

Rise

David Probert

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1 – Emerge

It had been two years since we'd seen the sun. Two years since it all began.

The only way we knew how long we'd been in the shelter was because Lynn had kept a calendar, but it was only a rough estimate, because Lynn had a habit of forgetting things (she always did). Back home it was turning the faucet off in the kitchen or the light in the hallway. Down here it was keeping up with the days, marking each one off as time ticked along, a task that wouldn't be possible without her digital watch. We called it the infinity watch, because the battery seemed to have an endless heartbeat.

Lynn had drawn a slash through the

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date on our very first night in the shelter. That slash had now become an X. There was no telling what kind of cryptic form it would take in years to come, if we even survived that long.

“You know that's not accurate, right?”

Vicky came out from the pantry with a large can of beans in each hand. “The days and weeks shift from year to year. You know that, don't you? Today's not Monday.”

“I know that. I'm not an idiot,” Lynn said.

Vicky set the cans onto the table in front of me and Lynn, and then she turned back to Dad, who was sitting in his chair near the bookcase.

“We're getting really low. We ate the last of the soup the other week, beans are almost gone, too. But that's not the worst part.”

“What's the worst part?” I was afraid to ask, but she was going to tell us either way. That was just one of the chinks in the armor of Vicky's personality. If she had something she wanted to say, she'd say it, even if you didn't want to hear it.

“Water,” Vicky said. “We've only got five cases left.”

Lynn looked up from the calendar, her brow furrowed. “Five cases? How long will that last us?”

“Best estimate, two, maybe three weeks.”

“Well, that's not good.” Lynn got up and taped the calendar back onto the wall. She

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smoothed the edges until they were flat. Then she turned to Vicky. "What should we do?"

"We have to leave," I said. "Go find supplies."

"That's a great idea, Zuri." The contempt in Vicky's voice was as sharp as a razor blade, and it cut nearly as deep. There was no room for an original thought outside of Vicky's. She had spent years playing mom, but she never did do a great job. Still, she tried.

"That won't work. We don't even know what's up there," Vicky said.

"I bet nothing has really changed," Lynn said.

"How the hell would you know that? Don't you remember what it was like before we—"

"Enough!" Dad slammed his hardcover book onto the ground. "This is a small living space, I get it, but we need to hold it together." He coughed. The sound rattled around in his chest. He grabbed the arms of the chair, composed himself, and continued. "This arguing has to stop."

Vicky glared at me for a moment. Then her eyes went to Lynn. She turned around and shut the pantry. "Batteries are getting low, too. Just saying."

Dad went to say something else but instead lurched forward and clutched at his chest. He began to gasp; I could hear the air trying to squeeze into his lungs.

"Dad!" I jumped out of my seat and

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hurried across the room.

By the time I reached him, his face had already gone through two different shades of red.

I knew what he needed, but I was so riddled with anxiety at that moment that I forgot where it was.

Lynn darted around the table to get to us, and Vicky shoved a chair aside as she came rushing across the room.

This was the worst episode yet. All the other times he was at least able to speak, even though his voice was strained, but this time was different. This time his voice was nonexistent.

“Where’s his inhaler?” Lynn knelt beside me and patted down Dad’s pockets, her voice trembling as badly as her hands. “Calm down, Daddy. You have to try to breathe through it.”

“Watch out.” Vicky reached past both of us and shoved the inhaler into Dad’s mouth. “Breathe in, Dad.” She squeezed the inhaler and a blast of air shot into his lungs.

The color gradually returned to his face, and he leaned back, finally able to breathe on his own again.

Vicky grabbed Lynn and me by our wrists and pulled us over to the far corner of the room, just beyond Dad’s earshot. “This is almost out.” She held the inhaler up and shook it. “We only have one more left. It’s not enough. His episodes are getting worse, and he won’t survive another once we

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run out.”

I glanced over at Dad. The sting of tears pricked my eyes. My superman, my hero, was now a brittle, old man. His hair had turned gray, a blend of the effects of stress and age. His wrinkled skin hung on the frail frame of his body like sheets on a clothesline. He wasn't eating enough — we all knew that much. He went hungry because he wanted to make sure that we had enough. We had decided to start sneaking him extra food, cutting it out of our own portions without him noticing. That seemed to help for a while, but then the asthma got worse and he grew more frustrated. There were days when he refused to eat altogether. He said that he had failed us girls, it was his job to protect us, and being holed up in an underground shelter for two years was not the protection he had in mind.

