It was unseasonably warm and in retrospect, the fog wasn't very usual either. However, if you're running ten miles, you get what you can get, and Spencer was just glad it wasn't raining.

He looked down at his battered red running shoes, noticing the spots where they were permanently stained from running through creeks, deep mud and through the rain. Despite himself, a small grin appeared on his face; this was going to suck so much.

The meeting place was only a couple of blocks away, and the captains usually didn't start until everyone was there. As he left his house, he glanced down at the jacket in his hand. Testing the air, he came to the quick conclusion that it was not necessary, and without looking, threw it through the door and closed it behind him, forgetting that he didn't have his keys on him.

“God damn it.” He muttered to himself as he patted his empty pockets, realizing that the keys and his wallet and his phone were all in the jacket he had just unceremoniously hurled. He looked down at his watch, which, thankfully he still had.

It read 7:00.

“God damn it!” he said again, running a hand through his hair. He was almost late as it was, and in a panicked moment of decision made the choice to go without the items. Everything would sort itself out later when he came home.

Residential houses got taller and taller as he jogged towards the meeting place, eventually transforming into small apartment buildings, and then turning again into proper commercial buildings. The street lights were already on, and the wet wind soon made Spencer decide that it had been a mistake to leave his jacket.

“Hey Spencer!” A voice made him look up. Another member of the team was walking across the street from him.

“Oh hey!” He waved at the other person, suddenly realizing that he didn't know the other guy's name. Tryouts had only been a week ago and they were still getting to used to each other. Spencer thought this person was a freshman, because he hadn’t seen him around before, but honestly, with his skill at faces, he could have been in Spencer's own grade.

Regardless of names, the other person crossed the street towards Spencer.

“You know what we're doing tonight?” he asked, a smile on his face. Definitely a freshman.

“You're kidding right? Tonight’s the long run. We gotta do ten miles!” Spencer said, shaking his head. “Although I still haven't decided whether I would rather do this or hills.” He said, looking in the vague direction of the worst incline in the entire county.

“Definitely hills,” the other boy said, “at least with hills you can get it over quicker.”

“Err. I'm not so sure,” Spencer replied as they walked, “sure its shorter, but it really sucks, especially if you're in varsity.” He added, knowing full well that the other boy was not in varsity.

“I guess. You guys have to do like twice of our run. Pretty incredible.” The other person said, looking at Spencer's running shirt. “Is that from the last invitational?”

Spencer looked down at the white and blue athletic shirt he was wearing. “Oh yeah, they were just handing these out with some other stuff. But it was totally not worth it. That whole race was a shit show. We had two fucking false starts and they threatened to disqualify the next person who did it. And then it rained halfway through.”

“Yeah, that does sound brutal. At least you got to go though.” The other boy pointed out.

“Huh?” Spencer said as they passed through deserted Sender St. and its many shops. The lights were on, on the street but all the buildings were dark. Kinda creepy actually, like something out of silent hill.

“Wait, you didn't even notice? Only varsity got to go to that one.” The boy said with a bit of a frown.

“Sorry. I didn't know.” Spencer said, not sure of what to add.

After that, they didn't talk, but that was fine since the meeting location was only another two blocks away.

They heard the blue and white shirted teammates long before they saw them. The meeting place was on the curb of a random hardware store and they usually congregated in a large alleyway that led to a parking lot behind the building. While it meant they were off the street, it amplified their voices, and the restaurant on the other side had complained several times. Tough. They were a team long before the restaurant was even there. There was no one there ever anyway.

“Car!” Someone yelled as Spencer and the other nameless student got close.

The whole crowd of people scattered in two directions, leaving just barely enough room for the busted up silver volvo to exit the driveway.

Spencer watched the car take the turn onto the street, hopping the curve as it did so, and realized that it had been the only car he had seen yet tonight. Man they really weren't kidding when they said downtown had gone to shit.

