

2024

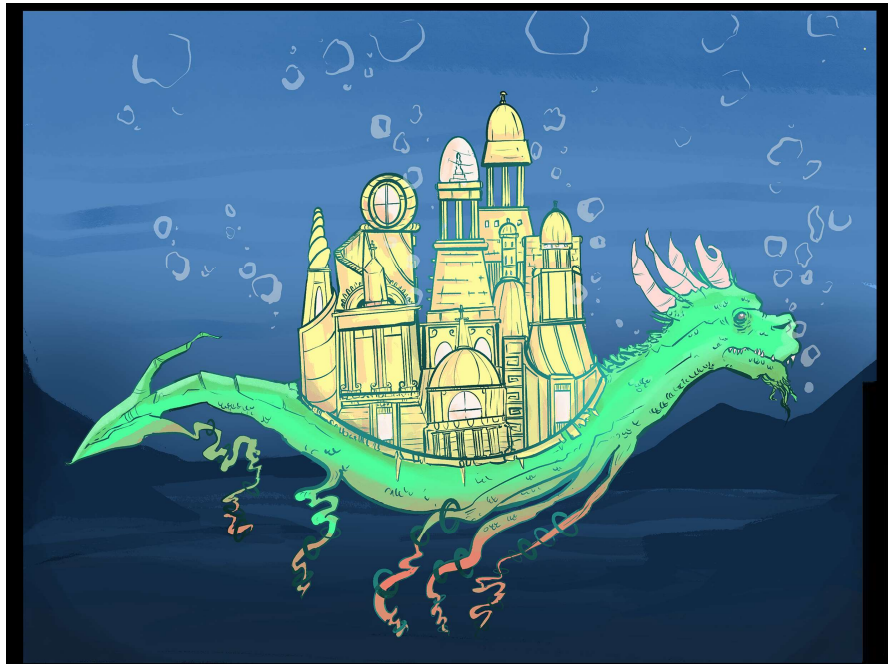
GEN CON WRITERS' SYMPOSIUM
IMAGE PROMPT CONTEST
RESPONSES



Ava Kelly
ARTIST WEBSITE



Ava Kelly
ARTIST WEBSITE



Alex Steffen
ARTIST WEBSITE



Prompt A: "Wonder Why" by Ava Kelly :
<https://avakellyfiction.com/>



IMAGE PROMPT CONTEST A



AVA KELLY
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Prompt	ID	Name	With 300words or less, describe the story you see! Provide a caption or mini-story.	Award
A	1	Jonathan Walters	<p>The subways rattled over her head. Civilization, for folks that weren't her, nice people who had nice friends and nice things. Some inventive ancestor had rigged a lamp into the concrete wall, illuminating everything in stark black and white colors, so sharp they had to cover it with a cloth to sleep. Her mother had loved that lamp, said it gave the family everything good, at least back when she was alive. Lassie missed her. She had killed her of course, but grief was already a complex monster during the best of times. Nevertheless, she had scraped together what she needed to survive her first maiden winter from open windowsills, and now had fully nested. Her worries and fears, as always, had decided that now, with nothing to worry about or fear, was the time for them to eclipse all other things. So, to calm herself, she did what her mother used to. She sang, and the words calmed her stirring heart. She sang to the little bundle of joy in her arms as it stirred. Her daughter. Her eventual killer. Soft things, with hard shells, living hard lives. It would kill her, like she had killed her mother, and her mother's mother, all the way back to the old times, before subways and lamps and even cloth.</p> <p>"My little chupacabrito," she breathed, and her voice was love.</p>	Winner
A	2	Ethan	<p>In the belly of a forgotten catacomb, a pair of ancient iron nails cling to crumbling stone. The air is thick with the scent of damp earth and the whispers of trickling water. These nails, weathered by time and encrusted with rust, once held something of great importance, now lost to the ages.</p> <p>Every crevice and crack in the stone tells a story, a witness to the passage of countless years. The walls, traced by veins of ruin, stand as a testament to nature's relentless march. What these nails once supported is now a mystery, their purpose considered unimportant, overshadowed by the weight of history.</p> <p>In this solemn place, the earth slowly reclaims what was once taken. Moss creeps along the stones, and tiny roots find their way through the smallest gaps, intertwining with the remnants of human endeavor. The nails, now remnants themselves, await a new purpose or perhaps the glance of one to wonder at their past.</p> <p>Here, within the quiet shadow, the nails remain a humble reminder of impermanence, symbols of a bygone era now slowly fading into the embrace of nature.</p>	
