

The Monster Inside Us All

By Hannah van Wyk

“Please. My daughter is infected. You must give her the treatment.”

The soldier at the door, who has the surname Ortega stapled across her collarbone, gives me an unreadable look. I avert my eyes. My dad continues to plead with her. “We came across the country to get here, after she was bitten. She’s farther along than she looks. If we don’t get her cured before—”

“How long has she been infected?” Ortega’s voice is hard. Uncompromising.

“Two weeks.”

She nods, then looks at me. I know I don’t look infected—not yet. My skin isn’t deathly pale, my bones aren’t showing through my skin, and my eyes haven’t turned all black. But I can feel it. The change. The monster that’s just waiting to creep out of my skin.

“I’ll pay as much as I need to,” Dad finishes desperately. He had been a lawyer before the apocalypse. Money doesn’t amount to much now, but it’s the only piece of leverage we have. I turn to Ortega again, hoping that the piece of humanity I have left is persuasive enough to make her see my desperation. And I am desperate. I don’t want to become like the thing that bit me.

Ortega turns, says something into a radio, and waits for the response. Then, when the crackling of the feed returns, she gives the signal, and the huge door lifts open. Ortega gestures for us to follow her in.

This base used to be an aircraft hangar, according to the traveller who told us where to find it. But now it’s the primary base for doctors and scientists, and the survivors who manage to get here. I look around the huge space, a knot of worry building in my throat. The traveller also told us that, while the scientists have come up with a treatment to stop the growth of the infection, they haven’t found a complete cure yet, to reverse the results. Once you become one of... them... it’s forever.

Don’t think about them. I clench my fists. I can’t think about them. The thing I could become.

“Jen? Are you all right?” Dad gives me a worried look, adjusting his glasses. I nod. I can’t bring myself to force a smile. Ortega says nothing, just keeps leading us through the massive

hangar, which is bustling with all sorts of people. Then, she opens a door at the end of the tunnel.

“This way.”

We let her shepherd us into a narrow corridor, lined with dim lights in little metal cages. It’s sort of eerie, like a horror movie. I keep thinking a monster might jump out at us at any moment. It’s worse to know that those monsters are real now.

We reach another door. This one is guarded by two soldiers, both of them carrying guns. They acknowledge Ortega, then look at me. I swallow. Can they tell what runs through my blood?

“We have another one. Open up,” she tells the soldiers. They nod curtly and one of them reaches over and turns the door handle. Before I can sneak a peek at the interior, Ortega shoves me and Dad inside.

The next room is huge, and lined with dozens of cages. It’s too dimly lit to see what’s inside the cages at first. But then my eyes adjust. My heart stops. The near-nonexistent contents of my stomach threaten to make an appearance on the surface, and I hear Dad’s sharp intake of breath.

There must be hundreds of them, all in different stages of transformation. One looks human enough, if a bit pale. Another is fully gone. I nearly scream when I see it. Ghostly pale, with long, spider-like limbs and ridges along the back like spines or jagged knives. He turns to me, revealing two eyes like black holes and a mouth full of yellowed fangs, stained with blood. He lunges towards me, his arm shooting out. I jump away, subconsciously reaching for my torn pants leg, where one of them bit me.

Dad reaches for my other hand, but I tear away. I’ve spotted something familiar in one of the cages. Something... or someone.

“Uncle Tom?” I whisper when I reach my destination. I can’t be sure it’s him. In fact, it’s not, I’m just imagining it, I’m—

The disfigured man turns around, and I see his face. He’s midway through the transformation. One eye is black, and one of his arms is shorter than the other. Worst of all are the spines along his back, tearing through what remains of a Star Wars T-shirt.

A light flashes along his untouched blue eye—a light of recognition. He opens his mouth, revealing teeth that aren’t bloodstained, but no sound comes out. He tries again, but still

nothing. Finally, he pushes hard enough. But instead of words, instead of the voice that would sing Ed Sheeran songs as loud as he could, a rasping scream is all that comes out of his mouth.

“Uncle Tom,” I whisper again. Tears mist my eyes, and I reach through the bars to touch his hand. Never had I thought that I might see my uncle here, of all the horrible places he could be. He hesitates, then entwines his fingers with my own. I choke on a sob, giving in to the tears.

“What is all this?” Dad growls at Ortega.

She doesn’t respond with belligerence. Instead, she looks... sad. “I’m sorry,” she says softly. “But the rumours you heard are lies. We’ve come up with a cure for the body—to stop the transformation. But the mind can’t be cured the same way. The infection feeds off all the evil that’s already in us. It keeps deteriorating the mind until, even if they look human, they’ll kill you without a second thought.”

I look away from Uncle Tom to stare, horrified, at the soldier. “You mean... even if I am cured...”

“I’m sorry,” she says again, enclosing her fingers around my arm. “We can take you to be cured of the transformation. But as long as your mind is going down the same way, we have to hold you.”

“No!” Dad cries. “No, you can’t take her! Please, no!” He tries to grab me back, but Ortega is faster. She reaches for a gun holstered at her belt and cocks it, aiming it straight at Dad. He stiffens, eyes locked on the gun.

“It’s all right, Dad,” I say quietly. “I’ll go.”

Dad shoots me a pained look. “Jen. You don’t have to. Please, stay—”

“It’s all right, Dad. I don’t want to hurt you. And besides,” I add, looking off to the side, where Uncle Tom is leaning against the bars of his cage, “someone needs to keep Uncle Tom company.”