

## **Non Human 231**

### Chapter 231 A Heart's Choice

The nearby fireplace popped and crackled, thanks to the new wood log that had just been added to it.

It honestly wasn't really that chilly, but I was glad for it. This large room was a little... cold, to a point. But I think it was more so the air between us, than the actual air itself, that was cold.

There'd been an awkward silence between us all as we returned to Landi's palace.

Vim sat down, done with his fire, and sighed as he reached over to move the tiny table in-between us three. To make it more centered.

It was a small box looking table with weirdly thin legs. It had a weird design on its surface. It looked like a huge snake coiling around itself, endlessly. It was interesting, but not as interesting as the glowing rock that was in Vim's hand. Half hidden in his palm.

He's not let that thing leave his hand once. Even earlier, when he had helped Landi's soldiers pour oil into the canyon he hadn't let it go. As the day went on, and grew darker, it was a little interesting to see that it somehow... dimmed, even though the world got darker. It seemed bright, yet it glowed with an odd darkness that made it harder to see all the same.

My eyes kept getting drawn to it. As if it was... somehow special. Important. Beyond understanding. It was actually a little concerning how much I wanted to stare at it.

It wasn't that pretty honestly. The glow was a strange dark color, somehow, and it... pulsed in a weird way. As if breathing. It made me feel as if I should be on guard around it. Unlike that giant glowing crystal back at the Armadillo's house, the Monarch's heart felt wrong... not beautiful.

Yet even though I didn't like it, I was more aware of it than not. Even if I got distracted, and looked away for some time, I always somehow knew where to look to find it. I'd blame the fact that Vim was holding it, and thus my eyes were drawn to him, but it was more than that.

Once Vim stopped messing with the table, deciding it was now positioned properly... he then casually placed the glowing rock onto its center.

My jaw clenched as I watched the little glowing thing roll a little... then come to a stop. Before it went completely still, my eyes darted to my left. To Landi, who sat just as close to it as Vim and I were.

Landi didn't reach for it. A surprise, honestly.

We three were sitting around the small table, in chairs of wood. They stood out among the more common stone furniture here. Other than the crackling fire nearby, there really wasn't anything else in the room. In fact it was a little weird how big of a room it was, to have so little. There were other chairs, and smaller tables, scattered around... but not enough to justify this massive stone room.

"What's this room used for?" I asked, unable to contain my interest.

"Nothing. It's one of many. I had them bring some of the furniture in just so it wasn't empty," Landi answered.

She sounded... sad. She hadn't even looked at the heart within grabbing distance of her, and instead was leaning back in her chair with a look of exhaustion. She was just staring off into the distance with empty eyes.

Maybe she was tired. She looked dirty. She and Vim had spent most of the latter half of the day setting the canyon ablaze. I had been there, but had stood back and watched mostly. I didn't like the smell of the oils they had used. Nor had I been confident enough to bark orders as Landi had.

It was now night. There were large, open windows, on one side of the room. Windows that were basically just holes. They had no glass, or anything to stop the wind from blowing in. They were partly why the room was cold enough that Vim had lit a fire.

I liked how I could see all the stars beyond those square holes. The dark stone, and the somewhat unlit room, made it seem as if there were square holes of stars just outside the room. It looked pretty.

Almost as pretty as the gleaming little star not far from me...

Once again I realized my eyes had drifted to the heart, and I blinked and looked away from it. I turned to look at Vim, who had sat back and laid his right leg over his left knee, relaxing.

"Hm...?" he smiled at my glance, and I smiled back at him.

Try to draw my eyes now, silly little glowing rock. I dare you.

“Stop flirting in front of me. It makes me sick thinking of what I almost did,” Landi complained.

Glancing over to her, I smirked at her. She thought that little exchange had been so flirtatious? Really...?

That meant his smile had looked as good to her as it had to me. That was wonderful to hear.

“You’re lucky I’m a calm man,” Vim said to her.

“Yes. I’m sure,” Landi sighed.

“I was pretty calm too, right?” I asked happily.

Vim nodded, and Landi smiled at me. “You were. But I think you were more shocked than angry,” she said.

Well... that was true. I hadn’t expected Landi to actually threaten me at all.

Especially in such a way.

"I used to fight with my sisters, you know. Next time you just need to ask," I said to her.

Landi smirked at me, but she still didn't break out into a laugh. She really was on edge.

"The purpose of this little discourse is to avoid fighting," Vim reminded us.

"Yes. Yes it is," Landi agreed with a sigh.

"I'll be honest I'm still not sure why we were even supposedly fighting," I said.

Landi lifted her hand, to rub her forehead. She brushed her long hair out of the way as she did, and I noticed most of her face had soot all over it. She needed a bath. "Because Vim takes every heart. I felt in danger, because I thought he had noticed the heart inside me... or was going to punish me for waking a Monarch," Landi whispered.

Turning to Vim, I waited to hear his response.

For a small moment it seemed he wasn't going to respond, but then he shifted and gestured at me. "That was no reason to endanger Renn," he said.

Right...!

“What else was I to do? You’re a walking god,” Landi argued.

“I’d think attacking Vim would have had a less dangerous response than attacking me, honestly,” I pointed out.

Landi groaned, and Vim nodded.

I mean it was true, wasn't it? Vim was so strong... did he actually need to fear Landi? Or any of us, really? Even if Landi had attacked him with all her might, odds are he'd not have killed her. He may have hurt her, to stop her, but I doubted it would have gone past a few broken bones.

Smiling at the two of them, I curled my legs beneath me. It seemed I was a little cold, somehow. Maybe spending so long near those massive blazing fires in that canyon had made me more susceptible to the cold.

This desert did seem to get cold quickly at night, didn't it?

That was probably why Vim had started the fire. He was strangely aware of such things, sometimes.

“The reason, for your information, that I take the hearts Landi... is because they’re things that corrupt. Just as their owners destroy and decimate, so too do their hearts. I take them to keep them from causing even more damage, or risk another disaster. Unlike their bodies, a Monarch’s heart doesn’t decay upon death. So they need to be disposed of properly,” Vim explained.

Huh.

“Then what about this one...?” Landi asked with a point to her waist. Or rather...

“Did Vim say it was in your womb...?” I asked, interrupting Vim’s response.

Landi glanced at me, and then nodded. “It is.”

“To be honest all this time I thought it was in her stomach. It wasn’t until Renn pointed out your true desire to me, that I put one and two together,” Vim said.

Glancing at him, I frowned at him. “How could you mistake the two?” I asked.

“Well it’s not like I can actually see it. I can just sense it,” he defended himself.

Hm... I wonder if it was like, from a unique scent or something. Or maybe he felt something akin to heat?

Vim then looked to Landi. “And Landi, the reason I’d not taken the one inside of you is for the same reason I take them myself. I take them to protect the world and those within it. You housing it keeps it

contained. Its contamination and danger is currently sealed within you. The only one in danger is you, since you house it," he explained.

Before Landi or I could ask or say more, Vim continued, "Now... one could argue that your temperament lately... your cruelty and strangeness, is because of that very heart. But to me that doesn't matter. You may be degrading, and becoming different... but at no more rate than you would with typical age and wear, as anyone would. So I've not seen the need to relieve you of it yet. Plus... I think women should sometimes be a little rambunctious. It's a good character trait to have, even if no one else ever seems to agree."

I smiled at Vim, very happy to hear him not just say such a thing... but to so openly tell us his honest feelings of the matter.

"Wait... are you saying her personality is affected by the heart?" I asked.

Vim nodded.

How'd it do that? I suddenly didn't want to even look at the the one on the table anymore.

"So... you've let me have it all this time? And it was fine? I hadn't needed to keep it a secret from you?" Landi asked softly.

Vim nodded again. "Of course. If you can house that heart, and not succumb completely to its corruption... then by all means, keep it. Endure. Just one less heart I need to worry about, honestly. For now at least," Vim said.

I nodded too. "Vim's free-will," I clarified.

Landi glanced at me, and I smiled at her. Surely she understood what I meant?

She held my gaze for a moment... then looked away, as if in disgust. I blinked at her as she took in a deep breath. "I wanted a child," she then said.

"A... Monarch?" Vim asked.

Landi shifted in her chair, and reached over to grab its armrest. For support. She looked like she wanted to run away. "Yes. No. Maybe...? I wanted someone powerful. To protect me. To stand beside me," she explained.

My stomach knotted as I realized what she was saying.

She had put the heart of a Monarch into her womb, in hopes it would help her give birth to someone... like her. Like us. Like Vim.

Someone strong and long-lived.

“Thus the harem,” I said, understanding.

She nodded, and actually sniffed. “They’re all stillborn. No matter if I bear a child of a beast, or man. Half the time they’re never even fully formed,” she said.

My eyes started to water as I stared at a woman who was far too proud to look so weak and broken. She suddenly looked...

Frail.

The same woman who had just been willing to openly invite Vim’s wrath. One willing to risk her life, literally... now looked like a beaten woman, with a broken soul.

“You should have come to me, Landi,” Vim said softly.

“Oh? So you’d give me a child?” Landi asked, perking her head up.

“No. But I could have warned you against your path. You’re not the first to try what you’re doing. But... I suppose this is my fault, too. I should have realized what you were doing. It’s obvious... now that I think about it,” he mumbled as he looked away from her. In shame.

I studied Vim’s look for a moment, and the way he looked hurt. He was... genuinely bothered. Upset. At himself. He was blaming himself for Landi’s trials.

Looking away from him, I looked to the little table in the middle of our seats.

The glowing thing was pretty... but small. About the size of my fist. It wasn't a perfect orb either, which was odd. I could have sworn that the one I had seen him give Bray all that time ago had been a perfect orb in shape.

This one though had a weird... line along its side. It glowed oddly, separated from the glow coming from within it. Was that... a crack? It looked like one. It looked as if the light from within was trying to leak out of it. It'd not shock me at all if it started to actually leak... something, from the way the light pulsed. It was as if it had water inside it or something.

"Sure, Vim. I should have gone to the Monarch Slayer. The hunter of Monarchs himself, the only one known to exist, and ask and beg him to let me use a Monarch's heart. For something he so obviously doesn't agree with. I can see it now, O' Vim, mighty protector and slayer of Monarchs... how do I give birth to the very thing you slay on sight?" Landi said accusingly.

Although I didn't really like how angry she sounded, I still nodded. "Yes Vim, I can understand her hesitation to come to you. From her perspective I could see how she decided to keep it all a secret," I said.

Landi glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, and I noted the tiny smile that snuck onto her face.

"Why would I impose my will against such a thing, Renn? I thought you knew me better," Vim asked me.

Looking to him, I smiled at him. "I do. I know that you'd not have forced her against such an action... I'm just saying... I can see it from her perspective," I said.

He huffed at me, but smiled all the same.

Vim then reached out with his foot, the same one that had been resting on his knee, and tapped the table with it. The little glowing rock wobbled, but stayed in the center. "Why this one...? Did you... think another heart would help or something?" Vim asked.

Hm... right. She had one already. I sneaked a glance to Landi's waist again.

Did she really have one inside her...? I mean, they weren't that big... but still...

Must hurt.

"I don't know. I'm grasping at straws. I had thought... maybe another would help, yes. Also, I think the one inside me has grown weaker. I used to feel it all the time, as if it was burning me from the inside. Now I don't even feel it anymore, unless I push real hard and feel that it's still there," Landi said as she lowered a hand to push on the very spot she spoke of. It took a lot for me to not stand up and go try and touch it too. Landi would probably let me, but right now such a thing would have been awkward a little... "I mean it makes sense. After so long, maybe it's... lost its power or something," Landi added.

I nodded, that made sense. Vim had said a hundred years...? That was...

“It hasn’t. They’re basically indefinite sources of power,” Vim said.

Landi and I looked to him, and he nodded as if to dare us to argue with him over it.

“How though?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter... that means it’s not the hearts, but me. I’m the issue,” Landi whispered.

Then she broke.

I flinched as the very proud, and even stronger, woman started to cry.

Hesitating, I was about to sit up and reach for her... but didn’t need to. She sniffed and quickly contained her sobs. “It’s not fair, Vim,” Landi cried.

“No. It’s not,” I agreed.

A hundred years.

Likely more than half my life. Or real close to it.

I tried to imagine spending so long... trying for a child. And failing each time. In such a terrible way, too. To not only be unable to bear a child, but she said stillborn? And not a few either?

Just... how many attempts? How many times had she had hope, seeing her belly swell, only for it to end with despair?

It was an unthinkable curse, in a way. One that made her...

I gulped as I realized that all of her banishments... all of her time spent alone, was because of this. This very desire.

She had been traveling around, forcing herself on men. Men of our race. To try and give birth to a child.

Had she had the heart before or after those ventures...? I wonder...

When had she resorted to it? If she's had it for a hundred years... then...

My eyes squinted, and I looked away from Landi as she wiped her face with her sleeves. She was already getting her emotions under control.

If she resorted to the heart a hundred years ago, out of desperation... then...

That meant she's been trying for far longer than that. Maybe even longer than I've been alive.

It was a daunting thought.

"Where'd you get the other heart, Landi?" Vim asked.

"In the whirlpool caves to the west. A giant sea creature had washed ashore in one of the inlets, dead already. I arrived to see the commotion, since everyone was talking about it. Turns out it had been a Monarch. I always assumed it died either of natural causes, or maybe it got into a fight with you and ran away before you could finish it... but still succumbed to its wounds. It had huge holes all over its body. One of them had the heart, gleaming in a pool of blood," Landi said.

Whirlpool caves sounded neat. I wonder what that looked like.

"Hm... and it burned when you first... uh... put it in?" he asked, and I noted the way he had hesitated. It was cute when Vim was unsure how to phrase things.

"Very. It was like sticking a hot poker inside. I spent months curled up in pain," Landi said.

I flinched at the image and the feeling it brought.

“Interesting. That means you were actually incompatible. It means you...” Vim went quiet, and then his eyes lowered. To the table.

We all looked to the orb, and I shifted in my chair. “Vim?” I asked.

He coughed, and shifted again. He lowered his leg, and leaned forward. As if to go into a deep contemplation, he crossed his arms for a moment.

Then he reached out and grabbed the heart.

Lifting the glowing thing, he held it out a moment and stared at it.

“You choose... and people die,” Vim said.

Landi gulped.

“I choose...” Vim lowered the orb, as if to put it in his lap. “And people die,” he whispered.

It was my turn to gulp as he turned to me, and so did Landi.

“So... let’s let her choose.”

My tail went stiff, and the hairs upon it sounded funny as they brushed against the chair’s brackets behind me. “Vim...?” I asked worriedly.

He nodded at me, and then held the gleaming rock out to me.

Feeling ridiculous... I slowly held my hand out.

Then he dropped the glowing thing into my hand.

I blinked, and almost dropped it. But not because it had been hot, or because it was heavy... but rather, the opposite.

I hadn’t felt any weight at all.

Holding the thing up, I wrapped it in my fingers as I worriedly held it carefully.

It had no weight. At all. I could feel it in my hand... but... It felt as if a tiny breeze could make it fly out of my hand.

"It uh... feels warm," I said as I cupped the thing in both my hands. It was warm, but it definitely also didn't feel as if it actually existed.

A feather was heavier than this thing. If not for the fact I could actually feel it, and touch it, I'd doubt it was even real.

Which was really weird. It was small, but not as small as that. And it felt... weirdly hard. Like one of the many gems back at Herra's house.

Plus it was throbbing. "Does it have a heart? Inside?" I asked as it thumped. It genuinely felt like a heartbeat.

"The pulse is the energy inside it. The power. It's one of the reasons we call it a heart, too. It acts as one, but also thumps like one, even though not an actual organ," Vim said.

I couldn't take my eyes off it as I spun it around in my palm... and eventually stopped as I studied the white line running down one of the little bumps.

"Is that a crack?" I asked.

“Uh... yes,” Vim said.

I frowned, and it seemed Landi had heard the odd tone too. She and I both glanced at Vim, who ignored us.

Deciding to let it be... I lowered the heart to my lap, and glanced at the two. “So... what do you mean then? Choose what Vim?” I asked.

“If I should be allowed to have the heart,” Landi said softly.

Oh. Right.

Right...

A weird tingle ran down my spine, and up and along my tail. I did my best to ignore it, but it was impossible. “Why...?” I asked softly.

“Vim’s stupid. But that stupidity is a kindness all the same... I guess I should try to win her over?” Landi asked Vim.

He gently waved at Landi to go ahead as he leaned back, once again relaxing.

Great. He really was going to make me decide.

Landi sat up and took a deep breath, and then focused on me. She was suddenly fixated on me, as if I was her enemy now. Yet at the same time she was looking at me with hope. It was a weird look on her face... and it made me wonder if I too sometimes had such a look. For instance when I looked at Vim.

“I want a child. With that orb, I might be able to give birth to one. One that won’t just be a child, but something strong. Strong enough to protect me. To live alongside me. To live hundreds if not thousands of years, like me...” Landi said.

I blinked, and once again had blurry eyes.

Her plea was so, so, beautiful. Especially to me. In particular to me.

Her words resonated with me. My heart thumped in anxious anticipation... as if it was me we were talking about, not her.

Glancing at Vim, who looked so calm as if he wasn’t even a part of the conversation, I wondered if he realized... how similar Landi and I actually were.

He had to. Surely.

Her desperate desire was... so similar to my own. Nearly the exact same.

Which of course made me want to grant it to her... but...

Squeezing the orb in my hands, I felt it thump. As if to remind me, that I needed to take this seriously.

Take into account all Vim's said. Not just here, in this room, but in the tent. And before. On our journey here. Every time. Every conversation we've ever had, even.

Vim's a firm believer in free-will... but at the same time...

"Basically Renn... I want a Vim for myself. Surely you of all people understand?" Landi then asked.

My gut tightened and churned as if she had just hit me.

I did. I really did understand.

Gulping, I lifted the small thing. To catch Vim's eye. "Vim... would this help her?" I asked him.

Vim clasped his hands on his lap, and studied me.

Was... was he going to just sit there? Silently? He surely wouldn't act so childish would he and...

But no. He finally sighed, and I realized he had not been rudely making a point but instead pondering something.

"To be honest Renn... it might. Although toxic, and likely to corrupt her, they are also undoubtedly sources of pure power. The power of Gods. The very thing that created her, or rather her ancestors. With them inside her, especially in such a location and in such a way... it's actually very possible that they could empower any fetus growing within her. In fact it might even be possible for a baby to form around the heart itself even, transferring the heart from her to the child. In which case... in a certain perspective, she really would give birth to a Monarch," he said.

Landi perked up, and actually grew a huge smile. "Really!?" she shouted.

Vim nodded, but did so with a frown. "Yes. However... as you've undoubtedly experienced Landi... the odds are so slim it's ridiculous. Your ability to survive their corruption is a testament Landi. It's not natural. You're one in a million, able to withstand them. The fact you haven't broken or literally deteriorated and melted from the inside out is amazing. Although the child forming inside of you is your child, your flesh and blood, it's still its own being. Its own self. That being might be more likely to survive a heart's power and corruption, but it's still... in the end, just a baby. Something little, weak, and frail. Not something suitable to endure the overwhelming energy of a Monarch's heart," Vim explained.

"Just... how unlikely is this possibility then?" I asked Vim.

“Incomprehensibly small. However, I’ll admit...” Vim glanced at the thing in my hands. “Another might increase the odds. More corruption would be an issue, but... it’d also vastly increase the odds of it working to begin with. What I’d assume is a child wouldn’t even be able to start getting formed under such a situation, with two or more sources of corruption. So any child that even begins forming... well...” Vim shrugged.

“If a child came into existence in the first place, it’d already be proof it was strong enough to endure,” I said, understanding.

Landi turned to look at me, hopeful.

“Yes. With that heart as well inside her, it’s likely she’ll not have to suffer stillbirths anymore. Simply because they’ll corrupt and destroy any embryo before it can even form. So when one finally does form, and a child is made...well... it’d probably be because it is able to survive, and reach full maturity... Though I’ll not comment if that child will be of sound mind or not,” Vim said with a nod.

“Have you known it to happen? Before?” Landi asked, excited.

“In a fashion. You lack a... certain vital ingredient, but it's not so great that it should make it outright impossible,” Vim admitted.

Landi turned to smile at me, and I smiled back... but only for a moment.

Right. Even if possible...

Did that mean it was right to give her the heart?

“What... what would be the reason you wouldn’t give it to her, Vim?” I asked, before Landi could make an argument that would just result in me handing her the heart here and now.

“It’s far more likely to just kill her outright,” Vim said.

I flinched, but Landi didn’t. “I’ll take that chance, Renn. Please,” Landi said, without hesitation.

Yes. I know you would, Landi.

I know.

“Does... the heart do anything else Vim? To her?” I asked.

He nodded. “Since she’s adapted to it, yes. She’s likely now stronger, healthier, and less susceptible to diseases and other infirmities. Plus she’ll likely stay younger, and live longer, than she would have without it. Though the degree a heart makes such changes varies person to person,” he said.

I frowned and glanced at Landi. “Then...?” I asked softly, and carefully.

Landi's eyes narrowed, but I was thankful she didn't look too hurt or upset with my inquiry. "I can't give birth, Renn. I tried for centuries. Long before I got the heart inside me. I'm infertile," Landi said softly, admitting it.

Which meant she'd not be able to try giving the heart to a child after they're born and stronger, strong enough to risk the heart itself.

But...

Centuries...? So she really has been trying this whole time. The idea was daunting, and made me feel sick.

Feeling horrible, I nodded and glanced back at Vim. "Other than death... is there any other reason to not give it to her, Vim?" I begged.

"Well, I could give you a list of a few thousand names, yes," Vim said.

Names...?

I frowned, as did Landi... as we both looked at him.

Vim nodded. "Not including the countless humans too, of course."

"You mean the Society...?" I asked, shocked.

He nodded.

"How does my death endanger them, Vim?" Landi asked harshly.

"You can endanger them both through your death, and your success, Landi," Vim said softly.

Landi flinched, and my mind whirled as I understood his meaning.

"You mean... the child could..." I started to say, but couldn't finish it.

Vim nodded. "Absorbing a heart is not always something to be happy about, Renn. She wants to give birth to a Monarch... well... that's exactly what she might do, in fact," Vim said.

Wonderful...

“But...” Landi grabbed at her chair’s armrests. They creaked as she sunk her nails into the wood, gripping them tightly.

“I’m simply stating the truth, Landi. As you are,” Vim said.

Landi blinked, and I could see that she wanted to argue... but couldn’t.

After all she had to have realized it too.

Looking down at the source of all this discord... I wondered how such a tiny thing was so potent and dangerous.

I mean... I knew it was... but...

“Is dangerous to hold it Vim?” I asked, worried all of a sudden.

“Yes. But not for as long as you are doing so. You’re fine, Renn,” Vim said gently.

Oh. Good.

“He treasures you, Renn. He’d not have offered it to you if it could have hurt you,” Landi said softly.

I smiled gently at the woman who was staring at me with covetous eyes.

A long silence followed, and I found myself staring at the glowing heart in my hands.

There was so much I didn’t understand... but I wasn’t sure what to ask. Or say.

But... did my understanding matter?

Did anything but Landi matter at this moment?

She was desperate. Even if I didn’t give her the heart... even if she didn’t get it...

She’d still keep trying. And then would seek out another, the moment she could.

Even if it took her hundreds of years.

The result would be the same. The inevitable end, no matter if it was good or bad, would come.

Landi would spend her whole life to accomplish her goal. She's already proven she was willing to dedicate everything for it.

So... would it not be better if she did it under Vim's watchful eyes? So that he could intervene if needed? If she did it under secrecy, far away... who knows what kind of trouble she could get into.

Glancing at her, I took a small breath. "Did... did you make this kingdom, Landi... for this reason?" I asked.

She nodded, but said nothing more.

I see.

Looking to Vim, I found him gently staring at me. Unbothered or surprised.

Either he had known, or had made that connection the moment he realized what was going on.

This castle. This nation. Everything... all for this.

This tiny thing in my hand.

So even if we didn't give it to her...

Yet... did I have the right? To make this choice? For her?

"Why... why me...?" I asked the two of them.

"Why not you, dear?" Landi asked.

"I've no power. Over either of you. I can't force any decision. Me choosing seems like... well..." I didn't want to say a cruel joke, since to Landi it really wasn't.

"Ah... she really is too smart for her own good, Vim," Landi said to him.

"It's why I find her so attractive," Vim said.

"I'm being serious here, you two," I groaned.

The two chuckled, and Vim gestured at me with a small point. "Renn, you make decisions all the time. Why is this one so hard for you?" he asked me.

“What decisions do you mean, Vim? This is her life we’re talking about. Maybe even the lives of many others... the whole world, maybe,” I said as I suddenly wanted to hand the heart back to him.

Vim smirked at me. “Never stopped you before, Renn.”

I opened my mouth to argue... but paused as I stared at the man who had just said something very serious.

“Huh...?” I barely got the noise out.

He nodded. “Ruvindale. Those we met on our travels. Lumen. Those pirates. The little boy... Renn, you’ve made many decisions. You’ve done many things since we’ve been together, and not once have I seen you ever worry over you not being strong enough to make them. Why now does it matter?” he asked me.

“Vim...” I whispered in shock. Shaking my head, I felt ridiculous. “That... that’s not the same!” I said.

“How so?”

“I... I mean...” My mind whirled to form a proper response... but...

Well...

Blinking wildly, I realized Vim was likely right.

Maybe not in the truest sense... but yes... many of my choices, and actions that stemmed from them, had been without care to if I could enforce or even finish my choices. A few times I had even done things that would have, and even did, endanger others.

Me taking Amber to the humans, after being told not to. My attempt to convince Fly to join, even though I sometimes stepped out of bounds of the rules as to do so. Me convincing Roslyn and her crew to join, before even getting permission from Vim...

"This seems... more serious. It's not my life I'm risking, it's hers," I whispered the only argument I could muster, after some thought.

Vim raised a hand, stopping Landi from saying something. She shut her mouth with a loud noise, thanks to her teeth. "That argument falls flat, when you reverse your positions Renn," Vim said gently.

Ah...

My hands started to tremble as Vim laid out the most obvious thing for the whole world to see.

Holding his gaze, I realized he really did know. He really knew all along.

He knew I related to Landi, and if fate had twisted and been different... it could have been me asking for the heart, not her.

And yet still... he had given the responsibility to me...

Which meant...

Turning my head, to look at Landi's pleading eyes... I wondered if this was to be my fate.

To be the one to decide the fate of others from now on. In his place.

Because he was so set in his ways. Because he placed me so highly in his mind, that to him I deserved... and was worthy enough for such a responsibility.

Well...

That was kind of what I wanted, I think.

To help him protect himself. From the very things he protected.

If it meant... being responsible like this... in this way... for everyone and everything...

Then... well...

I looked at the heart, and squeezed it. It thumped, and felt oddly warm... and I was glad I didn't feel some strange desire to keep it anymore. I wanted to get rid of this thing as fast as possible. And not just because the responsibility of it worried me.

"It could kill you, Landi," I whispered to my friend.

"I'd rather die than never be happy," Landi answered.

"It could kill others," I warned.

"Only until Vim culled it. It'd be a disaster, yes, but no more than I am already to the world," Landi argued.

Staring into her eyes, her beautiful gleaming eyes... full of hope... I felt a little lost.

There was no point asking Vim what he'd choose. He'd never tell me. Because he wanted me to make my own choices. And he knew his choice might interfere with my own.

But what Vim hasn't realized yet... or if he did, wouldn't ever admit it...

Was that I knew him. Better than he likely realized.

I knew his choice already. How could I not?

He had given it to me for this very reason, after all.

He had let me choose. Knowing full well what I'd decide. Since just as I knew him, he knew me.

He knew I'd resonate and relate with her request. A request, when broken down... was one so simple and basic. Something that shouldn't have affected, or avoided her, this long.

To Landi, the woman who shared a so similar desire as I. A woman who was more like me than I thought possible.

Rather... a woman I could have become. Had I not met Vim.

Squeezing the warm heart, I nodded... and then held my hand out.

"Really...?" Landi whispered worriedly. She couldn't take her eyes off the heart, even though she turned her head to look at Vim.

"Hm," Vim nodded, seemingly content.

See...? I knew he had wanted me to give it to her.

Landi said nothing else as she shakily held her hands out... and then gratefully took the heart from me.

She wasted no time and clutched it to her breast, as if it was already the child it'd grant her. As if precious beyond measure. More valuable than the entire kingdom she had built around her.

Smiling at her, I glanced at Vim, who I found to be smiling at me.

I tried not to acknowledge the worry in his smile... and then Landi rushed forward off her chair to wrap me in a hug.

Chapter 232 A Moment, Treasured

The Monarch was naught but ash and stains.

My footsteps made noisy sounds again as I walked along the bottom of the canyon. There was a very thick layer of black ash everywhere, but not a hint or sign of the Monarch's body or its toxic sludge.

It had burnt. The fires had worked. Which wasn't too surprising, they had fed the fire for two days straight. The heat had been so great that many of the knights had suffered burns and blisters, even when standing from a distance.

Stepping up onto a large rock, as to look around again at the area where I had recently fought the Monarch... I wondered which God had been its creator.

I hadn't recognized that dark hue. The toxic sludge was unique too... it seemed like such an odd ability for a God or Monarch to possess. Likely it was some weird mutation... but...

How did the original ability end up like that?

Maybe it was originally some kind of corruption ability. To poison and or convert others to the God's wills.

"Oh well," I said softly. There was no point worrying about it. Even if another Monarch in its blood-line existed... their source was gone. The God that had created them was no more. So the worst they could do was what this one had done.

Poison and torment the weaker creatures of this planet was all they could do anymore.

Honestly though...

“How many could even be left?” I wondered.

There had been a time that I’d encounter them often. Or at least traces of them. Now though...

“Well, this is two in as many years,” I said as I thought of it. This one and the one I had faced with Oplar, not too long ago.

In reality that was... concerning. Then there were those things in Lumen.

I had checked the body of the large one very closely, and hadn’t been able to find a heart. Nor had I sensed the energy of one either. But...

“What if it had been buried, in roots far beneath the city...?” I wondered.

Surely not... right? No matter where a heart was in the body, no matter how distant, didn’t change the energy that flowed into the body from it. It pulsed through the body in a huge wave of heat. It was unmistakable.

The creatures in Lumen, even through their roots, had not possessed that heat. That energy. They had been huge, powerful creatures... but simply creatures of normalcy. If one could call them that.

They were more like the non-humans in the Society than Monarchs. Just... a step further separated from humans.

I sighed at myself, and wondered if I was doing a piss poor job lately. Usually I was a little more sure of myself. A little more confident. Lately I've felt almost as if... well...

"As if I was being led by the nose," I mumbled as I went to climb out of the canyon.

Still... even if I hadn't mistaken those creatures in Lumen, it was undeniable that two Monarchs in as many years were unnatural. Especially lately.

The few that still lived were either the weak ones, like the little two-tailed creature in the Cathedral, or were in hiding and happy to stay sealed away... like Tor. Those like this one, or the one that I had faced with Oplar, were out of place beings. Things that didn't belong anymore. Things too strong and dangerous for this world that was slowly becoming more normal than not.

The age and era of mythos was over. It was time for...

Shuffling a little as I pulled myself up over the ledge of the canyon, I ignored the sound of rocks and dirt falling into the canyon from my clambering. I had dislodged a rock as I pulled myself over.

This time no one was here to bother me. There were still watchtowers stationed around the canyon, and some tents still erected nearby, but the amount of soldiers here had thinned. I could see people staring at me from a distance, but no one was hurrying over. They were just staring.

Either they recognized me, or were too afraid to confront someone who had dared to enter the canyon.

Deciding to not wait long enough to give them a chance to face their fears, or realize it was their job to confront such odd people, I headed back towards the city.

