

3:57 PM

It's not over. I hop forward, unable to run properly since my arms are bound by rope. At least the gravel path gives me traction. But my footsteps are way too loud; the creature's coming for me once it's finished with Preston. Or not, since it'll be- no, I don't like that thought. It won't eat Preston. There wasn't a single bite mark on the guy me and Roman found dead at the bottom of the cliff. Preston's the same; the creature's smart enough to not unlearn its lessons. But is the creature so smart that it doesn't view *us* as smart? Who knows... either way, it's pursuing me next. But why did the creature not follow the footprints leading to the house? Why'd it mark and follow me?

I have to think about this. If there's something about that creature I can exploit, I can still see another sunrise with Simeon and Roman. So it's blind, which is why- no, that's wrong, it sniped me with perfect precision using a small rock. It can't be blind. So why did it need the blood trail to follow me, as opposed to just the footprints? Is its vision blurry, so it could only see the color markings?

Turns out, the gravel doesn't give as much traction as I hoped; the gravel slips out from under my feet, and I land on my stomach, hands still bound. The only weakness the creature might have... is footprints. Which is a stupid and useless weakness for me. It's thin, maybe it isn't very strong? Roman and I could jump the creature, so long as we have the element of surprise.

No, a fistfight against that freak of nature would go horribly astray; that creature fought David, Ari, Preston, and Simeon all at once. Even if Simeon fled and Ari cowered, Preston and David should've had enough strength between the two of them to take down

the creature. Instead, David's whole face got obliterated; regardless of whether his face was rammed into the ground, or he got sucker-punched, he died from heavy bleeding and a crushed skull.

David's dead.

What that means hasn't dawned on me until now. Yeah, seeing a kid's lifeless corpse was disturbing, but the most disturbing part isn't seeing his corpse. It's what I won't see or hear, for the rest of my life. I'll never hear him boasting aimlessly about how strong or cool he is, or ranting on about how disgusting his friends are. Sure, it's not exactly something I'd miss hearing, but every time something's missing from the classroom cacophony, I'll remember tonight, and recall how his life was cut short.

Same with Preston and Ari, too. I won't hear Preston's calm discussion-holding of how everyone's doing, or Ari's sassy banter. Those voices, those ideas, those dreams... they won't just be dead. It'll be like they never even existed. I mean, to some people, those dreams will still exist; the school will probably mourn the kids for a few days, and their families will mourn them for months, likely years... until they're dead as well. But me, I'll carry on living. I'll go to those same classes, except this time, the seats where they sat will be empty of binders, folders and assignments.

But my brother... if he dies, my life won't just go bland. It'll be drained of what's good, of what I want. There won't be anyone there to support me; my parents will despise me further, and mock me for my failures. And Roman... he wasn't nice, but seeing him run so fast motivated me to become better. Now, one of the guiding lights in my goal to better myself... will be gone. And they can never be replaced.

I could've gotten on my feet again by now. I *should've* gotten back up by now. But I can't. I'm stuck here, unable to imagine a world where the people guiding me through life are absent, yet being forced to imagine that life anyway. No, not imagine, genuinely experience that life. Right now, Roman and Simeon could be *dead*. I haven't heard or seen them for hours. I last saw Simeon where David was beaten to death, and Roman... well, I was never comfortable leaving him with a rotting corpse. I'm isolated, and soon, I'll be more so. My eyes wet the gravel below, as my breathing hardens and loudens, becoming more difficult to control. I don't want to them to leave me.

But they don't have to leave me. Just because I haven't seen them doesn't mean they're dead. They could easily be alive right now, awaiting the moment they need me to save them from that creature. But what the hell am I supposed to do to fight that thing? Having lives at stake won't magically make me stronger; the power of friendship doesn't exist in real life, after all. I'm useless against a threat that powerful.

But I don't have to be. I'm not capable of defeating that monster, but Roman and Simeon might. Together, the three of us would stand a chance. The only thing I have to do is find them. I *must* find them. I *must* not give up! Because I'm on the verge of finally doing something memorable, something that people will celebrate me for. I dreamed for a chance like this, to show how great and awesome I can be. I begged and prayed for the chance to do something good for my friends.

Now, I can seize that chance. Only with the added threat of death if I fail.

4:32 AM

Well, I certainly haven't missed hiking downhill.

One thing I took for granted was the flat terrain; now that I constantly descend towards my target, my organs have re-entered the cycle of falling and splattering on my spleen, repeating that process hundred of times over the course of twenty steps.

Roman's my first target; if I can have his speed on my side, than I have an instant edge in combing lots of ground quickly. And furthermore, I already have a general idea of where he might be; I doubt he would've strayed too far from the car pyramid we found yesterday.

Wait, yesterday? Was that actually yesterday? Since I did sleep, it's probably past midnight now; so yes, it's yesterday. But I wouldn't be shocked if the river incident with Simeon and the map was multiple days ago. I've been hiking for so long that staying awake for another few hours might be impossible. And the mud's so soft that landing in it once will lull me to sleep. And unlike last time, I won't pass out for only an hour. No, I'll hit the hay and then some. I'm so fatigued that - if I stay awake - I'll be sore by the next sunset. And I'll die from exhaustion if I stay awake to see another.

Not to mention, I haven't been the only one hard on myself either. Roman's brutal hiking pace wore my legs down almost immediately; him yelling at me and slapping me that one time was icing on the cake. Preston threw me to the ground, tied me up, and beat me in ways I'll probably never know. By all accounts, I shouldn't be awake right now; my legs are on the verge of shattering, and they will if they receive another blow, no matter how minor. So, if the monster doesn't kill me, I'll inevitably die from exhaustion

But maybe that's how things are supposed to be. It's not like I offer anything useful to this world; I fail in virtually every aspect of life. I thought that fixing my problems and improving myself would make me feel better. But throughout this hike, I've been bombarded with the whining and depression of others, who are far better than me at almost every discipline. So, it seems that, no matter how hard I try to fix my life, I'll never find happiness.

Or maybe I'm the lucky one. Maybe my uselessness is a blessing in disguise, because if I'm useless, then I can't disappoint everyone around me. Everyone I know fell short of their comically unrealistic goals, and despite their high standards, my peers continue to beat themselves. But since I have no goals, no aspiration to improve on a skill I'm already amazing at, I'll never hate myself.

Well, that settles it. The moment I find my brother and Roman, I'm fleeing this place to live a mediocre life. I'll skip college, land some job as a fast food worker; it won't pay well, but at least not much pays worse. I'll have a childless relationship with some random lady - assuming a girl would settle for me - and find a small house which has two leaks in the roof and a cockroach infestation in the basement. I'll live a life where I achieve absolutely nothing, because I am nothing. Maybe Simeon will copy me; he'd benefit from a stress-free life. Mason too. As for Roman... he'll become a track star. I know he will. Because never once did he complain about being 'slow.'

Someone's breathing.

Has the monster caught up to me? I stand still, awaiting the sound of twigs cracking under the weight of strong feet. But I don't hear that sound. Instead, the breathing

persists; it's not a series of congested inhales and exhales, but a slow, confident rhythm, like that of someone who's mastered control of his lungs.

"Roman?"

