

The silence I'm enjoying is slaughtered as I'm dragged to the land of the living.

I curse, then shut my hands over my ears, desperate for the ringing to stop before I lose my hearing permanently. Thankfully, the sound ceases, but that damn ringing remains. I stagger onto my feet, scanning the now desolate city of Vancouver underneath a bland, black blanket, and simultaneously gazing at the body lying before me.

The body belongs to an elderly woman, maybe seventy or eighty. But her advanced age doesn't undo the disgust I feel at seeing the shoe-shaped pits stamped into her clothes. *How could someone be so merciless to an old lady?* No, they weren't being merciless, they were being smart; there was an entire hoard surging forward to get away from the demon. Even if one person had stopped to help her, they would have been trampled too, or worse yet, it would've triggered a string of tramlings, killing even more people. *Cruel way to live, I guess.*

An avalanche of concrete falls in the far distance, as a quilled, callous tail curls behind the man-made cover it so carelessly destroys.

There's a valley of rubble in front of me lined with buildings sliced in half - but I can barely focus on that when there's a stop sign only a few feet away. And just a foot off the ground is the head of the soldier who got himself killed. Well, his head's still attached to his body. In fact, most of his body's pretty intact; there aren't too many cuts, and not a single inch of his uniform below his collarbone is stained with blood. A standard sight. *No, there's nothing normal about seeing a man in American military uniform lying unconscious on the ground in the middle of a Canadian street.* Overall, standard mind-numbing sight. Then my gaze hikes up to the head... and that's where I see the U-shaped stop sign pole, stained with blood and other various internal body things, impaled halfway through the man's skull.

I turn around before I can vomit at the sight, and lurch forward, my stomach melting beneath the pressure. But physical stress quickly replaces emotional: my left shoulder, still fractured, crackles with spite, forcing my right hand to caress it like I'm petting an ungrateful chihuahua.

*Dammit Leonard, where are you when I need you to fend off the scary monsters?* No, it's good my childhood dog isn't here. That ferocious little man would get devoured by... by the...

I fall to the ground, my mind riddled with the spirits of the trampled and bloodied bodies that surround me. *Why aren't I moving? I need to move.* But I can't move. I cannot, for the life of me, *physically freaking move.* Gallons of blood are being spilt into the sewers, but I'm too damn cowardly to move an inch. I was so determined to save those other random soldiers from death, why can't I keep myself moving?

I look at the ocean, and the boats displaced by the demon's arrival. *The docks. I'll escape by sea.* I finally push forward, without that same motivation which guided me to save the others. I'm dead inside. Like I'm hauling my own corpse to the ocean.

Eh, I wouldn't be the first body I've hauled to sea. All those bodies I dragged onto lifeboats when those two other giants attacked my boat... my arms were ready to fall right off. But they didn't, and I managed to get a bunch of people onto lifeboats, myself one of them. I couldn't lift my arms after that, so I didn't stay behind to salvage what was left. Or shoot a flare into the sky - or at a giant monster.

How did I survive that night? To be randomly spotted by two young ladies, who plucked me out from a sea of other bodies... I should've been among those crushed by that giant fist, especially since all of my friends were there. All the coworkers who were around my sleeping quarters, rowdy and sweaty enough to turn a cold steel room into a swamp. But that swamp was my home for so long. And with the swipe of a ten-ton finger, it was stolen from me. None of my cremators were *forced* to stay aboard; they all stranded themselves on the wrecked freighter by choice. Something about 'honor' or 'helping others.' Nah, that's stupid. In the face of something that terrifying, you don't try to help others. The only thing that'll do is get yourself or others killed.