It was far enough that it took a bit to get back, mostly since I hadn't felt like running. It wasn't often lately that I got time alone to think to myself, so I was trying to utilize it while I had it.

Not that I was bothered by Renn's companionship... by any means... but...

Well...

She had a lot of questions. Ones that I wasn't ready to answer, just yet. So I was, admittedly, avoiding her.

Hopefully she understood... and would forgive me for it.

Luckily for me right now, Renn was more concerned with Landi. The two had become inseparable since Renn had handed over that heart. I understood the reason, of course, and honestly... I was okay with it. Pleased with it, even.

But it worried me.

Hopefully Renn wouldn't get any weird ideas from Landi...

Reaching the western gate, I approached the entrance as the guards grew alert. Half a dozen soldiers stepped away from the small guardhouse buildings on either side of the entry gate, to face me as I approached.

Hm, what was this? Were they going to deny me entry...? Really? When I had left earlier I had stopped and made small talk with these men, on purpose, so they'd remember me and...

"What did you do, man?" the one I had spent the most time talking to asked worriedly as I came to a stop a few feet from him.

Huh...?

Then I realized they weren't on edge or guard of me, but instead looking at me as if I was crazy and...

Glancing down, I sighed as I realized what the problem was.

I was covered in soot and ash. I looked as if I had just rolled around in an oven, or chimney. One that hadn't been cleaned in years.

Well... in a way...

"I fell," I said lightly.

One of the men scoffed, and a few others laughed.

"Don't tell me you went into that canyon..." one then said worriedly.

Great. What the heck was wrong with me? I should have noticed and realized this would have happened... it wasn't as if I had actually rolled around in the stuff, but I had both walked in it and climbed up the cliff walls which had been layered in the stuff. Plus falling down into it, causing that huge plume of smoke likely hadn't helped either.

"I did mention Landi had wanted me to check it," I said to them, reminding them about what I had said upon leaving.

"Well... yea... but..." the one nearest me stepped forward, and glanced me up and down. "Think we should be worried?" he asked his buddies after a second of staring at me.

"I highly doubt he's lying about Landi's orders. Who is stupid enough to do that? You going to argue with her about it?" One asked.

"Do you guys think I should bathe before telling her what I saw?" I intruded into their conversation, to steer it a little.

"Gods yes. She'd have you culled on the spot if you showed up looking like that," the one farthest said loudly.

The rest of the guards nodded, and I smiled as they all visibly decided to let me do just that.

"Get going then," the one who had stepped over to me said, gesturing for me to hurry.

"Will do," I said as I stepped forward, stepping through the small path the guards had made for me as I headed for the gate.

They wanted me to hurry, both to not incur Landi's wrath... but also so that they didn't get the orders to do the deed themselves.

People didn't like killing their fellows, when all they had been doing is their job, after all.

Entering the city, I smiled at myself and wondered if I should actually find a bathhouse, or just go back to the castle as I was.

Landi wouldn't actually care. Plus I'd rather bathe in the castle than a public bathhouse, simply as to avoid causing a ruckus... but...

As I hurried deeper into the city, I debated sneaking in instead of having to convince the guards to let me be. The ones at the gate had let me pass, since I had stopped to let them remember me before leaving... but...

I'd not done such a thing with any of the guards at the palace. And in this state they'd likely not believe me right away...

But if I snuck in I'd need to climb up the side of the palace. I'd done it many times before, but it was a pain. The monoliths were pillars of stone, yes, but solid. Flat. Perfectly cut, without edges or grooves to grab onto. Half the time I needed to damage the rock just to make footholds and places to grab at.

I hated breaking those monoliths. There weren't many left anymore, so breaking them made me feel like a piece of...

"My chimney could use a good sweeping as well, lad!" an older woman teased me as I passed her on the street.

Waving lightly at her as I laughed, I wasn't too surprised when I received several other similar jokes from those I walked by along the way to the palace.

By the time I reached the palace, I decided to just enter the normal way. I'll just have the guards run off to verify who I was with Landi, and deal with the waiting.

Yet instead of finding the normal guards at the palace entrance... I found the muscular woman who was on Landi's team of consultants. I wasn't sure yet if she was a general, or just some politician or czar... but her appearance alone made one assume, of course.

She noticed my entrance into the palace rather quickly, and stepped over to me before I could even try to fully enter the palace and get stopped by the guards.

"I hear your name is Vim," she said as she approached.

"It is," I said.

She studied me, and crossed her huge arms. At first I thought she was trying to be intimidating, but it became clear she was just... unsure of what to say or do.

"Need something?" I asked after a few moments of silence. Some of the guards had approached, but had stopped at a distance. As if just to listen, and to be ready for any orders.

The muscular woman hesitated, and then glanced down at my feet... then she nodded. "I just... wanted to meet you, I guess. My mother knew you," she said.

I frowned at the woman, and tried to remember the people I'd known here. I came here often enough along my routes, but usually didn't spend too long here. A few days at a time, at most. "She had?" I asked.

"Well... honestly you might not have known her. You had saved her from Landi's wrath once, and she told me if I ever saw you I should make sure to treat you right," she said.

Treat me right...? "Well, thank you I suppose...?" I said.

She frowned but nodded. "Did you go into the canyon again?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Was it okay? Should we set it aflame again?" she asked.

"No. It should be fine. But I'd recommend not going near that canyon, or any of the cracks around it, for some time. Just in case," I said honestly.

She nodded, and seemed relieved to hear me say so.

“Oh. Right. You probably want to let Queen Landi know,” she realized, then turned to the nearby guards who were whispering to each other about us. “Let this man pass into the inner palace,” she ordered.

The guards quickly nodded and saluted, but didn’t move from their spots. They looked as unsure as the woman in front of me did.

“Thanks,” I said as I went to round her, as to head for the stairs that led to the private quarters upstairs.

“Will you be around for awhile, sir Vim?” the woman asked as I did.

I paused to glance at her, and wondered what she actually wanted. Was she just... being awkward, because she wasn’t sure what to say or how to act in front of me? Or was it something else?

“I’ll be leaving in a few days, now that my job is done. If you need me for something just ask. I’m not like Landi who can’t take criticism or unable to hear bad news,” I said to her, inviting her to tell me what was wrong.

The woman stared at me for a moment, and then I noticed her muscles tighten as she shifted on a heel. Ah. So something was wrong.

“I’ll take that to heart sir. Thank you,” she said after a moment.

I nodded, and decided she either didn't feel it necessary now... or didn't want to say it here when being seen by so many others. So I stepped away and walked past the guards, to head deeper into the palace.

Leaving the onlookers behind, I headed into the section of the palace that only had a few servants. Ones accustomed and expected to keep their heads down, and to not notice or be noticed. Honestly it wasn't my kind of environment, but it helped during moments like these.

Climbing the stairs, I entered the upper-palace. The section where Landi was usually alone, except for the few trusted and private servants. Like the descendants of those women she had acquired years ago.

"Ah..." I paused a moment, as I realized that muscular woman was likely one of them. Or at least, a descendant of them.

That made more sense.

Landi didn't like humans, and was often cruel to them, but the reality is... like most predators, she cherished those she claimed as her own. And those families were definitely hers. She saw them as one would a pack, or family, in a way. Servants, but her servants. So they were special. To her.

"Vim! You dirty man, come here!"

Looking up from my thoughts, I stepped forward to go to Landi. She was waving at me from behind a doorway.

“Dirty...? What’d he do this time?” Renn’s voice sounded like a mother annoyed with her child as I rounded the doorway, and entered the room.

“I love how you sound so used to it, Renn dear,” Landi teased.

“Well is it a surprise? He’s always ruining his clothes and never even...” Renn went quiet as she tilted her head at me, and took in the sight of me. Landi snickered as she went to join Renn at the table.

They were eating. A human woman was placing plates down... but she too had paused as to stare at me.

“Vim...” Renn groaned at me from her seat.

“I’ll need to borrow your bath, Landi,” I said.

“Of course you will. Hellen, clean that thing up and make sure to get all the gunk he’s brought in too. Then burn those clothes he’s wearing,” Landi ordered.

The woman serving them food nodded quickly, saying nothing but very obviously agreeing with the order.

I waited for the servant to finish serving the food. The cart she had brought the food in on had been rather full, the kind of full that would have been seen as ridiculous for two young looking women. The

kind of wastefulness was to be expected of a Queen... but I knew the servant, and those who had prepared it, knew better.

Odds are very little of that food would be wasted, by the time Renn and Landi were done with it all.

“Well? Is it gone?” Landi asked as she took a seat next to Renn. The table they sat at was a large one, made of stone, but they were sitting closely to one another.

A little too close for my liking, to be honest.

Why'd I need to worry over other women more than I did men? Or was I just being paranoid?

“Yes. I'd order a perimeter around the canyon to avoid, in case of lingering toxins, but it and the gunk are all gone,” I said.

Renn let out a small relieved sigh, and Landi nodded as she went to eating.

I noted the glowing orb resting on the table, near their dishes. It was sitting on a tiny pillow, as to keep it from rolling.

She hadn't placed it in her body yet.

“Hungry, Vim?” Renn asked as she went to grab some utensils.

“Maybe later,” I said as I watched Hellen, Landi’s servant, place the last plate of food onto the table.

The human woman quietly collected her small cart, and a few empty cups and plates that were likely from earlier, and began pushing it towards me and the door.

“He probably ate the Monarch, that’s why he’s full,” Landi teased.

Renn though didn’t laugh, and instead frowned seriously. “Does he actually eat them?” she asked with a whisper, as if I was already out of the room.

Shaking my head at the two, I turned to follow the woman out of the room. Her little cart was impressively quiet as it rolled along the stone floor.

Leaving Landi and Renn behind, I followed her down the hallway.

“I’ll assume you need no help bathing, Lord Vim?” Hellen asked calmly.

Oh...? She must remember me from my other visits. Interesting.

The servants who had prepared my bath earlier, after the fight with the Monarch, had been older women. I didn't remember this one.

"No. Just toss me into the nearest tub of hot water please," I said.

She giggled softly. "And lots of soap and scrubbing, I'm sure," she said.

Well... maybe. I had bathed after getting back earlier, after fighting the Monarch, but hadn't been as nasty thanks to the scrubbing and shower near the canyon.

We rounded a corner and went down a smaller hallway. One that led to a larger room which branched into hallways and a series of rooms that had people working inside of them. I heard small-talk, plates clanking, and a fire... maybe even several fires burning.

In the center of the large room, was a square lift. One with large sturdy ropes, which they used as something of an elevator. Likely to help carry things up and down floors that were too annoying to carry up stairs.

"I beg your patience. My mother would not be happy if I let you into the kitchens in your state," Hellen paused to say to me, before a door.

Ah. Right.

I nodded, and obeyed as she hurried into the kitchen with her cart.

I heard her talk to others, talking softly in likely hopes that I'd not hear them, but nothing they had said was too concerning. One of the workers had only wanted to know who I was, and why I was so important.

Hellen returned, with an older woman. One that was undoubtedly her mother. They had the same build and hair, though the mother's had started to gray.

"Welcome back Lord Vim. We actually prepared a bath for Landi's new friend, so one's already ready. I'll go get you clothes," Hellen's mother said in greeting, and without waiting for my response hurried away. Heading down another hallway.

I watched her for a moment before going to follow Hellen. She led me down a different hallway, which led to a larger one. It wasn't much later and I was in one of the sunken baths of the palace, scrubbing away.

There were several baths here in this palace, as far as I was aware, so I didn't feel bad for taking Renn's.

If anything it just meant I'd get to tease her about it later.

Although Hellen lingered for a moment, likely waiting for me to ask for help in bathing, she didn't stay long. Once her mother returned with some clothes, they left them and me alone as they returned to their duties.

I took my time to clean, but not so much because I needed to. Unlike the toxic gunk I had swum in the other day, these stains were of just simple ash. A pain to clean off, to a degree... honestly the biggest pain would be for the servants who would have to scrub the large sunken bath tub once I was done.

Yet it seemed I had taken a little too long, as right as I got out of the bath to dry off, Renn peaked her head around the bath's entrance.

Pausing a moment as our eyes met, I couldn't help but smile as she beamed me a grin and stepped into the bathroom. "Done already?" she asked.

"You'd not have enjoyed it Renn, look at the water," I said as I went to drying off.

She did, and obviously saw the black-stained water... yet she hummed in a way that told me she'd not have minded at all.

"Weren't you having a meal?" I asked.

"We finished some time ago Vim. Landi's now with her... generals? She calls them her council," Renn said as she stepped over to the stone rack that had my new freshly folded clothes.

She lifted the shirt they'd readied for me and studied it, and I wondered what to think of her strange new tendency to bother with my clothing.

Maybe she'd always been this way, and I'd either not noticed... Or maybe it was simply the fact that to her I was now important enough to worry about.

Was it a cat thing? They liked to clean themselves didn't they? Or was it just a personality trait unique to her? Although Renn was a little similar to cats in nature, there were some differences. A non-humans bloodline influenced them, but not controlled them.

"Does Landi not want you to meet with her council?" I asked. She had been with Landi in the tent, when I had been fighting the Monarch, but that might have simply been a necessity. Honestly her being kept at a distance would have made sense before the whole Monarch fiasco, as to keep Renn and me out of the loop... but now Renn and her were close friends. There was no reason to keep Renn at a distance.

"She invited me. I've listened enough, I don't like how they all seem... scared of her. There's really no counseling going on at all, it's just them asking Landi what she wants them to do, and then they go do it. Right or wrong," Renn said as she put the shirt down and picked up the underwear.

"Maybe her decisions are just so perfect no one needs to argue or counsel against them?" I offered her a way to look at it.

"Funny, Vim," Renn said softly, telling me her thoughts on my words. There must be several things she disagreed with. I wonder what they were...

I smiled at her as I finished drying off, and deposited the now ruined towels into the stone... trash-bin looking thing they used as a hamper.

“Can I put those on?” I asked her for permission as I stepped over to her. She was now studying one of the pant legs closely, at the seam.

“Hm...? Why can’t you?” she asked as she turned to frown at me.

“You’re looking at them as if they’re going to bite me,” I said.

Renn smirked a happy grin, and then handed me a piece of clothing. “I don’t like the colors here. They’re the same as the rocks and stuff, it’s boring,” she said.

Ah. The dull browns. Right.

“You women get whites and silvers, though,” I said as I went to dressing. She was right now wearing one of those white dresses. It looked good on her, especially since it looked almost see-through.

“Yes, but you’re not wearing dresses Vim. Or would you? I bet we can find one that fits... some of the women here are rather muscular,” she said.

“I know, I met one of them downstairs. She seemed to want something, but hadn’t been able to ask it,” I said as I finished dressing.

“Hm...? You mean Landi’s guard?” Renn asked.

“She’s her guard? Makes sense,” I said as I gestured for Renn to follow me out of the bath. She didn’t though, and remained next to the rack... as if not wanting to leave just yet.

I patiently waited for her as she studied me... and I realized she was judging the clothes on me.

It seemed she really was offended by them. I wonder why... they looked normal, honestly. The colors were bland, yes, but they were made of nice feeling cotton. Something that would have been very expensive at a market. Especially here in this region.

“What is it Renn?” I asked her gently. Maybe it was more than the clothes and she was just using them as something to vent her frustration on.

“Hm... You...” She started to say whatever it was, but then blinked and frowned at me. Then she shook her head. “Never mind,” she decided.

I smiled at her as she stepped past me, and headed out of the baths and out into the hallway. She seemed troubled.

Following her, I watched her dress. Although it looked see-through, it was designed in layers. Only the top layer was actually see-through. Which kept certain things hidden. Yet I could easily see her dark tail swaying beneath the long dress thanks to the whiteness of the dress, and the couple feet of what wasn’t hidden dangling just above the ground, curled upward.

That swaying tail had a bit of a tightness to it. As if it was stiff from muscle pains or something. She was definitely bothered by something.

This is twice now that a woman has wanted to say something to me today, and chose not to.

Unlike the one downstairs though... this one's opinions, desires, and worries mattered to me. A lot.

"Did you come to see if the maids were scrubbing me or something?" I asked, hoping a small joke would draw it out of her.

Renn's ears twitched, and then she glanced back at me. "I knew I heard her ask..." she mumbled.

I smirked, and couldn't believe it. Was that really what was wrong? Hellen had indirectly asked, but not so point blank or likely with any weird ideas in the first place.

Renn noticed my smirk and looked away, back in front of her. She huffed, likely annoyed that I had smiled so brazenly at her.

"Next time I'm filthy I'll let you bathe me if you'd like. Cats are known for grooming," I said.

Her tail twitched. "Maybe I will," she said simply. She said it as if she was threatening me.

Amused, Renn and I walked quietly for a moment. We left the hallway, turning into a familiar one. One that led to the large rooms we'd been using for our visit with Landi. Where Renn and Landi sat on couches, relaxing and talking with one another.

Landi had given Renn an actual room, with a bed, but I'd not seen it or knew where it was. I tried to ignore the part of me that wanted to ask her about it. She'd probably interpret it oddly, when in reality I kind of just wanted to take a nap.

"Are we leaving soon, Vim?" Renn asked as we entered one of the large rooms. The one we'd been in earlier, before the whole Monarch fiasco.

"I'd like to, yes. Before Landi gets us involved in more drama," I said as I headed for one of the larger couches. It was the one I had been sitting on and...

Yes. It was still there. Although no longer on the couch, but on a new table. One that hadn't been there before. My little pieces of wood and strips of leather were all neatly gathered, with the knives. The scraps and shavings I'd collected on the floor were now gone, as well.

They'd cleaned it up for me.

Renn hummed, and I glanced over at her. She was standing a little awkwardly a few feet away, looking at a distant fireplace. One that wasn't lit, but was ready to be. Someone had replenished the firewood, and readied it. There were kindling and shavings in a small pile near it... maybe even the very wood shavings they had cleaned up near my seat.

Honestly a good use for them. I couldn't complain.

"Landi's going to tease you if she returns to find you so hesitant, Renn. You're usually a little more confident," I said.

Renn's attention returned to me, and she glared at me. "It's your fault," she said.

"Never said it wasn't," I said as I rounded the couch and went to sit back down. As to return to my little... project.

Renn huffed softly, and then walked over to me. She too rounded the couch, but hesitated before sitting down next to me.

Glancing at her, I wondered why she was doing her best to not look at me. She was now looking at one of the nearby tables, even though the table was empty. It wasn't even that fancy, nor had any weird designs on it.

"You can ask Renn," I said as I picked up the half-finished gift and the little knife that had been lying next to it.

"I don't want to," she whispered.

I frowned, and glanced up at her... and realized she had a rather sad look on her face. I hefted the little thin strip of boxwood. "I meant about this," I said. Maybe she had thought I was speaking about Landi, her situation, or the Monarch or something.

"I know you were. It's for me, isn't it?" she asked softly, yet still hadn't looked at me or it.

I blinked, and wondered why she looked sad after saying such a thing. And... why was she still looking that way, even though her ears were fully centered on me?

"Um... yes... But now I'm worried, is it that bad?" I asked, suddenly very conscious of myself.

Renn's sad look shifted into a weird smile. One that looked unsure of itself. And her eyes danced wildly, as if trying to find me but not able to. She kept looking from me to the table. "No! No... I uh... I don't want to spoil it. If you tell me what it is, then... well..."

Ah...

I sat back, lowering the gift and the knife to my lap. "You don't want to know about it, because it'll spoil the moment," I said as I understood.

She nodded quickly.

“And thus your worry. That we can’t talk comfortably, because I’d focus on this,” I said, as I continued to understand her.

“Well... yes...? It’s fine when I can focus on Landi, but...” she grumbled a little, and I couldn’t help but find her adorable.

She was unhappy. But not because of something serious, or because she was hurt or worried. It was simply because she wanted to spend time with me, but not while I was working on her gift. Because then she’d want to watch, and study it, and ask about it.

This was why she had hesitated to return here. This was why she had walked stiffly, and her tail had not flowed calmly like it usually did as she walked.

She had known the moment I came back into this room, I’d return my attention to my little project... and even though she was more than happy to let me do so, she also regretted it. Because then she’d have to find something else to focus on, since she didn’t want to see it until it was finished.

Sighing at her, I wondered what I was going to do with her. This meant I’d never be able to make her gifts without finding a way to hide them, or distract her while I spent time on them.

She was too curious for her own good, wasn’t she?

“I know...! It’s so stupid... I can’t believe I’m actually bothered by this. It makes me feel so ungrateful and... I’m sorry,” Renn rambled as she mumbled softly, and I noticed the red flush. She was embarrassed.

“Quite the opposite. I’m sorry I didn’t think of it. I... honestly would have told you all about it, had you asked,” I said.

“Exactly,” she said, nodding.

Right. She didn’t want to know about it. She wanted to cherish it. To cherish the surprise. For her it was more than just the gift itself, it was the moments that led up to it. The giving, and receiving of it.

Likely a source of her perfect memory. She remembered everything flawlessly... which meant she very likely wanted to cherish the moment she received it from me, so she could always look back at that memory fondly. The gift, the item, would fade and eventually break or be lost... but that memory would last her forever.

And I, being the kind of man I was... wouldn’t have realized that. Hell, I hadn’t. I’d almost went ahead and told her as I sat down, telling her everything.

Once again I’d not... noticed Renn’s personality. She was a gentle soul, who cherished such moments and gifts. To her they were more valuable than anything else in this world.

Even if to me it was just a small piece of wood. Something I could replace a thousand times over... To her it was something much more.

To her it was a treasure. To me a flimsy piece of wood, able to be recreated in a single afternoon.

Now though... was it? No. It wasn't. Suddenly the little piece of wood in my hand, which wasn't even finished, was more a treasure than that heart we'd just given Landi.

"You want to treasure these moments," I said, understanding.

"I already do Vim... I... I just..." Renn hesitated, and I knew it was because she wasn't sure what to say, or how to say it.

She felt ridiculous, because she believed her desires and wants to be greedy. As if she was trying to attain too much, too quickly.

Yet... that wasn't true at all.

Even if she was asking for something difficult to give, in all honesty... I fully believed she deserved it. She deserved every moment of happiness she could attain in this life.

And...

Staring into her eyes, and the tiny layer of tears within them... I smiled at her.

I would like to treasure these moments too.

"I could put two couches back-to-back. So we can sit without looking at each other. You'd be able to hear me work on it, but nothing else," I offered her a solution.

Renn frowned, but not in disappointment. She pondered it for a moment, and then glanced over at the nearest couch. "That... might work, if you promise to keep the conversations neat enough to keep me from wanting to watch you," she admitted.

I nodded, willing to try. "I'd like to finish it before we leave Renn. It's difficult to do such fine work while walking," I said.

"I figured..." she mumbled.

Putting the wood and knife down, I stood and decided to just do it. If Renn was going to be so unsure of herself... then I needed to take charge.

As I re-arranged some furniture, I noticed one of the servants peek in. likely hearing the noise. They only watched for a moment as I put two couches back-to-back, and then watched Renn happily sit in the center of hers. Right behind where I'd be sitting.

"Thank you Vim," she said.

“Hm. Finding ways to keep your adorable side happy is difficult, but a pleasant past-time,” I said as I went to return to my seat, and finish my project.

Renn giggled at me as I picked up the remaining boxwood... and studied it for a moment.

Hopefully... it was worth her wait and expectations. Maybe I should have found ivory instead...

“Well, what would you like to talk about?” I asked her as I shifted the wood, to find the spot I had stopped at the other night.

“Hm...” Renn hummed a moment, and I heard her tail slide back and forth along the couch. It sounded much smoother in its movements compared to earlier. “How about... Merit’s home? Her kingdom? Had it been like this?” she asked.

My little knife paused a moment, and I frowned.

Hell. Why not? If Merit hadn't told her already, I doubt she'd grow too upset with me for telling her.

“She was born in a pond,” I started as I returned to forming the comb.

Renn was right. Moments like these should be treasured. They were valuable. Too valuable.

I'd forgotten such a thing. Hopefully she'd teach me to cherish more things, or at least remind me how to do so.

#### Chapter 234 A Man of Many Gifts

Combing Vim's hair, I felt ridiculously happy as he carried me through the salt flats.

I was sitting on his shoulders. Being carried as if I was but a child. Beneath my butt were our bags on his back. We now had three. We'd been forced to add to our luggage, thanks to the insistence of Landi. She had gifts for those we'd meet along our journey back north.

And I had a gift of my own.

The comb was about the length of my hand, but not as wide. It was very light, and although it had many little teeth and looked frail... it was actually rather resilient and sturdy. The ends had soft leather strips somehow sewn into the wood, making it easy to grip, and the rounded curve of the top of the comb had lots of little designs. There were several small scenes of small animals on each side of the comb.

It told a story. From one side, to the other. Of my journey. It started with a goat, crane, and turtle... then ended a small badger and cat.

The thing made my heart fill full of warmth, beyond anything I could describe.

Running the comb through his hair, I smirked as I watched his hair conform to the new direction... only to return to its original state a moment later. I'd been messing with his hair for a good long moment, and for some reason I found it utterly amusing that his hair would easily get combed to one side... but

eventually go back to its original state shortly after. As if with a mind of its own. His hair wasn't very long, just long enough to grab at, but it still shouldn't reform so quickly. It meant it had something to do with his traits.

It was odd since his hair was actually really soft. It flowed in the wind too sometimes, so it was very strange.

"I think your hair is broken," I said happily.

"It likely is, yes."

Vim didn't seem bothered at all. He was completely focused on his walking through the ankle high waters.

Waters that smelled strongly of salt.

I paused in my combing of his hair to look around us. Off in the distance, I could see mountains all around us... but they looked tiny. Distant. Impossibly far. The whole area was a flatland, impossibly flat, made even flatter by the water covering it all.

It was a little strange, honestly. Not only was there a bunch of water out here in the desert, somehow, it was also... rather still. Although basically a giant pond, the water wasn't moving much.

We'd entered this strange pond of salt about an hour ago. It had taken us a couple days of walking to get here from Landi's city, and it had required us to pass over a mountain too.

"Is the ground hard, Vim?" I asked as I glanced down, past his head. The water was a little murky, but I could see the cracks he was walking on. His bare feet looked like they weren't sinking into the ground at all. Even though this area's brittle ground should be mushy with all this water covering it.

As I leaned over, Vim's hand grabbed onto my right leg. He held on gently, and honestly didn't need to. I wouldn't fall off from a little moving... but Vim was oddly protective sometimes.

"It's harder than you think, yes. But there's a layer of salt, that feels slippery," he said, lightly holding onto my leg.

Salt...

"Can I taste it?" I asked.

He chuckled at me. "You may. But it's actually very dirty. If you want the salt, we just need to boil the water. I'd honestly not recommend drinking it, but you can have a lick of a finger if you'd like," he said as he paused... and crouched.

I lowered, and smirked as he lowered me far enough that I could reach down and stick some fingers into the water. I made sure to not let my tail get wet as I did so.

Surprisingly, it was colder than I'd thought.

Lifting my now wet fingers, I stared at them as I realized they now stunk a little.

Still, I went ahead and licked them.

And regretted it.

"Bleh..." I groaned as I went to wiping my fingers on Vim's shoulder.

He chuckled at me. "I warned you," he said.

"Not well enough," I argued.

I could faintly taste the salt, but honestly I more so tasted stale water. Nasty water. As if it was more gunk than water.

As I ran my tongue along my teeth, to try and get the taste out of my mouth, Vim held up a water canteen for me.

Taking it thankfully, I made sure to swish the water in my mouth to get the taste out as much as I could.

Then I swallowed.

“Did... you just swallow? Why didn’t you spit it out?” he asked after a moment.

“And waste water?” I asked him back.

“We’ll be able to refill tonight Renn,” he said.

“Really...? Where?” I asked as I looked around again. The water seemed to on forever... Vim was walking at a good pace, but honestly I didn’t see how we’d be getting out of these salt flats anytime soon.

“You’ll see. Don’t feel like you need to ration the water. In fact it won’t be long and you’ll start seeing familiar scenery. We’re heading northward,” he said.

“Hm...” I didn’t doubt him, but I was going to have to wait and see how he’d prove it to me. The mountain we were walking towards looked... days away, at least.

Handing him back the canteen, I glanced at my comb. I debated going back to messing with Vim’s hair, but decided to just put it away. My own hair, and tail, had been brushed enough that any more would just cause issues anyway.

I slid it into one of the little pockets on my leather vest. There was one that was just the right size for it to snugly hide away. As if it had been made to fit.

Knowing Vim, he likely had carved it with such a thing in mind.

“Thank you, Vim,” I said again.

“Hm,” Vim no longer told me it was fine. Even though I knew he was tired of hearing it.

But...

I smiled at him as I put my hands on his head, and looked around again. “So I’m assuming animals don’t drink this stuff,” I said.

“No. Drinking this would just make you thirstier, like drinking from the ocean. Unless you're adapted to it... like the animals that live here,” he said.

“So... is this in a way, an ocean?” I asked.

Vim chuckled. “No. It’s just a lake. I suppose technically you can call it a dry lake,” he said.

“Doesn’t seem very dry... though I suppose that’s because you can’t drink it huh? Dry lake because it might as well be,” I said, happy that I understood.

Vim tilted his head. “An apt description.”

“Is it wrong?” I asked.

“Not really. The reason some folks call it a dry lake is because it dries out often. It’s actually dry more than not, usually. Most the time I come here there’s not a drop of water to be found,” he said.

“Huh...” I tried to envision it.

Odds are it looked similar... just with less reflecting, thanks to the lack of the water’s surface.

“One day you’ll see. Maybe the next trip,” he said.

For a short while I kept silent, just basking in the moment.

Vim likely had no idea how happy I was right now. Or how happy his little off-hand comments made me, either.

He understood me. He was learning. But...

Glancing down at the man's head, I wondered if I'd be able to get him to carry me like this again someday. He was only doing it now so that I'd not ruin my boots, or get the gunk on my feet.

"Would you carry me like this if it's dry, though?" I asked gently, hoping he'd catch the hint.

Vim tilted his head, and after a moment of pondering he nodded. "I suppose I could, yes."

Giggling at him, I ran my fingers through his hair. "I can't be that heavy," I said.

"Hm. I carry thousands of souls Renn. Yours is mighty indeed, but... no, you're not heavy," he said.

I stopped messing with his hair as I decoded his words. He spoke of the Society, of course, but...

Before I could say anything, shadows disturbed the world around us.

Looking around, and finding nothing, I looked up. And watched as a large flock of birds flew past.

Squinting at them, since the sun was right behind them... I tried to figure out what they were.

“Some type of gulls?” I asked.

Vim glanced up a little. “Those are flamingos.”

“Which are...?” I asked as I watched them fly past us. There were a few smaller ones still overhead, but most were now leaving us behind.

“They’re actually who we’re going to be meeting soon,” he said.

I frowned and looked away from the birds. “Huh?”

He nodded. “We’re... making a small stop outside of our normal route. I’d like to introduce you to one of my friends,” Vim said.

Leaning forward, to see his expression, I smiled at him. “Really?” I asked.

He nodded.

Excited, I sat back up and found the birds again. They were now smaller dots in the sky, heading deeper into the salt-flats. They were going the same way we were, by the looks of it.

“Usually you’d ask about them,” Vim said gently.

“I want to be surprised,” I said.

He nodded again. “Should I not have told you?” he asked.

“Hm... maybe. I’ll be honest Vim, I’m still... trying to understand my own desires. Like the comb. I wanted to know, yet didn’t. I’m... really not sure what to think of it all,” I said as I remembered those weird feelings the other day.

I had wanted to know so badly, yet at the same time had wanted to run away the moment Vim had picked it up. It made no sense.

“You’re curious, yet love the surprise. It’s surprising you never wandered far from your home Renn,” he said.

“Hm...? Why’s that weird?”

“You’ve the personality of a wanderer. An adventurer. I’m surprised you don’t have the desire to voyage to the ends of the earth, as to see everything,” he explained.

