

Those Underfoot

Scampering through the street between towering people, a Kobold weaved her way hurriedly through the crowd. Jostling after her came human guards brandishing swords and shouting curses. Daring a panicked peek over her shoulder at her pursuers, Kem ducked into the next alleyway, throwing herself into the cramped space between stone wall and abandoned crates. Dragging her tail in harshly, Kem clamped her claws around her snout. The heavy footsteps of the guards paused at the alley entrance, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Closer, and closer...

But the hiding place protected her once more. With ominous mutters, the footsteps receded. When she could stand it no longer, Kem wriggled back out of the pile. Glancing around quickly to ensure the coast was clear, Kem approached a large wooden door. As she anxiously reached up and rapped a short sequence on the unremarkable door, Kem fingered her growing horns in thought. The muted clack of an almost invisible slit opening in the door snapped her from this reverie.

Quietly, on well-maintained hinges, the door swung open. Kem slipped into the room beyond with a final furtive glance back. She felt the relative safety of The Den ease her tense muscles, before she dashed onwards through the rugged hole in the floor.

"You were chased again? Why do you keep volunteering for surface missions? One of these days, you're going to be caught." Grimmnr grumbled along next to Kem as they checked her over for injuries.

"Do you want to end up like Rimic? 'Cause I'm not telling Akko if you get your skull stomped in." Kem winced at the blunt reminder of the danger constantly hanging over them.

"I'm fine, come on, we'll be late for the announcement." She hurried off through the tunnels, Grimmnr trailing after her with pointed mutters about headstrong fools.

Kem strode into the cavernous cave known as the Great Hall, already packed with the rest of the tribe. Raising his staff for quiet, the Allwatcher spoke.

"My kin, for as long as even I can remember, we have been downtrodden. While the Hookclaws and Sewer Dragons flourish, Antoria's grip suffocates us.

But no longer. A group calling itself the Dragon's Voice has risen to help us. Their leader wishes to spread knowledge of our people, and stop the persecution" The Allwatcher paused, the stunned silence of the crowd palpable. Kem felt the crushing weight of fear, one that had controlled her so long she'd forgotten life without it, finally beginning to ease.

"The human lord, Witton, wants a future of peace. Where we trade freely and prosper. Our new ally has already begun. He has adopted one of our sisters as his daughter to protect her from the guards.

Our new lives have just begun!"

The tunnels resonated with the mood, the chanting song that echoed from the miners swelling with a new strength. Soon word began to spread through Antoria of the Dragon's Voice and its mission, papers calling for equal treatment flushing the streets.

But not everyone was as excited.

"I just don't understand what you're all celebrating" Grimmnr shook their head at Kem as they patrolled the further reaches of The Den.

“Literally *nothing* has changed yet, and we’re throwing parties” Kem frowned at that last comment, but said nothing. She valued Grimmnir’s companionship despite their prickly attitude.

“Well, it’s only a matter of time. And with Akko’s team helping them, things will surely get going soon” Kem knew Grimmnir was right, but still. She just had a feeling that this was going to be big. And big things *could* be good if you believed hard enough.

Kem stood in the Allwatcher’s cave as Akko made his report.

“They’ve been asking us loads of questions about our lives, and Tohlo saw a big planning room filled with the more important members all working together.”

“Hmmm, be cautious. We cannot risk being misinterpreted with this. It is much too important.”

“Yes, Elder.”

“Continue”

“Snublu still hasn’t reported back yet on Witton’s daughter, but I’m sure she’ll turn up. Otherwise everything has been going quite well.” His handsome scales glittered in the torchlight, and Kem struggled to focus on the report.

The Allwatcher nodded as Akko finished, dismissing him. Shooting a small grin at Kem, Akko departed. Excusing herself, Kem followed him out.

“Only twenty!?”

“Are you here to make a deal or not, little lizard? I ain’t got all day.” The trader sneered at Kem as she struggled to keep a hold of herself. The Allwatcher had told her to make sure this deal went smoothly, but this felt too far.

“We both know that’s below the going rate. This isn’t fair.”

“Fair don’ make money, lizard. An’ besides, you know your precious new rules. Nothin’ above twenty.” He leaned in, leering over her.

“So what’s it gonna be, little lizard? Is it a deal, or you gonna run to mummy?”

“... deal.”

The human grinned.

“That’s what I thought”

He picked up the perfect cluster of rubies and it to one of the muscular hulks standing ominously behind him. In its place, he dropped the cloth bag of silver and gold. Kem counted it out quickly.

“Hey, this is only fifteen!”

The trader smiled.

“Call it tax. Next time, don’ talk back, lizard. Now scram.”

“Told you so.” Grimmnir only said it once, but it hung in the air between them as they walked. Finally, Kem sighed.

“Ok. You were right. This isn’t as good as it sounded. Was that the only reason you wanted to talk?” Grimmnir hesitated for a moment.

“Snublu is missing. No one has seen her since she left to meet with Witton’s daughter”

“What? Are you sure? I mean, she was always distractible, maybe she just got lost or...”

Kem trailed off under Grimmnir’s glare.

“Do you hear yourself? Don’t you care?”

“... I’m sorry, I just... want it to be ok for once...”

Grimmnir stopped suddenly, and Kem stumbled on for a moment before turning. A small, familiar piece of carved horn hung on a broken drawstring between Grimmnir's claws.

"This was everything to her. She would never give it up without a fight..."

"How... what are you saying?"

Grimmnir met Kem's eyes, burning with a fire she had never seen before.

"I found it behind Witton's manor... Kem, there were bloodstains.

She's gone..."

It was only a few days later...

Kem pelted along familiar streets, the towering crowd around her swinging kicks and throwing trash after her. Just behind her came others armed with anything they could get their hands on. Glancing over her shoulder in fright, she sensed Akko engaged in his own race through their bond.

Kem spun on instinct, and lunged into a cramped space where old crates didn't quite meet the wall. As the thunder of feet passed and the not-quiete silence of Antoria settled once more, her thoughts turned to what had happened. Snublu's murder, Akko's secret meeting with Witton's unwilling "daughter"

...and then the message from the Dragon's Voice.

Vain, greedy, selfish, craven... Kobolds.

Reports of clawed corpses found at every corner, and missing children.

The Den discovered. Before the guards could act, civilians were smoking the Deep horns from their ancestral home. Females, wyrmlings, even the eggs were destroyed. The streets were slicked with blood and albumen.

Squeezing out of her hidey-hole, Kem clambered carelessly up the tower of crates that had served a Deep horn for the last time. From the roof she gazed out across Antoria, waiting for Akko.

A thrill of fear passed through their connection. He was cornered.

The shock froze Kem for a mere second, but Akko restrained her as she prepared to unleash the conflagration in her blood and level the city for him.

Stay safe

Take care of our egg

A spear pierced his shoulder.

I love you

And the bond faded away, the pain of death replaced with an anguish unimaginable.

The world warped around her as her power whisked her from this place.

Her howl echoed through Antoria, and the final Deep horn was gone.

Some nights, they said it was still there.

And then, they didn't.