

Kina's Climb

By Kirstie Olley

When you started the climb you either finished it, or it finished you.

It wasn't easy, going up the spire every few days. Dragging the weight of herself and the bulbs up over the dome at the bottom wasn't all that difficult, but the pinnacle itself was too tall and too straight. The surface stuck to Kina's hands, giving the illusion of safety, but each time she moved a hand or foot she had to tear it free. When she was tired, when she wanted to sag back and rest her weary limbs, the wall's grip didn't have the strength to hold her in place though. She had to keep her body close, distribute her weight evenly and keep soldiering on.

Kina looked up. The summit was in sight. Long thin strands stretched out from the tip of the top, slinging down to the fence, supplying the charge to the protective barrier around her home.

With an *oomph* she pushed on, struggling upward. Her muscles were a fire under her skin, and though she'd started while dawn was still a grey smudge of light now the sun pummelled her with heat, reddening her skin.

The bulbs bounced on her back, slapping her spine, kicking her kidneys. Kina wasn't new to the sensations however, the wet goop sticking to her palms, the burning inside and out. She did this every week, it was the only way to keep the charge in the fence, to keep the Others out, and to cry for help to anyone who could hear.

There had to be others out there, didn't there?

Just because everyone else who'd sheltered behind these walls had died didn't mean there were no other survivors anywhere. Right?

Even internally her voice carried the quaver of a lost four year old.

And then she was there, the receptacle open before her, the juice almost empty inside.

Kina wrapped her legs around the stalk as if it were a lover and struggled with the first of the bulbs. She pulled it around by the short rope that attached it to the harness on her chest and drew it in front of her. Her stomach muscles pulled taught under her ragged shirt as she kept her torso upright.

With a wrench and a pop the cork came out and Kina poured the sloshing liquid inside into the receptacle. The lines streaming down from the spear quivered and made a short, sharp *shzt* that brought a smile to Kina's face.

Every time she wondered if the source might become less potent, if the current would weaken. The Others would come in then. Despite the sun's heat she could feel the chill of that thought.

She emptied the other three containers until the liquid lapped at the brim. Re-corking the bottles Kina scanned the area. There were no signs of any Others, but no signs of help either.

With the hem of her shirt Kina wiped the sweat from her face. She corked the last container and prepared herself for the journey down.

The world flashed. Brightness that shamed the sun seared her eyes and Kina lost her grip on the bulb in her arms. It swung behind her and slammed into her other side hard enough to bruise. The bottles bashed each other, causing a clamour.

Kina wrapped her arms around the needle, adhering every part of herself to it while she waited for her eyes to readjust. Her temples throbbed, even her body pulsed with the pain. For an instant she considered that she might have touched one of the live wires, but she knew she hadn't, there'd been none near enough to brush.

Before she recovered the flash came again, stabbing through the air, enveloping the world.

Was this the end? Had she survived the Others all this time only to die like this? Tears stung her eyes. How could she fight this? Her spire, her fence, they could hold the Others at bay, but not this world-consuming lightning.

Something rumbled. It was a waterfall's roar, but with a depth and resonance she'd never dreamed possible. It was as all-encompassing as the light had been.

The tower trembled, like it was trying to shake her loose. No, that wasn't it – the tower was as terrified as she.

The noise surrounded her, her ears ached like her eyes, but somewhere through the roar she heard words, impossible as that seemed. Clinging to the pinnacle, weeping for her life, the words washed over Kina.

“Hey, come over here, check this out. What do you reckon this thing is?”

Her vision came back while another voice joined in. She looked up past the receptacle, everything was blurry, tears gushed in response.

The eye loomed over her so huge it blotted out the sky. Just its damn eye and she couldn't see anything else of it. Even the first time she'd climbed the spire her heart hadn't pounded like this.

Every day she'd prayed for someone to come, someone to save her. This creature, gargantuan beyond conceivability, could never see her. She would be too tiny to it. She would be smaller than a dust mote drifting in a sunbeam. Someone had come, but they were no saviour.

Kina clung, their words reverberating through her chest, their lights coming again to blind her. Kina gripped to the tower and held on to her life. If she could survive this, then the Others would be nothing.