

Only an Urchin - Anaïs, Year 6, VIC

I scurry through the dark alleyway, being careful to stay out of sight. They don't want our kind here. Crippled urchins, foul vagabonds - none of it. In Avondale, the tourist capital of the Nebula region, we're seen as beggars, rats, criminals. They pretend we aren't here, hiding the truth behind flashy billboards and smiling storefronts, covering up the hunger, the sickness, the cold.

I continue to creep through the shadows, darting in and out, dodging the yellow glow of the streetlights. I sidestep the cracks in the concrete and remember playing that game when I was little. I push away the memories; they're best left behind.

I make my way down to Lyka River. The smell of the sewage hits me instantly. It makes my nose wrinkle up. The government tries to cover up the stench by placing vendors with hot food in spots around the pier, believing the smell of fried donuts will erase the stink. But it doesn't work. I sigh, kicking a mountain of trash. It scatters, caught by the wind, before tumbling into the river. Clusters of street urchins huddle near weak fires, their smoke curling into the night.

I make my way over to an empty corner behind a green dumpster. It smells awful, but it's home. Well, at least for tonight. I crawl behind it, cocooning myself in my jumper. It doesn't stop the cold, but it'll do.

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3 a.m.

I get jolted awake. I open my eyes groggily, staring up. It's an old woman, maybe in her 70s. She leans over me, her yellow teeth so close to my face I can barely breathe.

"What is it?" I whisper, sitting up. She turns to me, fear dancing in her eyes.

"It's the R.D.C.C.," she says, in a raspy, almost incomprehensible voice.

"You sure? The R.D.C.C.?"

She nods forlornly.

The Royal Department of Civil Crime are vicious enforcers, hired to "fix" injustice, non-compliance, and stop 'crime'. They are the eyes and ears of the government. In this regime, we the dissenting poor live in fear of not being able to feed our families, provide a home, have a job. They claim to "fix" injustice, but their idea of fixing it is to eliminate us, until only enforcers and the wealthy remain in this city.

Long ago, Nebula was fair, until General Tenkouri came. What was equal became unbalanced, until half the population was starving, sick, and dying. Tenkouri made them hate us. She told them lies, twisted them, fed poison into their minds, one by one, until all their hearts were black as coal.

I grit my teeth at the thought of General Tenkouri and shakily stand up. I grab some rocks and my old slingshot; a bit dusty from months of disuse in my pocket and practice some shots. Then I scorn myself for being so foolish.

A slingshot won't stop guns.

I gulp. But then, what do I have to lose? "*Your pride,*" my brain whispers. I shrug it off. I turn back to the woman who sits cowering in the corner.

"Go. I'll keep them back. Tell the others to run."

I pull my jumper on, tugging the hood over so you can't see the top half of my face.

The old lady runs off, calling to people huddling in the shadows.

"Run," she says to them, "Run."

I step out from behind the bin. I can hear the clump, clump of their boots. It pounds into my eardrums, sending chills down my spine.

Last time I heard those clumps was when I was six. I was sitting on the floor of my house playing with wooden blocks when the clumps echoed through the house. My parents were quiet and gentle resisters, humming forgotten songs and reading books. My mother, a dark-haired woman, and my father, a bearded man with twinkly blue eyes, shielded me.

I remember, General Tenkouri came into the room. Then bang! She shot them herself. I remember the bullet grazing my elbow, imploding into my father. My mother picked me up, running down to the nearest corner, shoving me into the hands of a woman, then sprinting into the road. General Tenkouri ran after her. *Bang*. My mother's body falling onto the cobblestones.

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Clump, clump, CLUMP! Louder and louder come the footsteps. I pull out my slingshot and load a rock into it. I crouch, cloaked in the large build of the Westwood Bridge. Two men and a woman march over. The red-haired man is so close I'm scared to breathe.

"Nothing here, Marge," says the redhead.

“Yeah, give up,” says the blonde.

Marge shushes them, staring around, gun raised.

“Come out,” she yells, “Come out and I won't shoot.”

I stay back, knowing that trick all too well. Hopefully, any stragglers who didn't run will know too. *I hope*, I think, gulping. Unfortunately, a figure on the right bank moves slightly.

“Whoa, what was that?” says the red-haired enforcer, jumping slightly, clutching blonde by the cuff.

“Come out, we know you're there,” Marge calls to the figure who makes their way to the enforcers, arms raised.

The figure is shaded by the night, but as he moves closer, moonlight illuminates him. He's an old man, maybe 80, thin, frail-looking, wearing a scared expression.

“Come closer, old man,” Marge coaxes, beckoning him. “We won't hurt you.”

I want to scream. It's a deception. I want to tell him to run, but I'm frozen, watching. The man walks closer cautiously, approaching the enforcers. Quick as a flash, Marge pulls out her gun. And swiftly, before I can load a rock into my slingshot, the man is falling. He lands on the ground with a thwomp.

I cry. I can't help it, watching him fall, watching her shoot him. Tears roll down my cheeks. *Pull yourself together, Scarlet*, I tell myself, calming as my breath returns to its usual pace.

The enforcers chat; laughing, complaining about the office's lack of good biscuits, talking about their weekend. I growl. They just shot a man dead, and all they care about is biscuits. I creep behind the redhead and tap his back.

“Boo,” I say, then vanish into another shadow. The enforcers spin around, scanning the dark. Then I load a big rock into my slingshot, aim, and fire right at the redhead.

It hits him bang on, right in the back. He yelps, pointing his gun at me. I zip over, climbing onto the top of the dumpster and lay down. I reach into my pocket, pulling out a rock. I cram in two and let go, watching them hit Blonde and Redhead in the thigh and stomach. They howl in unison but shake it off.

“Come out here, we aren't gonna hurt you,” Marge says.

Like I believe her.

I hop off the dumpster and carefully approach, but mid-walk, Marge turns around, shining her torch. It lands on me. I swallow, holding my hands up. They beckon me closer. I don't move. I'm not falling for their trick.

I lean forward, grabbing Redhead's gun. He protests and tries to grab it back, but in a flash, I'm on top of the bridge.

"Come and get it," I say, taunting him as I scramble for time.

He groans and Marge shoots but misses.

The world slows. Marge raises her gun, shouts, "You can't win, we have you!"

The world blurs. My mother's cry, gunshots, they all mix in my head, forming one word.

Resist.

Before I can think, I've loaded a sharp, hard rock into my slingshot. The enforcers see this and laugh. But in an instant that rock soars through the air, its deadly trajectory striking deep into Redhead's temple. He expels a deathly groan, then falls like a sack of potatoes.

Then, I run. I run until I collapse. Out of breath, I flop down, barely noticing where I am, only noticing the stab of regret I feel.

I killed a man. A man who had a family. A living, breathing soul. A father, a husband.

Tears pour down.

I cry for the redhead. For my mother. For my father. For people like me. For Nebula.

For this city. I cry for it all, a sad mix of snot and tears.

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And yet, from the tangle of grief, guilt and despair, something gentle begins to stir. I remember the woman who warned me. The strangers who shared their bread. The hands that pulled me up when I fell. Small, fleeting things.

Tiny kindnesses.

Tiny, like sea urchins clinging to the rocks, half-hidden, easy to miss, but holding fast through every crashing wave.

Maybe what saves us isn't just resistance.

Maybe it's kindness.

One act. One moment. One choice.

But mostly, *hope*.

And me?

I'm only an urchin.

Small. Spindly. Trying to survive.

But even an urchin can hold the beginnings of a world.