“Ok, Spencer's here. Everyone group up!” Randal yelled. Randal was a pretty good captain all things considered. Also he ran like a fucking boss. Spencer could never understand how people did consecutive miles at six minutes or even under. He had always been good at distance, but speed was never a skill he had, hence why he was on cross country. If he had wanted to sprint the hell out of everything, he could have done track.

“Hey! I'm here too!” The other person said with a bit of a whine.

Randal looked at the freshman. Most of the group looked as well. “Who are you again?”

There were a handful of snickers from the other upper classmen, and some from the freshman's friends as well. Thank god, he wasn't the only one who had forgotten the kid's name.

“Damn it Randal, you know me, we're in history together!” The freshman protested.

Randal shrugged with a wry grin, “I know, I know, I was just joking. Also after the run I might need to talk to you about that assignment due next week. I have no idea what I'm supposed to write about.”

Randal was good at running, but academics were not his strong suite.

“Alright team. Coach Malanke can't be here because of something about actually spending time with his family or some bullshit, so we're doing this one by ourselves.” he said, clapping his hands.

“Everyone knows that today is the long run right?” He said, with a shit eating grin, looking for anyone who looked horrified, but if he was disappointed he didn't get to surprise anyone, he didn't show it.

“Teeeeeen miles!” he added. “And that’s everyone, even junior varsity. We'll split V and JV. Lets get… Partha, you wanna lead JV?” he asked an junior on the varsity team.

The girl shrugged. “Sure.”

“Cool, then we'll get going. Its not getting any earlier or warmer.”

The team then did about fifteen minutes of warmups, but were somewhat limited since the ground was concrete.

Ryan, one of Spencer's friends on the team had been talking to Spencer during the warm ups.

“You wanna try to pace this time?” Ryan asked, adjusting his watch as the team got ready, taking last drinks out of bottles, and attached or removed pieces of clothing.

“We'll see how this goes. I'm usually good at distance, but its been a while since I ran ten miles.” Spencer admitted.”

The two of them started their watches.

“Lets do this shit!” Randal yelled, the twenty or so people following him.

And just like that they were off.

The run started well at least. The initial parts of it snaked through the town, running up the dreaded hill and coming back down the other side, but since it was early everyone managed it fairly well. JV slipped behind fairly quickly, and by the second mile they were down to the ten or so people in varsity.

Spencer looked to the side to see Ryan. The other runner seemed to have no problems, even as they ran heavily down the annoyingly long hill. On the other hand, Spencer was starting to think he either had drunk too much water before the run, or not enough, it was hard to tell. Knowing that focusing on his own running was a sure fire way to get tired early, he tried to look around at his surroundings.

In front of him was a smaller subgroup within varsity, comprising of Randal and the rest of super varsity, essentially the people who actually placed. The distance between them and the rest of the team was small now, but Spencer knew that it would only grow as the night progressed.

The town was depressingly silent. Pale moonlit clouds hung over the mostly dark houses. The town had become a common spot for rich families from the city escaping the summer heat of the baking streets, and he knew that not all of them were even occupied at this time of year.

And so, it was mostly on empty houses that the moonlight illuminated as that orb revealed itself on the streets of the town. Despite himself Spencer had to look up as the clouds parted.

It really was quite beautiful the way it simply hung there in the sky. He could make out the details of craters and darker areas all around the orb. Its majesty was so incredible, it was hard to believe that all that light was actually reflected. Yessir, full moons were nice, if he actually was outside for them.

Wait. I guess it wasn't quite a full moon. He looked up still as he ran, focusing on the celestial body, free to run down the center of the deserted streets. There was a bit of it missing, which kind of spoiled the perfection of the scene.

He shook his head and looked back to the group. Sure enough, Randal and the rest of super varsity had put some distance on them, probably because of his day dreaming. Even Ryan was a bit ahead of him.

He turned back and was surprised to see that none of the other runner could be seen. Was JV really that far behind? And where was the rest of slower varsity?

