

“That was good work.” Mairon murmurs, inspecting the head I’ve brought him.

“My master will pay you handsomely for this.” Placing the head to the side he approaches me again, his eye producing an almost hypnotic glow.

“We have another job for you.” My tail flicks in intrigue.

“Go on?” I prompt him, noticing the way he’s musing about something.

“There have been rumors of creatures emerging in the north, foul beasts of tar and ichor. I need you to tell me if this is true, it could mean many things for us.”

Creatures to the north?

“I can do that, yes. Although the payment for information will increase with the danger of the mission as you know and you already have a tab going.” He nods slightly, waving a hand to indicate he wants me to follow him down into the depths of the fortress.

Despite the harsh blackstone surrounding us it is as though no sound can penetrate the air, not even the click of our claws can be heard as we move.

“The silence doesn’t bother you?” I prompt, trying to get him to speak a little more as the silence is slightly unnerving.

“No. No, you get used to it eventually. It is not always like this, the guards are training in the courtyard in case the creatures move in our direction, we must always be vigilant.”

I nod, pausing behind him as he stops to push open a large door, revealing a mass of gold and jewels.

“Pick what you wish, if you can fit it in your satchel you can take it.”

I draw my eye out from my belly to view it properly, my gaze immediately drawn to an ornate obsidian dagger. I pick up, weighing the balance of it in my hands.

“I will take this.” I look to him for confirmation that I can but notice he’s not even looking at me, just checking his claws for dirt.

“Take some gold as well, you’ll need it as the place you are going is a few days’ journey on foot.”

Grabbing a handful of golden coins I put them in my bag and look around for a sheath to put the dagger in, upon finding one I quickly strap it to my side and walk back over to him.

“Quite humble you are, only taking a dagger and a few coins.”

“Too many jewels would draw attention I can’t afford to have.”

With a quiet nod he leads me back through the silent halls and back into the courtyard where the grunts of training soldiers are now audible.

“Good luck, I would hate to lose my favorite assassin.” He grins but I get the feeling he doesn’t really mean it.

Nodding, I set out. If I want to get there quickly I need to take advantage of the daylight hours. He didn’t say an exact location, only rumors so I’d have to interact with locals to be able to locate these supposed tar beasts.

I head for the dark forest, I always feel like I’m being watched there but it’s the fastest route North without complications. Slipping into the dark trees I rise to my back legs, keeping a hand on my newly acquired dagger as I follow the gnarled path often run by Mairon’s wolves. A quick check of my internal clock tells me I have a few hours before it gets too dark to continue

safely so I'll have to find a spot along the way that will be able to protect me throughout the night.

Days pass and I start to notice subtle changes in the earth under my feet, the dark forest should have ended a while ago however the trees in this area are still dark and they look almost melted, cracks in the earth increase in size the further I trek, dark ooze starting to bubble up from their depths and seep into the earth around them. I raise my crowns and broadcast into the hivemind, trying to see if there are any living wormkin in the area.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

I pause and wait a moment, frowning when I don't get a response. With a sigh I decide to keep moving. I need to find a town, perhaps there will be wormkin or at least humans there. The silence is worse than the dark forest's, not a flit of a bird or the rustle of leaves, only the bubble of that tar like substance to accompany my steps. I keep the dagger ready in case of an attack but freeze when I sense a weak murmur from the hivemind. A cccat. A cccat in danger.

Quickly I speak back to them.

"Where are you? Can you see me?"

I turn my head from side to side as I receive no response. Quickly I start to search for any semblance of life, moving in the direction I think the voice originated from. I break into a clearing where the first thing I see is a wormling, obviously stuck in the tar. I can see that it's managed to roll it's eye away from it so that the eye isn't damaged or stuck in the viscous substance. Rushing over to it I crouch down, dropping my dagger briefly to try to pull it free of whatever the hell it's stuck in.

"I gotcha, one second."

Noticing it's wrapped around a broken crown I frown slightly, how did it get that? That must've been how it was speaking to me but whose crown was it? It takes a bit of work before I'm finally able to tug it free. I pull the coins out of my satchel and quickly deposit both wormling and eye in there, hissing at the pain of picking up another wormkin's eye.

"Don't worry little guy, I'll bring you to a host."

I speak to it before forgetting it can't understand the hivemind as it doesn't have any crowns so I grab the twisted S shaped crown it was holding onto and dump that in there with it. I don't even want to know what happened to the owner of said crown but it cant have been good.

As I start to leave I hear a deep rumbling sound, one of the fissures crunching open as a large inky hand stretched out to dig its claws into the dirt. I take a few steps back and grab my dagger, quickly tucking my wormling filled satchel into a hollow in a nearby tree so it hopefully wouldn't get damaged. I watch as the creature emerges, its body finally squeezing out of the crack in the earth with a wet pop. I stare in unadulterated disgust at the thing, it's body an inky

black that would be almost beautiful if it wasn't oozing all over the place and grinning with massive jaws.

It charges towards me immediately and I jump to the side, rolling out of the way of a potentially fatal gash. Diving under it I slash upwards with my dagger, tearing into the things belly and barely being able to avoid the gush of black that spills from the wound.

Fuck what is this thing???

It turns and takes another swipe at me, not seeming to care about the wound in its belly. I hiss, my ears flattening against my head.

Can it even die??

