

The new normal took acclimating to daily hunting parties to seek out resources, helmed by Mithras, whose experience was second to none even though the chaining methods he'd perfected in Banishment were no longer necessary. He'd take his volunteers, would scour the wreckages for hours and would return with carts full of pilfered food, cardboard boxes, cans, bottles, and first aid kits.

Those who could have fled to better stocked refugee camps did so — mostly the wealthy and affluent — to fill the vaulted ceilings of Stonewing and look down from their unmolested towers. Fever was silent, having no one to help dig them out of the rubble, and Key didn't have much more than that.

The destroyed houses were either retooled into flimsy shelters for families to huddle down in, or devoured by Skireans that could stomach gnawing on rotten wood and plaster. Electricity did eventually return, but with few stable buildings, topside, it was just a dim reminder of a life that had divorced them in no uncertain terms.

The tiny tilt had been fixed to no accolades, gas leaks had been repaired after a series of fireballs cascaded over the remaining pillars of community, and water returned to broken pipes, flooding basements and spilling out into the streets like gushing sores, rivers of toxic gunk flowing into the cracks and restarting the daisy chain of deconstruction.

New Paths persisted, a stubborn thorn in the side of the apocalypse, ripe for pillaging by new bands of brigands. Some had taken to referring to it as a fortress, some as an internment camp, some as a beacon of what their exile had wrought. None were more terse than the closest neighbors, who huddled around the sturdy wall, now accustomed to the hum of electricity that weaved between the haunting metal struts and smooth surfaces.

While the blanket of guilt and shame had settled over them, they had not tried to surge into the holes that opened like gaping mouths when the search parties departed like soldiers in an army, led by their general, who never once looked down upon them.

Mithras, the general, stayed his course, and only became violent if the soldiers were harrassed. New refugees that joined the tent city were often run off before they could cause a fuss, as Idris, the lord of this domain, Lady of the Lake, had sometimes spared resources due in part to negotiations.

Information was valuable, and often meant that the residents of the tent city could charge their devices, connecting those outside of the greater hivemind's influence to their loved ones. There were many nights where heaters could warm human families, and missing people were reported found and safe, thanks to the lifeline that could only be accessed if the Lady of the Lake approved it.

Grumbling was discouraged, and stories surfaced of the living storm that showed mercy even though there was little reason to. And, for that, the people were thankful. Thankful that even though rumors had spread that the Lady of the Lake had thought of them as food, she had not demanded her army purge the lands of the greedy and intolerant.

Blessed be.

The air grew crisp in the following months after the emergence of an ichor titan on the horizon. The thing was a mountain of sludge that rolled over the land in turbulent steps, washing away any signs of life and civilization as it spewed hordes of ichor beasts like an unholy cleanse of corpulence. Millions died or fell into the cracks left in the titan's wake, assumed dead by the cynical and missing by the foolish.

The skies were a constant cloud of burgundy darkness, peppered by flashes of orange and red as militant forces failed to stop the restless godshed from drowning the lands. Ash polluted the atmosphere, the withered remains of plant life made into a choking concoction that razed Human and Gravent populations. A poison so toxic that not even wormlings sprang from the corpse piles.

Within the walls of New Paths, however, when the sun did peek through the smog, times, while not good, were tolerable. The garden had grown to quite a large size, with a litany of nature casters constantly monitoring the soil quality and springing forth grains, vegetables, fruits, and trees. Food was abundant, and consumed in large quantities, with the little bit of surplus handed out into the tent city beyond the walls.

In an effort to bring about some sense of normalcy, Taiga had suggested that they hold a little unofficial harvest festival within the yard, with costumes, parades, and a feast. One that could possibly be shared with those outside, though she had pointedly not begged for it.

"It would boost morale," Taiga suggested.

"How do you figure?" Idris replied, her hands folded against her stomach.

It had become a yawning portal since the walls went up, and she was used to it despite her general spike in aggression. **With her constant discharging electricity, it seemed no amount of food would fill her.** It would burn up in the steel, and plague her every waking thought. Invade her dreams and leave her mouth a sopping pool of desire, **evaporating as her warring magic spilled out of her.**

"Whether you like to admit it or not, there has been a new norm established," Taiga said. "They keep raiders away, and you keep them warm and some of them fed, and definitely in contact with their loved ones. It's taking its toll and we are supposed to be doing our best by them."

"I do not care about *them*," Idris hissed. "Simping parasites that they are. They will do everything they can to remove me as soon as *they* have rebuilt *their* world. And then they will forget why they lived long enough to see it."

"You don't know that."

Idris blinked. Taiga was a fair bit shorter than her when she wore her prosthetics, which had been tuned up since Wrench and Cheese Melt had made their way. The thing about Taiga was that despite her deeply entrenched fear of Idris's territorial attitude, she still made sure that the organization ran as smoothly as it could.