“Ah... I’ll be honest I had wanted to. Once. But...” I shifted a little, and noticed how Vim also shifted... in a way that made sure I’d never lean too far or fall. As if he was willing to bend and tilt as much as possible as to keep me upright. It was a little gesture, but one that made me smile. “I got hurt. A lot. When younger. So I gave up trying to travel too much. I didn’t like getting hurt,” I said.

“Hm...” Vim’s thumb thumped against my right calf, reminding me he hadn’t let go. Even though I wasn’t leaning over anymore.

“We’re adventuring, Vim. Aren’t we?” I asked. In fact he was right. I was enjoying this beyond measure.

“Yes. But you’re still getting hurt,” he said softly.

Ah... so he had been thinking of the times I’d gotten hurt, or cried.

Before he or I could get too emotional over it, I patted his head. “Are you a Monarch Vim?” I asked.

He chuckled at me. “No Renn, I’m not.”

“Why the laugh?” I asked. I’d been completely serious.

“Because you had sounded adorable. Can I ask why you think I am?” he asked.

Had I said it oddly...? I had thought I had asked it rather seriously... “Landi believes you’re one,” I said.

“I asked why you thought I was one, not why she thinks I am,” Vim said.

I squeezed his head lightly, and kind of liked how he let me move his head around as I did so. “I mean... a lot of people do. Merit does too,” I said.

“So you think I am, just because others think so? I’d thought you possessed more self respect for yourself than to simply believe what you hear,” Vim said.

“Oh shush Vim... fine...” I grumbled as I grabbed two handfuls of his hair. He tilted his head a little, almost enough to rip the hair out of his head, but I made sure to not keep my hands too stiff. I didn’t want to hurt him to prove my point. “You’re as strong as one. You heal from wounds that no one else can... and even do so quickly. Your eye had only taken a few days to re-grow, Vim. Even my uncle, my great-uncle, a giant cat, hadn’t been that resilient. Landi had taken his eye... you’d not even flinch at such a wound,” I said.

“How big of a cat was he?” Vim asked.

“Huh...? Well... I guess pretty big,” I hadn’t actually meant to bring him up in such a way.

“Was he as big as that Monarch?” he asked further.

“Oh. No. but... he was likely closer in size to that thing than us, I suppose,” I said as I thought of it.

Vim hummed, and I sighed as I let go of his hair.

I had planned to tease him by saying if I yanked his hair out, it'd just grow back overnight. Now I felt a little awkward. “If you're not a Monarch or something like it, I can't imagine just what you could be,” I said. I wasn't aware of any animal that could heal like him, on any level. Plus it wouldn't explain his strength either.

He had fought that Monarch for hours, and when he finally showed himself... he hadn't had any visible wounds at all. Not a one. Which meant he had either defeated it with ease, or had healed from all of his injuries from it in that short of a time.

Either made him unnatural beyond measure. Even if one included our kind's strangeness.

Vim said nothing as he continued walking. He didn't splash as much as a normal person would when walking, but it was still noisy when we weren't talking.

“Though... can Monarchs be human? I mean, in shape and stuff? Seems they're all animals, or big beasts. Was Tor an animal too?” I asked.

“Tor is a mouse. Though... he’s small or big, depending on his mood,” he said.

Hm... “So then you can’t be one, can you? Since you look so human,” I decided.

Vim chuckled.

“What...? Am I wrong?” I asked.

“Not at all. I just found it funny that you so calmly said aloud what so many have failed to notice over the years. You’re very right, Monarchs are usually not... human in appearance. However, their descendants can be. And although not a pure Monarch, a child of one can still be a Monarch all the same. Bray is a good example of that. She’s a daughter of a Monarch, but I’d never hesitate to call her one. She’s very powerful, and possesses odd abilities,” Vim said.

“Hm... so... how distant does one need to be? You say that I’m likely a descendant of one... just where does the Monarch blood end?” I asked.

“The moment one is born without a heart. Sometimes it can be a single generation. Other times it can take many,” he said.

Ah. One of those little orb things... “And you can sense those things,” I said.

He nodded.

“Is it a smell? Or do you just... know somehow?” I asked.

“They give off a small hum. One I can hear. I can also feel their heat, their energy, if I’m close enough,” I said.

“A hum...” I tried to think of the heart that I’d given Landi. I remembered it pulsating, and being warm, but hadn’t remembered hearing it hum or make noise.

“It’s just something I hear. Think of it like hearing a heartbeat,” he said.

I nodded as I pondered it for a moment... but got distracted by a small breeze. It blew my hair around a bit, until it settled down on Vim’s head.

Brushing our hair, I eventually found myself focused on the spots I had just tugged and grabbed, I noticed my own hair laying all over his. My hair was getting really long.

“Vim... does your hair even grow? Do your nails?” I asked.

“Very, very slowly,” he said softly.

Slow. I'd known him for over two years now and... his hair was the same. I honestly don't think it'd grown at all.

"It's like you're frozen in time," I whispered.

Vim tilted his head. "It does, doesn't it?" he agreed.

It really made no sense. I understood that we were... different than humans. We lived longer, and as such sometimes were stronger. Faster. We healed better. All traits from our time with...

"My family believed that we had hunted for our gods," I said softly.

"That's actually very likely. Somewhere up your lineage was undoubtedly a Monarch. So yes... they're right," he said.

"Why would gods need hunters?" I asked.

Vim chuckled, and I was about to grab his hair again. And maybe this time tug a little. But he shook his head. "You're very astute Renn. I enjoy your mind. It's odd isn't? Why would Gods need help with anything?" he asked me.

Was... was this some kind of test? "Are you saying we're all misunderstanding something? Or that the answer to that is what you are?" I asked.

"Hm. No. Maybe... rather I was just enjoying your journey to enlightenment."

Enlightenment... "That's an odd word, Vim," I said.

"It means," Vim started to explain it, but I patted his head to stop him.

"I know. I just... found your use of it strange. Who taught you Vim? Who was your teacher?" I asked. Maybe his strange way of thinking was sourced from whoever had taught him. I wonder if they still lived. I'd like to meet them.

Vim then came to a stop.

The water beneath us splashed, a little louder than all the times before, and I actually rocked a little thanks to how abruptly he had stopped walking.

"Vim...?" I glanced around, half expecting some weird threat to be nearby.

Instead there was nothing... just the same endless water. Though off in the distance, in front of us, I could see tiny black silhouettes. Likely the birds from earlier. They were wading in the water.

His hand gripped my calf, and I was once again reminded he hadn't let me go yet. An odd thing, since he really didn't need to hold onto me when he was just walking normally. Then he looked up at me, and I leaned forward a little as to meet his eyes.

"My mother," he said gently.

Blinking at his answer, I found myself a little stunned.

Were his eyes watery...?

"She must have been very wise," I said gently.

"Hm... she was. As was my father," Vim said, and then returned to walking.

Feeling the awkward air, I wondered...

"Vim... you just told me about your parents," I said softly, warning him.

“I know,” he said.

Smiling at him, I wrapped his head into a small hug. He tilted his head, either to try and avoid it or maybe to keep his eyesight clear, but I didn't care. I squeezed his head.

Giggling at him, I felt him let out a heavy sigh.

Extremely happy, I kept squeezing his head for a long moment. It was a little awkward, thanks to how and where I was sitting, but it still felt good.

Vim and I would hug on occasion... but to be honest, I wished we did it more. I tried to always contain myself, since it seemed Vim really didn't like physical contact very much.

“The honest answer Renn...” Vim then said.

I blinked as I sat back up, brushing his hair again as I did. Why'd I find feeling his hair so enjoyable?

“I am, yet am not, a Monarch.”

Hesitating, my fingers lingered near his ears. I'd been about to grab them. “Vim...?” I asked worriedly.

He sighed and nodded. "I know. Sounds stupid. But it's the truth. I'm the closest thing there is to a Monarch, without actually being one," he said.

Unable to believe what he was saying, more so because he was actually saying it aloud in the first place than what it was he was saying... I felt strange.

Should I smile? Cry? What should I do? He likely had just revealed something he's never told anyone else before. To me.

Several minutes went by, and Vim finally glanced up at me. "You okay Renn?" he asked.

I nodded. "I'm just stunned. I don't know what to say."

He scoffed. "I know, isn't it weird? Maybe I'm sick."

I finally smiled as I leaned forward a bit, to smirk at him. "So... do you have a heart?" I asked.

"No. I don't. That's why I'm technically not one. I lack that very qualifier," he said.

"Then... how could you be one, without the thing that is needed?" I asked.

“Because that’s... well...” Vim went silent, and I enjoyed watching the way his expression changed. He was now struggling, internally.

“You’ve told me a lot of secrets so quickly; I think it’s fine if you keep some for later Vim. Don’t want you passing out on me,” I said happily.

He took a very deep breath, and I actually felt it. I noticeably shifted thanks to the movement, and he released it with a very heavy sigh. “Thank you. Yes. Let’s do that. We’ll continue next time,” he said, happy to be granted permission.

I giggled at him.

“Since we’re being all personal... can I ask one too?” Vim then asked.

“Hm? Of course you can,” I said. Honestly at this point there’s likely nothing I’d not tell him. Even the stuff that would make me want to crawl into a hole I’d not hesitate to share right now.

“Are you happy Renn?”

If I had been walking too, this was when I’d come to an abrupt stop.

Absolutely shocked by his question, I felt oddly uncomfortable as I stared at his upturned look. He looked worried. Upset. Bothered. He was genuinely apprehensive of my answer.

“Isn’t it obvious, Vim?” I whispered.

How could he not know? How could he be asking me this? With such a serious expression? After saying what he had just said? After doing what he’s done? Just the last few days alone should have proved to him how happy and content I was.

Was I not laughing enough? Maybe I didn’t smile as often? Had I not giggled like a little girl the other night, when he had handed me the comb? Hasn’t he been listening to the all-night-long conversation between me and Landi, full of tears and joy? Even now, today, hasn’t he been hearing my happy hums as I brushed my hair or his? Can’t he hear in my voice just how much bliss I was in?

Wasn’t it obvious...?

This man of all people in this world should know full well how happy and content I was with my life. Yet he looked as if it was not only in doubt, but...

“I’d like to know, Renn. I’d like to think you are, but...” Vim paused, his walking coming to a stop. His hand on my leg gripped me tighter, as if in worry.

Before he could say more, I bent forward and kissed him.

It was awkward, thanks to our positions... but no amount of clumsy misalignment kept me from doing it right.

After a moment, I sat back up a little. Staring at his face, I couldn't help but laugh. "You should see yourself," I said.

"I'm sure..." he mumbled... then coughed, and returned to walking.

Giggling happily, I couldn't help but fight back the urge to kiss him again. That look on his face was precious.

"I'll admit, I had not expected that at all," Vim said.

"I can tell," I said with a grin.

He went back to walking, making splashing sounds again, and I was a little surprised to feel... a small hesitation in his steps. As if he was suddenly stiff in his legs.

And he called me adorable.

"I'm very happy Vim. Beyond any way I can explain... can I ask why you'd ask such a thing?" I asked him. Hopefully by now he had gotten his mind under control. Usually he was so stoic... so such a shock had probably been painful for him.

“You’ve not cried in awhile,” he then said.

“Cried...? Shouldn’t... shouldn’t that mean I am happy? Why would you think I wasn’t just because I haven’t cried?” I asked, now a little worried.

Vim’s shoulder shifted beneath me, and I recognized the motion. He had just tried to roll his shoulder.

“Well... I guess I was just worried. People stop letting emotions get to them when they’re depressed. You had gotten teary eyed with Landi, when you gave her the heart... but you hadn’t cried. Even when she did. So...” he mumbled as he spoke, as if he wasn’t even sure what he was saying himself.

I mean... did he? Surely he did?

He just proved how deeply he cared for me. How much he understood me, and... how much he watched out for me. Even something like that had not gone unnoticed. Between such a reveal, and his beautiful gift... I couldn’t believe how this man could prove his affection for me in any greater method.

Falling for the Societies Protector again, I grabbed his head. It felt warm in my hands. “You really do love me, don’t you?” I asked.

“Isn’t it weird?” he asked back.

Laughing, I nodded. Yes! It was!

"I just worry Renn... I worry this life is too harsh for you," he said after a moment.

"Thank you for doing so... but I'm doing okay. Thanks to you. I'll be honest, I guess you're right... why hadn't I cried with Landi? It had been very emotional... I even felt very..." I shifted a little, and wondered if I should say it aloud. "I related to her," I decided to just admit it. Especially since Vim and I were suddenly being very open with one another. I didn't want to ruin the moment. Plus...

Well...

If anyone would understand me... I guess I'd prefer it to be him.

"I figured," he said softly.

"I think part of the reason is Landi herself. She cried, yes, but... only for a short time. Then she got all happy and boisterous. It made me want to be the same," I said.

Vim nodded, seemingly understanding.

Unable to resist, I sniffed.

“Aw Renn,” Vim moaned.

I laughed as my eyes actually began to water, and I started to cry.

“You’re actually crying...?” Vim asked worriedly, looking up.

I nodded. “Mhm.”

He sighed, but didn’t seem willing to yell or chastise me for it.

“It’s your fault,” I complained.

He nodded.

I let my tears drop to his head, and disappear into his hair. “You’re pulling my heart every which way. It’s not fair you can do it with just a few words, and I can only get you with a surprise kiss,” I said, complaining further.

There was no way to explain it, but it was as if he kept on giving me gift after gift. Each one making me swell with emotion. It wasn’t fair that his words alone could be something so precious and lovely and...

“My heart damn near stopped... so I’d say we’re even,” Vim said with a chuckle.

Oh. Good.

Sniffing, I smiled as I quickly got my tears under control. Maybe there was something wrong with me. I felt as if I wanted, and needed, to weep in his arms. Yet...

Then something blocked out the sky.

Quickly looking up, I frowned at the dense and dark cloud.

Where had that come from? The sky had been clear this whole time and...

Then the cloud moved, and light came back to the world.

My eyes narrowed as Vim glanced up as well, and I felt my whole body go cold as I stared up at a giant bird flapping its wings.

Yes. Those were wings. Connected to a bird. What had looked like a giant dark cloud, was instead a monstrous bird of unbelievable size. When its wings returned to being outstretched, it once again blocked out the sun and sent the world into an evening dusk.

Soaring high above us... yet blocking out most of the sky, was a bird beyond reason.

Stunned at the sight, I watched as the massive creature flew ahead.

I knew how birds could appear small in the sky. The pet hawk I had long ago had been huge, yet had looked tiny up there. So tiny that sometimes I lost sight of it even as it flew overhead.

Yet this thing... it was impossible to lose. It was just simply that big.

“Vim....?” I asked worriedly. Was that a Monarch? It had to be. It was huge. Too huge. If it looked that big up there as it was, then...

“Say hello to Miss Beak. Monarch of the Salt-Flats. One of my oldest friends,” Vim introduced me... and picked up his pace, heading for the spot the giant bird was descending towards.

Chapter 234 Miss Beak

“You’re kidding, near the Monolith Kingdom?” Beak asked.

“Landi’s place, yeah,” Renn said.

Miss Beak hummed, which vibrated the pool of water she was sitting in.

“After that... well...” Renn hesitated, and splashed as she turned to look at me. She was looking for permission to say it aloud.

“Landi has taken another heart. We’ll see if she survives it or not,” I said.

Miss Beak turned her massive head, as to point one of her massive eyes my way. “You’ve grown softer Vim,” she said.

“I knew it!” Renn said loudly.

Miss Beak chuckled, sending more ripples out into the fresh water oasis lake.

Unlike the many thousands of other flamingos that were surrounding this little oasis island, she wasn’t standing on one leg. She was lowered down, half-submerged in the only source of fresh water for miles. Sitting down.

Although massive in size, I knew the reason Miss Beak sat instead of standing like the others of her kind wasn’t because of her size. Her legs were plenty strong enough to support her. She was a Monarch, after all. But rather it was because she enjoyed the feeling of being submerged in cool water. She just liked the feel of it.

Plus it let her talk more easily with us tiny creatures that were stuck closer to the ground.

“She’s not absorbed it yet, but she plans to do it in the next year or two. I guess she wants to prepare herself for it. It had hurt her last time,” Renn then said, expanding on updating Miss Beak.

It was... interesting to listen to Renn give Miss Beak her version of our journey together. Like always, upon seeing her, I told Miss Beak of all I’d done and seen. Before we got to the rest of our conversations, she always wanted to hear of all I’d seen and done.

Renn had taken up the mantle of story teller without hesitation, and honestly was doing a mighty fine job.

I particularly liked how she walked around and danced in the water as she spoke. She was an animated speaker when she was into it.

The crystal clear pool Renn and Miss Beak were in was an oddity. The little island that it rested on was made of golden sand. Something that belonged on a temperate beach and not in the middle of the salt-flats. But as out of place as it was, it was still perfect for Miss Beak’s home.

This little island was big enough to house her massive body, but small enough to not be visible from a far distance. Even with the thousands of pink birds standing all around it.

“What reason does Landi need the hearts, Renn?” Miss Beak asked.

“She wants to give birth to a child. Seems she tried for many years, and never could, so she resorted to the hearts. Since absorbing the one, she can now get pregnant but they’re all stillborn. She hopes a second will keep them alive,” Renn explained.

“Hm...” Miss Beak hummed her noise, and I noticed the way Renn’s tail bobbed up and down along the waves of ripples because of it.

She, like Miss Beak, was half submerged. And unlike Miss Beak who was covered in beautiful pink feathers... Renn was naked. For some reason it was actually bothering me, though it made no sense.

Renn’s been naked in front of me before. Plus... it made sense. Why get her clothes and leathers wet? It’d just be annoying to dry them.

Yet it still bothered me.

I was the only one not sitting in the pool of water. I was not far from them, on the golden sand. Sitting on a massive log, from a tree that obviously had come from elsewhere. The trees growing on this island were thinner, with heavier leaves. More akin to palm trees. This log was likely from a forest from the north. Either Miss Beak had gone and got it, for some reason, or while flying around she had seen it floating in the salt-flats and had brought it back.

Not far from me were our bags. I was keeping an eye on them since the smaller flamingos kept wanting to come over and peck at them.

Unlike the pool of water, that they knew better than to go near, they didn't have any fear walking along the edge of the beach. Miss Beak didn't like them going into her water, but didn't seem to care if they walked along the outer perimeter of her beaches.

"Do you think it'll work?" Renn asked Miss Beak.

"No. But... I hope it does, all the same," Miss Beak answered.

Renn's ears drooped a little, but not too harshly. "Vim thinks she'll die too," she said.

"Vim's a realist, even if he pretends to not be. A sad trait he's picked up over his harsh life," Miss Beak said.

I huffed as Renn smiled up at the massive pink bird. Miss Beak had curled her long neck, the way these wading birds liked to do, and was staring down at her new friend with a very visible smile. It was a little interesting that even though she had a beak, one could still see emotions upon it.

I usually couldn't see such a smile. Not because she'd not smile at me when I visited alone, but because I was usually the one standing in front of her. The angle didn't let one see such a thing, thanks to her beak.

The two had been talking for quite a while. Miss Beak had wanted to hear Renn's story and Renn... being who she was, had been more than willing to share it. Going so far as to even tell Miss Beak things she'd not told anyone else, as far as I was aware. Even I'd learned a few things about her, like how her family had been abusive because she hadn't had enough fur for their liking. I hadn't really liked how happily she had spoke of her siblings, and how they had beaten her.

“Why did Vim kill your parents, Beak?” Renn asked, seemingly content enough with talking about Landi and the Monarch.

“They were cruel. They fed on humans as you and I would fish,” Miss Beak said.

Renn’s ears fluttered and she tilted her head up at the mighty bird. “Was there no reasoning with them?” she asked.

“No. Just as your family had lacked the necessary emotional connection with those outside their races, so too did my parents suffer from a sense of superiority. To them, Vim and my asking to stave their hunger was the same as asking them not to breathe. It made no sense to them. It was beyond them,” Miss Beak explained.

“How come such things cannot be taught? I once... in the beginning, also had not realized that humans... that people, even our kind, could be different. Why was I able to realize such a thing, but not them?” Renn asked.

Waiting patiently, I studied Renn as I awaited Miss Beak’s answer.

“It’s very good to hear that Vim has found a suitable companion. There is no real reason, Renn. Just as you were able to realize, and comprehend another creature’s sorrow and suffering, they had simply been unable. Just as easily as you figured it out, they as easily cannot. You might find your children, even if raised with love and care, succumb to the same heartless outlook on life. The cruelty of our ancestors is not something only they can claim. Many today, born as we speak, are just as cruel. Just as evil. It’s not something one can reason with, it’s simply a fact of life,” Miss Beak said.

Renn shifted in the water, her tail swaying on its surface. Or rather, right below it. It was interesting it floated, but not so much that it breached the surface. "So it's just a matter of a person's self. Each person can be different," Renn said.

Miss Beak nodded. "One could argue our ancestors were unable to find reasoning, being... what and who they were... but then one has to ignore the fact that those today suffer the same issues. Even someone raised in a loving home, in a peaceful society, without strife or grief... can still become someone without the ability to relate to the suffering of those around them. They lack empathy. Personally I'd say the reason doesn't matter. Whether they are cruel out of choice or because of an outside factor... say because of pain, suffering, or mental disability, their reason doesn't stop the cruelty. Or justify it. Whether a person realizes they're being cruel doesn't matter to the one who has to suffer at their hands. Does a wound hurt more or less if given to you by something with kindness, or without? One must realize that eventually a line must be drawn," Miss Beak said.

"Are you Vim's mother?" Renn then asked.

Miss Beak opened her mighty beak, and then laughed. Her laugh was loud, louder than her voice. Renn actually flinched down a little, her ears flattening on her head. Likely because the loudness of the laugh had hurt.

Several hundred flamingos nearby startled, flying into the air. They escaped, running away, likely in fear. They must have thought Miss Beak's laugh a sign of impending doom.

Not a surprise, since they were what she fed on half the time.

After laughing for a moment, Miss Beak shifted and lowered her head. Two massive wings shuffled as she giggled, making the lake rough with waves. "How lovely! I adore you, little Renn. No. I am not his mother, good thing too! If I had been his mother I'd have tossed his egg the moment I could! No... But I thank you for thinking so," Miss Beak chuckled as she answered.

Renn smiled up at her. "You lay eggs?" Renn asked.

Miss Beak laughed again, this time unfurling her wings a little more than last time. Renn got soaked as the little lake became violent, thanks to Miss Beak's movements. She had been mostly dry up above her stomach, but was now wet to her chin.

Renn didn't seem bothered at all, but it was obvious why. Miss Beak hadn't done so on purpose. She was simply that big, that even the smallest movement caused such chaos.

"I do! Mighty big ones too. Though... I've not laid one in many a years. Which is too bad, I'd have enjoyed watching you cook one," Miss Beak said.

"Cook..." Renn sounded very bothered by Miss Beak's sense of humor.

"That's my fault Renn. Flamingo's taste real good. Especially their tongues," I said. It was a running joke between her and me.

Renn spun a little to face me, and I wished she hadn't. I looked away from her a little, as to not stare at her. I focused on her tail instead of her body.

Jeez I was becoming very conscious of her.

“You’d eat them...?” she asked me with a voice of pure disappointment. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the look of disbelief.

Great.

Miss Beak chuckled as she lowered her beak, and tapped the water’s surface not far from Renn. Her way of getting someone’s attention. “Little Renn, do not fret. Even I eat my own kind. We are tasty. And Vim has not actually eaten any of my eggs... although I’ve offered many a time,” Miss Beak said.

Renn stared up at Miss Beak, and then turned to look back at me. I nodded quickly, to prove she was telling the truth.

“Why would you offer such a thing to him?” Renn asked her.

“Well why not? I’ve no mate, so the eggs will never form. If he doesn’t eat them, another creature will,” Miss Beak reasoned with Renn.

“Well... I mean... well...” Renn shuffled, and her long hair started to flow along the water’s surface thanks to her movement. Jeez it really was getting long.

Miss Beak made a happy humming noise and turned to look at me. Just a tiny tilt of the head, to turn her eye far enough. "She's adorable," she said.

"She is. Painfully so."

Renn huffed at me and stepped farther out into the water. "Can I touch your feathers?" she asked.

"Of course. In front of my right wing are the softest ones, I'm proud of those ones," Miss Beak turned her beak, to point where she was speaking of.

Renn giggled as she waded out farther into the water, to reach her.

Although a small lake, it wasn't that deep. The very center, not far from where Miss Beak was sitting, was shallow enough Renn could walk to it. However out there she'd probably be up to her head... or maybe even below it. Renn was actually not as tall as I thought, for some reason. She looked tiny as she stepped up next to Miss Beak and reached out to touch her.

As Renn sent her hands into Miss Beak's feathers, and let out a tiny happy shout as she realized her arms were sinking all the way into them, I was looked at by the giant bird.

Miss Beak held my gaze, and I wondered if maybe I'd done a disservice to her all these years.

She seemed very happy. She sounded pleased. Miss Beak always enjoyed our conversations, and my visits, but... it was clear she was very happy that I had brought a guest.

It made me realize that even though Miss Beak hated everyone else, and didn't ever want to go see or meet them... I should have been a little more forceful. I should have brought others anyway, even if she complained a little.

She must have been lonely all these years. Surrounded by nothing but the endless sea of salt, and the tiny little birds unable to do much more than chirp at her.

I should have brought others here. To meet her. But... how many would have been like Renn? Able and willing to talk so openly, and act so calmly? To not run or cower? To not hesitate to befriend her?

Celine maybe. But other than her...

"You're so soft!" Renn said happily as she pulled herself away from the feathers, and with great effort. She had nearly sunken completely into them.

"I have loose feathers around here somewhere. But I'm not sure how you'd carry them, since Vim would likely complain," Miss Beak said.

"I can handle his complaining!" Renn said forcefully.

I sighed at the thought of carrying one those feathers. They were bigger than us. The weight would not be an issue, at all, but...

"I'm sure you can. Tell me... How old are you Renn?" Miss Beak then asked.

"Hm?" Renn waded back towards the beach. So that she'd not be as submerged. "I think I'm about two hundred years old. Though I don't know how far off I am, honestly," Renn said.

"I see. Old enough, yet young enough. A perfect age," Miss Beak said.

Renn beamed up at her, accepting the complement without really realizing what Miss Beak actually meant.

"She's teasing me, Renn," I let her know.

"I know Vim. And it's lovely," Renn said without looking at me.

Ah. So she had realized. Interesting.

Miss Beak chuckled, which sent another wave along the water's surface. It splashed against Renn and her tail, making it wrap around her. I tried not to stare too much at the way it coiled around her ass and waist.

“How old are you, Beak?” Renn asked.

“I don’t know. Vim thinks I’m well over a millennia,” Miss Beak said.

Renn tilted her head, and turned to me.

“A thousand years. And yes, she is. I’ve known her that long, and she had nearly been fully grown when I met her,” I said.

Renn’s eyes widened, and then hurriedly returned to the giant bird. “You’ve known him that long?” she asked.

Miss Beak nodded.

“And haven’t wanted to drop him from the sky? You’ve the patience of a saint!” Renn said happily.

I smiled as Miss Beak laughed, fluttering her wings. “Oh I’ve done worse than that!” she said happily.

“Oh!?” Renn grew excited as Miss Beak quickly went to tell her about how she had tried to drown me. She had kept me submerged under the salt-flats for days... all because I had accidentally bled in her little lake.

Renn found it hilarious, at least. “He just let you do it?” she asked.

“Hm. I was so furious that if he had tried to escape or stop me, I’d likely have gotten very hurt. So in his gentle kindness, he had simply let me attempt to kill him until my anger subsided. It had only taken a few days,” Miss Beak said.

My companion giggled something fierce, splashing around with her arms and tail as if to mimic Miss Beak when she laughed.

Hopefully she’d not get any wise ideas...

“Wait...!” Renn then realized something.

Miss Beak and I waited, then tilted our heads at her as she looked back and forth at us.

“What is it?” Miss Beak asked after a moment.

“Does... does that mean you knew each other before the Society? I thought the Society wasn’t that old,” Renn realized.

“Ah. Yes. I’d known Vim before then. I even knew him before he ran away,” Miss Beak said.

Renn found that amazing, but hesitated. “Ran away...?” she asked.

Miss Beak tilted her beak at her, and then glanced at me. “You’ve not told her?” she asked.

“Unlike the two of you, I’m not fond of telling my life story every time I meet someone,” I said stiffly.

Miss Beak sighed, but Renn laughed. “It’s okay. I’m slowly getting it all out of him. He even told me he had parents not too long ago!” Renn said, proudly.

Miss Beak studied her, and then lowered her massive head. The tip of her beak went into the water, and she hushly said, “Renn, dear, everyone has parents.”

“Well... Vim’s so weird I’d not be surprised if he had told me he hadn’t had any. Though he hasn’t told me their names yet, but I have a plan to get them later,” Renn said, as if I wasn’t here listening to their conversation.

“Hm...” Miss Beak raised her head, and thus her beak out of the water, and nodded lightly. “You have a long and difficult journey ahead, but I believe you capable,” she then said.

Renn beamed a confident smile up at her as she nodded.

“Notice she didn’t ask you for help?” I said.

“I did. Her curiosity is pure and lovely. You could learn from her,” Miss Beak said.

“I was curious once,” I defended myself.

“Probably over something silly, I bet,” Renn complained.

“He can be curious, Renn. For instance he’s completely enthralled by your body right now. It’s been very amusing to watch him stare at you while also trying to not do so. He’s having a harder time not staring than he would while fighting a Monarch,” Miss Beak said.

I sat up, and wanted to say something but couldn’t as Renn turned to look at me.

She studied me for a moment, with a look without a hint of emotion... and I waited.

Then she smiled at me. “He does stare sometimes,” she then said as she turned her attention back to the bird.

I sighed in relief, yet at the same time... felt a little more worried.

Miss Beak laughed, and shut her beak a little sharply. Making a loud noise as she did. "A cat indeed! A very proud bloodline. Though... hm... I suppose you should be proud. I've never been one to know if you humanoid types are pretty or not, but you seem like one that would be," Miss Beak said.

"Really? I find you utterly beautiful. Is it because we're small that you can't tell?" Renn asked, seeing her statement as more of a serious one than teasing.

Miss Beak paused a moment, and I knew it was because she had not expected Renn's response. Then she glanced at me.

"The fact you two are so similar is a little disturbing," she said to me.

I scoffed as I stood up. "Difference is she actually deserves such teasing. She is beautiful. Sometimes I need to shoo idiotic men away from her, even though she never notices," I said as I went to our bags.

It was about time I started preparing dinner for Renn. And thanks to Miss Beak's earlier joke, I knew exactly what to prepare.

Plus I was now in the mood for flamingo tongue.

“Oh my. Look Vim, she’s now as pink as me,” Miss Beak said, teasing Renn who was blushing.

I glanced over at her, and smirked. So her face wasn’t the only thing that got redder when blood rushed through her.

“Just for that I think I will ask about you Vim. It’s your fault, you deserve it...” Renn then turned to Miss Beak, who waited patiently for Renn to continue. “Was Vim young when you met him?” she asked.

“No. Or well... maybe. He looked the same as he does now, if that’s what you mean,” Miss Beak said.

“Oh... really?”

Miss Beak nodded as I pulled over one of the bags. I’ll need to get one of the larger knives, since the only things here I could use for firewood were the trees. I’ll need to ask Miss Beak if I can chop up some of the log I’d been sitting on or just fell one of the others...

“Although not young appearance wise... I do think he was a little youthful in the beginning. He and I used to have many conversations that were the foundation of his current thoughts and beliefs. Though regretfully I’ve not steered his morals as well as I’d have liked. A failure on my part,” Miss Beak said.

I huffed at her.

“I’d love to hear all about them! Maybe Vim will be nice enough to let us stay for awhile,” Renn said, and I noted the way she had spoken. She had looked at me, as she did, as to imply a point.

