

The lab was dark.

Cold nipped at Heron's already fluffed up down feathers, chasing away any warmth which may have come from the greenhouse from which they had descended. Each step caused their claws to click over freezing concrete in a monotonous rhythm, the sound echoed and bounced off the walls like an omen of what was to come. In their nervousness they clamped their jaws shut around the edge of the shell they held, securing it in place.

Golden eyes scanned the dilapidated walls, what was once pristine had become cracked and ruined with age. Through the cracks; stone and earth broke through and invaded an environment which had once been sterile. Mother nature taking back the building which had once kept her from her creatures was a gratifying sight, yet not nearly as comforting as Heron would have hoped it would have been. Because danger still lurked around the corners of this ancient place, the scent of blood and decay still clung to the walls as if the previous inhabitants had never left.

And perhaps they hadn't. The chick paused in their walk, claws becoming abruptly silent as they scanned the looming doorway before them. It was a large entryway that led into deep inky darkness which remained undisturbed aside from the-

Heron froze as her blood turned to ice and her breath caught at the horrifying sight before her.

Amber eyes blinked back at the suchomimus chick from the writhing inky darkness. Then there was movement, a great lurching movement as the beast lumbered from the cold oppressing darkness of the pathway that would lead down into the depths. Heron scrambled back to give the massive acrocanthosaurus space to step out into the dim light of the hall. The light made them no less terrifying. The young adult was truly massive, larger than even her own father, with brown and orange markings layered over beige scales. All of it was accented by the scars which dotted their muscular form. As Heron's eyes moved over the massive shape of the acrocanthosaurus... She noticed a tag attached to their leg.

F-23

"What are you doing down here?" Any thoughts that had started forming were quickly interrupted by the rumbling voice of the now dubbed, F-23. Their eyes never once left Heron's form, though they did flicker curiously to the shell that Heron had been holding onto. In truth, the force with which they had been holding the shell had been causing their jaw to ache so they carefully lowered it onto the cold concrete.

"I want to.. Uhm. Explore further down." Heron answered, uncertainty and fear causing their voice to quiver. In response F-23 tilted their large head slightly then lowered their muzzle to sniff at her sea salt crusted down feathers then to sniff the shell in curiosity. In comparison to this massive carnivore, she felt like a small hatchling all over again. Weak and helpless in the face of what could be an enormous threat... She should have just stayed with her siblings in the bask.

"You smell strange." They spoke to her as they slowly stood to their full height once more, amber eyes alight with wary curiosity. Heron watched, slowly swallowing her fear as she

attempted to speak once more. She inhaled slowly and attempted to push the fear from both her posture and voice then began again.

"It's from the ocean. Ya know, the beach?" The young suchomimus attempted to explain, but was met with a confusingly blank look from F-23. Then it struck her, the earthquakes had opened the lab. The inhabitants had never left... Despite the fear, sympathy and determination welled up in her chest as she looked up at the massive carnivore. She would just have to show them what they were missing.

Heron used one of her legs to nudge the shell closer to F-23, trying to ignore the small flinch that they had made before relaxing ever so slightly to inspect the shell.

"That's a shell! It comes from the ocean, which is. Hm. Like, a big body of salty water! Very nasty, don't drink it. Anyways. Little creatures live in these shells," as Heron spoke they used a careful claw to shift the shell over to reveal the opening where a small critter could crawl inside. "They use the shells to protect themselves from predators. But they can't stay there forever."

"Why not?" The interruption was unexpected but not unwelcome, and when Heron looked back up at F-23 she was surprised to find they had settled down. Their large body laid upon the cold concrete, small arms tucked close to themselves and amber eyes locked onto Heron with rapt attention. She paused as she took in the sight, it reminded her so much of a hatchling eagerly awaiting a story from an elder... How much had they missed while being locked down here?

"Because they get big!" The chick answered with an excited smile, glad to finally have an outlet to share all she had observed while with her father and bask even when she should have been staying with the rest of her clutch. "As they get older they get too big for their shell so they leave it behind in search of another." She informed F-23 with a wide grin which showed off each of her pale teeth. The chick took in a deep breath before continuing to speak, "Then the shell is left empty! Either another creature uses it as home or its collected by dinosaurs like me who find them very pretty."

"Can you eat it?" F-23 questioned, using their large muzzle to nudge the shell and causing it to click softly over the concrete due to the movement. Heron couldn't get over the curiosity and awe which had quickly consumed this intimidating figure. Perhaps they weren't so bad...

"I wouldn't. I tried once when I saw a hatchling-"

"You are not a hatchling?" F-23 inquired with a look of confusion in their warm amber eyes and Heron paused in response before puffing up their soft downy feathers in offense to the question.

"No! I'm not a baby!" The chick hissed in response, feathers fluffed out to make them look larger to the massive acrocanthosaurus. But F-23 only seemed amused by Heron's offense.

"Continue your tales, little one." They rumbled to Heron, huffing in amusement as the chick's feathers slowly smoothed back down into soft regal looking down.

Heron stared for a moment before rolling her eyes and continuing, "You can't eat a shell unless your jaws are strong enough to crush it, and even then... I heard that it tastes nasty." She huffed as her tail flicked back and forth, "But those aren't the only things in the ocean! There are big things too! Like sharks, a shark swam by me once and it was sooo scary! Sharks are so big, I would have been just a little snack for them!" She squeaked as her feathers once again fluffed out, all the while F-23 listened attentively.

After what felt like hours of Heron talking until her throat started to feel dry, F-23 moved. The acrocanthosaurus slowly rose to stand and look down at the chick from their now full height, "Are you sure you wish to pass? To descend into the depths and into danger?" They asked her, eyes serious and melancholy. It made them look so much older than they were, as if they had seen far more darkness down here than Heron had witnessed in her short lifetime above ground.

Heron hesitated before answering, a sense of foreboding rising in her chest even as she tried to push it down. The truth was, she wasn't sure. Yet something kept driving her forward, whether that be curiosity or stubbornness she genuinely could not tell. All she knew was that she *had* to keep moving forward, she had to know what lay beyond what the gatekeepers. Heron steeled herself and looked up, meeting F-23's eyes with determination. Yet the soft melancholy never left the gaze of the older carnivore.

"Be careful, and stick to the darkness. You are small and your shadowy coat will keep you hidden. Consider me allowing you to pass a thank you for helping me, for giving me the courage to investigate what lay beyond the lab... Thank you for reigniting my curiosity, I had thought it had long since left me once I had grown." Their voice was soft and low, faintly rumbling in their chest as their muzzle dipped down to brush along their feathered back. A gesture done with such gentleness that it almost feel as if they had been constructed from glass.

After a moment, Heron spoke once more. "If you leave... When you leave, you should go to the beach first. There are some really nice sunning rocks there." She smiled, trying to hide her own unease and uncertainty before pausing as if realizing something. "Sunning means to basically lay in the sun. It's... Nice."