

## Non Human 351

### Chapter 351 A Map and A Few Tears

Little Root sat on my lap, or well my leg, and I was holding her hands as she made noises at me.

She really was adorable. Even though it seemed she was trying to break my fingers, with the way she was twisting them around.

"How do you play with her Windle?" I asked as I started bouncing the little girl's hands up and down, to distract her from trying to rip off a finger.

She didn't have the strength to do so, I didn't think at least, but I could tell she was gripping and pulling with a lot more force than should be possible for such a young child. Enough even to possibly threaten and endanger those who were weaker, like humans or Windle and Fly.

"Very carefully. And she doesn't get that rough with me, or Fly. Only you and Lilly," Windle said from his desk.

"Hm...? Wait? Really?" I asked as I glanced at him. He nodded as he continued writing on his desk, not bothering to look up at me.

I frowned at Root as she giggled at me, as if she completely understood the conversation happening about her right now.

"She's not actually trying to hurt you. She's playing with you. You just have the same strength as Lilly, and she instinctively notices it. So she knows she can play like that. With me, and those like Fly, she'll play but not as roughly. Or if she starts to, I'll simply tell her not to and pull my hands away. She gets the point and learns quickly," he added.

"Hear that? You're a gentle girl," I said to Root.

She of course didn't understand me as she tried to pull my left hand to her face. I could tell she wanted to stick my hand, or fingers, into her mouth. As to chew on me.

Vim let her do that, but I didn't. I didn't let her, which only made her try a little harder for a moment before giving up.

I'd allowed it once before, and although she hadn't hurt me, it had not been pleasant. For whatever reason the few little teeth she had were sharp. Sharp enough to break skin if you weren't careful.

Plus I figured letting her do it only further taught her it was okay. And I didn't want to teach her a bad habit, even though Vim didn't seem to care.

Glancing at Windle at his desk, as Root made noises while trying to push herself off my lap, I wondered if one day I'd be as nonchalant about a baby as he was.

He loved her, dearly, there was no doubt of that... but he and Lilly did sometimes seem to just... kind of ignore her. As if she was not the most precious thing in the world.

I blamed it on the fact she was their eighth child. After so many it must just feel normal. Natural. Something not to be too concerned over.

"Do you have any maps Windle? Of the Society?" I asked, finally bringing up the thing I had come here for.

It was morning, but late enough now that I knew it'd not be long until midday. I had spent the morning with Fly, Root and Lilly, but was now in Windle's office. Fly had gone to take a bath, and Lilly and Vim had ran off somewhere. As much as I had wanted to bathe with Fly, I had felt a little bad to abandon Root so readily. Especially since it seemed Windle was in a hurry to do whatever he was doing. I think he was writing letters. Likely in preparation for Vim and I leaving.

"I do. Several in fact," he said.

"Any more recent ones?" I asked.

Windle's little pen didn't stop as he wrote, even as he looked up from the paper and frowned at me. "Recent...? Yes. I update a general one every time I get new information, such as from Vim or a letter. That one is in the other room, on the table, that one," Windle gestured with his chin to across the room. I followed it to a door, one in the corner of the room. On the same wall as the entrance to this office, but over in the corner and leading another direction.

Many of these rooms were not square like I was used to. Most were rounded. There were flat walls, of course, but they were only about half of them. The other half made circles. It was odd, but also somehow refreshing. It made me feel like we were genuinely living inside a large tree, which it wouldn't surprise me if we were.

"Can I see it...? Or is there rule against that?" I asked.

"I see no reason as to why not. We do usually try to keep such full maps hidden, but you're Vim's wife. You'd likely visit each location eventually anyway," Windle said plainly.

I hummed at his viewpoint, and liked how it was somewhat methodical. He had not answered based on emotion. He and Lilly were oddly not as emotional so many made them out to be. Although Lilly did have an obvious emotional side to her, it was still seemingly ruled by reason.

"I'll look at it later," I said gently, deciding.

Root made noises at me, as if to ask if she really was more interesting than something I wanted to genuinely see. I smiled and nodded to her, telling her she was.

She really was adorable...! Her wings would rise upward every time she tilted her head, showing her emotions as well as my ears or tail did.

Root wasn't able to use them yet, of course, she couldn't even flap them... but they did move and move often. They were actually far sturdier than I had thought them to be, even though I had been told to be mindful of them. She could lay on them. As she slept. Even while Root rolled around no one worried for her wings. They were that sturdy.

It made me wonder what her wings would look like once fully grown. Lilly and Windle of course no longer had theirs, so I had no idea what to expect. Based off the size of Root's wings, it almost seemed like once she was Lilly's height they'd be almost twice as big as her! I suppose they did have to be big, as to carry them when they flew, but it was such a strange thought.

But I guess my tail was as long as I was tall, so maybe it was just normal.

"Why do you think Fly doesn't have wings?" I wondered.

"Her parents likely had them. It's how we lose our traits. Slowly, piece by piece," Windle said.

That's too bad... "Does that mean your parents had feathers all over too?" I asked.

"Actually yes. My father even had a beak," he said.

I blinked at that and glanced at Windle... wondering what he'd look like with a beak.

How did that work? Was it just where the nose was...? But wasn't a beak a mouth? Then wouldn't it mean it stuck out on the face?

I almost couldn't imagine it as Windle paused in his writing to look up and smirk at me. "A trait I'm glad to not have inherited," he said.

I smiled back at him. "My father had paws. Or well, pads on his palm. I don't know if I'd have preferred that or not. They'd have been useful, but probably would have made it harder to blend in and wear gloves and stuff," I said.

"You'd not have needed gloves then, though," he pointed out.

I blinked and nodded at the obvious, and wondered why I'd never thought of that myself.

"Other than that most of my family had more fur too. All over them," I said.

Honestly I was glad I had not inherited the fur. It would have been terribly hard to blend in while traveling with Vim if I had.

"No fur anywhere?" Windle asked.

Frowning I glanced away from Root and to her father. He had sat up straight and had crossed his arms, as if to ponder something. He looked as if he was talking about something rather important, even though we were just making small talk.

"No? A little around my tail, I guess, but not enough to even speak of," I said.

He found that odd for some reason as he scratched at his chin. "I see."

"Why do you find that so weird?" I asked, unable to not.

"You don't smell. At all. Usually those with fur do, at least a little bit. I was just wondering if maybe it was your bloodline's ability. Ours is flight, or was, so I figured being a cat... a large predator one at that, implied that yours was the ability to not be smelled by those you'd deem prey. Though I really thought I had smelled you when you visited the first time, maybe I had been mistaken," Windle said.

I smiled at him. "Actually I've lost my scent, so I'm told. Like Vim," I said.

Windle blinked at that and sat forward, as if to study me... and maybe even try to smell me too.

"You're serious?" he asked.

I nodded. "Supposedly. I can still smell myself, actually, so I'm not sure yet if I believe it or not. But I've been told by a lot of people that I no longer have a scent. Though I don't know exactly when it happened," I said.

Windle said nothing as I returned my attention to Root. She was frowning at me, in a very peculiar way.

"Either she's hungry, or about to do you know what," I said as I stood.

"Ah. I'll take her then," Windle offered as he stood as well.

Although I'd not mind feeding her, or cleaning her, I still handed her off without reservation. She didn't even smile or make noises upon seeing her father as he took her, meaning my assumption had been correct.

Windle stepped around his desk and headed for the door. I was about to follow him out of his study, but before I could he gestured at the other door. The one he had pointed at earlier. "There's a shelf with scrolls on it. They're the older maps, if you'd like to check those too," Windle offered, and then he left the study... leaving me behind.

Standing still for a moment, I frowned at what had just happened. Had Windle wanted me to leave him be...? Or was he just... being his typical nice self? Likely the latter.

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Deciding it was an opportune moment I went ahead and opened the door. I found another small room, similar to the study, but this one only had a couple tables in it and the walls were lined with shelves. Two tables sat in the center, with an extra set of smaller shelves on the other side of them. All the shelves, and tables, made the small room feel cramped... and there were no chairs in here.

Entering the room, I noted the lack of windows. Either there were none at all, or they were being blocked by the shelves. I left the study door open, and approached the nearest table.

It was a square table, and indeed had a map laid upon it. It covered the whole table, and looked as if it was even fastened to it... or maybe nailed to it. There was nothing else upon the table, just the map, and it was stunningly detailed.

I quickly recognized the detail in the artwork, and realized it was very similar to the one Hands had given me. In fact, it was so similar it was almost frightening.

How had Hands drawn in such detail, in such a degree, and yet be able to do so again and again? If this really was the same map Hands had drawn for me, then that meant he had likely made far more than just these two. Did he have memory similar to my own, or had he just diligently copied the first one he had made over and over again for all of us?

I could paint well, at least so I sometimes liked to think, but I wasn't sure if I could draw such little details as well as this. It showed not just roads, forests and mountains... but cliffs, their angles, and the rivers had depth to them. One could tell which river was deeper than the others, thanks to how he had drawn them. It was more than just color and size, it was accomplished with shadows and angles.

But as fascinated as I was with the artwork, my eyes instead focused on the fancy writing of someone else. Someone who wasn't Hands.

Windle had scribbled all over the map. Sometimes so much so that it blocked, or ruined, the fancy artwork beneath the notes. But I knew Hands would not be offended. This was the purpose of this map after all... to allow someone to write down a census, or a path, for themselves or others.

Reaching out, I ever so gently touched the map. It felt the same as the one Hands had given me, though maybe a tad bit older. It felt drier, somehow, even though mine wasn't wet at all and dry too.

"Owl's Nest... Home," I read his small note that hovered on top of a large strangely shaped forest. One that had a hole in the center, a hole that had only a single large tree.

Windle had written the name, and then listed the names of him and his family. Root's name was even here, and one could tell it had been recently added. The names of his other children were more faded than Roots, and his name, and Lilly's, were a little more faded than even theirs.

Not far northwest was Twin Hills. It had everyone's name too, and also something very interesting.

A set of numbers. And not a number to represent how many members lived there.

"Two ninety-seven..." I whispered and wondered what it represented.

It was far too big to be population, even if one included the humans... maybe how long it has existed? Or possibly the distance there?

Two hundred and ninety seven what though? Some people used leagues. Others a sparrow's day's flight. Vim used his miles...

I tried to imagine going to Twin Hills. I'd gone there, and returned though not to here, before... so I had a rough idea of the distance.

Two hundred and ninety seven thousand paces. Three hundred thousand of Vim's steps.

Frowning gently, I realized it was likely not too far off. It would only take Vim and I a little over three days to get there. And that was with us not really rushing, just walking like usual. With us stopping to rest and even sleep, maybe at one of the towns between here and there.

Glancing over to Ruvindale, I hesitated for a moment as I read the number... and instead focused on the small note Windle had placed upon it.

Little marks were made next to every name. Every single one... but next to Crane's, there was now a new word. "Survived. Moved to Nevi," I read.

Although I had already known Crane had survived, of course, I still found it very... strangely relieving, to see it written upon such a map.

As if it was proof. Real proof, and not just words spoken by others.

"Notice anything odd?"

I jumped, my knee bumping the table as I turned to glare at Vim. He smiled apologetically at me as he stepped closer. "Sorry," he said.

"Jeez Vim... you're lucky I hadn't been writing or anything," I said, annoyed at him as I rubbed my knee.

My knee of course didn't really hurt. I'd not hit it that hard. But still!

"Sorry," he apologized again as he stepped up next to me, and looked down at the map alongside me.

I smiled at him, even though still a little upset with him. "Odd like what?" I asked.

"Hm... how long have you been looking at it?" he asked.

"A few moments. Are the numbers representing distance? To us?" I asked with a point to the numbers beneath Ruvindale. It was just a tad farther than Twin Hills from here.

"Yes. Though only the nearest locations are accurate. The rest are slight guesses, based off my own guesses mostly, or his own calculations. Honestly by the looks of it a few are rather off," he said.

"Looks of it...? You don't verify and check it for him?" I asked.

"Why would I?"

Because he was your friend. Or at least, the husband of your friend.

Instead of saying that though, I went ahead and started to scan the map... to find whatever he had said was odd about it.

There was obviously something odd about it... since he had brought it up, but I wasn't sure what it was yet.

I checked around us. I memorized the names, locations, and distances of some of the northern locations I'd not known about until just now. Sap's name was far north, almost to the edge of the map. She only had her name there, nothing more. It was near a bunch of snow-peaked mountains.

After checking out the north I scanned the coastline... and I noticed, strangely, that the coast was a different shape than I had thought it to be.

"I thought the coast was more... wavy, like this," I said as I gently slid my fingers along the map, to display how I had envisioned it all this time.

"Nope. This is what it looks like. Hands and his father were sticklers about these maps. They're more accurate than you can know," he said.

Huh... so it was kind of like a half eaten moon. Interesting.

"Are those islands?" I asked, pointing at the cluster of them to the south of the coast. Some went so far they touched the edge of the map.

