

---

# Keep Them Alive

## Mira Grant

From set *Duskmourn: House of Horror*  
27. 08. 2024

Grown now, child, strong and solid and ready to face the horrors of the halls. Let me have the look of you, the seeing before you go.

Cocoon was kind. It isn't always. Four good legs and two good arms, such sharp teeth and claws. Oh, you will be a good protector, a strong defense against wandering nightmare and unseen danger! You will serve so very well, will protect so very skillfully, and will be a clean-drawn line in the mural of our history!

You are ready, child-no-longer, to understand your purpose here. Come with me, and I will tell you what you are, what you will be, as I take you to your destined beginning.

Born we are of House, as all good things must be born of House—as all wicked things must be born as well, for House is all. There are legends of a time before House was any, when it was but a whisper carried on the wings of moths, telling us what might one day come to be, but those are only legends; they change nothing of our living now. In those old stories, however, we were like the keep-alives; we existed outside House. Then the walls closed in around us, and the cocoons came, and in the cocoons, we were first reborn, although we were not children as you were when the sweet silk closed around you. We were creatures grown and other than we are now, as you were other before your own cocooning. Such is the way of House. What exists here is changed, as much for its own safety as for the amusement of House itself.

Of course I speak of House as a living thing. Anyone who walks here can see it as a living thing, see the way it moves and answers and reacts. House moves with intention. House comprehends what happens with its body, at least to some degree. Its awareness is questionable. Its life is not.

As ours is not.

When the first of us emerged from our cocoons into the splendid horror of House, we wandered with no comprehension of our purpose. Why should such as we exist? We lacked the voracious hunger of the cellarspawn, or the wicked malice of the nightmares. We had claws and horns and fangs, but we could not rip and tear as did the razorkin, not claim and transform as did the wickerfolk. We alone in the body of the House walked without purpose. Our days were long and our nights restless, for we had too much intelligence to be idle, and too little reason to keep occupied.

In those days, we lived all as one pack, large and awkward, a target for the more dangerous occupants of House, and it seemed our purpose might be simple survival. But that was so small, and we had in us the potential to be so large; it seemed unfair that we should be so limited. And our leader, all the way back then in the very beginning, was a great and terrible beastie who called himself Spindlewright. Six legs had he, and three arms, and claws enough to carve through stone. Horns like spears, and teeth like knives, and a fine, thick pelt of blue and green, rosette-spotted like the eyes on a vast moth's wings.

"I will know our purpose," he declared, and he left us, left his pack and his kin, to walk the body of House.

Deep and deeper he went, away from the attics and the high halls where we made our homes, and many dangers he encountered, deep dangers, dreadful dangers, horrors such as we had never once imagined—Horrors even to the horrible, things from which the other children of House fled in fear. He fought many battles, he sharpened his claws on bones, and he knew himself for a terrible predator. To protect his eyes, he fashioned himself a mask of broken bone and stolen scrap. This will matter, child, remember it.

On he walked, greatest of our kind, masked and terrible. And then, in a library clearly ruined by some great battle, where he prowled with the easy confidence of a predator, he heard a new sound. A terrible sound, that created a pain in his head like splinters in the skin. It did not stop, and so he moved toward it, called and repulsed at the same time.

We know this sound very well now. It is called "crying," and it is a terrible, wonderful thing. Terrible, for it means pain. Wonderful, for it means life.

He moved a fallen shelf aside, and there he found three creatures, one large and two much smaller, clinging to each other in the wreckage. There was the smell of blood, and fresh, untainted meat, and had he been hungry in that moment, before the bargain had been sealed, our mural would be painted very differently indeed.

But he did not hunger, and curiosity brought him closer to the creatures. They were furless and clawless, with no horns and soft skins, their faces matched to their bodies and not set apart, as ours are. They had no tails, no fangs, but clothed themselves in scraps of fabric. By that, he knew they were intelligent, for they must have fashioned their false furs in the same way he had fashioned his mask, and he felt a mutual respect that they had both, unknowing, taken steps to look more like one another. They covered their baldness to suit his sensibilities, and he had covered his face to suit theirs, all before they had even seen one another. What a miracle that meeting was. What a moment. What a mercy.