Ah, no matter. Plus there were better things to worry about. Like how Ryan was still gaining on Randal's group. Hrm. I guess he really wants to be part of varsity. All the more power to him. He'll regret that in a couple of miles when he cramps up.

Satisfied with his rationale of his own mediocere performance, Spencer's thought drifted to other things, like the his physics test tomorrow, whether Rachel from English class secretly liked him and whether or not he'd actually be able to make it back into his house when he got back home.

And then it hit him.

“Fuck me.” He said, grabbing his side in surprise and pain. Ryan and the rest continued off into the distance.

“Fucking hell!” He said, slowing to a crawl. Something had shifted in his stomach or intestines, and now it was positioned poorly for running. He had no idea what physically made such a situation hurt, but it sure felt like part of his left side had just been atomized by a particularly painful laser.

He grabbed his side harder and tried to focus on something else. Yet now, the night was irrevocably tainted. The moonlight was too harsh in its shadows, the black shadows of trees rustling chaotically in the silver light. The weather just a bit too warm: his breath seemed to cling to his mouth, as if a bubble of exhalation was stuck right up against his face. He was almost five miles in, and his clothes were covered in sweat, the exterior of his body freezing where the shirt touched his skin, which was hot as fire.

Should he stop?

Never. That would be showing Ryan and the rest just what they wanted to see. Plus he was halfway out anyway, by definition he had to go back.

Plus you never stopped running. It was too easy to stop again in the future. Give yourself a foot, you'd give yourself a mile.

The street stretched long in front of him, the lack of moving cars suddenly very apparent. He looked around but the rest of the group had left him in the dust.

He continued on, feeling like a small section of his side was being surgically removed by red hot salad tongs. Sweat ran down his face as he tried to mentally compensate for the overwhelming pain.

He ran around a bend and stared down the street. The road came to a stop.

Ahead, a dark expanse of forest rose above him, at the edge of the road was a small white fence, the entrance of which was open and shining in the light. Beyond it, a path continued into the woods, although it transformed into only gravel a short ways in.

Right. This was the path around the lake. But was this the right way?

A quick look behind him revealed no one; he still outpaced JV, a fact which didn't console him in the slightest.

He had a few more moments to wonder before he was running into the path by default. He strained to remember whether the route was supposed to hug the lake. Certainly, they ran by here on many occasions, and he knew that the lake's path ran all around it. It was also about four miles, which would be the correct distance needed to round out the ten that he needed.

He wiped sweat out of his eyes as he jogged down the path. The momentary change in thought had given him a reprieve from his side, confirming what he always though which was that cramps were somehow tyrannically psychosomatic in some way.

Yet of course, no sooner had the thought gone through his head then the pain returned, somehow deeper and harsher than before.

Fuck! Through the god damn lake path it was! Ten miles is ten miles, even it isn’t the way everyone else went.

He came up to the end of the street, his pacers thwacking against the pavement, before rising briefly to get over the curb onto the gravel path.

His feet crunched on the gravel, his legs adjusting to the new terrain. In front of him the path went further inward, until presumably it turned to run parallel to the lake.

After a few moments, and two or three surges of new found pain in his side, he came out onto the lake. It stretched almost half a mile or so outwards, its mostly still surface reflecting the moonlight off its depths. If he hadn't been in complete agony, it might have been beautiful.

He was breathing manually now. From experience, breathing in slowly and over many footsteps lessened the effect of the cramp somehow, and so he found himself sucking in air, trying his hardest to focus on anything other than the intense pain.

The path was mostly uniform. It was tenish feet wide, and continuously gravel. It was completely unlit, and sections of it were almost pitch black, while others were exposed to the lake, allowing the silver light from the moon to mark the path.

Minutes ran glacially by. His feet hit the ground again and again, the pain in his side ebbing then returning.

The path turned to packed dirt beneath his feet and lowered by a foot or so in a quick dip which disturbed his cadence.

No sooner had it done so than a puddle appeared right in his path. Annoyed, he ran to its side, only to be presented by another.