"Yep. Some are huge, too. Bigger than they look on this map at least."

"Are those islands where they went? The other members who left?" I asked.

"No. That place is far, far away. Far beyond what this map shows, that way," he said with a point to the far corner of the western part of the map.

I hummed at that and decided to continue along my original path. The one I'd taken with Vim.

I found Tor's village. Then followed it to Telmik, and through a huge mountain range. I saw the smithy, the Clothed Woman's Sanctuary, and Lumen. Then I followed it downward, ignoring the Bell Church and other locations above Lumen.

The Armadillo's cave, as Windle called it. A bunch of rivers, one I knew I had met Roslyn and the pirates at. Secca, with Leval's name crossed out. And another location between Secca and Landi's Kingdom.

"Why didn't we stop there Vim?" I asked as I pointed at the small location called the Solid Rock.

"The two people there don't want me to visit unless they summon me. They're just a pair of old fish who like to be left alone," Vim said.

Oh... that's too bad.

Following the rest of the path, I was a little surprised at how few members, or locations, were noted between Landi's place and the Crypt. Just two, and they were both far out of the way.

"Why don't many of our members live down south here?" I asked with a point in that area.

"It's a harsh environment. And there are actually a couple, though Windle doesn't know about them," Vim said.

Ah. That made sense... though I wonder if that means there were many other locations not listed here in this region as well.

After I finished following the rest of our path back here, traveling through the Keep and Summit, I was a little surprised to see the many other locations near the western inland seas that Lumen rested upon. I had heard about a few of them, from Oplar and Vim, but hadn't realized there were so many. I counted a quick twelve just along the inland sea, and there were a few near it but not upon it.

"Well... other than there being more places than I thought, I don't see anything really odd Vim. What should I be looking for?" I asked as I continued to look.

"Hm...? Oh. I had just been teasing Renn. Sorry," Vim apologized as I slowly glanced at him.

Woops. I had misunderstood him then. Great.

Sighing softly, more at myself than him, I went back to the map. This time to retrace my journey through the Society... though this time without rushing, or feeling like I was missing something.

"This is actually one of the most complete maps there is. The Chronicler has one too, but now I doubt its validity," he said.

"Right..." I nodded as my eyes lingered on Lumen. Brom's name was crossed out, with a little mark upon it... and strangely so was Herra's.

And unlike all the other names where Windle had wrote where they had moved to, Herra's had simple been crossed out and marked. With the same symbol used for Brom.

"Vim... why is Herra's name crossed out?" I asked.

Vim didn't answer right away, and I didn't like what I found when I turned to look at him.

"I see. I'm sorry Renn, I thought you knew..."

My eyebrows met with each other as I glared at him and squeezed my hands. I was glad I had recently cut and filled my nails, else I may have drawn blood.

"Vim...?"

He nodded slowly. "On the way back to Lumen, delivering her family's gems, she got sick. She died not long after getting back. Likely from the same plague that we had encountered down south," he told me.

My eyes widened as my breathing increased, and I tried to believe what I was hearing.

"Herra's dead?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes... I'm sorry, Renn. I had learned about it from Oplar, so I had figured you had heard too."

I slowly shook my head. "I'd not heard. No..."

He nodded softly at me, and I was thankful for his gentle expression. He really did feel bad, even though it wasn't his fault.

Someone else really should have told me. Oplar especially. Vim and I have been so busy lately... so...

Taking a deep breath, I reached over and grabbed Vim's arm. More so his sleeve, as I thought about that strange woman.

We had traveled south. To meet her family. The family she had hated. At least on the surface.

"She's dead..." I whispered.

"Mhm."

How sad.

She had voted against me in Lumen. To not allow me to stay there... but she had never been rude. I had even almost considered her a type of friend, even. Just one I could visit, never linger near for long.

"I'm awful," I whispered.

"Why?"

"I'm not crying," I said. I felt like I should be, yet I could tell no tears were coming.

"Well... you two weren't that close were you? Not like Merit, or anything," he said.

I nodded slowly. He was right. We had traveled together, and been friendly, but not close. Not like that.

"Still... I had felt for her. Her situation with her family, and all. I... would she have lived, Vim? Had we returned to Lumen with her? Had she not traveled alone?" I asked.

"I can't say Renn. Diseases are one thing I can't kill on sight. Though... I'll admit, had I been around her, I may have been able to notice early enough to help her fight against it. As I had with you," he said.

I nodded. Yes. He had helped nurse me back to health when I had gotten sick too.

"But that's a simple what-if, Renn. She had not been like you. She had been older. Weaker."

I nodded again. "I know Vim... I just... hm..." I wasn't sure what to say.

Another death. One that seemed... so needless, somehow.

"It happens, Renn. The one thing that is constant, no matter who or what you are... death will find you. One way or another," he said.

"Mhm... I think I can cry now," I said as I stepped closer to him.

He didn't hesitate to lift the arm I clung to, as to let me wrap my arms around his waist. I didn't cry harshly, nor did I weep terribly... but I still clung to him all the same.

The few tears that came did so easily as Vim patted my back, like always he was willing to indulge my me and my emotions.

I didn't feel any shame in letting Vim indulge me. Nor did I feel any shame crying for Herra either.

It was the least I could do... since I knew her family may not shed any for her.

Everyone deserved at least a few tears, after all.

"Bad time to tell you Lamp's pregnant too?"

My tears instantly dried up as I looked up at Vim, shocked.

"What!"

## Chapter 352 Merit's Kingdom

The small raft rocked as the boatman pulled the oar, and then pushed it. He only had to do the action once to keep the raft up to speed.

I sat a few feet from him, and although the large lake we were on was calm and relatively empty it wasn't very quiet. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of birds flying overhead and littered all over the lake. Floating and swimming around, squawking happily to one another.

Their numbers made sense, of course, since these lakes were one of the few sources of fresh water for hundreds of miles. But most of the birds were not desert or highland birds, like they should be. Most were either the type you found in the ocean, or damp wetlands that were over a thousand miles away.

The raft started to slow again, so the boatman rowed his oar once more. In doing so the raft picked up speed, causing some nearby birds to have to paddle away as we neared. One of them quaked at us, though it didn't look like a duck at all.

"So... may I ask, sir, are you one of them? The spirit folk?" the boatman asked as I studied the strange bird.

"Hm? Ah..." I looked away from the bird and nodded over my shoulder. "Yes, I suppose. I'm here to visit a friend," I said.

The older man frowned knowingly as he nodded. "I figured," he said gently.

"How'd you notice?" I asked. Even at places like here, where humans and non-humans lived together rather openly, no one usually realized who or what I was on a simple glance.

"When you got on the boat. It shifted oddly, and then settled instantly. As if you had weight, and then suddenly didn't," the man said as he rowed again.

Ah. I smiled and nodded, understanding what he meant.

I'd say he was very observant, but he's likely worked on this boat... or at least on these lakes, his whole life. He worked as a ferryman so was likely very used to the feeling of his boat shifting as people got into it. He was likely able to tell if one was used to boats and who wasn't.

Though it was funny he called this tiny raft a boat. It wasn't wrong, per-say, but still.

"Still I'm shocked you hired me! You spirit folk usually have your own methods getting to the city, don't usually hire us regular folk," he said, sounding a little happy about it. He sounded like he was looking forward to telling his family and friends about his strange customer later on.

"I like to surprise those I visit," I said gently, giving him my excuse for not using one of the ferries this place had that were only for non-humans. Off in the distance I saw one of them, a large several deck ship with huge fanned out wings, looking like bird tail feathers while unfurled.

It, like our little raft, was heading for the center of this massive lake. To the huge city in the middle of it.

"Well, I'm thankful for the business no matter the reason!" the man said happily.

Oh...? I noted the sincerity in his voice. He spoke as if he was somewhat struggling, and thus actually thankful for the work. Any work, it seemed.

Strange. This was not called Oasis just because it was an actual oasis. Merit and her people had made it a point to take care of all of their inhabitants. Not just the nonhuman ones, either. Last I had known there had been a monthly stipend to all residents, regardless of their status or what they did for work.

Maybe that stipend was over? Or maybe it was no longer enough to live off of? Though this man could simply be the type to not accept such welfare, his pride not allowing it, as well.

"Have there not been a lot of visitors lately?" I asked, wondering if maybe there was something wrong. Maybe knowing the state of the local economy, or the immigrants, would let me know more.

"Hm...? No more or less than usual, I think. The storm season's just finished up, so it'll pick up soon as the neighboring nations start needing food, like usual," the man said.

I nodded slowly. Right.

"Though there's been talk of banning entry to the Wevling folk. Not sure why, honestly, but I understand it."

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Wevling? The smaller nation to the south?

We had a few members there, so I wondered what was going on.

I frowned at him as I parsed his words. "If you understand it, why wouldn't you know why?" I asked. That made no sense.

"The Queen and them have to have a good reason. They'd not do it otherwise," he said simply.

Oh. Right.

I nodded slowly; it felt a little odd to hear such pure loyalty for Merit from such a man. But it was not a surprise either. Humans were usually either full supporters of their rulers, or hated them. Though he might just be saying that because I'm not a human.

"All's well, really. Lakes are healthy. The people happy. We just had a festival a little bit ago, too," the man continued to tell me about his home as we drew nearer to it.

The city did look fine. It was raised upward, having multiple levels. There were docks and boats all around its outer layers, and giant trees and plant life on its upper ones. It wasn't the only town here on the lakes, what with a few others being off in the distance, but it was the largest and where most of the residents of Merit's Oasis lived. It wasn't the largest kingdom in this region, by far, but it still held tens of thousands of residents last I heard.

Some of the boats docked at the city were obviously from afar. Coming from one of the surrounding nations, through the channels and rivers that connected to these lakes. I knew some of them were likely stuck here at the moment, since some of those rivers were currently dried up. I had passed through one of the larger ones on the way here, and had not needed to use a bridge or swim. There hadn't been a drop of water in it.

"Didn't you say the storm season just passed?" I asked, wondering why that river had been dried up already then.

"Aye. It had been a light one, honestly. Probably one of the lightest in a long time," he said.

I see. So the rains this year had been bad. That wouldn't bother this place much, what with these massive lakes as reservoirs, but it would upset the natural order of the nations around here. Many of them relied entirely on those rivers, and the few small lakes they themselves had.

A large hawk flew down and landed on the tip of the raft. Its large talons made noises as it turned and looked around, ignoring me and the man completely as it perched and studied its surroundings.

"What kind of spirit are you sir? If I may ask?" the man then asked, liking because of the bird. Maybe he thought I was a hawk too, because of it.

"No idea. I have no traits to speak of," I lied gently.

"Ah...! So it can happen to your kind too! Fascinating. I'd always wondered," he said as if it made perfect sense.

"Hm."

"Must be strange, but we normal folk have the same problem. I was an orphan myself, so I have no idea where I'm even from!" the man said as he rowed the boat.

"Think of it positively, that means our failures are our own. We don't get to blame others like all the rest do," I said lightly as I watched the hawk spread its wings and take to the sky.

The man laughed at that. "I'd not call that a positive, sir!"

I would.

As we neared the capital, the Oasis, I noted the hubbub on the docks we were nearing. A group of people were unloading one of the larger ships that were docked at it. It looked to be a bunch of barrels and boxes.

"Well, sir. Welcome to Oasis! Or welcome back, I suppose?" the boatman said as we slowly floated up to one of the smaller docks. On the other side of the large ship being unloaded.

"Thanks. I guess," I said with a sigh as I stood as to disembark.

I'd already paid the man, but I still went ahead and dug out a few more coins of the local currency.

I didn't outright pity him, or completely believe his faint attempt at crying poverty, but I did like the idea of possibly purchasing his loyalty a little. Not so much for me, but my fellow kind. Us non-humans.

"You already paid, sir!" the man noticed what I was doing as he grabbed the dock, as to steady the raft against it.

"I did. For the ferry. This is for the local news, thanks," I said as I reached over and handed him the handful of coins.

The man took them, with a look of odd worry as if he knew he shouldn't be taking them for such a silly reason, but I didn't give him further chance to argue. I stepped off the raft and onto the dock and nodded.

"Thanks again. May your lips never dry," I said, parting with him using the common phrase around here.

"You too sir!" the man shouted happily as I stepped away, and entered Merit's Kingdom.

I knew where I'd find her. Like the rest of our people she'd be up in the higher levels of the city, where the foliage was thickest. Like the proper queen she was, she lived up on high and looked down on those she ruled.

Though I'd hurry to her, since I was here on her request, I decided to take a small detour. I'd round the docks a little before heading straight to the center of the city. As to see the city, and its state.

It seemed fine on first glance. The waters were clean. The docks bustling. The people didn't seem upset or worse for wear...

But I knew full well appearances could be deceiving. Especially right now.

Half the world was at war, after all. And something told me even this tiny little oasis, hidden in the far corner of the world, was having its own troubles.

