

(had to cut an introduction for the sake of time. Info may be roughly shoved throughout the rest of the text to compensate)

"Can I at least wash?" he said, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"You can after your duties." The secret-keeper thrust her basket at him. "Take this."

It was heavier than it looked, and he staggered under the weight. "Woah, hey! What's in this?"

"Leftover food."

He paused. "Aren't you supposed to keep secrets?"

"Yes," she said, and marched off down the halls, beckoning him to follow. He did so, mind aflutter with questions.

This wasn't unusual when it came to the topic of the secret-keeper. It was a role that was gossiped about frequently, if only due to the title alone. Everyone knew *who* the secret-keeper was, but the secret in question was exactly that. Carolina was the only one, and generally kept to herself. The few acolytes who'd managed to hold a conversation longer than a minute with her couldn't squeeze out any information, but that didn't stop the rank-and-file cultists from guessing amongst themselves.

(can't think of guesses to list as examples. agony.)

He was shaken from his thoughts by Caroline clearing her throat. "Vierco, do you ever wonder why our home is the way it is?" she asked him.

As it was, he did every day, ever since he'd first walked into the Nightmother cult's manor. It never stopped growing. It was a slow growth - maybe a hall would suddenly be several strides longer one day, a door frame would receive an extra meter of radius on another - but over the course of half a year it was more than enough to see visible progress from outside.

"I assumed it was just magic," he replied, holding back the curiosity in his voice. "So are you going to tell me?"

"Not here. Not now." She didn't so much as turn around as they made the fifth hard in the past minute. Something felt off about that, but Vierco decided not to bring it up. "I will show you."

So the two continued down the winding halls of the manor. They were longer than strictly necessary for anything manor-shaped, and the halls' solution was to wind up close like intestines. The length of their trip wasn't helped by the doors everywhere. There were doors along the halls and along the walls, and Vierco had learned over the last few weeks that some of them led to nowhere at all.

Just to test, he tugged at one as they passed. Sure enough, behind it was more polished stone wall, shiny enough that he could just make out his silhouette on its surface.

“Vierco, come. Time is precious.” Carolina’s paw gripped his shoulder as she pulled him away.

Then there was one more door, one he was sure he hadn’t seen before. It was something about the corners that seemed ever so slightly smoother than

His antlers scraped the low doorframe as they passed, and he winced. He *definitely* hadn’t been here before; every other door in the manor he’d ever passed through didn’t require him to duck.

“Do brace your eyes,” said Carolina, stepping out of the way so he could see inside.

“What do you mean—” he began, and then saw.

Through the door was a great, circular room, the ceiling lost to the darkness above. Taking up the majority of the floor space was a great, open pit, and once Vierco’s eyes adjusted to the light he could make out the teeth.

There were hundreds, thousands of teeth, set into a wet, lumpy interior. They were pointed, looking sharper than any warden’s fangs, and he looked more closely he realized they were set in layered rings. The layer closest to the top, the most visible one, spun clockwise, while another row of fangs went the opposite way beneath, the one below it moving clockwise again, and so forth.

“What,” he said.

(feeding sequence introduction cut for time. Tldr: Carolina Reaper briefly exposit that this is the house’s mouth and it is their duty to feed it. It’s why the manor grows.)

He took a glance into the basket. “It’s all carrots in here,” he pointed out.

“They are unpopular,” Carolina said. “Now please, feed the house.”

“Even the green parts?” he said, giving the shoot in question a gentle tug.

“It becomes very upset if we do not give it the green parts,” she said, without the slightest change to her monotone. “It shrinks in protest for days.”

(meant to be after the feeding)

“And you are now the secret-keeper. You have joined the very few that know this house is alive.”

“And we’re supposed to never tell anyone else about it?” he asked.

She nodded. “Correct.”

“But you just told me.”

“Because exceptions exist. You are now the second secret-keeper still alive.”

Vierco tilted his head to the side. “I thought these sort of successions happened when the previous person got old, or died, or something like that.”

“I’m simply preparing for retirement,” she said, completely deadpan.

“Aren’t you younger than me?”

“Yes.” She didn’t even blink.

(ending, they separate)

There wasn’t much privacy in the cult’s dorms, so Vierco made his way down the labyrinthian halls until he found a good, empty closet and hunkered inside. Just enough light trickled through the closed door’s frame to let him see as he produced a pen and sheet of paper.

*To M,*

*I have identified a potential vulnerability in the Nightmother Cult’s base of operations. Awaiting further orders.*

—L

He folded the paper up tightly and tucked it into his vest. Then he stepped out of the closet with all the air of someone who hadn’t been writing secret letters in the dark, though the act was made pointless by the fact that there was no one outside.

And now, he thought with an inner, mental sigh, there was the trouble of getting the letter sent.

-3/29/25