

Junior Division, Prose
Rachel Lidstone, Gander
Code (an excerpt)

The wind slammed against the cracked, derelict walls almost as hard as Sata's heart slammed against the bones of her rib cage, and howled like the sound her breath made when it came unspooled from her lungs in harsh gusts. Few sounds cut through the storm. But she could still hear the braying calls of a pack of feral *zhan* as they circled the ancient building.

Eventually, they would find the same way in that she had. They would find her.

Sata let herself fall a little deeper into the safety of the building before she collapsed against the nearest wall and slid downward, until her tailbone fit uncomfortably at the joint between the wall and floor.

She knew what planet she was on. The star chart she had downloaded into her Halo had told her that much, just like it had showed her a route through the asteroid belt, just like how it had helped her navigate until her ship had sustained too much damage to continue on. At the very least, she knew where she was.

The planet had a name, a number, a designation within the galactic catalog of planets. It was also considered uninhabitable—decades ago, its humanoid population had been decimated by a ceaseless war. They had built machines of destruction, marched soldiers off to battlefields, set off bombs until the planet was so saturated with toxins that no one could survive there anymore.

It was the mutagenic chemicals in that cataclysm that had birthed the *zhan*.

Their name was a word in a language that no one spoke anymore, meaning simply *monster*. It was an astute description. Their long, twisted limbs, with fleshy, membranous skin pulled taught over malformed bones, their mouths brimming with teeth, the way their dark eyes searched through the smoke-thick atmosphere with cunning and hunger... it all invoked feelings of terror befitting the word. *Monster*.