

My head bounces on the helicopter's window, dragging me to the world of the woken. Greeted by a sea of concrete, I stare down at the city, awaiting the moment when I'll be absorbed into the masses. But that moment never comes.

*Why am I getting deja vu? I've never been in a helicopter above a city before. But I have woken up in a helicopter before. Yeah, that's it.* The others on the helicopter - all soldiers - slumber, with one snoring too loudly. Now *I'm* the one who's awake first. Should that matter though? I doubt it'll be long before we land, anyway.

But should I wake the soldiers up first? No matter what, they're going to be woken up when this jittery helicopter lands on a skyscraper's roof; when that happens, they're in for a rude awakening. *But is being dragged out of your sleep by a screaming man a ruder awakening? No, that's just pretending to be an alarm clock.* In summary, it would be worse to let the soldiers be woken up by the helicopter.

Which is exactly why I'm gonna let them sleep until then; I should be in for a treat with their funny faces. Until then, I stare down at the city; even in the darkest night or brightest day, I'd never know what time of day it is with those city lights burning my retina. *Inside the buildings oughta' be a little more relaxing on the eyes.* I look out the helicopter's window, to the ocean, to where - beyond the city's edge - lies a massive island, with hills rising above the city's highest skyscraper and a lush forest covering its surface like a rug. *I'm sure it'd be much nicer to retire on an island as opposed to the city. Oh, who am I kidding, I don't have nearly enough savings to retire anywhere...*

The helicopter stops moving forward; my head thunks on the metal wall behind me. *Did it wake them up?* No, but the everyone still sleeping is gonna get stirred like they're in a blender; the helicopter glides onto the roof below, a big yellow H almost aligned with the legs of the little chopper. Slowly enough to give me time to prepare, but quick enough to disturb the young soldiers from their sleep. This should be fun-

The helicopter collides with the helipad; for a brief second, the insides of the helicopter are thrown straight up, like we're the guts of a man who just fell off a ledge. Then, we all fall back down, hard steel banging up my tailbone. I shouldn't have been so preoccupied with the reaction's I'd get; I should've been more concerned with comforting myself. But those youngsters better be awake now...

Yes! "Gah! What the hell- we're here already?" The face of the kid-soldier across from me is a mix between an angry Chihuahua - and I'd know that look anywhere, because I had one of those as a kid - and a high schooler who found out he failed a test. Perfection. "Why didn't you wake us up?"

"Uhh... it's so weird we landed already. I feel like we just took off," I say. That's a white-faced lie; in reality, it feels like I took off two days ago, even though it's probably only been three hours. But the intense lack of sleep I got due to the ripping rotors, along with the yapping kid-soldiers, made it that much harder to fall asleep. Good thing it's the middle of the night, so I can just return to my place and crash, before figuring out how to help Veronica and her mess. *Huh, that's the first time in a while I've remembered to help someone.* "So I'm assuming I can go home now?"

"One second, our boss needs to clear you first." The soldiers walk out the helicopter single-file. "Oh, and by the way, that stupid rant of yours cost us a lot of sleep. So I hope you enjoyed what little you got, since you filled our heads with literal nonsense."

"The rant? Oh yeah, I almost forgot about that." I hoist myself up, tiptoeing out the helicopter very slowly, so I don't accidentally fall onto my face. Forgetting about the rant was me being honest; all those thoughts and bizarre conversations with Veronica and these guys just blended after a while. Maybe I'm accustomed to the idea of giant monsters roaming free in the oceans; now that I'm safe and sound in Vancouver, though, all that chaos should be behind me. I just need to get further inland to be even safer.

I reach the building's roof, wobbling after having sat for the last few hours, surrounded by the darkest bright lights I've ever seen. The three or four blaring yellow lights on the roof illuminate the bland concrete shells I'm standing on, against the backdrop of the most dull black night I've ever seen. Good thing the island and tips of the buildings interrupt the creepy darkness. "So, about me getting to go home... when does that happen?"

"One second sir." The soldiers turn away, talking to some more people - probably officers or whatever other military ranks there are - and dismissing my very real concern.

"Excuse me, but I'd like to go home, and not be held against my will. Actually, I technically don't need your permission to go home. So I'm leaving." Well, I handled that perfectly! I sulk over to the door - which, based on the surrounding buttons and line running vertically straight down the middle, is some kind of elevator - to where I can get some rest.