Frowning, he continued on the degraded path, trying his best to keep his feet dry, an attempt that lasted all of five minutes. Beside him, the lake distanced itself from the path and between them tall reeds obscured the view. The increased wetness took to the air as well. Cold sheaths of fog hung close to the ground, off to the side of the path and on the lake itself. For the first time in the run he heard sounds other than his team or himself.

Off to his side an insect sounded, a loud cheeping noise that continued on and off. The sound was joined by others, until they were all around him as the path ran through the marshy area. Frogs joining the symphony with their dull croaks.

His feet pounded the ground, splashing the mud onto his shoes and legs. Their now wet soles slapping against the ground. Yet as he listened to them, he realized that something was off about the sound.

In some bizarre cognitive dissonance, his physical footsteps didn't seem to line up with what he was hearing. It took him only a moment to realize that he was actually hearing two pairs of steps, only slightly out of synch.

God damn it! He really had screwed this run up hard if JV was catching up to him. Who was leading them again? Partha? Of course. She was almost as good a runner as he. She must have left the other suckers in the dust if she had caught up to him.

Well, at the very least it meant he was on the right path.

Pain momentarily gone, his competitive nature rose inside him and, using the sound of the footsteps, he tried to pull ahead of Partha. He pumped his arms and did his best to look upwards at the slowly waving tree branches above him. He could totally do this.

Yet not five minutes later, he realized that Partha had matched him. That was to be expected, they still had at least four more miles to go, and the easiest way to get a good time if this were a race would be to pace oneself off someone else until the last mile or so, and then pull ahead, which was probably what Partha was trying to do.

However, Spencer was never one enjoy matching pace with someone else. If you did that, there was always the chance that they would, as they planned, pull ahead at some point in the future. And that was important, because there was a huge psychological advantage in passing someone.

Fortunately, there was also a morale boost in leaving someone else in the dust. Spencer smiled somewhat. Partha was varsity, but certainly slower than him. He picked up his pace, tearing through the darkened path.

The world was forest and moonlight, shadows running across gravel, the briefest hint of water reflecting light in the reeds next to the path, breathing, sweat, footfalls and of course, the dull simmer pain lingering right beneath the surface.

He listened harder again, having been satisfied that he outpaced her.

It took a moment to get the proper read on the footfalls, since they were still in line with his own. That meant she had kept up with him!

A frown ran across his face and he looked backward. Maybe they could run together if she was going to go all out…

The dark path looked foreign as it disappeared behind him, only the smallest trace of his footsteps in the thin mud told him that he had once been there. The trees were getting thicker overhead and he had a hard time making out anything in the darkness behind him, especially as he was running.

Well, this certainly wasn't the outcome he wanted, but he was willing to run with her, especially if she didn't hold him back.

He listened for the eventual sprint as she would close properly.

Yet as he listened, he noticed something odd about the footsteps. He had been running on the packed dirt now for what should have been at least a mile or more, and had gotten used to his own feet hitting the hard packed dirt and occasional mud. It made a distinct sound, the impacts low in tone due to the dirt absorbing most of the sound as opposed to wen they had been on the asphalt. Yet the sound of the other set of foot steps behnd him was more of a slapping sound, as if you were running with incorrect posture or with soaked shoes.

While this thought was going through his head, an opening appeared in the reeds, if only for a second.

Ice ran through his veins, his eyes widened, his heart raced, and the world slowed to a crawl. He was suspended in time, with his footsteps hitting the mud beneath him. A sudden and animalistic fear ran through him. For across the lake, illuminated briefly by a streetlight on the other side, was the unmistakable form of JV.

He wrenched his head backwards and stared in fear at the footsteps following him. The continued, twacking wetly against the mud. The darkness shifted and shimmered in the moonlight, never quite allowing him to see far enough.

He was on the wrong side of the lake. The run had gone around the lake but he was on the wrong side! If he was on the wrong side then who was following him, and why did their footsteps sound so off, like someone running barefoot? It it was another varsity runner, how had they gotten behind him? If it wasn't, and it was another person, what were they doing running after him?!