Even if that ferryman didn't notice, or care to speak it aloud.

Merit's letter requesting my aid was proof enough.

Chapter 353 Merit's Crown

"I swear Vim! He thinks he's so smooth! He had the gall to sneak into my room earlier, you should have seen his stupid smirk when I opened my bedroom door and found him naked on my bed!" Nasba continued to ramble about her love life.

She was leading me to Merit's chambers, and we were walking through the large stone hallway with walls of vines and flowers. The plants clinging to the stone walls and ceiling made it seem as if we were underground, under a thick rain forest, not in the center of a lake in the middle of a massive desert.

"He's not even a duck! Who does he think he is?" Nasba then said with a huff, her tail feathers flapping wildly in annoyance.

She sounded, and looked, utterly pissed off... but I could hear the truth hidden beneath it all. Or maybe I more so saw it. Was it the way her feathers were swaying? They were fluffed up, as if angry, but had that twitch of happiness that ducks got. The one where they wagged their tails, like a dog.

"He's not a duck?" I asked, unsure why that was such a big deal. To some it was, but I had not really thought Nasba to be one of them. She was one of Merit's closest friends, and had been involved in Merit's little Oasis from the beginning. There weren't many other ducks here, so I had always thought Nasba to be more open minded.

"Not at all! He's a fox! That stupid, handsome faced bastard even has a tail! It stinks, you know!" Nasba said angrily.

I smirked at that. Jeez she was barely hiding it at all, wasn't she?

"Some do say foxes stink," I agreed.

"They do! At least, he does. I swear, not even a long soak makes it any better," Nasba grumbled as her tail feathers flapped again.

Right. A long soak together, I bet.

How nice. If anything I was glad to hear it. It was just another point of proof that the Oasis was doing well, all things considered.

I had spent an hour or so walking around the city, namely the docks and outer layers where the common folk lived. Everything had looked relatively fine. The market stalls were full, but not so full that no one was buying anything. The people were smiling and healthy. A few had even offered to buy me dinner, inviting me to join their happy little lives for the small moment I had walked past them. Like always Merit's Oasis was friendly to outsiders.

And as far as I had seen, there were more non-humans than before too. I had seen almost a dozen while walking around, and I'd not recognized any of them. I had no names to any of their faces, though it had been obvious they had been members of the community. A few of them had been delegating work on a stairwell, one that led to the upper levels of the city. Community work, basically.

"When'd your little fox fiend arrive?" I asked, wondering if maybe I could get a little information out of her before she continued on her love struck tirade.

"Oh? A few years ago. He came with a group from a neighboring nation. He ended up staying here after realizing what we are, joining us. Though he claims it's only because of me, I know the truth! He just likes our water!" Nasba said as she pointed at me, as if I was the one she was upset with.

"I've always found your water a little stale," I admitted.

Nasba laughed at me. "Because it is!"

I shook my head at her as we neared a corner. One I knew led me to Merit's chambers.

I had helped build this place, after all. I didn't actually need a guide.

But I enjoyed hearing Nasba's latest news, even if I had to pick through her lovesick rambling to get any of it.

"Speaking of delegations... I've heard you plan to ban anyone from Wevling from entry," I said.

"Hm...? Oh. Yes. Maybe. They sent a delegation a little bit ago. Some of them are still here. They're being insufferable, they want us to subjugate them," Nasba said.

Subjugate...? "Them?" I asked.

"Something about a war, or famine. I don't know Vim... I'll be honest I've been very distracted lately," Nasba said with a sigh.

"By your fox? Understandable," I teased her.

She laughed at me as we rounded a corner, and approached the large door that looked too big even for Nasba to open. She opened it easily though, with one hand, as she turned to grin at me. "I know? Isn't it weird? A fox and a duck!" she told me.

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"Least you're not a hen?" I suggested as I stared past her shoulder to the dark room beyond her. It looked like a prison it was so dark.

Nasba's laugh and grin both disappeared as she went wide eyed at me. I paused half a moment, since she stood in the middle of the doorway and blocked my path, and then she barked out a happy laugh. "Vim!" she shouted a groan as she went on a laughing fit.

She stepped away, allowing me to enter Merit's bedroom. As Nasba continued laughing she stepped away from the door and went to a nearby wall. The dark room quickly became lit up as she opened windows and pulled back their curtains.

"Come on! Wake up!" Nasba yelled as she then walked over to the bed in the center of the room.

The bed was huge. Far too big for someone so tiny, to the point it was comical. There were dozens of massive pillows, each bigger than the one lying amongst them, all piled in a circle in the center of the bed. Nasba grabbed at the heavy blanket that lay upon it, pulling it off and away the bed with a little

more force than really needed. The blanket hit the large pillars around the bed, which held up a mighty canopy of vines and plants, wrapping around one of them in the process.

A tiny groan of a complaint came from the bundle of pillows and other blankets as Nasba crawled onto the bed as to get to the center.

"Get up you! Come on! You have work to do!" Nasba shouted at her friend, and queen, as she rummaged around the pillows looking for the tiny monarch.

I smiled at the two as Nasba found Merit. I watched as Nasba crawled back off the bed, pulling Merit by an ankle. She went so far as to fully drag Merit off the bed, to the point she fell off the bed and onto the ground.

Although there were large rugs all around the bed, Merit still fell with a hard thunk as she landed face first on the ground. Merit let out a pained groan as Nasba brushed herself off as she stepped away from the bed and Merit.

"Really now. Get up already! You're a queen now, start acting like one!" Nasba shouted at her friend as she walked away from the collapsed Merit on the floor. She paid her no heed, even though Merit wasn't moving and wasn't even properly dressed. She had a thin nightgown on, which had fallen and rolled upward in her fall and was revealing her backside in full. Nasba didn't seem to care at all as she walked over to one of the corners of the bedroom, to one of the large dressers.

"She's been a queen for years Nasba. If she hasn't adapted yet, she won't ever," I said gently as I kindly looked away, to stare out one of the nearby windows Nasba had recently opened.

One should be modest in front of royalty, after all.

"Oh shush...!" Merit finally finished waking up, groaning as she pushed herself to her feet.

As she stood and Nasba rummaged in the dresser, I noted a nearby table. One that had a bunch of cups and other stuff on it, a mess really.

Her crown was amidst the mess. A napkin was even stuck on one of its many little arches. The sight of it so haphazardly sitting amongst the mess made me smile.

Stepping over to the table as Nasba helped Merit get dressed, I cleaned the crown of the things clinging to it and lifted it up. It was a closed crown, but the inside piece was a soft silk. I'd fashioned it to be a crown that would not get her looked down upon by neighboring royalty, but still retain a semblance of humility and her purpose. It was more akin to what a princess or duchess would wear in other nations, not the actual monarch, but it was adorned with special jewelry. The type that I knew made them seethe with jealousy when they saw it.

A part of the reason I had made it so was simply her size. Merit was a tiny thing, and making her a massive crown that was accustomed and expected to be worn by rulers would have been funny. She would have likely taken offense if I had made her one of those towering things. Some of the rulers in the northern nations had crowns nearly half her size for crying out loud.

"I don't need you to wipe my butt!" Merit growled.

"You do when you're dirty!" Nasba shouted back, which made me frown and glance at them. Nasba was in fact wiping Merit with a cloth, but not her ass. She was just wiping her shoulders.

"Why are you so filthy anyway? Does that mean your bed is all nasty?" I asked as I stepped over towards them and the bed. Her room didn't smell bad, really. Though the plants helped, they were mostly what I could smell at the moment.

"What...? No? She's just a picky bird," Merit complained as Nasba went to wiping Merit's face with the cloth. Merit made noises as Nasba did so, as if she were Merit's mother and preparing the girl for school or something.

The thought was a funny one, but I kept it to myself as Nasba finished and then went to give Merit her last layer of clothes. A blue dress of silk that was fashionable and proper. One she could wear even outside and not be found odd, or not properly dressed.

"Don't smirk at me like that. You think I want her to do this? She does it no matter how much I complain," Merit said stiffly as she glared at me.

I shrugged as I waited for Nasba to finish, and once she stepped away with a smile... seemingly content that Merit was now prim and proper and ready to face the day, I went ahead and placed her crown upon her head.

Unlike before, the crown settled easily. It didn't shift or fall off to her chin, thankfully.

Merit glared at me as I moved the crown a tad, a little to the left. Although Nasba had cleaned her up, her hair was still somewhat rough. She needed to comb it.

"Good morning Merit," I said in greeting.

"Good? You call this good?" Merit asked as she suddenly yawned. It was a mighty one, one that made her reach up to cover her mouth if a little slovenly. As she did her crown shifted, tumbling off her head and down her back. Before it landed on the rug, Nasba caught it. She sighed in a way that told me she had fully expected it.

"See? You don't put her crown on until after her morning drink," Nasba chastised me by waving her crown at me.

How was I supposed to have known that?

Chapter 354 An Oasis of Problems

Walking alongside Merit, I stared out at the world around us.

We were on the roof of her castle, at the highest point in her Oasis. From here we could see nearly the whole city around us, and the lake beyond. I could even make out the distant cities and villages on the other lakes nearby, though they were small specks in the distance.

"I can't give you months Merit. I really shouldn't even be giving you the one," I admitted to her.

"I figured. That's why I asked for six. I knew that stupid fat church girl would cut however long I asked for, no matter the number, so I asked for a lot more on purpose. Honestly I might not even need you this whole month," Merit said as she approached a door. One of the few on this terrace-like rooftop. It led to a small room with a few small windows, and I knew within would be tools.

Gardening tools.

She opened the door, and I noted the smell of metal and dirt within as she entered. The door, and the room, were tiny. Too tiny. It had been made for her and only her, and thus was half the size it should have been. I could enter, but would have to crouch to do so. It was as if it was some kind of kids play pen or something.

Merit wasn't in the room long and emerged with a bucket full of gardening supplies. Even a pair of gloves, though she wasn't wearing them. They hung on the pail, and by the looks of it had been doing so for years.

"I'm glad you've become so versed in politics," I said, praising the small woman as she then walked to the center of the roof.

Hundreds of plants, of all species, littered the roof. Some did so in small planters, while others were in recessed divots in the ground. There were also little aqueduct like funnels and paths all over, that were feeding all of the plants. It made the roof gleam a little, thanks to the high desert sun.

"You say that, yet I feel as if I don't know anything about politics at all anymore. Half of the emissaries nowadays speak in riddles it almost feels like," Merit said as she placed her little pail down near a large flower, one nearly as tall as she. It hadn't bloomed yet. It was just a large bud. A peculiar yellow one that I didn't recognize.

"That's probably just your attitude. You've finally reached the same point most monarchs do at some point in their rule," I said as I watched her study the flower, and then reach for a small pair of scissor like clippers.

"What's that?" Merit asked as she clipped a tiny leaf about half way up the flower. It didn't get to drop to the soil below, she caught it and put it into the bucket and then went to cut off another.

While half kneeling on the ground, Merit continued to prune the flower. In doing so, strangely enough, she looked even more royal than ever before. It almost made her even seem older, as if she didn't look like a snot-nosed brat.

"The point the burden becomes something they don't value anymore," I said gently.

Merit paused mid-clip of a tiny leaf, and glanced at me. "Are you saying I don't seem interested in my kingdom anymore?" she asked, a little worriedly it seemed.

"Not at all. I was honestly just making a small jest. By the way, at the moment right now you look very much the part Merit. I don't think I've ever seen you so queenly, other than when you had cut that woman's head off," I said.

Her face contorted a moment, and then she looked away. I tried not to notice the blush that had almost formed as she did so.

Great. Now I wanted to change the subject.

"I called you here for two reasons, Vim," Merit then said, likely also hoping to change the subject.

Thankful for it, I nodded. "Yeah?"

"I... I don't have proof yet of the first thing, so I'll bring up the second thing first," she said as she paused a moment and looked up at me.

"Hm?" What'd that mean?

"Another war is headed our way. At least, I think so. The southern nation of Wevling sent a group of ambassadors a couple months ago. Before the storm season," she said.

I nodded. "That tiny coastal nation? I'm sure we can handle that in a month," I agreed with her. Maybe not even a month. They only had a few cities, like Merit did.

"What...? No. Or well, yes. Maybe. Actually I think one of the women they sent is a saint. I want you to prove it, if you can," Merit said.

Hm...? "Sending saints as emissaries isn't too unique, though stupid on their part. Maybe they did it because we're a nonhuman nation?" I wondered. Saints were becoming very rare, very quickly. It was odd they'd risk one so haphazardly.

"We're?" Merit asked angrily.

Ah. Right.

"I do recall you mentioned I was always welcomed here, society or no," I said with a smirk at her.

She huffed at me and after a tiny glare turned away. She stood, grabbing her pail and moving to the next patch of dirt. This time it was a bench of small vine-like shrubs. Some type of berries maybe.