"Actually, you can't leave. We need to check with our superiors first to make sure you're allowed to go." Well, that's bullshit. They can't hold me here against my will; that's a blatant violation of civil liberties, or something. *Wait, doesn't the government violate liberties on a regular basis? Yeah, this isn't surprising.*

"Well who cares about your-"

A low boom echoes across the city.

The hairs on the back of my neck rattle; I stand with my toes tensed like they're a hawk's talons, ready to fly away at the first sight of danger. Only the danger which I'll be fleeing from is the kind which can't be sighted in time. I drag my pointer finger along the down button, smoothing the side of the wall with my sweat. "What was that?" I ask.

"Um..." the soldiers only look to one another for guidance, failing to answer each other's questions. Stares are tossed around like a deadly silent game of hot potato, before all the soldiers stare at me.

"Of course you're useless." I mutter; I look for a door handle to press down on, almost throwing my body weight into the wall, before remembering that I'm standing in front of an

elevator shaft, not a simple door. *How did I forget this was an elevator? I was reaching for the down button two seconds ago.* If there's an elevator shaft, then there has to be buttons.

"Hey, can you call the sergeant? Maybe he-" Another low boom. This time, I'm already conditioned to the sound, and I don't stand stiff in place like when the first boom rattled my mind. But this time, I'm swallowed by an overwhelming dread, over how the booms aren't a one-off occurrence. *Is it some kind of explosion? If it is, I can't see it...*

I finally get my bearings together for long enough to press the down key on the elevator - before realizing that it requires a card to open. *Stupid elevator.* "Hey, can one of you open this thing?"

"Yeah, one sec." One of the soldiers walks towards the elevator door, and takes out his keycard for - another low boom emerges. The soldier fumbles his keycard in his hands. I almost dive into him, out of some incredulous fear that he'll throw the keycard thirty feet backyard off the edge of the building and strand us on the rooftop. But I can't will myself to move, much less attack a fellow man. "This should call the elevator. It'll take a few seconds to get up."

"Are you sure you know nothing about whatever I'm hearing? Cuz' a bit of assurance would be nice."

"I'm sorry, they tell-" Another low boom. And then another. And another. Three consecutive booms, each more unnerving than the last, for the only other sounds I can focus on are the dimming helicopter blades and the frantic breathing of those uniformed youngsters. And the occasional sound of their tamed voice... or my own.

Actually, forget being calm. "Can someone tell me what the *fuck's* going on?!"

"Found it," says one of the soldiers, pointing towards the island which blocks the city from the sea. My eyes shoot over at the speed of light, bound by chains to whatever's hiding beneath that dark overgrowth of caliginous trees. I thirst to know the source of those booms; my eyes salivate, for they strain themselves to their absolute limits just to gain a pixel of detail.

Turns out, I was looking in the wrong place.

The light arching over the island's ridge spills out onto the trees, providing some insight into their timber green color. Yet soon enough, a vicious orange whip ensnares the calming green, whittling away at the serene sight. Not only does the fire creep between the branches of the trees, but the flame ascends above the crest of the island, reaching for the clouds like the hand of a devil tasting the freedom it's been denied for too long.

More plumes of fire rise from behind the safety fence that's the island, and after each one, a low boom follows in its wake. When I demanded an answer to the mind-melting question of what was causing those low booms - which might swipe this building from under my feet - I was provided an answer. And now, I feel even less satisfied. No, I don't feel less satisfied, I feel less safe. Less safe than when the low booms could've been anything, like an aircraft surpassing the sound barrier, or a drum, or-

Or one of those colossal demons roaring.

Other than the low booms, another sound emerges from beyond the island. The crunching of leaves and twigs fills my ears, only this time, the scale of the flattening is far grander than just leaves; it's like the ground itself is being flattened, as any heinous imperfections hiding in the porous dirt are sought out and destroyed. All of that, on a scale too colossal to believe. And the sound isn't interspersed like the low booms which have now ceased. The earth-moving sound originating from behind the island does not stop; it moves like a continuous machine, grinding through the ground until its mission is complete. Now, as the sounds have seized the attention of every living thing on this roof, the shape of the island's ridge is altered, with some sections collapsing into the unseen ocean. As these sections collapse - and the low booms return with a fiery visual to accompany them - one section of the mountainside is refilled, restored to its former glory. As though nature has undone its first wish. An explosion, followed by a low boom, detonates behind this newly re-emerged section of mountain...