His mind raced wildly as he speed up. There had been some stories in the paper about some crime lately, nothing too serious, but the town had certainly seen better days. A shocked realization ran through his body.

There was no one around. There were no lights, no cars. There was plenty of brush around and of course the lake itself. Oh god, hey were going to mug him. How could he have been so stupid? They were going to get him!

Pain completely and suddenly suppressed by adrenaline laced fear, he pulled ahead, his feet racing over the mud, the warm air cloying at his mouth.

And yet he could not shake the footfalls behind him.

Who could do that? Not some random homeless person or drifter; they had kept up with him for what was now surely two miles and he was sure that by this point they were running under a seven minute mile. Crazy Joe off the street couldn't do that right?

The footfalls slapped behind him, sounding closer.

And it wasn't just the footfalls. It was other sounds as well. The insect hum and risen to a new high, a constant buzz all around him. Deep beneath them, the frogs had taken on a constant barrage of calls. And other sounds as well, long plaintive cries of some bird or other creature, the chattering of what could have been squirrels, and some sort of deeper humming? He had no idea what kind of animal that was…

And he was the only person here. The footfalls sounded behind him.

He suddenly felt very alone. He wished for, begged for another opening in the trees so that he could call out to the group across the lake, but the trees and marsh were uncooperative and he was afraid of calling out and having no one answer him.

And he was the only person here.

If possible, his fear increased in a single nonsensical yet unshakable thought. What if he *were* the only person here.

If he was the only person here, then the thing behind him, the thing that had been following him was…

He could see it now in his mind that had nothing to do for the last five miles, having timed to hone its imagination: something following him, its footsteps wet against the mud because of its webbed feet, wet with water because it had just crawled from the lake as he had passed. Scaly yet slimy skin of a kind known to animal rather than man, yet running implacably on two legs in some horrible mockery of human form. Better than human, the thing was superhuman, its skin stretched tightly over bulging deformed muscles, shifting grotesquely as it sprinted after him.

Sweat poured off his face as he now broke into a sprint, having fully formed in his mind what must be coming after him. He dashed through fog lying on the ground, through mud which sucked at his shoes, trying to grab them as he ran, through wet warm air, choking his breaths.

The footfalls sounded closer. They were real. He could hear them. Thwack, thwack, like someone wearing divers fins, yet impossibly quick.

There was no escaping it!

A cry sounded from the forest beside him, a sudden piercing yell sounding disturbingly like a woman screaming. His mind didn't have enough time to process the call before it was gone, its impression and the steady thwack of footsteps the only things left in his mind.

It was gaining on him.

The pain, gone for so long finally returned, piercing his side like a lance of pure agony. He clutched the area forcibly, gathering the flesh of his side into his grasping hand, desperate to run quicker, faster, somehow!

It felt like the upper half of his body was being separated from his lower half on one side by jaws made of pure fire, reverberating outward and backward through his back. He was bent over now, still sprinting as best as he could, pain slowing him.

The thwacking sounds stopped.

Fear and uncertainty ran through him for a brief moment. Perhaps he had outran it finally? Perhaps it had given up the chase?

He turned his head to look behind.

Partha looked up suddenly as a strange and disturbing sound came from across the lake. Grabbed from her own thoughts, she nearly jumped in shock.

“What the hell was that?” She exclaimed to the JV members still following behind her.

One of them, cracked a grin and wiped their forehead. “Ha, that? Its a fox! Crazy though huh? It really sounds like a person doesn't it?”

Partha listened for a second call. But none came as she continued running along the well lit path on the other side of the lake.

“Are you sure? That sounded pretty… real” She said, breathing during the question, half out of nessesity and half out of discomfort.

“No, I'm pretty sure. It was just a fox. The only thing we have to worry about finishing this damn run.” The JV member said with a laugh.

“Huh...yeah.” Partha said with a faked grin of her own, as she recalled the cry.

“Yeah… just a fox...”