"You've been so snarky lately with me. Is it because I'm a queen now, Vim? Do you hate royalty as much as you do everything else?" Merit asked with an odd tone.

I blinked at her strange question, and wondered if I had been rude just now. I hadn't felt like I had been, in fact I had felt almost as if I had been talking to a friend. Almost like how I had just been talking to Miss Beak a few days ago.

"Why would you ask me that Merit...? Was I being rude just now?" I asked, wondering if I hadn't noticed at all.

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"You talk to me like you do Celine now," she said softly.

Shifting a little, I made sure not to break Merit's garden rooftop as I stared down at her. She was already messing with the little shrubs, but was doing so with a rather solemn look. One that almost made her appear depressed.

Merit was usually angry. Not depressed.

Damn.

Ever since I found out she had been pining for me I had been trying to treat her as normal as possible. To not make it awkward.

Seemed I wasn't doing a very good job at all.

"You should know me better than that, Merit. If I truly hated you, I'd not joke around with you. Though I do admit I'm probably being a little... rude, I suppose. But I've had a lot on my plate recently, and I'll be honest it feels weird to see you so dolled up. I miss you looking feral, I think," I said honestly.

Merit tilted her head, and I noticed she had tried to stare at her own reflection in her trimmers.  
"Feral...?" she mumbled.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I don't like royalty...? I mean, I don't, but is it that bad? Wasn't I friends with some of them back in the day?" I wondered to myself.

Merit sighed at me. "Okay Vim. I get it," she said stiffly.

"I hope so, because I don't."

She finally laughed. A tiny little chuckle, but a laugh all the same.

I smiled warmly at the sound, and sight of it.

That was the first laugh I'd gotten out of her since arriving. And it's been almost an hour or so since Nasba and I had woken her up.

"Alright...! I get it! Now stop making me feel weird or I'll stab you in a very soft spot with these!" Merit said as she held up her trimmers threateningly.

"Please don't," I said seriously.

"Hm... you're probably right. If I did that you'd not be able to help me with an heir would you?" Merit said as she nodded and frowned.

A tad stunned by the statement, I took a small breath and shook my head. "I'm sure I could find some tadpoles for you, what with these likes. Shouldn't be too hard," I said.

It was Merit's turn to be stunned, but like me she got over it quickly. She huffed at me.

"The woman might not be a saint, I just have a strange suspicion. Her eyes don't glow, but she knew I was a fish. Although one could argue a lot of people know, since those like Nasba don't necessarily keep it much a secret, it seemed odd the way she had brought it up. The land she's from, Wevling, is a nation that believes in some stone spirit. Probably some kind of monarch back in the day, they all carry little stones that they pray to. It's weird," Merit said, returning us to a more normal topic.

"I'll find out for you. What do you want me to do if she is one?" I asked.

"If she is a saint then she's a spy. Their religion, that rock thing, despises saints. They believe their god was killed by one, so all saints are banished from their lands," Merit said as she stopped messing with the little shrubs and stood up to look up at me.

"I'm starting to like these stone believers," I said.

She smirked at me. "Figured you would. If she is a saint I can use her as a bargaining chip during negotiations. They want me to rule over them, but they want my protection, food and water, but don't want to really give me much more than some coins. Ten percent of their yearly taxes," Merit said.

"To them that's a hefty and very normal offer, Merit. They're humans. They see money as valuable," I said.

She nodded. "I know. But I'd rather have access to their port. It's not very big, but a lot of the banned goods finds their way through it, so I'd like to put my own people to task on keeping the waters clear of slaves and drugs," Merit said.

Hm. How proper. She really did make a good queen, even if she didn't want to admit it.

"Nothing wrong with making more friends, Merit. I'm glad you're entertaining it at least," I said.

"I don't need friends, Vim. These people out here are savages. They sell their own children into war, and then try to pay off their crimes with trinkets and coin. All they do is bring war and orphans."

I smiled at her and nodded. Yes, the people at the far corners were a little more primitive than others still. Mostly thanks to their belief systems. They didn't see the act of selling their children as anything more than selling their own property.

And Merit didn't take kindly to those who abused their own. Particularly their children.

"Either way, it'd be good for you to have a few more allies out here Merit. Though you don't like to claim allegiance to the Society, you still draw from its stores. Not that there's anything wrong with it, but if a day comes you need aid swiftly you may find yourself struggling because of it. It can take months for you to request help, and then receive it, even if hurried," I said.

She nodded softly. "I know, Vim. I know."

I sighed at her, since I hadn't meant to make her feel sad.

"And? This other request?" I asked. She had mentioned another.

Merit shifted, her eyes danced a bit as if she was trying to remember what I was talking about... and then she sighed and nodded. "Don't laugh at me, okay?" she then said.

My eye twitched, and I spent half a moment fearing what she was about to ask... but calmed down a bit once I realized she had already made a comment about asking me for a child. She'd not attempt the same thing twice so quickly, she wasn't the type to do so.

Merit had been serious in her attempt to woe me, these last few hundred years, but she had a strange perspective of romance and relationships. Plus she had a lot of strange pride, in strange places. She'd likely not try again in such a way during my visit here. She always tried once, maybe twice, but never more.

I nodded at her as her eyes focused on my own. She was tired of waiting for an answer.

"I'll not laugh," I promised.

Hopefully.

"Really? Everyone else has. They think I'm crazy," she said.

Oh...? So it definitely wasn't about me, then. They'd not laugh at her over my lack of reciprocating her feelings. They pitied her over it, and everyone here was far too kind to tease her in such a way. Not even Nasba would.

"You're many things Merit, but you're not insane," I told her gently.

"Thanks. You might regret saying that soon, though," she said.

"Now I'm looking forward to this. Go on then," I said with a small gesture.

Merit took a deep breath and sighed. She shrugged her tiny shoulders, and then shook her head. "I think a god recently made itself at home nearby."

The world went still.

There were no clouds in the sky, but if there had been they would have frozen in place. The soft swaying of the leaves and plant life around us went still, and the water flowing through the tiny aqueducts in the roof stopped flowing as if frozen.

Merit noticed instantly. She stood up straighter, looking around in a panic... as I closed my eyes and took a small breath.

Gulping gently, I was thankful that not only did the world resume around us... but nothing had broken either. For a few moments there I had half expected to utterly destroy not just her little garden here on the roof, but possibly the whole castle... maybe even the whole city.

Luckily the world was safe, for now, as Merit's eyes returned to my own.

"Vim...?" she asked worriedly.

"Let's hope you are insane, Merit. Otherwise you and your kingdom are in danger. Danger not even I can protect you from," I said softly.

Merit's tiny hands clenched into fists, and she gulped worriedly.

Chapter 355 A Home, Unnatural

Impossible.

Yet. Not.

"You sure Vim?" Merit asked with an odd tone.

I didn't take my eyes off the house, afraid to do so, as I nodded.

"Yes. Go back Merit. Now."

"But..."

"Return to your Oasis, Merit. I'll not be able to protect you. Do what I told you, quickly," I told her again.

Merit groaned, but she must have finally heard the seriousness of the situation in my voice. She spun on a heel and ran off, running at full speed back to her lake.

Taking a deep breath, I felt a strange shiver run down my back.

How far were we from her kingdom? Twenty odd miles? Was it far enough?

It'll have to be.

I didn't have the luxury to wait for them to escape. Even if Merit only took her and her fellows, it'd take too long. It'd take them days to get far enough for it to make a difference, and even then it might not matter.

And I could not afford to wait. At all. It was a miracle the fool was still here... especially since Merit claimed they had arrived years ago.

How had I not noticed? How come it had taken this long for Merit to say something?

A part of me had wanted to yell at her, but I knew doing such a thing would have just made me an asshole.

It wasn't like Merit had been sure, after all. It was amazing she had even noticed the house was odd enough to be noteworthy as it was. If anything I should be praising her. If not for my own misgivings about it, I'd almost be willing to fulfill her recent request about an heir for this. If it was even possible.

Too bad for her, I suppose.

Still... how long has it been since I'd seen a god?

Before the Society. Before my return to these lands.

Before running off I had found that group of them. Alongside Miss Beak. I had genuinely thought them to be the last. They themselves had claimed themselves to be so.

But here before me was proof. Validation.

Terrible reality.

"How come...?" I wondered as I studied the house. How had I not found them until now? How come I came upon them in this way? As happy as I was that Merit had noticed, and had the mental wherewithal to let me know even on a hunch, it was ridiculous all the same.

Though in a way it was obvious the house was unique.

It was unmistakable.

At least to my eyes.

The wood was too flat. The stone cut too perfectly. The gleam of the windows, the glass they were made of... the shingles on the roof... the lights that glowed all around it; hanging on little lamps of black metal. Every piece of the house was made out of material not found in this world.

And that was before taking into account the lush gardens all around it. There were flowers, green grass, and even a tree with apples sprouting from it. And we were miles from the lakes. The rest of the area around here was dry as a bone. Decrepit, even. There were cracks in the earth, some wide enough someone like Merit could get stuck in them.

It was why Merit's kingdom was so lusted over. Why when we had founded it we had to deal with three separate invasions from the surrounding nations. They had been jealous, severely. Her lakes were a true oasis in a desert constantly in drought. And even she had to be careful sometimes with her lake's water volume during the long streaks of lack of rain.

There were of course other houses out in the middle of the desert. People were sometimes desperate, or didn't know any life other than the one they had been born to. Some lived off as little water as the cacti and desert plants out here did. But I'd never seen one so perfect, so lush, so...

Out of place.

The house was resting on the edge of a plateau. I wasn't sure what it was overlooking, but I knew it wasn't a lake or river.

It looked... small, really. Maybe only two or three rooms big at most. Just a house. A home. If not for its location and the stuff it was made out of, and the out of place gardens, it would likely be something I'd not even notice. Something Merit wouldn't have deigned to notice either.

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Just a common house out in the world, hidden away from most onlookers. A place of comfort. A hearth.

Yet I felt no comfort at the sight of it.

I'd rather be facing down untold armies back in the north than this.

There was a monster inside of that quaint little home, after all.

And not one of the fake ones made as their pets, either.

I squinted at the sight of the glow in the air around the building. Something akin to a desert's mirage, the shimmering of hot air, was all around the house... but it was not from the heat. It wasn't from the angle I was looking upon it, or any other trick of light.

The very air was infused with divine power. To the point it was thick. As if hazy from a fog.

Risking a look away, I glanced behind me... and was glad to not see Merit. She had ran with all her might it had seemed. The world around me was bumpy, with rocks and hills, so it was likely she was just a mile or two away already and slightly out of sight. I didn't linger on the horizon though as I looked back at the house.

Okay.

Stepping forward, I braced myself as I approached the house.

What would it be? What kind of method would this one use to try and kill me?

Was it one I have faced before? Would I know how to handle it? Or will I need to spend the next many years figuring out how to handle them?

Hopefully the Society could survive without me. It just had to happen while we were in the middle of war.

My eyes narrowed as I chastised myself.

Ignore the current world Vim. Ignore it all.

You have a god to slay.

And distractions could not be allowed.

My heart thumped heavily in my chest as I neared the house.

Old instincts kicked in. A lifetime of hunting them took over, as I forgot the world around me and focused on the possibilities.

I kept looking all around, expecting something to happen without warning. A hand bursting out of the ground made of metal or stone. A flash of light from above. A screech that popped not just eardrums, but organs too. Maybe giant creatures, or sudden explosions of great heat and force.

Yet nothing came even as I drew closer... even as I reached the gardens and grass.

I paused at the edge of the first patch of grass. It swayed a little in the desert wind; the hot air didn't seem to even bother the blades as they flowed back and forth. They even seemed to have a slight gleam of moisture on them.

The grass was perfect. Each blade as flawless as the last. The line where the grass ended was cut so perfectly that not even I could have nurtured it to such exact form. The hard, dry, ground around the grass looked almost fake next the lush green.

Just beyond this patch of grass was a row of colorful flowers. Large things with many petals, with thick stems and leaves. Around them were small bushes, all formed and fashioned into little shapes. Circles, squares and more.

It looked like a garden found in a true castle. Not like Merit's, but one in the north. A place that needed dozens, if not hundreds, of servants constantly working on it all to keep it in such a perfect and healthy state.

This place was off-putting. Even if it had been in the center of a lush forest it would have seemed out of place. I didn't even have a name to give to most of the flowers. Why was that one glowing?

My upper lip twitched as I looked away from the gardens and at the house. Although the windows looked clear, and I could see within them, I saw no one beyond them. I saw something of a kitchen. Maybe a shelf. But nothing more.

Stepping forward, I entered the threshold... and suddenly felt cool.

My first breath of the divine infused air was one of refreshment. The world had immediately become cooler. There was now even a slight breeze, one that was gentle and nothing like the dry one I'd been feeling since entering this region. I felt as if I was now standing on one of the beaches to the north, but not so far north the breeze was freezing or damp.

