

It happened in spring.

Apt, considering the season was strongly associated with the birth of new things.

They were monsters, ravenous and destructive, and born from a realm hated by the gods. Frighteningly massive and full of sharp teeth, these monsters spread across Skire like a blanket of locusts, chewing through everything that stood in their way.

In Uto, this upheaval brought nothing but chaos to all the residents, including the crooks, who hadn't been understood as people yet. Still monsters, who tore everything apart and devoured cccats and humans whole. For now, the gravents were safe, for they could fly and crooks could not.

Greg formed in a dump patrolled by an enormous crook with lightning bleeding from its face and neck. It lumbered along on four arms serving as legs, for its true legs ended in scabbing, scarred stumps that bled on occasion.

Surrounded by new plant growth, Greg sat up from his hovel of garbage, white stringy hair stained an off putting dirty grey at the ends, as if he were a rug rolled through swampy puddles of mysterious fluids. Three bulbous yellow eyes void of pupils took in the myriad of sights, sounds, and smells.

He watched as the monster spoke an alien language to a cccat that fled in terror. It sounded sad to Greg, and he wheezed to make himself known.

The monster rounded on him, scrambling over to take his long curtains of hair in its hands. Still it spoke in a language Greg did not understand, but the pleading in its eyes was clear as day.

Please stay.

Greg saw no reason to leave. A fervent whispering tickled his long ears, dangling black cords of tufted fur, telling him to be useful to this monster. This monster would not hurt him, no matter what. Only he could understand it now.

So Greg peered forward, past the monster as it was to see that it was also a Crook. And one day, her name would be Idris, and she loved him very much. Him and another, but the other wasn't here yet.

When he searched for the other, he saw a pampered pet with luxurious fur and a beautiful collar around its neck, perched on a sturdy tree, raking claws into rope and chewing on toys with feathers and leather attached to a stuffed body.

"Greg is going to stay," he said to the monster. Idris. He said to Idris.

Idris didn't understand him either, but she at the very least showed him to a little shelter made of old wooden crates stacked next to a dumpster with a frayed tarp serving as a roof. Greg sniffed around, arching his long neck so he could sweep the whole area in one motion. Idris seemed satisfied by this, and when Greg curled himself up small enough to fit, she made approving noises with her throat.

She often petted him and cleaned his fur with water from her pool, which was just a giant gaping hole in the ground filled with rain water. Greg let her do whatever she wanted, and only rebuked her when she got aggressive.

It happened often, and he saw the change in her eyes. The half lidded norm was someone else, the Idris, he supposed. The wild eyes, open and darting, was a completely different being, the monster.

One that Greg knew could be reigned in if he stared for long enough. He could hear the monster's name but could not replicate the sound yet. He would search for it more another time. When he was less tired.

During spring, it often rained. Greg sat under the tarp when it did at Idris's request. **She did not want him to get hurt, and she pressed the tacky plasma of her electrical magic down to illustrate the danger. In the rain, the magic spread farther and faster, and would hurt him.** She chuffed a lot at him during the rainy days.

"Greg is patient," he said. "Greg understands."

He enjoyed the rain well enough. Liked listening to the constant hiss and the way it would bounce off the tarp and drip over the edge. He caught the raindrops with the dexterous hand on the end of his short, whip-like tail and sometimes held open containers out to gather cleaner water. It would be easier for Idris to groom him if she had clean water.

Sometimes, intruders would appear along the edge of Idris's territory, and when it wasn't raining, Greg would plod along on all fours, with his hand-tail grasping a stick to ward the intruders away. He didn't like to see

Idris get hurt, and intruders weren't always lost. Sometimes, they came looking for a fight, and Greg knew they would lose.

"Greg thinks you should leave," he said. This intruder was a cccat with a badge and a gun. Scared and inexperienced, coming to answer a report about a monster living in an overgrown dump.

"I'm here on order from the 51st Precinct," they said, flashing their badge. "You the monster?"

Greg held up his useless paws, the pale yellow claws retracted, and the officer visibly relaxed. "Greg is a hermit living in an old tarp. Sometimes he makes scary noises."

The cccat didn't buy it for a second, and eyed him up and down with a glassy red sphere slotted into his mouth. They swallowed the eye. "I don't hear any complaints about you. I'm talking about the monster that shrieks."

"It is not here," Greg said. "Greg thinks it has left this place. Greg has not seen a monster. Maybe the information is incorrect."

The cccat's crowns twitched and the brown quills along Greg's cluster eyes twitched as well. The cccat curled its lips in disgust, confusing the cluster eyes for a real line of cockroaches.

"Well, I'm going to have to take a look around anyway."

Greg's hearts pounded. Idris would surely eat this cccat and lure more trouble if they set foot in the dump. He couldn't bear the idea. He saw what the Central Intelligence Bureau was capable of. Mechs and weapons the likes of which hadn't been used on people before.

