

Runner

We were all the same once, says Finder.

The lights are dimmed and the room is quiet and the day's scent is apples, apples and cinnamon, faint as always but unmistakable. And Finder sits cross-legged on the floor and gazes up at the ceiling, arms encompassing the whole wide universe.

We were all the same, and we lived somewhere else, somewhere far from here. But we've been here for long enough that we've become different, different from the Lynoans in their cities above and the people of Huidao who live across the waters. We are Aki now, and they are not. Yet we are all people.

It sits and listens and nods. The idea of a lost home so far away scares it, for none of them know what lies more than a few hundred heights above. But it has hidden behind corners and giggled at passing Lynoan traders, at their slender bodies and darkened skin and carefully arranged hair, and the funny way they walk and speak, and it knows that beneath the strangeness they are related to it.

And this place was built by people, continues Digger. None of us know how, or when, or why. But people shaped and placed and joined every piece of steel, every pane of glass, just as we do with the scraps we can tear off.

So we live by recycling the work of our ancestors? it asks. Why can't we make big things ourselves?

We've forgotten how, Digger replies.

But if *they* could do it... It looks around at its magane. It can't be that hard, can it?

Digger glances at Finder. Many smarter than you have tried and failed. We Aki, we aren't builders. Perhaps we used to be, but we're different now. In only a tenday, you will be named, and we will cease to be your magane, and you will start to play your part in our society. And that means you can influence its direction a little, but for the most part it will carry on as it has, because that is how we live.

But if the rumors of a terror from below are true, Finder interjects, we may all soon be forced to run or die.

Digger shushes Finder. This isn't the time. For now, rest, and dream big dreams.

Suddenly the reality of the situation imposes itself more forcefully, and it crawls forward to huddle in Finder's lap. I'm scared, it whimpers. I don't want you to go away. I don't want to have to be by myself.

Finder strokes its smooth head with one gentle hand. Don't linger on these thoughts. You are young, and we are not yet old. We will always be here for you.

It is trying to fall asleep, later, when it happens.

The apples have faded, leaving cinnamon tinged with something new it cannot yet identify, a hint of tomorrow's scent. Over the quiet hiss of the air vents and the muted voices of its magane in the kitchen it can hear occasional clatters from beyond the forward wall, and a rising groan that begins to drown out everything else.

And then there is a crash outside, a deafening impact, louder than it ever imagined possible, and its outer eyelids snap open and it leaps to its feet amidst a rising rumble and the screech of metal on metal. It barely catches sight of Finder and Digger before an invisible hand tosses it against the wall, a silver blur filling the room, debris flying everywhere, and then –

There is silence.

Shaking, it rises to its feet, its back against the warm steel of the wall.

It perceives the end of a massive metal cylinder lying crumpled and broken and half-embedded in the rear wall, and with stumbling steps it approaches and sees through small glass windows motionless bodies and red-stained chairs, and then turning away it glimpses the bodies of Finder and Digger lying where they fell beneath jagged chunks of steel, pools of blood spreading out across the polished floor, and it knows they are dead. And as the ringing in its ears and in its thoughts begins to fade, as it starts to realize what has happened, it hears a faint noise from behind.

It turns and then leaps backward in surprise, for one of the corpses in the metal cylinder has crawled up to the window and is knocking weakly on the glass. But this corpse isn't dead, doesn't even seem badly wounded, despite being covered in blood, and it looks around for a bit before spotting a handle attached to the metal; it seizes it, and pulls open the end of the cylinder.

Are you female? You look like an ergin, it blurts out, and then decides maybe it shouldn't have said that.

Yes, she replies, but looks at it strangely, and asks what an ergin is.

She looks Lynoan, it thinks, tall and thin and brown-haired, and she speaks the Lynoan dialect, and it's never seen a Lynoan who wasn't a trader, so maybe it should try to bargain with her.

I'll tell you, it says, if you tell me what you're doing down here. And why you killed my magane, it almost adds, but it can't bear to say those words out loud, and with difficulty it pushes back the pain because it needs to focus on what she's saying.

But then there's another crash, not as loud but still startling in the near silence, as the rear ceiling collapses. And the lights cut out entirely, leaving them in darkness, the scent of cinnamon dissipating, making way for a sharp tang it doesn't recognize and doesn't like.

The fear comes rushing in, the darkness and the smell and its magane are dead and it will never get a name and what's the terror from below that Finder mentioned? And instead of answering, she's stumbling forward, sending metal fragments clattering across the floor, and gasping as she puts weight on her right leg, and it realizes she *is* hurt, and rushes to drape her arm across its shoulders.

We have to get out of here, she manages to say.

It starts to point out that, while it agrees, there's now only rubble where the door used to be, but then it glances at the remains of the forward wall, and notices a tunnel leading upward at a shallow slope, tilted and bent, lit by flickering light entering through jagged tears along the sides, and instead asks whether they should go that way.