All the paperwork was taken care of. Every single person who performed a job was accounted for, and was treated with the respect that they deserved. She carried out Idris's whims as best as she could, and her diplomacy knew no bounds. She could get anyone to agree to anything.

Within reason.

"I will not let them in," Idris said in a way that Taiga knew better than to push against.

"Then let us go out," Taiga replied. "Mithras will make sure ours are protected if you let him."

"He does not want this either."

"You and I both know that what he wants doesn't matter. He will do what you say. It will be good for the younglings." Taiga straightened, not breaking her eye contact for a second. "And they are the priority."

Idris shifted in place. During the day, she could step away from the wall for long enough to have private conversations, but she loathed being away from her perimeter. Her enemies were crafty and quick, and the CCCats who stayed outside would always broadcast when the wall was safe to touch. They couldn't help it.

"Nobody leaves," Idris growled. "But we may have our party." There was a long pause and Taiga feared that she would immediately recant. "You are right, it will be good for them."

Within hours of her decision, the word had spread across the New Paths property, and the youngest of the younglings gathered together to scour the house for articles of clothing that could pass for costumes. Most of what had been deemed unnecessary had been eaten in the beginning when times were lean and the nourishing food had to be reserved for Human consumption.

They were not really that ideal for much of anything, but ripped and ratty tights had been repurposed into ghostly wisps, and blazers and button ups had been turned into recreations of "normal" jobs.

Like office worker and mail delivery person. One youngling had dressed as a door man, which constituted a sweater stained from some mysterious substance with hastily drawn black rectangles painted on it from old cans of exterior paint. Ludus, naturally, had a closet full of costumes from his years as a streamer, and was more than happy to share so long as it was taken care of and returned in proper condition, a rule Worm Money had instated.

When they were a gaggle of poorly (or not so poorly) dressed creatures, people, occupations, and characters, Worm Money set out a table and organized a series of simple party games with the help of the nature casters growing a plethora of gourds to play with. Most of them were eaten by biters, who chewed like crazy.

Outdoor ovens were constructed with earth magic, fueled by fire magic, and those with culinary ability made all manner of dishes for a feast. All vegetarian. Meat hadn't been an option in months.

Idris, however, kept mostly to herself, her watchful eyes waiting for danger. Mithras stood near her, also attentive.

"[I feel like this is a mistake,]" she said. Despite knowing that the only other Crook that could understand them — Hacksaw — was preoccupied with Ludus's insistence on having fun, she still spoke with a low voice. "[I know this is a mistake.]"

Mithras placed a hand on the wall. While he could not see beyond it, he could tell when there was unusual activity through a series of underground rods that branched out under the soil. His awareness had been fine tuned through necessity, and Banishment had trained him well in identifying threats.

New Paths was stifling, though he would not stop Idris from doing what she desired. There was a part of him that could feel it creeping up in him as well. Old habits were hard to break.

"[Say the word and you will be fed,]" he whispered. "[As much as you like.]"

"[Bad for morale.]"

"[Whose morale?]" He paused, working his thoughts over with steely eyes. Agitation on the edge of his tongue. It stung through his palm. "[They need not see what you don't need them to see.]"

"[Embly would be disappointed.]"

"[With all due respect, Embly does not know the full breadth of what we are.]"

They left it at that. Mithras had made his offer, and slunk off when younglings came to pester him about marching in their little parade, knowing that he would not dress up even if they all begged at the same time.

Idris felt her patience dissolving through her fingers, the ache of near starvation on her mind again. The wall went unelectrified as the younglings played with what little they had, and she felt pangs of pride well in her. Despite every possible thing in the universe trying to drag her back into the depths, for at least one more day, she was going to stick to the first of Skire's words spoken to her.

When she was encouraged to participate, she declined the first time, spying the presence of her first lifer coming from the shadows to observe with distilled interest. They were similarly dressed up using whatever was available, and appeared to be some kind of animal. Maybe a bird.

The second time her younglings came to invite her, she let that fierceness leave her, making way for a form of Idris that was much more aligned with the one that had fished wormlings out of gutters to give them a home. She was provided with a series of painted cardboard petals that hung around her thick neck like a limp wreath.

A beautiful flower, and master of the garden, to which many of the younglings squealed with joy alongside their new friends. Friends of all species, forged in the furnace of adversity. Bonded by shared interest and mutual connection.

This was what she had set out to do in the first place, and that sinking feeling of the world very and truly being over ebbed away for the first time in months. Tension eased out of her like a slowly deflating balloon, making a racket between her ears, but it was worth it.

This was worth it.