There's no response, but that breathing flows back and forth, like a child rocking back and forth peacefully on a swaying swing set. Am I hearing my own breathing? No, my breathing's run amok, so loud it hurts to hear. But if Roman's here, if he's behind that tree besides me, then surely he'd respond. Is he asleep? In these conditions? Unlikely.

Am I confusing the monster with Roman?

I freeze, tuning into my surroundings. But to my dismay, I hear nothing. No twigs crunching, not even the sound of wind knocking the loose spring leaves out of the trees. Could the monster already be here, already snuck up on me, and I never noticed? No, it would've made noise. I'm safe right now, there's nothing wrong, nothing's about to attack me. I don't know why the hairs on my arm are standing up, there's-

"Winch?"

No, I can't be sure that's Roman. He could be behind that tree - but the monster could be there as well. "Winch, it's me. I'm here."

No, the monster could be mimicking Roman's voice! I don't know what it's capable of; for all I know, it could be wearing Roman's skin and imitating his voice. If I see what's behind that tree, whatever's there could grab my face and snap my head clean off.

But then again, even if Roman's not behind the tree, there's still no point in fleeing. The moment I muttered Roman's name, I gave up my location to anyone listening; if the monster really is behind that tree, it could just run out from behind and attack. No, *I* need

to make the first move; I have to be the one who sees if its friend or foe that's hiding from me! "Winch? Please say something!"

"Roman! It is you!" Turning the corner was the right choice; Roman's there, sure enough. But based on his appearance, whatever he's undergone in the last few hours must've been a catastrophe. His mud-coated face has a small cut on its cheek. Or maybe that's just redness from crying. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"My right shin broke, Winch." Oh, frick. "I can't run or walk right now without my leg exploding. Hang on, are your hands tied?"

Oh yeah. I forgot I was running with tied hands. "Yeah, can you move your arms?"

"One second, let me find a stick." Roman finds a six-inch stick on the ground, and splits it in half so the middle part has a diagonal edge. Within a few seconds, the ropes fall to the ground, like they were never there. "So... I'm gonna need you for support, if I'm gonna move. How do you wanna do this?"

"Alright, hang onto me." I bend down to Roman's right side, and he wraps his arm over my shoulder. With his huge, lanky frame hoisted on my back, I've become a natural crutch. "How'd it break? By walking?"

"Winch... I have some apologizing to do." Roman... apologize? Sounds impossible, but... so does my peers getting butchered in the middle of the woods. "When you said that some kind of... non-human was responsible, I mocked you. I might've made a mistake in doing so."

I want to tell Roman to stop, that it's okay since he's injured. We walk forward, but already, the massive gap in the length our strides makes moving as one extremely

challenging; Roman falls forward, but I use all my weight to support him so he doesn't put any pressure on the injured leg.

"Roman, I think I also have to apologize," I say.

"We haven't seen each other in hours." Roman accidentally slips forward, but I catch him. "I'll slow down if you speed up a bit. Just do your best to keep up while talking."

"Well, it's on the behalf of someone else." Roman looks at me, and the memories of what happened less than an hour ago already weigh my eyes down like an anvil. "Roman, I found David and Preston."

"Of course you did," Roman groans. Even when he's dependent on me, he can't help but make- "I'm sorry I said that. Thank you for finding them."

"Yeah... slight problem..." I want to stave off saying what actually happened for as long as possible. They're all monsters. Wait, what? Why'd I think that sentence? "I did find David and Preston."

"Yes, you already told me." Oh god, these people are monsters. How would Roman react if they died? "What kind of shit did they get themselves into now?"

"They... might be dead." Roman stops lumbering forward, his mouth forming a little 'o' while dropping. I don't want to follow up on those four, awful words. I just want to see Roman's reaction before I say anything else.

"Are you sure? Like, did you see their bodies?" Yeah, that's smart. We're both incredibly sleep deprived. I might've hallucinated the entire incident. Well, except for the part where I got cut by a rock, since the wound's still there.



“I saw David’s corpse in Preston’s arms. Well, it was a corpse according to Preston. And there was so much blood and bandages in his mouth, I couldn’t argue otherwise. ” Roman nods his head; does that mean he believes me? Or is he too exhausted to refute anything I say? “As for Preston, it’s... more complicated. I heard him screaming, before either a branch or bone snapped, and I left him with the, uh...”

So how do I describe the thing to Roman? A deer-man? Who knows. “So you saw it too.”

“Wait, you already encountered it?” I ask. “So how are you alive?”

“It chased me,” says Roman. “I felt so awful I thought my heart was about to explode. Seems my legs did that first.”

“Did it get you?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. When I got injured and leaned against a tree, it sort of idled around next to me, like it was waiting for me to do something. It even poked my legs at one point; it lost interest after I screamed from the pain.” So it was torturing him? What the hell does this monster want? “It might’ve been blind, if it thought I was a stick or something.”

“Yeah, it might’ve been blind when I saw it also,” I respond; if we can compile our stories together, we might find a way to kill the monster before it finds Simeon. “When it stared at me, it stood there before grazing my arm with a rock. See?” I show the cut to Roman; he isn’t fazed.

“It threw stuff at you too? Odd. It got my attention first when it threw a rock at the back of my skull.” Wait, so it managed to hit Roman, but not me? That makes no sense... well, I guess Roman is a bigger target. “I guess you were lucky it missed you.”

“I actually think it was maiming me. I think it wanted me to bleed and run off, so I’d make a blood trail so I’d find the others for it.” Still, why didn’t it do that with Roman? “Maybe it’s selectively blind.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?” Questions Roman.

“Well, you know when you’re looking for something random, like a pencil or your keys, but you can’t find it no matter how hard you try?” Roman snickers; I wasn’t even trying to be funny, but I’ll count that as a win. “And then you ask your mom for help but she finds it in two seconds? That could be what’s happening here. I’m telling you, it’s blind at random times.”

“That’s funny, but no. Wait, Winch, are we going downhill?” Roman grabs onto a nearby tree, swinging himself in the opposite direction. “Winch, we should be going *away* from the woods! We have to leave, since we both narrowly survived a bloodthirsty monster.”

“Uh, multiple problems with that. One, uphill is where I last saw the monster. Meaning that if we walked in that direction, we’d still be dealing with the monster a whole lot sooner. Second, I’m not abandoning Simeon to fend for himself in the middle of the woods.”

“But Winch, if we find-”

“David.” I say, suddenly awakened to the reality that there’s not any reason to call me Winch anymore. After all, there’s no other reason to call me Winch, since the person named David is... well... “My name is David.”

“David, we should call the cops and get the hell out of here. They’ll do a way better job at finding Simeon than we ever could. Wait, didn’t you just say you found Preston and David? Where the hell was Simeon in that scenario?”

“Yeah, they said he ran off towards the river. But we need to find my brother. And since we’re both thirsty, we could use a drink from the river as well.”

“Winch- sorry, David, just tell me whether or not you saw a working phone at the parking lot.”

Was it charged? I genuinely don’t remember. “I did, but-”

“Then that settles it.” Well, it seems things took only a moment to return to the way they were. Roman’s ordering me around again. “We go back to the parking lot, get the phone and call the cops.”

Except... do I really need to give into his demands?