A	3	Charlotte Fanjoy	<p>It had been hours, this she was sure of. At least four or five, toiling down in the depths of the abandoned railroad tunnel, on the most impossible quest: to find the end of a rope. It sounds simple on paper, but any who had tried before knew otherwise. They knew in advance not to go near the woods, and not to go near the tunnels, and most certainly not to pick up the old hemp rope that rested softly on the leaves by the entrance. Those who did never came back, and she was hiking to join them.</p> <p>If she had expected to find dead bodies of previous fools lying around, she would have been wrong. Not like she was looking anyway—She only looked at the rope. She needed to find the end of it. It had to be done. Her subconscious had told her so, and egged her on with superhuman determination. Maybe her own mind was the only thing trapping her down here. But even if that was the case, she didn't want to overpower her urge to keep going. She would turn around when she needed to—yes, that was it. This was her choice. She could change it if she wanted.</p> <p>Give or take ten minutes, and maybe she'd turn back around.</p>	
A	4	Jay Bienvenu	<p>Ever wonder why the Monstrous Seven chooses the spookiest places to meet and organize? It's because they operate outside of the mainstream. Tangle with them and you'll find yourself in a litter-filled abandoned subway tunnel. Or strapped to a log in a dense forest. Best not tangle with them. Even better, the less you know about them the better.</p>	
A	5	Jonathan Darer	<p>Home at last: cool damp air soothing sun burnt skin. Moira's bent core axel and punctured heart pump whined feebly. The chasers would be here soon but for the moment she was safe. Despite the glass and rubble, the floor of the shop where she was born smelled of oil and gas and metal. "Don't try." She said and darkness took her.</p>	
A	6	Sy	<p>A remnant thing, a whispering madness crawled bloody-fingered through strewn rubble. His veins ran with burning, spinning concrete, his groaning heart welded from dripping, rusted rebar. He tore that heart out, dribbling typhus from the hole, leaving it in wrenched strips along his path. Into an ultraviolet sea he sojourned, to kiss the sun's mythic face with tattered, weary lips.</p>	