"Greg knows you are scared." He dropped to all fours and shuffled closer. Most of the entrance points to the dump were covered in thick blankets of dirt and newly sprouting grass. "Greg thinks you know that these are people. The monsters. The greater hivemind tells you that it is monsters. But it is just peoples."

The cccat blinked at him. "You don't act like those other ones."

"Greg is a crook. But Greg is not a monster," he explained. "He is just like you. Different, but coming from same wormling. There are many wormlings here."

Another curled lip of disgust. Greg let the cccat take a few steps closer to the dump and a slimy wormling crawled out from under the

bushes, the glassy eye peering up at them with interest. This seemed to be enough to drive the cccat away.

"Oh, disgusting," they said. "Look, if you'll just keep it down then let's call it at that. I don't know what you freaks are up to, but hanging out with wormlings is some freak shit."

"Greg will remember."

The cccat, unnerved by that response, retreated. Greg dropped the stick and picked up the wormling with his hand tail, being sure to gather the eye up as well. The squirming body made his skin crawl, but he'd grown used to the feeling. Idris gathered every wormling she could find and kept them safe.

Offered them hosts when she had them, and showed them colorful pieces of trash to inspire them. Greg didn't understand why this was her Calling, only understood that this was how she was meant to perform her duty as a Crook.

The cccats that formed left immediately, often with upturned noses or alarmed disgust. And each time it happened, Idris would mourn them. Greg took to comforting her by draping himself on her huge scaly body and purring.

On one beautiful day, Greg called Idris over. When she slid towards him, he took one of her hands and pulled her over to the tarp, where a sizable nest of shredded paper sat in an old crate, chock full of wriggling pink beans. Rats, dozens of them.

"These are Greg's friends," Greg explained. "Some of them will die, and Greg will give them to you for wormlings."

"Wormlings," Idris said.

Greg squeezed her hand tighter. "Greg will do this and the Old One will be happy, he thinks."

"Wormlings," Idris said, more seriously this time. "Cats."

"Greg thinks they will not always be cats." He let go of Idris's hand and pointed to himself. "Greg is not a cat. Greg is a crook."

"Crook."

Greg nodded. "Greg is a crook. Old One is also a crook."

Idris muttered for a long time in her alien language. Greg stroked her cheek with his hand. He couldn't imagine what it was like to not be able to

express himself. Skire had designed him to be able to do that from the moment of formation, and whenever he tried to look at where Idris had come from, his eyes did not work the same.

Only ever forward.

"Greg thinks Old One is getting better," he said, reassuring. "Old One has learned many new words. Old One will learn many more."

"Yes," Idris replied, turning and going to her pool. "Greg. Yes, Greg." He was satisfied with that.

Idris disappeared into the water, the overflow sloshing against the makeshift wall to protect the tarp from excess water. Greg returned to tending to his rat box. The two parents were a pair of wild rats that he trained with food and sharing his shelter, Pidge and Gideon. Hideously diseased things with milky blind eyes and kinky tails that were always intertwined.

They responded well to him, and would nestle in his hair during the night, curling their tails with his tendrils, likely because they were remarkably similar in size and texture. Greg knew that they would die of disease very soon, and he would present them to Idris to be hosts, and he would hope that they would be crooks so he could tell them where they came from.

Alas, as the pink jellybeans grew fur and opened milky eyes and twined their bald tails, Pidge and Gideon did, indeed, die of disease. He found them elsewhere among the garbage heaps, food clutched in their teeth.

He presented them to Idris, who mourned with him, and coaxed wormlings to take them as hosts. Both ended up being cccats, and Greg offered to tell them where they came from, but neither were interested.

The rat box, once no longer needed for nesting material, became a place for the fully grown rats to sleep and play. Greg took great care to use what he could find to make things for them to chew on and hang from. Buried them in freshly shredded newspaper and cotton, and gave them enough food scorned from the endless piles.

At some point, he wondered if the residents of the greater city knew how much they were throwing away, and why they chose to dump it here.

He supposed it didn't matter if all his Pidges and Gideons could have toys to play with.

On another sunny day, while he was playing with his rat empire, Greg heard Idris's bellow. Alarme, Greg dropped the little tuna can full of breadcrumbs and scrambled after the sound, leaving the rats to enjoy a bountiful feast.

He found Idris just outside of her territory, squatting over a lump of creamy fur, a beautiful sparkling collar around its limp neck. It was covered in blood, clearly ravaged by a wild animal looking for a meal.

He recognized it. The pampered pet. Poor thing.

"Is Old One going to take this?"

Idris blinked at it. She'd ever seen such beautiful fur. So soft and silky despite the blood and the gaping wounds. "Special. Soft. Good for wormling."

Greg wheezed, this was the other one that she would love. "Greg has clean water. Lots of it. Old One should take it. Make it clean. A wormling will come. It will stay."

That was enough for Idris to be tender.

It will stay.