

ASHES OR THE HEART REACTOR

September 7th, 1989. The day I lost everything.

Chernobyl, Ukraine, was their place of origin—where I had caused something irreparable. I knew I should have died for it. Wendigos, they had been proclaimed as; ungodly, ferocious creatures that seemed to come from the deepest, most obscure parts of hell. They rampaged through Europe in the first hours of lockdown, traveling at speeds that seemed impossible. By noon, the week after their outbreak, the only thing that remained of human civilization was the remains—the ruins of what once was a thriving species.

My alarm blared, just like the sirens that echoed through my home that fateful night. I clutched the photo of what used to be, with my aged and parched hand. A Bottle, broken and empty in my other hand, symbolizing the pain that surged through me every time I thought of...

But something felt off, like those bastards had awoken. The alarm sounded: "9:48 PM." 9:48, I thought. Just then, an ugly, distorted, primal roar burst out. It rippled through.

I ran. I ran for what seemed to be miles, then whole continents, then whole realities; past forests and mountains I went, past buried cities that used to be bustling, past...

It all went black.

I could feel icy, hard concrete pressed against my back as I slowly regained consciousness. The more I tried to jolt myself up, the more my cranium ached, the more I bellowed in agony. through my impossibly blurry vision. I could make out the menacing silhouettes looking down upon me in pity, like I was some sort of caged monstrosity. 47, 34... I don't know how many there were!

At last, I fully opened my eyes. It felt like they were bulging out of their sockets. Before I knew it, I was escorted to another dimly lit room. Questions were tossed at me left and right, deafening voices screaming at me. I didn't know what to say. I was—I was overwhelmed. "Who are you?!" was the only one I remember. As the feeling of a gun pressed aggressively against my head seemed to paralyze me. How did I land here?

Over the next weeks, the world felt relaxing but eerily calm. I was used to their blood-curdling roars, their skeletal jaws that spread impossibly wide. But now, silence. No more constant fear and terror, no more demonic creatures. But I still wouldn't forget that day, that night when I had lost...

Every time I remember that, I taste charred iron; I smell open wounds and flesh. And yet, it all feels like a blurred memory from a world that never accepted me. "Who would be stupid and ignorant enough to just do that?" My body tensed, my vision blurred. My eyes and hands trembled. My body fell.

Screams rang eternally in my ears, a tormenting reminder of what pain, destruction, and heartbreak I had caused. I could see it all again: red lights illuminating hallways of pure terror, alarms blaring deservedly as molten graphite and steel darted throughout the halls, piercing the soulless corpses of those who had perished that night. Among the flames, among the terror, among the agony.

"STOP IT NOW!" A voice shrieked in anger. I bolted towards the gates that separated life and death. Bursting through the iron walls I went, with strength no mortal being could obtain. Away, and away, and away I went, until the shrieking stopped, until the despair and desperation had been terminated. I was no different than a stray dog; without a home. But I was going to find purpose in my miserable days of living. I will stop the everlasting nightmare that I have created.

Back to where it all began. Except everything had changed. The trees that used to be brimming with light were now only a shell of what they once were. They were like skeletons with souls trapped for eternity inside. My head ached like it had never before. I felt as if God's fury was being pounded on my very existence. But yet, I pushed on.

Oh, how stubborn I was. I lingered like a memory through those endless hallways; each step I took reminded me of the pain, the agony, the death, the catastrophe that I was responsible for. The voices of the dead rang in my ears like sirens of despair. The smell had become unbearable—rotting corpses still lay here. Their souls had probably moved on upstairs, but I knew God wouldn't be so generous.

Before long, I had begun my descent into the place that horrified me most. What kept me awake at the time of distress... what became...

Screams erupted as my vision pitched. But those screams weren't of the people that perished that day. The screams were mine. I knew it was because it was the day I lost my—

A WHITE ROOM? WAS I AT PEACE? HAD THE LORD FORGIVEN?

But as my mind raced for possibilities, a mechanical, almost automated voice woke me from my trance: "Patient 928, from Chernobyl. Status: awake." I was relieved; I was safe. I was unharmed, nothing had truly happened. I stood up, walking towards the only object in the room: a mirror. As I stared into the glass, the Wendigo smiled back.