She’d been doing that lately. Saying something, with the intent to get me to realize something. Usually related to something she wanted.

She wanted to stay here? For a while?

Sure. Why not. Out of all the members, Miss Beak was one of the few... or well...

I stopped searching for the knife I wanted as I realized that Miss Beak might be one of the last ones I’d actually considered a friend. A real one. One that was more than just a friend, really...

I saw her almost like an equal. I valued her input. Her wisdom. Her sense of humor. I considered Tosh, and those like him, friends... but I’d never ask him personal questions. Nor would I ever reveal my more...

“Regretfully... my friend’s lovely mate, I’ll not get to enjoy such a wonderful thing with you. As lovely as it sounds, and as much as it breaks my heart and much to my regret,” Miss Beak said softly to Renn.

I paused, and frowned. More disturbed over Miss Beak’s refusal than her teasing. Was she not enjoying Renn’s company? I had been so sure that...

“Is something wrong?” Renn asked softly.

My hand lingered above the open bag. Afraid to move.

“Only the inevitable. I’m sorry Renn, but I must go just as we say hello,” Miss Beak said.

My heart thumped, as I heard something weird. Something in her voice.

Something in the way she had spoken. Something softer than usual. Something I’d not heard since I had burned her parents. Not since she had swallowed their hearts and...

“You must go...?” Renn whispered worriedly.

“But... if maybe Vim will allow... I’d really appreciate a favor. From the both of you,” Miss Beak said.

“Anything,” Renn said.

My eyes shivered... afraid to turn and look at them. Afraid to admit what my heart already knew. What my heart had heard in her voice.

“I’d like to see the sea. The real one. Before I go.”

My hand shot out, grabbing the flap of the bag. Squeezing the bag, I gulped and realized what was happening. I stood, lifting the bag and making some stuff fall out accidentally.

No...!

“Wait... wait!” I shouted as I dropped the bag, and stepped forward towards the water.

Miss Beak turned, and blinked yet said nothing.

My feet hesitated as I slid down the small incline, stepping into the water. I had almost tripped. “You can’t die!” I said as I confronted her.

Renn’s ears went still as she turned to face me, but I ignored her and her terrified expression. Instead I focused on the Monarch who had just declared something so ridiculous.

“You can’t die,” I whispered at the quiet bird. Please tell me I had misheard...

“Oh my mighty Vim... I do believe that’s the first time you’ve ever displayed such sorrow for me,” Miss Beak said.

My tense body relaxed, but not for a good reason. I suddenly felt exhausted.

She hadn't been kidding. I hadn't misheard. I hadn't misunderstood...

Biting back a retort that would have likely ruined this already terrible moment... I closed my eyes and shook my head. "Beak... if you go..." I started.

"I'm going Vim, and even your mighty self will not be able to stop me. Not this time," Miss Beak said.

She spoke gently. A soft voice not fitting her mighty size.

Damn.

Opening my eyes, I ignored Renn's distraught gaze. She was crying already.

"I rely on your wisdom, Beak," I said.

"You do. And it will always humble me that you would find my simple self so important. But, Vim... per usual, even though mighty and wise beyond means... you fail to notice the obvious," Miss Beak said.

The obvious...?

I looked away from her huge eyes... and glanced at her beak. I found nothing odd about it. Maybe a few more scratches than before, but nothing glaringly obvious. I quickly searched around her body, her wings, her feathers... the spot Renn had been touching her, where small patches of feathers were ruffled.

Nothing looked strange. Nothing that told me what was wrong.

Had I missed something...? Her heart felt fine. It was pulsing. Humming. I didn't smell blood. I didn't smell death. And she's been talking with Renn and me this whole time, and I'd not heard or noticed anything odd or...

Miss Beak then chuckled, and tilted her head. Bringing her beak over towards Renn. "Look, Vim," she whispered.

Renn started at the obvious gesture. She looked from me to Beak, her face a mess as she tried to understand what she meant. "Huh...?" Renn's ears fluttered in worry.

"Beak..." I whispered harshly.

"Fate is taking me from you. Yet behold... a perfect replacement," Miss Beak then said.

Renn tilted her head up at the mighty bird, and it was painful to see the understanding on her face. Her expression had softened. As if Miss Beak's words had healed her heartbreak already.

"She's not a Monarch, Beak. She can't eat hearts," I argued.

Beak chuckled. "She needs eat only one."

Only... one?

It took me far longer than it should have to understand what she meant... and once I did, I almost spat at her.

Stepping forward, I splashed into the fresh water lake. "Beak!" I shouted.

It was true. I didn't need to hear the wisdom of my old friend to realize the truth. I was falling for her. Maybe even had fallen completely already... but this was not the time for teasing!

"I wish to see the sea, Vim. Before I die," Miss Beak said to me, ignoring my despair.

Taking a small breath... I resisted the urge to argue. To debate her. As I'd done with her for centuries. To debate and argue over the simplest of things. Over morals. Beliefs. Science. History. The Society. The humans.

What I'd done.

What I hadn't.

Everything.

"Okay..." I whispered, giving up without a fight.

Miss Beak's eyes softened as she blinked at me. "Mhm... will you come with me?" she asked us.

"Of course," Renn said before I could.

"The sea is weeks away," I whispered. I tried to plan the closest path for us. My mind was fuzzy, but like always... even when troubled and full of despair I could think. I could reason. I quickly planned a route. One that led around a monolith to our south. "We can follow the salt, then that river full of crocodiles and..." I said as I blinked the thoughts out.

"I don't have that much time. I have hours," she said.

I shook my head. "I'll not be able to get us there that soon, Beak," I said. Hours...? Really?

"I'll carry the two of you," she said, simplifying it.

Carry... while she flew...? I hesitated as I shifted in the wet sand. I'd be fine... but would Renn? Up there? While flying so fast?

Glancing at Renn, who was staring at me with huge and worried eyes... I once again noticed her naked form.

She really didn't have any fur anywhere. Not enough. Not for that cold up there. Not as fast as Beak would fly. At that height, at that speed, even here in the desert ice would form.

Would Renn be okay?

"Please Vim. I can feel the tug of sleep even now. Do me this favor," Miss Beak then said, likely noticing my worry.

Her statement made me stumble... but it was the sound of her voice that really made me pause.

Had... had that been a crack? Had Miss Beak's voice just cracked and rasped? As if unable to breathe...?

A long... heavy moment passed as I stared into the glowing eyes. The huge orbs. That I've stared at countless times over the last thousand years. That I've relied on, to be steady. To be able to provide me with sound and astute wisdom. An indifferent, yet understanding perspective I couldn't find elsewhere.

Yet within those eyes... right now I didn't see my familiar friend. I didn't see the calm mind, almost as old as my own.

I instead saw a mind in pain. A mind straining.

A mind failing its body.

My friend's eyes looked cloudy. And dull.

Not the eyes of a Monarch at all.

"Vim...!" Renn shouted and not as to argue in Miss Beak's favor. She instead had shouted in concern. In worry... and out of the corner of my eye I saw it.

Miss Beak had started to tremble. She had started to shake. As if in a tremor.

Unable to ignore it... unable to deny it...

Giving in...

I nodded.

“Get dressed Renn,” I said... as I turned to get the bags. I’ll need to wrap her up. It was a good thing she had picked up some blankets recently. I’ll even hold her, and try to keep her covered in as much of Miss Beak’s feathers as possible.

“But...!” Renn cried out, but immediately splashed towards me. To our bags.

It was time to say goodbye to my friend.

For the last time.

Again.

Chapter 235 A Monarch’s Death

Waves splashed up against Beak’s body, dousing the now... strangely ruffled feathers. They looked broken now, somehow, even though none should be so. Some were poking outward at weird angles,

while others looked snapped and tilted. None had yet detached or floated away, but it'd not surprise me if they started to. Especially since the waves were rather rough.

Vim was also hit by the wave, but like the many before he barely noticed. He was standing on her body, staring out at the open sea. He was clothed... which meant he had once again likely ruined his clothes, but I couldn't fault or blame him.

He had sat with his friend to the end. Though it hadn't been long, really.

We had arrived at the sea, and Miss Beak had flown down to land on this white beach. It was honestly... beautiful. But right now I couldn't find it in me to enjoy the views, or the setting sun in the distance.

Instead all I could focus on was Vim. His back was turned to me, but I could see the crestfallen shoulders. He looked tired again.

A glowing pink orb was in his left hand. It was much brighter than the one we had given Landi. It was so bright that it was almost startling... but I assumed it was because it was freshly removed from... well...

I gulped, and glanced to the hole that Vim had made. To dig out Miss Beak's heart. It was rather visible. There were a bunch of feathers askew near it, and that area was much darker than the rest. Stained with blood.

Vim had genuinely just... ripped her open. With his hands. Digging into her, as to get the heart. It had been a little startling, honestly. Vim hadn't been gentle, at all. His friend had died, so she hadn't felt it, but... I had expected him to be gentler.

If he had done that with that other Monarch, then it made all its screams and thrashing make a lot more sense. Anything would have reacted so to something like that. I wonder if he did that with every creature he faced. I mean, it made sense... they were so big and strong, it wasn't like he could fight them normally. I had faded in and out of consciousness back during the Lumen incident, but I did remember hearing that creature scream and roar. Odds are he had attacked it the same way.

I flinched as a strong breeze blew in from the sea. One that honestly wasn't as cold as it probably felt.

Trembling, I wrapped my tail around myself as to better try and keep warm. I curled up a little more, squeezing the blanket closer that Vim had wrapped tightly around me.

The sky had been cold. A very strange type of cold. One I'd never felt before. It chilled me to the bones... and honestly had not been very enjoyable at all. The lack of finding it fun at all wasn't just because I was upset or emotional over what was happening either.

Vim and I had rode Beak's back... covered in her feathers. Thanks to how big they were and how many she had, we had sunk into them a little. Between the massive feathers, Vim holding me and the blankets he had wrapped around me, I had not gotten to see anything. All I'd been able to experience in the sky was the noisy wind, and the severe cold. The chill had seeped into my bones. The chill reminded me of the many nights in that pit back in my home mountains, during the winter. It was nearly the same, but different.

It had felt like we hadn't flown very long at all. Maybe an hour or so... but it had been enough. I was now freezing, and somehow unable to get warm again.

I should start a fire...

Looking away from Vim, who was still standing still on Beak's body and staring out into the sea, I glanced around at the pretty beach.

Yes. There were plenty of old, thoroughly dried, sea-wood logs all over. Plus not far off the beach were thigh-high wheat stalks and grass. Ones that looked dry enough that they'd burn easily.

But as much as I wanted to start a fire... I didn't want to get up. I didn't want to unfurl or leave the blanket, what little comfort it gave.

I huffed and glanced back at Vim.

And found him gone.

Hm? I panicked for a moment. He had been standing up on her body for some time now... so finding him gone was alarming. Especially since I couldn't find him again. I scanned her massive body. Following the huge mound of feathers, only half submerged even though many hundreds of feet out into the ocean. Her huge, long neck... and the massive beak and head, also still above the water. Her beak was angled, and when the waves hit just right it disappeared from view.

Vim really was gone. I scanned the ocean around her body, and...

“You should have started a fire, Renn.”

I jumped, and the brisk movement hurt thanks to how cold I was. I glared at the man who stepped up to me, walking slowly as to not kick up too much sand. The sand here on this beach was very light for some reason, flowing even in the wind.

“I was just considering it,” I answered.

He nodded... and then came to a stop an arm’s length from me.

He was soaked, dripping with sea-water... and his clothes clung to his body oddly. But... it wasn’t his appearance my eyes fell to.

Holding out a bright pink orb, Vim waited for me to take Beak’s heart from him.

“Vim...” I whispered.

“I’ll make us a fire and a camp. Over that hill is a nice little area... just give me a minute,” he said, and leaned forward a little more to bring the heart closer.

I groaned as I shifted the blanket, and before I could even get my hands all the way free, he dropped the heart into them.

"Careful...!" I mumbled as Vim stepped away, heading behind me. Likely to the place he wanted to make camp. Probably beyond the sand.

"One moment Renn," Vim said again, leaving me.

Sighing at him, I shifted and dropped the blanket a little. Even though it made me shiver a little... I found myself a little warmer all the same.

Miss Beak's heart was a little bigger than the one I had held before. Landi's had been rough, with edges, and about the size of my fist. This one was likely half more the size, and was a smooth and perfectly shaped orb. More like the one I remembered in that forest, that Vim had given to Bray. I held it with both hands, running fingers along it... and couldn't find a single flaw or bump.

It felt smooth beyond reason, and it glowed far brighter than Landi's had and not just because of the pretty color. It was so bright that looking into the center of it was actually a little difficult. It was like looking straight at those mirror-lamps that some places of the Society had.

Just like Landi's, this one felt impossibly light. As if the ocean breeze could easily snatch it from my hands if I weren't careful. And it was warm.

It didn't pulsate as often as Landi's had, but when it did there was a strange... wave of warmth that exuded from it. It was warm enough to actually make me feel better, yet not so hot that it was strange.

It felt like a rock that had been sitting in a fire for hours, but was now cool enough to touch.

Holding it close, I sniffed as I stared out into sea. At Miss Beak's body.

What a wild turn of events.

We hadn't even been speaking for more than a few hours. Then she just...

Someone moved the bags near me, and I startled again as I turned to see what it was. It sounded like an animal trying to rummage... but it was just Vim.

He was now naked. And looked as if he'd dried off already. None of the sand was sticking to him, not even near his feet.

Watching him dig out another set of clothes, I sighed at him. I wanted to complain that he'd likely just ruined his only good set of clothes, again, but knew better than to say it aloud.

She had been his friend. A pair of clothes as sacrifice to spend her final moments together was not a price worth complaining about. At all.

Yet this was his second, or in a perspective third, set in such a short time. Not only had he ruined and lost his better set of clothing, he had also lost his leathers. They had been melted by the Monarch in Landi's nation.

We no longer matched. And Vim didn't even seem to notice, at all. So I really wanted to snivel, but...

But...

I coughed, and pulled my blanket closer. I kept the heart near my chest, to try and get myself warmer.

Glancing over to the body of the Monarch, as Vim got dressed, I wondered how it had happened so quickly.

She had landed... on the beach. She lowered, to let us get off her. Then she and Vim had simply walked out into the sea.

I'd stayed on the beach, although honestly I wasn't sure if it had been the right choice or not. I had been cold. Freezing. And... very unsure of what to do or say. I had been able to tell that they had exchanged a few words before Miss Beak just... sat down... then she had laid down... then...

She had simply passed away. Within minutes of sitting down.

Being out there I would have been able to hear what they had said, but then I'd be even colder. And... well...

It was likely they had simply just said goodbye.

And she had been Vim's friend, not mine.

My eyes welled with tears as Vim sighed and sat down next to me. I rocked a little as he sat up next to me, close enough to feel his heat.

"I'm so sorry Vim," I said as I looked at him.

He didn't look as if he was hurt and I also couldn't tell if he had cried or not... but...

Well...

I'd seen him wipe his face a few times. From here. While he had dug out her heart. Many would have likely argued he had done so only because of the sea, the waves that hit him, but... I knew better than to assume that.

Vim wasn't bothered by the sea. At all. But he was bothered by tears.

"I've not held this many hearts, so one after the other, since the wars," Vim said softly.

He was staring out at the horizon, at Miss Beak's body... and...

Leaning over, to rest more against him I shuffled under the blanket. To bring the heart out. Once it popped up over the blanket, and its bright light appeared, he glanced at it.

Offering it to him, Vim instead ignored it. He glanced away, back to the body.

Ah... maybe he didn't want to hold it. Maybe he had given it to me not because I'd find it interesting but... well...

Returning it to my embrace, I decided to carry it for him. If he'd let me. If it hurt him that much, where he didn't even want to look at, then...

I suppose it made sense. They were their hearts. It'd be like holding Nory's or... I tossed those thoughts away quickly, as my throat constricted in emotions.

"It's beautiful," I whispered. And not just the heart. Vim being affected that much over his friend's death was beautiful too, in a morbid sort of way.

"Mhm... this was a severe loss. One of the worst in a long time. I wasn't expecting this at all," Vim said softly.

"I don't understand Vim... was it just age? She just... didn't look as if she was dying. Not until the end when she started wheezing and trembling," I said.

"Yes. Not much else can kill them, barring extreme violence," Vim said gently.

"Why now? When we arrived...? You had even said you originally hadn't intended to go see her right? What is the timing of that?" I tried to comprehend it.

"She... likely just held on. Until I arrived. She was likely ready to die ages ago. Years ago. She held on through sheer will, just to say goodbye," he whispered.

My blurry eyes began to leak.

Vim shifted, and I felt him shake his head. "Three Monarchs in fewer years. Then those things in Lumen. If it was just Monarchs and beasts I'd chalk it up to happenstance and fate just being weird, but this... Miss Beak..." he stopped talking, going lost in thought.

"I'm not happy anymore, Vim," I said softly, thinking of the conversation we had been having before we met her.

"I'm sure," he said with a sigh. "Of all times for me to have asked..."

"Who was she, Vim?" I asked.

“Miss Beak...? She was... the daughter of one of the strongest Monarchs to have ever existed. They had ruled over an entire legion of lesser Monarchs, and their servants. In our terms, she’d have been a princess. One to inherit a mighty throne... until I took it all from her,” he said.

I squeezed her heart, and wished I could have spent more time with her. I had been able to tell her my story, but had only heard a little of hers.

“Why’d you kill her parents Vim...?” I asked softly.

“They had been cruel beyond measure, Renn. She had begged me of it. So I destroyed their kingdom... reducing it to a sea of salt...” Vim then sighed. “She forgave me. Gave me insight. Always willing to share her wisdom and perspective, no matter the problem. I enjoyed talking with her,” he added.

He then shifted, as to glance at me. Or rather, my blanket... likely the spot where the Monarch’s Heart was hiding.

“I had relied on her to devour hearts. She was old, and powerful. She was able to completely ignore their corruption, and absorb them,” he said.

“So... are there more hearts inside her body?” I asked as I glanced at it.

“No. when I say absorb I mean it literally. She had been able to decay and absorb them inside her, adding to her own. Landi can survive the corruption, but she’s not strong enough to do such a thing. And

Bray is near her end, I can probably only give her one or two more before she too fades away. And not a one of her damned children have been born with a heart either," Vim complained.

I blinked at the information. So those other wolves had been her children...!

Normal ones. Not Monarchs.

I gulped... and wondered if Miss Beak's comment about eggs had been related. Had she... been trying? Even without a mate?

Vim sighed heavily, rubbing his face. He looked more exhausted than ever. "With this I'm down to three. What am I going to do when they're all gone, Renn?" Vim whispered.

I had no idea what to say. He sounded so broken. So hurt.

Was that tone because his emotions? His loss of Miss Beak, his friend? Or was the inability to feed these hearts to someone, or something, capable of absorbing them... that big of an issue...? What was torturing him more right now, I wonder?

I slid my fingers along the heart beneath my blanket, and wondered why these things were so dangerous. To make him this weary.

"Can... can I eat them? Or you?" I asked carefully.

“No. Without hearts of our own, even if we survived and acclimated to it we’d be unable to absorb other ones. Plus even if we perfectly accepted the heart, it’d cause issues. The power of these hearts come with a cost, one way or another. For Landi it was a part of her sanity. And even then, once dead, the hearts still remain,” he said.

“So... doesn’t that mean eventually, no matter what, there will always be a few hearts left? No matter what?” I asked. If they could only be destroyed by being absorbed by another, then... even if you did it perfectly, at the end, there’d always be at least one left.

Vim inhaled deeply, and sighed. “Yes. My original plan long ago was to take the last heart myself,” he said.

“Vim...!” I didn’t like the way he had said that. At all.

“Come on Renn. Let’s get you warmed up,” he spoke quickly, likely because he didn’t want me to talk or confront what he had just said.

I grumbled and groaned as he stood, and pulled me up with him. This was one of the times I didn’t feel like waiting patiently for him, at all.

Glaring at him as he guided me towards the hill, where behind was smoke flowing into the ocean breeze, Vim turned to look out at the ocean.

I paused, as he did, and we both looked to her body. Still there. Still motionless.

“Did... did it hurt?” I asked softly.

“I’m sure she had been in pain, yes. But... her death had been swift and easy. Like passing in her sleep,” he whispered.

We turned away and headed for the hill. As we crossed over it, I found a large fire. Vim had gathered up a bunch of very large driftwood logs, and set them alight. The fire was bellowing thanks to the intensity and the strong ocean breeze. The fire was taller than both of us combined.

“I’ll get our bags,” he said softly as he deposited me near the fire. Close enough that I could tell once I got warm enough, I’d be scooting away shortly after. Yet right now the heat was balming, and felt great.

Sitting patiently, I was glad that there was still some sand here. It was a mix of sand and grass, so it was the perfect composition. Hard enough to not sink or shift, but soft enough that I knew I’d be able to sit for a long time without complaining.

Vim returned shortly. He deposited our bags not far behind us, and then promptly took a seat next to me. I had to scoot closer, since he hadn’t sat directly next to me this time.

“Feeling okay Renn? You’re still trembling,” he asked.

“I’m feeling better already. It was... strangely cold up there,” I said.

“She was desperate. She flew high, and fast. Under normal circumstances she’d have flown lower... forgive her,” Vim said softly.

“I wasn’t complaining Vim. How high had we been, anyway?” I asked as I glanced up. There were lots of clouds, but they weren’t dark.

“Higher than any mountain peak,” he said.

I blinked, and wondered if that was true. I mean... it likely was, Vim didn’t lie about that stuff... but...

“May I see it?” Vim then asked, extending his hand.

Ah. I nodded as I handed him the heart.

He’d already grown calloused enough to face it. Fascinating. He really was strong, in more ways than one.

He took it carefully, and lifted it as to stare at it. I watched his eyes as he studied her heart, and I noticed the reflection in them. His eyes looked odd with that pink hue.

Watching him, I curled my legs into me and wrapped my arms around them. Both to get warmer... and to steady myself. I wanted to latch onto him, but knew right now wasn't the moment.

"A Monarch's power can roughly be told by how bright they shine. She had been... very strong," he said softly.

Oh...? So the light wasn't just random? "Because she had absorbed other hearts?" I asked.

"Yes and no. Absorbing them does make your own stronger, but not by much. Rather your true strength comes from how close you are to the source. Beak had been born from two originals. A direct descendant," he said.

"Originals...?" I asked. Did he mean... two Monarchs? Or...?

"Her parents had been created by their god. Directly. In fact, Beak had been alive during the reign of gods, though hadn't fully matured until after their fall," Vim said.

I soaked up the information, and once again wished I could have spent more time with her.

"She must have been very wise," I whispered. All the things she must have seen, and known! It was...

I blinked as I realized that what was why Vim had cherished her. Why he called her his friend.

She had been from his era.

“We argued a lot. Differing beliefs and whatnot... but yes... she was wise beyond measure. I’ll... miss her perspective. Hopefully I and the Society don’t need her input from now on, her ideas had saved us on many occasions,” he said softly.

Oh... “Hm,” I wasn’t sure what to say.

He took a deep breath, and lowered the orb. To his lap. It gleamed, but he no longer was looking at it. “She never joined the Society. Refused to meet anyone. I wish I had brought others to her,” he said softly.

Frowning, I shifted. “She... wasn’t a member, Vim?” I asked. Surely she had been, right?

“No. I saw her as one, yes, but she herself didn’t. In fact... no one else had even known about her, as far as I’m aware,” he said.

Squeezing my legs, I felt horrible.

“She’d been alone...?” I asked softly.

He nodded. "She preferred it. I'm glad she spent some time with you, before going. Thank you Renn," Vim said to me.

Blinking the tears, I nodded.

What did I even say during moments like these?

Vim stared at the roaring fire, and his eyes narrowed. He had thought of something that bothered him.

For a long moment neither of us said anything. I kept my eyes on him, as I worried about what to do or say.

He looked angry... which was completely understandable, but...

Beyond that anger, hidden within, was obvious sorrow.

Coiling my hand out from my blanket, I reached out to take his. He allowed it, as I leaned closer to him. Resting my head on his shoulder, I decided to just... be here. For him.

That was what I had wanted, and needed, all those years ago. It was what I had been searching for after Nory.

With my head on his shoulder, I wasn't able to watch his expression... but it was for the best. Especially as I felt one of his tears slide onto one of my ears.

It was a tickly feeling, like tiny raindrops falling onto my ears. Thanks to the angle. Yet I focused, and kept them from fluttering and fidgeting. As to not bother him.

"My friend is gone," he then whispered as he squeezed my hand.

I squeezed his hand back, and stared at the glowing orb in his other hand. He had started squeezing it too. Likely far harder than he was my hand.

"I used to hate them, Renn," Vim then said.

"Hm...?"

"Monarchs. I hated them. Despised them. Hunted them with a fury you'd not comprehend. It was those like Beak who taught me to abandon that hate. To see past my hatred, and see that they too were victims. As much as the rest of us," Vim said.

I gulped a very heavy emotion, and turned my head a little. To see him.

He was crying. Or at least, had been. There were tear stains on his cheek.

“It hurts to think of how many I had slain. Those I had hunted who hadn’t deserved it. Like Beak. Those I could have been friends with. Those I could have spared,” he whispered.

“Vim...” I squeezed his arm again.

He smiled and nodded. “I know. I’m just being melancholic,” he said with a sigh.

“No, Vim... it’s okay,” I said quickly.

“No. It is not.”

Yes. It was.

But how did I convince him of such a thing?

I could barely convince myself the same thing.

He sighed. "Feeling warmer?" he asked.

I nodded, though my heart was the warmest right now. Full of emotions, churning and twisting within me.

"It'll get cold tonight," he said.

Yes. The ocean. "Will... will her body be okay? Should... we burn it? Like the other one?" I asked.

"It'll decay quickly enough. Especially in the sea. Without the heart inside it, there's no danger. It's now just like any other large carcass. Like a whale. It'll just help the ecosystem," he said.

"You took the heart of that other one out too, though?" I said.

"That had been covered in toxic sludge. I hadn't worried over the body, but the gunk," he said.

Ah.

"Plus I'd rather not burn my friend. It'd just make me hungry. Even if she'd likely find it hilarious if I ate her," he said.

My blurry eyes welled with more tears as I laughed. "Vim...!" I pushed against him a little, to scold him.

He chuckled, and I was so happy to hear it.

Thank goodness he was so strong. So much more than me. It let me be strong too.

The two of us laughed at each other for a moment, and then a much lighter air settled into silence. The world suddenly felt a lot warmer, a lot better.

"Thanks for being here Rennalee," he then whispered.

Sniffing, I nodded as I squeezed him closer.

Returning to laying my head on his shoulder, I took a deep breath.

Keeping the orb in focus, as the rest of the world around it became blurry... I leaned ever closer to him.

I was glad I was here too. But not just to have met Beak before she had passed.

Clinging to him, as he silently cried, I thanked the world for letting me be here.

For the man who likely had always endured these moments alone.

Just as I had.

At least from now on, we could endure together.

Chapter 236 His Tyranny, Her Argument

I was used to life being hard. It rarely wasn't.

But usually those hardships were things I could face. With my strength, or my knowledge.

I could defeat that which threatened me, or those I protected. I could outsmart that which I couldn't defeat with mere strength. Most tribulations were more... normal in theme and style. Enemies. Famine. Disease.

Monarchs.

Gods.

I could face them all.

But time was one thing I could not face. Even though I myself was immune to her wills and touch, the rest of the world wasn't.

Even those who were almost as powerful as me. Even the mightiest Monarchs were susceptible to time's wrath.

It just took them a little longer, is all...

"What is it Vim?" Renn asked, her tail twitching as she glared at the crocodile, holding its stern gaze.

"Something that would love to eat you. It's bigger than you think beneath that murky water," I warned her.

I was keeping a close eye on her as we stood near the edge of the stone bridge. It was a bit of a drop to the river below, but I knew that those massive beasts could leap high enough to snap at us. Even if it seemed impossible.

Especially so that one. For a normal beast, without a hint of a Monarch's blood, it was huge. Maybe the biggest I'd ever seen before. Its head alone was actually bigger than Renn's whole body, her tail included, it just didn't look so from this angle. Half its head was submerged.

“Looks like a lizard or something,” Renn mumbled.

I scanned the banks of the river, for one out of the water. There wasn't one. Which was odd. It was a warmer day, so you'd think at least one would be sunbathing... Maybe this one, glaring at Renn, was the reason. It was big enough that even a normal sized crocodile was likely seen as food.

“That's a crocodile. There are many types, and other species, but this is basically the biggest. It's a saltwater creature... and likely very old considering its size,” I said.

“Hm? How old do you think it is?” Renn asked, interested.

“Well...” I focused on the murky water that hid the rest of its body... and noticed the stillness of it. It wasn't moving at all. Yet even without movement, I could imagine its size. It was likely big enough that its lower body and tail were on the floor of the river, even though this river was huge.

“Several hundreds of years likely,” I said.

“Wait... really? Older than me?” she asked.

I nodded. “Very likely. This whole river is full of them, so please be careful. They'd tear you apart very quickly,” I warned her again.

She smirked at me, and then looked back at the thing. “Vim speaks highly of you,” she said to it.

Well... yes. "Imagine them like the bears of the river, Renn. Mighty ones," I said.

"Hm..." she nodded, seemingly understanding.

"Actually, you're one of the very few creatures that hunt these things," I said, as I studied the way her tail lingered in the air near me. It was oddly still. I wonder if she instinctively knew not to underestimate the beast.

"Wait? What? Me?" she asked, excited.

I nodded. "Yes. Jaguars, unlike most big cats, don't mind swimming usually. They hunt a lot of creatures that live in the water, and thanks to their size and strength even creatures like this are a part of their diet. If I remember correctly, mother said it was thanks to the biting force," I said as I did my best to remember what Mother had said. I could remember the drawings on the board, and the tiny creatures she had made on my desk. I distinctively remembered watching the little black cat eat the lizard, by attacking it near the base of its skull.

"Your mother...?" Renn turned to me, and her tail finally started moving again. It twitched.

Nodding again, I turned my attention to the creature in the river. Its eyes hadn't left Renn. "Mother had enjoyed teaching about animals and stuff," I said.

I felt, and out of the corner of my eye, saw Renn's look. She was staring at me with a strange gaze... but I kept my eyes on the crocodile instead. For many reasons.

"So... I, a jaguar, hunt these?" she asked softly.

I nodded. Honestly I doubted a normal sized jaguar could hunt something that big, but it was what mother had said.

"So if they're here... am I?" she asked.

Blinking, I frowned as I realized she was right. Usually one existed where the other did. "Actually... I'm not sure. There are rain forests and such to the east of here. There very well might be large cats here and there, yes," I said. I tried to think of when and where I'd seen one last. I remembered lions, and other spotted cats, but it was years ago... Actually, oddly, I felt like those memories were from my trip up north, to the wilderness beyond that huge mountain range that cut this continent in two.

"Hm... I have an idea of what I'd look like, thanks to my uncle, but I'd like to see a more normal one. You call us big cats, so I've always wondered just how big," Renn said.

"You've seen mountain cats haven't you? You're customarily a little bigger than those, but not by much," I said.

"Oh... I thought you said we were beautiful," Renn said.

Hm...? "What do you mean?" I asked.

I glanced at her for a moment, and found she was smiling at me but with a tiny look of disappointment mixed in. "Mountain cats aren't ugly, I guess, but they're not beautiful either I don't think," she said.

Oh. I smiled at her. "I see what you mean. Trust me you're definitely prettier. Did your uncle not have a more colorful appearance or anything?" I asked.

"He had... I was just teasing you. Plus I like it when you call me pretty," she said as she looked back at the water.

Hmph.

I let her study the creature for a few moments, and then once she was content we returned to walking along the bridge. Heading for the other side of the large river, as to reach the road in the distance.