And when I told them that - after they offered me a flare and the chance to stay behind - they berated me for being a coward. Is wanting to *live* cowardly? Well, then I'm the biggest damn coward on the planet; my life *must* be worth something, if that's why I try to keep myself alive. I

don't even care about improving my living condition; I was fine working on that freighter, cuz' it meant staying alive. And yet, that goal was somehow overruled in the minds of my coworkers by the fact that 'other people matter.' *Yeah, of course I give a shit about other people.* That's why I tried to get them to go on a lifeboat with me. And they all got crushed. That's why I tried to save those innocent young soldiers. And they got crushed.

Maybe the problem is that everyone I meet dies by getting crushed underneath a giant monster; maybe I should just get friends who die in new ways. No, I just need friends who don't die. Like Veronica. She evaded the government, so she's good at staying alive. I bet she gets it, even if she's a little over thirty years younger than me.

Already, I bob up and down on the buoyant boardwalk, hopping from one destroyed plank to the next, the soles of my shoes nipped by the splintered wood. I wave my arms about, regaining my balance before I can fall off the side and plummet to the riverbed. The night's already bitterly cold - getting soaked would just make it worse. I won't be needing a large boat; a small dingy will do fine, like the one to my left. It's no longer than two men, and no deeper than my ankles. I'll be skimming off into the ocean in no time.

I hop onto the boat below, dunking the small engine underwater. I loosen the fuel cap so the engine can breathe and squeeze the small rubber bulb with a rope attached on either side. Here's to hoping that this dingy's full of fuel. *Shoot, I guess this technically counts as stealing; well, Veronica, you aren't-*

The ground quakes erratically, and my sweating palms accidentally pump a bit more fuel than necessary into the tank. *That shouldn't be a problem, right?* I turn to face the boat's front; moving forward, I put more weight on my left shoulder. Big mistake. The joint cries out in pain, demanding I stop before it's shattered into crumbs. I fall onto my belly, now resorting to crawling forward with one arm, endlessly wary over how the thundering stomps rummage through the city, signaling the demon's approach. I lift the choke handle - but another jolt from the ground

tears my right hand away from the bar, almost ripping it off. I'm surprised I didn't cut my hand.

But now that the choke's open for the engine, I turn my hand onto the ignition, and-

And an unforgiving shadow is cast over the docks to my right, blocking every artificial light source from reaching the dock, and plunging the shattered boardwalk further into despair.

The demon's head - the same head which snorted a man's head through a stop sign - dips into the water, pursing its lips like it's kissing its hideous reflection. Then, it carves the water with its horns, creating gentle ripples while mauling the wooden boardwalk and butchering the boats. My hand remains on the ignition - too terrified to let go, for letting go might accidentally trigger the engine, and therefore grab the demon's attention. But I'm also so sweaty and fidgety that I just might start the engine anyway.

With my body stretched across over the boat's hull, and my upper back raised inches off the ground, my abdomen starts to burn with the intensity of a thousand sit-ups - within seconds, my muscles constrict around my stomach, begging me to stop. But I can't, for then I'd drop my hand on the ignition switch and start the engine, . *Godammit, I should've... exercised... more... ow!* My own abs punch my stomach, desperate for relief; to my left, the demon plants an arm, shifting its fused claws across the shoreline. The crunching of concrete startles me, jolting my hand upward. My mind breaks from the pressure, and I flick the ignition switch high enough to start the engine.

The low rumble may be quaint compared to the demon's enormous scale, but under this immense pressure, the quaint whirring of a boat engine roars like a hurricane in my ears. *If I had held up my arm for a few more seconds... seconds!* But alas, my hand finally collapses, ending the burning sensation in my core. Instead, my entire body's doused in gasoline in set ablaze, once I see the demon's eyeless head craning in my direction.

*It can't notice me. No, it will notice me, but it won't care. I'm one guy. What kind of nutritional value would one guy have for a big-ass monster?*

I must not move. But the demon's nostrils send a chilling blizzard through the docks, forcing my body to shiver against its will. My nails rattle on the hull, tapping the metal with just enough noise to lure its head closer. *Why can't I stop shivering? Stop it!* No matter what I do, I cannot make myself stop. I keep tapping the hull, capturing its curiosity and sealing my fate. I can't even look up to face it. My only hope is that the demon mistakes me for a static object, that's only moving due to its casual breathing. And the only other thing I hope for is that the breathing stays casual. If it snorts, I'll be reduced to a red disk.

