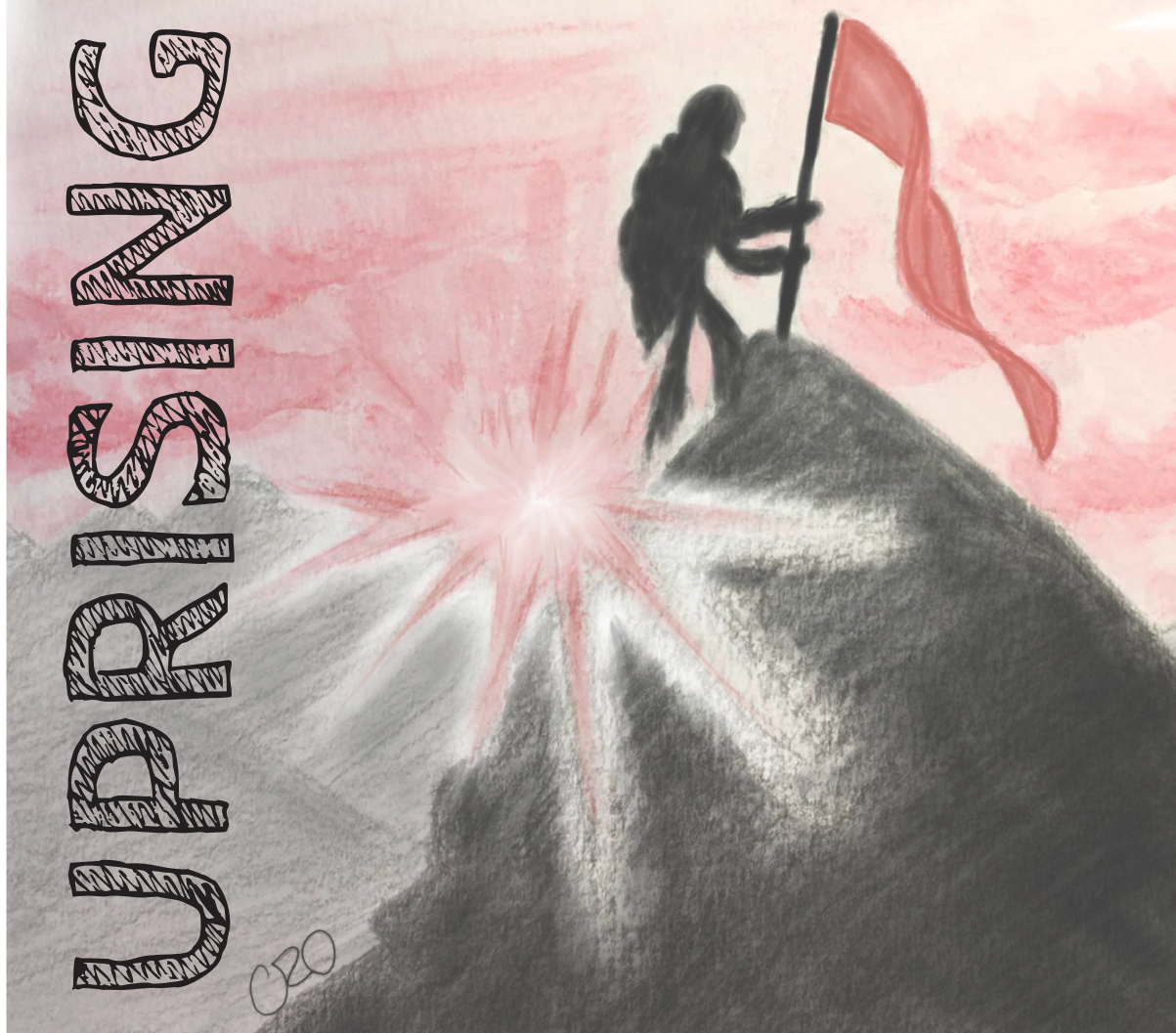


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Literary Magazine

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Introduction

Inkwell Literary Magazine is proud to present its third issue, "Uprising." We are so thankful for this theme as we watch those who are rising up around the globe to fight for the health and welfare of our planet in big and little ways. We want to give you writing that inspires you to continue the fight, to face your inner demons, and to keep hope burning bright in a dark time.

Our writers explore the idea of true courage being in falling for something just as much as it is standing for something. We want to remind you of the iron in your bones, the fire in your soul, the strength in your arms, but also the reason in your mind, the love in your heart, and the humility on your tongue.

May our writing help you find the honor of martyrdom, the inspiration of the people who stand on the soap box, and the glory of the cause, not the battle.

"Behold, all who are incensed against you shall be put to shame and confounded; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them; those who war against you shall be as nothing at all. For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I am the one who helps you.'" – Isaiah 41:11-13 ESV

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cover art by Cara Olechea



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Let's Uprise Together

By Katelyn Lain

Let's uprise together!
It feels like our world is being ambushed by a mysterious sniper on one of the world's tallest buildings. Citizens panic while policemen search to end this cause of fear.

Some people put up walls to protect themselves while others are trying to control the changes in their lives.

The cause of fear is not the pandemic, but the change to our lives.

People lose their jobs. Children and college students are sent home from school, killing successful routines. Bills are hard to pay. Some must return to living with toxic families.

Loneliness threatens the world.

Everywhere I look, I see an uprising against this change.

People selfishly hoard grocery items for fear of want. The news uses change to manipulate politics. Social media numbs the pain of loneliness with humor. People refuse to stay home to avoid acknowledging a problem.

King Hezekiah lived in a time of political and spiritual uprising. However, his response to that revolt has redefined my view of uprising. I will let Hezekiah tell his story, as he lived in a pandemic of change.

"One day, my administrator, secretary, and friend Joah went out to meet the Assyrian supreme commander, chief officer, and field commander at the Jerusalem wall. Unknown to the men outside the gate, I stood against a pillar with my comrades on the wall talking to the Assyrians outside of the wall.

Wrapped in a mantel, I watched my citizens pass by me, only the breeze tugging at my hood threatened to expose me.

"What are you basing your confidence on? How are you planning on rebelling?" one of the Assyrians asked.

"Certainly not Egypt. That's like leaning on a splintered staff and expecting not to get splinters in your hand."

"Besides, we could give you 2,000 horses, but you still wouldn't be able to put riders on them."

The first speaker guffawed at the blow.

As loud as a donkey ready to attack, the commander brayed, "We have orders from your God to destroy you."

I was proud to hear my wise companions speak.

"Please speak to us in Aramaic, master. Don't speak to us in Hebrew lest the people on the wall hear."

Calling out even louder in Hebrew, the commander spoke fear into the people's hearts.

"Do not believe Hezekiah. The Lord will

deliver you into our hands. Turn yourselves in before it's too late.'

I sank my weight against the pillar.

People stood still in the streets. As a sheep before the slaughter stops its fight when it feels the blade against its throat, so the people looked stunned and silent.

'It's your choice: life or death. How will your God deliver you?'

I examined the people. As obedient as a faithful daughter, the people did not answer the Assyrians because I had ordered them to be silent.

Heading back to my palace with head bowed, I waited to hear the account of my three faithful comrades.

They arrived with their clothes torn. I did the same.

I sent my three officials to the prophet Isaiah with one message: 'Pray for us.'

I went into the tabernacle of the Lord. As the angels prostrate before Yahweh, I laid on my face in prayer before God.

Isaiah sent a message from Yahweh: 'Do not fear. I will fight for you. Assyria will be attacked by another nation, and Sennacherib will have to turn home to fight. There I will end his life.'