...and unveils the silhouette of an archaic maw gaping wider than a house, equipped with wide, shallow teeth, and horns longer than a yacht.

“.....”

Not a single man dares to break the silence, to confirm the mangled, hideous reality which we are all witnessing. Until...

A single man screeches, dropping his handgun which clanks onto the ground, and accelerates to a full sprint.

On the roof of a building hundreds of feet high. “*Wait-*”

Too late. Once the man has taken off, he cannot be stopped; even as his heels screech against the concrete, the force generated by his terror sends him hurdling off the edge of the building. If he started screaming, he’s falling too fast for the tragic sound to reach us.

“What just-”

A soul-shredding curdle reaches us, shrewd enough to wind through the gaps of our skin cells and into our flesh, yet powerful enough to make our blood fizzle with every vibration. Not only my eardrums vibrate upon hearing it; every square inch of my ear vibrates, the shivering blood chipping away at the flesh on which my body was built.

“*Fucking the elev- Open the fucking elevator!*” Screams a random man; every body on this rooftop surges towards the elevator doors, as the man with the keycard gets trampled by those too terrified to remember him. Someone jams their keycard into the correct spot, opening the elevator and causing all of us to fall into the chamber, which will take us to where we can run without throwing ourselves off rooftops. Before I fall in, I gain a final glimpse of the silhouette. The... the *demon* descends down the mountain like a tsunami; silent enough to prevent those unsuspecting from noticing it, but fast enough to reach its victims before anyone can realize their fate.

“*Get out the doorway!*” I yell, sick of being shackled in silence. When we untangle ourselves from the mess we created, the elevator door finally closes, sealing us in a gently descending room... with a window granting us a full view of the carnage.

“You were telling-”

“*Shut-*”

“How is-”

“Where-”

“Everyone *shut up!*” I scream, getting everyone quiet enough so I can yell my stupid opinion.

“I... *fuck!* I didn’t think of stuff to say! Uh, panic not now, panic when on ground! Then *run!*”

My sentences come out partial, as my heart’s beating so fast it’s pressing against my throat. I claw at the wall, trying to climb above the tangled mess of limbs and screaming mouths, but only manage to get a few feet higher before slipping down again. *Why isn’t everyone thinking straight? Come on, panicking isn’t going to help anyone, we just need to get ourselves into mental order, than come up with a plan-*

Another wretched curdle lambastes the air; this new curdle’s over three times louder than the previous one, making the flesh in our ears sizzle, and in some places, pop. When the curdle ends, I crawl out from beneath the mess of people, standing on my feet and facing the panicking crowd of five, maybe six. Technically, all of these people outrank me, but due to my age and experience with *that*, I feel like the most senior person in the room.

But it’s *back*. Well, maybe not the same giant monster, but another one of them has come here, at my supposed safe haven, to finish the job the other two started. I knew I couldn’t evade their wrath forever; I thought I could bury the sight of all those dying souls in my mind, and lock it far away to where I’d never be reminded of it. But now, all those memories, all those screams and flashes of light before a thunderous fist crashed down and squashed all the people I knew, resurge from the deepest depths of my brain.

Dammit, I’m gonna go through this shit all over again, aren’t I? “Alright, everyone, calm down! We need everyone to stay calm!” My demands are buried beneath the shouting and other relative chaos; frustrated with a lack of acknowledgement, I throw my hands into the air. “Shut up! Listen, we have an emergency on our hands. We need to find a way to get as far away from this city as possible.”

“Shouldn’t we help people?” Asks one of the soldiers. Yeah, he’s right, we should help people... except we can’t.

“No, the gun’s won’t-”

“Yeah, let’s shoot at the monster to try and kill it, and then-”

“No!” I yell; I recall how little those flares did to repel the other monsters. I doubt bullets will have much of an effect on this thing either. “It’s too big to be brought down with guns! If those bombs out there couldn’t damage it, nothing will!”

“Alright, so we shoot-”

“No! No shooting, period! You’re just gonna get yourself killed if you try to be a hero and save people!” Despite my throat being battered from yelling, I doubt a single one of these idiots will listen to anything I have to say. No, they’re just gonna charge up to that thing, guns ablaze, and unload all their ammo without making a dent, and end up trampled, devoured, or worse.