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” I lift Roman up a little, reminding him who’s the only reason he can move in the first place. “You can’t move without me. *I’m* the one calling the shots. *I’m* the one who decides where we go, cuz you can’t go anywhere without me. And right now, I’ve decided to go towards water, and away from where the monster’s lurking.”

“But-”

“Zip it.” You know, maybe it’s for the best Roman got injured. After all, with Preston and David gone, someone has to fill in the gap for being an angry jerk. And since I have nothing to lose, since I’m resigned to living a mediocre life from now on, why shouldn’t it be me? I think it’s time Roman gets a taste of his own medicine.

For Simeon’s sake, that is.

*5:05 AM*

“Winch- no, David, I think we should stop.”

But I don’t want to. Sure, Roman’s injured, and he’s been moving slower than usual for the past five minutes, but that doesn’t mean we should stop. We’re moving way too slowly to cover enough ground in order to find Simeon. Had we been moving at Roman’s old pace from twelve hours ago, we’d be at the river by now. But instead, we’re still lumbering along, unable to reach a place that we could’ve reached with the time we have.

“I don’t think that’s the best idea. Once we’re at the river, we can rehydrate so we don’t die.” Don’t *die*? Why did I choose those words, as opposed to something less extreme. I might be going insane, but still... I didn’t like the sound I heard after Preston’s final screams. What happens if that sound comes out of *me*? I am *not* risking stopping.

“Winch, we’re so close to the river. Giving us a moment would do us some good.”

“And let the monster catch up to us, or Simeon? Absolutely not.”

“David, you need to consider the possibility that Simeon might, well... you know.” If he says it, I’m throwing Roman onto the ground and kicking him in the stomach. It’s only

fair, since I've endured that treatment countless times. "Have already bitten the dust. And that we're wasting our time looking for him."

I want to throw him onto the ground. I really do. But some stupid, useless weakling inside me can't. I should be harsh on Roman, I really should scold him for not having the will to do what needs to be done, but I can't. Why? Why can't I be better. "We go to the river."

*5:21 PM*

"Winch, *please!* My calves won't last much longer!"

"Yeah, mine too, Roman!" But the tides of power shift in favor of Roman, once he wraps his elbow around my neck and starts squeezing it as hard as he can. But don't need to stop, nor do I want to. But, dammit, it's so hard to breathe when... when there's no oxygen... "Fine! Roman, you win! Are you happy now?"

"Yes! David, I'm dying out here! If we keep this pace up, I'll puke! And I've only had shit food to eat in the last couple hours!" Roman collapses onto the mud, lying down face first. "Please, I know you care about your brother, but I'll die if we keep this up!"

"Then how do you think *I* felt?" Looks like I got the chance to scold him after all.

"You're bringing this up? *Now?*"

"Yes! For the longest time, *you* were the one who set the pace. *You* turned what was supposed to be a fun, casual hiking trip, into a living hell. And want to know something else? *You* were the one who decided that everyone should split up. So that we'd be happier. Well, turns out you were right. I would've been so much happier if I let you run

off so I wouldn't fun myself to death. But if we just stuck together, then maybe we wouldn't be in this mess!"

"So you'd rather have had me stick around and be a pain in your ass?" Roman picks himself up, holding onto a branch for support. "Winch, I gave up on a group hike before we set foot here. I came here for myself... "

"You gave up on a group hike... when I didn't?" This whole time, Roman's been the one making every human being on this mountain absolutely miserable. No wonder he wanted to tear us apart . "If I pushed through a pain you caved in to, wouldn't that make me... *stronger than you?*"

"David, please stay quiet. We'll summon that thing again if we keep yelling." Heh, Roman's even saying please. But then again, I agree that yelling's a bad idea. We'll definitely attract that thing, or Simeon.

Wait... "Or would Simeon hear us if we kept yelling?"

"We've made more than enough ruckus to get Simeon's attention if he were anywhere near us. The only thing we're luring is the monster. No one else."

"So... is this enough of a break for you?" I give Roman my hand, and hoist him onto my shoulders again. This time, I want to get *him* to the river as fast as possible. Because there's excitement running through my mind. "I have an idea, let's get a drink first."

"Oh no- I mean, oh yay." The river's so close, the sound of trickling water is practically flooding through my ears - along with another exciting idea. The monster can't be harmed when it's fighting us on even footing; even Ari with a spear and Preston as backup stood no chance against that thing. Not to mention, the monster fought one of

the strongest people I know - David - and mauled him with two other opponents as well. The monster must die if we want to secure the next day. Otherwise, we'll be locked in night, with the last thing we see being a starry night sky.

But if we fought the monster on those slippery rocks at the river... we could knock it off balance, or better yet, "I have a plan to drown the monster."

"David, please don't try that. If what you told me about David is true, you'd have more luck against a bear. Don't try anything stupid."

"It's not stupid! The river would do- *oh, let's go!*" Water! A sight so glorious to see, it almost sheds a tear from eye. I only say almost, because I'm too dehydrated to weep; once I let Roman have a drink, I dunk my head into the water, inhaling all the heavenly water and the sand that comes with it. I don't care about any brain-eating amoebas, letting them devour my brain is worth every sip.

"Roman, do you understand why I asked you to push yourself now? Now that we have water, you don't have to worry about dehydration anymore."

"David, I'm still worried."

"Now think about what would happen if the monster died." Roman dunks his ears below the water's surface, but that doesn't stop me from shouting straight into them.

"Sure, it'd be painful, and we might lose a few teeth and a limb, but you know what we'd gain? We can live until sunrise, and get to go home, knowing that thing won't stalk us again. Or *anyone*, for that matter. We'd be *heroes*."

Roman gargles, the water bubbling around his head to shield his ears. "Roman, by killing the monster, we'd be avenging all of our classmates who died. All of the *people*

who died by that creature's cruel hand. We deserve better than to be disregarded and disrespected. Wouldn't you like to show the world that you're worth something for once? This is our chance, Roman. This is our chance to become *legends*."

Roman surfaces, not to agree with me, but to catch a breath. "David, now that I don't need your help moving for the next twelve or so hours, I'm gonna be dead honest with you: shut the *fuck up*."

"No, Roman," I say, while Roman swims into the river and pushes off the riverbed with his good leg, "*they're* the ones who are gonna shut up, once they see what we do. Today, that monster dies."

*6:10 AM*

In a couple hours, the sun will rise.

In a few hours, all this misery will end. I only have to wait. Just sit and wait, until we finally eek out a victory. Because a victory is all I can ask for.

I stand with the water's surface intersecting my knees; this time, I don't make the mistake of keeping my shoes and socks on while I'm wading in the river. This time, I'm smart, which I should've been all along. Because, out of all my dead peers - not friends, peers - I was the one who survived.

They laughed at me, scolded me, hated me for being an eyesore. Like I was the physical embodiment of the worst versions of each and every one of them. No, that's not why they hated me. They didn't even hate me; they were afraid that someone as weak and



pathetic as myself would actually be better than them. Turns out, their worst fears came true.

And now that I've proven myself as superior to all my peers, there's only one thing left to do: kill the monster and cement my place as the greatest man in my school. Hell, if that monster's as smart as it's acted, it might have the same fears as my peers. Of it being dominated and destroyed by someone it deems weaker. And now, just as I've ignited the worst fears of my peers, that monster will learn to hate itself, and rightfully so.