"Think I could lure it out with some food? I'd like to see what it looks like," Renn asked.

I chuckled at her. "Maybe. But you won't need to. About a day down this road we'll pass another river, one full of them. They line the banks often enough, so you'll get to see them there," I said.

"Good. Why's the water so... murky anyway?" she asked as we reached the end of the bridge.

“It just is. From the gunk and the soils. Farther west from here are rain forests and tropics. Their waters are like that, not often clear like the ones you’re used to,” I said.

Renn hummed as we stepped off the stone bridge, and onto the dirt path. I noticed some fresh wheel marks, from a larger wagon. Likely not even a day old.

Glancing behind us, to the bridge and the river we had crossed over, I made sure we weren’t being stalked by anything or anyone.

I’d hear a large beast like a crocodile approach us. I’d sense it. But yet still... I was on guard.

I’ve had too much loss and headache lately. I’ll not allow any more.

I knew fate’s design. I knew her cruel methods. I knew it from experience.

Life was hard, and then it got harder. Always.

And since I was immune to such cruelty... since fate could not hurt me the ways it hurt others...

Glancing to my companion, who smiled happily at me, I smiled back.

Yes.

I'll protect you. From anything. Anyone.

At least you.

"Who is our... next member Vim?" Renn asked.

"Well, I figured we'd go see the weaver."

"Weaver...? You mean like someone who makes clothes...?" Renn noticeably perked up, excited.

I nodded. "She's a bird. Though her family are not... all birds. Sometimes I take some dyes to her. I did last trip," I said.

"Is she far?" Renn asked.

"Well, she is now..." I admitted. We had been walking for two days now and still weren't as far north as we had been before. Beak's little trip to the ocean had added a few weeks to our journey.

“Hm...” Renn lost some of her perky excitement, and I quickly gestured at her to get her attention.

“You once told me you’re not too good at sewing,” I said.

She nodded quickly, and I noticed she grew a little happier. Not as much as earlier, but at least she hadn’t grown somber. My attempt at keeping her happy had somewhat succeeded. “Never have been. Back when I was living with my family... I needed my sister’s help to make clothes. I’m not sure why I’m so bad at it to be honest,” she said.

“Maybe you can learn then,” I offered.

Renn’s eyes lit up. “You think?”

I nodded.

She giggled as she stepped closer, and I half expected her to wrap her arms around my own. Yet she didn’t. Maybe it was still too warm for her to be so clingy. “That’d be wonderful! Maybe then I’ll be able to keep your clothes in at least some type of presentable shape!” she said.

Ah... I glanced down, at my last set of clothes. They weren’t that bad, but... well...

Yes. My clothes, and my leathers, had been ruined during my fight with the Monarch. A pity, honestly. I should have at least removed my leathers before engaging the thing. I hadn't been thinking.

"We don't match anymore, do we," I said as I realized it.

Renn's steps hesitated, and I realized what I had said bothered her. Enough to make her smile disappear completely.

"Can you not make more?" she asked softly.

"I can. Maybe while you spend some time to learn to sew I'll do so," I said, as I tried not to notice the hurt in her eyes.

She had taken my off-hand comment very seriously. Personally. Deeply.

Was wearing similar clothes really that big a deal...?

"Hm..." Renn nodded, and looked away. To the dirt road we were traveling upon.

I studied her face for a moment before looking away. I didn't like how her ears had drooped a little.

So upset over clothes. Over leather. Stuff I paid no heed to, ever.

Honestly... when had I last actually cared about what I wore? I couldn't think of it. It was one thing to pay attention when I needed to. If I needed to blend in with a certain culture, or humans, but...

"I know they're just clothes... but Lellip and Nebl made them for us. I feel bad about it," Renn then said.

I blinked as I realized what was really troubling her.

Oh...

"They'd be happy to know their gifts were useful," I said gently.

"I know... but..." she nodded, but I could tell it still meant a lot to her.

Yes. Right. Gifts. Presents.

Precious little treasures.

Material items.

Things I no longer held value in. Proof that I was growing... too old.

Staring at Renn, who was walking with a very happy and content smile, I realized how I could likely fix or at least... keep myself from getting worse.

"Can... I ask something of you Renn?" I asked softly.

"Hm?" she turned her head and smiled at me.

"Watch over me," I said gently.

She blinked at me, and then smirked. "What's with that?" she asked.

I nodded. "I know. But seriously... please keep an eye on me. Make sure I don't forget or miss something important. Like the leathers again," I asked her.

Renn slowed to a stop, so I did too. I held her gaze, one that looked shocked, and smiled at her.

Ridiculous, I know. But still...

“Okay Vim,” she said seriously and nodded.

“Thanks. I’d blame my age, but to be honest I was like this even as a child. I never cared much for the little things,” I said. If Renn knew of all the stuff I’d abandoned in that house, where I had grown up in, she’d probably weep.

She gave me a toothy grin as she nodded. “I bet! But it’s okay. You treasure the important stuff enough to make up for it,” she said.

I nodded, but... didn’t have the heart to tell her that wasn’t true.

I knew I was numb to a degree. Maybe not as bad as I could be... but...

“You know I ran away once,” I said.

“Hm...?” We returned to walking, and I noticed she was closer again. It’d not be long before she either grabbed my hand or wrapped my arm up.

“A long time ago, before I met Celine and joined the Society. I ran away. For a lot of reasons... but mostly because I was tired of feeling shame and guilt,” I told her honestly.

I noticed Renn's tail become a little stiff, as it stopped swaying in the air. "You... mean what Beak said? Earlier?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. Other than her... well... there are two others who knew me before I ran away. One you'll get to meet someday, but the other I bet you never will. She now sleeps on the bottom of the ocean, and I'm not sure if she'll ever wake up again," I said.

"Bottom of the ocean...?" Renn whispered.

"She's a huge tortoise. A Monarch. If she's even still alive, honestly. I've not seen her in..." I tried to remember last time I'd spoken with her. "Well not long after Celine died. So at least two hundred years ago," I said.

"A friend like Beak," she said softly, understanding.

Nodding, I held out my hands to try and display how big of a turtle I was talking about. "She's huge. So big she's an island unto herself. She doesn't say much, but has a very wicked sense of humor. She once ate another Monarch right in front of me just to make a point at how slow I was being," I said as I remembered that moment.

"Slow doing what Vim?" Renn asked.

“Killing it. She thought I was taking too long. Basically to her it was a joke. She didn’t do it to help, but to tease me.”

Renn giggled at me. “That’s a little weird.”

“Hm... other than her, there’s another Monarch. A great ape. He lives in a very secluded and dense forest to our northeast. He actually has two children, who are Monarchs too, but they’re not able to absorb hearts. Their own hearts are very small, and weak. A pity,” I said.

“Where’d you run to Vim?” Renn then asked.

I blinked, and wondered if her asking that and not about either of my other friends was because she wanted to meet them herself and thus not ruin that moment for when it happened... or if she was genuinely that more interested in what I’d done than them.

“Well... the ocean. I ran to islands. Not far from where the sea turns to ice, I found a chain of small islands. They were... nice,” I said.

“The ones you mentioned before,” she noted.

I nodded. I had somewhat touched on them when I had told her of my meeting with Celine, but hadn't gone into detail. “My exile had felt short, but it turned out to be something that had lasted a long time. Those like Beak, who knew me before I had run off, are... or were... too much, like me. They too didn’t, or don’t, notice the passage of time as much as we should. So even they don’t really know how long I was gone. But Celine and some others, like Hands’ father, spent years trying to find out,” I said.

“Hands? His father?” she asked.

“His name was Eyes. I didn’t like him... but it wasn’t his fault. He was a very good man. He had a heart of gold. Anyway, they decided I’d likely been on those islands for hundreds of years at least. They scoured records, history, and tried to find and talk to people as old as me. Like Mordo, even, and only could figure out that I was older than even their current records of history,” I told her all about it.

“Records of history?” she asked.

“They compared my knowledge to what they knew. Names of nations, events, and such. Honestly I didn’t care much about it. To me it didn’t matter. It was weird I hadn’t noticed, but I never understood why they seemed to care so much how long I’d been gone. It wasn’t like it changed anything, even if they figured it out,” I said.

“So that’s where Hands got his strange passion from,” Renn said, as if it made sense.

I chuckled. “Yes.”

We rounded a small bend, and I noticed a blur in the distance. Far down the road, was a small black wagon. Or maybe even a carriage. It was still far enough away that even I couldn’t make most of it out.

“Did it help?” she then asked.

I was about to ask what she meant, but then realized. “No,” I said honestly. “The time spent on those islands likely only caused more harm than good. To me. To the world.”

Renn’s look softened, and it felt weird that she was looking with such an understanding gaze. As if she knew exactly what I meant.

“Yet... I’m glad I did it. Even if it was wrong in the grand scheme of things. I think had I not done so... I would have become a something worse than I am now,” I said.

“Worse...?” she tilted her head at me.

“I think I would have become the very thing I set out to destroy. I’d have become a monster. A tyrant... more than I am already, I mean,” I explained.

“Vim if you think you’re a tyrant then you and I really need to have a very long conversation,” Renn said a little sternly.

“Careful Renn. I know Beak claimed you to be her replacement for my debating partner, but this is one you’ll lose,” I warned.

“Really? What did she say about this? Did she say you were a tyrant?” Renn asked.

“Worse. She believed me to be a far worse creature. One who played god,” I said.

Renn slowed to a stop, glaring at me the entire time.

“Well?” I asked, waiting for it.

“Do you really believe yourself to be a tyrant Vim?” she asked softly.

I nodded. “I may not force my will on others Renn... but I constantly change the fates of everyone around me. Can you really look me in the eyes, after everything you’ve seen me do and say I don’t bend the world to my whims? Half the time without care of what might happen after? Did we not just recently have a similar conversation, where you basically said the same thing?” I asked her.

“You do it to protect us. For good reason,” she argued.

“What of the thousands who died in Lumen, Renn? Or the thousands more who will likely die from Landi’s insane ambition? Or do they not count simply because they’re human?” I asked her.

Renn’s eyes narrowed at me, and her tail began to twitch wildly.

Oh? I actually struck it nerve it seemed.

“Vim... you could destroy everyone and everything. You could wipe them all out, if you wished. One time you told me you could not face armies, that you were but one man... but that is definitely not the truth. You could. You could kill every human,” she said as she pointed at me.

I had told her I couldn't face armies...? Must have been in the beginning. I didn't remember that conversation. It was the typical excuse I gave new, or young, members when they asked why I didn't just wipe out all the humans.

Damn. Her memory was better than Beak's.

Maybe Beak wasn't far off in her jest. Renn might actually be a very dangerous debater...

“If your claim against my statement is the mere fact that I don't kill or slaughter more than I do, just because I don't feel like it, then your argument is flawed,” I said

“How so? If anything it's the best argument. You keep your strength in check. You don't allow your great power to abuse those unable to face it. If anything I'd say sometimes you hold back too much, Vim,” she said.

“Hold back too much...?” I asked. When? Where? How so?

She nodded firmly, and stepped forward. She pointed up at me, as if to accuse me. “You should throw your weight around more often! Humans have laws and stuff, but just like our kind they still respect

strength and power! Think of all you could do to further keep the Society safe if you were just a little more forceful?" she declared.

I frowned at her. "If you mean for me to act more like Landi, then you're missing the point," I said.

She frowned back at me, which quickly turned into a glare. "Am I? If you did as Landi does, you could have a whole town. A nation. Just as Merit tried. If you did it, with your strength and all your knowledge, I bet it'd work. You could make a whole city for all of us, and no one would ever be able to hunt or hurt us again!" she said.

Hm. It's interesting that Renn was now arguing something that many others have done before. Even Beak had suggested it once, long ago.

Smiling at her and her fiery glare, I nodded. "Sure. I'll just force all our members to the same city. To live under the rule of a man they wouldn't be able to even look in the eyes, as they quake in fear. Half of my time will be spent breaking legs to keep them from running, and the other half would be spent burying those who die from stress or heart attacks," I said.

Renn's glare immediately died, shifting to a look of pure shock. Like a bubble popping, she realized exactly what I meant.

"Oh..." she mumbled.

I nodded and chuckled. "I like your train of thought though."

“What’s a train?” she asked.

Hesitating, I knew that I had likely just been shocked into a weird expression just like her.

Then she laughed at me, to the point she actually grabbed her stomach as she giggled away.

Watching her giggle and laugh at me, I couldn’t help but smile at her. Damn she was cute. “Your reasoning, I mean.”

“I figured...!” she snickered at me, still finding it funny.

I sighed at her. “What were we arguing about again?” I asked as she calmed down.

“We’re not arguing, we’re debating,” she said.

Sure. Whatever. “Don’t argue that I’m not a tyrant, then try and tell me I should become a real one,” I said.

“Hm. Funny isn’t it? But you’re right... it wouldn’t work, since most of our members wouldn’t be willing to live in such a way. I could see them running away... but would some actually die out of stress? Really?” Renn asked.

I nodded. "Many would. Think of those like Silkie. For some of our members the mere presence of humans, or a predator, is enough to make them panic," I said.

"Right..." Renn mumbled as she went into thought.

Reaching out, I patted her on the back, her lower back, to have her return to walking with me. I hadn't needed to, with her not carrying any bags or packs, but for some reason it was where my hand felt at home the most.

I'd lately been carrying all the bags. It wasn't an issue at all for me, and it let Renn be more comfortable as she walked. She wasn't weak, by any means... but... Well...

I enjoyed watching her be free and happy. Walking around without a care. If I made her carry stuff, even if she didn't notice the weight she was still conscious of the item itself. The bag. So she'd not walk with as much of a bounce as she did now while not carrying anything. I liked to see her skip occasionally as we walked, or turn and spin. She didn't do it often, but when she did it brought a smile to my face.

Though she did have something in her possession at the moment. Something precious. Or well, for her, she had a few things that were precious.

One being the comb I had made her. Tucked safely away in her leather breastplate. The other was wrapped and hidden in a bigger pocket, near her stomach.

Miss Beak's heart.

I wasn't... sure why Renn had asked to carry it for me. But I wouldn't complain. She'd not be harmed holding it for a short while, and... it was probably her way of being kind.

Returning to walking, I noticed the wagon again. But now I noticed it had a large canopy. It might indeed be a carriage and not a wagon or cart.

Renn walked with me, picking up pace, but I noticed the way her tail twitched. She had wanted to stand and argue with me some more.

We were a few days from the nearest town. I wanted to keep a steady pace, if I could. To make up for lost time. Time I'd already wasted, thanks to that quarantine and going out of way to see Beak.

She obliged as she huffed. "I'll admit Vim you... are a little dangerous, to the world. Your mere existence breaks laws, natural ones. But... you're not a tyrant. You're not evil. I know evil. My family had been evil. The snake which had hunted them had been evil. The men who had tortured Nory had been evil. Those people in the sewers of Lumen were evil. You're not like any of them, on any level," she said.

"I'm humbled you think so, Renn... but the fact of the matter is what you say is only true from our perspective. I'm not evil to you, or our members, but what about the children of those I killed? What of those who survived the sewers? Who now are likely living terrible lives, beyond what they had been, because I had destroyed all they knew and understood?" I asked.

“That’s not your fault. You’re trying to justify the suffering they’re enduring while ignoring their own failures. The only reason you put them in that position, is because they or their fellows forced your hand. You weren’t the question, but the answer,” Renn argued.

Frowning at her very mature way of looking at it, I wondered if maybe Beak had realized in her short conversation the type of person Renn was. Had she? That quickly?

Maybe her statement at the end there hadn’t been a joke.

“You’re too smart for your own good. And... you’re right. I agree. But the fact doesn’t change, Renn. For some I’m not cruel, but for others I’m the worst thing to have ever existed. You can’t deny their perspectives just because I’m slightly more justifiable in my actions than they are,” I said.

“Why not?” she asked.

Smiling at her very predator-like perspective, I shrugged. “Because if we did, we then need to excuse the acts of the real tyrants. Everyone, no matter what they do or how they do it, have an excuse somewhere. No matter how small. Where do you draw the line?” I asked.

“Between right and wrong,” she said simply.

“If only...” I said.

“Hmph,” she made a noise at me, and her tail smacked me. If she did it on purpose or not I didn’t know.

“You’ll need to hide your traits when we get closer to them,” I warned.

“I know. I wouldn’t need to if you were the tyrant you claimed to be,” she grumbled.

Blinking at her, I couldn’t help but smirk at her. “Now that’s a diabolical way to debate. That’s scary as hell,” I said happily.

If only Beak had heard that! She would have laughed something fierce.

Renn grinned at me. “I’d been serious though,” she said.

I could tell.

We walked in silence for a moment, as Renn’s tail slowly calmed down. It went from twitching wildly, to swaying normally again.

“I’m tired of being the tyrant, Renn,” I said softly.

She glanced at me, but I kept my eyes on the carriage in the distance.

Nodding, I sighed. "Celine was like you. To a point. She used to get so, so angry at me. She wanted me to resort to force far quicker than I did, than I do. She too believed that if I was just a little more violent, then things would be different. Which was funny since she imposed so many rules on me that limited that same violence," I said.

For a moment Renn said nothing, and then her tail brushed against me. "What did Beak say? About that?" she asked.

"She agreed. Most of those I've talked to about have all agreed. Though they all had differed to what degree I should be more forceful, and where and how," I said.

"Then Vim... if everyone else agrees... why don't you?" she asked.

"Because they hadn't been around to see what happened the last time I did," I stated.

The dirt crunched under my feet as we walked, and I realized I had stepped a little too strongly. A few steps later my footfalls sounded normal again, as I got it under control.

Renn noticed, but said nothing about it. Then she clasped her hands before her, twirling her thumbs around each other.

“You mean the mistake you made. The one you mentioned before,” she said.

I nodded.

“One failure doesn’t justify a lifetime of inaction, Vim,” she said softly.

Glancing at the woman who had just said the exact same thing Miss Beak had said long ago, I wondered if I should shiver or scowl at her. What were the odds of that?

“What...?” she asked after a moment.

“I’ll say the same to you that I did to Miss Beak, all those years ago,” I said softly.

She nodded, expectant.

“It does when the failure had been so horrible that the world is still to this day healing from the damage it wrought,” I said.

Renn’s ears twitched as she stared at me.

“Do... do you regret it then, Vim...?” she asked.

I didn't hesitate. “No. I'd have done it again, would do it again. But... maybe not as wildly. I might have done it a different way. Or without as much hatred,” I admitted.

“Hm...” she studied me, and I knew she wanted to ask. To know.

But was I ready to tell her...?

It'd be interesting to see if she came to the same conclusion Miss Beak had. Or would she be more like the others? Would she fault me, or praise me? Would her love for me grow, or smolder out and go cold?

As I thought that, I realized exactly why I didn't want to tell her yet.

That was it. Obviously. If I told her... she might come to no longer love me.

And if that happened...

“Vim?” Renn got my attention, and I realized I had missed something she had said.

“Hm?” I tried my best to smile at her. In a way to beg for forgiveness. In a way to pretend as if I’d not really meant to ignore her, and it had only been an accident.

She opened her mouth, to say something... and I noticed the way her lips trembled. Hesitant. Unsure.

Great. I must have missed a very serious question.

Renn then smiled and sighed. “It’s okay. How about we talk about something else?” she asked.

Something else...? “Like what?”

“Hm... how about we debate about how you sleep?” she asked after a moment of thought.

“How I sleep...?” I asked. What was there to argue over that? The amount of it maybe? I did feel tired, but... well...

I was trying to ignore it. It was actually starting to become a concern. Hopefully it was just exhaustion. From the recent issues. From Lumen to Miss Beak...

“Yeah. You always sleep on your back, with your hands crossed on your stomach. It reminds me of how someone is placed when dead. I don’t like it. Plus it makes it hard for me,” she said.

Frowning at her, I wondered if I really did sleep like that. Didn't I sleep on my side most often? Maybe I hadn't been lately... "Wait... hard for you? How so?" I asked. What'd she mean?

"Yeah, how am I supposed to sleep against you when you're lying like that? Your arms are bigger than they look, they're big enough that I can't find a way to lay my head on you anywhere, or sleep against you comfortably. It makes it very uncomfortable and awkward to sleep on you. It's not fair," she complained.

Staring at the woman who had boldly complained about such a weird thing, I couldn't think of anything to respond with.

"All you got to do is leave an arm out, or something. An outstretched arm or even just your elbow or something, Just somewhere for me to rest against. I mean, really," she said with a huff.

"Renn..." I groaned.

"What...! Yes, I know, you're just starting to get used to letting me hold your hand or arm, so it's a huge step... but it's not that big of one, Vim, really. We sleep next to each other all the time, what's a few inches closer?" she asked.

"The distance you speak of is that akin to here and the moon," I said.

"The... moon...?" Renn mumbled, and then frowned as she looked up at the sky. Although day, we could see a bit of the moon. "Oh, really Vim? It's not like I'm asking for anything too drastic," she said.

Well... maybe she wasn't... but...

"Most humans go much farther much quicker. I've seen humans just walk up to each other, and then hurry off to a room! Without even introducing themselves! Without a hint of romance, or anything!" she complained.

Nodding, I smiled. "Yeah. It happens," I said. And not just thanks to alcohol or the moment, either.

"Don't you dare tell me, Vim," Renn's voice was cold, cutting the hot air. I quickly stopped thinking of the more recent times I'd done such a thing.

"You do touch me though, Renn. When you sleep you often reach out for me. Half the time you sleep the whole night with your hand on my chest, or back," I said. Did she not even realize she did?

"Then there should be no problem if I'm a little closer! If you're already used to that," she though used it to argue in her favor.

I sighed as I glanced away from the woman who was very heated, though arguing with a smile. The wagon was closer now. Close enough I could make out the little flags on each of its corners. There were also... yes. Two other horses. Riding on either side of the wagon, with men on them. I couldn't see the glint of armor, but there was little doubt they were guards of some sort.

“Really Vim... it’s not even like you sleep that often. It’d just be once in a blue moon, even,” she mumbled.

“Hm...” I wondered what to say. How did I argue against this?

I mean... it’s not like I wanted to. What she was asking for was something I’d not dislike at all. The mere thought of the feeling of her against me made me want to smile. Hell, I’d just earlier a few moments ago had wanted her to grab onto my arm. As we walked. In the heat.

But that was precisely why I couldn’t just give in. It was one thing for her to sleep next to me, or for her to touch me in her sleep. It was a completely different story for her to lay against me in such a way.

If I let that happen, it’d only result in the next step being taken. Likely that same night.

Even if Renn wasn’t arguing for that exact thing, she might as well be. For me, at least. Even if she didn’t realize she was.

And I couldn’t let that happen. Not yet.

Right...?

“I’d even be okay with lying against your back. You lay on your side when you’re not actually sleeping, but you haven’t been doing that lately... so...” she mumbled as she continued to complain.

Ah. That might work. Would I be okay with just that? Or would that still be too much for me?

For a few steps I heavily debated my own desires and fears, and hated how I was losing every which way.

“When you were with Nory... did you sleep in the same bed?” I asked her.

“Huh...!” Renn startled, her ears going stiff. Then they calmed down as they flicked. “No. We had separate beds on either side of the cabin,” she said, as she blinked quickly. Either she was remembering the cabin she spoke of, or was trying to decipher what I was saying.

I nodded. That made sense. It’s not happened in some time, but when we had first started traveling together Renn had awoken in a startle some nights. Or mumbled in her sleep, crying. About either Nory, or her friends or family. When she reacted over nightmares of Nory, she sometimes sat up really quickly and looked across the room, or off in the distance. Not the way someone would act when they were used to sleeping next to someone. She had never reached out for someone who usually was right next to her, but instead someone far away.

“Why...?” Renn asked, after I didn’t say anything.

“Just wondering if I could do the same or not,” I said softly.

Renn immediately glared at me, nearly snarling at me. "Really Vim...!" she was about to go off on me, but I smiled at her and reached over.

Her eyes narrowed onto my fingers, and I noted the way she snarled. She had been ready to bite at them, as I grabbed a lock of her hair.

Holding it gently as she wearily glared at me, waiting expectantly, I nodded. "Lately your hair's been getting everywhere. You might not have been sleeping on me, but your hair surely has," I said.

She blinked, and then her face went a little red. "Well... it is long..." she mumbled as she calmed down.

Chuckling at her, I nodded. "I'll think about it. Give me time, Renn... Remember, I'm known for running away. If you push too hard I might just flee in terror," I said halfheartedly.

She giggled at me and nodded. "Why do you think I'm asking for permission?" she asked.

Frowning at her, I decided to nod. That was true, I guess.

"Hide your tail and ears, Renn. We're nearing them," I said softly.

"Ah. Okay..." she sighed as she went to oblige. I tilted a little, to let her open her bag on my back, and dig out her hat.

She found it easily enough, since we had intentionally kept it accessible. She went to putting it on, and I noted she no longer had any pins.

“No more pins?” I asked.

She shook her head as she tucked her ears under the hat. “Last few I had broke from the flight to the ocean. I think dropping the bags from her back did it,” she said.

Right... my bad.

“I’ll make you some later,” I promised.

She smiled and nodded as she then went to hiding her tail. She had to untie the leather belt on her pants to do so, and I slowed down to watch her.

Although her tail was long, and looked difficult to maneuver in such a way, she was able to situate and hide it faster than she had done her ears.

Once done, she smiled proudly at me... waiting for a compliment.

“I’d say well done, but honestly it hurts to see them missing,” I said.

Renn grinned at me, and nodded. “My tail’s so pretty now, after all. Smoothly combed and all!”

I nodded, and wondered if there really was a difference. I honestly hadn’t been able to tell.

We returned to walking at our normal pace, and I sighed as I noticed one of the guards notice us. They didn’t do anything, but they spoke up to their companion who turned to look at us too. Odds are we were all headed for the same town.

Renn hummed happily, seemingly content.

Good thing too. I was worried she’d pester me about that sleeping stuff for longer. If she had I might have given in. Hopefully she’d not realize that.

Then suddenly she was up against me. Smirking wildly up at me.

“If you ever run away again Vim... take me with you okay?” she then said gently.

I chuckled at her. “Sure. It’s a date.”

Her arms finally found my own. She wrapped them around me, holding me close to her as she clung to me. She giggled happily, as if I'd once again given her a mighty gift.

As we approached the slow moving carriage, I sighed as I resisted the urge to take her to those islands.

We were close, after all. From here we'd only need to cross two oceans. It'd not be difficult. I could make a suitable enough ship in a few months... gather enough supplies for her, then...

It was such a silly idea. One I'd never act on. At least not until every single promise, every single person I was responsible for, was gone. I'd not act on it until no one needed me anymore. Until the world had changed again.

But maybe... if I did my job right...

If I kept her safe...

Even if hundreds if not thousands of years from now...

As long as I kept her next to me, safe and sound, then the little whimsical fantasy could be more than just a dream.

I let the idea tease me for a long while, as Renn hummed happily while we walked.

Arm and arm, ever forward.

Chapter 237 Shutters; Shaking

The storm rattled more than just the window shutters.

A wild wind was blowing, and although the rain was coming and going it wasn't gentle when it was here.

Right now there was no rain, but the loud roars and rumbles of the storm made up for the lack of rain splattering the windows and side of the inn.

The shutters were on the outside of the glass windows. But they had these little metal hooks that one could latch and secure them with, here on the inside. Vim and I had already secured the three windows in our room, but I could hear the banging of shutters elsewhere. Ones that hadn't been secured. Not just on this building, but those around us too.

The whole world got bright for a moment, and then the loud boom followed. I didn't jump at the sound, even though it was loud enough to be startling, but I didn't like how the very air vibrated thanks to it. It made my ears flutter, as if someone was blowing into them and tickling them.

I didn't like that feeling. It reminded me of the roars of that Monarch. Of those creatures in Lumen. Of that snake, long ago.

Usually such sounds were followed by pain. Suffering. Sadness. So although I liked storms, and enjoyed them, this part of them really bothered me.

Plus this storm was oddly cold. Usually storms like this made the air warmer, or more humid. Yet right now this inn felt strangely cold, enough to make me glance over at the fireplace nearby. I should light it.

Another massive gust slammed against the inn, causing the shutters to rattle fiercely. I turned to watch the windows for a moment, half expecting one to break at any moment. They didn't, but I heard something bang off in the distance. Across the street, maybe.

Looking away from the window, I stepped away from it and over to the table where Vim sat. He had a bunch of small wood and metal pieces littering the table, and he was currently shaping one of them into another pin.

He'd already made a handful, and it was very interesting that many of them were unique. He was making them with little designs, most had simple flowers but of different styles. Others had a star, or a moon.

"You could sell these, Vim," I said as I picked one up. It looked like some kind of rose.

"Hm," he didn't seem to care.

I wonder if he made these so cutely for me, or if this was just his artistic side. The comb had been very unique, something that anyone would be able to tell had been tailor made for an individual. Maybe a child. But that had been something personal. A gift. For me.

These little pins were things I broke and lost all the time... so him making them so precious was actually a little concerning for me. What if I broke them? It made me almost want to not use them... even though I really needed to. Especially if these weird sudden storms were going to start popping up. It had hit right as we entered town this morning, and I had almost gotten my ears noticed thanks to it. The heavy winds had blown my hat off, right as we entered the inn.

Luckily no one had been on the lower floor, in the lobby, at the time. I had been able to get the hat back on before the older woman and her husband had emerged from a backroom.

"I can always make more Renn," Vim then said.

I flinched, and not because of the loud slam from outside. Something had broken and fell over. Maybe a sign. "Huh?"

He nodded as he put down another pin, finished with it. "You can break and lose them. I'll just make you more," he said.

The cold room got a little warmer, and I smiled at the man who had just made me blush. He went to making another, as if not even aware he had done so. Likely didn't.

"How'd you know what I was worried about?" I asked.

"The same way I know when you're hungry, or upset," he said.

Hm...?

Oh. I glanced behind me, to my tail. It was twitching and swaying. It of course didn't look that odd at the moment, but I knew the truth. My tail must have absentmindedly reacted to what I was thinking about.

Really what was I going to do with myself? I was glad that Vim took such notice and care of me, to where he paid attention even to the little details... but... That was also why he wouldn't tell me certain things. Like his weakness. Because of those very visible emotions I possessed.

I sighed as I pulled back the chair I had been sitting in earlier, to sit with Vim at the table.

Sitting down, I reached over to grab one of the small pieces of metal he was using to form the pins. It was a long, thin, strip. Kind of like a tiny stick. It felt a little rough, and was oddly heavier than the heart in my pocket even though a fraction the size.

Playing with the little metal thing, I bent it and tried to replicate what Vim was doing. He bent them to form, then broke off the excess lengths... then he connected the metal designs to little wooden clips, where the designs were engraved.

"How long do these..." I started to ask.

"Monsoons? Usually only a day or so. Though what happens is in this region, these monsoons come and go. Sometimes back to back. It can be like this on and off for months here. But this one's pretty bad," he said.

Yes. It was. This small town wasn't as small as some of the tiny ones we'd passed through on the way down south... but it wasn't much bigger either. It was about half the size of Ruvindale, and seemed even less populated. We had arrived right alongside the storm, so hadn't been able to see many people, or hear any gossip, but I had heard the innkeepers talk and complain about the damages the storm would bring. They had worried the storm would break more than they could afford to fix.

Business was bad. Very bad.

Another city in terrible straits, to prove that Landi had done a lot more harm to the world around her than she should have been allowed to.

Yet I had...

I glanced at the windows nearby, and their noisy rattling. A few of the shutters sounded like they were about to break and fly off at any moment.

A good distraction from my own hypocrisy.

"How much... money does an inn like this make Vim? Is it a decent amount?" I asked.