Before I can yell something more, the bones in my legs become mushy, as the elevator’s floor and walls start jittering around me. And then the shaking stops... and then it erupts so violently that I cover my head, fearing someone’s gun might accidentally go off. We’re experiencing an earthquake, but not the consistent, predictable kind which you can wait through. No, this kind of earthquake is rapid, jolting, and inconsistent. As though it’s triggered by something far more malevolent than two tectonic plates colliding.

The stale concrete wall ends, exposing the window to the absolute carnage occurring below. The endless torrent of heads move like a hundred pool balls within a pool table, clanking and bouncing against one another with no real purpose except for one: to move away from the shoreline. Some of the heads are swept beneath the mass, confined to a terrible fate of being mowed down by the rest, for none are willing to stop running away from... *that*.

The demon rises out from beneath the docks, the boats stored in the boardwalk trickling off its back like tears from an eyelash. Its tail - lined with spiny quills - rises above the waves, and slaps back down, unleashing a volcanic eruption of water. The demon’s whole body surfaces

from the waves, gangly and inconsistent in its saurian proportions; its body almost blends with the surface of the water, due to its tarnished, ash-colored skin. Its chest and stomach are too thick for its winding arms, and a thin neck barely supports a hanging head, which swings out of the water like a tomahawk and roars. Another curdle punishes my ears, but I get one final glance at it, before the elevator grinds to a halt. I see its huge, hooked shoulder spikes on its back, its nibbling teeth, and-

The two smooth bull horns protruding from where there should be eyes.

"Wait, it's blind! It can't see us" One of the little idiots calls out, rushing out of the elevator and into the street. His companions follow, too stupid to comprehend that 'blind' doesn't mean 'weak'; it's gonna decimate them no matter what And furthermore, when it marches through the street, it blocks the city lights from reaching the people below, distorting its victims' sense of direction. And as the shadow crawls further into the concrete trenches surrounding me, only parcels of debris are shedded by the buildings; if the demon were truly blind, it might as well ran straight into five buildings. It's detecting obstacles, and that means it *can* see.

The jittering earthquake, which I've grown accustomed to after feeling its unrelenting wrath for a full minute, booms with the power to lift me half a foot off the ground, then drop me back down. A wave of road debris ripples forward, showering the heads of any unfortunate enough to meet its gaze - including those who I shared that elevator ride with. Glaring to my right, I see the windows of other buildings, sprayed with an oozing red mush and chunks of meat. They sag on the glass, slowly wiping their misery off the clear surface and onto the shattered road. Next to the mush, a titanic foot lifts off a flat red disk of its own creation.

I fall onto my knees, holding my mouth tight so my screams are carefully cradled inside, whisked away before they can reach the demon's ears.

Layered beneath the overwhelming screams of terror, is the sound of explosive gunshots. *Fuck! They're actually gonna get themselves killed!* But if I can make them realize that the demon can see to some degree, I can save one or two of them. Following the trail of footprints

leading into the street, I emerge into the chaos; the crowd has thinned, but there are still enough people to force me to caution my haste. A woman runs into my side; the time to apologize for blocking her way slips through my fingers as she runs away, abandoning her handheld belongings to the ground. And I don't bother reminding her.

I look where the scattered soldiers have pointed their blasting assault rifles; the demon treads above, the bland, starless night replaced by the sight of callous skin and dripping saliva. One bead of saliva oozes from the demon's maw, stretching to its absolute limits before getting severed and plummeting more than three stories below. And that droplet of saliva falls on a soldier, pinning him to the ground.

Although the crowds have vacated the streets, the air still feels stuffy with its aroma above. I choke on the stuffy air, gagging for another breath, as I fall to the ground next to the man pinned down by the saliva. But when I look into his contorted eyes, I witness how the saliva's not merely pinned him, but crushed his whole body. His limbs twist like tree branches, and the upper and lower halves of his head face two opposite directions. When I dip my hand into the puddle - feeling for any fleeting warmth his body might have - I only feel a clear, glossy fluid, which almost entombs my hand with the body.