I was able to eat for the first time in the past three days. My servants acted confused. I guess they expected me to be concerned about the message at the wall.

I knew my comfort: The Lord would fight for me.

The next morning I was reading in my chamber as I usually did at that hour when a messenger brought a letter with the word 'mavet' smeared in blood on the cover. The signature read 'King Sennacherib.'

Death. Death. Death. The word written in blood.

'Do not let your god deceive you when he says you will be delivered. Look at the other kings Assyria has destroyed. Did their gods help them?'

As a thin candle with a long wick, my

strength was waxed faint.

How had the king heard of the message promising deliverance? Had Isaiah been captured by the Assyrians? Were there spies in the city?

I went up to the temple of the Lord. Letting my heavy kingly garments sag my body to the floor, I knelt.

I took the bloodstained letter from my breast and spread it out before my God. 'Please show the power of your name by delivering your people.'

Again, Isaiah sent a message from the Lord to me.

'Hasn't my prophet, Isaiah, told you? I have ordained this long ago and I am now bringing it to pass. I will fight for you.'

The next morning I went to the Jerusalem wall, disguised in my cloak again. I paced. My mind paced. My heart paced. I quoted the words of Moses from the scrolls, 'A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.'

My eyes fluttered in the direction of a bird that had swooped onto the wall a few feet away from me. But my vision moved beyond to a flock of vultures circling in the distance where the Assyrians had camped.

Upon returning to the palace, I received a report of a messenger who had walked into a dead man's camp, counting the corpses of around one hundred and eighty-five thousand men. The rest of the army had returned home.

Upon hearing the message, my arms raised to the God of my predecessor, David. 'It was the angel of the Lord,' I cried.

Later, I heard of the death of King Sennacherib by the hand of his sons.

The Lord truly had fought for me."

Hezekiah redefined uprising. He fought his battles in prayer. Whatever battles you are facing, bring them to the Lord, as King Hezekiah's letter. Yahweh will fight for you.

Whether it's your bills, letter of unemployment, textbooks, note from a loved one,

spread out some symbol of change before the Lord and use your uprising to strengthen your trust in Christ.

Let's uprising with Hezekiah!

*Disclaimer: the quotes are not word-for-word of Scripture but rather summary quotes.

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Zero Tolerance Policy

By Rose O.

I love Captain America. Not for his looks or his heroic deeds, although he does look great (thank you so much, Chris Evans) and accomplishes some of the greatest superhero feats of cinematic history. But I love him for his attitude. Really, he's a bit of a punk, picking fights all the time, usually fights he can't win. But he fights for a reason, and he never compromises on that. His reason is simple, and the simple reason I love him: he doesn't like bullies.

But I really can't attribute my avid distaste for bullying to Captain America, as much as I love him. Actually, the person who was my first example of standing up for the mistreated is someone I love much more than a comic

book hero. Namely, my dad.

I don't remember my dad ever talking to me about bullying and how it should be dealt with. He may have at one point because that's something my dad would probably do, but even if he did, that's not what taught me how to deal with bullies. Instead, I learned about bullying through the small things my dad did over many years.

My dad always has time, no matter how busy he is. Even while working three or four different jobs, my dad was never missing as an influence in my life. When he had to leave on business trips, he called. If he was without phone service, he wrote letters or postcards. When he was home, he made sure to spend time, not just with all of his family, but with each of us specifically. He would ask us how we were and he would listen. He valued us.

And he didn't just do this with us, his family; he did this with others as well. He ate meals with his students. He prayed with and for his coworkers. He picked up extra work to help someone out, made meals for those who needed a hand. Sometimes this meant less sleep for him, less in the budget for things we wanted to do, extra work, less studying—and lower grades—on his graduate degree work. But he always made time because he valued people. Even the people who were needy or ungrateful, even when we were being unreasonable or inconvenient.

So, I learned that if there's a person that others avoid, you can be the person to give them attention and friendship. If someone is struggling, you can be the one to lend them a hand. If someone has fallen, you can be the one to lift them up. I learned to value people.

But what about those who do the opposite?

My father is not an angry person. I've seen him angry many times, but that's mostly more at himself or the problem than another person. And I have never, ever seen him violent. Except once.

My family has always had several dogs. Once we had a pair of siblings, named Reese

and Hershey. Hershey was the sweetest dog we ever had. And Reese, when he grew big enough, took advantage of that and started to bully her. He tried to keep her from eating and would snap at her every time she went for a mouthful of food from her own bowl. I would usually help my dad feed the dogs, so I often saw him give Reese a reprimanding smack for this, or just push him away from Hershey's bowl.

But one day Reese bit her when she tried to eat and my dad had enough. He picked up Reese (who was by no means a small dog) by the scruff of the neck and the haunches and pushed him up against a window of the house. "Don't you EVER bite her again!"

At the time I thought the measure may have been a bit extreme, but Reese never bit Hershey again. Later my dad told me a story about his own experience with bullies in grade school. He told me about a kid who would never leave him alone until the day my dad decked him with his metal lunchbox. The bully never belittled him again, and the demerits my dad got, he says, were worth it.

The story and that incident are now inseparable in my mind for two reasons: one, I could never imagine my dad hitting a kid with a lunchbox until I picture him slamming Reese against the window. Two, I learned the other side of the problem of bullying. This new aspect of my dad's character, so different from his usual gentle, caring demeanor, put the puzzle pieces together for me, making a point that no story or lecture of his ever quite accomplished.

Bullying is about undervaluing people. The opposite of bullying is not the absence of discomfort, but the presence of respect. The opposite of bullying is what my dad does every day, caring for people, treating them with respect—acknowledging them as people. And this valuing of people leads to an intolerance for bullying, because bullying is the opposite of respect.

So, you don't have to be like Captain

America to fight bullying. Instead, you can be like my dad. Because rarely do those of us who aren't Captain America have the chance to fight bullies—or knock out Hitler over 200 times. But we can all treat people with value and respect, every day of our lives.

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In the Medina

By Kaleb Shelton

“Make sure you don't have any valuables in your pockets,” Luke warned as we got out of the little red taxi. We were standing in front of a very oriental-looking blue archway. All kinds of people were streaming in and out of it. There were women wearing the traditional Muslim headcoverings, tourists from dozens of countries, and older men wearing Moroccan jellabas. This was the entrance to the “old city” part of Fez, Morocco, known as the “Medina.”

As I followed Luke through the archway, he turned around and pointed out that the archway was green from this side. I threw a quick glance at it, but my attention was riveted to the people and objects around me. Unlike

Luke, who had spent most of his life in Africa, this was my first time on the continent and also my first exposure to Muslim culture. To be honest, it didn't seem that different from an Indiana Jones movie. There were young men and teens riding their rusty bicycles or men leading donkeys loaded to the fullest capacity. Middle-aged men called out to passersby to step inside their little shops and older men in their long, pointy-hooded garments slowly shuffled through the narrow, brown streets or sat in clusters eating or talking in their Arabic language. Scrawny, disease-stricken cats and the occasional dog scavenged in the gutters. Every object in sight looked as if it was at least a few decades old: rusty, brown, worn, dusty, shaggy. The only things that displayed radiant color were the foods and the souvenirs the people of Morocco were trying to sell to their foreign visitors.

Several times I was foolish enough to look at a souvenir curiously and then make eye contact with the seller who would call prices out after us until we were out of sight. Whenever this happened, I mimicked Luke as he kept walking, laying his right palm on his chest and saying "Shukraan, shukraan," which is Arabic for "thank you."