I recognized the temperature. The moisture in the air. My lungs felt at home as I took another breath.

A perfect environment.

A mockery of the environment around me.

A mockery of the world.

Taking another step forward, I strode deeper into enemy territory as I approached the house. I paid no heed to where I walked, even though there were perfect paths laid before me. I cared not to stay on the dirt paths littered with colored stones, and just walked through the grass and flowers.

Usually I tried to not destroy or harm the environment around me, but that was only because I felt pity for the little lives I usually destroyed when doing so.

There was no life to pity here in this fake environment.

Reaching the house, I stood before a very unique door. It looked wooden, but I could tell it was some kind of metal. There was no peephole, or glass window, upon it... but I knew better.

A god did not need such human tools.

Turning my head a little, I steadied myself as I readied for pain.

This would hurt. It always did. Always will.

But it was the price I paid to do what I had to. What my parents had demanded of me.

About to kick the door in, I hesitated as I heard a sound. I blinked as a heavy lock clanked, and then the door slowly opened inward.

Going still, my mind whirled as I assessed my situation.

A man had opened the door. An old man. One with gray hair, at least what was left of it. He was balding.

He wore attire I was used to seeing upon a god. He seemed alone, at first glance. His house was as small inside as it had looked outside. I didn't sense anyone else as the man finished opening the door, and then smiled at me.

A tired smile.

"Hello Vim. I figured you'd show up, though I'm surprised it took you this long."

My stomach fell as I panicked.

I didn't know who he was. I'd never seen him before.

And I never forgot a god.

And a god he was.

"Well? Come on in."

A god was inviting me into his house.

I blinked as he turned, and gestured deeper into his home. A small table was now sitting in the center of it, though it was bare of anything.

With unsteady feet... I stepped forward and accepted his invitation.

Chapter 356 Carson

The door slowly shut behind me, though neither he nor I had pushed it closed.

It shut with a clank, and locked, as I watched what appeared to be a frail man slowly walk over to the table he had recently conjured from thin air.

"Do you like alcohol? Or tea? Sweets maybe?" the man asked as he turned to smile at me. I blinked at him, and suddenly the table was full of food and drinks.

Damn. I hadn't even noticed him move his fingers or hand. Was a lack of facing these bastards causing me to become sloppy? Get it together Vim.

I didn't answer the god as he looked away from me and grabbed one of the large pitchers. It was made of metal and the bottom half of it looked wet and iced, as if it had just been sitting in a chest of cold ice. It likely had been.

He had a cup in his other hand, one I'd not seen him grab, and he went to pouring the contents of the pitcher into the cup. The dark swirl that poured from it was unmistakable. It was one of those hard liquors I had never been able to figure out how to replicate, even after all these years.

"I've not drank in hundreds of years. So forgive me if I become a tad sentimental," the man then said as he raised the cup to me, as if in toast.

I shifted as I then watched the old god take a drink. He drank slowly, as if to savor the drink, and then once he was done he released a great sigh of relief.

"Ah... I've always wondered why I didn't desire this stuff like I used to. Especially when it still tastes so good," he said with half closed eyes.

What the hell was going on...?

Was he trying to trap me? Play out some kind of scheme...?

Did it matter...?

I slowly stepped forward and glanced around. At the house around me. It really was small, though it was as flawlessly made as the outside of it. Not a piece of wood had a sliver out of place. The light fixtures were fashioned of gold and silver, and the lights dimly glowing were doing so with electricity not oil, gas or with wicks. I heard the soft hum of divine power in the air, but it wasn't so thick that it made me nauseous.

If there was some kind of trap lying here in wait, it wasn't a big one. Great power made my hair stand up on edge, yet I felt somewhat normal.

The fact the house actually looked somewhat lived in made me even more wary. Why was his bed only half made? And why were there dirty plates and cups on the kitchen countertop, near the sink?

Was someone else here? A god could just snap their fingers and handle such slovenly problems... unless he was like some of the others who enjoyed such things, making them feel more normal because of them.

It was obvious this place was made by a god, for a god, but those tiny little oddities made me hesitate. There was even a fireplace with a tiny fire within it. A fire of divine power, burning without any fuel.

After another once over of the small house, I found a soft smile upon his face.

"You haven't aged a day."

"I don't remember you," I stated.

The god's smile turned into a small frown as he nodded. "I know. We've never officially met. But I have seen you, or rather been showed you, by others. Your image, even a few of your fights with some of our less fortunate friends. I suppose by now that had been over a thousand years ago..." the god said as he blinked a few times in thought.

Right. I knew what he spoke of. Very well.

"It has likely been that long since I'd last seen one of you," I admitted to him. There was no point in lying, since he likely knew already.

"Of that I have no doubt. If any of us are left anymore, they're like me. They'll not show themselves to you ever again... until they're ready, at least," he said as he glanced down to his cup.

It was empty. He had not drank quickly, but had drank it all earlier.

Half expecting him to refill it with a snap of his fingers, I was a little surprised when he actually reached over and grabbed the pitcher again. "You honestly look the same as you did back then... which is rather surprising, because I don't think I do!" he said a little happily, as if it was funny to him.

My eyes narrowed at him as he filled up his cup. "I've never met one of you who looks so frail and old either," I said.

He laughed at me, and it sounded unnatural. It was a youthful laugh, unlike his appearance, but I could hear the strain in it. As if his body was hurting him, like an actual old person's body would. "Most undoubtedly!" he agreed as he gestured at me with the cup.

As he finished laughing, and went to shaking his head at me, I noted the way he breathed. It was... somehow strained.

Was he sick...?

Could a god get sick?

Impossible...

"Don't mind if I drink, do you?" the god then asked.

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I blinked and frowned at him. What? Hadn't he just asked me that?

"No...?" I answered him, since I hadn't earlier. Maybe he had simply wanted me to give him a genuine and vocal answer.

He smiled and nodded, raised his cup to me in cheers and then took his second drink.

Shifting a little, I noted the floorboards beneath me didn't even creak or strain even though I knew I wasn't being careful at all. If I had been in any other house, I would have just shattered half the floor.

What the hell was going on...?

I tried to collect myself as he finished his drink again... and, just like last time, he sighed loudly in relief as he finished. He stared down at his once again empty cup, and had a sudden look of sadness on his face. As if he wasn't someone capable of snapping his fingers and filling a whole ocean with the stuff he was drinking if he wanted to.

For a few moments there was silence, and then he looked back up at me and gestured at the table. "You sure you don't want anything to eat or drink, Vim? I can make you anything you want, you know? Anything you desire," he offered.

"I do not want anything."

"Hm... here I thought you'd have attacked me on sight. Maybe, although appearance wise the same, you are different? Older? Wiser?" he asked.

"I'm only stunned for a moment. It will pass."

He grinned at me. "Because you're not sure what to make of me. Right... well, before your clarity returns, let me say a few things if you'll allow it," he said as he nodded.

He coughed and put the cup down. He waved a hand above the table, and I clenched up.

Here it came!

Yet the next moment came and went without any pain or shock. Instead... all that had happened was the table had changed a little. What had been a square table was now a lower one. A circular one, and there were now chairs before it. Larger chairs with cushions, ones to be sat in for extended periods.

There was now also less stuff on the table. The pitchers and cups remained, but the food was gone.

"Please," the god invited me to sit with him as he himself took one of the chairs. He sat slowly, as if he really did have old and weathered bones... as if exhausted. When he sat down he even slightly slumped forward, as if his aching back was contorted with an old injury.

Had he been standing oddly before? I had not noticed. Maybe he had.

For a small moment I debated my next action.

Should I just attack him? I wasn't foolish enough to believe he was actually frail. Even if his body was, that didn't make him any less dangerous. He only needed to snap his fingers or wave a hand to hurt me. To destroy me, almost. One didn't need youth for that.

But...

Glancing at the chair as the god reached for the pitcher once more, I felt strangely apprehensive.

I've talked to gods, of course. Though never for long. Never for good reason.

But as far as I could remember... not a one had ever invited me to converse like this.

Not in this way.

Not since what happened, at least.

I gulped and stepped forward, and knew I was likely going to regret it... but I pulled back the remaining chair and sat in it anyway.

"My name is Carson. I was much younger when I first heard of you. Since then I, amongst others, have been on the run. Had been, I suppose. In hiding. From you, of course, as I'm sure you know," Carson said with a small grin as he filled up his cup for a third time.

"Okay..." I whispered, unsure of what else to say to that.

"Not too long ago I noticed I had started... aging. And forgive me, Vim, because I don't remember when I first noticed, but my mind has too," Carson said with a point to his head.

"Impossible," I said flatly.

"Ah, so I had thought too. Regretfully I think it's actually been happening for a long time. I remember having suspicions a long time ago. Maybe even before I separated from all the rest. But it was only recently that I had begun to accept it, to admit it. Odds are I've known for a long time... and well..." Carson went quiet as he leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. He held his cup with both hands and slightly shrugged, as if trying to tell me it was what it was.

For a long moment we sat there in silence, as I stared at a god claiming to be dying of old age.

If this was his attempt at tricking me, or getting me to show mercy, he was probably one of the stupidest gods I'd ever met. And that was saying something, since I had met a few who were no wiser than a rock.

Yet...

There was something in the way he was staring at his cup. Something in his eyes... and...

About to say something, to ask a question, I was cut short as Carson gulped and lifted his full cup. "Would you like a glass, Vim?" he offered again.

I didn't allow even an eye to twitch as I turned him down. "No thank you."

He frowned, but nodded. "Don't mind if I do, do you? I gave it up all those years ago, since I no longer felt the need... but I soon expect to pass and I would really like one last glass before I do, if it's all right," he said as he lifted his glass, as if to ask for permission. Not in cheers.

"Go ahead," I said softly.

Carson gave me a gentle smile as he nodded, and then closed his eyes as to enjoy his third drink.

The god drank slower this time compared to the first two, and did so in several small gulps. He let out a small sigh of relief once he was finished, and he winced a little as he nodded. "Strange, Vim," he then said.

"What is...?" I asked. You were, obviously, but I wasn't going to say it aloud. I was afraid to, almost.

"I remember my first drink. It had burnt my throat. I had thought it would have burned going down like that time, since it's been so long since I'd had a drink. I wonder why it hadn't? Maybe it's the quality..." he asked.

By my parents he wasn't faking it at all, was he?

Stunned in silence, I watched as the god frowned at his now empty cup. He looked coherent, but it was very obvious now.

He didn't remember taking those earlier drinks. At all.

Unless he was faking it. But why? For what reason?

Was it an old injury...? Maybe some kind of power gone wrong? A few of the gods I had hunted back in the day had hurt themselves, or their fellows, on accident. Collateral damage from their strange and powerful abilities. But what could have caused this? Was something stuck in his brain or something?

Carson lowered his cup and glanced at the pitcher. I half expected him to ask, once again, if I'd like a drink with him... so before he did, I cleared my throat and shifted in my chair.

"What is it you want, Carson?" I asked carefully. Almost gently, in fact.

The god before me tilted his head and frowned at me. "Hm...? Didn't I tell you already?" he asked.

"No, not yet," I said softly. He was genuinely surprised. He really thought he had already.

Carson smiled. A sad one. One that somehow matched his, supposed, broken mind.

"I want to die, Vim. I'm hoping you'll help me do so."

Chapter 357 One Last Drink

"I'll be honest, Vim. I don't remember the name of it. But I do know it was made from where I'm from. The whole world imported it from us," Carson said as he poured me a cup of his liquor.

"I recognize the smell. Though I've only ever encountered it in your cabinets, and cups," I said honestly as he filled up my cup.

He grinned at me. "Have you now? So you've tasted it before? Good! Good," Carson seemed to really like that as he finished and sat back, and I stared down at my full cup.

The liquid was dark, yet somehow clear. It felt cool, as if it had ice in it, but there was no hint of any. The scent of it was strong, and itched a part of the back of my brain. One that made my left eye half close.

As I studied the liquor Carson filled his own glass again. "How wonderful. My first drink in forever, and I get to share it with someone special," he said to himself, excitedly.

I didn't correct him. This would be his fifth, at least since I'd entered the house. Something told me he had likely been drinking this stuff for nearly forever, maybe this whole time, and he's just... never noticed.

It almost made me want to not drink it, but I knew even if it was poisoned and corrupted it didn't matter. My body would not be harmed by it. My parents had made sure of that.

I lifted my cup once Carson had finished filling his. We cheered one another, and then both took a drink.

I kept my eyes open as I watched him over my cup, as I took a drink. Carson, like the times before, closed his eyes and indulged in his drink.

Unable to deny it, the drink was delicious. I felt the tiny sting, the burning sensation he had mentioned earlier, but it was nowhere near bad enough to bother me or ruin the taste or flavor. It was one I had indeed drunk before, so many years ago, and like before... I failed at recognizing the taste to it. There were several flavors mixed together, and all unique and pure. You would think I would be able to easily tell what it was made out of.

