

"I don't KNOW what it was! All I know is it came from the portal!" Cake yelled as she charged toward the Circus's tent. Remnants of Ichor infected the grounds from the shotgun blast after the shotgun blast to the beast's head. Her arm was covered in it, held out to drip the black ooze that threatened their lives and the dirt beneath their feet.

Nocturne followed close behind her, having nearly lost his life to the beast that had come from the only portal they had left that returned to Skire. With it came the earthquakes, shaking Earth's ground sure to have alerted anyone in the area of the strange happenings. As long as no one knew about the beasts, things would be fine.

"We need to get rid of the portal." Cake breathed, tossing the empty shotgun onto the table where everyone had gathered. Since the moment it had begun all that had been on the Circus grounds had come to the makeshift kitchen. Midge huddled against Loca, gripping her arms with her legs against her chest, fear painting her face as she jumped from the bang of the shotgun hitting the hardwood.

"What good will that do? There's more of these portals out there around Earth and I don't think everyone knows what's going on like we do." Loca objected, his arm wrapped around Midge to bring her what little comfort he could as Cake paced. Walking back and forth, riddled with thoughts that grew the flames around her neck further.

"I don't know!" She yelled, running her hands through her hair as she circled the front of the group. All faces she knew well and had grown to be her family but one was missing. The largest face in the group. Dropping her arms to her side she breathed, "Where's Athen?"

"He left the moment the earthquakes started, we don't know where he went but..." Loca glanced at Nocturne who looked as traumatized as one would expect from someone nearly crushed by an unknown beast. She could pity him if not for them all being in danger, he was sure it wasn't the last they'd see.

"Fuck- I'm gonna go-" Before Cake could finish her sentence the earth beneath them once again shook. Knocking Cake to the floor and the chair falling. The tent wouldn't endure such turmoil much longer, it wasn't built to withstand damage like this and if they didn't get it taken care of soon it would all come down on them.

"God- Get to the Portal!" Cake demanded, trying to climb to her feet despite the rumbling that raked the continent but as fast as it had begun it had ended. The group fell silent as if waiting for more; Cake sat on her floor on her hands and knees. Her chest heaved as her mind tried to catch up with her.

The flourish of the tent door opening dragged her back into reality as Athen walked in. At his side he held a sword, his long hair tied in a braided bun as he looked upon the group before him. The Circus had already taken enough damage as it was and the grounds had suffered greatly from fissures escaping from the portal.

"Where the hell have you been?" Cake asked as calmly as she could despite the venom that dripped from her words. Climbing to her feet she dusted herself off but Athen seemed unphased.

"I'm going to Skire." Was all he said as he walked past the group. His wings were tucked tightly against his back walking through the turmoil of the damaged tent towards the back where the fight of Cake and Nocturne's life had just taken place.

"The fuck you are!? Monsters are coming through and I will be DAMNED If one of my friends gets hurt!" Cake objected as she followed suit but Athen never even turned to look at her as he walked with determination and vigor. Pushing aside the ichor-covered tent flaps and out into the cracked courtyard. The remains of the destroyed ichor beast lie in its circle, the ichor that had come from it writhing with life and trying with desperation to get back to its host. Or at least what was left of it.

"This isn't a debate Cake, I'm going. People are in need and I can help." There was no arguing with a man of his size and knowledge. He'd been blessed with wings to stay off the ground and Cake knew that. He was built for a chance like this and for a man who'd been waiting for his chance of redemption who was she to tell him no?

Cake's ears drooped and the hardened expression she wore softened to that of concern; unrelenting she followed him to the portal. The earth around it was demolished with pieces jutting out sinking the portal into it at an angle. Never in her years had she seen something like this but it was bound to happen one day. Bound to destroy the continent they called home at one point but worst of all, the planet that had birthed them.

"Just- Be careful, please? Don't die or do anything stupid, okay?" Cake wasn't sure what to even think. What to say to someone far older than she was and had been through more. He was a gladiator longer than she had been and served in a war alongside her. Now he was going to serve the very home she had abandoned.

"Destroy the portal once I'm through and don't fix it until I return."

"But how will you-"

Athen placed his hand on Cake's shoulder giving it a firm squeeze forcing her to look up at him. An overbearing silence fell between them as they simply stared at one another for a long few seconds before Athen turned. Placing his hand on the rings of the portal with a foot placed on its edge. Only for a moment, he glanced back at Cake. To the Circus where so many had grown to need him or call on him. Not quite friends but damn if he didn't love returning to the same faces that sought him out.