“We have to do something,” Lynn said.

Vicky just shook her head. She knew what we had to do, but it was nearly impossible for her to admit it. Because that would be admitting that I was right.

“Vicky,” I said, “You know what we have to do.”

“Two years. We've been down here for two years without seeing the light of day. You both remember what things were like. You remember why we came down here in the first place.” Vicky reached up and rubbed her temples in a circular motion, trying to ease one of her tension

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headaches. “Zuri, you were nineteen. Lynn, you were sixteen. You were both old enough to remember what was going on.”

Lynn and I nodded, but neither of us responded.

“Now imagine how much worse things could have gotten over the course of two years. That’s a long time. It’s plenty of time for shit to seriously go downhill.”

“Maybe it got better,” I said. And I was really hopeful about that. Who was to say that society as we knew it had spiraled into a hopeless abyss. Maybe when we went into the shelter, that was rock bottom for the world. Maybe it got back on its feet and was chugging along better than ever now. Maybe we were the fools, hiding in a shelter while the world went on above us as though nothing had happened.

Vicky shook her head, and she didn’t give any more attention to the shred of hope that I was desperately clinging to. “We took everything from the house when we came down here. I know there’s nothing left there that we can use.”

“What about the pharmacy in town? They have to have inhalers,” Lynn said.

“Do you remember how much looting was going on? I highly doubt there’s anything left.”

“You think people stole inhalers?”

“People stole everything, Lynn.

Humanity is selfish. People raided and looted, they took far beyond their own means. They took just to

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take and to have. They didn't give any thought to the people who would actually need what they were stealing. We're lucky that Dad saw this coming years in advance, otherwise we might not even be here right now. We'd be just as screwed as everyone else up there.”

“But we don't know that,” I said. “We don't know if everyone is—”

“They are. Trust me.” Vicky looked over at Dad to make sure he hadn't heard us. “He'll never let any of us leave. He's too afraid for our safety.”

“So, what do we do?” Lynn leaned closer, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Neither of you are going to do anything. I'm the oldest. This is my responsibility. Once he's asleep, I'll sneak out. You two will have to close and lock the hatch behind me. You'll need to keep an eye on Dad while I'm gone. Keep the inhaler with you at all times, and don't give him too much, just a puff if that's all it takes. We need to preserve it as long as we can. If he asks where I went, just be honest with him. He won't be happy about it, but I think deep down he'll understand.”

“Maybe one of us should go with you,” I said.

“No, it's too dangerous. You both need to stay here with Dad.”

I could see the concern and fear weighing on Lynn's eyes, and I'm sure that mine mirrored that. I did believe that things may have

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changed, or maybe I just wanted to believe it, but I knew deep down that they most likely hadn't.

We spent most of that evening reading and playing board games. Lynn snuck around the shelter, scavenging for supplies that Vicky could take with her. She stuffed whatever she could find into a small, gray backpack.

Dad had eventually fallen asleep in his chair with the book sitting on his lap. He was snoring, a welcome reprieve from the gasping sounds he had made earlier. Vicky walked over to him and she gently kissed his cheek. "I love you, Daddy. I'll be back."

She took a couple of steps away and then paused to make sure that he wasn't going to wake up. When she was satisfied that he was sound asleep, she hurried out of the room.

There was a high ladder that led up to the hatch. The small space below it was our shelter's version of an entryway. Vicky held a flashlight up to the hatch, which seemed to be a hundred feet above us, and maybe it was, none of us had ever counted, nor had any of us ever dared to climb the ladder.

Lynn handed Vicky the backpack. "I put some food and water in here."

"Thanks." Vicky slipped her arms through the shoulder straps and grabbed a hold of the ladder. "I'll be back as fast as I can."

"Be careful," I said. My heart sunk. It was an awful feeling, a feeling of finality, like saying goodbye to someone you know you're never going

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to see again. I only hoped it wasn't intuition.

