

The somewhat-peaceful air was cut once more with the harsh blare of an extraction siren, bright red fluorescence swallowed by the thick black ichor pooled in the body of the machine. Toodles smacked the turnwheel with both small palms decisively.

“See? Told you I was big enough!”

Sprout smiled. It definitely wasn't his idea to let a child come down with them, but Dandy had let her run into the elevator anyways. ‘All hands on deck,’ supposedly. Though at least their passage had been safe so far. For all of one floor. Sprout leaned over and knocked on a wooden crate for good luck. They were the first ichor extraction team to come down here, the first ones to scope out what was left of the winding catacombs left in the wake of Gardenview's closure. You can only hide for so long until supplies dwindle. They were going to come down here eventually.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sprout said playfully, “now let's get you back to the elevator. It's almost time to head off.”

“Okay!” Toodles practically threw herself forwards, running in the direction of the heavy metal doors. He could hear a raspy squeal and a childish giggle from up ahead, the sound of tussling and shelves knocking together with a clatter. Yatta must've caught up with her. Sprout couldn't help but chuckle a bit to himself, especially as the stern voice of Brightney cut through the commotion to reprimand the roughhousers. With a small pep in his step, he followed their lead.

There was a quiet promise between all of them. This ichor was their lifeblood, literally but yet figuratively, what gave their authors the ability to breathe life into lines on a page. Maybe if they dredged up enough of the old stuff, more than enough to just sustain their lives... Maybe if they had it all back in their hands... Maybe something would happen for the better. Maybe someone would come back. Maybe more. Maybe, if Dandy was right. And Dandy was always right. He was the one who knew it all.

Sprout nearly tripped as a little grey stone came sprinting out from a side hall. Pebble's frantic yelps drowned out his breathy giggle as he stumbled back.

“Hey, what's wrong? Scared of your shadow?”

Pebble jumped, stamping his rocky paws and barking wildly. With the scrabble of stone nails on linoleum, he turned tail and sprinted for the elevator. Poor pup looked like he'd seen a ghost. Dandy would surely have something to help him calm down. Sprout took another step and froze. It... must've just been the building settling. Dandy said there'd be nothing down h-

This time, the ragged breath came so close that Sprout could smell the sickly-sweet reek of rot. Slowly, he turned to meet his own eyes. Watery, strained, bulging eyes that leaked thick black ichor in rivulets down his face. His caved-in, broken face, the gaping cavity in his head thick with syrupy filth and mold. His face upon his broken body, limbs shattered and twisted like old trellis wire, one arm dragging worthlessly behind the shambling creature. The putrid scent of old strawberries mixed with the metallic tang of ichor.

Sprout could do nothing but stare. Stare at the face that was his own. That should've been his own. That wasn't his own. The face that gagged on the viscous inky bile pushing up its throat

and through its mouth. The face that barely seemed to focus on the form before it, dwarfed by its bloated size, an overripe berry far too plump. Rotting on the vine.

The shaky red irises suddenly snapped to attention, locking directly with Sprout's. With a choking gurgling growl, the effigy of filth lurched forwards, swinging a thick hand at Sprout's small head. Barely a second to react, he fell backwards, smacking the ground hard as the clawed mitt sailed over him. Turning rapidly, Sprout pushed himself to his feet and began to run. He choked on the odor of the broken body behind him as it began to make chase, moving sickeningly fast for its size and stability. Oh God, oh God.

"GET TO THE ELEVATOR!" Sprout screamed, voice straining. "GET TO THE ELEVATOR AND GET IN IT *NOW!*"

He rounded the corner to Toodles' wide eyes, growing wider at the sight of the monster behind him. Shrieking, she hauled herself off of Yatta's chest and hurtled towards the open elevator. Brightney grabbed Yatta's hand, dragging her as she attempted to scramble to her feet.

"WHAT THE FREAK IS THAT?" She yelped, wishing she knew a stronger expression. Pebble snarled, backing further into the metal room. His small body shook like a leaf.

Sprout threw himself forwards into the elevator, hitting the metal floor with a painful slam. He flipped onto his back to watch as the creature before him strained against the harsh white light of the room, squinting and gagging as rancid ichor dribbled down its chin. Blindly, it lunged at Sprout. Just as the elevator doors came sailing down, heavy and hydraulic.

Its head smashed inwards with a sickening crunch beneath the foot of the door, rotten skin bulging like a balloon with the pressure of liquid insides before bursting suddenly, spraying the elevator and its inhabitants with thick chunky ichor. The elevator began to sink lower, a wet snap ringing out as what remained of its head was rended from its abandoned body. Sprout sat in the puddle of viscera and ichor, feeling it uncomfortably warm against his skin. Glancing to Yatta, the childish joy always on her face now missing, her cheeks pale and her eyes wide. To Brightney, always so composed, shaking as a chunk of rotten strawberry slid off her glasses and splatted uselessly onto her shoe. To Toodles. The child. The child they brought down here. Her lip quivering, tears welling in her eyes, gripping handfuls of her dress. The child they brought down here.

With a ratcheting sound, the hatch behind them swung open, Dandy rising up on a small platform.

"Well hi, friends!" His voice rang out cheery as ever. It echoed harshly in the room. Looking down at the shellshocked toons, he snorted.

"My goodness, it looks like y'all saw a ghost! Hah!"

Sprout turned to face Dandy, shaking, and promptly vomited on the floor before him.