"*Shit!* It killed him!" Yells out another soldier. But before they can resume their meaningless crusade, one of its legs crosses through the air, scraping against a building; the leg peels the building's wall off, exposing shattered steel beams and chipped wooden desks inside. I dive to the opposite side of the street - evading the falling debris - and only one copies my efforts. But the rest of the young, careless soldiers, standing below a waterfall of several tons of concrete, only blink in the face of destruction. And when the concrete hits the ground, not a trace of blood escapes from underneath the dust.

"No!" The only surviving soldier screams, rushing over to one of his compatriots. *Why am I not stopping him? He's just getting closer to the danger zone...* but part of me doesn't want to stop him. *Everything* they've done has just led to their demise at its gnarly hands. Actually,

nothing those men have done has sealed their fate; the only way their fate could've been altered was if they left the chaos to save themselves. To not try and be heroes. Now, they're just casualties - meaningful only as statistics - buried beneath rubble and spit. An entire life, reduced to a number amidst a thousand more.

*Thousand more... I have to escape this hell. Maybe take that guy with me. But where?*

"Hey! Old guy! Help me hoist this thing on my shoulder!" The last surviving soldier pulls out a black-and-brown gun, only this gun has a green rhombus secured to the front. Well, I hope it's secured.

"Is that a fucking RPG? No! No! Stop it, you aren't *doing anything!*" But the soldier ignores my advice. He steps back with the RPG on his shoulder - so much for needing my help - and points the weapon at the demon's tail. That tail swoops over us, gliding like a sea snake - an animal which can devastate a human body with a touch. And the idiot beside me shoots an explosive directly at it.

The explosive detonates between the demon's right thigh, and a bulbous fat lump at the front of its tail. Once the demon finishes its painfully long stride - and rattles the Earth once more - it swings its tail through the concrete wall of buildings, shredding thousands of hours of construction in seconds, all without spilling any of its own blood. And its head swings to the front as well, mowing through the debris like a blue whale swallowing millions of krill.

The last remaining soldier retreats behind me and to my left, that heinous clicking persisting to piss me off. "*Stop!*" I demand, running over to the soldier who's reloading his RPG. *Does he honestly want to die? Even if he does, I still have something to live for!* "You aren't achieving *anything!*"

"*Yes I am!*" He screams, continuing to click together the parts of the explosive mechanism. "I got its attention! I'm distracting it so the other people can get away!"

"Great, you did it!" My sarcasm hopefully conceals my frustration with how he actually managed to pull something off. "Now, *fucking run!*"

“No! If I can shoot this into its mouth, I can save them... I can save everyone...” He screws the grenade onto the front of the RPG, and drags the weapon onto his shoulder.

“Save *us*, you fool!” As he aims the weapon once again, I dive into him, tackling the soldier to the ground and punching him solidly in the eye. And then, once I kick him in the stomach, I steal his RPG.

But when I grab the weapon, I realize why he was so determined to save people. The weight of the weapon which can destroy cars with a press of a button feels awesome, and empowers me to fight back. *No, stop it! This thing's heavy, but so is the several tons of concrete that fell on those guys!*

The soldier stands up again, then glares while my back faces the demon, his eyes dropping to the floor.

“What’s the ma-” My words are dragged into the gutter, when a smooth, long horn grazes the side of the building next to me. And when I turn around, I’m greeted with the sight of a head - heron-or-egret-like, coated with dark callous skin, and centered around a dark void for a mouth.

I step backward, cautiously backing away as its head tears through the road, reducing the asphalt to dust. By moving. *Holy shit, if it moves ten feet closer, I'm fucked.* Yet despite its cautious advance, it doesn’t attack; I don’t attack either, and gently lower the RPG onto the ground, where it’ll be carved like the road. Why the demon doesn’t decimate me instantly is astounding. But that grooved, callous skin, resembling the cracks of a dried lake, just crawls closer. But even though I’m smart enough to step back, the other guy gets a different idea. A nasty idea, that’s gotten everyone else killed so far.

He goes for the RPG, walking towards the malevolent demon, while I trip on a body. My heart leaps so powerfully it bulges from my chest and almost softens my fall, if it weren’t for how hard the concrete is. My spine lands splat on the ground; I force my teeth together and grind their flat tips to a fine powder, so that I don’t scream and alert the demon. But that effort to stay silent may have been pointless, because the soldier’s fingers are slithering around the RPG.

It snorts.

I'm blown back another dozen or two feet, hitting the ground with my left shoulder, and slumbering after almost exploding from an intense state of shock.