of trees as an older buck moved cautiously towards the edge of the line. Its ears flipped back and forth, trying to pick up the smallest of sounds that did not belong. Its nose twitched as it sniffed out the barest scents. It stood immobile for ten more minutes, before deciding that it was safe to venture forth. It strode forward, still looking for signs of danger. It moved thirty meters out into the center of the clearing before stopping. It gazed around at its surroundings once more before looking down at the ground. It pawed at the snow, looking for any scrubs of grass that survived the snow. Its hoof finally found what it was searching for and the deer lowered its head to eat, completely unaware of the mortal threat that lingered nearby.

The crosshairs settled on the shoulder of the deer and rested there. The eye behind the scope stared unblinkingly.

Johnny had been lying in the same spot on the western side of the clearing just inside the tree line all morning, waiting for the perfect prize to come along. He had been reflecting upon the last few years and how twisted his life had become. At five feet eleven inches tall, his time on his family’s ranch had honed his body and strengthened his muscles. He was the star linebacker of his high school and was a starter for his freshman and sophomore year at Purdue University where he was studying physics and chemistry. Then the invasion had come. He had been home on summer vacation when American forces abandoned the west coast and turned the mountains his family had lived in for generations into a giant wall. For the last year, he and his parents and brother had survived in the same way his ancestors had, by hunting and growing their food. They also scavenged parts and supplies from nearby areas that had been abandoned during the retreat. Now at twenty four, he was lying under a snow bank that had covered him in the hours of waiting, trying to help his family survive the harshest winter anyone had ever known.

Johnny incrementally moved the forefinger of his left hand to the trigger of his Winchester rifle and let it sit there for a few moments as he gauged the wind and distance. He began to apply pressure to the trigger, squeezing it back. Just before it reached its terminus, Johnny let some pressure off as the buck took a couple of steps forward. He readjusted his aim and began to put the pressure back on the trigger. He brought it back to the terminus and paused. His father had taught him to fire between heartbeats. Just as he timed the shot, the buck’s head snapped up, its ears alert and searching. Johnny took his finger away from the trigger, hoping the buck would again calm down.

That’s when he heard it. The distinct rattle and pops of gunfire being brought upon the wind to his ears. Instinctually his ears located the sound to the southwest towards his home. Johnny burst from his position in an explosion of snow and ice, causing the buck to panic and cry out as it tore off towards the safety of the north woods. Johnny took a quick second to stretch his extremities and sling his rifle over his shoulder before taking off at a sprint towards his home. Using the skills taught to him over the course of his life, Johnny was able to distinguish between thick snow and the recently covered trail. The sounds of gunfire increased as he closed the distance. He was still a half mile out when the concussion of an explosion rattled the air. Johnny tried to will his legs to move faster as panic began to set in. He crested the final ridge separating his home from the valley he was hunting in. He slid to a stop at the edge of the tree line and gazed in horror at the scene below him.