My eye lands on a large piece of coral-like material jutting from its shoulder. I can cut that off, bring it back to Mairon as proof, and get the hell out of here. I boost off a tree to land on the creature's back, cutting at the coral with my knife and growling with frustration when it doesn't break. Quickly I spark up a flame in my hand and focus it on the coral, hoping to weaken the material. The beast screeches at the flames and thrashes around, its tail almost hitting the tree with the wormling. I need to finish this up fast.

I try cutting out the coral by digging the blade into its flesh and cutting around it, trying to pry it free as it writhes underneath me. Finally with a wet pop it flies off, rolling across the ground and spilling tar everywhere. I try to jump off before it grabs me, digging its claws into my shoulder as I narrowly miss a far more fatal blow. I rush to the tree, grabbing the satchel and the coral protrusion before sprinting away as fast as I can. I hear the beast thundering along behind me, hardly slowed by the ichor like I am. The earth trembles and I see movement in the trees a little ways away, I don't plan on sticking around long enough to learn what exactly that movement is, one monster is bad enough I don't need two on my tail.

I find a thicker grove of trees, hoping that the tight gaps will slow the creature so I can get away. Making a sharp turn I dive into a hollow under one of the sickly trees, curling up to hide as I hear the thump thump of its footsteps against the earth.

Only once I'm sure it's gone do I start moving, slowly emerging with my ears on a swivel to listen for any potential signs of its return. Carefully I head south again. I need to make it back to Mairon's fortress to warn him before the Ichor beasts reach his lands. For a moment I almost forget the wormling accompanying me.

"You okay?"

I hear its faint and wavery voice respond through the hivemind.

"Y- Yeah..."

I nod, silently slipping through the trees, it takes a full day before the trees start to show signs of health again. Loose yellow-y leaves cling to the branches and the bark is slightly more healthy despite the few gashes in the earth that still extend to this area. I make a mental note to start

looking around for a host for my new companion despite the fact that I still can't hear any birds or other forest animals besides the occasional shift of crows and vultures scavenging the dead earth for food.

I trek on despite my tiredness, pushing myself to my limits to make it to the greenery before night comes. I've already spent one too many nights out here in the territory of these monsters, returning to a safe area is my main priority right now.

Night comes and I'm still walking, having slowed down as the moon rises higher and higher. I can feel the tiredness start to seep into my bones and eventually I'm forced to stop having walked for almost three days straight, lugging around this hunk of coral, and fighting that creature. I look for a place to sleep, eventually finding a tree with branches tangled enough that I can sit up there without potentially falling out as I sleep. Clawing my way up with one hand as I drag the coral with me.

I settle myself into the mix of branches, scooting around until I find a comfortable position and carefully making sure I won't squish the wormling in my sleep or cause the coral to fall out. I wrap my tail around myself, relaxing as much as I can against the rough bark of the tree.

I'm only able to sleep a few hours before nightmares jolt me awake, gasping for air as I rest my forehead against the tree, sighing softly and trying to pull my act together long enough to start moving again.

Carefully I start my descent which happens to be significantly more difficult than climbing up as the blood(?) from the beast has made the coral slick and difficult to grasp despite digging my claws into its pores.

I drag myself onwards, jumping down the last bit and setting off on my trek. It takes me another few days before Mairon's fortress comes into view. I hear someone blow a horn as they see me emerge from the woods.

Gods above he's so dramatic.

I wait at the entrance for the massive gates to be opened, huffing in annoyance at how long it takes to even open them a smidge. Once the gap is big enough I stalk in, ignoring the guards as I pass into the courtyard, looking around to see if Mairon came out or if he's being a lazy ass and just sitting on his throne. My ears perk as I hear him yelling at some poor soul in the training section of the courtyard. I don't feel like walking another step so I simply reach out to him mentally.

"Mairon, I'm back, get your ass over here."

The yelling stops and I see him come around the corner to strut in my direction.

"You're back," He says dismissively although I can hear the glimmer of concern in his voice upon seeing my wounds.

"There are fucking massive creatures up there, like *massive* massive. I wish I was joking. They're made from this tar-like substance I've never seen before. I managed to rip out a chunk of one so it can be studied." I hold out the coral and flesh combo and give him a blank look as his mouth crinkles in disgust.

“Ah. Follow me.” He starts walking towards the entrance of the main building, the blackstone walls swallowing us as we enter. I choose not to mention the wormling I’d acquired as I wasn’t sure what he would do to it. He leads me into an area I haven’t seen before, it appears to be some kind of forge area with burning hot furnaces, various metals, and handcrafted weaponry along the walls.

“You may place it here and then go. I will study it further and perhaps I will share my findings with you seeing as you did procure this for me at the risk of your life.” Mairon muses, gesturing vaguely to a mostly empty table.

I give him a deadpan look at that comment. If he’s made me do all that and actually refused to tell me what the hell it was I might actually throw a fit.

“You fucking better.” I huff, my tail lashing briefly.

“Now, now, don’t get your crowns in a twist.” He grins, baring sharp black teeth.

“Helkaraske will lead you to the exit.” Mairon waves me off dismissively as he starts to examine this new material.

I give him a slight nod and look towards the doorway of the forge where a large white crook waits to lead me out. Following it through the halls quietly I focus on the wormling again, carefully checking to make sure it was still alive. I really do need to find it a host, I can’t carry it around forever as it’s taking up valuable space in my bag.

Valuable space I get the feeling I’ll need entirely too soon.