

The silver glinted briefly as he turned the coin between his fingers before letting it roll into his palm. The face was worn and grooved with too many scratches to count. It sported a mirror finish once, with a flawless facade. Unfortunately, age and use had taken their toll. Almost reverently, he drew his thumb claw across the surface, taking care not to damage it further. It was strange, he thought, the meaning that the metal held. Countless cultures believed silver to be a pure element, possessing strange purifying powers and the ability to ward off unnatural evils. It was even stranger then, he thought, that he was so drawn to it (It was ironic that he was so drawn to it). A shuddering sigh disturbed the air for only the briefest moment. Something within him said that using "silence" instead of "air" would be more poetic. That much was true, it had a nice clichéd ring to it. He'd have used that if it weren't so wrong. The silent cacophony was deafening today, his thoughts all but lost to the noise. He glanced up from the coin, not sparing the energy to lift his head. The walls seemed grey and heavy, stained by the light creeping in through the window. They reminded him of concrete. There was some malevolence to them now. Even this, the room that was once his last safe haven sought to cast him out. He didn't belong here anymore, didn't deserve the shelter. His body ached, and he hung his head further. A strange heaviness weighed on him, told him to crawl to the nearest corner and lie down. From somewhere, motivation came. People were counting on him, in one capacity or another. Cold, empty eyes snapped to the clock face. The hands read 3:25. He was late already. He shuddered and heaved as he lifted his ragged form from the floor, more pulling himself up than standing. Short, shambling steps carried him away. He blinked, now standing at the doorway to the bathroom. As he stepped through, he quickly turned his head to the right. There was a mirror to his left, right behind the sink. He hid his face from the foul reflection that the thing cast, daring not to look into it for fear of what he might behold. His chest grew tight, though he couldn't quite say why. It was a familiar feeling. Sadness? Anger? Hatred? Shame? He walked past, safely out of view of the mirror. He stood amidst the piles of unwashed clothes. They needed to be washed, and he meant to do it, but it slipped his mind. It always slipped his mind.

The ritual continued: shower, dig appropriate clothing from the pile and wash it, microwave something to eat that lost its appeal long ago. It was always the same. Some days it was different, though. Days like today. The fog was back again. Cold, damp, and grey, it covered everything. His ears swiveled ever so slowly. He thought he heard birds chirping, but the sky was dead and grey, and the rain was pouring down. The fog was in his head, too, he could feel it. Nothing looked right, nothing sounded right. A spike of fear stabbed at his heart. He glanced around in an inexplicable panic, wary of sudden deceptions. The house was empty as always, but he could feel *something* watching. Perhaps it was the noise? Perhaps it was the fog? He shook his head. Something sat in a chair, all curled up, and another lay on the floor. They were both watching him too. He could see the judgment in their eyes, the sadness and regret. It made him angry. He yelled. "Stop looking at me." He turned, hurrying away. Sorrow replaced anger as he realized. His chest ached. The world seemed thin. Doubt crushed him. What was he? Why was he here? How had this happened? An answer rose up from the most sick, twisted depths of the chaos. It

was his fault, of course. It always had been. Always just the wrong step, the wrong turn, the wrong twist or flourish and it all came tumbling down.

His body shook, leaning on the counter, trying to hold himself up. His claws scratched vainly against the cold, hard marble. No mercy was to be found here. His eyes began to grow wet. He twisted them shut, cursing himself for being so disgusting and weak. And suddenly, it all came rushing forward. Slowly, he sagged and slumped until he sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. Slowly, drops of moisture dampened his clothing. He sat along, praying for the slightest gesture, the most insignificant sign. Words echoed through his head. "I want to go Home". "Won't someone save me?" But he sat alone. The wave went as quickly as it had come. The flood had been replaced with a dull, throbbing emptiness, and had left even more noise behind. After a while, he found himself wishing for the flood to return. Somehow, the vacuum was even worse. He knew it would return. It always did. Sometimes, the fog would clear up, but it was as thick as ever now. It was a bad sign. Today was going to be a very bad day.

Now, he stood at the door. He had dried his cheeks as best he could. His eyes were swollen, and his fur still slightly damp, though. The evidence of failure was plain for all to see. He had no choice, though. The clock now said 4:30. He was very late. He stepped outside. He walked down the street, a slight stagger to his step, a side effect of his absenteeism. He hung his head and hid his face, but it didn't help. The sly sneers, the disgusted glances, the harsh laughs said everything. He screwed up his face and hunched his shoulders, hiding inside his protective shell. The leaves of the trees were still as he passed, undisturbed by the storm. Finally, he escaped, arriving. He walked through the store without a word, mumbling a soft reply when necessary. He couldn't laugh today. There wouldn't be any sly quips. When he emerged, now dressed in uniform, he was met with accusing stares. They blamed him, of course. Why shouldn't they? A man walked up to him, an important man. Questions were asked, and accusations were made. He was late, and they were upset. Did he have a reason? No, of course he didn't. He never did. They would never understand. They could never know of his failure.

