

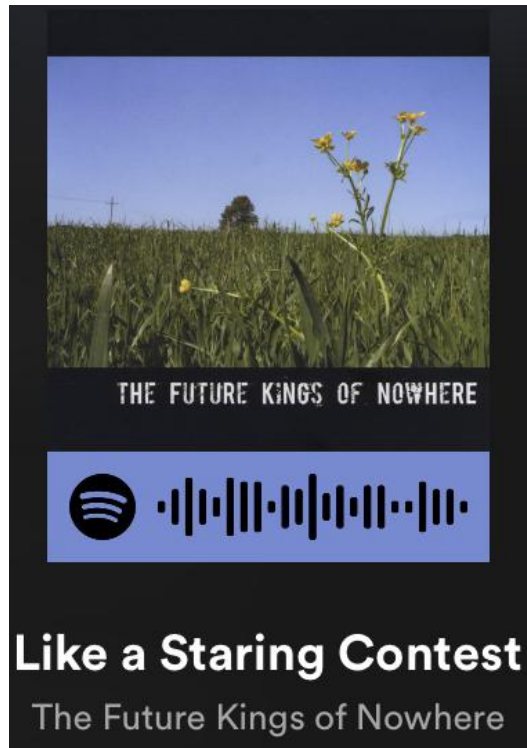
First Response is a collective of short stories and art, set in a post-apocalyptic future.

Decades after pollution and war ravage the Earth, there are two groups of people in the wastelands; those that strive to heal the world that died, and those that benefit from it staying dead.

Kit Winfrey is an engineer at the Kusasa Corporation, one of the world's leaders in environmental and community outreach. Passionate and driven, he quickly became a leading mind in the corporation. He may be spreading thinner and thinner, but it's as they say: If you love what you do, you never work a day in your life!

Oxford Jones is a scientist at the Kusasa Corporation. Brought along by Kit, he hasn't quite yet made a name for himself like his childhood friend. But, maybe this new discovery can change that...

Recommended listening...



TW: Graphic depictions of violence, gore, medical equipment, and self-mutilation.
Be gentle, read at your own discretion

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Thank you so much to Katie, Allister, Al,
and Parker.

My best friends and team.
First Response was kept alive because of
y'all's creativity and support, and I am so
fucking blessed to have you bitches in my
life.

The worst part is how cold the floor was.

It was frigid. Kit had gotten acquainted with the cold by hour three, but that didn't make it suck any less. It numbed out the bloody void where his arm should have been, felt like death rubbing its scaly hands over his body.

He couldn't remember what happened next. He was told that half the company rushed into his lab. That the whole med team dropped their work to bring him back. That The Director didn't leave his med room for three days.

He remembered what happened before.

—
The needle was thick, its contents stinging and sluggish. He grit through it, keeping his eyes trained on Ox.

Tired. And anxious. *How long have you been trapping yourself down here? How much oil have you burned? Do you have anything left?*

“It'll be okay.” Kit shivered as the needle squeezed out, discarded to the side. He grabbed Ox's hand. “I know it'll be okay.”

Ox twitched a smile.

“I know. I just... sorry I had to ask for your help.” His mouth puckered to the side. “I get that you're busy.”

Kit shook his head.

“I'm never too busy. Not for you.” He pressed his thumb into Ox's palm.

Ox's brow wrinkled, squinting at the floor. He pulled his hand, leaving Kit's limp.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Of course I am.” Kit’s shoulders dropped, eyes pricking. “I know how it seems. Vesta is working me like a war horse, and this promotion is becoming a pain in my ass. But still-”

“Promotion.” Ox cut in, shoulders tensed.

“You... got a promotion.”

Kit froze.

“Fuck. I didn’t tell you.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

Kit’s arm twitched, limply jolting. A burn bloomed in the crook of his elbow.

“I was going to.”

“Sure.” Ox spun in his chair, turning to his work table.

“I was. I’m sorry, it’s just been-”

“A lot?” Ox interjected, voice thick.

“Yeah. I bet it is, Winfrey.” Kit winced at the formality.

“It must be so hard to have a team of your best buddies to work with, and a spot in the Director’s pocket. Mr. Golden Boy doesn’t have to worry about staying relevant enough for funding or approval.