One time, a man selling leather seat cushions caught my attention and I stayed for a few seconds to examine the merchandise. "Real leather," the man said in almost perfect English and demonstrated by putting the cushion to the flame of a cigarette lighter. "Fifty dirham." When we walked away, the guy followed us around several blocks, shouting out prices. Luke had told me about tactics that vendors used to pressure unsuspecting tourists to purchase something they didn't really want. Boy, did I feel pressured. When the cushion salesman finally gave up, Luke turned to me. "That guy was unusually persistent," he said.

Finally, we came to the shop of one of Luke's friends. He was a very kind old man selling beautiful glass tea cups. I bought a purple one for my mom and a pink one for my

little sister. After we left, we passed a shop that had a lot of swords in its window. I had determined not to leave Morocco without at least a dagger or knife in my possession, so Luke and I went in. I examined a few of the daggers and swords the shop owner had on display, but then an object hanging among some other items in the far corner caught my attention.

"What's this?" I asked, walking over to it.

"That," the vendor said in excellent English, "is a handmade Tuareg Sleeve Dagger. The Tuareg are a people who wear turbans and wander the desert. This dagger is around sixty years old, I think, and look, it has cobra skin on the sheath and handle."

Immediately, I wanted it. However, in the Medina, you don't just go in and buy something. Here, the barter system still reigns supreme.

Luke leaned towards me. "Do you want it?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes," I said, "can you barter for me?" I had never bartered before.

He grinned. "Sure."

It was like a chess tournament. The dagger was laid on a table, along with a few other daggers I had selected to buy for my brothers. Luke and the shop owner faced each other on opposite sides of the table. After a few moments of serious silence, Luke named a price in Arabic.

The shop owner burst out laughing. Looking over to me, he pointed at Luke. "He barterers like a Berber!" he exclaimed. "A Berber!"

From what I remembered of what Luke had told me, the Berbers were red-haired people with a long history. But apparently, they weren't very admired by other Moroccans.

For the next few minutes, I watched intently as the two of them bartered for the price, switching occasionally to Arabic and then back to English. Apparently, Luke had a very particular idea of what a good price would be. Suddenly he shook his head, started walking away and motioned to me to leave with him.

Alarmed, I started to protest. I wanted the dagger! But just then the shop owner gave in and I realized that Luke had employed a tactic of his own. The shop owner knew that Luke's price was a good one, but had tried to trick us into paying higher. When Luke had pretended to leave, taking the prospects of the sale with him, the shop owner had given in and accepted the good price. Although he looked like a tourist because he was American, Luke was too experienced to be tricked by the souvenir sellers, even though they often tried.

We spent the rest of the day looking at shops and sights. I had my first ever Camel Burger in a restaurant called "The Clock." We went to the tannery, a very famous but also very smelly tourist attraction. The tannery is where animal skins are treated to make leather products out of, which are some of the best-selling souvenirs. They soak and dye the skins in pits filled with a mixture of pigeon dung and water which produces a very smothering odor, especially on a hot day. Thankfully, we had been to a perfume shop earlier that day and the proprietor had rubbed some very pleasant smelling stuff called amber on my wrist. I held my wrist near my face the entire time we were near the tannery.

Finally, we came back to the archway where we had started. Gratefully, I looked up at the green side of the structure. But our adventures weren't over yet. As we passed under the shade of the archway, we were surrounded by about five skinny teenagers. Three of them started talking to us while two of them snuck up right behind us. Even to me, it was very obvious that they were pickpockets. Though we had our wallets in our backpacks, our hands instinctively reached for our back pockets. When they realized we could not be robbed, the teens moved away. One of them shouted a rather strange remark in parting. "You have face like vegetable!"

The Medina of Fez marks only one of my experiences in Morocco. I visited Roman ruins, went hiking, fossil hunting, saw a city that

was almost entirely blue, and spent the night in a hotel where the shower and the toilet were in the exact same space. But I think the Medina was the only place where I caught a glimpse into another culture, learned to understand it better, and gained a better appreciation for my own.

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Lab Coats Versus The Lab Rats

By Kathleen Coyle

“Do my veins look darker to you? I...I think my blood is turning black!” Rosa squished the skin around on her arm, poking at her veins.

“They look fine. You’re imagining things again.” I briefly glanced in her direction from where I lay upside down, hanging slightly off the side of my bunk.

“Isla! You didn’t even look. I really feel different this time. I think it was the last injection they gave me. Look.” She shoved her arm in my face. “They really do look darker.”

“Gee, I think you’re right.” I slowly rolled over and pushed up into a sitting position. “Oh my! Rosa, your eyes are turning black!” Rosa

shrieked and dashed to the single mirror we had in our room, pulling down her eyelids and studying her eyes.

"They are not!" She turned to me, hands on her hips. "That is so not funny, Isla."

"You've been here how long? Four, five years? And nothing they've given you has ever changed anything. For all you know, they could be giving you a placebo."

"You've been here even longer, and you're still the same too. Why are we still here if nothing is working?"

I looked away from her, studying my nails. "I guess they'll keep trying until something does work." Three loud knocks sounded from our door before it slid open, disappearing into the wall.

"Isla? Treatment time." A tall woman with a sleek bun and a lab coat stood at the threshold. Rosa and I shared a look. Nurse Betty. She wasn't as bad as the others. Sometimes I thought I saw sympathy in her eyes. But she was still a part of why we were here, and I hated her for that.

"Wish me luck. And don't stress too much while I'm gone." Rosa gave a little nod and then frowned as I left the room.

My footsteps echoed down the hallway as I silently fumed about my circumstances.

It started soon after the Formidulo virus hit. The quick and methodical seizure of children from schools, from their homes. Children to be used, tested on, experimented with to engineer a new breed of human. One that would withstand the strength of the Formidulo virus. Airborne, the virus killed nearly half of all who came in contact with it and instilled fear in everyone.

We stopped at the same door as usual and entered the same room where I climbed atop the same exam table and awaited new experiments to be done to me. Just as I had done every year for the past six years.

"Good morning, Isla. How are we feeling today?" A balding man with thick glasses and a clipboard entered the room. Dr. Pearson.

"Oppressed as usual. Devoid of my rights as a citizen." I glared at his fat shiny head.

"Lovely to hear that. Shall we begin?"

"Why not. It's not like I can say no."

"So I heard from Dr. Gilbert that you've had an interesting development. Care to show me?"

"Not really." He raised an eyebrow and looked at me from over the rim of his glasses.

"Chipper, aren't we?" He stared a little longer, then signalled at the door. "Show me."

Nurse Betty entered the room again carrying a small cage with a skinny rat in it. Bile rose in my throat. She placed the cage in my lap.

"Show me." Dr. Pearson's voice was sharp now, slicing into my heart and making my pulse jump. Goosebumps flared across my back. I stuck my fingers inside the rat's cage. I poked it behind the head. He spun and snapped at the offending finger but otherwise seemed fine. I knew better.

The minutes seemed to tick by ever so very slowly but soon the rat began to pace before curling up in the corner. Its eyes dilated and its tongue lolled out the side of his mouth. It began to pant heavily, its chest heaving. But as time passed its breathing slowed and then stopped. For good.

"That is absolutely fascinating." He scribbled furiously on his clipboard. He gestured to Betty again, and she took the dead rat and left. "Can you explain to me what that was?"

I slowly clenched my hands into fists at my sides. The blood underneath my cheeks simmered.