ID	name:	With 300words or less, describe the story you see! Provide a caption or mini-story.	Award
A	7 CJ Siebeneck	<p>Shattered. The ground's covered in crystal shards, physical remnants of the violence that happened here.</p> <p>Clues are everywhere. When Kai peers closer at the crystals, he identifies them as quartz, a type of stone that works well as a conductor of technomagic. The rebar on the ceiling is bent and broken like a frayed rope.</p> <p>He knows what had been here. He knows what is missing from this prison. Not who, but what, an object-turned-celestial that cannot be destroyed. Only contained.</p> <p>And now it's broken out of its cage. The machine will continue to do what it's been programmed to: to enforce order. But just as it is defined by its rules, humans are the opposite, unable to be bound by any category.</p> <p>There is too much chaos inherent in humanity. The Machine cannot handle this.</p> <p>Kai stands up from his inspection of the broken crystals. The forensics team is here, dressed in their hazmat suits. Kai's only protection is his faded trenchcoat.</p> <p>Kai nods as the forensics team passes him, hiding his smile. He hadn't left behind any evidence when he'd been to the Machine's prison last night.</p> <p>Kai squeezes the tech drive in his pocket, feeling the gentle vibrations of an active information trap. It'll keep the Machine occupied until Kai needs it.</p>	
A	8 Amanda Clark	<p>Sure, her crew wasn't happy with the emergency landing on a backwater planet full of nothing but ice-encrusted prisons, but Helen had sought her sister for centuries. The second she felt that twisting pull deep in her gut, the one that connected the twins across space and time, she knew she was close. The crew could eat dirt. Or maybe ice.</p> <p>The moment the ship's airlock settled, Helen jumped free, unwilling to wait for anyone. She wasn't even sure what was in her bag, but some inner force in her mind ensured she still held her communicator at least.</p> <p>Helen allowed her sister's magic to guide her ever closer across frozen terrain. Occasional blustery creaks in the distance disrupted the otherwise quiet land. More than once, Helen checked her communicator for signs of life, but the screen showed only cool blues and purples.</p> <p>Rounding the corner, Helen spied the prison. Despite the spiraling smoke pouring from shattered windows, she knew immediately that's where she needed to go.</p> <p>The sisterly bond pulled Helen to the furthest tower, but as she crested the last steps, the connection immediately severed. Helen stumbled into the tight room, bereft, as her boots crushed over recently broken bits of ice.</p> <p>Her sister wasn't there. Again.</p> <p>But her essence was everywhere, clinging to the chilled blocks and rusted bolts, sliding along the curved cement walls. Helen fell to her knees, her fingers clicking haphazardly at the communicator in her hands.</p> <p>Maybe she'd always wonder why her sister kept leaving like this only moments before they could reunite. But for now, Helen had evidence she still lived. That was enough. It had to be.</p>	Runner Up
A	9 Danielle Portera	<p>Fear comes in many forms.</p> <p>For me, that fear stemmed directly from the life they curated for me. From the life that required an entire team to perfect - all the way from hair and makeup to what dog I owned and what water bottle I drank from.</p> <p>The mask I was made to wear suffocated me slowly with every dinner party, every political rally, every coffee date with friends who were placed in my life to mold me into a more acceptable version of myself.</p> <p>They told me this person would be better received by the masses. If I kept to the script, all our dreams would come to fruition. My husband would one day be the President of the Northern Nations and I, his compliant shadow.</p> <p>I didn't keep to the script.</p> <p>The day I finally spoke truth from my lips, I single-handedly brought the entire political party down with me. Not even my husband could stand to look at me after that day.</p> <p>The hate mail began to pour in, and I knew I had to act quickly. My perfectly curated world came crashing in around me. However, the debris it caused made for a nice diversion for my exit before my replacement was ready for her debut.</p> <p>Tonight, I am to meet with a trusted member of a secret society in the tunnels beneath the city that loathes me. I will begin the process of stripping away the mask I no longer have to wear to please those masses.</p> <p>Each layer peeled away is one step closer to discovering who I was before the parading began. I no longer have to fear suffocation.</p> <p>The fear that remains is how long it may take to finally find the real me underneath it all.</p>	