Wheat? Poppy? Potatoes? Sugarcane? Maybe berries, or something like them? Or maybe it was some mixture, with specific herbs and spices? Surely it was fermented, and likely within a barrel, but how? With what method? Was fire involved, or maybe some other distillation process?

Although I languished in its conundrum, and dedicated its taste once again to memory, I had no more answers to its origin or methodology than I did before sitting down.

Damn.

"Ah! Just as I remembered it, lovely," Carson said between a breath of relief as he placed his cool cup to his forehead, as if he had a hangover all of a sudden.

Maybe he did. He was broken in odd ways, so maybe even a god could suffer such a simple malady under such a condition.

"It is very good, yes," I admitted to him.

He smirked and nodded. "It is, isn't it?"

It was.

Carson sighed gently as he put his cup down onto the table and leaned back a bit in his chair. He gestured at me as I went to take another drink. I still had half a cup left.

"I've been here for a few years now, I think. I saw you from afar, in that lake town nearby. I had visited during a storm. I'd gone to save them from sinking, but saw you and panicked. I ran away... and then eventually found myself back here, waiting and hoping you'd come back one day," Carson then said.

Oh...?

"That was almost fifty years ago," I said, remembering that storm. It had been almost unnatural. I wonder if he himself had been the cause, somehow. Merit's kingdom had indeed almost sunk because of it. We had stopped it, but half the city had flooded even with my best efforts to stop such a thing from happening.

Carson shrugged. "Might have been."

Right. It didn't matter. Whether it was a year ago or a hundred, it genuinely didn't.

All that mattered was the here and now.

"So you came back," I said softly.

"I did."

"To here," I said.

He frowned and nodded. "For you."

"Why...?" I whispered.

Carson the god met my eyes and smiled at me, as if I was a child asking why the sun was hot.

"I know you can kill us."

"I can," I said.

"Would you?" he asked.

"I will."

Carson's smile grew a little, becoming gentler. "Yet you look troubled, Vim. Why?"

Shifting a little, the little bit of liquor in my cup swirled as I lowered it to the table. I placed the cup down, as if afraid of spilling its contents, and wondered how to respond to him.

I was troubled, wasn't I?

And it wasn't just because this was strange.

"Here I thought you were incapable of pity. If only they all knew," Carson then said.

My heart went cold.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Gone, Vim. They're all gone. If any are still alive, I don't know where they are, or even who they are anymore. I remember the others, being with them for what felt like an eternity, but the memories are all jumbled and hazy... I don't think I could even..." Carson's face contorted into worry, and maybe even

pain, as he pondered his own memories. I almost felt bad for him, but the sudden realization that I was pitying a god made me all the more callous.

I'll not pity him again.

Carson then turned, and waved his hand lazily at the area next to us. I took a small breath, to steady and steel myself, but once again he fooled me. Instead of an attack... the world simply shifted. Colors came and went, and the house around us faded a bit into shadows... as a woman appeared.

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For the tiniest moment I thought it was another god. Maybe one that had been here all along, that I hadn't sensed. But very quickly the reality of what I was seeing, what was happening, became clear as the woman's appearance shifted ever so slightly. As if a reflection on dirty water, she seemed almost see-through as she turned and smiled down at something.

And... unlike the fancy dress she wore, with all its fancy details, and the hat upon her head which I could make out every strand of straw... her face was as blank as an empty canvas.

She almost looked like an apparition, without a face. It was unnatural. Made me feel on guard, even though I knew she was just a memory. A vision. A play of light.

She wasn't really there next to us.

"See...? I can't even remember their faces. Or their voices. We should be able to hear her right now, talking to me," Carson said with an empty voice as we watched the woman stand up straighter and jiggle in a laugh. A hearty one, which very well should have been noisy and boisterous by the looks of it. She was even holding her stomach as she did.

The two of us watched the scene for a moment, until it went still. The faceless woman became solid for a brief moment, and then shattered into millions of tiny pieces as she and the scene around her faded into mist. As if turning into countless grains of sand, the image fell away and revealed the house around us once more.

Carson sighed as the memory disappeared, and turned to look at me once more. "I'll be honest, Vim. I had kind of hoped you would have simply killed me on sight. So that I'd not have to suffer. Or even know what was happening," he said.

I gulped, and suddenly wished to take a drink again.

Feeling thirsty for the first time in years, I shifted and held the god's gaze. His eyes looked weary. In pain. Depressed.

Humans had such eyes.

Non-humans had them even more often. It was the same eyes I'd seen many times. The ones who begged me for a mercy.

The plight of the ending.

Yet...

From a god...?

But no.

I knew the truth.

My father had proved it too.

"You really want to die," I whispered.

Carson slowly nodded. "I do."

"You've been waiting for me. To do the deed," I said, understandingly.

"For a long time," he added.

My stomach churned, as if the liquor wasn't sitting well. But I knew the truth. I was simply disgusted.

"Why are you hesitating, Vim? You used to kill us on sight," Carson asked, as if accusationally. He almost seemed to be trying to egg me on. As if begging, almost.

The cup in my grip shattered. I had squeezed too tightly, and Carson didn't even flinch. I felt a tiny pain in my left hand, where the cup had undoubtedly cut into me. But I ignored it, and the liquor that was now slowly making its way towards me along the table's top.

"I wish to die, Vim. My mind has failed me. My body following suit. I do not know how or why, but it is a fact and it is my hell. I am in a prison I cannot endure. And you my only hope to escape it," he asked of me.

Standing up, I knocked over my chair. It rattled on the ground as it fell, and Carson looked up as to keep our eyes connected. He didn't startle, or look worried or upset. The man still had that same pained smile on his face he had had most of our conversation.

He was serious. Completely serious.

A god was asking me for mercy. In a way I'd not ever experienced.

Glaring at the man, I wondered if this really was a trick. Maybe I was being fooled completely. Beyond even my own senses.

Surely... right?

But the liquor had not been weird. It had tasted fine, and I felt fine even after almost finishing that cup. He had not used his abilities upon me, yet. I felt no tug or pull on my body, soul, or mind. I had not been whisked away to a far corner of the world, or set aflame from within. The only things he's done so far is unsettle me, by acting oddly.

This man, this god, was my enemy.

The enemy of my parents.

And he was begging me to kill him.

Even if he didn't ask for it... even if it was all a ploy, it still needed to be done. It had to be done. Even if this was all some strange attempt at tricking me, it didn't matter. He still needed to die. And I would still have to kill him.

Especially if this wasn't a ploy at all, and he really was of failing mind. A god was a disaster. A danger to the world. One with a broken mind was even more-so. A terrible calamity even beyond their little creations.

With a wave of his hand he could wipe out Merit's Oasis. This whole area. The whole region.

Not far from here was Miss Beak. Past her were others. Well over a hundred members called these deserts home. He endangered them all with each breath.

He was dangerous. And if his mind really was broken, he was a danger to even himself.

And even he knew it.

"You're... sure about this?" I asked carefully, unsure of how else to address it.

"I've been waiting here for hundreds of years for this. I'm sure," he said with a nod.

I saw the surety. The relief, even.

But even more so... I saw the surety in his response.

He had said hundreds of years just now. Even though Merit's kingdom hadn't even been here that long.

His mind really was gone. Lost to time, maybe.

I had always known gods could be crazy.

Insane, even.

But not like this. Not like this at all.

It almost made him seem...

Normal.

Carson then flinched and shook his head. "Please... Vim, please. My own mind is not my own anymore... I just now was wondering who you were, I hadn't recognized you," Carson said stiffly, as if in pain.

Maybe he was.

Taking a small breath, I nodded.

Fine. I was going to kill him anyway.

May as well put an end to this craziness while I could.

Hell, I even had permission.

Stepping forward, I rounded the table and approached the god. I did so carefully, even though he didn't seem to even acknowledge I was drawing near. Then, right as I was about to reach out to grab him... he startled and raised a hand.

I almost shot forward, to stop him, but he flinched. "Wait..!"

Hesitating, I flinched as Carson glanced down to his cup. He grabbed at it, and then realized it was empty.

"I'd... like a drink first. One last time, before I die," he said slowly, as if speaking in a lull.

My eyes wavered as I saw, and heard, the serious plea in his voice. By my parents, this wasn't a ploy at all, was it?

Feeling strange beyond reason, I reached over and grabbed the pitcher. The one he'd been using the whole time.

He perked up as I picked the pitcher up, and went to fill his cup. He watched the liquor fill his cup and he grinned happily at it. "Why, Vim! How did you know what I like?" he asked happily.

"Just a hunch..." I whispered, unable to understand how his mind could really be so far gone. It was as if he couldn't even remember the last few minutes.

As I poured from the pitcher, I realized something rather interesting. Something I should have noticed even before, but used the strangeness of the situation as an excuse for not doing so.

The pitcher wasn't emptying. No matter how much I poured from it, it remained nearly full.

Once his cup was full, I lowered the pitcher back to the table... and noted the heaviness of it, and where the liquor was within the thing.

It was indeed nearly full. As if not a drop had been poured from it yet.

An infinite source of liquor.

Damnably creations.

Carson then lifted his cup to me, in cheers... and I realized I had just been rather rude.

Finding another cup, I quickly filled it up as well. I took the cup in hand, clanked it against his and nodded.

"To life," I said.

"To death."

I drank alongside him, and made sure this time to drink it in full. I didn't waste a drop.

Lowering my cup to the table, I watched as Carson finished his own cup... and then breathed a very familiar sigh of relief.

Fifth and final cup.

"Tastes as good as I remember it..." he mumbled... as I stepped forward, to let him pass before he forgot all about his drink again.

Chapter 358 A Gift, Given

My return to Merit's Oasis had been an odd one.

I had felt... strangely tired. Empty, maybe, even. To the point I had not even realized how far I had traveled until I was walking through Merit's castle, and heading for her chambers.

It was the middle of the night, which told me it had been a few hours since I had left Carson's house, but it felt as if I had just watched it fade away moments ago.

Another god dead. Maybe even one of the last ones. If not the very last one.

I should be happy. Proud. Feeling accomplished.

Instead I felt...

Blinking, I found myself in front of a door. Merit's door. To her bedroom.

Hadn't I just been walking through the lower floor hallways?

Probably.

I sighed at myself, shook my head a little, and collected myself.

The god was dead, Vim. It was time to return your focus to those you had promised to give it to.

Pushing the door open, I frowned as I found a dark room. One that was dark and quiet, but being used.

Honestly I wasn't sure if I had expected to find Merit in her room. But it was where my feet had taken me, and it seemed like usual my instincts were correct. I walked up to the large bed, and my frown severely deepened as I stared down at two naked women.

"You two aren't a thing, are you?" I asked seriously, as I stared at Nasba's ass. Her feathers usually covered it, so I usually didn't get to ever see it. She was now lying in a way that revealed it, with her feathers spread out away from her. It was better than I had thought it would have been.

Merit scoffed at me as she slowly sat up. She had been lying next to Nasba, curled up in a ball. "You're dumb, Vim," Merit said dryly.

"Well I mean..." I gestured lightly at her, and the duck that was snoring away. "Wait. Wasn't she just telling me about some fox? One she was courting or being courted by?" I asked.

"She is indeed seeing him. That's why she's here, she's upset with him. She came to drink and complain about him," Merit said as she crawled towards me.

Ah. That made a lot more sense.

"Then why are you naked too?" I asked.

"Are you seriously asking me that?" she asked with another scoff as she rolled off the bed and to the ground next to me.

"Right..." I admitted my stupid mistake.

Merit hated clothes.

Why had I forgotten such a thing...? My mind was all a mess, wasn't it?

"Well...? Was it a god, Vim?" Merit asked as she walked to the edge of the huge bed, to grab a nightgown.

"Hm..." I wasn't paying much attention to her as I stared at Nasba's naked body. Had she always been so sexy...? I liked how she had some feathers on her lower back that sat flushed with her body. They blended so well against her body, lying so flat, that it was as if they were tattoos or something. It was sexy as hell.

"Vim..." Merit groaned at me, and I blinked and glanced at her... and then down at the thing in my hand.

"Here," I stepped over to Merit, who now wore a nightgown, and handed her the pitcher.

"What?" Merit grumbled at me as she took it. It was a tad too big for her, so she grabbed it with both hands. Likely to make sure she didn't break it.

"Careful with it. As long as you don't break that, you'll have booze for the rest of your life," I said.

Merit tilted her head at me as I glanced again at Nasba. She had shifted, and I couldn't help but smirk at her. Had she just heard me say booze?

Had she always been a booze-hound? I really should start paying more attention to our members, particularly the ones who deserved it. Nasba wasn't the smartest, greatest, or strongest... but her loyalty to Merit was second to none. And I respected that, a lot more than I was willing to admit aloud.

"What the heck...?" Merit made an odd noise so I turned and found her pouring the liquor from the pitcher. Onto the floor. There was already a nice sized puddle at her feet, to the point she was actually standing in it.