The two smaller ones were crying, burrowing against their larger as cubs will burrow in the den before the cocooning time. Spindlewright moved closer in his curiosity, and the larger one pulled away, gathering the small ones close. He stopped, looking at them, and waited to learn what would happen next.

So long he waited that the echoes of the battle which had destroyed this place faded from the memory of House, and a cellarspawn pulled itself from the wall, hungry as House ever was. It came for the strange things, drawn by their crying as Spindlewright had been, and Spindlewright attacked it, driving it away from *his* discovery, *his* great mystery, which must be studied, which must be understood.

Back and back he drove it, and it fought, but he fought more fiercely, and in the end, it was felled by his power and his persistence, and he returned to the creatures.

The two smallest were crying harder than ever, while the largest was motionless, a spike of jagged wood protruding from its middle. It had been broken loose during the fight against the cellarspawn and had flown all unseen to pierce and pin. There was blood, more blood than ever, and while the creature yet breathed, it no longer had the strength to cry.

Spindlewright moved closer, sniffing at it, trying to decide what was to happen next, and the creature opened its eyes. It moved its mouth in a shape called a "smile"—you will see your first smile soon, and it will light you up inside as it did him, it will recolor your world in new brilliance, such as you have never even dreamt before! I envy you that first smile, I do, for mine was long ago, and the one who wore it is no more.

“You ... saved us,” it said.

Spindlewright huffed his acknowledgment.

“Or you ... tried,” said the creature, smile fading. “Ah. I don’t think you quite ... saved us all. But you saved what matters. I can’t be too ... unhappy.”

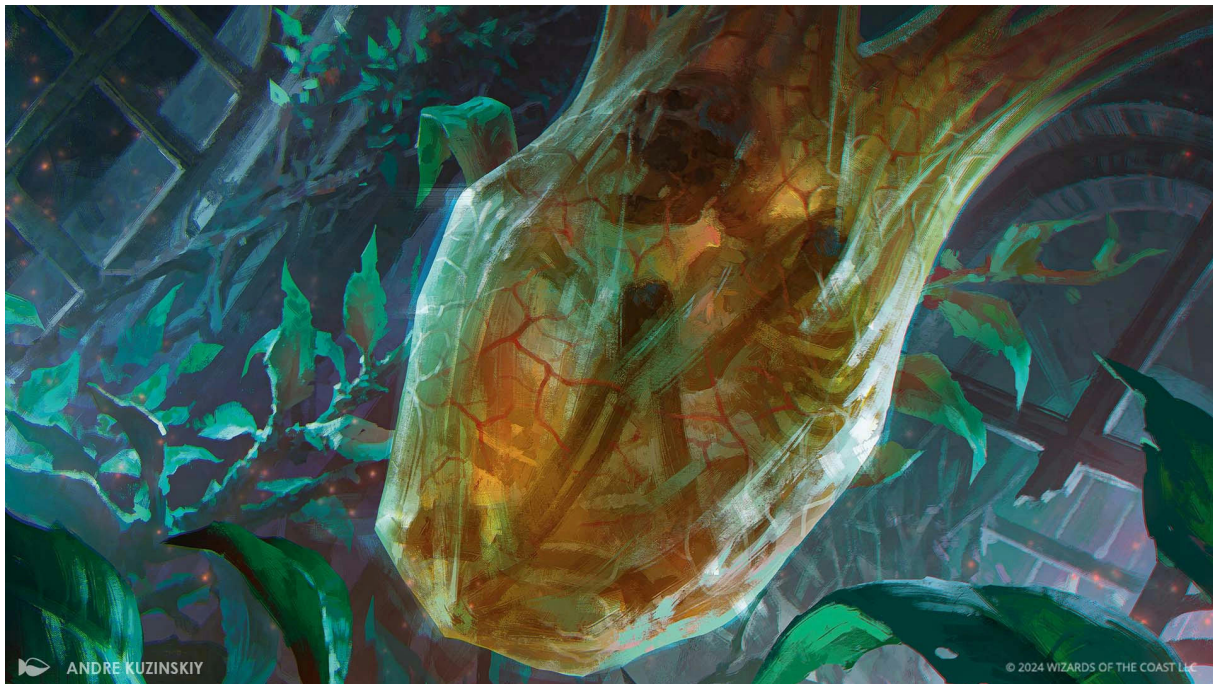
The creature spoke the language of House, the language sometimes muttered by the razorkin and by the nightmares. Spindlewright understood enough to know that the large one was dying, and he was grieved, for he wanted to know more.