Prompt B: "Scythe" by Ava Kelly :
<https://avakellyfiction.com/>

IMAGE PROMPT CONTEST B



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B	1	Amanda Clark	<p>Demi never used to bat an eye at a kill request from the Council of Gods. Council targets were all the same anyway: powerful men oozing charm and sophistication by spades, yet in dire need of a lesson. If they were assigned to Demi, well, that just meant theirs was the most ultimate of lessons.</p> <p>This particular target was different, though. With Demi's centuries-practiced swing, he never should've seen her coming. Yet, he'd dodged her blade in one swift turn. On reflex, Demi grabbed his tie, swinging him around as if he weighed nothing more than the black silk in her grip.</p> <p>Warm hazel eyes locked onto hers. Her scythe stilled, tilting time and spraying electric shrapnel into the liminal air surrounding them. The longer the man stared, the more Demi felt that he'd pushed beyond her heart, delving instead into her tattered soul. It almost hurt to breathe.</p> <p>She forced her gaze to the empty street. The people... where had they gone? Demi glanced up, concern growing heavier with each breath. Clearly, her target was to blame, but she didn't understand. She hated this bout of hesitation, but the tick of the man's jaw made her pause. Again. Was he more than simply a man? Was he...like her?</p> <p>A deep, yet hopeful dip in his brows pulled at Demi's mind, twisting a locked thread within. But why would the Council want him dead?</p> <p>And then he smirked, the comfortable shape of his mouth suddenly ripping memories loose. He leapt forward, holding tight as the onslaught of buried lies devastated Demi.</p> <p>Once her mind steadied, the Goddess wound black silk around her fingers again. Her scythe had never been meant for him, but looking skyward, her eyes promised swift vengeance.</p>	Runner Up
B	2	Ryan Haberern	<p>He leaned in close, but not close enough to crush the corsage. Caroline finally showed interest. "What would your parents say?" Ryan said in a soft voice. "That's tomorrow's problem," she responded. She reached out and grabbed his tie. He inched closer. Caroline looked up, "run away with me... now."</p>	
B	3	Jay Kibble	<p>Our first real date was a blur of fake stars in the ceiling, booming swing music, and sweaty bodies at Fountain Square Theater. The walls had been decorated to look like Italian alleyways, complete with balconies and terracotta rooftops—or had Stephen said they always looked like that? This was a repeat for him, having taken a past boyfriend swing dancing years past; I was brand new to it. Brand new to him.</p> <p>Rock step, one, two, rock step, three, four. Step on his toes, blush in embarrassment. Clearly my dance class days had left my memory. Then again, ballet doesn't exactly carry over to swing. Sweat drenched my binder and dress shirt. My packer had a mind of its own.</p> <p>"Christ, sorry," I mumbled as I paused to adjust myself yet again. I looked like I had a perpetual tent raised.</p> <p>"Shhh, hey, dont worry about that, just focus on me. Nobody's worried about that—well maybe except for me—but you're in charge here."</p> <p>He gave me a wink and grin combo sexy enough to make the devil blush and my brain fizz enough to temporarily forget the embarrassment and self-awareness.</p> <p>Rock step, one, two, rock step, three, four. Gradually find a rhythm, even if it's a basic one. Lose myself in the music, the rhythm, his scent.</p> <p>"Lead," he guided. "I know you can do it." Okay but with what? My dick? My two left feet?</p> <p>My mouth?</p> <p>Without thinking I grabbed his tie and pulled him in.</p>	Winner
B	4	Jonathan Darer	<p>You can't fool me. You try to hide behind your dapper suit and tie. A marionette in white so calm, so disciplined, so in control. Really you're standing on top of a precipice waiting for the push that brings you tumbling into sensual overload, shared secrets, and trembling gasps. No place to hide. Interested?</p>	

