

Zombie Within the Cage – Leon, Year 12, QLD

During the most frigid of autumn days, a young man exchanged four cans of soup for a bag of ice chunks. He freed a hand from his pocket and extended it for a handshake, but the supply merchant did not reciprocate. An elbow from behind jagged his side and thrust him into the ground. The offender took up the young man's spot in the queue and he was forgotten.

He picked himself back up without wiping off his mud-caked clothes. The stench that wafted out of his foul fabrics smelt like its yellowish-moulding texture. Squinting against the winds, he took in the bleak surroundings: giant oaks deprived of leaves and greenery, barb-decorated walls at the borders of the land, and the fields of tiny tents peppered around him. A shivering deep within his chest began to rattle his frame and chatter his teeth. He started towards the imposing gates, lugging the icebag behind him.

The biting breeze pushed his head deeper into his battered coat. As he tugged at the zipper, he passed by fireflies in the fading dusk – they were tents with warm orange glows within, accompanied by the silhouettes of couples, friends, and family. No matter how hard the wind blew, their warmth and life stayed intact within the tent's thin canvas walls.

Cold daggers kept targeting the exposed flesh of his neck. As he approached the gate, soldiers with guns in their gloves eyed him from a distance. They permitted passage. He felt their gaze on him as shuffled out, the entrance clanking shut the moment his icebag crossed over.

Back hunched but spine throbbing, he trekked alone alongside a river, the ice bag accumulating dirt and grass as it dragged along the ground. Greenery sparsely began to crop up. Some bushes and vegetation blossomed dark green amidst dead shrubs and wooden carcasses. He noticed a pair of ash trees on the other side – one sturdy and the other wilting. They were the last ones alive on the other side of that river. The pair fought against the coming of Hades while surrounded by dead wood. The sturdy ash shook against rough gale, shielding the other's brittle branches. Between the young man and the ash trees, a little ferryboat bobbed in the river, dejected after years of waiting for its next coin.

He continued onwards, falling into thinking. Only silent, idle thoughts accompanied his desolate road. The last beams of sunlight cracked through the horizon. He reached into his coat and took out a warm metal torch, thawing his numb palm. A beam guided the way ahead. He used to fear these vulnerable situations, flicking the torchlight towards foreign twig snaps or night creatures' scurries. Such qualms mattered little anymore. Aeons of solitary thinking revealed how little value his life bore and how indescribably cold his existence is.

But he knew where to find warmth. He just needed to open the lock.

Familiar streets came into view. The last couple of footsteps brought a house of thick, dust-painted walls before the young man. He turned off the torch, returning it back into his coat, and entered.

His hand instinctively flicked the light switch on the wall. A click rang in the hallway, but no light shone from above. Sighing, he strode through the pitch darkness, past a dull grey fridge with an ajar door. The dead-rodent smell strengthened as he neared the bathroom.

Moonbeams cracked through a window, revealing a bathtub half-filled with water and ice. Heaving his icebag up, he splashed the contents over the body within the tub.

“I’m home, dear.”

The rotting had gotten worse, but he could still identify the face’s gentle features. Everything stayed still within the tub, creating a picturesque painting of a winter pond, with the ice cubes forming frozen lily pads. Time nearly stopped inside the little bathroom, but the man’s feverish breathing kept it going. The wind blew against the thick brick walls and yet he shivered. Warmth escaped wherever his clothes didn’t cover.

He opened the supply cabinet. Eyes adjusting to the darkness, he realised only three cans of soup remained. Procuring the nearest one required his arm to fully extend, discomfort aching as more heat escaped.

“We’re running a bit low on food, dear. I might need to go hunting soon. After all, a squirrel’s tastier than a bullet, right?” A cackle fended off the silence.

The can popped open, the lid scraping along the rims as it was torn off. He only took two gulps. Plenty of liquid still sloshed inside.

“Dinner’s ready, dear.” He poured the rest over the body.

As soon as the liquid broke the bathwater’s surface, icy debris and thrashing limbs erupted out. A ghoulish scream bubbled, shaking the tub’s walls. The flailing went on for some time, then died down when all traces of the soup disappeared. A significant portion of the water went along with it. Frowning, the young man walked over to the near-empty bag of ice, then shook the rest of the shards into the tub.

All his senses had been frozen numb, but the short meal dusted off his hunger, which clawed and burned his insides. He glanced back at the bathtub’s occupant. A change of the times set them apart. He knew they were the same, or more so, his soul was the same. How pleasant it must feel to be free from a demanding meat cage.

The house used to be warm, even after the catastrophe happened. Orange lamps and bright laughter shone from inside the windows. They’d take care of each other, play stupid games they made up on the spot, build houses of cards, recite stories in goofy voices, and so much more than he could recollect. That bond kept them far cosier than any bonfire could.

“We’re still together, of course.” The man stuttered the words a bit as another onslaught of chattering broke his speech.

He looked around the room. There were two sinks arranged side by side in the bathroom. A near-depleted tube of toothpaste lay between them on the countertop. A cup sat by both sinks, each containing a dry toothbrush. The young man began to crave warmth.

The supply cabinet flew open. *Crack* went the can. He drank. The contents drained too fast. He shook the last droplets into his mouth. It wasn’t enough. The last can snapped open. He drank some more, gasping for air between heavy gulps. He kept tipping the can until the flowing stopped, with only the hard metal edge resting on his lips.

He tossed the can aside, ignoring the loud clattering that echoed in the small room. He was too hungry to notice, but the frigid soup froze his insides. He barely had control over his own limbs, for his whole body trembled. His brain spun, replaying the image of those warm tents near the merchant. The dark silhouettes inside merged with his vision, aligning themselves with the bathtub's occupant.

“Darling I... we haven't talked for a long time. I want to hear your voice again, so I'm going to pull you out. You wouldn't mind, would you?”

Heartbeats hammered in his chest. His hand wavered in the air. Every muscle in his body attempted resistance against his will, but the young man had long stopped thinking. He wondered, confused, at why he was so averse to this choice before. How did he let the cold bother him for so long?

Thin, pale fingers rippled the surface of the water.

They broke the lock, and the cold didn't matter anymore.