To the place, he called home before stepping through the portal for the last time.

What Athen had expected was not what he had been faced with emerging from the portal that clung to its floating land mass by vines stuck to the trees deep-rooted in the earth. Eeridi had fallen apart and from the distance that the tall cccat stood, he could see it. The

slow-moving beast crawled like a sloth from the crevice it had broken through. The inky black that poured from it slowed the oceans and rivers that once traveled through the lands now flooding what city skapes hadn't drifting off from their original spot on the planet.

Looking over the lands he could see groups that had huddled together, many running from more ichor beasts while others clung to floating masses far from the ichor that infected everything it touched. He'd only ever come back to Eeridi for work but even though he still loved it. He still cared deeply for it in his heart and alongside it the people that lived on it.

"HELP!! GET OFF ME!!" A pleading scream snapped the man from his thoughts and quickly his attention was brought back to the ground below. The black sludge moved with life but it wasn't in a normal way. It was as if Eeridians had been taken over, crawling from the sludge that covered their entire bodies as they grabbed at the small pod.

Clawing at their legs trying to drag them into the darkness with them as the grey and green pod grabbed at anything they could. It took little time for Athen to spring into action. Before he even knew it he was running toward the island edge, his fire-tipped wings spreading in anticipation for take off as he dived off towards the assailants. Grabbing his sword hilt he swung it from its sheath with a swift movement. Bringing the blade's tip hard into the black blob that screamed in an unholy wail upon impact. Its body went limp and its hand loosened around the pod's leg leaving behind an oily handprint in its wake.

The pod's chest heaved as he crawled back, rolling onto their butt with shaking hands that barely held them up. Looked up at the tall fiery Skire as he pulled his sword from the assailant to resheath it. Slowly Athen turned to him, his face hard and unchanging from the moment he had arrived to where he stood now. Unphased by the chaos around them he walked to the pod and stuck a hand out.

"I'm Athen, are you alright?" He asked, the pod glancing from his face to his hand before taking it carefully.

"I-I'm Kal. Thank you for saving me I- I thought I was a goner." Kal stammered, his breathing still shaky as the black mass once again began to stir back to life. Begging hands weakly at the floor before it fully came back to life.

"Come with me, let me help you," Athen spoke, not waiting for his permission to be grabbed before he was scooped up in his arms. Large reddish-orange wings spread once more to take off towards the higher land masses that drifted far from the black death below. The small pod could only cling to the dark feathers of the cccat as he was lifted to an island that drifted aimlessly among the others.

Athen didn't know what else he could do but airlift people from the turmoil beneath them. He wasn't sure what he could do seeing as whatever those creatures were they weren't going down without a fight. They still writhed with life, screamed for help in broken words that vaguely sounded like Skire's caught in the ocean of Ichor. They were people once. They were just like him and Kal before but now? He didn't know.

Placing Kal upon the floating earth the small pod quickly collapsed as soon as their feet touched the solid ground. Unable to hold themselves up anxiety racked their body and the fear that painted their face only set in more as tears formed in his eyes. "You'll be safer here," Athen spoke as stood over him, his wing outstretched over him as if his way of indirect comfort though he knew it would mean nothing.

"I-I... It's..." The words fumbled from Kal as he stared at the grass beneath him that once was part of a vast forest. Now stagnant from no winds that blew from the atmosphere being destroyed.

There was nothing Athen could do to help him now. All he could do was bring him to safety and that's what he had accomplished. He had more to worry about, more Skire's that needed help and as much as he wished he could stay he looked back out on the world beyond. Or at least what was left of it. An ear-piercing roar erupted from the beast in the distance that shook what was left around it. No one was safe from its call of danger but it would not stop the bird.

Walking back to the edge he only looked back at Kal once. Crumpled to the floor in tears and shaking likely hurting from the ichor that clung to his armored body like an infected cut. He couldn't do anything now but he would return. He promised that to himself he would. When all of this was over he'd come back to check on all those that he helped to be sure they survived. He wouldn't wish any of them to end up like the others.

Creeping to the crusted edge, his wings opened once more, hands ready at his sword as he took in a shaken breath. As much as he held himself stoic his host's original heart pounded in his chest. His knees felt weak and his hope was all but gone. He didn't expect the world to come back from this. He didn't expect his birthplace to come back from this but Everything be damned if he would let anyone fall on his watch.