"How about I show you?" I lunged off the table, hands outstretched ready to clamp them around his fat neck.

"Ah, ah, ah." His hand darted between us, a bright flash making me pause. A taser crackled within his grip. "Dr. Gilbert told me what you were capable of. Did you think I would come unprepared?"

"If you know what I'm capable of then why do you need an explanation?" I slowly

backed up until my legs hit the edge of the exam table. I crossed my arms, refusing to give up my standing vantage point.

"I'm just curious to see if you understand what it is that you've accomplished. Now be a good little girl and give it your best shot."

I sneered at him. "I'm nineteen."

"I'm well aware."

"I stopped being a little girl the day you people ripped me from my life."

"Spare me the sob story, dear." He paused for a moment. "I'm waiting."

"I gave him Formidulo."

"I see."

"You scientists poked and prodded me and filled me with chemicals, and now this is what I am. A monster." I took a deep breath.

"See, Isla, that's where you're wrong. You are so much more than that." Dr. Pearson's eyes took on a glint that made my skin prickle. "Your body metabolizes any virus, bacteria, any foreign pathogen that it comes into contact with, and then adds it to your genetic makeup. Your body downloads it into your DNA. And then," he chuckled, "you can pass it on, upload it into another being."

I swallowed thickly, not enjoying the childlike enthusiasm that lit up his face when talking about my ability to kill.

"And so quickly, too! Formidulo normally takes two weeks, a week tops, to kill. And you! You did it within a matter of minutes! Incredible."

"That's not incredible," My voice was steel. "How can you talk about death so casually? I killed that rat. Don't you get it?"

"Yes." His lips curled. My stomach curdled. "A strength unlike anything anyone else could possess."

"I thought you were searching for a cure."

"We were. But now we've found something greater. Something we can use."

I gasped as I understood. "I'm a weapon to you."

"What's better than a biological weapon with an entire database of deadly viruses?"

I opened my mouth but no words came out. What did someone even say to that?

"You can go now. I've seen enough."

I hated being dismissed like that. But I hated being in that room more.

"Are you alright then? Not feeling sick?"

Rosa peered down at me from the top bunk.

"I'm fine."

"You've been awfully quiet." She raised her eyebrow at my nonverbal grunt. "In fact, you always seem to be awfully quiet when you come back from the experiments."

I stared at the ceiling, avoiding her gaze. "Rosa...I have to tell you something." She stared at me a moment, analyzing my expression, then quickly climbed down the ladder, squishing next to me on my bunk and tucking her head against my neck. Rosa was only a year younger than me but felt like a younger sister to me.

"Let it out, Isla. What's on your mind?"

And I told her. I told her how two months ago they stopped testing serums and pills on me. How every day when I left our little room they began to test my newfound abilities. So many little animals that I had killed. So many viruses and bacteria that they injected into me, all becoming a part of my DNA.

"Do you hate me for not telling you?"

"Of course not! Isla, this is a lot to take in for me. I can't even imagine how unbelievably hard it was for you to take in."

I squeezed her tight. "I'm glad you aren't mad because I'm going to make it up to you."

Rosa cocked her head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"Not here." I looked up to the round black camera in the center of our ceiling, to its red flashing light. I grabbed her hand and pulled her into our small bathroom. The only room without cameras. "I've been thinking about this for a long time now. Almost as long as I've known what I can do. The doctors have been testing my abilities, but so have I."

I slid to the bathroom floor, bringing Rosa

with me, and gripped her arms. "It's not right, Rosa. What they're doing to us. We're being treated like animals at their disposal. I can't take it anymore. We have to get out of here."

"But how? We've been here for so long and never found a way out. I remember picking at the door for hours when we were kids, trying to get it open."

"I have a plan." She looked into my eyes, searching.

"I'm with you."

At twelve on the dot every day they herded all of us test subjects into the mess hall and served us questionable lunch. My plan had been whispered among the kids, passed around all the way down to the smallest captive, Jimmy, who was just eight years old.

"Pst, Isla." Jimmy poked my arm while staring straight ahead and shoveling bite after bite into his mouth.

"Yeah?"

"I'm scared. I don't know if I can fight the bad guys." His hand clenched his spoon tightly, but I could still see the tiniest of tremors.

"Jimmy, look at me." He turned his frightened eyes to me. "You don't have to fight. In fact, don't. When everything starts, I want you to hide under the table until everything is quiet. Can you do that for me?" Under the table I grasped his small hand and squeezed.

"Yeah. Yeah I can do that." He squeezed back. I ruffled his hair and then he dashed off to beg for seconds.

"When do we begin?" Rosa's eyes darted around the room to all of the guards surrounding us.

"Now." I took a deep breath and then climbed on top of the table. My voice echoed off the bare white walls. "For too long we have been locked up like prisoners, tested on like rats. Enough is enough."

The clatter of silverware filled my ears as I saw the kids around me gripping forks and butter knives in their fists, their eyes darting around the room, zeroing in hungrily on the guards.

"My brothers." My gaze landed on Paul, the boy who arrived a month after me. "My sisters." My gaze landed on Rosa. "The revolution starts now!" They began to pound their fists on the tables, silverware clanking. "Join me! Take back your freedom!" I punched my fist into the air, and my fellow prisoners leapt from their seats with a wild battle cry.

The cafeteria was chaos. Children striking out at guards in any way they could. Small sparks began to light up the room sporadically as the guards brandished their tasers but we had numbers on our side. The guards were overwhelmed.

I jumped down from the table top and sprung into action, darting around the room unnoticed amidst the chaos. An exposed neck here. A palm there. I flew through the whole room until I had tagged every single guard.

One by one they began to fall, slumping to the ground in awkward piles of limbs. Kids celebrated, jumping up and down and laughing.

"What did you do to them?" Suddenly Rosa was speaking from behind my shoulder. I smirked. "The first symptom of Formidulo is drowsiness."

Rosa raised her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide. "They're going to die?"

My expression hardened. "I'm not a murderer. That would be stooping to their level. I just gave them more of the sleepy and less of the kill-y." I laughed.

Just then the cafeteria door swung open, and Nurse Betty stopped dead in her tracks, surveying the chaos, mouth wide open. She was silent for a few moments before finding my eyes.

"You're going to need this." In her hand was a rectangular key card. The key to our last obstacle, the front door. She held it out to me. I felt my feet carry me until I stood right in front of her. I took the card.

"Thank you." Nurse Betty didn't say anything in response, just nodded her head.

I turned towards Rosa and the others, a

massive smile splitting my face. “Let’s taste freedom.”

We ran from the room, some limping along, leaning on others for support. I stopped abruptly when I rounded the corner. There stood Dr. Pearson. I clenched my teeth and stomped right up to him not hesitating to grasp his wrist. I stared into his eyes, and he slowly fell to the ground. I began to walk away from him but couldn’t resist turning back.

Stooping down I poked his forehead. “I hope you like the chicken pox.” I chuckled as I saw small red bumps begin to appear on his skin.

I let Rosa drag me all the way to the thick steel door. I waved the card in front of the scanner. Heard the faint little beep. The door was sucked into the wall, and I felt the sunshine for the first time in six years.

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Tigers Eye

By Kenzie McGregor

His face was just as handsome as the day she said, “I do.” She touched his neatly pressed tuxedo, noting where the white carnation had been pinned with care by his elderly mother. Both sets of parents had beamed with joy and smiles on their wedding day, though glistening tears had danced in their hopeful eyes.