Yes, she says, and they begin to climb.

They soon settle into a steady pace up the broken tunnel, and it decides to remind her of its offer.

She exhales. I don't suppose you've heard of Melea's plague? she asks.

It wonders whether it has anything to do with a terror from below.

From below? Probably. A couple of Lynoans discovered a sort of disease that eats metal, she tells it. No one's quite sure what it is, but I think they said it's been spreading upward for a while. She rubs her eyes. Last I heard, traces were found eating through some of our subway tunnels. This one must have collapsed just before my train went through, and it ended up in your house.

Eats metal? it repeats. But the whole world's metal.

Yeah, that's why it's bad. We're evacuating, migrating upward, so we can escape for as long as we can, but... She shrugs, awkwardly. I was on one of the last trains out of the central city. I guess we weren't quite fast enough.

They stop and peer through one of the holes in the curving walls. The tunnel they are in descends from the ceiling to the floor of a vast chamber populated by enormous metal pillars marching away into the distance. More subway tunnels crisscross the ceiling, and the pillars are dotted with bright lights flashing in irregular and incomprehensible patterns. It asks her what the flashing means.

No one knows, she says. They've probably been doing that since they were built. Milliondays ago, maybe.

Then she hears a sharp breath, and she follows its gaze down to the chamber floor, but it's too dark for her to see anything there. It notices her confusion and looks at her, and in the inconstant light she notices the translucent inner eyelids blinking, and the oddly shaped pupils.

Down there, it says. Why are you looking at me?

We see things differently, she realizes. I can't see what you see.

There's a pause, and then it goes back to looking outside. The metal around our home is turning brown, it says. A bunch of people I know are running around, but I can't tell what they're doing. Then it gasps, and looks at her again, eyes wide in shock. It... it turned... like liquid... and...

That's what the plague does, she tells it. It eats metal. The tunnel shifts a bit and a deep groan runs through it. There's nothing we can do.

It tries to duck under her arm and run back down the way they came, but she catches it by the shoulder and brings it back to face her, and it sees light and shadow flit across her face, her eyes deadly serious, and it feels opposing forces warring inside its head.

There's no time for that, she tells it. This tunnel is going to collapse, and we have to get out of here before it does.

But... It pulls against her grip. The... all the...

They're already dead, she shouts in its face. Run!

And they run.

They are safely past the collapsed section and making their way along a horizontal stretch of tunnel, lined with rows of lights stretching interminably into the distance, and its anguished expression and uneven breathing are worrying her. Tell me about the Aki, she says to it. Tell me what an ergin is.

It glances at her and takes a couple of breaths. My people, the Aki, it begins, live down below. We dig our way forward through the strata and use what we find to build our homes. One of my magane, Digger... was on the team that broke through into a big open space a few hundreddays ago, and we moved into a new room there a bit later.

Magane? she asks.

Kind of like parents, it replies, only they didn't give birth to me. We don't have sexes like you do. Only the ergini are female, and they're pregnant all the time, and they live in a special chamber that takes care of them. They're going – they were going to be moved to a new chamber in less than a hundredday. There's a big parade and everything each time we dig far enough that we need to build a new chamber for the ergini. Only now they're dead, and so are Finder and Digger, and...

It starts to lose it again, and she casts about desperately for another topic.

You know, she says, I never asked your name.

I don't have one yet. It looks at her miserably.

Well, we'll have to fix that then, won't we?

With a grunt of exertion it pulls her up onto the platform, and they walk down the empty station, footsteps echoing off metal walls over the faint hum of electric signs, past pillars and benches and locked doors and up the stairs into Lynos proper.

She knows the ways out and up, and they hurry through a deserted city, past forlorn bazaars full of untended stalls, down silent corridors lit by multicolored lamps, across narrow bridges spanning the gap between enormous walls. It helps her up the ramps and stairs and rests with her on moving walkways. As they head outward, the lighting grows dimmer, the architecture more functional, and the drip-drip of leaking pipes chases their steps. And after a few tenthdays they find themselves on a narrow catwalk running along a wall, just below the ceiling of the pillared chamber. They pause, and look down, and it sees that the floor and the bases of the pillars are coated in brown.

It's weakening the pillars, she tells it. Soon this whole place is going to collapse.

And though the pain has faded a little, it's still there lingering in the back of its mind, the knowledge that everyone it ever knew is dead, all except her, but her people have all fled upward and they're still safe and it's happy for that, at least.

But then she cries out and turns to the wall beside her, and it turns too and realizes with a start that the wall isn't opaque; it can see people floating behind them, floating in some sort of murky liquid with tubes and wires leading downward out of sight. And she starts tapping frantically at the glass, mumbling under her breath as unfamiliar red symbols appear and vanish, and it doesn't know what to do.