I'm also tempted to reach for my pocket, as if there's something in my sweat-drenched, soggy pants that'll save me. Maybe there was one that could save me. Maybe if those military guys had lived, had I convinced them not to aimlessly throw their lives away, they would... aimlessly throw their lives away, here and now, for me. Instead of random people. But then again, that last guy did technically save people, didn't he? That grenade averted the demon from the masses, whom he probably saved from a death by trampling. He actually saved someone, against my inferior judgement. And he died for it, even though I tried to save him.

And now I'm stuck here, about to die saving no one.

Another low rumble echoes across the city. But unlike the demon's breath, this low rumble doesn't emerge from a throat; the rumble caulks the vacant city, with a low, mechanical whir. The breath of the demon - having nearly frozen my sweat and stuck me to the boat - disappears. Have I been saved? Am I-

The demon unleashes another blood-letting curdle, and I escape my frightful bonds and shut my palms over my ears, and curl my head between my knees to further erase the horrific sound. Only when the sound of a devastating explosion replaces its curdle, does the noise finally cease.

A fighter jet flies overhead like a huge wasp, furious over a foreign animal poking its nest. Another volley of explosive sounds spew my ears from behind, and another two fighter jets fly overhead. And the demon doesn't respond. *Is it weakened? Are they finally killing it?*

I gloat over the explosive destruction for a few seconds - before realizing that I'm standing in the dead center of said destruction. I release the rope tying the boat to the pier. I dive for the ignition next, fully ripping open the boat's engine amidst a violent scene of fighter jets pummeling a giant monster. Before I get a whiff of the well deserved pain the demon's experiencing, the boat throttles to life, pushing straight towards another portion of destroyed, stray pier. Before my head's given a thousand splinters, I grab the motor handle, steering the boat parallel to the pier and towards the river's interior. The city lights are once again obstructed by an ominous shadow; as the demon twists to face the city's interior, its tail sweeps through the pier, clearing the river of any man-made objects. Before the demon's tail can sink me, a series of fiery strikes batter its back, forcing the demon to kneel on crippled knees while lumbering into the city. *Haha, it's doomed now. Admit it, you stupid beast; you've been bullying us this entire time, but now we're the ones bullying you. You deserve this.*

I look forward into the river a final time, ensuring that I'm not on a collision course with any unwanted boardwalks, boats, or islands. Then, I turn around and watch the light show. Some childish, guilty part of me knows this is wrong: sure, the demon's about to be bombarded to kingdom come, but all those homes - mine somewhere among them - will be incinerated as well, along with all those unfortunate people. But watching the demon quiver on its knees, fall to the ground, and being forced to join the corpses which it trampled... I can't stop shivering. Not because of the frigid cold night or terrible fear which overwhelmed me, but out of a burgeoning desire for revenge for those who died. *Their bodies won't be retrieved though. They'll all be incinerated.* So I can't dismiss the sadness I feel, either. No matter how hard I try.

Finally, the demon collapses, no longer trying to catch fighter jets with its gangly arms and jaws. The demon knows it's beat; by curling its head beneath its body, and letting those massive shoulder spikes on its back shimmer with white, it seems to be raising a flag of surrender. *Wait, that doesn't make sense. How would a dumb monster know that a white flag-*

The quills on its tail ignite with a bright neon blue-and-purple, then swing forward and stab its own back. I jump up, before slipping on the wet boat and smashing my tailbone into the hard metal. *Grr!* But what kind of tactic is this? Is it retreating into its body like a turtle? No, it looks more like a dinosaur than a turtle. But whatever kind of creature the demon is, and whatever kinds of bizarre behaviors it exhibits, none of that will make a difference. In moments, the only thing pumping through its veins will be scorching fire.