“I love you,” she had whispered in his ear during the opening ceremony prayer. He peeked with a mischievous brown eye and said, “I know.” That had earned the playful shin kick he received and the temporary forgetting of her vows to him. Oh, but he got her back when he swooped her up into his sturdy arms and carried her down the aisle. Their guests were mortified, of course. But she had

quite enjoyed it.

“Michelle, it’s time to go.” A masculine hand touched her elbow.

“Just five minutes more, please.” She hid her eyes from the waiting figure and looked into the face of the one she loved. She missed his smile, his wit. She shivered at the cool parlor air.

“You can come back early tomorrow. He’ll still be here.” The man checked his gold pocket watch and motioned towards the door.

“I love you,” she whispered to the silent face and walked backwards to the door. She needed every moment with him, every detail etched in her memory. In her mind echoed his voice, “I know.”

Hers weren’t tears of joy.

As she walked down the street and over two blocks to their house, Michelle avoided the large crowds of people congregating around the most popular stores. Don’t let them see your eyes. I wish everyone would stop staring, she thought. People looked at her—or maybe through her—as they adjusted their ball caps or nodded at a friend. She shivered and pulled her grey cardigan around her supple shoulders and quickened her pace. Past the shoe shop, up the steps, slip the key in the lock, bolt the door.

107. Breathe, Michelle, she reminded herself. There you go, deeply inhale. Exhale.

She leaned against the oak door and slid to the ground. Her pulsing heartbeat and airtaking lungs were the only sounds in the empty shell of a house. 91. That’s better. She was the only living thing there. Oh Rob, what comes after death does us part?

It was supertime, but she loathed the thought of food. Was that a moving shadow down the hall? She felt trapped alone under a boulder that crushed her shoulders, pushing her into the hardwood flooring through constant force. Little quick gasps escaped her lips.

Paralyzed.

There it was again. 112. She sat stone still and tried regulating her breathing. Glancing

at the tall grandfather clock on the far side of the living room, she noticed its silvery blades pointed at 6:30. Did she really leave the cookbook open on the kitchen island? That was unlike her. Always a neat freak, Rob had jested with a twinkle in his eye. And that chair at the head of the island stood crooked next to its neighbors. The pictures, their pictures, on the face of the fridge leaned to the left towards the freezer as if haphazardly knocked by a careless hand. Was I really that much of a wreck this morning?

But shadows flitting at 6:30 in the hallway . . . unlikely. Unless someone’s in here with me, she thought. Okay, calm down. You’re perfectly safe. 90. You’re alone.

Michelle stood to her feet with effort and fished in her sweater pocket for the stone. She ran her fingers over the smooth surface and clutched it in her palm. So perfect it’s almost soft, she thought. Both calming but emanating strength, its gentle ripples swelling and abating like an amber ocean with somber depths and cheerful surfaces. I still have it, Rob. All these years later. If only you understood how much it means right now . . . how much I need you . . . I think you’d be surprised. “You’re strong, Michelle.” The richness in his voice like deeply stained mahogany rang in her spinning head. I can do this. I can be strong.

She exhaled and sat down at the island, clinking her keys against the granite countertop and jumping a little at the noise. I wish I weren’t alone. She closed the cookbook and placed it on top of the other blue cookbook, spine facing her. Each cookbook was color coded, and she smiled at this small measure of control in her life. At least some things never change.

Knock knock knock sang the oaken front door. Michelle froze and swiveled her eyes to the ominous thing. 115. One, two shadows she saw through the window shrouded in white blinds. I need to dust those, she noted. What could they want?

“Michelle, hello? We thought you might be

home,” the muffled voice said.

Michelle melted to the floor and tucked her body into her cardigan in a fetal position. Think small thoughts. Think small thoughts, she inwardly crooned, daring not to make a peep.

Knock knock.

Please go away, Michelle thought. She pulled her sweater tighter and prayed her pounding heartbeat wouldn’t alert the people on the other side of the door. The last thing I need is strangers invading my house. The shadows shifted and shrank, retreating into the distance after a hundred breathless moments. People were certainly watching her, but why? She wiggled her fingers into the rock’s hiding place and took it out. It felt like glass but hid a world of fire beneath the outer layer. One could hardly tell where the one began and the other ended. It was a polished, almost golden caramel Grand Canyon ridge in the palm of her hand. 89.

“I suppose I have to eat,” she informed the silent house. She sat up and drew her knees to her chest, slipping the stone back into her pocket. Maybe I can do this, she thought. After mindless musings she stood and opened the freezer. So pretty—all that lush green. She grabbed the closest bag of broccoli, noting by touch the unwelcomed presence of ice crystals on the inside. She sighed. The other bags in the freezer looked the exact same. It’ll have to do.

Michelle sat at the island and ate her broccoli one stalk at a time. Her eyes were sentries guarding the ever-darkening house. Lights. She almost laughed a bitter laugh at her folly. Of course the lights would help. She flicked on the kitchen overheads and meandered into the living room.

There. He sat there in his favorite brown recliner and watched baseball at 8pm. The Mets were always his first choice. She never understood the fascination with the little white ball and how fast it flew through the air.

“I love you,” she had said each night after

the game finished.

“I love you more than this,” he’d respond and point to the screen. Michelle would blush because she knew it was true.

She sat on the couch now and stared at his weathered piece of furniture. He used to cross his left leg over his right—leaving only one leg indentation in the leather.

Michelle suddenly felt the tears speed down her cheeks and plummet to her blouse. She didn’t understand. Why am I not okay? she thought. I know he’s gone, but don’t people eventually get on with life? Her shoulders shook but no noise came out of her mouth. He was everywhere in the house from the walls to the fridge to the rugs and the blinds. His routine walked the shell of the house like a ghost; his routine lived in her. Her blurry eyes were drawn to the saying on the bookshelf: home is where the heart is. Michelle sobbed. Tomorrow her heart would be buried six feet under. She cried till her eyes lost all their tears and burned like a desert.

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Thump. Michelle bolted awake in a state of confusion. It was dark except for the kitchen lights, and the night stood stalk still. 118. Alone on the couch, but why? Without a blanket too. Did she hear a noise? Something moving upstairs? She pulled her cardigan tight and struggled to breathe. 121. Her heart raced. Where was the bat Rob always kept around just in case? But Rob couldn’t protect her. She was alone. She imagined a dark figure creeping around the bedrooms upstairs, peeking in closets, rifling through papers, holding a knife at the ready. 130. Her racing heart found another gear and kicked it into full throttle.

Alone. I wish Rob were here, she thought. Or anyone for that matter. Shadows in the corner danced like stealthy men and turned her blood cold. Don’t stare too long. She snapped her eyelids closed and felt for the stone. Tiger’s Eye. Think of anything but here. You are

strong and brave, she repeated to herself. I'm alone and I'm fine. I wish I could be with Rob in the frigid parlor rather than here. Rob. 115. You can do this. I can be fierce and grieving can't I, she thought. I will heal. It will get better. It has to. Michelle pictured the Tiger's Eye resting in her fingers, pulsing strength. 80. You need to sleep, she thought. Tomorrow will be an exhausting day.

And it was indeed an exhausting day for Michelle.

She sat at her island thinking of her stone. The grandfather clock struck 3:00 and reverberated into her soul. She felt it hard to be fierce and grieving at the same time. Impossible? Maybe. She was no Tiger's Eye. She wasn't strong . . . or brave. Today had certainly shown that.