"David, please promise me something." Roman's speaking; he's letting his leg float in the river while sitting on land, so he can cope with himself for failing to be better. Good. Let him rot in his own misery. How many times has he forced me to do the same thing? Countless times, over countless memories which are too painful to recall. "Once the sun rises, we make a break for the parking lot. No excuses. Just let us leave and let the cops find Simeon. I might kill myself if I'm forced to spend another night in these woods."

"Kill yourself?" Well, Roman shouldn't be rotting this much in his misery. He's still a person, even if he needs to be pushed. But what if I'm pushing him too hard? No, that question's bogus, he's been endlessly pushing himself for god-knows-how-long. He can handle a little external confrontation. Hell, I'm *helping* him by dragging his own voice out of his head. "That's a little stream - sorry, strange - don't you think?"

"I just want this day to end. Why the hell should I try if I'm going to end up in the same miserable place again? There's no way I can be happy here."

"I think you could." Roman's yapping is bothering me; he needs rest longer. When I slept, even only for a couple of hours, it gave me the chance to recover most of my

energy. Once he rests, he'll feel much better. "Just go to sleep. Let yourself go. You don't have to stay awake. I'll keep watch in case any unwanted visitors stop by."

"I know I'm exhausted, but..." Roman lies down in the mud, and in the next few seconds, his eyes grow heavy and droop, and his breathing shallows. The only part of him moving is his rising, falling chest.

Finally, the only people left to stand up to me are me, myself and I.

*7:39 AM*

How serene the morning is.

The sun nips the horizon, and I - vigilant as ever - gleam while I watch. I've never been happier to see the sun in my entire life; yet, virtually nothing feels like it's changed. I'm so conditioned to the environment, nothing can faze me. The water I dip my legs in feels like a cold, cozy blanket on a hot summer's day. The rocks don't mold my soft skin into uncomfortable shapes; it feels like I'm sitting on a cushioned chair. As for the gnats swarming at the water's surface, and the guppies swimming below, it feels like they're cleaning the dirt and sweat off my hairs.

This morning couldn't feel any better. I'm lucky Roman hasn't woke up yet; without him complaining about his leg, I'm perfectly happy. The first rays of sunlight pierce the horizon, warming my skin and erasing the fear that's been draped over over my shoulder.

"Winch... can go..." Holy shit, Roman's awake. Except he's lying flat on the ground and his eyes are closed. He's yapping in his sleep; you've gotta be kidding me. This

moment was absolutely perfect, and then - despite being oblivious to what I was doing - Roman ruined it. "Go home... rest."

What is Roman even dreaming of? Why would he mention me? Why would his dreams - in which he's free to dream about anything *but* our current situation - include me?

"Sluh, sluh, slower... but-"

"*I'm not weak!*" Even in his dreams, Roman's addicted to the thought of being better than me! Even that's pathetic by his standards! How stuck up, how obsessed do you have to be to feel the constant need to compare yourself to others? Not me, that's for sure! No, Roman seriously needs an ego check. I don't care how happy he feels getting to insult me in his dreams. I slide off the rock - and the squished veins which prevented me from feeling any discomfort in my rear inflate, and my muscles stiffen seconds later. I awkwardly waddle over to Roman, who's mumbling so rapidly that his words are impossible to understand.

I grab Roman's hair, tugging his face back and forth like a gaming controller's joystick. A rude yet fitting awakening, for a rude and fit person. "Roman, you stupid asshole! Even in your dreams, you can't say a single nice thing about me?"

Roman doesn't respond; he merely deflects my finger that's pointed at him like a knife. Oh, so he thinks he can get away with disrespecting me? "You're *so* damn lucky you saddled yourself with an injury, cuz I'd drag you off the ground and beat you into a tree!"

Roman groans angrily, then flops his head onto the ground, arching his stomach to the sky. “Winch, are you-”

“*David!* For the last fucking time, my name is *David!* That other David died, because he was stupid and weak!”

“David... died?” So Roman can’t bother thinking about his dead classmates... how tragic. How tragic he doesn’t have a single morsel to spare for the memories of his friends. “Isn’t... he there?”

Roman points across the river, as the sun gleams down and illuminates the river, creating a beautiful dawn which trickles downstream. But where Roman points, a roughly humanoid figure stands.

Roughly... as in completely inhuman.

The course, blackish-beige skin sinks the figure into the surrounding forest; only a small loincloth interrupts the monotonous color-scheme. Its leg are as thin as needles, yet the lines of its leg muscles carve through its body like canyons. Same deal with its arms, only the arms end in beefy hands, each with three short fingers and a slightly longer thumb. Its shallow stomach ends abruptly, with a chest protruding outward like a miniature mountain range, turned on its side and hung up above its ribs. There’s a tapir-like nose on its head, and a long face with narrow slits for eyes, and two, iron-gray horns, shaved down to derpy cones.

So my wish was granted after all. “Hey, *asshole!* Yeah, you!” The monster does nothing but stand there. “Do something, you *bastard*, or are you freaking deaf-”

The monster breathes, shooting out a gust of air through its proboscis. So it did register my insults. “Come on, aren’t you so strong? Come here, then! Come out to the water, and fight me like a man!”

I get off the riverbed, and agilely hop from rock to rock; I spread my arms like an eagle, so I can intimidate the monster. But my rants must not register inside the monster’s head, because it’s refusing to move a muscle. Does the monster know my plan to drown it in the river? No, the monster may act smart, but it’s still a dumb animal.

“*Winch!*” Did the monster just say my name? No, I think Roman said that. I suppose he’s fully awake. “*Please, help me! I’m sorry about anything I said earlier!*”

“Roman, what are you talking about?” I speak from the corner of my mouth, not daring to look away from the monster for a single second, out of fear that it’ll, what, kill me? Yeah, kill me. That thing might kill me, because it’s a monster, and that’s what monsters do. They murder innocent people.

I may have made a slight error in judgement. “*Suicide!* What I said about killing myself, I was acting stupid, okay? I don’t want to die like this! *I don’t want to die like this.*”

Every second the monster remains motionless, is a second I can use to, to retreat. Because I’m a coward? No, why am I being cowardly? I have a plan, to drown this thing in the river! I, I have to, have to hold, um, my ground, and stand firm. Stand firm, hold ground, or- No, wait, what was I thinking of two seconds ago? “Winch, I didn’t ever want to hurt you. I just wanted you safe and away from me.”

“Roman, be quiet,” I whisper, without facing Roman. Every second the monster stays perfectly still, is another second I can use to retreat. I step backward onto a smaller, more jagged rock; that foot slips, slapping the water’s surface. I can’t keep slowly inching away forever, nor can I stop spitting... why can’t I stop spitting, why is my mouth so foamy? And why am I holding up my fists like a boxer?