	ID	Name	With 300 words or less, describe the story you see! Provide a caption or mini-story.	Award
B	5	CJ Siebeneck	<p>"Don't you walk away from me," Milo warned. "We aren't done."</p> <p>"Of course we are." Richie didn't even bother to look at him, rolling up his sleeves. His fingertips left charcoal marks on his white dress shirt.</p> <p>"You never told me!" Milo said. "Not before you dragged me into all of this."</p> <p>"You were already involved," Richie snapped. "You're just angry I ruined your ignorance."</p> <p>He wasn't wrong. Milo had stumbled blindly into a world he wasn't ready for. The magic undercurrent that ran through the city coalesced, right on top of his apartment building.</p> <p>It explained why everyone thought the building was haunted. Richie was "a modern sorcerer," or warlock, or whatever he called it. He'd dragged Milo out of his apartment as the floor turned goeey. Milo didn't want to know what caused that.</p> <p>Richie turned away, no doubt intending to return to investigating Milo's apartment. Milo reached out, grabbing his tie. Richie stopped, blinking in surprise.</p> <p>"You're not going anywhere," Milo said. "Not without me."</p>	
B	6	Alan Birkmeier	<p>Well shit, when I used that last 5 buck on Kohl's cash to get this tie, didn't think it would matter this much. If it breaks she falls and is dead. Not a great scenario. Oh shit did I tie a full or half Windsor? Fuck.</p>	
B	7	Danielle Portera	<p>Death was not on the menu that night.</p> <p>I sit back down at the white linen table and glance at my surprisingly attractive date, Leo. I release a breath I didn't know I was holding. Could this be the date that changes my life?</p> <p>A blood-red martini garnished with a vibrant lemon peel has appeared at the table and my eyes meet his molten brown eyes.</p> <p>"How did you know raspberry lemon drops were a weakness of mine?" I am genuinely surprised but realize it must have been on my profile.</p> <p>"I pay close attention in hopes of bringing you maximum pleasure." He replies with a wolfish grin. My face bursts with heat and a chuckle of embarrassment sneaks out.</p> <p>Why does this make my stomach flinch? Have I forgotten what it feels like to be flirted with?</p> <p>The waiter appears abruptly and refreshes our waters. As I reach for the martini, his hand fumbles past and knocks the glass over, drenching my white blouse with red. I gasp, standing immediately, and knock the chair over leaving me no option but to escape to the restroom.</p> <p>My frantic pace is halted by a hand on my arm. I turn to find the waiter steadying my shoulders with his broad hands.</p> <p>"I am so sorry. You don't understand." He says as I shove him off and step back.</p> <p>"What is your problem?" I whisper loudly. Rage takes over. I grab his black tie. "This was my chance and you ruined it for me!" His eyes flashed with genuine concern.</p> <p>"Ma'am, I saw your date drop something in your martini. Then, I realized why he looked familiar."</p> <p>I looked down at his phone to see a police sketch of a serial killer.</p> <p>Peering around the corner, Leo is nowhere to be found.</p>	

Prompt C: Art by Alex Steffen:

<https://www.instagram.com/alex.steffen.works/>



IMAGE PROMPT CONTEST C



ALEX STEFFEN
ARTIST WEBSITE



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C	1	Kathleen Lawrence	<p>Magnificent towers of shimmering gold Artistic marvels and innovation Luscious fabrics, twinkling jewels But He spares this no rumination He hears the laughter Their joy, the songs For this He protects And endures on</p>	
C	2	Melissa Reuter	<p>When all was said and done, the afterlife was not at all what I had been prepared to face. All of those moments during my chaotic 22 years, never able to believe that how I was living was quite good enough for Heaven... but was I really bad enough for Hell? Then after the blinding light, the brief jab of pain... this truly unbelievable middle life appeared.</p> <p>Cruising along below our terrestrial first existence was the transformative Golden City atop a tireless green sea dragon. At first I remember a dreamy confusion. And it talked to me, this dragon. I thought I must be insane, but then the murkiness of my mind cleared a bit and I realized that I must have died. Can you imagine realizing, "I must be dead"? The dragon spoke to me not in words, but left impressions on me and I began a period of guided reflection. It healed me, truly transformed me. If humans had only known of this middle life, we would have known that we had nothing to fear, no reason to hate. I am being moved on now, but it's all right.</p>	
C	3	Alan Birkemeier	<p>For sale: 3 bedroom, 2 full bath 2,300 square foot home. This cozy starter all stone home located inside the Castle walls. Yes, unfortunately, a dragon recently scooped the castle onto its back and flew away into the stars. However, atmosphere did magically stay with the castle and this home is not in any of the soon to collapse towers. Centrally located on the dragon, so less chance of being eaten or dedicated on. Price recently reduced 30,000 gold coins. Down to only 500 gold coins. Quite a steal!</p>	
C	4	Chris Stafford	<p>The wet of my blood seeps through the cracks of my burnt skin. I have tested the limits my body could take in these tunnels. Now I will push myself further than I have before, deeper into the beating, burning heart of this living city. My father charted a way down, and I will complete his work. I will bring the beast crashing down and end this reign.</p> <p>As I push the last few hundred feet, the interior of my eyes begin to boil. Even without them I swear I can still see the fiery glow of the beast's heart. My last breath of air has all but evaporated from my lungs and I count my last steps. They are studied and paced, and I know exactly when to lung with the last of my strength.</p> <p>My legs give and fail to push me forward for the last deadly leap, but I crawl. It's enough to finish the job. The searing heart beats inches from me. I press my hand firmly to it. It sears and melts my bones to it instantly, but enough blood remains in what's left of me, the same blood my father had.</p> <p>The heart reacts, shudders against my father's bloodline. It seizes and beats violently a scant few more times. A wail, and I feel myself slip away as the city begins to plunge.</p>	
C	5	Adam Petrosino	<p>The Forever DM's heavy shoulders are slack, from carrying homebrew cities in tow and unused characters on their back-making their movements sluggish and slow. These fragments they carry aren't lost or forgotten, they rest on the DM's shoulders with care. It's a heavy burden they think of often and one they long, with others, to share.</p>	

