

Another Creature of Flesh and Blood

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Micah breached the surface and took in a long breath. He waded excitedly towards the stone barrier that lined the beach, for it had been too long since he'd seen the city and felt the blazing sun on his shoulders. Behind him, waves lapped the weathered concrete, calming the ever-present nerves that went along with this exploration. Still, Micah felt giddy, eager to continue his studies of the creatures that once roamed the surface.

Micah began scaling the barrier, careful to avoid the crumbling edges. The barrier, like many other useless strategies, was obsolete now that the creatures that lived in these cities were gone, stolen by the sea when the floods battered their homes many years ago. A certain species (known as humans) took this as an opportunity. In laboratories high above the ground, they got to work developing lung implants and pressurized, temperature balanced wetsuits that could withstand the growing ocean. After years of trial and error, this new race of humans fled into the sea, and, generations later, Micah was born.

The city beyond the barrier had once been considered the center of the universe, but now its buildings loomed above Micah like phantoms as he maneuvered between trashed food carts and cracked roads. Micah peered into the cracked windows lining the streets, searching desperately for something new, something extraordinary.

Just as always, the only life up here was him.

Micah eventually approached the opening of a dark tunnel, ducking beneath the broken archway and into its rancid atmosphere, stopping just before the faded yellow line of the platform. Laid out in the channel below was a bizarre museum of skeletons. Suspended by bits of rope and wire, the bones Micah had gathered from various places were constructed into creatures that were meticulously arranged by size and shape. Some had craning necks longer than their torso, others stood on two feet with long sticklike bones protruding from their bodies as arms.

Micah plucked a rag out of the pocket of his wetsuit and dusted off his creations, saving his favorite for last. He ran a finger over the grooves and knobs of the sculpture with a smile. It was not nearly the largest of the creations, nor the smallest, but was remarkable nonetheless. The bones were arranged with delicate precision in an acrobatic stance, with one point breaking off from the body in a long rod that curled around the ribcage. It was the first creation that Micah had felt sure of, and the only that felt complete. In his youth, he had dreamt of the old world, of the life that thrived on the land above. Only when Micah came of age to leave his parents' home did those dreams finally come to fruition. Since then, Micah had been journeying to the surface as regularly as he could, spending the day hunting for bones to assemble into his calculated estimations of their past forms and displaying them in this tunnel to protect them from any further damage. In truth, Micah did not know very much about the old world or its wildlife, and often he would abandon a project with this frustration, but with this skeleton, Micah knew it was right. Somehow, he just knew.

A quiet mewing pulled Micah's attention away from his skeletal creature, echoing softly through the tunnel. Micah peered into the darkness, listening intently for another break in the silence. After a moment, he heard the noise again, followed by the patter of tiny footsteps.

A small and furry creature with blazing golden eyes and oddly pointed ears emerged from the darkness. Micah, his heart thumping raucously, crouched down to greet the living, breathing creature in

amazement. In the many years he had come to this tunnel, this was the first time he had ever seen life beyond himself. It sauntered up to him confidently, rubbing against his ankles. Hesitantly, Micah stroked the creature, marveling at the luscious texture of its fur. It nudged Micah's hand and looked back towards the tunnel. The creature slipped down into the channel like a shadow, and Micah followed it, pushing the fear out of his mind as he set off into the tunnel.

After hours of darkness, Micah sighed with relief as a light shone through a distant crack in the walls. The creature stopped, peering back at Micah with its luminous eyes, then disappearing through the crevice. Micah stepped into the opening, flattening himself against the damp wall to squeeze through. When Micah reached the other side, his jaw dropped in shock.

People, living people, bustled about an enormous cave, smiling as they chattered with each other. They were humanoid, like Micah, but were pale from lack of sunlight, with heavy clothing to fight off the damp chill of the cavern. The spaces where their eyes should be were empty, just two small indents as a jarring indication that something was missing. Micah inched closer, too entranced to notice the rock underneath his foot. He stumbled, whimpering as his knees smacked the dirt. The people whipped around, chatters growing as they surrounded the intruder. Micah covered his ears against the deafening noise, and the creature that led him here curled loosely around his ankles in an attempt to give comfort.

"Who are you?" he called.

The chatters immediately died down to a murmur. Micah slowly uncovered his ears, watching the sea of people part for a very frail man with a leathery, ancient face framed by a short white beard. His chattering sound was scratchy and hushed, but did not pause until he was within a few feet of Micah.

"We were humans, just like you," he answered. "But the floods pushed us into the ground, so we became Terra." The rest of the once-humans nodded in agreement.

"I am Olin," the man said, offering his hand to Micah.

The creature still wrapped around Micah's legs yawned loudly, nuzzling into his thigh. "What is this creature?" Micah asked.

"That, my friend, is a cat."