No, I’m not in a boxer, a boxing match, ring, uh... what- why isn’t it *moving*? Did I blink? Does the monster even *exist*? I swear, it’s so still, I’m having another hallucination. And my ache’s hearting as well. No, what? Why’s my brain unscrewed? “I just thought you’d be happier if you weren’t around me. That’s the only reason I ever-”

One of my feet slips again; this time, my knee bashes the slippery rock, the impact echoing throughout my leg like I’ve been hit with a hammer. Kneel, breathe hard, eat the- no, there’s no food. Why am I hungry? The monster, the monster wants to eat- no, don’t think that. *Focus*, Winch, *focus*! “I ever acted like a monster towards you.”

“Roman, *shut up!*” I turn around, my eyes abandoning the monster to its smiting silence. But contrary to what I expected, Roman isn’t bawling his eyes out. He’s smiling, hands on his lap, staring at me like he’s experiencing a perfect moment.

Until the silt from the opposing stream-shore bursts like solid rock being melted by a meteor, and the air rushes in to fill the void it leaves.

Roman opens his mouth to scream, but the scream never comes; a thick grip wraps around my backbone, like two serpents burrowing into my flesh and coiling around my spine. With a force that makes me weightless, I’m raised to sun, the scorching light roasting me alive. And then the force slams me down into the river like a human

sledgehammer. My eyes and mouth sting from sand particles, and the once cushioning pebbles on the stream bed smash by back into brittle fragments. My hop collides with a jagged boulder, unleashing a disturbing popping sound. I gulp for air, but only chug down more freshwater.

Was that an *attack*?

Pinned to the bottom of the river, I poke my head up for air, before realizing the passages to my lungs are flooded with water. I belch up as much as I can, but my breathing can't give my muscles the oxygen they're begging for. Now, my hip which struck the rock explodes in fiery anguish, like I pipe is funneling out the bone and blood in my body and replacing it with flame.

But this doesn't satisfy the monster's ravenous appetite. A steel trio of curled rods hook onto my upper teeth, bleeding my upper gums and the roof of my mouth. I can't see two feet in front of me, because of the water pouring out my eyes; before I can bite the monster's fingers off, the same force hurls me out of the river, and I float through the passive winds before hitting a sturdy tree.

I finally purge the water from my esophagus, but my relief is short lived, as the blood seeps through the cracks in my flesh and into my stomach and lungs. My eyes are still blurry, but I can vaguely see Roman's faint outline crawling away from the river, away from the callous stickman with the strength of ten men. I grab his wrist, pulling him towards me, so we're both stacked on the tree together. And also... so I have protection against another hurricane-level attack.

“*Stop it!*” Roman screams. The sun’s fully risen above the horizon; instead of continuing its assault, the monster basks in the sunlight, stretching its arms behind its back and flaring its nose while rearing its head back. “*Stay back! Stay the fuck back!*”

Why isn’t the monster finishing the job, as opposed to standing there? It’s completely vulnerable; if I was standing, I’d tackle it to the ground and punch a hole through its stomach. But it knows I can’t stand, and it stands, mocking me for all the damage I’m unable to do. This monster doesn’t want us to die. It wants to *enjoy* our deaths; after all, wouldn’t murder get very repetitive very fast? This thing, this wicked abomination of nature... it’s no monster...

... it’s a *demon*.

The demon finishes stretching, and walks towards me again. I could easily get up and run right now, if I wasn’t drowning in my own blood. I can only hope the gashes aren’t too deep. Yet as the demon approaches, I can’t do anything but weep in self-defense.

But I’m not the only one who wants to keep me alive. Roman crawls in front of me, holding out his hand like a crossing guard. The demon backhand swats the arm away, and a small bit of Roman’s blood flies into the sand. The demon snatches Roman’s and drags it behind its neck, holding it like a barbell, and bending the arm until something snaps.

I scream out Roman’s name- or at least I try, before coughing up blood in my mouth. The gash isn’t awfully deep, but my breathing getting raspier as opposed to easier; I can’t focus on myself, while the demon drags Roman through the mud and throws him into the river. He plunges down, and for a few seconds, he stays there. Like he was knocked unconscious, in a river, where he could drown.



“*Get away!*” I scream, racing to rescue my friend from the depths. But the demon has other plans; I slip on the silt, as the demon grabs my soaking coat. I lock my arms on my chest, bracing for the impact, but instead, the demon rips the coat off, tossing it into the river. I stumble backward, gaining only a foot of distance before the demon reaches for my chest, grabs my shirt, and slams me down onto another large rock, chest-first. I can’t think of why my heart’s able to beat despite being sandwiched between a rock and a hard place; I only look for Roman, or any sign that he’s surfaced for a breath of fresh air. I see nothing.

I reach for where I saw him sink, but the demon has other plans. It squeezes its elbows around my neck and presses its forearm down on my throat. My first reaction is to gulp for air; big mistake. I gulp down a glob of the demon’s saliva instead, struggling for a breath while wrapped in heavy, chain-like arms.

I reach out for Roman again, but the demon won’t stop strangling me. I have to escape, I have to figure out how to live through this! The bones in my neck are clinging to one another for dear life, I can’t handle this pressure much longer! But this demon, it’s so much thinner and meeker than I am, and yet, it’s infinitely stronger. Am I just genuinely that awful at everything? Am I this useless? I can’t beat this thing! I’m writhing and kicking everything my foot touches, but nothing happens!

My teeth! I jerk my head down and bite the demon’s forearm, *finally* forcing its hand to move. I’m free, but I dig my teeth so deep, that pulling them out of the demon’s iron skeleton is pointless. So I tug harder; the demon holds its arm like its on an armrest, and with the force of a lumberjack swinging his axe, the demon frees its arm, not shedding a

single drop of blood. Its only injuries are the teeth embedded where I bit down, while my injuries include the two, top-front teeth I'm missing.

No, I can't think about myself, I have to find Roman. I have to save him! I dive into the river, but trip on the shallow rocks, bashing my knees against the pebbles on the riverbed. Roman's body's there! And there's still bubbles coming out of his mouth! I grab him, raise his head above water, and shake him around until he coughs up the water he's inhaled. But while Roman's started breathing, my throat fills with blood, as my two missing top-front teeth dye the river red.

"David... *David!*" I get a final glance of Roman, before the monster rips me away with the strength of a tornado. The frigid wetness greets me again, when my face is pummeled into the pebbles a full three feet below the water's surface.

No, no no! This horrible freaking creature's just going to drown me? Not crack a fatal bone like Preston, or punch me through the mouth like David? Am I so pathetic that it's going to let me squirm in my own horrible torrent of pain, and not let me die quickly? Am I not good enough to have a peaceful passing?

The lack of oxygen combined with an interrupting heart rate takes effect immediately; my limbs flail uncontrollably, like someone's teeth chattering after a cold dive in the pool. My brain, throat, and lungs all burn, igniting whatever oxygen is left in my veins to give me some final kick for survival. But there's no point. The monster's perfect, incapable of being beaten. It's not even trying right now, isn't it? Because that's how much suck. It doesn't need to try, it just needs to hold me, and- let- my body- do- the- rest- of-

My whole body shoots outward in every direction like a detonating grenade, continuing its useless efforts to escape. But when the monster collapses on me, sealing me on the ground like a coffin lid, all hope inside my body dies with my limbs, as the flame pushing me to safety dies. Wait, the monster *let go*! I can surface! I arise like a humpback whale into a swarm of sardines, opening my mouth so wide my lower jaw cracks in half, and expelling all the water in my lungs before a new surge of air quells the burning.