C	6	Andrew Eddmenson	<p>"A City Built from Dragon Scales"</p> <p>A city built from dragon scales Soared across the sky - The road to which along its tail Behind the dragon winds.</p> <p>The spires of the towers Sprawling 'cross the creature's back Held those once devoured By its predatory pack.</p> <p>One by one, the dragonflight Preyed upon each town Until but one last city's light Remained upon the ground.</p> <p>When the pack of dragons Landed at their final meal, The eldest one among them Did not know how it should feel.</p> <p>Considering humanity, The elder dragon paused While other dragons, tragically, Mankind's extinction caused.</p> <p>Turning on its kin, their leader Ripped the pack apart And rescued from within the people Who would mend its heart.</p> <p>For following the battle, Alone the dragon pined - It's broken limbs were tattered, While its eyes were clawed and blind.</p> <p>But the people came together; And despite the dragon's guilt, It's injuries were mended While the city was rebuilt.</p> <p>With wings replaced by engines And a guide on either ear - The dragon once again ascended To the atmosphere.</p> <p>Beyond the scars along its tail, Several stories high, A city built from dragon scales Soared across the sky.</p>	Runner Up
C	7	Ryan Haberern	<p>She had always known the story of Fliplig. In fact all children knew the story. Why didn't James know the story of Fliplig? She pondered this while staring into his eyes. Emma slowly sat down and began telling the story of how the world came to be.</p>	
C	8	Sarah Kenny	<p>A two hour and thirty-six minute descent. 156 minutes during which the crew took measured breaths and gave weary smiles.</p> <p>Then, a sudden arrest of motion as they hit bottom and the submersible's outdoor lights shuddered to life. There was a mad rush to the windows and the micro-periscopes.</p> <p>After what could have been minutes or hours, someone spotted it.</p> <p>No bigger then a child's fist, it drifted through the midnight trench like a carelessly blown bubble. The creature: single-celled, translucent gentle. On its back: multitudes. A world isolated and unspoiled. Flickers of movement behind the window of the spires. The glint of sunlight in a place no sunlight could reach.</p> <p>Over the hum of the life and electrical systems, some swore they heard music, proud and lilting with a somber undercurrent. A fanfare at 6033 fathoms.</p>	
C	9	Matt	<p>Sexy Seth's dragon dragoned sexily</p>	
C	10	CJ Siebeneck	<p>The Great Temple of Oaka has always been difficult to locate. Dedicated to innovation and creativity, it requires such characteristics in order to reach the Temple. The temple resides upon the back of Utuu, a sea dragon that judges the worthiness of those that make the pilgrimage to the Great Temple. Without his blessing, one cannot enter - and with his disapproval, one may find themselves as lunch.</p> <p>Passing these tests and making it into the temple is only the first stage. The Great Temple is the size of a city, yet the only humans that inhabit it are pilgrims. The Temple is run by automatons, creations of a long-dead arcanist who built the Great Temple. Whether these automatons can be considered sentient, well - that's a debate best left to the Circle of Scholars and their endless discussions.</p> <p>Each building is dedicated to a different expression of creativity. Painting, dance, technology, magic, chemistry, and many more are represented in the design of each building and the automatons that devote themselves to each practice. In these places of worship, the pilgrims make their sacrifices. Stories. Songs. Science experiments. By giving a taste of their ideas back to Oaka, it ensures years more of productivity and success.</p>	