Two new black triangles blotch out the night sky, except they don't deliver the same low rumble that the fighter jets do. Only once they cross through my vision - and the excitement - do I notice them. And when I do, I rise back onto my feet - and collapse immediately, from the pain in my left shoulder which I keep forgetting is shattered. But I regain my footing and punch the air in excitement, watching as the B-2 bombers soar over the crouching demon. The fighter jets clear the way for the bombers, for once those bombers unleash their fury, everything will be flattened. The demon shines its shoulder spikes brighter, with its tail quills still impaled in its back. But even that eerie nonsense won't scare the superior might of the bombers.

The bombers unleash their first volley; where the fighter jets made the demon shudder, the bombers' bombs make it weep. Buildings melt where the bombs land; yet the demon's skin stays completely intact, the only visible damage sustained being the slowly parting, glowing shoulder spikes. Doesn't matter what it does; the demon knows it's finished. As multiple planes circle overhead, it continues igniting its strange shoulder spikes with light, refusing to back down. So it does feel something other than pain. Pride. It's too prideful to even *consider* abandoning the fight. And that shall be its downfall.

Through the thick veil of smoke and the incredible distance I've traveled, the scene's ignited by the fire. Even after the bombers unleash a second bombardment, the demon doesn't react. The spikes have become parallel to the ground now - and with an ear-splitting crackle, streaks of lightning pulse out from its flaring shoulder spikes and back, until the night retreats behind the horizon. I stagger backward, and stare behind me; there's still plenty of distance I can put

between me and the battle. As though all the calm of the river hadn't already been destroyed, a strange hum swells in the air. I twist my head to find the hum's source, but the answer's staring me dead in the eye; the demon's producing the humming. The bombers unleash another volley. But even though I stand over a kilometer away, I can feel the pilots' impending dread; the bombs melt before they can touch the monster's skin. And the air before me starts to swelter, hazing the demon which resembles a thundercloud.

The brightness of the lights take effect. With wings of metal melted and folding inwards, one of the fighter jets falls into the ground. Neither the sound of the boom nor the sight of the explosion reaches me. Around me, the air fumes, blistering my skin with such smoldering intensity that I splash water onto my face, begging for that frigid fear to return. I wish the frigid fear could return, because then, the worst was left to my imagination. Now, the next phase of this nightmare has arrived.

Those lights... those aren't just a display to ward off a threat... it's... it's an *attack*!

I scream against the horrible humming, and take one last look before I hop off the boat and dive into the water, anxious for the cold to flood through my veins. But with that, the monster retracts its scapula within the span of a millisecond, smashing its shoulder blades together.

White.

I see white. Everything is white. Even when I shut my eyes tighter than the bonds between atoms, slam my palms over my eyes, and throw my whole body overboard into the icy depths, all I see is pure white light. Not only has the demon turned night to day, it's hurled the sun at the Earth like a baseball. The light does not dim. I briefly experience the misconception that my ears will be spared from the sensation my eyes experience. But no. Whatever the equivalent of that pure white light is finally hits my ears. Pure sound consumes my eardrums, as I'm forced to endure the maximum limits of my senses.

For a minute, it endures. No, it doesn't simply endure, it overrides my very being. For a whole minute, both pure sound and light punish my existence, even as I sink to the riverbed of my



watery tomb. I scream, but the scream is nullified by the tyranny the demon's shoulders emit. Even the water doesn't feel cold anymore; all I feel is lukewarm water, and the bubbles escaping my lungs and snagging my cheek.