Knock knock knock the door cried from its place on the hinges. 109. Her heart was too tired to race much faster today. Michelle looked down and sighed. Let the strangers overrun the place. I don't care anymore. She felt for the comforting presence of the stone in her pocket. Gone. Her heart sank. No, where could it be? She thought. Empty. With hollow dismay she felt the rip at the corner of her cardigan pocket. How could she be so foolish, so careless? The Tiger's Eye could be anywhere—in the house, on the street, in the cold parlor, or forgotten in the grass by the graveside. Lost. Probably forever.

Knock knock mourned the knuckles on oak. There's no use in looking for it now, she numbly thought. She wanted to cry, but with what tears? She reflected a few seconds more. An empty house, not a home. This vastly altered life would be her new normal . . . maybe she would be okay without the stone. She would fight to be okay, there was no other way. She could still feel its natural heart shape, the coolness on her skin, the mesmerizing cascades of love. Perhaps she would be okay without him.

Michelle stood up, straightening her shoulders. She padded to the door, unbolted the

lock after a quick breath, and opened the portal to her house in a mix of confused resolve but unsure of what was next.

"Hey, Michelle." The speaker still wore her funeral clothes. But then again, so did Michelle. "We, um, wanted to check on you." She gestured to the two other ladies standing on the steps. They held a crockpot, a casserole dish, and a blueberry pie.

"Thanks, Amy." Michelle shifted uneasily on her doorstep but tried looking pleasant.

"Of course," said Amy. "It's the least we could do." She stood at a little distance and seemed content to stand where she stood. She gave Michelle a slight smile and gazed into her amber eyes.

Hers wasn't a frightening look but a welcoming one, Michelle thought. 78. Do I let them in? I suppose it'd be rude to leave them standing there.

"John and I came by last night but you might've been busy then. I brought some friends with me today."

Michelle shifted again and put a hand in her sweater pocket. There was something decidedly bright in Amy's eyes. "You can come in." Maybe they aren't so bad after all, she thought. The ladies walked in, and Michelle closed the door.

"What a lovely home!" said Amy. She set the pie on the island, and the other ladies followed suit with their dishes. "It's so clean and tidy."

Michelle ducked her head. "Thanks." Somehow she felt attracted to this kind woman, even though she didn't know her that well. Without realizing it Michelle reached for a hug. Amy gently obliged, wrapping her in a reassuring embrace. It felt like healing.

"Helen made you a broccoli cheese casserole," Amy said. Helen gave a shy smile.

"Broccoli casserole is my favorite." Michelle's eyes misted, and she shook her head a little in disbelief. "How did you know?"

Helen looked at Amy. "We're your neighbors, Michelle."

“Neighbors know things about their neighbors,” Amy said.

Michelle looked at the ladies standing in her house. Maybe she didn’t have to be fierce either, not right now. Maybe it was okay to grieve when you were hurting.

Because eventually, things get better.

There will always be people who care, people who’d reach out and make sure she’d be alright. Even without her stone, Michelle sensed a new kind of calm reassurance. Things would be hard in the coming months, even the next few years. Who knew how long grief lasted? But there would always be someone waiting to help.

“And neighbors are here for each other.” Amy walked to the island and looked at the food. “Michelle, it’s okay to not be okay all the time. But you have to let something other than pain grow inside you,” she said quietly.

Amy’s words struck home. She was wise. The loving kind of wise that makes you want to listen. Maybe it’s okay to let people in, to share some of your fears with people who care about you.

“You don’t have to be alone. We’ll keep you company.” Helen’s voice sounded like feathers, airy and sweet.

Michelle knew she was right. They all were. She had been so wrong about them, about herself this whole time.

“Do you mind if we eat an early supper with you? We’ll even help with the dishes.” Amy winked at Michelle and the other ladies nodded in agreement.

“I just so happen to have four stools at this island.” Michelle gestured for everyone to sit while she got down the plates. It was the first time she’d smiled in about a week. And it felt really good.

Amy joined Michelle in getting the plates and cutlery ready and squeezed her shoulder. “Hey, you’re going to be alright.”

Michelle thought about the impromptu little gathering with something akin to pleasure. I don’t have to be alone in this. I don’t have to

be so brave when I have strong people around me. People that care. What is this feeling? She felt the warmth from the ladies in her home and suddenly realized it. Tiger’s Eye. It was hope.

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The Winner Lost

By M.J. Scoggins

History remembers the victors: the men and women who rose up and shaped the world. The rebels, the conquerors, the winners.

It doesn’t mention the losers.

We had never understood the skies. Our history, our culture, and our literature were littered with intrigue and fear of the stars. We had always feared the monsters in the dark, those spawned on distant worlds under strange suns. Our stories were full of the space explorers we aspired to be. Some stories ended in intergalactic warfare with fanged, winged, or clawed creatures. Others ended in peaceful coexistence with intelligent, gentle beings.

The stories with war were more popular.

Some thought the stars would bring new opportunities, new medicines, new technologies. They were hopeful and dreamy about the stars. They wanted to walk under different skies, fly between the galaxies. Meet the aliens.

Oh, we had launched our expeditions. They moved beyond the small trips to our own moon, beyond the probes and the satellites we launched. We conquered our solar system, even built colonies on neighboring planets. We mined asteroids for raw minerals. We pumped chemical liquids from moons and planets, selling them to the highest bidder.

But we always knew the reality of what we could find out there among those celestial bodies: a new war to fight. So we prepared for it. After arming our ships and training our soldiers, we thought we were strong. We thought we were ready.

We weren't.

We found them in a system not far from our own. A race reaching for the stars, like we were.

Some rejoiced. New cultures, new technology, new ideas, they thought. New friends. But as we learned of them, the logical saw them for what they truly were.

New enemies.

The attack began with centers of power, swift and without warning. Shielded spaceships blasted capitol buildings and command centers. The Presidential Palace in China. The Palace of Westminster in England. The Pentagon in the United States. The Mogamma in Egypt. And many more.

It was a strategic attack, demoralizing and disruptive. Governments were thrown into disarray as they scrambled to establish chains of command in the wake of the attacks.

The United Nations called for a nuclear strike as fleets of warships were launched into the sky. Just like that, the entire planet was at war with an enemy it didn't understand.

We manned weapons we had only ever

fired in training, flew ships through battles when before we had only ever piloted them through obstacle courses. The bigger ships served as in-space hospitals, missile launchers, and carriers for fleets of smaller, more agile craft. They were floating cities stocked with thousands of lives: drafted soldiers and volunteers, doctors and nurses, generals and privates.

I was a mechanic. I never wanted to be a soldier. But I found myself on a ship with machines I had never seen, a simple private. I had never even killed an animal before. Now I watched as scores of people died, even as they killed thousands more of the enemy.

We were months into the war when they brought the first prisoners. One of the enemy ships had been damaged in the attack rather than completely destroyed. With the amount of firepower both sides employed, the losing side was usually left obliterated. But not this time. We had boarded and invaded the disabled ship. I had been one of the foot soldiers. I can still smell the strange atmosphere, feel the gun in my grip, hear the screams.

The prisoners were transferred to my ship while scientists and engineers tore apart the alien ship, studying the technology.

I was given guard duty.

The prisoners gasped and choked in our thinner atmosphere. We had no idea what they ate, or even if they did, so we could not feed them. Some were injured and lay listlessly on the cold metal floors of the cells, while their comrades tried to tend them. Others were angry, screaming and screeching in strange noises that either flowed together like water or diced against each other like breaking glass. A few of the very foolish even tried to escape.

Those were dragged away for testing first.

No one was so naive as to believe that "testing" meant anything more than vivisection.

