

D287 is at the door to the cafeteria. He smells like worry. The seventh meal group is the largest and the last of us is getting his tray. The rest have started eating, but D317, D194 and D051 and I are looking for seats.

"The food," D287 says. "It's poisoned." His voice is flat because he has already seen what those of us standing inside the door, scanning the room, also see: everyone else is already eating and some of them have already slumped over their bowls. We watch as the rest fall in order. They don't scream or regurgitate or make any sound at all other than a gentle sigh as they fall forward onto their food.

"Who?" I have turned towards D287 and all of us still standing now smell like worry.

"Undead mammals," he says. He gestures with one antenna. "The ones from before."

The first to fall begins to stand and the unquantifiable light in the eyes of the living is absent from his. The shoulders of others start to twitch. Without thinking I flick my wrists and send my tray flying sideways to knock him over. 317, 194 and 051 do the same in short order and the five of us scramble out the door to the cafeteria and up the path towards the narrow halls and single-width entryways of Personal Storage.

The Ones From Before. That's what we all call them. They have some complicated animal name none of us pronounce the same way twice. Names themselves are problematic but these are really strange, something with lots of the hard consonants and mismatched vowels of the more exotic mammalian tongues. Their name doesn't matter anyway. What matters is that they are the walking dead. They are mindless and starving and they come after us and grind their dead teeth against our carapaces until they break through and get at flesh and organs. We can rip them to shreds like anything else, yes, but three more appear while we take the time to do so and they wear us down and then their Master arrives – or so it's said – and makes new ones out of those of us who fell. It is a horrifying way to die, the worst we can imagine. To be ripped from the Hive and robbed of our utility in service to the mania of a monster is the worst thing that could possibly happen to us.

We are going to run – there is no point pretending that we can defend ourselves or the Hive if lunch group 7 has been turned en masse, and we know this, and our scent is resignation and alarm – and then we are going to talk.

“What do we do?” I don’t know which of them it is who says this and instead of answering I climb up the ladder at the back of Personal Storage and look out across Workshop #3 and the main hall towards the guard tower and the Royal Stairs. Normally at this time of day there would be drones working on maintenance support – shaping patches for holes somewhere in the walls, practicing comb construction – and guards flanking the bottom, middle and top of the stairs. Today, there are corpses littering the floors and walkways. Those who seem to have fallen first have multiple of the undead mammals clinging to them, like suckling pigs; those who ate the food, I assume, are dismantling the bodies of their more recent victims. I must have given off a lot of fear, because abruptly the conversation downstairs stops and the others cluster at the bottom of the ladder.

“What’s happening?” They each ask this at the same time, a chorus in search of a conductor. I do not answer because I’m still watching: the horrible old pale-skinned mammal has stepped slowly into the main hall and its two sickening eyes sweep the room and it smiles, revolting, mocking us.

Her Majesty emerges from the top of Her stairs and they look at one another. She has no weapons but she does have the royal armor and I can hear the thin whine of rage emanating from her. She rises up and launches herself at their Master but he lifts his hand and a beam shoots out and she falls out of the air and tumbles face-first to the bottom of her stairs. She does not move again. Undead begin crawling towards her. She is just another meal to them and she hasn’t been dead for a second.

I turn and leap down to Personal Storage. “It’s over,” I say to them. “The Queen is dead. The guards are dead. We take what we can and we run as far as we can. We will likely be caught, but perhaps some of us will make it. We will never ome back here and we will never see our brothers again.”

They look at one another and then look at me to see if I am serious, but I have already rent open the locker nearest me. It contains some pens and paper and ink. The next one belongs to a guard, and in it I find his spare chain shirt. It’s mithril. Our hive is wealthy. We have great pride in our wealth.

I begin sweeping things into the first pack I pick up. The rest are still staring at me and I can’t look at them as I scavenge. When the pack is full I hoist it onto

my back and finally turn. They have at long last started to scavenge for themselves. "Their Master is in the main hall. Be careful."

They nod. I nod. We say in unison the thing we always said at the end of each meal: "The Hive survives."

Their Master hears them in Personal Storage. I consider calling out a warning when I hear the alien sound of sweeping fabric in the halls, but that would give me away as well as them. I loop around through the waste grinder and head back out to the far side of the main hall. I leap packs of the living dead and arrive at the top of the Royal Stairs without incident. I hear the scraping of armor against stone behind me and I know that Her Majesty has begun to stir in her new state. I do not feel sadness, because that isn't her. It's something else that looks like her. We know this about the undead already, and I have no time for sentimentality anyway. I run – unthinkable sacrilege – through the Royal Chamber and at the end, behind the throne, I find Her personal belongings. I suppose I am lying to myself about no time for sentimentality because I realize I have come this way not for any shortcut it might offer but to take something. I don't even know what I want, just... something; something that uniquely symbolizes the Hive. I find Her Majesty's seal and wax – again, an inconceivable transgression – and I sweep them into my bag before I can let myself reconsider.

I open the Morning Windows behind the throne and leap out onto her viewing balcony. The sun is setting, on the opposite side of the Hive's topside mound, and the shadow of the Hive stretches out before me impossibly large. I leap down onto the sandy ground and run away: first to the east, but I know that in time I will loop north and then west again. Somewhere in that direction is a human town, I know, and perhaps there I can find transport away. If the Hive is to survive, I must survive. I must find a new Hive if I am to sustain the memory of my old Hive. I am terribly alone for the first time in my life but it is temporary and it is necessary and that is all I need to know to carry.

One day, I know, I will be stronger than this and I will do anything and everything I can to destroy Undead wherever I find them. I do not believe that I will come back and eliminate *this* one, I know, but I can destroy as many of its kind as I can in the years left to me and with the death of each I will redeem one of my countless brothers.