

The Hunt Pt. 4

In Which Everything Is Perfect

The automaton stops in front of a set of stairs, stepping aside. I make my way past them and start up the stairs. From the way the light of the lantern is reflecting on the walls, I can tell it is not moving. I look back, "How long will you be waiting?"

It does not respond.

"With luck, I will return shortly," I head up the stairs.

...

I am in a vast storage room, packed with dull pink crates emblazoned with an elaborate mask. Several automatons, perhaps built more for lifting than any I have seen earlier today, are packing up several crates and look up at me with what may be alarm. The closest one stares down the stairs and the weak lantern-light within and returns to their work. The others follow.

I head past them to the only exit I can see. The crates are being filled with bags of the grey ash they sell at market. I had always assumed the Architect manufactured that herself, but I can imagine how a deal such as this could be struck.

I hope this place only just manufactures the ash, but a name like 'The Academy' makes me worry it has a use for it.

...

The next room is a kitchen. The Academy has a use for it.

It is abandoned, everything in the same dull pink. It appears that some form of oatmeal from a pre-packaged kit is on the menu for breakfast. I analyze one of the packages. Unlike the ash, the formula is created off-site.

There are two ways out of the kitchen, one leading to a hallway of identical dull pink doors, small spherical lamps hanging above them. They are marked with numbers, going up to three digits. The other door leads to a cafeteria, with pink floors, walls, tables, and chairs.

If the hallway leads directly to the kitchens, it is likely the quarters of the workers. That does not help me especially, as I do not know who is missing.

However, the Architect described this place as 'perfection' and implied that the creature I am hunting, which really should have sensed me by now, is a threat to that. Unless I am misunderstanding her point, I assume she would be describing the core purpose of the facility, which means the creature is primarily targeting the students of this monstrous facility, whose living quarters should be beyond the cafeteria.

It is a stretch, but I am working with what I have.

I enter the cafeteria, frighteningly clean. I mentally apologize to the worker who will have to clean up my boot prints, and the other messes I will leave behind.

As I approach the living quarters for the students, identical to the worker's corridors, I hear the sounds of automatons. Two enter my view, identical in model to the ones the Architect uses for security but with extra aesthetic decoration to match the walls, and turn to look at me.

They charge immediately.

...

I kill things. I do not kill people, or at least try to avoid it.

I do not know if automatons are things or people.

I pick up two nearby benches and throw it at them, as a test. They catch the benches and crush them in their hands. They are stronger than me, but I could've caught them faster. Hopefully this means I can outrun them.

I wait for the automatons to get closer, then kick the table to my right into them. I sprint to the right, curving towards the hallway, keeping as close to the wall as possible to maintain distance.

I don't allow myself to look behind me, trusting my hearing to tell me if the automatons were approaching. It appears one of them has fallen on the other and they were struggling to get up.

I reach the hallway and keep running.

All I can hear is automatons approaching from every direction. I need to end this hunt quickly.

...

A metal fist slams me against one of the doors. Somehow it holds. From my superior vantage point, I can now tell that there is another difference between workers' and students' quarters: their very small plaques get their names.

I do not allow this distinction to distract me from stabbing the automaton in the mechanical gut and pushing them off of me. I keep going, cracking my jaw back into place with my free hand.

The creature here should have sensed me by now. It should be trying to find me.

An automaton comes at me from a side hallway, crushing my left shoulder bone. The knife in that hand drops, and I don't have the time to pick it up. I pull out my second knife and stab the automaton in the head.

I said I try to avoid it.

I take a breath, scanning the environment. There are at least twenty automatons behind me, seven in front of me. And one of the lamps across from me is projecting an entirely different variety of light.

If this was the Smoke, this would not be an issue. But this environment is made to be identical. This is the first time I have consciously noticed it, but there are others behind me that are wrong as well.

I predict I have less than five seconds to test my hypothesis. I throw my knife at the offending lamp.

Something lets out a shrill scream, and a spherical glowing bug flies from the shell of the lamp, leaking dark blue blood.

It flies over the crowd of automatons behind me, it's screams causing it's brethren to leave their shells and follow.

The automatons are closing in. I've lost both my knives and I have only one opportunity to follow the bugs.

I wait.

...

Just as they reach me, I jump forward. I land on the chest of the automaton in the right direction, and sprint over them.

As I reach the end of the wave, I land on a metallic skull with unexpected force, crushing it and throwing me off balance.

I crash to the floor, catching the blow on my right arm. It is still almost functional, as opposed to my left. My legs work fine, and so I run and hope the automatons need time to turn around.

The bugs are racing ahead, gathering in number. Their light is mildly entrancing, an effect that only gets worse as the pain from injury increases. I imagine with the amount of ash the students, and perhaps the workers, are taking, it would be easy to guide them back to their nest.

I do not have the stamina to outrun the automatons forever, and I grow weary of the bugs leading me through hallway after hallway.

As I round the latest corner, I see the bugs entering what looks to be a religious space. At my feet is the first bug I found, it's wings having finally failed. I poke at it with the base of my axe. It has no mouth.

I crush it under my boot and it says no poetry as it dies.

...

I cannot tell the practice of this space. Any religious symbols are too hard to make out with the dull pink everywhere. Even the stained glass windows are all pink glass.

I close the doors behind me, barring them with pews.

The bugs are nowhere to be seen.

I look up into the rafters, dark enough to hide most creatures I have hunted, but perhaps not a creature at least partially composed of glowing lights.

The automatons are closing in on the door.

I hear a hissing noise above me, and look up into the darkness. The bugs lighten up all at once. Time begins to blur. I drop the axe.

Something winds down the ceiling, it's back covered with brilliant light. I step closer.

In the back of my mind, I hear the clash of metal on stone.

The lights grow closer, and I watch as clear tubes shoot from the front of it into my chest. They reflect brilliantly in the light.

Perhaps something wooden breaks behind me. I pay no mind, watching red liquid head out down the tubes.

I try to step closer to the light, but my legs don't move. I can't even focus on the light now and my vision keeps flickering, denying me the majesty of the light for cruel seconds at a time.

I think this is the first time I have been happy in years.

...

A metallic fist pulls me to the ground, the sound of glassy tendrils snapping bringing me back to some semblance of reason. Me and the automaton that may have saved me are sprayed with my blood.

The automaton looks down at me with no sign of emotion, paying no attention to the creature in front of it. It is possible they cannot even detect the light it produces.

I can see the base of the axe laying near my right arm, which has seconds of strength left. I grab it and try to throw it in the right direction, unable to aim without dooming myself.

I am in a religious place. I will have to place hope in miracles.

...

The metal of the axe meets with flesh, and all the bugs scream at once, bursting my eardrums. The automatons take it worse, staggering back.

The light reflection off the automatons starts to fade away. I use the last of my strength to pull myself up. The head of the creature is a fleshy orb from which the leaking tendrils project, my axe having pierced it's hide farther down and apparently managed to hit the heart. Its snake-like body, covered in dying light, extends up into its nest in the rafters, making it possibly the largest creature I have killed. It has certainly been feeding well.

As usual, the creature uses the last of its breath to speak:

"Thine eyes gleam like the purest of silver,

Divine in their creation and judgement."

I run out of strength and fall to the ground.

Most of the automatons walk past me to inspect the creature, but two start to drag me out. It takes twenty more minutes of trying to move my limbs before I pass out.