But everything lucky comes at a price; Roman stands with his stomach on a massive rock. The demon enters from his left; and with a blow sure to make the heavens shudder, the demon slams its fist down on Roman's spine, cracking it, and making Roman scream in a higher pitch than I thought humanly possible.

"Nuh, nuh..." dammit, I'm so exhausted I can't even scream! I should be helping Roman right now, I have to save him; the demon flips Roman on his side. But I guess my breathing was too heavy, because the demon finds a rock and flings it directly at my forehead. My whole vision blurs, and I nearly collapse into the water. But before long, I'm mentally locked in one position. My brain won't give the orders to move, I'm just... I'm just too... too *damn fucking useless*!

"David, listen to me," Roman wheezes, exhaling so loudly he might be summoning a tornado. But whatever's about to happen to him, I can't stop. "Don't worry about me. Don't think about what happens next to me."

"Gah..." I spit out more water mixed with blood and silt, unable to make my brain make me do anything else. I *know* Roman's about to die. I *know* doing nothing will get

me killed as well. So why? Why can't I do *anything*? Am I not even able to move a single foot forward, just so I can distract the monster, to give Roman another breath? I have to do *something*! I have to *fight*.

"Don't worry about what other people do," Roman says, before the air flees from his mouth. "you are... already... so much better... then them all."

"*Move!*" Even when I shout at myself to move, I can't. It's like my body's actively resisting any pain, any thought of being put through more misery. Which makes sense when I think about it. People have done nothing but make me miserable my entire life. And since I couldn't take any more pain, I never bothered to improve myself, never bothered pushing myself to be better. All I ever was, was dead weight.

I have hindered every single person in my entire life. Simeon... he was so stressed about keeping secrets from me, he nearly drove himself to insanity, and's probably dead for it. Mason... I could never help her. All I could do was reinforce her own safe hatred, never fix it. And as for Roman... I have done nothing except torture him this entire hike. First mentally, then physically, all thanks to my own stupid insecurities. And now that he's brought to his brink at a critical moment, I've left him defenseless, about to die on that rock. I do deserve death. I deserve death, because I've contributed nothing but hatred and misery to this world. Maybe when I'm gone, people will finally be happy.

"You care, David. You care for people. Thank you... for teaching me... that's more important than anything else."

Wait, what?

Roman's on the verge of the death, and he'd rather preach about how it's better to be nice than to be mean? Fuck that, we need to focus on *killing* this invincible demon.

But my legs fidget so rapidly that I can't walk forward, and water drapes over my eyes like a waterfall. I'm struggling just to both breathe and bring a foot forward. The demon lifts it foot onto the rock. I stumble forward, trying to punch the demon so I can distract it long enough to buy Roman some time, but I awkwardly swipe the air instead, failing. I've done nothing but fail this whole hike, my whole life, even. When will my failure end? When can I catch a break, and actually get a win?

For a split second, the water around my eyes peels open like a curtain. And in that moment, a slight glimmer of metal juts out from the demon's foot, which presses down on Roman's chest. There's metal in the demon's foot, the foot which the demon isn't holding its weight on.

There's a *knife* in the demon's foot.

Finally, I have a moment of victory. In that short second, I gained all the information I need in order to win; I fall forward, into the rock on which Roman is pinned, and grab onto the hard rubber grip of the knife. With all the strength in my arm, and more, I unsheathe the knife from the monster's foot; part of my bicep bursts, finally succumbing to the burning sensation lambasting me for so long.

But the demon has it way worse than I do. For the first time, the demon isn't silent; the sound it makes isn't as harrowing or dominant as I expected. The demon's scream is more akin to a hyena whelping for another bite of meat. A sound that's depressing and submissive.

Holding its own foot in its arm, the demon staggers backward, kneeling onto the mud with the punctured foot behind its body; the screeching ends, and the demon resumes its silence, giving me satisfaction for merely a brief moment. But now... I can make the demon scream. I can make it *bleed*. The knife I hold in my hands is at least a couple inches long, and still straight and sharp enough to puncture bone. I don't know how this creature got a foot in its knife - no, vice versa - but it's about to have a knife in its head.

I exit the river, wheezing with every passing breath. My lungs burn, from the leftover freshwater still swashing around inside them. My eyes might be bloodshot; there's blood on the roof of my mouth, which drools onto the ground to leave a bloody trail beneath my groin. But I move forward anyways, because now, I'm *this* close to winning. I don't know if Roman's alive; I'll have to check on him in a few moments, because I will *not* turn my back to this awful beast *ever again*. I am *not* the sum of my worst mistakes.

"You... awful... awful, sad thing..." I mumble, switching the knife downwards so I can slam the weapon through the creature's skull. I don't care about making it suffer anymore; I just want this miserable, horrendous day to end. I just want to see that demon's corpse bleeding out on the ground, so I don't have to fear for my life anymore. So I can go home, and rest.

Yet despite the fact that a puny child is holding a sizable knife, the demon seems resolved towards its fate. It doesn't crawl away or flee. The demon stares me in the eye, still as a statue, absolved of any malice towards itself or me. A truly emotionless creature. And it's not a wonder this thing is incapable of feeling emotion; it doesn't need to worry

about grades, or having friends, or even its own life. It just needs to dominate everything around it without a care in the world.

Well, before it dies, I'll make it care. "Do you have any idea how miserable... you've made me? How you've made the families of the people you *murdered*?"

No response. Makes sense, since such an awful creature has likely never experienced something as wonderful as a family. Well, there's no point in giving the creature time to think of ways to escape...

I hold the knife over the creature's skull. I'm gonna carve that thing's brains out, and eat them. Or not, that's too gross. But once this creature's dead, I'm gonna smile so hard, it's gonna... it's gonna... I'm gonna kill this thing, right now, right freaking now...

Why am I not stabbing the creature through the head? I *have* to kill this thing; not for revenge, not even for some moral duty for the families who haven't mourned their losses yet, but for a simple law of nature. If I allow this creature, this monster, this *demon*, to live for another second, that's another second in which it could kill me. There's nothing my flimsy body could use to kill this creature. The creature's frame is more disgusting and pathetic than mine, yet it surpasses me in speed, strength, and intelligence. Is that why I can't kill it?

Because no matter how hard I try, no matter much energy and time I devote to defeating this perfect being, I can never win. Am I the one who's kneeling on the ground with a knife in their skull, and I haven't realized it yet? Is the creature the one sparing *me*? This thing isn't attacking because it's scared or sad... it's awaiting the moment I

make my move, so it can use its perfect brain to think of the perfect counter-attack and deliver the perfect execution perfectly.

I... can't win.

The realization makes my cheek sore, with how hard I clench my teeth. My face, finally dried after all the water dripped off it, wets again with new tears streaming down. I thought there wouldn't be enough moisture in my eyes after all the crying I've done, but oh well. I hold the knife in my hand still, but it shivers, like a rattlesnake's rattle. It's so close to dropping out of my hand, I might impale the creature's feet by accident.

So I pull the knife away, so I can't inevitably get annihilated by an animal ten-thousand times better than me. "Why..." I complain. "Why won't you let me *win*?" I walk away from the creature, pacing back and forth, but never glancing away. "I do all this hard work, and for *what*? To be beaten by some genetically perfect asshole?"