"I will," Vicky said.

Vicky climbed the first few rungs of the ladder. She paused on the third rung and looked up at the hatch as though she was having second thoughts.

"You're gonna be okay, Vick," I said. "If anyone can do this, it's you."

My hard-headed, hard-ass older sister nodded and then continued up the ladder. The beam of her flashlight danced over the hatch, and the squeaking of her sneakers against the metal rungs echoed so loud we thought it might wake Dad.

When she was at about the seventh rung, she let out an abrupt scream. Her right arm swung back and she tried to hang on to the ladder with her left, but that arm slipped away, too, and now Vicky was falling down the shaft.

She landed on her feet, at an awkward angle that caused her ankle to twist and pop. She cried out and collapsed to the ground. "Goddammit."

"Are you all right?" Lynn ran over and knelt beside Vicky.

I snatched the flashlight from the ground and swung the beam down to Vicky's sprained ankle, which was already swelling and turning purple.

"You've got to be kidding me," Vicky said.

"You can't climb up there like that." I knelt to get a closer look. The flesh of her ankle was

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already ballooning against the inside of her shoe.

“Take your shoe off before we have to cut it off.”

Vicky untied and loosened the laces, and I helped her out of the shoe.

“What happened?”

“There was oil or something on one of the rungs. My hands slipped off.”

Lynn looked over at me. “Now what?”

For a moment, the only sound was the hushed cadence of our breathing. Vicky shook her head and went to say something, but I cut her off.

“I’ll go.”

“What? No.” Vicky reached up, and Lynn and I grabbed onto her hand and helped her to her feet.

“What other choice do we have?”

Vicky tossed the backpack to the ground and then hung her head and hobbled over to the wall, where she leaned against the concrete and sighed. “It was supposed to be me. You two were supposed to stay safe down here.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said.

“I’m coming with you.” Lynn snatched the backpack from the ground and swung it over her shoulder. She wasn’t even halfway to the ladder before Vicky voiced her disagreement.

“Absolutely not.”

“She can’t go alone.”

“She’s not even going.”

“Yes, I am.” I walked over to the

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ladder and grabbed the first rung. Then I turned back to a frustrated Vicky. "And you can't stop me. One of us has to do this, Vick. You know that. We don't have a choice right now."

"We're Kilpatrick girls," Lynn said. "We're strong, right? Like Mom. We can do this."

Vicky shook her head and she stared up at the hatch before finally bringing her attention back to me and Lynn. "If you can't find anything, you just come back, we'll figure something else out. Do you understand?"

I nodded. "We will."

Vicky turned to Lynn. "If it can't be me, it's not going to be either of you on your own. Keep an eye on each other, and I swear, if you run into any trouble..."

"Then we'll come back," Lynn said. She was smiling with the vibrant exhilaration of a young student going on an exciting class field trip. "We got this, Vicky."

"Maybe you should take Dad's gun."

"No," I said. "Keep the gun here in case you guys need it."

"You need it more than we do. Who the hell's going to come down here?"

"I'm not comfortable with it," I said.

Then Lynn chimed in. "I've never even shot a gun before."

Vicky sighed. "All right, but you better be careful."

"We will," I said.

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She watched us with the reluctance of a mother watching her children go off to do something dangerous that she didn't approve of.

"I can't get up there to lock the hatch behind you," Vicky said. "Cover up the area around the door after you close it. Okay? No one can know we're down here."

"I'll do it," Lynn said.

I nodded and began to ascend the ladder. I climbed very carefully, feeling for slick spots as I went along. Lynn stayed close behind, and she continued to ask how I was doing along the way.

It seemed to take forever, but we eventually reached the top, and as I unlocked the hatch, Vicky called up one last time.

"One more thing."

"Yeah." I glanced down, and looking at Vicky from this height made my stomach queasy.

"Don't be a hero."

"Just supplies: food, water, inhaler. I got it," I said.

I unlocked the hatch and pushed my body against the door, its weight pressed down on me, but once I put my full force into it, the seal finally separated.

For the first time in two years, the cool embrace of fresh air held my body as the world we once knew welcomed us home.