The day crept on. He struggled through the minutes, and eventually the hours. Things were said about him and to him, as they always were. He tried his hardest, did the best he knew how, but it didn't matter. He was weak, and he was easy prey. He had no counter-argument, no funny remark. He could no longer tell joke from attack. They all felt like a sharp lash. Why was he so serious, he heard? He didn't know any other way to be. Finally, it came to a close. It was black outside now, and shadows filled the world. He walked through the darkness, forgotten by the world. Something was creeping up around him now, within him. The familiar panic began to rise. He twisted about; movement, just there on the edge of his vision. He twisted back; a suspicious sound, just ahead. What foul creature had come for the feast? His heart pounded as his strides lengthened. There's nothing there, he told himself. What could possibly lurk here in the night? But it was of little help. He could feel the presence all around him. Dark visions began to play through his mind, forming from the noise that lingered: visions of unholy, unspeakable things, born of sickness and fear. His trot broke into a run now, breathing hard as he fled from the demons given unseen form. He bounded up the steps to his house, keys already in

hand. He tried to jam them in the lock, but it didn't go at first. He was too shaken. He jumped, hearing a distant cry, dislodging the keys from his hand. Glancing around, up and down the street and into the trees, he scooped the keys back up. Finally, the door swung open, then shut as he slams it behind him.

There is something new here now that wasn't there before: new presences, unlike the rest. He walks into the sitting area. There are people. They are familiar people, and important people. He utters a hopeful greeting, looking for some small comfort. He is answered with a scolding: He left a mess, as he always did. It had been forgotten in the chaos. He apologizes, as he always does, now feeling more empty than ever. The flood is returning, though. He can feel the crushing weight building up already. As the first leaves, he turns to the second person. He wants to say something happy, but he has nothing happy to say. Instead, he tries to share some of his pain, his doubt, hoping that the other will understand, will have an explanation. Unfortunately, they never understand, and he is only met with anger. The other person does not like what he says, and begins to yell at him. It's his fault again, of course. Why can't he ever be happy with anything the other person does for him? Isn't it good enough? The flood is back now. He whimpers as the other's anger is spent. They are calm now, but they still do not understand. They tell him that he can fix it, that he just needs to try and see things right. He doesn't even try to explain; the words won't come. He's already tried hundreds of times, and he's always given the same answer: "of course you can, if you just try." Was he not trying? He must not be. But he was sure he was. It was already so hard to simply survive. What else could he do? He didn't know. He's shaking again, and can barely drag himself up the stairs. His cold, grey haven awaits. The door closed, he finally has some solitude. The mask shatters from the force of the flood, hidden for so many hours, festering and rotting away. He slumps to the ground again. He's such a failure. Nobody truly cares for him. He's not surprised, though. Who in their right mind would ever care for something as broken and damaged as he was? "More trouble than it's worth" seemed like a reasonable description. After a while, he drags himself up. Colorful images, both moving and still, dance across the screen. They're happy and carefree, and he hopes it'll rub off, that it might help clear the fog. It doesn't, though. It's a very bad night. After a while, he gives up. The fog, the noise won't leave him alone. It torments him with a never-ending chaos. They strike his heart like hammer blows as he slowly crumples and withers inside. Songs sing of salvation from the pain, of a special person coming to the rescue and reviving what little remains. It is ironic, he thinks. It would do him no good now: there is nothing left of what he once was. All that remains is an empty mask. He slumps down beside the bed, rather than on it. He's not ready to sleep yet, not ready for the new torment of fevered nightmares. He pulls something from the drawer. It's heavy, a familiar weight. He'd known it most of his life, though it felt different now. He looked it up and down. The chaos screamed at him, taunting him. He wanted to. It would be so easy. The weight fit his hand well, the grip well formed. He hefted the weight... a couple pounds of pressure is all it would take. He gave a shuddering sigh, and returned it to its place in the drawer. It would not happen, as it had not happened for years. He hung his head as his shoulders sagged. He was exhausted. He felt like a coward, as he always had. The fog

was still there, and he knew that, this time, it would still be there in the morning. Tomorrow was going to be a very bad day.