"Some can make a lot; others barely make enough to survive. For most it's just enough to keep the owners fed and clothed, and pay whatever tax or city-fees they have. I've personally never been a fan of such service centered businesses. They're long term ventures and investments... which means there are

lots of opportunities for things to go wrong,” he explained as he grabbed his little steel knife, to go about cutting and forming the little design he had planned for the new pin.

“Is that why you made Lumen?” I asked as I stopped messing with the metal strip in my hand. I had somewhat shaped it like he had done, but it was obviously not good enough. It bent askew in odd places.

“Lumen, just like the other three companies we’ve had, started the same as the rest. As a simple business front for us to sell the goods and products the Society makes. As to keep all profit in house and our members safe from interacting with human merchants,” Vim said.

“Ah... right.” That made a lot of sense.

“Brandy and the rest were the ones who wanted to make the bank and other branches. I helped, but honestly would not have done the same,” he said.

“Because they draw too much attention,” I said.

He nodded, and blew off some of the wood shavings he was accumulating.

I hummed as I watched him craft, and felt oddly excited. What would it be this time? Another flower? An animal?

The room lit up again, growing bright, as the whole world shook. My ears fluttered again this time, even though I had tried not to let them do so.

“Tickles huh?” Vim asked after the rumbling stopped.

I nodded. “It’s annoying.”

He chuckled at me, and lowered his hands, to pause a moment. “Why ask about the inn Renn?” he asked.

“Ah... I heard the innkeepers. They were worried the storm would damage more than they could afford to fix,” I said.

Vim blinked at me, and I noticed he grew a little softer. His eyes relaxed, his shoulders lowered a little.

“What...?” I asked softly.

“Your heart is mighty Renn. Do you want to start a fire? It’s getting cold, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Can I?” I asked. I glanced to the nearby fireplace. It was rather elaborate, made of nicely made stone. It looked like something Vim or Lellip would make, with care and attention to detail.

“Why wouldn’t you be able to?” he asked as he went back to his pin.

“Nory had not liked us making a fire during storms. Worried the wind would make the fire spread,” I said as I stood and went to light the fire.

Vim chuckled behind me as I kneeled before the fireplace, to gather up the small wood chunks and pieces as to start the fire. “Your little cabin must have been rather breezy,” he said.

Hesitating a moment, I slowly put one of the logs down and glanced at him. “It had been!” I said.

He glanced at me and smiled, nodding in understanding.

“We did our best you know! We actually spent months making it, and we tore down and rebuilt whole walls several times. We tried really hard to make extra rooms too, but no matter what we did...” I used the little fire starter to strike the fire alight. It started gently, and almost went out, but eventually took hold and grew into a proper flame.

Stepping away from the fire, I wiped my hands and glanced at the nearby door. This room was actually rather large. Far bigger than a usual inn’s room, but the door looked relatively normal. I stepped over to it, and pointed at the way the door laid flush. “See? We couldn’t get this done right. No matter what we did, we just couldn’t stop this huge crack from forming around the door frame. It let in a lot of cold air, and animals and stuff. Mice and things. Nory hated it so much, so we eventually gave up and just made the cabin one big room,” I told him.

Vim had put aside his little pin and turned to see what I meant. "I see," he said.

Nodding, I then pointed at the nearby bed. "Our beds too! I thought we had done well, but after sleeping in all the beds in the Society I've realized how horrible ours had been. I wish Nory could have slept in some of these beds... I bet she'd have loved them," I said.

"Beds are hard to do right," Vim agreed.

"I use to get fleas, you know. During the summer," I said, and kept my eyes on the bed... to not look at him. It was a little embarrassing to say.

He chuckled. "I'm sure! A lot of our members have similar problems. That or lice. I actually get a letter every so often for that very reason, to help them get rid of mites or lice or something. Usually in the bigger villages, like Tor's or the Bell Church," Vim said.

Hesitating, I glanced at the man who had just so calmly said something so terrifying. "Wait really? It gets that bad?" I asked.

Vim nodded. "Yeah... I mean they all know how to get rid of them by now, but sometimes it takes a little more... oomph? There's a way to use steam to get rid of bugs, that even though I've tried to teach a lot of people no one seems able to utilize it. Or they're scared of it or something, so they call on me to do it for them," he said.

"Do bugs bother you Vim?" I asked as I crawled onto the bed, to sit and talk to him this way. The fire was working already, warming the cold room, but it was still cold enough I didn't want to sit on the chair.

“No. Usually never do. I’ve messed with like nests, or bee hives, and can usually manhandle them without a single sting,” he said.

“Like the animals,” I said with a nod.

He nodded back.

“But... dogs and cats notice you? I’ve seen you pet both,” I said.

“They’re bigger, and can see me. Even they usually are a little unaware of me at first too. It helps to talk and make noises, to let them know that even if they can’t smell or sense me, I’m not anything weird,” he said.

Hm... “What about when you go all invisible?” I asked.

He frowned at me. “Invisible?”

I nodded as I gestured around us. “Sometimes you just... disappear. Then appear again, usually behind me or something.”

Leaning against his chair, he turned a little more as to face me more directly. The bed was behind his chair. "That's just me being sneaky Renn, I don't actually disappear or anything," he said with a smirk.

"Somehow I doubt that. Is that some secret I'm not supposed to know?" I asked.

Vim shook his head. "No? I really don't know how to disappear or anything. But I can see why you'd think so. You're not the first to ask or question it. I believe it's because of your heightened senses," he said.

"My senses...?" I crawled a little closer to the edge of the bed, to be closer to him.

Vim sat up a moment, as to turn his chair. So that he more properly faced me as well. "You and the others. The Non-Humans. Your senses are far better than a humans, more akin to animals. They're heightened and more alert, more attune to the more subtle sounds and smells. So, because I lack such things, it tricks you. It's precisely because you're more observant that it makes it so much easier for me to sneak up on you all," he explained.

I crossed my arms as I tried to comprehend what he was saying. He was basically saying that the reason I sometimes mistook him, or his presence, was because I was... too focused? Really?

"I know. Makes little sense. But it's a thing. When one's hyper-focused, sometimes the obvious is what they miss," he said.

"I suppose... I guess it makes sense. When I'm fighting for my life, I actually do sometimes have to struggle to remember what happened. For instance I can remember every moment before, and after, being kidnapped in Lumen. But there're a few things that are hazy while it all occurred," I said.

He nodded. "Exactly. For you though that's likely thanks to the adrenaline and pain. You had cracked your head something fierce, Renn," he said gently.

I reached up to touch the spot. I didn't feel it anymore. No more wound. No more scab, but somehow I did feel as if I felt something. Maybe the hair was thinner there, or something.

"I had, huh," I mumbled.

He nodded. "Such injuries can do odd things. Be thankful only your memory is a little fuzzy. A small price to pay," he said.

"Hm..." I nodded as I scratched behind one of my ears, since my hand was up there anyway. Hopefully that itching wasn't a flea, it'd be rather ironic to get some for the first time in a long while just because I had spoke of them.

"I appreciate you making those pins Vim... but why not rest?" I asked as I patted the bed.

Shadows from the fire danced on Vim's face as his eyes narrowed at me. "The fact you say such a thing like that in such a way while having absolutely no hidden meaning is why," he said.

Hesitating, I took a moment to decipher his words... and then felt my face grow hot. Hotter than the fire. Hot enough to almost wish I hadn't started said fire. "Vim...!" I groaned.

He chuckled at me and turned back around, to go back to his pins. "I will later. We're only a week or so away from the weaver, and since we might stay there for a short while I think we might stick around here for a few days. If that's okay with you," he said.

"Huh...? Yeah. I'm okay with that," I said excitedly. Stay here for a few days? Of course...! Even if the town was somewhat small, and right now not something I could venture out in... at least not without looking like a crazy person, thanks to the storms.

Sitting on the bed, I smiled happily as I watched him go about carving another pin. I liked how he focused on his task, even if he looked bored as he did so.

"Honestly, she's become more of a seamstress lately. I probably shouldn't call her a weaver anymore," he said.

"Hm...?"

He put the pin down and went to make another. "Her husband had been the one to form the clothes themselves. She had been the one to make the materials. When he passed she took up the mantle," he said.

Oh... "He died?" I asked.

Vim nodded as he went to carving. "Only two of their children had been born like you. The rest had... more human blood than not. In fact last time I visited only two were still alive. But even with that said, their family has grown exponentially. One of her children partnered with one of Merit's friends. A duck. It's funny, really," he said.

"Funny...?" I asked. "And a friend of Merit? Really?"

He nodded again and then flinched, and I had to lean a little as to see why. I couldn't see the reason, but I did watch as Vim tossed the pin he had been working on into a different pile. One full of bent and broken pieces.

He had broken it for some reason. Had that been a genuine accident, or because of my question?

"The weaver is a bird. But she married a fox, similar to Lomi. Her children both ended up with birds themselves, even though they were both more fox than not. One's still with her. The other is..." Vim went quiet, then still.

"Wait..." I wasn't liking where the odd look on his face was taking the conversation.

Vim sighed and nodded. "Yeah... Lomi's village," he groaned as he reached up to squeeze his eyes.

"Aw... Vim..." I felt cold again as I watched him rub his eyes.

“Hopefully the Chroniclers letters have reached them by now. If not we’ll once again be the bearer of horrible news,” he said softly.

I gulped, and remembered Riz. Another one of those moments...?

“Did... did Lomi know them?” I asked.

Vim took a breath and tilted his head as he thought of it. “I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember...? Vim...” I wanted to toss a pillow at him.

“Yeah... surely not right?” he shifted in his chair, now uncertain.

“Please don’t tell me Lomi’s related to them, and you could have taken her there. To her rightful family,” I complained.

“Lomi hadn’t smelled like a bird at all,” he said as he turned to look at me.

Was that defensive attitude for himself, or me? “Vim...” I groaned.

“I know. Shit. This is what I get for categorizing everyone by their traits,” he mumbled at himself.

“That’s not a good enough of an excuse...! What if she’s related to them? What will you do?” I asked as I crawled closer to the edge of the bed, in case I needed to step off the bed and shake him.

Vim though said nothing.

“Vim...!” I swept my legs off the bed, to accuse him some more. To question him. To find out what we were going to do!

“I’m thinking Renn,” he said softly.

“Think faster!”

“I can’t. I’m not like you,” he argued.

“Then think aloud!” I ordered.

“By now Lomi’s either set up roots, or she’s grown to hate it there. If she hates it there, taking her to the weaver is the best course of action. However, if she has decided to make a life there with Porka and the rest then...” Vim actually obeyed. I nodded, listening intently as he continued, “Then there’s the question of what’s best for Lomi. Those at the weaver are birds, but mostly human. A dying family. Half

will not feel safe with Lomi, being thick of blood as a predator. The other half will die before she even matures.”

“Gods Vim...” I groaned at him.

“What... You asked?”

“I did...” I complained. So it was a bad scenario all around. “If she made a home there? What then?” I asked.

“That’d be for the best. Our hope is she chooses one of Porka’s kids as a mate, to continue the bloodline,” he said.

“Playing god again,” I noted.

“I know, Renn,” Vim said softly.

Squeezing the blanket on the bed, I glared at the man who looked hurt. For once.

“I sent Lomi a letter. In Lumen,” I said.

“I know. Gerald asked me for permission before he sent it. Remember?”

Growing angry for a new reason, I huffed at him. “Why the heck did I need your permission, Vim?” I asked.

“They were weary of you Renn,” he said gently.

“You’re making it very hard for me to love them,” I said.

He nodded. “It’s very difficult, yes.”

About to agree, and go off on a tangent about those in Lumen... I hesitated and realized what he had just said.

Gulping at the man who had just fully agreed with me, for good reason, I realized once again what Vim meant by protecting those we hated.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly as I tried to relax my emotions. I was heated now... angry... which was very upsetting. I had just been so happy, and warm, and content...

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and Lomi won’t be related to them,” Vim said softly.

“Is fate ever that kind?” I asked.

“No.”

I leaned back and fell against onto the bed. Rubbing my face into the smelly blanket, I groaned a cry.

“The Chronicler should have noticed, though, Renn. That’s part of her job. If she had family still, then...”  
Vim’s voice was a little distant as I buried my head and ears into the bed.

“How would we even prove it?” I asked. My voice sounded muffled thanks to the bed.

“We’ll need to compare names. There could be a generation or two gap between Lomi’s parents and those from the weaver’s family. I think I took them to the fox village a long time ago. At least fifty years ago,” Vim said.

I sniffed as I sat up, to look at him. “You sure?” I asked.

He nodded. “Very. We had not passed through Ruvindale, but I think I made a stop there after dropping them off. Ruvindale had not been as fancy, not even half as big back then I think.”

For some reason that made me feel a little better. "So... her parents might have been the children, or grandchildren, of those from the weaver's?" I asked.

He nodded.

Sighing a little in relief, I nodded. "That's good."

"Is it?" he asked.

"Yeah...? That means that Lomi's more fox than not. It means it very well might be better she stay with Porka and the rest, even if she was related to them," I said.

Vim frowned at me. "You're not upset anymore?" he asked.

"Of course I am! But... that makes it a little better," I said.

Vim didn't seem to really agree with me, and I sighed as I laid back down. This time on my back. "What a whirlwind," I said as I realized the storm was still blowing strong. I had completely forgotten about it.

"Hm..." Vim didn't seem to agree, but I knew it was because he was still bothered. Still ashamed.

But he should be...! Forgetting such an important thing... really...

“How many of our members are related to each other, Vim?” I asked while staring up at the ceiling. I saw a large cobweb near one of the larger banisters. It looked newer, maybe even freshly made. I didn’t see the spider anywhere, but now I was looking for it.

“More than you’d think, to a degree. It’s rare for predators and prey to mingle, so I should have remembered this one. Even if the offspring had mostly been human,” he said.

“Is that why you forgot? Their human children?” I asked.

Vim didn’t answer for a moment, and then he sighed. “Yes,” he admitted.

“And here I thought you didn’t hate humans that much,” I said as I rolled over a little, as to stare at him and to stop looking for the spider. It was likely just hiding thanks to the storm. And us. We were noisy.

“I try to keep my hate evenly spread. But no... the reason I stop thinking about them is because there’s no need to. It only takes a few trips throughout the Society for them to either die, or disappear. Leaving for one reason or another,” he said.

“Hm...”

“Cruel. I know. But it’s reality, Renn,” he said.

"I know," I said softly.

The fire popped, and my tail twitched because of it. It thumped against the bed, and I focused on it... to calm it down a little.

"You were upset with me, huh," Vim then said.

"Mhm," I nodded.

"Good," he said softly.

"Mhm," I nodded again. That was what he wanted from me, after all. To keep him in check. I wasn't sure yet what to think, but for now it just meant I'd need to keep tabs of everyone and everything. Who knows how many others he'd... simply overlooked or forgotten. Not on purpose, of course, but simply because he was... well...

Vim was stretched thin... wasn't he?

Over two hundred years. That's what he had said. Two hundred years since Celine had died. That meant he's been the Societies protector for even longer. All this time... and it was just him. All of this responsibility, thousands and thousands of lives, on his shoulders.

It was a little concerning, and alarming, but I knew I needed to share some of that burden. Even though I knew my tiny shoulders wouldn't be able to carry much.

Though maybe I didn't need to carry the Society, or any of the members... maybe all I needed... was just to...

Let him rest against me occasionally, when he needed it... and...

"Renn."

I blinked, and turned... and found Vim smiling at me... and he was...

"Huh...?" I groaned as I flinched at the bright light. Vim was oddly bright, as if illuminated from behind by...

Sitting up quickly, I groaned as I realized I had fallen asleep. The room was warm. Very warm. And not just because I had a bunch of blankets on me. The windows were all wide open, and the bright hot sun was happily rushing in.

Vim chuckled at me. "I'd usually let you sleep Renn, but it seems there are no restaurants in town that are open right now. And the inn-lady will only cook some for you if you're there with me. I think they're worried over wasting food. They don't want to cook anything that might not get eaten. I can't blame them, really, but it's annoying," he said.

Oh... my stomach noisily told Vim what I thought of that, and he laughed at me as he pulled the blankets off me. Revealing that although still dressed, Vim had been nice enough to take off my shoes for me.

"I slept the whole night?" I asked.

"You must have been tired," he said as he stepped away from the bed and bent down. Half a moment later he was offering me my boots.

I must have been, but honestly hadn't noticed. Vim and I had been journeying quickly, at a faster pace than usual, but it hadn't felt like we were really straining ourselves. Or rather, I hadn't felt the strain. I knew Vim wouldn't have noticed even if he had been running the whole way.

Maybe I was still exhausted from Lumen... honestly it wasn't as if we'd really spent very long to rest in any singular place. Even in Secca, where we had stayed for almost a whole month, I had not rested. I had been up at the dawn, and worked all day alongside Riz and the rest.

Maybe Vim was right...

After putting my shoes on... I realized something odd. I studied my palms... I didn't expect to see anything obvious, like blurriness or a slight trembling, but I felt as if I should. However they were oddly... clammy. A strange layer of sweat was on them, for no reason. Maybe I had squeezed my hands tightly all night? And while under the covers, in this hot room, had sweated more than usual?

"Renn?" Vim's soft question drew my eyes upward, to a face full of worry.

“Vim...?” I asked softly.

Then his hand was on my forehead, causing me to go still.

His hand covered most of my head, and even most my sight. It was a little shocking, and not just because of what he was doing. Had his hand always been so big? It felt strangely rough, and...

A little too cool, honestly.

“You’re sick,” he told me what I had already felt.

“You’re kidding me...” I blinked as my eyes quickly grew watery.

“No... I’m not,” Vim sighed as he pulled his hand away, and I felt the rush of hot air that followed his movement.

Rather... it was likely not the air that was hot, but me. Maybe that was why the room felt so warm... it wasn’t just because of the sun.

“Is it that plague? The sickness...?” I asked worriedly.

"I don't know yet," he said as he knelt a little, as to stare into my eyes.

I blinked the blurry him away, and stared into his eyes. I couldn't help but smile at him as he studied me with a very worried expression. Had he ever been this close before? Maybe when I had kissed him but... that had been a fleeting moment and...

I could kiss him right now. He was close enough. Just a little lean forward and...

"It might just be a fever. But the timing is very concerning..." he said as he stared at something in my eyes, and frowned. The way he tilted his head made me give up on the wonderful idea of trying anything funny. He looked far too serious right now, and would likely grow upset with me.

"Can you not tell?" I asked. If anyone could it'd be him.

"Not yet. Your pupils don't have any hint of a sickness or anything too severe... but you're not a human Renn. Your immune system will fight it differently than them, so it might take time for such a thing to become obvious."

Vim's eyes squinted, and I noticed a small scar on his upper right eyelid. It ran up his eyelid to right under his eyebrow, and seemed to be the cause of a few missing eyelashes.

Interesting. I had seen small scars and stuff on him before, so I knew he had them... but it was still shocking to see any on him. I wonder how he got them even though he seemed to heal so flawlessly. Or

maybe the scars just faded over time? Or was it a matter of how much damage he received, or what type?

Wait...

"Is that scar because of me?" I asked as I reached up, to touch his face.

"Hm?" he let me touch the side of his face, and obviously had no idea what I was talking about.

But how could he? As far as I was aware Vim never looked in any mirrors, or cared to.

I felt horrible though. It likely was. It was the same eye I had punctured... and did kind of look like a small cut from something sharp and pointy. Like my nail had been at the time... and it would have been in that same spot too and...

"You're sick Renn," he said as he reached up to touch my hand, which was rested against his cheek.

I nodded. Was my hand hot to him? His face felt cool.

He took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm sorry," he then said.

“What for...?” I asked.

Vim though didn't answer. He just... held my gaze. Ever gently.

I smiled at him. “You can't seriously blame yourself Vim,” I said.

“I can and do.”

Although I wanted to argue with him, rather fiercely, I couldn't help but feel a little warmer because of how seriously he had said such a thing.

He really did.

How kind of him.

“If it is that... plague thing, what do I do?” I asked.

“First... open your mouth,” he said.

“Huh...?”

He nodded and stuck out his tongue. "Like so," he said after showing me.

I giggled at him.

"Renn..." he groaned at me but I nodded quickly.

"Okay! Jeez..." I stopped teasing him as I did as he asked.

Vim studied my tongue for a moment, and then nodded to let me know I could stop.

It felt oddly dry all of a sudden, as I used it to lick my lips. "Well?" I asked.

"I can't tell if it's the plague or pox yet or not. But for now we'll act as if it is. Just in case," he said.

"Okay. What do we do then?" I asked.

"We will keep you healthy. First thing first..." he stepped away, and I wanted to growl at him as he stepped away. I had somewhat hoped he'd have asked me to do more weird stuff.

Glaring at him as he walked over to the side of the bed, I watched him lift my leathers.

Oh? I glanced down and realized he had removed them too. I was just in my clothes. My under-layer stuff. The loose stuff that was beneath my real clothes, and leathers. I hadn't even realized he had undressed me to such a point.

For some reason I found that very funny.

"Here."

Looking up, I squinted at the brightly shining orb.

"Huh?" I reached up to take Beak's heart from him, and felt the warm thing pulsate as it fell in my hands.

"Keep it close. To your chest," he said.

"Okay... wait...? That...? This will actually help?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"It will. No. You can't eat it or put it in your womb, don't get any funny ideas," he warned me.

Smirking at him, I moved the heart closer to my own. "Funny ideas?" I asked him.

He ignored me and moved some of the pillows around. To make a spot for me to rest against.

"I'll go get you food. Or make it myself if none of these damned humans won't," he said.

"You can't blame them Vim. Especially during a famine," I said.

"Yes I can. We'll likely only be able to stay here a few days, unless I want to kill everyone," he then said.

"Huh! Why would you do that?" I asked worriedly as he finished messing with the pillows.

"They'll not take kindly to someone sick sleeping in their home," he said gently.

Oh. Right... "Wait... they'll get sick too then won't they? Maybe we should..." before I could finish my thoughts, Vim stepped over to me and actually picked me up. I let out a tiny yelp as he moved me back to the center of the bed, dropping me against the newly stacked pile of pillows.

He was kind enough to do it in a way that didn't hurt my tail, but he still kind of just plopped me down.

“You. Rest. Unless you need to use the restroom you’re not leaving this bed,” he ordered as he went to taking my boots off.

“Jeez Vim,” I complained as he untied my laces.

“Sleeping is one of the best cures for such an illness. Go back to bed. Rest,” he ordered again.

I sighed as Vim pulled the blankets back up over me. I suddenly felt hot again. “It’s hot,” I complained.

“It actually isn’t. It’s a little humid but that’s it. Plus a little sweating would do you good,” he said.

It wasn’t...? Great. I figured, but it worried me to hear it.

“Honestly I don’t feel too sick. My head doesn’t really hurt or anything,” I said. I did feel clammy and hot... but...

“That’s good.”

“Have I been coughing or not?” I asked. Some of the people we’d seen that were sick had coughed, but not badly enough. It was why those checkpoint quarantine places had been so serious. Other than the spots and severe fever it was hard to tell sometimes if one was sick or not.

“You did. While sleeping. But not enough to alarm me, I thought it was just this bed. It’s kind of musty,” he said.

“It is actually...” I agreed and complained with him. It needed to be aired out.

Sitting on the side of the bed, Vim sighed as he reached over and gently touched me on the cheek.

“Can’t you get me medicine or something?” I asked him.

“I plan to. I’ll go find the local herb grower or collector and see what I can get. For now keep that heart close. Stay in bed unless absolutely necessary. I’ll be back shortly,” he said.

I nodded, which made his fingers brush into my hair.

“Will you be okay?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh. Yes I’ll not get sick. No disease of any kind on this earth can affect me,” he said.

On this earth... “You say things very oddly sometimes, Vim,” I reminded him.

He smiled at me. "I know. Need anything before I go?"

"Can you make me some of those berry drinks?" I asked.

He frowned, and was about to say no... but decided instead to smile and nod. "Sure. Anything else?"

"I don't like the soups you make. So please try to convince someone else to make them, if you could," I begged.

He laughed at me and nodded. Standing from the bed, I had to stop myself from reaching out for him. I hadn't wanted him to go yet.

"I'll be back, Renn. It'll be okay. You're strong, and I'm here," he said confidently.

"Mhm. Don't be long or I might get funny ideas," I said as I lifted the heart a little, to slide it out from under the covers and show it to him.

Vim hesitated near the door, and then glared at me. "Funny," he said without a hint of humor, and then left the room.

Giggling at him, I smiled happily as I held Beak's heart close... and went to watching the sun's rays peer into the room, while listening to the sounds of distant voices and birds. Chirping happily.

They sounded almost as happy as I felt. Which was funny, since I was sick.

Last time I'd gotten sick... had hurt. And not just physically. It had been a very lonely experience. And the dreams had been horrible.

The pink heart thumped against my chest, sending a wave of warmth through me. Although I was hot, the warmth was somehow cooling. Like a breeze.

It felt good. Almost as good as knowing Vim would be taking care of me. That I was in safe hands.

I'd only gotten sick a few times in my life. One of them had almost resulted in my death, but had also led to me meeting Nory. The other times though... well...

"At least this time I'm not alone," I whispered as I drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 238 His Prayer to His Gods

Again.

I was helpless again.

“Why, here again? Really what’s Miss Viella’s problem? Still won’t let you use her kitchens?” The young woman giggled as she held the door open for me.

“They’re in the middle of making their own dinner,” I said as I stepped into the back of their small tavern.

The young proprietress was shorter than Renn, but had a much larger belly. It stuck out enough I had to wait for her to step aside, so I’d not bump into it. It didn’t help that this room behind the kitchens was kind of cramped.

She giggled at me as she led me to their kitchens. “Still! You’re her guests! But oh well, honestly I’m not going to complain, you pay well!” she said happily.

I did. Plus I brought my own ingredients, and fetched my own water. The only thing I took was some charcoal and wood, for the fire... which were already burning. They must have just cooked their own lunch or dinner.

“Need any help today sir?” she asked as she watched me place the large pot onto the cooking stove.

“Nope. Today’s just a simple porridge,” I said. Or well, more a soup really. I had made a real porridge yesterday, but hadn’t been able to get Renn to eat much of it.

She’d not awoken since passing out the other day. So all I could get down her throat was liquids.

“Where’s your wife I wonder? You must be from the north, though you look more like the eastern folk. Those down south and west usually make their wives cook,” the young pregnant woman teased me as I pulled out the handful of coins.

Although I gave her far more than should be necessary for just borrowing a kitchen for an hour or so, she didn’t hesitate at all to take them. Nor had she the other two times I’d paid her either.

It wasn’t that she was greedy, but rather that was how desperate she and her husband were.

They didn’t even open their tavern anymore. There were no customers, so there was no point.

“Thank you,” she said seriously as she cupped the coins with both of her hands. I noted her stained nails as she hid the coins away. They were dirty, and broken.

“No. Thank you. I’ll probably need to borrow it tomorrow too... do you think I could ask a favor?” I asked.

“Hm?” she tilted her head at me as I went to readying the food. I wanted to finish quickly.

“Renn, my wife, she loves berry smoothies. But no one’s selling any, and I don’t want to intrude on the grove nearby without permission. I’d be willing to pay handsomely for them, if you could get me some or get me permission to pluck a few,” I requested.

The woman giggled. "What? That's all! Sure. Phill's actually related to the family that owns those orchids. Though I'm not sure they have berries... I'll let him know," she said as she stepped away, heading out of the kitchen and out into the tavern itself.

Waving her off with a thankful smile, I sighed as I went to cook and prepare the meal for Renn.

Two days. Two, long days.

I usually never noticed the passing of hours or days. They just melded. Blended. Faded. I noticed those around me. When they woke. When they yawned in sleep. I noticed storms come and go. Seasons changing. But rarely did I actually notice the days in full. I noticed the passage of time of those around me, but not for me myself.

Yet right now I was noticing every passing moment. Every minute. Every hour.

Again.

Since Renn joined me, I've begun to really notice the passage of time. And not always for the better.

Happy times passed quickly. Moments like these lasted forever.

A cruel joke.

Using the tiny billow they had to feed the small oven, I got the fire hotter. Pulling out all the ingredients, I cut up what was necessary, grounded the rest, and then went to fetch some water.

They had another smaller fire, for boiling water. It seemed all the wells here weren't considered very safe, but it was more likely because of the disease. People in this era usually didn't care to boil the water they cooked with here, yet were now very aware to always do so. Hopefully they continued this new tradition even after the plague was over.

Fetching a few buckets of water, I returned to the kitchen and went back to work.

I hated every moment of it. I hated the smell of this tavern. This city. I hated the voices coming and going, from the young woman and her husband in the tavern and those passing by on the road. I hated the humid air. The monsoons that brought it, and the one that was heading our way now.

Yet most of all I hated myself.

"I should have been more careful," I whispered as I watched the porridge bubble and cook.

Renn was currently suffering from a severe fever. Although no spots, blackening fingers or limbs, or any ulcers or signs of a pox had shown themselves, I wasn't comfortable enough to think she was succeeding in fighting the disease off.

Although not a human and far stronger than most of those like her... she was still just a woman. Her body was that of a young woman. Thin. Small. She barely weighed over a hundred pounds, as far as I could tell. Soaking wet.

Sighing, I tried to scour my memories. From my youth. With my mother and father.

They had taught me so much... but I didn't have Renn's memory. Some things blurred. Some things were a little... hard to remember. And when I actively tried to remember specific things... they became even harder to remember, sometimes. As if my own mind was tormenting me.

All their teaching of diseases, and I couldn't remember a way to properly handle them. I knew how to eliminate the disease from a large population. I had been taught how to inoculate. How to force herd-immunity... even how to create vaccines through trial and error.

Yet I couldn't seem to remember how to... heal and cure a single individual. Other than the standard medicines and tender care, such as I was doing.

Why couldn't I remember anything more? Surely they had taught me a cure? A cure-all? They had to have. They had known everything.

The worst part was I felt as if I did remember a method to cure someone from a deadly disease. Even when they were on the brink. I remembered my mother mentioning it... but...

For the life of me I couldn't remember the finer details. Had it involved plants? Animals? Something else? Was it from steam? Or...

"Damn me," I whispered softly.

Quickly finishing, I gathered up the pot and cleaned up my mess. Although I wanted to get back to Renn as fast as possible, I didn't want to sour the relationship I had with this young couple. They had been the only ones willing to let me borrow their kitchen in this whole damned town.

I couldn't blame the humans for their fear and superstitions... but sometimes I really wished I hadn't vowed to not force my will on anyone anymore.

Peeking my head out into the empty, and somewhat dark, tavern. I caught the woman's attention. She was sitting with her husband, sewing something.

The sight of the two sitting alone in a large open tavern, with so many empty chairs and tables... was strangely eerie.

"I'm done! Thanks again guys," I said with a wave.

"Come again! I'll find out about those berries for you, sir!" the young man smiled at me and spoke loudly, a little too loudly even for the empty tavern.

"Thanks," I said again as I stepped away, and grabbed the pot.

Leaving the tavern's kitchens, I stepped out onto the main road of this town. It was a stone road, but full of weeds. You'd think without any business, and with most people having absolutely nothing to do, they'd at least keep their town well kept. But no. Most people hurried to and fro, doing their best to stay inside and away from everyone else.

Carrying the pot, I noticed a few odd looks as I headed back to our inn.

I noticed a few people I'd seen before, but it was interesting to see faces I hadn't noticed before. It either meant I was drawing attention, or there were more people in this village than I thought. Eventually people had to get out, either to get food or fresh air, so it was understandable but...

Reaching the inn, I hesitated.

Right. No more distractions. Can't ignore it now.

Looking up to the second floor, to the windows in the right corner, I studied them.

They were half shut, to let the air flow in and out but not much else... and seemingly hadn't moved at all. They looked just as I left them.

Which meant Renn was likely not awake. She, being her odd self, would have happily flew open all the shutters and windows upon waking. Knowing her she would have even been leaning out of the window, watching and waiting for me.