After an eternity - compacted down to a minute - the horror ends. White fades to black, and all noise is silenced. Instantly relieved from the overwhelming sensation, I lunge to the water's surface, gulping in gallons of fresh air before I drown. The air's unbearably hot - hot enough to make my skin feel brittle - but I walk on the shallow riverbed, as the level of water slowly dips beneath my knees. Once I climb onto the island's shore, I pat my forearms, feeling the warmth of the demon's aftershock, combing the tarnished hairs on my head and mottled skin of my body. My eyelids refuse to open; even beneath the surface of the waves, the heat seared my eyelashes together. I duke it out with my welded eyelashes, until I gain a glimpse of my surroundings. But what was once a beautiful, moonlit land-and-sea-scape has been reduced to a black, charred sky, devoid of starlight. And behind me, where that dreaded demon lays...

Nothing. Behind it, is nothing. I faintly recall a city, with buildings sticking out from the ground and people bustling about. But now, there simply lays a molten nothing. Nothing is there... except for *it*.

I scream, but I can't hear a single thing. Even my vision's fuzzy from the shock. I hold my right fist - made fivefold by my vision's fuzziness - to the demon, but my rage does nothing. I can barely see whatever I'm supposed to be looking at. The demon could be resting, jumping for joy, roaring out into the abyss angrily... but none of it would make a difference. My body's drained of all energy, sapped of any will to resist.

So I collapse backwards, soiling my back on the muddy beach, staring up into the night sky, and search for a single star not murdered in cold blood by the demon. I find nothing. I see only empty darkness. A normal person would be terrified of that darkness, but I'm not. I've seen the worst of what darkness has to offer. And the darkness doesn't make me feel scared. It just

makes me envy the darkness even more, for in the darkness, I can't know the worst of what that demon can do.

I stroke my stomach with my one functioning arm; I wish I had something to eat. My stomach feels as desolate as the city which got obliterated. I hold my right hand over my mouth; for a moment, I almost chew the mud, for I'm wishing for anything to fill the void inside me. Instead, the void gapes wider as the ground beneath me quakes, dissolving whatever food remains in my stomach. The quaking grows so extreme, that my body's lifted off the ground and slammed back down. Good thing I'm on the soft mud to comfort my fall.

Three massive silhouettes emerge from the darkness, furiously charging out of the river on the opposite shore. But these silhouettes are unlike the demon which annihilated the city; they vary in shape and size, with the largest silhouette being bigger than the other two combined. Even with the city of Vancouver decimated, it doesn't matter how much energy the demon has left; its friends have arrived, ready to bring the destruction inland.

Or maybe not.

The three silhouettes grab the exhausted demon when they're within range, wrestling the demon until its arms and legs hover off the ground. The first silhouette easily overpowers it, dragging the exhausted demon out to sea, sinking below the depths, to my right, behind the island, vanishing back into the night as quickly as it appeared.

Now, I lay on the mud, half sunken into the Earth which will claim me. I stare up at the sky, with a soul having been burned, tortured, and lashed, and wonder what other calamities the darkness hides. No matter how much I think I've endured, there's always something more. But despite all of this, I'm alive. I'm alive to watch another person get snorted through a stop sign, or crushed by falling concrete, or incinerated by a demon's shoulder flames. And I'll be chained to a rock while it happens, powerless to stop the tragedy.

And yet, every time I watch these mass losses of life, I live, breathing the air that's soaked with sorrow as I fall asleep to awake in a fresh day. Because that is the only way good will be

achieved. Only those who understand true loss will be the ones willing to prevent it, to stop others from hastily rushing to their doom. And / understand true loss.

Over the course of an hour, if not several, this demon has torn down buildings. It has trampled thousands of lives - literally and figuratively. It has melted away a bustling, vibrant city, a place where people came together to enjoy their lives. But those *demons* shredded away humanity's achievements. The monsters have sent a clear signal: they have *no* intention of treating human lives with any kind of dignity or mercy. They hate us. And because of that, because these beasts are so determined to exterminate every human being, I-

A new source of light flashes overhead, and I shut my eyes for the final time tonight, finally letting the fatigue swallow me. But before I can drift away from the stress, one final thought rings in my mind:

Tonight, the war between men and monsters begins.