But then the large creature pushed the two smaller toward him, as they cried and quivered.

“Please ...” it said. “One last ... favor. Please ... keep them alive.”

It closed its eyes then, and it left house in the only way that any living thing ever can. Spindlewright wrapped his first two arms around the smaller creatures as they cried and clung to his furs, and he knew what they were, for they had been named by their elder as their care was passed to him:

They were keep-alives, and he would do exactly that. He would keep them alive, as long as he could.



Art by: Andrey Kuzinskiy

Spindlewright returned to us with his new charges and told us that our purpose had been found. And thus, did we learn many things.

First, that a beastie is at their very best when they have a keep-alive to protect and care for. We cannot steal them from their own kind, but we can woo them, offer them gifts and friendship until they give us smiles in return. Once a keep-alive has smiled at you, you will be theirs forevermore, even once they have left House behind or been taken where you cannot follow. They give us gifts equal to the ones we offer them, and more, for they give us a kindness we ache for deep within our bones.

Second, that the keep-alives are terrified of our true faces. All the kindness we can offer, all the friendship that has passed before our masks come off, none of it matters, for if they see us truly, they will fear us, and they will flee. A fleeing keep-alive can never be befriended again; they are lost. We are divided, as a pack, on how to handle those losses. Some say they should be put to death at once, mercifully

culled before House's other occupants can have them. Others say it is never right to kill a friend, and simply let them go, even knowing that they won't survive for long.

Those first two, they gave us the mural. They painted it on the attic walls with their own hands, with paint Spindlewright had gifted them from a playroom far below, stolen from under the watch of nightmares and cellarspawn. They painted a beautiful world we had never seen, and they filled it with us, with great shaggy creatures that watched over them benevolently and out of kindness. We add to it still, paint ourselves in the fields they drew for us, sketch our outlines in the spaces that remain. It is our history and our home and our greatest treasure, and we would fight House itself to protect it.

They gave us the mural, and they gave us the lessons. One grew tall and strong and clever in Spindlewright's keeping, staying with him for so long as their story goes. The other saw the maskless and fled into the halls, never to be seen again. The loss of that keep-alive broke Spindlewright's heart, and he led us no longer.

Without his heavy paw to guide and mold us, we broke into the packs we occupy today. The mural was declared neutral ground, shared between us, too precious to risk to the protection of a single pack, and we scattered through the House.

Spindlewright and his keep-alive remained together. They had many adventures, until at last they didn't; until his keep-alive came back to the mural with his mask in hand, broken down the center, and wept and wailed and smiled no more. It would not accept another keeper but followed the path of its sibling down into the House, to be seen no more.

Spindlewright's bones sleep somewhere in the House, unremarked and dearly remembered.

Your keep-alive is there as well, already waiting for you, although they do not know it. Fashion a mask from these things we have gathered, drape yourself in things both colorful and pleasant to the eye, and go forth to find your companion. We have one purpose in this House, one pleasure.

Keep them alive. I believe in you, no-longer-child, and Spindlewright would believe in you as well, were he still here. You have grown strong and clever, you have survived your own cocoon, and you are ready to be a glorious companion to one who needs you.

You will not succeed. None of us do, not forever, and when you fail, you will return here, to add your stories to our mural, to gather with your own kind for a time, to tend to the cocoons as I have done. And then you will go again, for we know why we are here, and we know what we must do, and we know one day, if we are clever, we will succeed.

Keep them alive.

Nothing more is needed.