The catwalk trembles a little, metal squeaking and clattering, and it whirls around to see that one of the pillars has cracked open near the bottom, and a large chunk has broken free and vanished into the dissolving floor. The inside of the pillar is rotten with brown; all the lights on it have ceased their flashing.

She turns back to it, and takes a shaky breath, and it sees the look of despair on her face and knows something is very wrong. I... she begins. My... I can't leave.

Wait, it says. Slow down. Who are they?

They're, they're sleepers, she explains. In hibernation. The machines keep them alive until whenever they've chosen to be woken up.

But who—

This is most of Lynos, she says, and her bluntness surprises it. Thousands.

I thought you said you were evacuating.

We were, she says fiercely. I don't know what changed. Maybe they thought they'd be safer this way; maybe they believed it wasn't going to reach them up here. Well, it's going to. I can't tell how long they wanted to sleep, but I, I've got to try to wake them up. They're all going to die if I don't.

Look, it says; the anger in its voice surprises it, and it knows she can't see anything below but it gestures downward anyway. There's no way you'll have time to get them all out.

You don't know that, she replies.

Maybe not for sure. But I believe it. I believe you're throwing away your life and I don't want you to do that. It blinks hard, and it doesn't know why. Isn't that enough?

No. She shakes her head. Not against all these lives. Not even against one particular life.

They're already dead, it whispers, but it knows she isn't listening.

We're different, she says; we see things differently. I'm staying, but you don't have to. You can get out.

It looks at her, at her hand resting against the symbols glowing red on the glass, at her damp eyes glistening in the shifting light, and it says nothing.

Go, she says. Get out. Run!

And it runs.

It runs from betrayal, from loss, from pain. It runs from the ghosts of its magane and its naming that will never be and the lost hopes of the Aki, swallowed up in an instant to leave it here adrift. It runs from her because she wanted it to and from itself because it didn't. It runs from Melea's plague and it runs from its own thoughts and it keeps running though its body screams at it to slow down, though its heart screams at it to turn back.

It runs from nimble Lynoan fingers tapping swiftly on glass. It runs past crumbling pillars spattered with brown, past corridor walls that once bore paint, past locked doors and long-dry pipes and unidentifiable switchboxes. It runs because it can hear the shriek of collapsing steel behind it and it runs because it knows the plague lurks beneath its feet as well. It runs through the grave of an elder race to escape the graves of two others. It runs and it doesn't look back.

And suddenly it emerges into a light that is wrong, a light it has never known. It emerges into an open area covered with green fibers like enormous mold, and columns of wrinkled brown spreading into rustling green membranes. It emerges into flashing light and a deafening klaxon and a strange voice that speaks from nowhere.

Citizen of Tashpan, the voice says, there are transports remaining. Please proceed to the surface to continue with evacuation.

Arrows light up on the floor beneath it, and it follows them forward. And it finds itself at one corner of an enormous space shaped like an inverted pyramid, opening upward beneath the unseen light, and contracting to a point below. The arrows lead it onward, around the edges of the pyramid, up ramps and staircases and skywalks leaping across the open air, through silent streets and abandoned galleries.

By the time it reaches the top, the lowest levels show the touch of the plague. It stands blinking in the bright light of a yellow-white orb high overhead, and wonders that there is only half a world here, that it sees only a pale blue dome above, infinitely far away. But then the ground trembles, and it gazes down into the shining well of glass and steel, and sees the bottom crumbling to dust, and it remembers to look at the arrows that are directing it to the door of a small capsule.

There is a chair in the middle, and one of the walls is glass, and it decides to sit down because what else is there to do? It panics a little when straps slither their way around it and lock into place, but they don't seem to do anything else.

Liftoff in three, two, one, says the voice, and then, though it feels nothing out of the ordinary, suddenly it's shooting upward unimaginably fast; it's watching the pyramid below shrink to nothing, watching the horizon bend into a curve, the blue swallowing the grey and then darkening to black itself.

It finds itself staring at the little grey dot below, the circle that encompasses its entire world, everything it has ever known – besides itself. And as it watches, the brown plague comes bubbling up, flooding the surface, eating away at the labor of ages; in a single frozen instant the towers founder in a sea of entropy—

And then the shining steel dissolves into brown dust.

Elsewhere in orbit, the other refugees from the uppermost levels are busy debating where the plague came from, whether it was an accident or a weapon, and their testimony will determine the destiny of planets and empires.

But in its little spaceship, one Aki is still gazing down at the brown sphere below. Lying entombed in that dust is everything it knows, everything it remembers, all its wishes and triumphs and regrets, and two races dead and gone.

Everything that it's put behind it.

Down there, it decides, there's nothing for it anymore. It will leave the past behind and carve out a space for itself in everyone else's universe, for it is Aki, and all it needs are itself and these metal walls. And it will run wherever it has to.

I am Runner, it says to itself. And it runs.