I didn't like to think about that.

The two months after the prisoners' capture were strangely quiet on the war front.

Rumors came of skirmishes between smaller ships, but the No Man's Space between the two fleets went largely undisturbed. Meanwhile, I spent every day standing outside a cell block at attention, escorting prisoners to the lab, or shouting meaninglessly at them when they grew especially restless. Eventually, we learned what they needed for survival and were able to provide them with the barest of nutrition and care. But it mattered little. At the end of two months, there were only two left under my supervision. These I decided I could watch with less rigor and more curiosity.

I had learned a little of them through rumors from the lab, but the most I had learned came from observation. They showed kindness to each other, clearly not believing only the strongest should survive for the good of the many. On the first day, there had been one that was injured. The others ripped up their own uniforms to wrap his wounds. They were fiercely protective of one another, to the point of risking their own lives for that of a comrade. Two had been shot when they tried to prevent us from taking another away.

These weren't barbarians or cannibals, or worse, animals, as I had heard them described by disparaging, low-ranking soldiers. Their technology alone would show their innate intellect, but their treatment of one another? These were proud, courageous, compassionate people, not very different from us.

Could they not see how similar we were to them?

Could we not see it?

There were physical differences, but they were very few. In form, we were alike: two legs, two arms, one head. It was the details where we differed.

Their skin tones varied from person to person. One of the two in my block had skin that was a light brown while the other had skin that was almost black. Their skin was soft and stretched taut over muscular flesh. Their eyes were ringed: white to brown to a black center. Then there were the strangle...bristles, all

over their bodies. It was sparse on their arms, but covered their heads. It seemed to grow, as these two now had it thickly covering their lower faces.

And their blood was red.

Two nurses came from the lab. I recognized them immediately.

"Just one more. We don't want to waste the last of the specimens."

I nodded, raising my gun. I turned to the prisoners. I had been fitted with a translator so I could give them instructions. It was crude, but communication was possible. "Humans. Away from bars."

They yelled a garbled mess of words at me that even the translator could not hope to understand. I was pretty sure they were expletives. I couldn't blame them. I'd be swearing, too.

"Away! Away!" I gestured with my gun. They growled deep in their throats, backing away from the bars. I keyed in the code to the lock. The nurses advanced.

One human fought, but the nurses shocked him with a taser. It had been one of the first discoveries they made, the humans' susceptibility to blasts of electricity.

The other prisoner surged forward to protect his comrade. I stepped into the cell, pointing the gun at his torso. The nurses dragged the unconscious one away. I backed slowly out of the cell and punched the code for the bars to close.

The second human continued to yell. My translator finally began to pick up on the words.

"Monsters! Let him go! Let him go, you..." It fizzled out as the human screamed. "What you do with him?" The translator shrilled.

I couldn't bring myself to answer. I had seen other guards tormenting the humans, but I found no joy in these creatures' pain. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to be fighting them. Perhaps I was a coward. These people could destroy us. They were vicious people.

Our scans and surveillance had seen that. We had monitored their communications, hacked into their satellites and their databases of information. We hadn't seen much, but it had been enough.

They were a suicidal, genocidal people. Their history of discovering new peoples and cultures, even of their own race, traditionally ended in enslavement, subjugation, or worse, annihilation. So when we found them in our wanderings, when we learned of their history... we struck first in a war some had never really thought we would have to fight. There were no attempts at diplomacy, for we had seen that these people would not respond to it. And after we leveled their major cities, they would not have accepted a peace treaty even if we had offered it.

The motivation for war had always made me uncomfortable. We had found them. We attacked first before they had even met us face to face. But we saw their ships reaching out, closer and closer to our system. A race such as they would not come peacefully if they found our homeworld. They were conquerors, and many civilians would die should war ignite closer to our home. Cities, colonies would be destroyed. Children would die. Our pre-emptive war, where we were clearly stronger, was surely the best option. We would destroy the monsters from the stars before they could smell our blood.

But...as I stood looking at the human in the cell, raging at the bars, liquid falling from his eyes in his distress...I did not see a monster.

I saw a person.

A person we had broken.

"Why?" The translator in my ear asked, echoing the human's question in my own language. "What we do to you?"

It wasn't the first time I had heard that question. I turned towards the bars, staring into his ringed eyes. How strange to have eyes that were more than one color.

"You threaten our home." I waited for the translator built into my mask to repeat the

words to him. "You would kill our people, if given the chance."

He stared at me, skin wrinkling above his eyes. "You attack us!"

"So you wouldn't find us. You are killers, conquerors. We will not be your slaves."

"We not know you existed!"

"You would find us. One day."

The human slammed his fists against the floor. "You gave us no chance! You attacked! You did not try!"

I looked away. He wasn't wrong.

"Look! Look!"

I turned back. The human had pulled something from inside his torn uniform. It bore an image of a smaller human - a female, by her longer bristles. She looked...young.

"My sister! She died. In your attack!"

I swallowed hard.

"What she do to you! What did any one do?" He collapsed back against the wall. Fluid was streaming thicker from his eyes, and his lungs seemed to have trouble taking in air.

I could see my daughter, waiting light years away. I hadn't seen her in two years. Because I was protecting her. Defending her.

When my shift ended, I went to my bunk. I skipped a meal, wanting to sleep. To forget. To ignore the guilt telling me that something about this was very, very wrong.

"Hey! Clean up, you smell like human."

I barely glanced at my bunkmate. He made the same joke every day.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Just tired." I removed my mask, frowning against the beginnings of a familiar, burning pain behind my eyes.

"Tired of what, standing in front of a door all day?"

I rolled my eyes. He was in rare form today. "Tired of thinking. Something you wouldn't be familiar with."

"Ooh, someone's in a mood." He stuck his tongue out at me, mocking me.

"Do you ever get the feeling that we shouldn't be here?" I didn't know why I was

asking. I knew the answer I'd get. But I had to talk about it with someone.

"You mean, other than every time I have to eat that engine scum they give us?"

"I'm trying to actually have a serious conversation with you." I was almost growling now. It wasn't the first time I was tired of his joking. I turned away, beginning to change out of my uniform.

He was silent for several minutes before he spoke. "Yes. I mean. I don't know. We're here for the betterment of our world, you know?"

"At the expense of theirs."

He looked away. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess so."

"They didn't do anything. And we attack them because of what they might do?"

He turned back to me, expression annoyed. "You don't actually believe that, right?"

I froze. "What?"

"Look, I've been on the survey teams. Studied the scans of the planet. It's a geological money pit. Worth more than anything in our system, anything in this system."

"It's inhabited," I protested.

"With a violent, potentially dangerous species. And this place...it could be the answer to the energy crisis back home. Could keep our world running for centuries. They're not making the most of it, so..."

"So what, it's a sham?"

"Oh, come on. It wouldn't be the first time in our history we fought for a reason other than the advertised one."

"Just like them," I murmured.

"What?"

"We're just like them." I spat through my pointed teeth.

He leaned back against the wall. "I don't know that I'd go that far. And you have to admit, it will help our planet. It'll help our people."

I had never been so angry in my life. "At the cost of blood!" I shouted. "How many died? How many of our people are dead? How many of their people are dead?"

"Alright, hey, calm down!" He held up his

hands.

I threw back on my uniform and left the room without another word. My body was shaking with anger. I felt taller, like I was floating and towering over everyone as I stormed down the hall.

I had never been impetuous. I was a rule follower. I was a private. A low-level, not-very-talented mechanic. A guard. I wasn't the best, the brightest, or the most influential.