I have to fight a losing battle because no one can bear to look anywhere but at you. And you...”

Ox sniffed, his shoulders hunching.

“You fucking left me behind.”

“Ox-” His arm burned.

“Don’t. Don’t you dare pity me, and don’t
pretend you know what it’s been like.
You. Weren’t. There.”

“No, Ox-” His arm BURNED.

“You got a promotion? Well good for you. I
lost my fucking job.
No help from you, nothing.”

“Ox.”

“What?” Ox whipped up.

Dark blisters and bumps crawled out from
the injection site, ugly and raw under the
clinical lighting. They moved like mold,
crackling out slowly. Kit’s eyes were wet,
his face as red as his knuckles were white.

“What’s happening, Ox?”

Ox’s face dropped.

“I’ve never seen cancer look like this.” Kit
strained, but he stayed locked on to Ox.

“That’s because I made it.”
Ox grabbed a scalpel, shaving a small bit of
the infected skin off and dropping it into a
petri dish. “It’s spreading much faster than
I thought it would, though.”

Kit broke eye contact long enough to look
at the affected area. Bile rose in his throat,
and he held back a gag. His skin looked
halfway to a corpse. He felt his veins, his
muscles, every cell in his arm scream and
wither.

“Antidote.” He choked out.

Before Ox could respond, an alarm sounded from the hallway outside. Ox glanced at the clock on the wall, eyes wide.

“Shit. Out of time.”

“Ox. Antidote.” Kit’s voice was barely a whimper, the crawling scream of his skin reaching his bicep.

“I-” The pounding of footsteps cut Ox off. He glanced at the door, then back at Kit. The color drained from his face as he stumbled back against his desk. A vial dropped, making him flinch.

“I’m sorry.”

He sprinted out the door, running up the stairs.

Kit screamed.

Kit screamed.

—

The alarms stopped at some point, but no one came into the lab. The footsteps had thudded off, and it was just Kit.

Calling for help had become futile, and the burn was inching towards his shoulder with determination.

Ox had left.

That wasn’t allowed to be the problem, but it’s all Kit could see. Ox had left him like this, and had said things Kit had never heard, and had left him to turn into a pile of steaming rot.

But that can’t be the problem because Kit needed to not die.

There was no antidote.
His blurred eyes had scanned every inch of
Ox's desk, but besides the shattered vial on
the ground there was nothing to be found.

No cure. Next step.
What do you do when you can't heal an
infection? You cut it out.

He knew the med labs.
He knew that there had to be
some form of surgical tools in the room, t
he labs were transferred into med bays in
crisis.

There was no telling where it would be,
and how long he had, but it was a solution
to the problem he was allowed to think
about.

Hoisting himself onto Ox's chair, he used
his legs to push the wheels around the
room. The pain was centered in his right
arm, but it rippled across his whole body.

The alarms were sounding, and he was
blatantly not listening. Because there was a
problem.

Finally, a drawer let out a hiss of
containment sterilization, making Kit sob.

He grabbed his supplies. A small part of
him noted that this was not the intended
purpose of numbing cream, and another
part yelled that anything fucking helps.

A page from his beginner survival course
flashed in his head. He knew the steps.
Break the bone. With as deep a breath as he
could get, he slammed his shoulder against
the side of the cabinet. It popped and
crunched, the muscles in it already
weakened by the infection.

His vision went dark, and he was on the ground.

He blurred back to consciousness a few seconds later. With a groan and a shove he was on his back. He yanked his sleeve up over his shoulder, exposing the irritated, bubbling skin. He slathered some numbing cream on everything he could, the coolness barely permeating through. He roughly tied the tourniquet, ignoring the way it dug into his flaming nerves.

Deep breath out. Deep breath in.

Surgical saw in hand, he began.

Either his screaming was silent, or it was so loud he couldn't hear it.

All he could think was to keep going, his only thought in completing the task. His vision was spotted, his ears rang, and he continued.

—

It was done faster than he thought. He kicked the festering lump that used to be his arm as far as he could. With the last spark of proper consciousness, all he could do was sob. With the problem solved, there was only one thing left.

Ox was gone.