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C	11	Lily Chesgreen	<p>The burnt out neon sign belonging to the dollar store three streets down from the beach reads, "Underwater Kingdom" – dull like the street light darting, illuminating green until green shines obsidian, etching sloppy eel tracks spilt sticky under tires, tongues forbidden from licking concrete, cities built of too fine bricks, crumbling scales littering the parking lot.</p> <p>Salted ink leaves sand on my tongue resonating into teeth, gums drunk on attempts to forget. I've constructed too many cities from sand spilling over onto highways, too many cities on the backs of shiny tails, stop signs laced in gold, dragged through thick waves, my kingdom, an escape, throat aching as salt caresses lungs. And I now wonder, an escape for who?</p>	Winner
C	12	Amanda Clark	<p>Grandfather always said to eat the largest monster, to surely make me big.</p> <p>Grandmother always said to eat the fastest monster, to surely make me swift.</p> <p>Father always said to eat the strongest monster, to surely toughen my fearsome scales.</p> <p>Mother always said to eat the smartest monster, to surely sharpen my legendary wit.</p> <p>Brother always said to eat the ugliest monster, to surely boost my hideous nature.</p> <p>Sister always said to eat the stinkiest monster, to surely ripen my natural defenses.</p> <p>Like a good monster, I always listened. But I never obeyed. After all, they are gone, and I persist.</p> <p>I have found different monsters. Ones who refuse to fight. These monsters create instead. They dare to dream, to build new worlds with newer ideas.</p> <p>I survive with them, consuming precious thoughts and harboring beautiful freedoms. We float into the depths, always seeking more. The deeper we go, the more I believe... that the real monster was never me.</p>	
C	13	Danielle Portera	<p>It has been three days since the sea monster raided our district and threw us into the gilded cages upon its back. I may have felt some kind of sympathy towards the creature if he weren't a brainless brute forcing innocent merfolk into Kaidissa's lair.</p> <p>My tail is cramping from the confinement of this box. If our calculations are correct, we should be passing by the Arches shortly, designating the decent to our destination - the depths of the Abyss. Our sources claim Kaidissa's lair is a bottomless cavern of unthinkable horror where she feeds off of fear itself, careful to pace herself in order to savor every last drop of life from her victims.</p> <p>A shudder runs down my spine and floods my mind with the images and screams of the merfolk we were too late to save.</p> <p>A distinct code of clinking on the metal bars draws my attention to the mermaid in the cell adjacent to mine. My eyes sweep to the Arches that have just come into sight and back to the emerald hair floating around her face. I had recognized her from the vibrant marketplace back in our home district where I would purchase spears from her family's weapons stall. Now, the only remains of our home are the few dozen survivors locked in these cages. There is no room for failure.</p> <p>The clinking pattern that follows in the distance is what I have been waiting for all morning.</p> <p>The emerald mermaid's piercing sapphire eyes meet mine and we exchange our familiar smiles but today, a deadly and mischievous curl finds its way across her lips and I nod to confirm.</p> <p>Let the rebellion begin.</p>	