

Rodorus caught a flash of anger in Janku's eyes as he backed away but noticed that Vark, in his dramatic rage, completely overlooked it. Dromdas fussed over him but only partially managed to calm him down. Vark took a deep, shuddering breath and turned toward the prisoners.

"We have wasted enough time. Open the barrier!"

Rodorus held his breath. Silence ensued as the great slab rumbled open to reveal a dark, crudely excavated tunnel beyond. At the sound of the grinding stone, the semi-conscious prisoners instantly animated and writhed feebly in their shackles. Rodorus felt a stab of pity as one haggard woman began to pathetically cry out. He tried unsuccessfully to blot out the taunts and cruel exhortations spewed by Vark and Dromdas, who treated the execution like a sporting event. Janku stood apart, a silent shadow, his expression inscrutable.

Something sinuous shimmied from the depths of the excavation. Rodorus felt a chill and unconsciously held his breath. The prisoners, sensing the rush of the approaching creature, began to flail and scream.

Dromdas snorted like an animal and clapped her hands. "Look at them! Now they are afraid. Where is the bravado they showed when they defied you?"

In the span of a moment, the throwwort burst furiously from the opening like a geyser. Its pallid serpentine body swayed and undulated, the waxy, pockmarked flesh alive with burrowing parasites. Completely eyeless, its triangular head was dominated by a quartet of nostril slits and a row of yellowed, scythe-shaped teeth. By its formidable size, a good meter in circumference, it was clearly a queen. A gelatinous rush of excrement jetted from its underbelly and puddled viscously on the rock, the stench penetrating the annex barrier.

Rodorus and the others retreated under a communal hush, their eyes fixed on the monstrosity as it sniffed the air. The prisoners could only stare mutely, their bodies frozen in a rictus of terror. Undulating obscenely, the throwwort raised its head, uttered a piercing shriek, and whipped one of the prisoners from his shackles, shattering the chains into pieces. The wretched victim screamed and struggled briefly before the creature ground its powerful jaws into his torso. Mustard-colored blood fountained from the mutilated carcass, spraying the now hysterical survivors. The throwwort raised its head and wolfed down the body.

Sickened, Rodorus turned away, but not before he glimpsed the sick fascination in the eyes of Vark and Dromdas. Is this abomination what we have become? he thought bleakly. Is this to what we, a once proud race, have devolved? We cannot even call ourselves animals, for we cannot insult them in such a fashion. We are lower than the slime we tread on, baser than the darkest thought...

Suddenly, he could not remain to witness the massacre of the remaining prisoners. His submissive bow went unnoticed, as did his hasty retreat from the annex. Not even Janku deigned to look his way. Only the guards cast him a cursory glance as they separated to allow his exit. Closing his ears against the ensuing screams, he hurried down the tunnel as quickly as his game leg would allow and tried to stifle the sob rising in his throat. One thought managed to surface above the cauldron of his emotions, momentarily supplanting the horror he had just witnessed.

*Princess...hear our plea. Join us in our battle and deliver us from this darkness...
Princess...*