Stepping into the inn, I was thankful the innkeeper and her husband weren't around. I didn't hear them in the back, or the kitchens either.

They weren't really rude or annoying... they were just scared for themselves. It seems they had lost their only child to the plague already, so were now very alert and on guard of it. If not for their very real issue of income, they might not have even let Renn and I stay here.

If they found out Renn got sick it'd probably cause issue. Every day that went by and they didn't see her would only increase the chance of them growing irate... I was actually lucky that they were doing their best to stay out of sight and out of mind. They didn't want me to see them, because they didn't want me ordering food.

The more they hid, the easier it was to hide Renn's condition.

I didn't mind burning this whole village to the ground, if they tried something funny, but Renn would undoubtedly be upset with me afterwards... so I'd like to avoid it if I could.

Reaching the stairway, I took a deep breath and sighed.

Right. Stairs. Up to our room.

To her. In her bed.

Sick.

Forcing my feet forward, I did my best to ignore the way my stomach tightened and curled. As if in hunger. Which was funny. I couldn't remember the last time I had actually felt true hunger.

Slowly ascending the stairs, I did my best to keep myself in check.

Don't break the stairs by stepping down too harshly. Don't bump your shoulder or elbow against the walls or rails. Don't break the floorboards. Don't tear the large rug in the hallway. Don't step too hard. Don't let your strength escape your control. Don't destroy the world around you, just because it was once again trying to take something you loved away from you.

Especially since right now my strength had no place here. It had no purpose. It could do nothing.

My strength meant nothing right now.

Pausing in front of our room's door, at the end of the hallway, I hesitated.

I could hear her. She was still breathing.

The sound of her breaths made me want to sigh in relief. I had only been gone for about an hour, but it had been long enough for the worst to be expected.

The plague could kill that fast. Especially those like her. The strong were strangely susceptible to that which the weak usually survived.

So hearing her breaths through the door was very relieving. It was comforting. It gave me a little hope.

But her breaths were shallow. Quick. As if in a deep slumber, while in a nightmare.

Reaching out for the handle, I studied my hand that grabbed it. The way it trembled. The way it hesitated.

I was terrified. Of opening the door. Of finding her in worse a condition than I had left her.

Taking a deep breath, I forced my hand into motion. Opening the door, it creaked loudly as I pushed it open.

I had pushed a little too hard. It hit the large dresser that sat against the wall nearby. It made a loud bang, but not one so loud it'd draw the innkeeper or her husband. But it had been loud enough it should have startled her. Her ears should have fluttered. She should have turned her head quickly, as to glare at me after calming down. Just as the many other times I'd startled her before.

Instead she remained motionless in bed, sleeping soundly.

“Damn,” I whispered as I stepped into the room.

The moment I did, I smelled the sweat. Renn’s scent was far stronger now than I’d ever smelled... and not for a good reason.

Sighing as I stepped up to the bed, I felt my whole body and all the tense muscles just... relax.

But not from relief.

It was that plague. She didn’t have any spots visible, just yet, but there was no arguing the truth.

She was covered in a layer of thick sweat. She had a look of discomfort and pain on her face, and tear stains running down the sides. Even in her sleep she was hurting.

“Oh Renn...” I whispered.

Putting down the pot, and other items I’d gathered, onto the nearby table... I went to close the door.

Shutting it quietly, I tried to calm my racing mind.

I wanted to figure out when or where she had contracted the disease. But there was no point. It didn't matter. No matter who she had gotten it from... wouldn't change the fact she was sick now.

Even if I killed them, it'd not help her. It'd not take the disease from her body.

The problem was I wasn't yet even sure what kind of plague it was. Or if it even was a plague, and not a pox or something. I should have paid more attention to those bodies we've seen...

But more than that...

One did not cure a patient already sick with it. Not with typical medicine. These types of diseases were faced preventively. By inoculation.

Not something I could do now.

Because I couldn't remember. Because I wasn't smart enough. I should have kept all those notes and books my parents had made. Why had I not...?

I should have. I really, really...

Stepping over to the bed, I reached over to brush some of her long hair out of her face. To get it out of her mouth. It clung to her sweaty face, defiant.

"I'm so sorry Renn," I whispered.

She of course didn't respond or hear me. After making sure her face was clear I went to finding the heart. I found it tucked beneath her side. I just put it back on her stomach, in a spot where it'd not roll easily as I debated my next few steps.

I should clean her. I had found some herbs and medicine that would help, to a point, but I still needed to prepare them. I would need to grind them, and then mix them with something she could drink. If she doesn't wake, or isn't able to, then it'd be easier to soak some cotton or something and get her to drink it that way...

Then... then what?

Just... wait for her to heal?

That was it really. I could keep her clean. Keep her hydrated. Occasionally give her some medicine...

But other than that...

For a tiny moment I studied the heart, and debated putting it inside her. It'd be a huge risk but...

If she was able to absorb it, it'd heal her. The problem was she wasn't in any condition to try it. Putting the heart in her now, even if she was strong enough to house it, would just as soon kill her as the disease would.

"Last resort," I whispered and decided.

Honestly there was no point panicking just yet. Although a plague, there were plenty of humans who seemed to have survived it. Half of Landi's city had survived it. And Renn was no human. She wasn't one of our weaker members or...

She coughed softly, and I studied her face. It was wrought with pain.

"Damn."

I knew something horrible was going to happen. This was par the course. This was my life.

To always lose everything I came to care for. Losing them to things I couldn't do a damned thing about.

Taking a deep breath, I did my best to ignore the smell of her and the sickness. I quickly stepped out of the room and headed downstairs.

“Oh my! I saw you brought food back, just who’d you convince to cook for you?” the innkeeper greeted me as I stepped out of the stairwell, and seemed a little too happy. She was likely glad that I’d not asked for any of their food, even though I’d have paid for it.

Right now food was worth more than the coins one bought it with.

“Rather I found some ingredients and a young couple more than happy to share their kitchen for a few coins. But regrettably I only have two arms so... wasn’t able to bring much water back. Mind if I take a few buckets from the well? Both to boil for drinks, and for a bath later,” I asked politely.

It felt stupid to be doing my best to seem as amicable as possible. It needed to be done... yet it still made me upset.

I wanted to be angry. Yet I felt abnormally calm. Sometimes I hated my own personality.

I was a bastard sometimes.

“Of course dear! It’s probably full as can be thanks to that storm anyhow,” the innkeeper laughed as she turned away, to go back to the backrooms and do whatever she had been doing before hearing my return.

“Thanks,” I said as I went to go fetch some water.

Yes. Water wasn't in demand. Food was.

Well, here soon there would be something else in demand if the world wasn't careful.

As I drew water from a well, that was very clearly not as full as she had hoped, I did my best to not vow to return to Landi and rip those hearts from her cold corpse.

It didn't take long at all to return to my room with a few buckets of water. I quickly went about boiling some in the fireplace, and then dug out some of our nicer towels and cloths.

"Renn...? Rennalee?" I tried to wake her a little, if anything out of kindness.

She stirred a little, but not enough. She was out cold.

"I'd apologize, but you'd likely have just enjoyed this beyond measure," I said as I went to undress her.

It was easy since she was practically naked already. Her shirt had rolled up in her sleep, half off her. I did my best to not tug on her long hair, or bother her tail too much. It was oddly still... barely moving at all. It was almost concerning how still it looked. Even in her sleep it usually slithered around quite a bit. Half the time wrapping around my leg or something.

Once she was undressed I went to wiping her off.

“Or well, maybe I should. I apologize for doing this while you sleep, so you can’t enjoy it,” I said after a few moments of thinking about it.

She likely would have. Although I knew she’d have also gone a shade of red beyond anything I’d seen from her yet.

After wiping her free of sweat, the water I had boiled was ready. I ground up some of the herbs, added them to the fresh drinkable water, and mixed them into a thick tea like substance. I used one of her thinner cotton shirts to soak it up and give it to her.

Getting her to drink it was surprisingly easier than I had thought it would have been. She gulped the herbal medicines down without much issue, which told me she had been parched.

Yet still she hadn’t woken. Laying her back down, I covered her back up in the blankets after moving them around a bit. So that the more sweat drenched parts were past her feet, and not on her.

If this continued much longer I’ll need to get new blankets for her. Maybe even another bed. It didn’t feel too bad yet, but if she continued sweating this bad then...

Putting the heart back onto her stomach area, I made sure it wouldn’t slide away again. At least not right away.

It was likely the only reason she wasn't already dead.

Although a little morbid, I found myself thanking Miss Beak. Her timing had been impeccable.

Once done I went to clean up a little. I restarted the boiling pot, to make another batch of drinkable water, and also gathered up the soup I had made earlier. I'd not try to feed it to her now, but I wanted to keep it warm at least. So after making more drinkable water I'd let it simmer over the fire.

I'll need to get more firewood. Especially if I wanted to keep the fire going through the night. There was enough for the rest of the day, but not much longer.

It'll be even more needed here soon. Another dark monsoon was heading our way. From the south. It made the world more humid, but the harsh wind also made it cold. Especially in this older inn.

It was a good thing we hadn't been caught in it long. If Renn had gotten this sick while on the road... when such a storm hit...

Pausing a moment, I wondered how long it'd been since we left Landi. A little over a week roughly, surely. But... how long actually?

It could take weeks for a disease to fester. So it made sense... but something still felt a little off. She hadn't shown any signs at all until now. Likely thanks to her bloodline, surely, but...

“Does it matter...?” I whispered as I stared at the burning embers beneath the pot.

I was not ready for this. I knew death would come for everyone. Anyone. I would bury countless people before it was my turn, just as I’d already done. So I knew it. I had expected it.

Yet this was far too early. I just found her. I just started to let her in.

I wasn’t ready.

Sitting before the fire as the day grew old, and the night came... I did my best to not let myself get too caught up in my own depression and hate.

I could let that happen if she died. Getting so melancholic right now was only a disservice to Renn and...

The sound of blankets shuffling brought me out of my thoughts. I turned and found Renn sitting up, groggily looking around.

“Renn...?” I stood quickly, abandoning the fire and the small pot I had been messing with.

“Vim...?” she sounded hoarse. I quickly readied a glass of water, and was glad it was cool now. It was moments like this that I wished we had ice.

“Here. Quickly,” I offered it to her, and she weakly reached out for it. I helped her take it to her mouth, though it seemed she hadn’t needed much help. She was groggy, but not so weak she couldn’t move.

I felt the strength in her grip through the glass, and it actually relieved me enough to let out a tiny sigh.

That strength was a very good sign.

She chugged the glass of water without any hesitation, and released a tiny relieved burp afterward. “That felt good,” she said.

“I’m sure. Want another?” I asked, and did my best to not let my relief sound too obvious.

She was actually somewhat coherent. And although flushed in the face, she was looking around with heavy eyes. She blinked up at me and smiled. “Please,” she asked for another.

I nodded and went to pour her another glass.

As I did, Renn coughed... and although it sounded scratchy, her coughs sounded far better than they could have been.

Once she was done coughing I handed her the glass, but she didn't go to drinking it right away. Instead she reached down under the blankets, and pulled out the heart. She glared at it for a moment, and then put it down on her lap. It must have fallen under her as she rolled and sat up and had been somewhere uncomfortable.

"Is that food?" she asked as she took a drink.

"It is. Feel up to eating it?" I asked. If she'd go in and out of sleep, it would be best if she ate while she could.

She nodded as she took a deep breath after finishing her glass. "I could eat a whole horse," she said.

"I've never cared for horse," I said as I went to gather up some food for her.

Renn gave me a soft, odd sounding giggle. It turned into a small coughing fit, but she got it under control a little before I returned with a small bowl of the soup.

I received a smile in return for the soup, and she hesitated. "I can't smell anything. Did you make this?" she asked as she studied the bowl on her lap.

"I did. But I promise it's not one of my weird soups, it's more to your liking," I said.

“Hm...” she promptly took a large bite. So large that some of it leaked from the corner of her mouth as she chewed.

While I procured a small cloth for her, she smiled and finished the bite. “Doesn’t matter. I can’t taste it at all,” she said happily.

“Only you would find such a thing humorous,” I said as I held the napkin out for her... but she didn’t take it and instead went to ready another bite. Which told me just how hungry she likely felt.

Sighing softly I went ahead and wiped the side of her mouth off for her. She grinned at me, and then took another bite. This time though it was a more moderate one and no mess followed.

Renn went to humming as she ate, and I had to pull over a chair and sit down.

Thankfully Renn was completely focused on her dish, as I let relief swell through me.

She hadn’t noticed that I had gone weak in the legs.

It wasn’t over yet, of course. But this was a very, very, good sign that she was acting so lively. Maybe between the rest, and little care I could offer, she’d overcome this with little effort.

If only.

Renn continued to devour the porridge. Or well, it was more a soup really. Though not as dense, on purpose. If I had known she would have awoken I would have made another porridge. A proper one. She would have preferred that, likely. But something was far better than nothing.

After a little bit I went to get her more water. She took it thankfully, and downed half the glass before going back to her food.

Watching her eat quickly, I found myself growing more and more relieved. Yes. This was good.

I shouldn't have panicked so quickly.

To think but mere moments ago I had been considering razing all the surrounding nations. To return to who I had been, long ago.

But it was no surprise. I was so used to those I protected dying. So used to them fading away, no matter what I did or tried.

They were all just so weak... so brittle.

Because of me.

I took their strength. I stole it from them all.

Even if I had done it to save them. Even if I had done it for the right reason...

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

Renn's ears perked up a little, and she turned to me with the spoon still in her mouth. She made an odd noise as she plucked it out and tilted her head at me. "What for Vim?" she asked.

"I hadn't been able to find the berries you like," I said, apologizing for that too.

My dear companion gave me a lovely smile. "Please Vim! It's okay! I wouldn't have been able to taste it anyway," she forgave me as easily as she breathed.

No. It wasn't okay.

"Eat the rest Renn, before you collapse again," I reminded her.

She nodded and happily went back to eating.

Watching her eat was somehow tiring. As she ate I noticed her gusto slowly died... until she only took a few bites here and there, and in small increments. She was getting tired again.

It was interesting to see her ears slowly start to droop the more exhausted she got.

"I'll be honest Vim, I hadn't been able to taste anything... but it had been warm, and now my stomach doesn't hurt," Renn finally said as she finished.

"That's all that matters," I said as I took the almost empty bowl from her. She hadn't eaten as much as I had wanted her to, but it was better than nothing. Far better. Usually she'd eat several bowls full.

"Hm..." she made an odd noise as she mumbled something I hadn't been able to make out. Something to do with my cooking?

Putting the bowl aside, I watched her drown the rest of her water. Then she lazily handed the glass off to me, and promptly fell backwards. Landing with a huff and a small smile.

"Good night. Again," I said softly.

"Hm... 'Night Vim."

Before I even put her glass of water down, she had drifted back into sleep.

I sighed at her, and went to covering her back up. She hadn't even noticed she had been naked.

Once again I put the pink heart in its position, this time a little closer to her chest. It gleamed in the now dark room. Probably strong enough that anyone outside would be able to see the weird hue. A quick glance to the windows told me I should probably shut the shutters and maybe even cover them.

Either plague or witchcraft would get the town riled up. I should be more careful.

Before I could pull my hand away however, she rolled over. Snatching my hand with her own, she curled up a little on her side as she pulled my hand closer to her. She did it with such surety that I almost said something, doubting her drowsiness, but she quickly returned to her very familiar snores.

Fast asleep, Renn held my hand to her chest. Clutching it as if it was a pillow.

It was honestly an adorable sight, and feeling, but it worried me. She felt very warm. Hot. Too hot.

"Really Renn..." I went to putting the heart back into position. This time I just dropped it in-between her arms, near our hands. It fell against the back of my hand, and rested against her. It pulsed strongly, thumping with its strange rhythm.

Kneeling down next to the bed, as to not disturb her, I let her hold my hand.

If my hand gave her even an iota of comfort, then she could hold it all she wanted. For as long as she wanted.

Since it seemed I couldn't do much else.

Her waking and eating, if even for a small moment, was a wonderful sign. But I still couldn't help but worry.

Sitting next to the bed, I kept a watchful eye over her... and begged a tiny prayer for my parents not to take her from me just yet.

Chapter 239 A Warmly Cold Morning

Vim took the cup from me, and handed me the bowl of porridge in return.

It was warm and steaming a little. I took a deep breath of it, and was glad that I could finally smell it. It smelled very good, and reminded me I was starving.

Yet I still didn't take a bite. Not yet. I waited until Vim returned to sitting next to the bed, holding a now full glass of the berry smoothie.

Smiling at him, I tilted my head at him. "Sorry Vim," I apologized.

Vim at first seemed to ignore me, and then he reached over. I went still as he brushed my long hair away from the bowl in my hands. Some had almost fallen in.

“For what Renn?” he asked once he got most of my hair behind my back.

“You had wanted to rest here. Sorry I ruined your chance,” I said.

He sighed at me, which told me he didn’t think my apology had any reason to be given. “This is resting, to a point. Plus we’ll be here a while more yet. We’ll wait here for a bit before continuing on, both to make sure you’re okay but also so you’re not contagious when we go to see the weaver,” Vim said.

“Contagious...” I mumbled the word, and my stomach yelled at me. It was tired of waiting and forced my hand to grab the spoon and get to work.

Eating slowly, I chewed the small clumps of meat and vegetables, and wondered why Vim made such nasty stuff if he was able to make normal stuff just as easily. Not that his nasty stuff was... not edible, I guess. It tasted good, but the smell was usually really bad. It made it hard to actually enjoy it.

A rising sun was trying to peer through the shutters. Vim had told me another storm would be reaching us soon, likely before the day was over, but it already smelled as if it was here. The smell of fresh rain and cold wind was strong.

“A week? Really?” I asked as I chewed.

“Really,” Vim said stiffly.

Hm... It honestly didn't feel as if I'd been sleeping that long. I mean, I felt hungry enough to justify it, but...

Glancing at Vim, I slowed in my eating as I studied his look. He looked upset... not so much at me, but just in general. He looked worried. It reminded me of the look he had back in Lumen, while sitting on that weirdly tiny stool in the hallway. While waiting for Fly and her people to show up.

I didn't like that look on him. It usually meant something bad was about to happen, or had.

“I feel rested and fine. I could have sworn we were just talking a few minutes ago, though,” I told him. I remembered him feeding me. And me telling him about how much I cherished him, though I couldn't remember his response.

“That really was four days ago Renn,” Vim said gently.

Huh... maybe fevers always did that. The few times I'd been this sick before, was usually when I was alone. So...

And the one time I had been with someone, with the witch, she had used her magic to heal me. So it hadn't lasted as long, or in such a way.

“If it’s been that long has anyone grown suspicious?” I asked. I remembered him mentioning something about the humans here. Something about how they might grow upset if they found out if I was sick. And would then do something drastic because of it.

“The innkeepers know. But they’re too afraid to do anything. They don’t even come out of their section of the inn anymore,” Vim said.

“Were you mean to them?” I asked as I continued to eat.

“Only a little,” he admitted.

I sighed at him, but knew better than to be surprised.

At least he hadn’t done something severe...

As I ate I glanced over at the fireplace nearby. Vim had strung up most of my clothes near it, telling me he had recently washed them. I understood why of course, since I felt kind of grimy. I needed a bath... but I could tell I should be feeling a lot worse than I did.

“Did you wipe me down?” I asked.

“Hm? Yes,” Vim nodded without a hint of shame.

Somehow that made me blush. “Really?”

“Yeah? Sweat is a good thing but it’ll just make it worse if you don’t wipe it off eventually when sick. Especially when it’s humid like this. It’ll make it hard for your body to regulate your temperature and...”  
Vim went quiet after a moment, and smiled at me. “What?” he asked after a moment.

“Thank you,” I said warmly.

Vim’s expression softened and he gestured for me to return to eating. “Eat it before it gets cold Renn. And I thought you’d complain instead.”

Taking a bite I nodded. “It’s upsetting I wasn’t awake for it, I guess,” I said with a mouthful.

“Right? You’ll never know what kind of expression I had when I did it,” he teased me.

Giggling at him, I debated telling him that I likely knew full well what kind of expression had been on his face.

But didn’t, since it would have only ruined the small happy moment we were experiencing.

Bringing up that terrified and worried expression now would only make his smile die. Which would make my own fade.

There was no point in saying aloud what was obvious.

After swallowing another bite, I reached for the glass in his hand. He dutifully handed it over, and I quickly gulped down more than half of it.

With a heavy sigh, I felt the wonderful taste of the berry sludge fill me. "I wish I had a pot full of this instead," I said.

"In a way you do," he said.

"Hm...? Is there that much?" I asked. Really?

He frowned at me. "Why wouldn't there be?" he asked.

"Didn't you buy this?" I asked as I glanced into the glass. It looked, and tasted, real good. Usually it was sold in wooden cups though not glass ones.

“No? Or well, I guess. I bought the ingredients, yes, but...” he then pointed to the fireplace. To the small table littered with pots and cups, and bowls and plates.

“Oh...? Wait... you made this?” I asked as I turned the glass a little.

“Yeah...? Why? Does it taste bad? It tasted fine to me,” he said worriedly.

I shook my head quickly. “It tastes great...! But... that means you could make these all along? Really?” I asked angrily.

“Well... It’s not like they’re hard to make, Renn,” he said gently.

Quickly drinking the rest, I pushed the glass out to him. He sighed and nodded, taking it and standing away from his chair. He went over to the table, to refill the glass for me.

Smiling at him, I went back to eating my porridge as he poured some more of the delightful drink into my glass.

“Your fever broke last night. I actually expected you to wake up then, honestly. But I think you had nightmares, about halfway through the fever you started really rolling and moving in your sleep. Once you had even almost fallen off the bed,” he said.

“Hm...? I don’t remember any nightmares,” I said as he returned to sitting next to me and the bed.

He nodded. "That's good."

"Did you catch me?" I asked him as he handed me the freshly filled glass of my favorite drink.

He smirked at me. "Rather you slapped me. You rolled over and bumped into me, then slapped me as if upset I was in the way," he said.

Laughing at him, I wondered if that meant...

Then I stopped wondering about it, since it was obvious.

He had sat there. On that chair, next to me this whole time.

For some reason that knowledge really made me feel warm inside. Almost as warm as the things on my lap.

Lifting the bowl, which was now almost empty, I stared at the glowing pink orb.

"Think it helped?" I asked.

“Very likely did, yes. Your fever’s gone, you’re already coherent, and your hunger has hit with a vengeance. Most people, humans and not, would still be too weak to even sit up let alone scarf down a whole bowl,” he said as he offered to take the nearly empty bowl from me.

“It’s about to be a second here in a moment,” I said with a smirk.

He nodded as he went to fill it back up too.

As he did I rolled the heart along my lap a little, rolling it around. “How does a heart help like that... like this? I thought they were dangerous,” I asked.

“They are. Their energy is pure, and it’s toxic to those unable to house it. But by being near such a pure heart, like Miss Beak’s, you’ll benefit a little from the energy they give off. They radiate it... that heat you feel from them isn’t actual warmth, but their energy,” he said as he messed with the pot hanging over the fire.

“Still... how though? Why does this energy help?” I asked as I lifted it, to stare into the orb. It wasn’t easy, since it was so bright inside it.

“The energy is... pure, as I mentioned. It’s the same energy that Saints use to perform their miracles. Their magic, as you call it. Their healing abilities are just them channeling this energy in a way that pinpoints an injury or wound. We can’t do that, since neither you or I are a Saint, and I don’t want you trying to absorb the heart if we can avoid it... so our only way to use it is the way we’re doing so. Its efficiency is very minimal when just near you, but it’s still the energy of a god. So it still has an effect on the world around it,” Vim explained as he returned to sitting next to me.

Handing me the newly filled bowl of food, I nodded as I handed him the glass in return. It was empty again.

Vim didn't even sigh as he stood back up, to refill it again.

Going to devouring the second bowl, I studied the man who was patiently and happily playing nursemaid.

"Why can't you use it Vim?" I asked him between mouthfuls.

For a moment he was quiet, and then he shifted a little. I noticed the way his shoulder moved, telling me had done his little rolling of a shoulder thing. The fact I noticed made me smile. He really was a man full of tendencies. His age really had to be a factor for it. So many countless years had reduced him to a man of few actions and words, in a way.

After a few more moments of silence, I decided to ask a different question. It seemed this was one of the ones he wasn't ready to answer yet. Not even to me, who had almost died, and was still stuck in bed while sick.

"Would it help other people too, Vim? Say... those with scars? Or injuries? What about Tosh? Would it heal missing limbs? What about the young boy that recently died, at Secca? Riz's brother. Would it have helped him?" I asked.

“It might have. A heart alone, outside, wouldn’t heal a missing limb... but if absorbed properly, then yes. It might re-grow one, similar to what happens to me. Though not anywhere near as quickly,” Vim said as he returned to my side, holding the glass patiently as I continued to eat.

“Why didn’t you bring one to the boy then?” I asked.

“They hadn’t wanted to risk it. I offered to either bring one, or take him somewhere where he could potentially get help. Neither he nor his family permitted it. They felt the risk too great,” Vim said gently.

My spoon lowered, dropping lightly into the bowl that was nearly empty again. “They refused...?” I asked softly.

He nodded. “They did.”

“But... why?”

Vim’s eyes softened as he held my own. “Some people aren’t brave enough, Renn. Some people don’t trust what they don’t understand. Some just... give up,” he said.

“And you... being who you are, didn’t force it,” I whispered.

He nodded.

I gulped, and not because I had anything to swallow. "Vim..." I groaned.

"I'll not force my will on anyone Renn. Not even if it'll save their life," he said.

"I wish you would."

He smiled at me. "So do I... sometimes."

"Then why not?"

"We've talked of this," he said.

"Would you let me die, then?" I asked him.

Vim opened his mouth, to say something that would have likely broken my heart... but then he stopped himself. He frowned, and his eyebrows knitted closer as he suddenly went into contemplation.

My heart began to thump quickly, as I realized I had just made this very old and very stoic man realize he had very likely been breaking his own rules.

Woops.

He reached up, cupping his mouth as his eyes narrowed and lowered. Suddenly very deep in thought, I wanted to groan as my tail squirmed beneath the covers covering my legs. My tail curled and coiled near my right foot, suddenly very itchy.

“This is where I give explicit permission to you, huh? Well from now on Vim, please don’t hesitate to ever do anything you need to, okay?” I said gently, trying to not sound too rushed and bothered. Hopefully he didn’t notice how stiff my voice had sounded.

Vim then blinked, and then smiled at me. “I appreciate that... but that’s not how it works, Renn.”

“Says who? I’m giving you permission. Here and now,” I said.

“Says me. But... yes... I’ll admit I thought of it. In fact I had thought of it and had your situation worsened... I would have done something. Without your permission,” he said softly.

“Hm...? What? Wipe my body? Vim please, I’ve been trying to get you to touch me for over a year now and...” I started to tease him, but Vim shook his head... and didn’t even smirk or smile at me.

“I had debated putting the heart inside of you. To save you,” he then said.

Oh... "But Vim, I'd have been okay with that if that was what it would have taken," I said.

"Yes. I'm sure. But I didn't have your permission. Not yet."

"Your rules are very weird Vim," I said softly.

"I know. And many contradict each other. And more than a few I even try my best to circumvent and use loopholes against all the time, so even I know they're wrong," Vim said with a sigh.

Giggling at him, I reached over to pat his thigh. "I forgive you."

"Hmph."

"Still... should I try, Vim?" I asked as I glanced at the heart once more.

"No. Especially not right now. You're still sick Renn, even if you feel a lot better."

"Yes. But I mean... later?" I asked.

“No.”

I grumbled, and put the idea away. For now. Maybe I could convince him to try another day.

After all... I'd need to, wouldn't I? Someday?

He had said it granted a longer life. A healthier one. Keeping one younger, for longer.

That meant someday I would need such a thing. If I wanted to stay with him longer than not.

“Do different hearts do different things? Or are they all basically the same?” I asked.

“They do the same thing to those who are near them, or absorb them. But once you absorb them completely, those who fully adapt to them... become a Monarch themselves, basically. It's very rare but they can sometimes also gain their abilities. For instance if Landi perfectly absorbs the heart we just gave her, she'll be able to use that toxic trait. Or whatever original ability the god which created that Monarch's bloodline bestowed on them... Though how it'll manifest...” Vim shook his head and shrugged, “No idea.”

“Wait... you can get their abilities?” I asked.

He nodded. “Under the right circumstances. It's very rare though.”

“What was hers?” I asked as I lifted the heart.

“Miss Beak, like her parents, had been able to produce intense heat. The kind that could melt even steel,” Vim said.

“Huh... seems like an odd ability for a bird,” I said.

“It was. The salt-flat she lived in was basically made that way. When I fought her parents, they quite literally melted the entire region. Turning what had been a chain of mountains into a giant pool of slag. That all eventually hardened, and the minerals that remained formed the flat layer of earth which you saw,” Vim said.

I gulped at him.

He... had fought that? And survived...?

“Most Monarchs though don’t have such grandiose abilities. The ones who had such things died first. I made certain of it,” Vim then said.

Squeezing the heart in my hand, I wished I could somehow look into Vim’s mind. As if to see his memories, or thoughts.

I could only imagine the things he saw or knew.

“Why’d you hunt Monarchs for anyway, Vim?” I asked.

He blinked, and then frowned at me. “Next question, Renn,” he said gently.

Oh. Right. Okay...

“Uhm... Do you want some porridge too?” I asked, lifting the bowl a little. Even though it was basically empty now.

He smiled at me. “I’m fine. Would you like more?” he asked.

“For now I want more of that,” I said as I reached for the glass in his hands.

We swapped, but this time Vim didn’t get up to refill the bowl. Seemed he knew I wasn’t ready for another bowl just yet.

Taking a drink, I studied the way Vim stared at me. He looked relieved... but also tired. Maybe his relief that I was okay had made his tiredness return to the forefront of his mind.

“Are there baths here Vim?” I asked.

“No. I’ve looked around for a large barrel or bucket, but can’t seem to find one. So I can either just get enough water, and warm it for you, and you can wipe down or I can go make a bathtub for you real quick if you’d like.”

I giggled at him. “You really would make one for me wouldn’t you?”

He frowned. “Yeah...? Want me to?”

Shaking my head, I wondered why he was so... eccentric sometimes. Or maybe to him, making a whole bathtub was not that big a deal. Likely it wasn’t but... still...

It wasn’t like we could take it with us. Which meant he’d make an entire tub just for me. For this singular use.

Such a thing warmed my heart, but made me wish he realized how odd he was sometimes. Normal people wouldn’t think like that.

“I’m sorry that I worried you, Vim,” I said gently.

He blinked at me, and then smiled. "You had. But it's okay. It reminded me how powerless I really am. I need to be smacked down like that sometimes."

Chuckling at him, I rolled Beak's heart lightly. Making it roll off my lap, and in-between my legs. "Powerless. Sure."

"I am. I fed you some medicine but I doubt it helped much. Your own body, and the heart, is what kept you alive," he said.

Hm... I wanted to argue with him, but decided not to. "Have you really never been sick, Vim?"

He nodded. "Not like you just were. I get something like a fever sometimes, when I receive a lot of damage and am healing... but it's from my own body fighting itself as it heals. Not because I'm actually sick," he said.

"Huh..."

"Probably should have asked before you drank so much of that junk, but mind showing me your tongue again?" Vim then asked.

Tilting my head at him, I had to ponder a moment to remember what he meant. At first it had sounded so weird. He wanted to see my tongue? Vim did? The man who rarely if ever made a saucy comment or joke?

But then I remembered what had happened before I had fallen asleep before, and went ahead and leaned forward and stuck my tongue out for him again.

He leaned forward as well, and went to looking into my mouth... for whatever he was searching for.

After a moment he nodded and leaned back.

“What do you look for?” I asked, and went to take a drink. My mouth felt dry now.