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"Merit..." I groaned at her. Really, what was wrong with her? Maybe I wasn't the only one who had gone all crazy all of a sudden.

"It won't stop!" Merit said happily, finding it hilarious.

"I just told you what it was," I said with a huff as I crossed my arms at her.

Merit turned the pitcher upright, as to stop pouring it all over the floor. "Nasba! Get up!" she shouted at her friend.

"What...?" Nasba pushed herself up quickly, as if in shock, and glanced around.

"Go get some glasses. Quickly."

Nasba frowned at her queen, then blinked in realization and nodded. "Right...!" Nasba shot up out of bed, her tail feathers flapping loudly as she ran off.

I shook my head at her as she ignored me completely and ran out of the room.

"What about those glasses?" I asked. There were some on the table nearby.

"Those are dirty," Merit said simply.

Right. They had been drinking, she had said.

While I fought a god. Hilarious.

Well...

I flinched as I realized I really hadn't fought him. At all.

He had not fought back, after all. In fact I had spent more time checking his house and the contents of it than I had actually doing the deed.

I had killed gods quickly before. But somehow this one had seemed too quick.

Merit stepped out of her puddle and walked over to a different table. One that was more of a desk, really. It was near one of the windows, and had a bunch of small plants upon it. She moved some of the plants aside as she put the pitcher upon it. "I'll keep it in my vault. Nasba will drop it otherwise, given enough time," she said as she studied it.

"I would...!" Nasba declared happily as she came back. She had a large platter in her hands, littered with cups and another pitcher. A pitcher of water.

For me, or her headache I wonder?

I was wrong for both. She placed the platter on the desk next to Merit, and then went to clean up the mess her queen had made. She poured water down into the puddle and then went to clean it up with her tail feathers.

"Really Nasba?" I asked. Her own feathers?

"What...? They're easier to clean."

"Water rolls off duck feathers," I said.

"Not mine, not entirely. The feathers underneath absorb water, the top ones don't," she explained as she stepped back, to reveal the spot she had been cleaning. It was now dry, barring a few tiny specks gleaming in the dark, likely between the tiny cracks in the floor.

I shook my head at her, saying nothing more about it as she hurried back over to Merit. To take a now full cup.

"Usually I'd not pour you any Vim, but since it's unlimited... may as well," Merit said happily as she poured one for me too.

Half tempted to turn her offer down, I decided not to. Not just because she was right... but also because I was in the mood for a drink too.

While Nasba took a drink from her own cup, Merit startled as she turned to face me. She gave me an odd smile as she grabbed the cup meant for me and offered it to me.

"Mhm." I raised the cup to her, since Nasba hadn't seemed willing to toast with her.

Merit quickly lifted her own cup, and I nodded down at her as we both took a drink.

It of course tasted good, but suddenly I no longer wanted to find out how to re-create it. Any interest I had in it was long gone. And not because an indefinite source now existed.

"Hm... this is definitely different," Merit mumbled as she stared at the cup.

"It's great!" Nasba shouted happily, her feathers dancing in joy.

"Mhm," I only made a small grunt again as I took another drink. I only had a few gulps left, since the cups were tiny. Nasba had only brought cups fitting Merit's hand, not my own.

It'd be the last cup I'd ever drink of this stuff, so a part of me wanted to enjoy it, but another wanted to just dump it aside as Merit had been doing earlier.

The taste would just remind me. And I hated such reminders.

There was no pride in what I'd done.

No joy.

No accomplishments.

I had killed nothing but an ill man. An ailing soul lost and confused in his own mind.

"Where'd you get this Vim? It's great!" Nasba asked as she poured herself some more.

"I stole it from a god," I said.

Merit twitched mid-drink, and her eyes hardened as Nasba laughed. "Right! Sure!" she laughed, not believing me.

But that was fine. That was better than the truth.

Holding Merit's hard gaze, I tried to ignore the strange tear about to slide out of my eye. It didn't belong in my eye, or on my face. Even if I pitied him. Even if I felt horrible.

He was still my enemy.

A god. An enemy.

Enemy of the world, not just my parents.

But he hadn't been one.

Not any longer.

Time had broken him. Long before I had been able to.

And although our meeting had been abrupt, and strange beyond reason...

I felt as if I had killed a friend. Again.

Nasba's cup clanked as she placed it down a little roughly. I glanced at the pitcher near it, glad to see it didn't shift or rattle thanks to her rough handling, and then flinched as I realized what I'd just given them.

A god's toy was not to be so haphazardly handed away. What was I thinking?

Well, that was just it. I hadn't been. My mind had been numb.

"Could make this a whole export," Merit said happily as she finished her cup and went to fill it up again.

My eye twitched, which released the single tear, and I couldn't help but smirk and laugh.

Oh well.

Chapter 359 A Saintly Scheme

At least the rest of the world was normal.

Beneath me was a small, if noisy, crowd. Humans and non-humans alike were gathered, though the humans outnumbered the unnatural ten to one. They were all dressed nicely, and lively, as they mingled together. There was light music, food aplenty, and everyone had a glass of dark liquor in their hands.

Merit had wasted no time in showing off her new treasure. Though she had wisely hidden the pitcher itself, and had simply filled up several barrels worth before serving the party with them. She was tiny but wise.

Which was more than I could say for the saint I was watching.

The young saint was dressed in a rather modest dress, but it was some kind of plant based thing. It clung to her body in a way that made it sexy, almost too sexy even though the only skin she revealed was from the middle of her neck up.

Her eyes weren't glowing, and I felt no hum of energy from her, but that was because she was keeping it sealed. The only way a saint could hide the glow in their eyes was to detach themselves from their conduit. It was the same as holding ones breath, for a saint. It kept her abilities at bay, but it wasn't a comfortable experience. It was in all honesty a painful task. I was surprised someone so young was able to endure it.

She was tall for her age though. And had a very, almost unnoticeable, limp. Odds are she had suffered a terrible injury in her youth. But I had no time to pity the girl as I watched her slowly sneak her way through the crowd, heading for Merit who was talking to a group of people in the north side of the room.

The saint wasn't moving too quickly, nor did she seem to really be trying to sneak around. I just felt like she was, because I hated her. She was a saint, so I wanted to be angry with her.

I just had a god act human. Last thing I needed was for a saint to try and pull those same heartstrings. I'd not allow it.

The moment she tried to make me pity her, or something like it, I'd crush her skull. Remorse or no.

A tiny groan drew my attention away from the crowd beneath me, and I smiled as I watched a pair of hairy hands grab at the banister I was sitting up. The small mouse, barely any bigger than Merit, grunted as he got himself up and over the banister's edge and then he crawled towards me.

"Why Vim! What a lovely little spot! Though I fear difficult to reach, not one to come to with a full belly I fear!" the mouse said happily, his whiskers fluttering as he came over to sit next to me.

"Hello Klaus," I greeted the man as he huffed and sat down to my right. He bumped into me as he did, since there wasn't much room between the rafters here, but it felt just like a tiny kid so I wasn't bothered.

His floppy ears fluttered as he looked around and down at the party goers beneath us. "Why, oh my! Look at them all!" Klaus said excitedly, as if he hadn't ever realized just how many people got together in such a room for such parties.

I glanced him up and down as he examined the people beneath us, and was glad to see that he had no more missing parts. Over the years he's slowly lost pieces of himself, though has never been willing to tell me how or why. A part of his left ear was half gone. A tiny piece of his nose was missing. A few fingers, and I knew a few toes though I couldn't see them from the way he was sitting. He was sitting on his knees. And worst of all, from a few visits ago, he had lost a part of his tail. The large rodent tail sat behind him on the banister, and was no longer long enough to slide over the other edge even though it was only a few feet away.

"Who are we watching Vim?" Klaus asked seriously as his dark eyes scanned the crowd.

"That woman in the plant dress. The one with black hair, walking past Hafni," I said with a point at her.

"Ah! The one they say might be a saint," Klaus said knowingly as he nodded.

"She is one," I said.

"Oh my...! Yet still lives? You must have plans nefarious!" Klaus said with a tiny laugh.

"Well, Merit does," I admitted.

Klaus nodded knowingly as we watched the saint pause to talk to a pair of men. I didn't recognize them, but their attire told me they were from here. Maybe some kind of politicians or something. I knew I could inquire about them to Klaus and he'd know, but I didn't care to.

"I must say, there are far more of us than I thought! Why, are there forty-three of us? Not including those not here?" Klaus asked, and I smiled at the feel of his whiskers on my arm. They were twitching fiercely as he counted our members in the crowd.

"I believe there are sixty-eight of you here, currently," I said.

"Oh...? No, no! Sixty-nine, Vim! Sixty-nine!" Klaus then said loudly at me.

"Hm...?" I frowned at him, and noted the smirk hidden on his rodent-face.

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"A son! I've had a son, Vim! A real one!" he said happily, informing me of the news.

"Oh...! Congratulations Klaus! What do you mean by real...?" I asked carefully. Klaus was odd, being so non-human, but he wasn't that weird was he?

"A flesh and blood son! With a human body! Not even a snout or a tail! I've named him Pierre!" Klaus said excitedly.

Oh...!

Reaching over, I patted the tiny mouse on the back, gently. "Very well done. May I meet him?" I asked. If he had been born fully human, that meant he may pass quickly like one. So I should make sure to meet him at least once before he does.

"No! Not yet. Can't until the eyes are adjusted! Must stay in the dark, and not imprint!" Klaus said hurriedly, as if scared all of a sudden.

I see.

Although human in shape, there was a chance the boy still had a few features of his parents. Though... imprint...? Really? Did a mouse imprint?

Before I could allow any of my confusion or questions to take shape, Klaus then sighed and shook his head, as if in defeat. "Though... maybe not. I fear I may have underestimated him a little," Klaus said.

"How so?" I asked worriedly.

"The lad has no fur! Or claws or tail! In fact he looks so human, and acts it; I'd not believe he popped out of dear Clarini if I hadn't caught him myself!" Klause said.

I smirked at him. Funny.

"It happens, Klaus. A weird defect of our making. But even without tail and whiskers, he's still your son right?" I said gently, hoping to suggest a tiny imprint of my own.

"Rightly so! I shall make him a great hoarder! Like his father and fathers before him!" Klaus said proudly.

I nodded, glad to hear it.

Klaus crossed his arms, his claws scratching at his elbows a little noisily as he huffed. "I always worry the poor boy is freezing to death, what with no fur. I'm glad we live where it's warm now, not that nasty cold business up north," he said.

Right. He and his wife had come down from the inland seas. Hadn't there been others they came with...? Other rodents...? A sibling, maybe. Or another child. Couldn't remember.

"How old is the boy?" I asked as I looked back down and found the saint. She was now closer to Merit, and waving goodbye another young woman. She had just finished another conversation.

She really was heading for Merit. It set me on edge, but I knew it was likely just politics. She was supposed to be some kind of ambassador from that southern nation. Even if she was hiding her saintly self, she still had a job to do I assumed. Odds are she just wanted to talk to Merit about business. Maybe even about the new liquor flowing in everyone's cups.

"He's a few years old now. Still so tiny though, which worries me. Not even walking yet!" Klaus said.

Hm...? A few years old?

I frowned and nodded. That meant he, although human in appearance, was thick of blood.

Good. I was glad to hear it. Better to have his bloodlines strength and abilities than just to look like them.

If anything it would be better for him to be human, at least outwardly, nowadays. There weren't many places like this left anymore, where non-humans could live so freely without worry. Up north entire locations that had once been like this, living amongst the humans, were now in hiding.

"Well once he's ready let me meet the young rodent. I'll give him his first coin or something," I said.

Klaus laughed. "You would, wouldn't you! So kind of you!"

I was kind, sometimes.

The saint shifted, and I frowned as I watched her pick up another cup from a passing server. She now held two, one in each hand.

I'd assume she planned to hand it to Merit, as a conversation starter, but Merit had a large goblet in her hand already. One made of solid gold and littered with jewels. She had no need for another cup.

Maybe Merit wasn't her goal then...?

Then the saint's form shifted.

She paused, her back turned to the crowd, and from up here I noticed the way she had her head hung low. I couldn't see her face, or eyes, from here... but I knew they were likely firmly shut tight. She was using a power. I could see it in the air around her. It wasn't as obvious as Carson's interference, but it was as clear as day all the same to me.

And in her hands, I saw the liquids within the cups shimmer and glow.

"I got to go, Klaus. That saint is going to try and kill Merit," I said as I slid forward.

"Oh no!" Klaus clambered away as I slipped over the edge and fell to the ground.

It only took half a moment to land, and I did so haphazardly. The stone ground of the large room cracked and broke under my impact, and people screamed and shouted in a panic as they darted away. A few of the closest people to where I had landed even fell over, likely from the shock and the ground moving from under their feet.

I paid none of them any mind, and ran forward amidst the confusion. I darted past humans and non-humans alike, a few who even shouted out my name as I passed them.