The creature doesn't express any emotion at my rant; hell, it probably doesn't even understand me. I don't care. I want it to know some semblance of emotion, even if it's just a depressed teenager's rant. "You've done *nothing*, absolutely *nothing* to deserve everything you've been given, and you just take everything I've worked so hard for, away? You... fucking suck. I wish I could gouge your eyes out, but I can't, because I can never beat anyone in anything even if my life depended on it. But you can beat me so easily that your life doesn't depend on anything. It's not *fair*!"

Before me stands the source of all of my pain over the past *day*, and in my hand is the weapon which can end its life. It's hilarious how I hold no power in this situation. I've



never wielded a combat knife in my life; I know for certain I'll mess up the striking maneuver in two seconds. How... how can I win this? I can't. It's that plain and simple.

But is there another way I can benefit from this? No, killing the creature is the only option. But what Roman said- no! *No!* What Roman said was *stupid* and *naive*. He should be ignored. The more attention I give to these perfect assholes, the more whiny they become, like how I talked to my brother-

My brother. Oh my god, he's dead by now, isn't he? There's just no way he's stayed alive until sunrise, with this creature hunting him down. He's probably been bleeding for hours... in that time, I could've stayed with him, comforted him in his final moments. I could've *saved* him. But no, I had to be perfect, I had to be a hero by sticking with Roman and looking for people to save. And in the process, I left the people who really did need saving to die. Though it's not like I would've been much help anyways.

I drop to my knees, with a soul decimated by that single realization. Oh my god, our final major interaction was at this exact stream. He was so scared, I didn't know what to do... is that how he died? Scared, thinking people would hate him if he told the truth? I never helped him through any of it. Oh god, I really am the worst boy to ever live. "No wonder people don't like me. I'm a poison to everyone around me."

"Winch, you're *wrong*." Wait, is that Roman? I'm not turning around to face him, but that's definitely his voice between the heavy wheezes. "You didn't make my life more miserable. You made it better. Because out of all the people who were selfish, you were the only one who cared. You were the only one who cheered for me, who encouraged me to keep going. I didn't realize it then, but... having someone legitimately be invested in

me, was the only thing that kept me going, even when I thought I was failing. You aren't a poison, you're a good person. Because you actually give a shit about others."

Well, I guess Roman's extended rant about kindness and goals and what-not helps a little. But that doesn't help me now. It doesn't help me find my brother. Wait, this creature... this creature was the last currently-living thing to have seen my brother. Does that mean- no, that's stupid. But even if there's a chance, even if there's a sliver of hope, then I have to try. I have to care, because that's the only way I can be sure my brother is alive.

"I will... help... you." I gargle out the words, which I say towards the monster; Roman's scolding silence sets the uneasy tone immediately. "I have a... friend... who is thin and you saw. If you understand me..." I grab the knife by its blade, holding it out so the creature can take it from me, "then you can keep this, and show me where my friend is."

Would he understand the word brother? Or was friend a better word choice? Well, either way, the monster reacted, by reaching for the knife again. "Winch, what the hell did you do?"

"Good question." The creature leans its head in the direction of knife, and starts grappling the handle with its hefty left hand. But it's gentle, pulling it out slow enough so my hand doesn't bleed. Is the creature going to help me?

The creature stands up slowly, over a defeated me who can't help but wonder if giving the murderous monster a weapon was the right choice. Well, if I want the creature to help me, I can't be calling it as a murderous monster, can I? From beneath the creature's nose,

its lips fluctuate, its cheeks puff up, and its proboscis curls in, only to expel outward upon-

*“Anything.”*

So it does speak. Course and raspy, likely with vocal cords unfit for speaking English. But... it spoke! It's willing to compromise! Oh my god, my brother still has a chance, he's not doomed yet! “Yes, anything! Anything you want! Just please, help me and my friend there, to find my, uh, other-”

With the speed of a tornado, the creature hoists me in one arm; but to its insanely strong self, I must be lightweight, for it leaps to the rock on which Roman lies with effortless precision, and scoops up Roman as well. Now that I don't have to concentrate on staying awake, I start to fade, for my exhaustion has caught... up to...

*8:24 AM*

I'm awake again. But where am I now?

I'm somewhere in the forest, and I'm moving... oh, that's right. I let the monster drag me away. Well, if it was a true monster, I wouldn't be alive.

My comfort ends when the monster drops me onto the ground, and all the soreness from that beat-down resurges back onto me. My jaw aches, and I can't move it without half my cheek lighting up. Worse yet, there's an acute pain ringing inside my chest; I'm the luckiest kid alive if that's not a broken bone I'm feeling. But either way, I'm lying down on the ground now... I don't need to worry about over-exerting myself anymore. I can rest.

I'm rolled off of my belly, and the creature pulls me to my feet, pulling me around like I'm a puppet on strings. Standing isn't easy either; my legs are wobbling, and I have to fan my arms to keep myself from tumbling onto my side. But once I shake out my legs a little, standing's comfortable as well. Yeah, the pain's even going down. But my brain, my brain aches, not because of the pain, but because something's missing. Roman. Where is Roman? Wait, Roman's not here!

No, no way... no way the monster- *the body*! It's the body of that overweight guy I saw earlier! Why did the monster bring me here? And why is Roman gone? Wait, don't tell me that when the monster heard me refer to a friend, it thought I was talking about *Roman*. No, it would understand the difference between the friend I was talking about, and the friend with us by the river. Most animals of the same species look the same to us humans; the monster probably thinks us humans all look the same. Or does it think *I'm* the one who doesn't understand the difference? No, it's tricked me! It's forcing me to help it, while I gain nothing.

No, I gain something. Right now, Roman's gone. And if I don't figure out what the monster wants, I'm doomed along with him. And there's a chance Simeon died somewhere in-between all that chaos... I have to trust he's still kicking somewhere. Otherwise, I've made a horrible mistake.

The monster approaches the body, flipping the corpse on its belly, and taking out a handgun from beneath the leaves. The monster grips the edge of the muzzle, letting the pistol's body dangle from its fingers. So this is what it wants. It wants me to somehow make the gun work. Was this really-

*“Show. Me.”* Jesus, that voice still scares me. But was this really worth it? No, the monster would’ve certainly killed us anyway. I made the right choice; otherwise, we’d be left for dead in the middle of the stream, with no one able to get past that bloodthirsty beast.

The monster pushes the gun towards me, almost hitting my chest with it. Like it’s trying to make me grab the weapon. Does the monster want me to show it how to shoot a gun? I thought it wouldn’t need a gun, considering how overwhelmingly strong this thing is. Well, it may be perfect, but being perfect at everything doesn’t make you bulletproof. So it makes sense why the monster would want a gun of its own. I take the gun by the muzzle. For a moment, the monster’s own skin grates against my hands. But for a creature so cold and callous, its skin doesn’t reflect that property; it’s rather leathery, disguising the sturdy undertones which hold the real power. But now, the gun’s in my hand.