“Signs of infection, or the plague or some kind of pox. Some diseases make these marks, or ulcers, in the mouth. Yours is a little red right now, thanks to that slop, but it looks fine. By the way did you know your wisdom teeth look flat? Did you break them? Do they hurt?” he asked.

“My teeth...? No...?” I ran my tongue along them. Which ones was he talking about?

“Then it’s fine. Might have been from a blow, or just from time. You don’t grind your teeth much in your sleep but over the many years I guess it could happen,” he said, letting it be.

A little worried now, I wondered if maybe my mouth, or teeth, had looked funny. “Do they look weird...? I know they’re a little pointier than normal compared to at least human teeth... but...” I ran my tongue once more along them all.

“They’re fine. They’re sharp yes, but you’re not a human Renn so it’s to be expected. Rather I find them to be adorable. They give your unique smile even more personality,” he said.

Smiling for him, I fluttered my ears. “Unique smile?” I asked.

“That’s the one,” he said and smiled back.

Wonder what made it so unique to him. Hopefully that didn’t mean my smile was weird to everyone else...

“Would you like to eat more Renn? Your stomach hasn’t gurgled lately, but...” Vim then asked.

“Hm... no...” I returned my attention to the glass of berry goodness. There wasn’t much left. I quickly drank the rest, and breathed out a tiny sigh afterward.

For a few moments I sat there, staring at the slowly growing brighter room. The sun was rising, and the world was growing warmer. Usually by now I’d be hearing the beginning of the day. People talking, and walking. Dogs barking. People making noises as they moved stuff, or banged metal.

Yet the world was oddly quiet. Other than a few chirps from birds occasionally... there wasn’t much else.

“If it did this to me Vim... what will it do to our weaker members...?” I asked softly.

“You already know, Renn,” Vim said.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and held it in for a moment.

I did. I did know.

And...

Glancing down at the pink orb, I wondered how much of a difference it had made. If Vim was right... and it really had made a large difference, and kept me from succumbing... then...

Without such help, our weaker members were even less likely to survive.

“Should we have punished Landi?” I asked, doubting all of my choices.

“We should have. But punishing her would not have changed the outcome Renn. We got rid of the source... so the disease won’t be able to continue spreading without recourse. But now it needs to run its course naturally. It’ll spread everywhere, or won’t. Once summer ends and winter comes will be the real test. Winter is when such things become more deadly, usually,” he said.

“Is... is there anything we can do? Can we at least warn them?” I asked.

“Those who can make a difference, like the Chronicler and Brandy, already know about the plague. Though they hadn’t known how bad it was before we left, by now they undoubtedly do. They’ll begin measures to keep our members safe. The Society has gone through many plagues Renn. This isn’t the first. Though... I’ll admit it’s the first one from a Monarch in... well... maybe even the entirety of the Societies existence, at least,” he said.

“Didn’t you say you could make a cure?” I asked. I thought he had said such a thing before, when we had been quarantining outside of Landi’s capital.

“I can, yes. But it requires a risky method, and can’t be done by person but by group. Basically we’d need to infect a large swath of a population with a minor version of the disease, so they can face a weakened type of it. Then once they overcome it, as you have, they’ll be immune to the real one. The problem with this method is we’re likely too late. It’s likely already in the north. Plus this disease is from a Monarch. Who knows if such a method will actually work or not,” he said.

“You’d... make them sick on purpose?” I asked, trying to understand.

He nodded. “Think of it like making calluses. So that you don’t hurt your hands or feet anymore. You build up a resistance to it.”

Ah. That did make sense, then.

Though...

I glanced down to my hands and frowned. "My calluses never stay," I said. I had gained some while working in Secca, but they were gone already. My palms felt smooth.

"I've noticed," he said.

Smiling, I side-glanced him. "Have you? Here I thought we'd not been holding hands enough for you to," I teased him.

He huffed, but smiled at me.

Enjoying the sight, I reached over to him. He noticed, and at first ignored my outstretched hand, but reluctantly took it in the end.

Grinning at him, I nodded.

He nodded back, and I noticed the way he glanced at my hand in his.

Was he checking for calluses? He was moving his thumb a little oddly...

"Thank you for getting better Renn," he then whispered.

My toes curled, and I clenched my jaw as I stared at the man who suddenly looked exhausted. As if mere moments from falling over into a deep sleep.

“Vim...” I whispered.

He nodded. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Blinking watery eyes, I nodded back at him. What did I say to that? What could be said?

He had spoken so purely. So warmly...

To me it had been mere moments. I had been awake, then asleep, then waking up hungry.

But to him it had been many days.

Likely days of fraught and worry.

I’d known that feeling before. It was torture.

And for him... well... For a man who was usually able to do anything... for him this might have been impossibly upsetting.

Because he was so strong... and so wise, when he encountered things he couldn't do anything about he broke.

I gulped, and squeezed his hand.

A few long moments passed, and luckily the world didn't seem willing to ruin them. Time simply dragged on... slowly...

Then he took a small breath and nodded. "Would you like me to fetch water Renn? Or more drink and food?" he asked.

Although I did feel a little grimy... right now I felt the tug of something a little more important. My eyes were starting to get droopy.

"I think I'm going to lay down for a bit first..." I said as he held out the now empty glass.

"Hm. You do seem cold," he said, as our hands separated.

Cold...? Really? The room felt a little warm still, especially with the now bright sunlight pouring in... plus Beak's heart was still in-between my legs, warming my thighs. Not to mention my own heart was really warm and happy and...

But after a moment of looking at myself, I realized what he meant... and felt the rush of blood warm me even more.

Vim chuckled at me as I quickly laid down, as to hide my embarrassment. And my naked body.

"You should be nicer to me Vim. I'm still sick," I complained while burying my face into my pillow.

"So I can be mean when you're not?" he asked as I felt him grab the blankets.

"Well... no..." I mumbled. "But it's not fair since you don't get sick. It means I'll never get to return the favor."

He hummed as I reached down to find the heart. It had rolled away a little. Once it was in my hands, I re-adjusted myself to get more comfortable.

"Though in a way Rennalee," Vim said as he pulled the blanket back up over me.

"Hm...?" it wasn't often he used my full name. For some reason it made my ears twitch to hear him say it.

“You have spread something to me. A sickness in its own form. You can be proud of that and use that as an excuse, if you’d like,” he teased me.

Smiling at him, I reached out to take his hand. He let me, and I enjoyed the small squeeze he gave me. “Flirting while I’m sick isn’t fair, Vim. I’m not up to task.”

He chuckled at me. “Woe the day you will be.”

Chapter 240 Martin

Renn stretched, letting out a long whine of relief as she did so.

I studied the way she twisted her waist, and coiled her arms around each other. She twisted a bit, in a way that reminded me of the source of her bloodline.

Cat indeed.

Once done she let out a happy huff, and then turned and nodded to me.

She was ready.

"I know you don't like carrying much stuff Vim, and that we already have a bunch of baggage, but I really think we should maybe consider some kind of tent. We'll not always get lucky and find a cave," Renn said as she stepped into one of the puddles as she came over to me.

"You'd be surprised. Though... maybe. I'll consider it. When alone I never need to worry about the weather, and usually we're in the north so there are enough towns and stuff along the road to keep shelter when we need it," I said.

"Not many towns out here Vim. Plus the few we encounter are all... well..." Renn hummed as she debated what word to use to describe the famine, plague ridden towns.

"Not up to par, yes," I agreed.

"Yea that," she nodded.

Hefting the final bag, I secured it to my back and nodded to her. I was now ready too.

She smiled happily at me, and nodded back.

Stepping away from the cave we had used to keep dry last night, we headed back towards the road we'd been on. It was a good distance away, albeit visible from here.

Renn happily hurried to keep up with me. She notably did her best to walk through as many puddles as possible. It was a good thing that the ground wasn't too muddy, even though not as solid rock as it had been lately. Grass and trees were starting to return, becoming more commonplace. But although still a dry ground, and heavy with dirt, the ground was very good at soaking up the water. Likely because last night's monsoon had been more wind than rain, really.

Alone I'd never let such a storm keep me from trudging along my path. No strong winds or heavy rains could stop me.

But Renn was another story. And not just because she was still recovering from her sickness.

"How much longer Vim?" Renn asked.

"A few days. We should reach a river soon, which leads to their town. You'll start seeing houses and stuff along it... or at least, we should," I said. The famine and plague had done a lot of damage to the last few villages we'd passed through... so I wouldn't be surprised to find most of those small family homesteads now empty, or gone entirely.

"Does that mean we might be able to sleep in a real bed tonight then?" Renn asked.

"Actually if it doesn't storm again, I'd like to just go straight to them. I can carry you if you get too tired, if that's okay with you," I suggested.

Renn paused, long enough to give me a weird grin. "I'd be more than happy to let you carry me," she said happily.

Figured.

She splashed into another puddle again as we reached the road. It was a dirt one, but it looked as if at one time someone had tried to layer it with stones and pebbles. There were enough everywhere; all the same river washed color, to tell me they weren't natural. But the attempt had been... poor. It was in the end, just a plain dirt packed road.

Which was funny... I could have sworn at one time there had been a stone road here. Made by the previous kingdom.

I wonder what happened to it. Likely buried under grass and dirt, or simply misplaced.

"How far are we from Lumen, Vim?" Renn asked.

"A few weeks at this pace. From the Weaver's we'll head north a bit more until we reach the Crypt. From there we start heading back west, to lands you're familiar with. We'll circle north-west, checking on a few other members and then head back south. If no one has any requests or needs us, we'll actually head back towards Telmik, passing north of Lumen as we do," I told her of our route.

"We won't go through Lumen...?" she asked softly.

I tried not to smile at her, since her question had sounded a little sad. “No. Unless they need us. Brandy knows what route we’re taking, so she knows where to send letters to intercept us if we’re needed,” I said. Hopefully she wouldn’t.

They really should be able to last a few years without me, at least. If not... what was the point of them taking over?

“Hm... Then what? Once we go back to Telmik?” Renn asked.

As we walked, I noted the way her tail swayed in the air. Its perkiness was back. When we had first left that inn, once she felt fine enough to travel, it had hung low. Nearly touching the ground. And not because she had wanted it to.

She was doing much better now. She honestly was acting as she had before she got sick. I didn’t see, or feel, any weakness in her mannerisms or actions. Nor did I hear it in her voice, or smell anything strange from her.

Yet it had only been a few days since we had left that inn where she’d gotten sick. So I was doing my best to treat her as if she was still recuperating. Even if she herself seemed to have no plans to do so.

I needed to keep our pace even. Slower than usual. Nearly back to the pace we’d taken when she first joined me. Before she grew accustomed to my more normal speed. And although I hoped to walk continuously for the next few days, until we reached the Weaver... I knew better than to push her past her limits. The moment she seemed tired or exhausted, I’d have us stop. Storm or no.

“Odds are there will be a request or two at Telmik. There hadn’t been any last time because I’d recently been there. Not even a few months before. So we’ll head to wherever we’re needed and from those places take a new path. Hopefully one that heads south and then west, up along the coast instead of against it as we had coming down,” I said.

“So... we really just make big circles then? Just choosing slightly different paths each time?” Renn asked.

I nodded. “It’s more of a zigzag pattern, really. Sometimes we need to circle back or go a distance away, to one of the farther members, but it’s rare,” I said as I waved a finger in the air, mimicking the paths.

“You don’t always go to Landi, right?” she asked.

“Yea. About one in three times when I come this way. There are only a few locations I go to each time. Like Lumen,” I said.

“What location have you not been to the longest? Who haven’t you seen in a long time?” Renn asked.

Her question made me pause, and I frowned. The longest...?

“Well... Hm... most likely the mouse couple up north. Near Elk and his family. Or maybe the Penguins. I think last time I saw them was when they visited Telmik. And that was at least a hundred years ago,” I said as I thought about it.

"A... hundred years ago? Really Vim?" Renn asked worriedly.

I shrugged. "They live very far away Renn. It takes me over a year just to get to them. And that's with me rushing as fast as I can. With you it'd probably take twice as long. Unless they actually need something I can't afford to go that far from the Society. Not just to say hello," I said.

It was regrettable... but they were the ones who refused to leave their homelands. They knew the risks that being so distant brought.

"Do... do I slow you down that much Vim...?" Renn asked worriedly.

"Hm? No. What I meant was that was with me running at full speed, without stopping as much as I can. I'd not be able to do that with you... or anyone, for that matter. I won't lie to you; we do travel a little slower while together... but not enough to worry about. Remember half the time I'm traveling with someone else too. Honestly you keep up rather well, all things considered," I said.

Renn grinned at me, pleased to be complimented. "Brandy and Oplar travel around too right? Do any other members do so? You mentioned those twins before too," she asked.

"There's a few, yes. Actually Brandy and a few others sometimes come this way, to the Weaver. Merit's friend is here, remember? She comes here every so often too... though she hasn't asked to join me here in a long time. Ever since she settled in Lumen. Maybe something happened," I wondered.

"Oh...? That's not something I wanted to hear. Why do you think something happened?" she asked.

Shrugging, I accidentally stepped a little too harshly in one of the puddles. The splash made Renn have to duck away, since some hit her. She laughed at me, though, and didn't take offense or seem bothered. "Sorry," I apologized.

"Did talking about Merit annoy you that much?" she asked with a laugh.

"No. I'm actually in a good mood... that was an accident," I said truthfully.

She hummed as she stepped a few feet away from me. Likely because we were about to walk through a large batch of puddles. Some were even a little deep.

"Anyway, I think Merit made a point to visit them every few years. If she hasn't been going lately something must have happened... I don't think she had died, so I'm just making assumptions. Merit can be... fickle. Touchy. Emotional," I made a light comment about her friend. I didn't want to say too much, since not only would it sour Renn's mood but honestly Merit didn't deserve it. She and I didn't get along very well, but I had no choice but to praise her lifestyle choices and ability to endure.

There weren't many who could live such harsh lives as she had and still wake up in the morning.

"No more than any of us, Vim. Still, I hope she's okay. I'd like to meet a friend of a friend," she said.

"Hm..." I nodded. I guess I couldn't argue about that. Out of anyone in Lumen for her to dub friend, Merit was really the only one worth such a high praise. So far at least. She'd been the only one, other

than Tosh, to vote against banishing her. And Tosh had very likely only done so because of me. I liked the man, but I knew he'd always favor me when it came to such things... which made him biased.

Merit on the other hand would usually do the opposite. She'd vote against me just to spite me. So for her to have cared enough for Renn to vote in her favor... well...

Walking through the batch of puddles, I found myself smiling confidently as I made it through them without causing another mess.

"Is it that hard, Vim?" Renn asked as she got closer again, thanks to the lack of puddles.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Controlling your strength," she said.

Ah...

"Yes. Sometimes," I told the truth, yet not all of it.

"Is that why you try not to let people touch you? Or you them?" she asked.

“Well... it’s an excuse for it, at least,” I admitted.

She smirked at me. “I see.”

“To be honest... It’s when I get emotional that I need to be careful,” I said.

“Hm...? But you just said you’re in a good mood,” she pointed out.

I nodded. “That’s an emotion too, Renn. Happiness is just as potent, if not more so sometimes, than anger or whatever,” I said.

“Ah... I suppose that is true, isn’t it?” she said as she pondered it.

It honestly wasn’t, at least in this scenario. But I didn’t want to admit to her the real reason I sometimes... was more than I was.

Not yet, anyway.

Plus it wasn’t a complete lie. My strength and abilities did get... out of hand... sometimes, especially so when emotional. But only to a point.

"I once hurt someone in the same way, a young girl... not realizing how strong I was. Luckily the witch had been there to save her. After that I've always been... very careful, or at least I try to be," Renn said.

I nodded. "I've assumed. Most of us have similar stories. Plus I've noticed you've never had trouble interacting with our weaker members, or that bowl boy. You're rather good at it, honestly, you're far stronger than it seems," I said.

"First... His name was Hark. Really Vim, why's it so hard for you to remember something like that? And more importantly, what was yours? You were strong even when young right?" Renn asked with an odd grin.

Ignoring her first point, I nodded. "Luckily I was raised by two... special people. By the time I interacted with the rest the world, I'd been taught how to control myself. However it has happened over the years, regrettably. I've not only hurt people, and things, I've killed them too. Not too long ago..." I tried to think how many years it had been. "Maybe twenty or so years? I had fatally harmed a young child. A street urchin. I had been in the middle of saving one of our members from the northern church, and they had somehow jumped up onto my back. I'm not sure why they did it, but out of pure reflex I had grabbed them. To pull them off me. Well... even though I realized in the next heartbeat that they had just been a child, and not an actual pursuer or enemy, it was already too late. The damage had been done," I said as I remembered it.

I hadn't thought of that moment in years. It somehow hurt a little.

"Why would they jump on your back?" Renn asked softly.

I shrugged. "I don't know. The only thing I can think of is they thought by aiding in my capture or something they'd be rewarded... but sometimes weird stuff like that just happens. I feel bad about it, but I'm not a god. I'll not always be fully alert, or in control. Though if you'll forgive me for voicing an

opinion, it always sickens me. Not just the act I committed, but the things said by the one I had done it for," I said as I remembered the rest.

"The one you saved?" she asked.

Blinking his expression, and the words he had said after realizing what I'd done, as far away as possible... I nodded and decided to change the conversation.

This one was just pissing me off.

"Speaking of strength... maybe it's time I started to teach you how to actually fight," I said.

Her ears perked up, and a strange grin planted itself on her face. "Really? Finally! I've been wondering how to bring up that we've not been training lately, Vim, and it's been bugging me senseless... though wait... what do you mean? Weren't you already teaching me how to fight?" Renn rattled on some interesting things as she drew closer.

"I've only started getting you used to a sword. I've not actually taught you how to use it yet," I said.

"What's the difference...?" she asked.

"Everything. And I more so meant... well... you'll see. We'll wait a bit until you're sure your bodies fine, though," I said.

"I really do feel fine now, Vim. I feel better than I have in a long time, even. I don't even have any muscle aches or anything," she said as she glanced down at herself, raising arms to check them.

"I don't doubt you Renn. But sometimes a fever can come back. No need to risk it just yet. Let's just give it a little time, is all," I said.

"Hm... okay..." she nodded, but I could tell she didn't fully agree with me.

Truly I didn't doubt her. She very likely did feel fine.

She was still carrying Beak's heart after all.

But I was in no mood to push her body, and send her back into sickness. All that would do is make me hate myself more than I did already.

Although a little disappointed, Renn didn't seem to let it bother her. She quickly stepped closer, leaning forward a bit as to smile at me. "Do you think I could become like you Vim? Maybe not... as strong, but as good?" she asked.

"I believe you have the mind and temperament needed, yes. To be honest you'd probably become far more skilled than those like Lilly... but..." I hesitated as she blinked at my words, and her smile twitched.

She said nothing, and waited for me to continue... and I slowed a little. I came to a stop, half-stepping into a small puddle as I did so.

Renn came to a stop too, and I held her gaze as she stood up straighter... waiting for me to say it.

"I do think you can take the steps necessary to become a true danger... but we won't know until it happens," I said finally.

"A true... danger...? What do you mean?" she asked softly.

"You can kill Renn. I can tell that. But there's another step necessary, to become someone who I'd consider deadly," I said.

"What is it...?" she asked as her tail twitched.

"Cruelty."

Her left ear twitched, and her eyes narrowed. "Cruelty," she repeated.

I nodded.

For a tiny moment she stared into my eyes... but then she looked away. To our feet. Or rather, to my own. To the foot that was in the puddle.

"You're already a warrior, Renn. You have the body, the strength and speed, plus the basics. You're not a frail woman unable to defend herself. Plus... I believe you can kill without hesitation, if the need requires it. But I don't know yet if you can be cruel enough to be like Lilly," I said.

Renn's cheek made an odd movement, and I realized she was biting the inside of it. Chewing on it, as if anxious.

I hadn't meant to be rude or make her cry... but I had been honest. Maybe a little too honest?

"There's nothing wrong with that Renn. Don't take my words as an insult. In all honesty you could probably beat Lilly, with a little more training. I was just... forewarning you, I guess," I said.

"You don't kill cruelly, Vim," she then said.

I shifted, causing the puddle to splash a little while Renn's eyes returned to my own. She then nodded, as if to tell me she was willing to argue her point if needed.

"Only because you've not seen me need to yet. The only foes you've seen me encounter have been those too weak or simple to require such brutality. You'll not think the same when the time comes. Likely not too far from now, too. Regrettably the world never runs out of lowlifes or threats," I said.

Renn grabbed her elbow, to squeeze it lightly. It seemed this was bothering her more than I had thought it would. Interesting.

About to ponder the reason... I decided to instead just get an answer.

“Why does this bother you so much Renn?” I asked gently.

She blinked, and her tail flicked lightly. “I don’t like the idea of you being cruel, I guess. Even if I understand why, or that it’s needed, it still upsets me... I guess,” she said.

Huh... “Here I thought you’d be more bothered by your own dilemma. Are you not worried about having to do what you don’t like, or feel is right?” I asked.

She nodded. “I do. Of course. But... I also know that if it came to it, I’d do the same. I’ve been cruel too, Vim, for those I protected. For Nory. For the kids. Even for Fly, in those sewers. I had been willing and ready to do almost anything to get her out of there,” she said.

I was about to make a comment on that singular word she had chosen. That... almost.

It was that almost that didn’t cut it. That little detail was what made me doubt she could really go as far as I’d expect of her, in my position.

But...

Keeping my thoughts to myself, I smiled gently at the woman who huffed as she compartmentalized and processed what I was saying. She was coming terms with loving a man who just reminded her that he did things that went against her own moral compass.

She knew I did. She knew I had. And would again. Yet acknowledging and accepting it were two different things.

“Can I say something selfish?” I asked her.

Our Societies jaguar perked up as she focused on me, and nodded quickly. Excited to hear it.

“I’d honestly rather you never became so, Renn.”

For a small moment Renn only gaped at me, but then she gave me a very toothy grin. “That is pretty selfish, for you!” she declared.

“It was, wasn’t it? Don’t tell anyone,” I said.

Renn giggled happily, and I stepped forward. To return us to walking.

She didn't follow after immediately, and chose instead to stick behind me and laugh for a moment. It didn't take too long for her to get it all under control, and then hurry after me.

She stepped up next to me, and elbowed me lightly. "Can I ask why not, Vim?" she asked.

"Of course you can. And it's because anyone can be cruel, Renn. It's harder to not be so," I said.

Renn's happy smirk slowly died as she pondered my words, and then she tilted her head. "Is it really? I'd think it's more normal to be kind than cruel."

"It's precisely why you think such a thing that makes me hope you never change, Renn," I said.

"Are... are you teasing me?" Renn asked as she frowned, as if she didn't get what I was saying.

Maybe she didn't.

"No. Would you like me to?" I asked.

She nodded quickly.

“The only person I want you to be cruel to is me,” I told her.

“The...” Renn’s face twisted into a weird smile and utter confusion as she tried to understand what I had just told her.

And oddly, it continued to only grow more confused the longer she pondered it.

Smirking at her, I nodded as I looked ahead. To let her simmer on that for as long as she needed to.

Walking relatively quietly for the first time today, we rounded a large batch of trees. Ones that had been hiding thick lush grass. The river could be heard in the distance, and not far from us was a sign.

Approaching the signpost, I frowned at the symbols carved into the hastily made signpost.

“Is the plague here too...?” Renn complained as she broke the silence, leaving her deep concentration.

“I think it is saying don’t enter if you’re sick, rather. That’s the symbol this region uses, not for death but to kill. Marked for death, basically,” I said as I pointed at the largest symbol in the center.

“Huh...? Oh. So it’s saying don’t come near if you’re sick or we’ll kill you,” Renn understood.

I nodded as I glanced down farther down the road. I still couldn't see any houses or signs of people, but I knew they'd start popping up soon. "To be honest I expected to eventually run into a blockade or something. Though I expected it a little later, once we're farther north. There are actual nations, with real militaries up there," I said.

"Hm? You mean like what Landi was doing, don't you?" she asked.

"Yeah. Pretty much," I said as we returned to walking.

"Wouldn't people just... not use the roads then?" Renn asked.

"They will. Or will try. But it's still effective, and a good deterrent too," I said, and blinked a little to keep back the yawn that had nearly slipped through.

Renn hummed, not realizing how close I had just come to yawning.

Me. Yawning.

I'd done it a few times on that ship. With those pirates. At the time I had simply blamed it on my healing and the general... laziness I'd had at those moments.

Now though...

"Vim?" Renn drew my eyes and attention, and she frowned at me.

"Hm?"

"Are you tired?" she asked softly.

Great. "Noticed...?" I asked worriedly. Was it that obvious?

She nodded. "Want to rest? Why didn't you sleep at all last night?" she asked accusingly.

Because I didn't want to admit I was actually tired.

"I tried," I lied.

"Did you though?" she must have seen through it.

No. But I should have.

For a few dozen steps, Renn said nothing... then she sighed at me.

“Sorry,” I apologized softly.

“You should be. You’re lucky I’m so understanding sometimes. If we had been a normal couple, one would question if you were cheating or something,” Renn said.

It was my turn to frown. “Cheating?” I asked. And... a normal couple? What was that supposed to mean?

She nodded. “Yeah? Coming home tired all the time would be a good indicator I think,” she said.

Was it...? “If only that was all it was,” I said lightly.

“So something is wrong...? You’ve said it was odd before but... Should I be concerned?” Renn asked, dropping the weird teasing about cheating thing.

“Don’t know yet... I feel as if I’m healing, or just got done healing massive damage. It made sense after Lumen for a bit, but by now I should be fine,” I said honestly.

Not to mention I have actually slept. I slept while we were quarantining. I rested while she visited Landi. I rested while she did, in that inn. Though honestly I’d not really slept much since the quarantining...

Yet even though I'd not slept much, I should not be tired. Not anymore.

Something was wrong. And it was time I stopped ignoring it.

But what did I do about it?

"Something is wrong, I think," I finally admitted.

Renn made an odd noise as she stepped a little closer. "Jeez Vim... why didn't you say something?" she asked.

Hadn't I? I mean I thought I've made it clear that me being so tired was strange...

Or well...

Maybe I hadn't. I might have pointed out that it was odd, but not necessarily something to worry about. My fault for shrugging it off.

"Want to set up camp Vim? Before we reach the Weaver?" Renn asked.

“No. We’re already behind schedule,” I said. Not by much, but if I kept allowing it to compile then it’d become a problem later.

“Then what Vim? You can’t just keep getting more and more exhausted. All that will do is get someone hurt or killed, eventually,” Renn said worriedly.

“Says who? I’m actually very good at persevering through exhaustion and wear,” I defended myself. If she had any idea what I’ve endured and accomplished while broken she’d never let a thought like that ever enter her pretty little head.

Renn made an odd face at me, but I wasn’t able to spend long studying it and enjoying it. It was a new look for her. A new expression. One of worry and anger mixed in an odd way.

Instead I had to look down the road, to the pair of horses approaching us.

And the knights sitting upon them.

Renn turned, and I sighed as I bent a little, as to let her quickly dig out her hat again.

“We’re not done having this conversation Vim,” Renn said as she went to hiding her tail and ears.

“Sure,” I agreed as we slowed a little... both to give Renn time to hide her traits, and for me to study the approaching men.

Or rather, a man and woman.

It didn't take long for them to reach us, and they slowed once they did. I came to a stop, which made Renn do the same, as I held the man's gaze.

They weren't heading past us, but for us. He had even turned his horse a little as to approach us at an angle... in case he needed to spur the thing away at a moment's notice.

“Ho' there,” the man greeted us, and I looked for any sign of his allegiance.

I found none. No emblem. No flag. No colors. He wore mostly leather armor, with only his chest plate being metal. The woman wore only metal on her feet. Her boots looked heavy. Too heavy for her. Or she wasn't accustomed to riding a horse, and was having difficulty because of it.

Not an odd appearance. Most knights in this era couldn't afford metal armor. Plus for most it was too bulky than useful... but...

“How can I be of assistance, fair knights?” I asked him.

The man smirked and scoffed. "Please. I'm no more a knight than you are, and you know it," he said.

Shifting, I frowned at the man who seemed to have calmed down a little. He crossed his arms, and slouched forward a little... putting himself in a position not suited for combat at all. It blocked his sword, and tangled his horse's reins.

Glancing to his companion, I found her studying Renn. She looked about as old as Renn did, making her more a girl than a woman, but she was a little bit taller and wider in the shoulders. There was a faint smell of sweat from her, and a tiny layer of it on her brow. She had been doing something physical not too long ago. She also looked tense.

He was relaxed, but she wasn't.

An odd pair, honestly. Maybe this region was this desperate... to employ such people for soldiers.

"Well, assuming is a fun past time of mine. Pray take no offense," I said lightly.

He laughed, which made the woman's horse's ears flick. Similarly to how Renn's did sometimes. "Aint' that the truth! When we're bored we try to stir up trouble. It's always made me wonder how our women put up with us," he said.

Hm. "Can't be because of our coins, or good looks, I'm sure," I said, to see if my assumptions were true.

The man sighed and smiled. "Good. Thought so based off the look of ya' but you never know anymore. Where you from mate?" the mercenary asked, just as relieved as I was to hear the familiar code-phrase.

"Actually, farther up north. We're heading back to our band, the Silken Band," I said.

The mercenary frowned and sat up a little more. "You're serious?" he asked.

I nodded. "Unless you got bad news for me," I said.

"None at all, far as I've heard. Huh... you're a long way from home, then. Hm..." the man looked away from me, for the first time, and turned his gaze to Renn. I heard her tilt her head and shift behind me upon his gaze.

"Let me guess... hired to keep the sick out?" I asked him, both to get his eyes off Renn and also to somewhat focus the conversation.

He nodded. "Aye. A pain, and makes me feel more like a bandit than anything else, but it pays well. The two of you don't look sick, are ya?" he asked.

I shook my head. "We've been staying clear of people as much as one can. It helps that that Nation of Stone is culling all who are, too," I said.

The mercenary nodded. "Indeed it is. Glad to hear the rumor is true," he said, taking my words as gospel.

After all, why wouldn't he? In his eyes we were now comrades... though under different banners.

Which made his lack of one interesting. Even if currently employed as something of a guard or patrolman, he should still have a mercenary band he belonged to and paid tribute to. Yet he had no markings, or visible colors. Not even a hint of one.

Neither did the girl.

"Mind if we walk with you back to town? I'd like to hear what news I can from you, if able," the man then asked as he went to hop off his horse. As to walk alongside me.

I kept myself from sighing as I nodded politely. After all refusing wouldn't have been very mercenary-like of me.

When not at war with one another, mercenaries were in truth comrades and compatriots. It was how they survived such a dangerous lifestyle. By trusting no one but themselves.

Breaking that trust would just make him draw his sword. Since then to him I'd no longer be a mercenary, and thus warrant death. Since I'd pretended to be one.

"Names Vim," I held my hand out as he turned, and he grinned as he took it.

"Martin. My sister here's fresh blood, a virgin of the field," Martin waved at the girl who was clambering off her horse.

Ah. Not his wife or companion then.

"Plague I'm assuming?" I asked lightly as our hands separated.

"Aye. Took the whole family other than her, so now here she is. Tough life but she's doing alright," Martin said as the girl calmed her horse. It had tried to step away from her after she had gotten off it.

"World's always cruel," I said, and turned as I was about to introduce them to Renn... but she was already on the move.

She stepped forward and held her hand out to the sister, beaming a smile. "I'm Renn!" she introduced herself.

Renn had somewhat caught the young girl off guard. She had just been turning around, after settling the horse, and nearly jumped at the sudden close proximity of Renn. The mercenary girl shifted, and blinked a worried look from Renn to her brother... who promptly huffed and ignored her.

“So? What riches did you find down south, daring the stones and plague?” Martin asked as we started to walk, leaving Renn and the unsure sister behind.