But I had morals.

And that gave me the courage to do something I never would have dreamed of before that moment.

Once I found a computer terminal, it took me four minutes to pull up files on the designs of every ship in the fleet. I downloaded them onto a chip. I was a mechanic by trade. My codes let me into the files. They'd think I was just studying, trying to move up the ranks, increase my expertise.

It wasn't hard to lie to the other guard on duty. I knew him. He let me take his shift, swapped easily with me. Then came the hard part.

I opened the cell door.

When I walked in, the human lunged. I tasered him. I didn't have time to fight him. I threw him over my shoulders, dropped my weapon. I was a guard for the science labs. I could have been carrying a body to the trash, a prisoner to the laboratory. No one questioned me. Not even when I walked into a deserted hangar, strapped him into a cockpit with the chip tucked inside his uniform, and slapped him to wake him up.

The translator garbled his first few words. Then he began to growl and shout when he saw me and realized where he was. I covered his mouth.

"Go home."

His skin crinkled as he fought against me.

"Go. Home."

He stilled. His eyes narrowed.

"Go. Home. Be safe."

I didn't know if he understood. But I could

hear alarms ringing. I had enough access to get that point, but I had always known that was as far as I would get.

“I’m sorry.”

I set the autopilot, climbed out of the ship, watched it take off. Then I held my hands above my head and kneeled on the floor.

Now, I’m sitting in a cell that I used to guard. I really do stink of human now, I suppose. But even here, I’ve heard the news.

The tide of the battle has changed. My human got through the blockade, made it back to his people in the stolen ship. Two days later, the humans’ attacks were more precise, hitting the weakest parts of our ships. We’re being crippled, scrambling to recover. There’s already rumors that we’ll start retreating. That we’re considering surrender. That we’re losing.

And it’s all my fault.

My execution is scheduled for an hour from now. Treason, of course. I’ve been given paper to write my last words. I don’t know if anyone will ever read them. I know I’ve caused the death of so many people.

But I hope I’ve saved the lives of more.

Our war was wrong. Whether it was a preemptive strike or a war over resources or a racial slaughter, it was wrong. The humans did nothing to deserve the death we rained down on them. We weren’t protecting ourselves.

We were the monsters from the stars - the ones we always feared.

My people will lose this war. I’ll lose my life in the process. The humans don’t even know who I am. They will probably never know. But they’ll survive, and my people will stop shedding innocent blood.

I’d like to think my family would be proud of me, if they knew the truth. I chose what was right. They may never know the truth. History won’t remember me kindly, if it remembers me at all. But I am satisfied with that.

I’ll be on the losing side if it means I will not be a monster from the stars.

Because I suppose all victors are monsters

to someone.

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Coup D’état

By Meredith Thomas

One for the wicked and heinous king
Two for his vile, cold-hearted queen
Three for their empty, velvet bed
Four for the severance of their royal heads
Five for the coming of their bloodline’s end
Six for our heroic, sleeping friends
Seven for the liberty their sacrifice brought
Eight for valiance of all who fought
Nine for the silence War always brings
Ten for the dawning of the new era of kings

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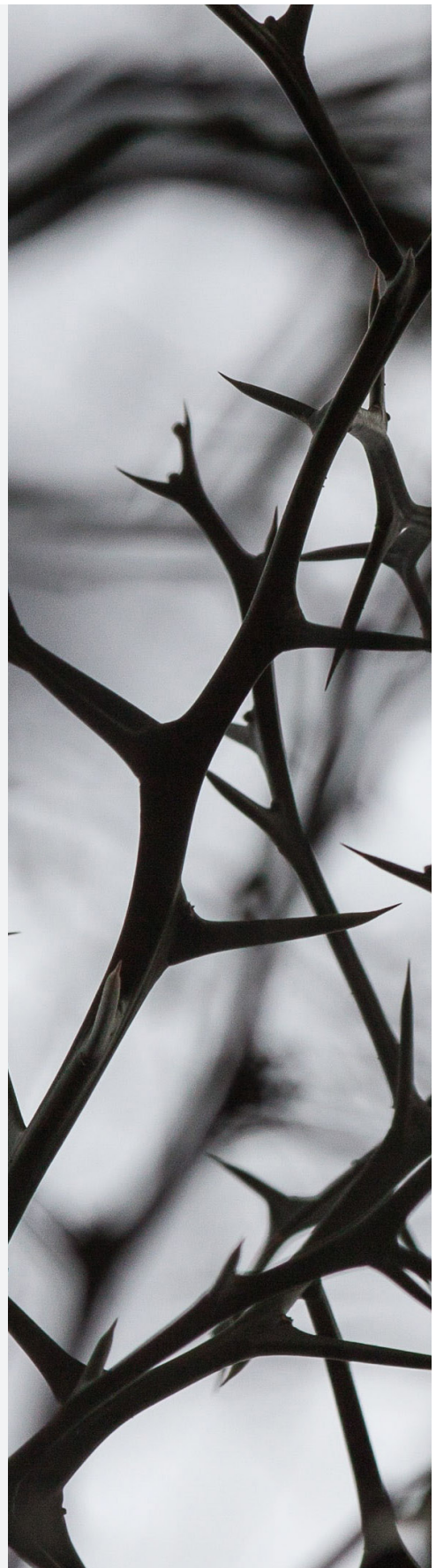
Offering of Thorns

By Emma Galloway Stephens

We mourn because the world is broken.
The deserts and the forests, all cracked,
fissured in the fixture, a vessel split
and leaking blood and oil into the water,
the air, the soil, the valleys, the heights.

And Oh, we cry, If only we could lower
this weary, broken planet into the ground
and raise it up again in, say, three days,
to watch it rise victorious as the sun after
the passing of the tempest in the night.

The bird cries two more times before
we step away from the cosmic graveside,
bloody hands on our shovels. The soil we till
resists our hands. The fruit it yields: an
offering of thorns.





Pandemic

By Sarah Kanoun

You could say I'm sad:
Sad for all the friends I could have made,
All the wonders I could have felt.
Sad for all the smiles I could have seen,
All the days I could have loved.
Sad for all the things I could have made,
All the dreams I could have dreamed

But maybe what I had was enough for what I need.
Maybe what I saw was enough for what I feel.
Maybe what I dreamed was enough for me to reach.
And someday,
This world will be back again to love in.



You think that you can knock me down

By Olivia Thomas

You think that you can knock me down
Cut my flesh and break my bones.
Bury me into the ground
Left to rot under your feet.

But though I sleep, I will not die
I'll feed all the weeping trees.
Forests shall rise and so will I
Forming a parlor for us.

Every evil comes dressed in lace
They come to afternoon tea.
I know this devil has my face
She talks on, and I listen.

We negotiate all the world
What should live and what should burn.
We sit, and I am undisturbed
I've bargained with her before.

She is stubborn, but so am I
Weary souls are not for sale.
She is ceaseless, but so am I
I will not let her consume.

We sit with knives concealed in wrists
I could kill me to kill her.
I am willing, but she resists
She knows the power I have.

So I know that none can break me
Because I've sat down with her.
She has played her hand against me
And I have risen victor.

So sharpen blades and play your cards
Your only tools in this fight.
I'll shuffle mine and scan your guard
I've fought this fight many times.

A courtroom of conversation
Waits for you to step inside.
A game of negotiation
Who will fall and who will rise?

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Note: This poem discusses the theme of rising up against the evil in the world by facing down the evil inside. The poet portrays the evil within as the devil, who stares the poet down with her own face.