I guess I can show the creature how to use the gun. Careful to keep my finger away from the trigger, each of my fingers slither around the handle, like a group of baby pythons swarming around an unsuspecting alligator. The pistol becomes completely nurtured by my left hand, and my right releases the muzzle; the only thing left to do is wrap my trigger finger around the thing it’s aptly named for.

And then shoot the gun, to show the monster how to use it. But... does it know what happens next?

I face the monster, gun in hand. My finger jitters on the trigger, waiting for the brain’s signal to press down and deliver a fatal shot. I’ve been through this exact scenario

already; I held a weapon to the monster's head, ready to end its life with a single strike. Except this time, I don't need to go anywhere near the monster to kill it. I can stand safely at a distance, and pull the trigger. Finally, I've regained control. No, this is the *only* time I've been in control... except is it control, if the monster still has something I want? The monster ran off with me *and* Roman, which means shooting it would end the life of the only mind which knows where Roman is, and possibly where Simeon is as well. But, aren't I morally obligated to end this thing, so-

With inhuman speed, the monster whisks the gun from my hands. I instinctively pull the trigger in self-defense, only by that point, the gun's long vanished from my grasp. The monster wields the gun the way I showed it, only unlike me, the monster points the gun at the sky, and commits to what I lacked the will to do.

The sound of the gunshot blasts my ears, despite being fired off in a different direction. The jaw pain reawakens, and I cower backward, curling my head into my stomach for protection from the bullet that's about to fall. The bullet doesn't hit me, but when I look back up, the muzzle which I could've used to save my life is now about to end it.

Think, Winch. How can you escape this situation? I'm inferior in this situation in every single way. Outrunning the monster is pointless, especially now that I've given it a loaded gun; fighting is a no-go, since my body would break from stress before I even touched the monster; and how would I outsmart the creature? Yeah, no chance any of that's happening. I definitely couldn't beat the monster in my prime; now that I've been bruised beyond belief, any sort of resistance is comical. Although... there is one thing I can try.

“Anything?” The monster’s own words, its own request, being flung right back at it might work. If this monster, this perfect storm, was able to ask for help, than surely, by god, it must be able to feel an ounce of emotion. Maybe not for its murder victims, or for itself, but maybe it has some basic understanding of giving back to those who gave to it. I can only hope.

The monster tosses its weapon, throwing the gun up in the air and grabbing it by the muzzle before it hits the ground. I back down, holding my arms to the side as a symbol of submission and gratitude for the creature which is sparing my life. But the creature disregards me, instead focusing on the ground, and a... a rope? Why is there a rope in the leaves? The creature tugs the rope, and the sound of a metal latch being unhooked follows suite.

And then the creature dashes into the bushes, leaps onto a tree, and gracefully swings away, vanishing like it was never there.

Find the latch, find where the rope leads to... okay, I found the rope. My arm’s too weak to lift it, but at this point, I’m so fatigued that my brain doesn’t register the exhaustion. What does register are the damaged ribs. But those don’t matter. I’m this freaking close to finding my brother, to finally finishing with this awful hike.

I found a metal latch.

My fingers flail like spider’s legs, trying every possibility to open up the latch. But my arms are so numb, and every part of my body is screaming at me to stop... no! Don’t relent! I’m so close! The latch flicks open, and a square section of dirt shakes. A trapdoor? Has to be! I pry my finger between the gaps of the wood, and - standing like a

bodybuilder deadlifting a massive barbell- my saliva flies through the gaps in my teeth, and my muscles split into fragments. I finally expunge the last of my strength into lifting the trapdoor, and fall backward, though successful in my efforts to open up the hidden door.

I can't stand, I might die if I stand another second, so I crawl. I crawl like an earthworm into the trapdoor, which in turn leads into a dirty, musty chamber, rotting of some awful smell and-

Roman's there. And, and-

"*David!*" *Simeon!* I don't have the energy to respond, but I can flop down through the slanted chamber, until I land right on top of Simeon's lap, in some lame, half-assed hug.

"*Oh my god!* I, I can't believe *you're alive!*"

"I can't believe you a life." No, that's not what I meant to say. I'm way too tired to celebrate. No, who am I kidding? I'm *finally* with my brother, after being separated for hours... he's alright! And in better spirits than me, by the looks of things! "How... how did you survive the-"

"The monster? I honestly don't know. It just grabbed me and dragged me into this pit." So that's what happened after the parking lot incident? The monster grabbed Simeon and ran off to... here? For what? Honestly, who knows... all that matters is that me, Simeon, and...

And Roman's here as well. "Same here. My retina were about to burn out before you found us. Just glad you did."

"Roman, why so amicable?" Asks Simeon. "Aren't you gonna scold-"



“Can’t bother. I don’t even want to scold you for assuming something that’s... probably a very me thing to do.”

“Yeah, Simeon. We’re all burned out. We’re going insane. Gone, I mean. Just, remind me, how did you get out of here?” I ask.

“What?” Says Simeon.

“Sorry, how *do* we escape here?” Simeon has no way of knowing that; I’d have better luck asking a fish. “Actually, doesn’t matter. I gave the monster a gun; it shouldn’t be back to kill us.”

“Wait, *what*?” Says Roman. “You gave the monster a *gun*?”

“Yeah, that’s more like the Roman I know,” says Simeon.

“Look, it wasn’t the best idea, I’ll admit it. In fact,” if the rope was that close to me, couldn’t I have just felt around the ground until I found it? Instead of, I don’t know, giving the monster a *gun* so it would find me the rope instead? “fuck it, I’m defending myself here. I *did* make the right decision. If I shot the monster, I’d be bleeding out on the ground right next to it. Then your little hidey-hole would be filled with blood, or whatever.”

“No, no criticism here,” says Simeon. “We’re all totally exhausted. We aren’t acting our smartest.”

“I was saying I *was* acting my... smartest...” there’s a low rumble surrounding the dirt. The roots holding up the mini-bunker - and the only reason we aren’t being buried alive - bounce on my forehead. There’s a stampede coming, I can feel it. But where is it coming from? Part of me thinks its coming from everywhere.

Part of the light which lets me see Simeon and Roman is obscured, by a seemingly feminine figure standing over the hole. “*Roman?*” The voice screeches. “You’re *alive?*”

“*Val!* I’m so happy to see you...” says Roman. Hang on, isn’t this the girl we were looking for with Mason? “Yeah, we’re alive? Why are you here?”

“Me and the cops Mason called heard a gunshot, so we rushed over here as fast as possible... how the hell you’d get down here?”

“Doesn’t matter!” Roman tears up, grinning with a stuttered smile. “If the police are here, that means we’re finally safe... which means we’re going home!”

“Yeah, we’re going home!” Screams Simeon, and I scream out as well, shaking Simeon’s head. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, nor do I need to think about what I’m doing, since I actually freaking lived through this hellscape! Roman’s laughing, and I sigh in relief, because the nightmare’s finally over.

“Well, we’re probably going to the hospital first. I’m pretty sure I broke a few bones and tore my shin along the way,” says Roman. Shoot, we’re going to the hospital. Because we almost died on what should’ve been a peaceful hike. But what should or should’ve been doesn’t matter anymore. The only thing that matters... is the fact that we get to sleep in a warm bed, with clean clothes, and potentially take a nice, warm shower.

And get to go home, and never return here ever again.