Drinks fell and clattered. Plates and platters joined them. A woman fell over, her high-heels snapping in the process. She was barely caught by the man next to her, and another fell into a table. The mess it made as it fell distracted the others as I reached the saint. She had spun towards me, her glowing eyes going wide and white as I came to a stop right in front of her.

The modestly dressed saint looked even younger upon seeing me. Her face went almost as pale as her eyes were as I reached out and grabbed the cups in her hands.

Sure enough the liquor inside both of the cups was swirling and bubbling. As if boiling.

She had infused her divinity into the liquor. Merit would of course not have drank from them, what with the alcohol basically boiling and frothing, but that had obviously not been the intention. I knew what such liquid did when splashed onto skin. It would have melted Merit to the bone.

"Greetings, Miss Saint. My name is Vim," I introduced myself as I quickly chugged down the contents of one of the cups... and then quickly swallowed the rest of the other.

Taking a small breath as I felt the burning sensation of literal acid roll down my throat and into my stomach, I cracked my neck and tossed the cups away... and then grabbed the woman by the neck.

#### Chapter 360 A Pond Within A Lake

Somehow I had stayed my hand. Even though the saint had panicked upon my grabbing of her throat, and had attacked me by trying to infuse her power into my arm, I had kept myself in check and hadn't killed her. In fact I hadn't even bruised her. She had simply used so much of her power, so quickly, that she had passed out in exhaustion and had collapsed in my grip.

It was the better of the outcomes really. I had helped Merit secure the saint, and she was right now under the watchful eye of Merit's little legion. People who were not just strong enough to handle a captured saint, but also cruel enough too.

I wasn't honestly sure what Merit planned to do with her yet. She wanted to hand her off to the nation she had been tricking, as to further entice them to capitulate to her demands during negotiations... but such political schemes rarely went as planned.

"Petty politics," I mumbled.

Still, I didn't like how bothered I was about sparing the woman. A part of me knew it was because I still had the distasteful taste of an almost unjustly killing in my mouth thanks to that god, and that bothered me more than anything else.

Me. Feeling bad about killing a god.

What was the world coming to?

I sighed as I rounded a corner and heard voices. A few I even recognized.

Walking deeper into the hall, I slowed a little as I approached a large open room. One with a few tables. One of which was full, of not just citizens but members of the Society.

"Hey Vim!" Rogigo raised a cup in greeting. His feathers fanned upward as he half-stood, as if about to take flight. It was a funny thing to see since he, like all of the ducks, had no wings and hadn't for as long as I could remember.

"Rogigo, Azlo. Betty," I greeted the few faces I recognized, and was able to put names to. There were five of them sitting at the table, and all had drinks and food before them. But based on how there was a slight mess, and most of the plates had only scraps, they were all just finishing up.

Two of them were ducks. Betty was some kind of deer, with tiny little white horns poking out of her fluffy hair, and Azlo was a type of bear. He had come from the north, from that village that had recently fallen thanks to the feud with those boars. I wasn't sure what the last woman was, since I didn't see any obvious traits upon her, but I'd not mistake the way she eyeballed me. She was no human, based on the way she was staring at me with wide eyes.

"Where's your wife Azlo?" I asked. She was usually inseparable with him. In fact why were they here? Hadn't they just been at Telmik? I could have sworn I saw them there recently.

"Opli's pregnant Vim. I left her home," Azlo said with a huge grin.

I paused, a little stunned, and then gave the giant man a gentle smile. "Congratulations!" I said as I stepped over to him and grabbed his shoulder. He shyly laughed as he nodded, going a slight red in the face as I squeezed his shoulder.

He was a bear, and far stronger than anyone realized, but he was a pacifist. Thus so many saw him as a weak man, even though a giant of one.

"Don't congratulate him, Vim! He should be home tending to her, not here getting drunk!" Betty said loudly, pointing her cup at the bear.

"Aye, I agree with my drunk deer," Rogigo said with a laugh.

I shook my head at them as they all teased Azlo, but I could tell some of it was not in jest. A few seemed rather upset with him over it.

"Ahem..." the woman I couldn't place, name or species, slowly stood from the table, and the rest of the table realized they had forgotten her.

"Ah! Vim, meet our newest member. A rock eater!" Rogigo said loudly, laughing as his tail feathers flapped and slapped the ground behind him.

"She doesn't eat rocks, you doofus! Ant eater! How many times do you have to be told before it settles in your ant-sized brain?" Betty shouted angrily at the duck.

"Greetings. My name is Vim. I'm the Society's Protector," I said in greeting as I held my hand out to the woman. The ant eater, it seemed.

Her eyes narrowed as she took my hand, and she gave me a strange smile. One that looked off, for some reason, then she opened her mouth and spoke and revealed why. "Nice to meet you, Vims. My name is Antly," she said, slurring a slight bit thanks to a rather obviously long tongue. It had slipped out a tad as she spoke, which made me wonder if it wasn't just long but her mouth was ill-shaped for it.

Wasn't there another anteater in the Society...? Not here, or in the north, but...

Yes. Gary. Did he have a slight lisp too? I couldn't remember.

"Antly. Welcome. If they haven't explained much, know that if you ever need anything simply reach out and let me know. No matter how small and insignificant you think it may be," I said.

"Oh...? Can I asks a favor right now then?" Antly asked as our hands separated.

I nodded, and ignored the strange grins at the table next to us.

"I'm told there's another like me. A Gary. Where is he?" she asked with a hopeful, if not bashful, smile.

I smirked at her and nodded. "I just thought of him. I think he's north of here, where the desert meets the tropical forests. I'll get you two in contact if you'd like," I said.

She nodded quickly. "Yes! Please!"

Right.

"Wish it was that easy for me," Betty said with a sigh.

"Don't be jealous deer, I'll hold you if you want," Rigogo said.

Betty ignored him as she swirled her cup a little. It didn't seem to be full of the liquor from that pitcher, but instead some kind of lighter wine. "Meet any deers looking for a wife lately, Vim?" she asked me as Antly awkwardly sat back down at the table.

"Actually I have. A man named Elk up north, though you might argue he's not exactly a deer... being an elk and all," I said, trying my best to not make it awkward as the table stared at me with utter interest.

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"What's an elk?" Antly whispered to Azlo, as Betty quickly stood up, knocking over her chair.

"You're kidding! Where?" Betty asked loudly, suddenly sobering up based on how her eyes focused.

"Far north. Where it snows nearly the whole year. He spends his days cutting down trees," I said.

Betty blinked, and went into thought. "Is he a new member?" she asked, telling me she had just tried to remember him and his name. She hadn't been able to.

"He is. He joined with his family, a bunch of other elks and deers. A few humans too. He seems to be a kind man... he helped me build a bridge a few months ago," I said.

"A bridge?" Azlo asked, and I wanted to sigh. I really didn't want to get into details about the wars at the moment.

Azlo, like his wife, were heavily involved in them. He was likely here for that reason. To check on the Oasis and the members around them. He and his wife were always running off to investigate, take census, and deliver news. Lately though it's felt more like they've been mail carriers more than anything else.

"Well, if you'd like Betty once I'm done here you can come back with me to head back north. I won't be able to take you much farther than Telmik, but by then you'll be mostly there if you'd like to go meet him," I said, offering Betty the opportunity and also changing topics a bit.

"Just ignored me..." Azlo grumbled softly, and I ignored him again as Betty quickly nodded.

"When are you leaving?" she asked.

"Merit has me for a month. Give or take," I said.

"I'll be ready! Don't leave without me okay? I swear if he gets taken by someone else I'll blame you!" Betty said as she slowly sat back down.

I frowned at her but nodded.

"There you are! Come on Vim, Merit wants you!"

I turned to see Nasba. Her feathers were all raised up, as if agitated. She had likely been running around looking for me.

"You bet she does," Rigogo said with a snicker.

The table all laughed and snickered, so I shook my head and stepped away from them. They were lucky it was obvious most of them had been drinking, though maybe not. Nasba's face was furrowed in disgust as she glared at the table as I approached her.

"Let's go, Nasba," I said gently to her as the table continued to giggle as they went to teasing Betty instead, about how she was just as thirsty as Merit.

"Hmph." Nasba's tail feathers folded up as she turned and stepped away. I followed her out of the room and into the hallway, as we left the noisy group behind.

"I assume this is about the saint?" I asked. It'd only been a few hours since I'd handed her off to Merit and the rest.

"They tease her Vim. Over something she can't control. Something that hurts her so deeply she weeps in her sleep. It's cruel," Nasba said stiffly, her back to me.

Wincing, I nodded. Right. And I was the one who enabled that hurt.

"They'd been teasing each other before you arrived Nasba. About the same thing, basically. Though I do hear you, fully. Some of our people can be reckless with their off-handed comments," I said. We'd lost many over the years from such things. Half the time you don't even realize who you lost until years passed and you wonder where certain people went.

"They don't tease her within earshot, Vim. They know better. But it still hurts to hear it, and she still knows they do," Nasba said softly, now sounding sad more than upset.

"Monarchs are always ridiculed Nasba. If her love life is the worst of it, then she's doing a good job," I said.

"And you. Callous as a cactus. Would it kill you to just sleep with her once or twice? What harm would it do?" Nasba asked as she came to a stop.

Great. This conversation again.

"The harm would be far worse than not doing so, Nasba. We've talked about this. I've seen it before. You think she feels pain now? You have no idea the pain she'll feel when she then knows exactly what she won't and can't have, after experiencing it. Better to never had than to have lost it," I explained.

"Says you. Not everyone is like you Vim, able to endure the way you do. Why not just give her a small moment of your eternal life? Where's the harm in that?" Nasba asked, unbothered by what I'd just said.

"Considering she may well live for thousands of years I'd not so haplessly throw out that small moment as a descriptor," I said.

Nasba's tail feathers unfurled as they slapped the stone ground. "You and your fancy words!" she complained.

I sighed and nodded. "I'm her friend, Nasba. And that's something more than I give to most of our members. I can't give more than that. Even if I wanted to," I said.

"Bah...! I don't know who is worse, you or that damned fox!" Nasba said as she finally turned back around, huffing as she stepped away.

Hm. Thank you Mr. Fox, whoever you are.

Feeling saved, I followed Nasba in silence for a bit as she continued to mumble complaints. Most of them hadn't even been about me, but the fox, as we rounded a corner and found Merit.

The queen of this oasis paused upon seeing us, and Nasba hurried over to her friend. "I found him drinking and partying with the others!" she lied.

Merit grinned at her. "Partying. Sure," she said as I approached.

Before I could say anything Nasba turned to look at me. She stuck her tongue out at me and then ran off, her feathers flapping as she did.

"What... did you try and flirt with her or something? Comment on her naked body, now that you've gotten a good look at it?" Merit asked as we both watched her run back down the hallway we'd just come from.

"No? So how's it going? She awake yet?" I asked, changing topics.

Merit blinked, as if remembering what I meant, and then nodded. "Oh yes. She woke up not long after we tied her to that pillar. She's why I needed to see you," she said as she pointed for me to follow. We turned and headed back down the hall that she had come from, away from Nasba's direction.

"She still alive?" I asked.

"For now. That's the problem."

"Hm?"

Merit nodded. "I have another problem. One that might in fact take up the whole month you owe me," she said.

"Your problems are mine as well, so don't worry much about it," I said gently.

Merit slowed... which made me slow to a stop as she glanced up at me and glared.

What...?

"Comments like that are why I fell for you, you know?"

Were they...? I frowned and sighed at her. "Explains why so many are trying to sneak into my bed lately," I said as I thought about my recent trip to Telmik. The one time I had tried to lay down to get some sleep someone had tried to climb into it. And it hadn't been Celine.

"And that's why I hate you," Merit then said with a flat tone.

Woops.

"So? What's the problem?" I asked.

Merit sighed at me and nodded. "She's not from another nation, or a spy or anything. She's actually from Wevling. She hid herself on purpose," she said.

"Which is...?"

Merit shifted a moment, and I wondered how much of her glare was her earlier frustration towards me, or the situation itself. Something told me the former.

"It's a prophecy, Vim."

I blinked.

"Don't break my castle!" Merit shouted angrily, and I startled and looked down. Sure enough, there was now a bunch of cracks spread out all over the stone floor beneath me.

Whoops. "Sorry," I shifted, and made sure I hadn't broken anything too badly. It seemed I had just cracked some of the tiles, nothing more.

"Jeez Vim," Merit complained.

"Sorry," I apologized again, feeling bad. I should have known better. She was a saint, for crying out loud. Of course there was going to be mention of such things.

"It's fine... Just don't break it anymore."

Right. "Do I even want to know?" I asked her as I stepped away from the web of cracks I'd made.

"I hope you do. You just promised my problems were yours too, and this is my problem," she said.

"How so...?"

"It's concerning my oasis. And the fall of it. Or rather, it drying up and disappearing."

Great.

