

Non Human 361

Chapter 361 Simple Moments Before War

This was much better than dealing with prophecies, or waging war.

I was here again to wage war, as my last few visits had been about, but it wasn't as pressing. The neighboring nations had gathered some mercenaries, unable to even field their own armies anymore. Odds are this would be one of the last battles I'd have to fight in for Merit and her Oasis for some time... as long as it didn't go bad.

"Go bad," I scoffed at the idea as I placed the pipe into position.

Adjusting the pipe, I connected it to the small trap and went to squishing the ends. I used quick friction, spinning them in my hands as if wringing a wet towel, to force the two together. The pressure was great enough, and done quickly enough, that the two softer ends of the connectors got squished together, forming a slight bond.

It wasn't enough, of course, thanks to how copper worked. So I gathered up some of the putty paste Nebl and I had concocted together years ago and I went to slathering it on the section, as to make sure it'd not leak in the future.

The putty took several days to harden, but once it did it became not just rubbery but an almost perfect seal. Perfect for pipe work, where I didn't want to or have the ability to weld anything.

Only real problem with it was the damned stuff was a pain to make, and I only ever had so much to use at once. The bucket near my feet was now less than half full, and I knew it was all that was here. I'd not

be able to make any more before I left, which meant I'd need to send some down here before I came back next time as to finish the job I was doing now.

Once finished with that section of pipe I stepped back to study my handiwork, and then went to turn the water pressure back on. The circular crank was at the end of the small hall, and squeaked as I turned it. I heard the water fill the pipes quickly, where one even banged thanks to the shift in pressure, and after a few moments of listening and watching... I was glad to see there were no more leaks, and the pressure was strong even through the whole hallway.

Pleased with myself, I nodded and went to gather up the tools and supplies. As to go down to the next hallway, for the next floor's pipe works.

"Why do you look like you're having so much fun, Vim?"

Stepping out of the hallway, I smiled down at someone who didn't belong in the sub-basement of the castle. A place that was damp, somewhat dark, and smelly.

"What's that?" I asked, unable to contain my amusement as I stared at what was likely the most dolled up Merit I'd ever seen.

She had a puffy dress on, that had actual flowers all over it. Seemingly not just sewn into it, but maybe even grown into it. Honestly it looked way too fancy to be what it was, someone had genuine spent a long time on it. Even the little vines, coming from the flowers, had somehow been formed into tiny little designs on the dress. It was like someone had taken a flower garden and made a ball gown out of it.

"Shut it. It's Nasba's idea. The Wevling people like clothes made of plants," Merit complained.

"Don't you like plants too? Why the red face?" I asked as I carefully stepped past her, making sure to not touch her or her dress. I wasn't filthy, but I had been working down here for most of the day already.

"Because I feel ridiculous. And I like growing plants, not wearing them," she complained further as she followed me to the next batch of pipes.

"I have noticed the ducks do like to dress up. Or well, all birds do I guess. Either they love clothes, or love shiny things. Though I've noticed never both," I said as I thought about it. The Weaver, not far from here, was the same. She and her husband made enough clothes each year to give each member in the Society several sets. Yet they had no love or desire for jewels. Or money, for that matter.

Walking down the hallway, I scanned the pipe system and looked for any that needed attention. Oddly this one seemed in a much better shape than the last one, even though older. I only found one spot that was leaking, and it was such a small leak that I almost didn't bother with it.

"Sucks for me because Nasba finds dressing me up to be the funniest thing to do ever since she's figured out what sex is. I can always tell when she's going to do it with him because she wants to get me all dolled up, as if I was the one going to do it and not her," Merit grumbled.

I frowned at that. I now had several odd questions, and I didn't know if I wanted answers to any of them.

Wait, so her little fox was her first relationship...? Surely not, right? Nasba was as old as Merit, and they were both several hundreds of years old by now.

"Yes. This is her first attempt at having a partner. Though something tells me it will be the last. She does nothing but complain about him, but seems to love him more than she loves me," Merit said as I went to turn off the water pressure in this hallway.

I frowned at the queen who was being suddenly self-loathing. "I'd wager against that. But let her have her romance Merit, not many of us ever do."

"You telling me that just makes me want to shove one of these pipes up your backside," Merit said.

Ha.

Tapping the section where the pipes were leaking, I made sure the water had gone still inside of it. Once I was sure, I went ahead and pinched the pipe on both ends, around where it leaked, and broke it off from the system. Some water, some very hot water, poured out but I didn't mind it as I messed with the two spots I'd just torn the pipe from. I stuck a thumb into both ends, rounding and flattening the broken and torn copper I'd just ruined. Once it was back to form, at least as well as I could get it, I went to get a new piece of pipe.

"Why am I having to suffer these political meetings, and being treated like I am by Nasba, while you get to hide down here playing with pipes?" Merit asked.

"Because I slaughtered over five hundred people the other day for you. All by my lonesome. I didn't even get a thank you," I said as I lined up the new pipe. It was a tad too long, so pinched the top piece off, removing an inch more.

Merit scoffed. "You slaughter humans as easily as I cry myself to sleep."

Frowning at that, I decided not to comment to it as I slid the pipe into place.

Once secured, I squeezed it a little at the ends. Just as I'd done the last time. Then I went to get some of that putty.

Before I found the bucket, I found Merit. She held the bucket up, glaring at its contents.

"Is this all that's left?" she asked.

"Yes. I'll have Nebl send you more. I'll pass through the smithy on my way back once we're done," I said.

Her glare went from the bucket to me... then she looked around us, at the miles of pipes along the walls.

"What...? You helped build this place, Merit. That was how long ago now?" I asked, wondering if she was upset with the state of her castle. It was growing old, but it was old.

"We're five years from our two hundredth anniversary," she whispered.

Oh...? Two hundred already? For some reason I thought it was only a hundred or so.

Stolen story; please report.

"A mighty lineage," I said.

"One strife with war. I should have never accepted the Wevling kingdom into our banner," Merit said softly as I went and scooped up some of the putty from the bucket she still held.

"Maybe. But it allowed us to avoid that prophecy, didn't it?" I said. That had been what... fifty years ago? Maybe not that long.

Time was really starting to blur lately. I blamed the chaos. The wars weren't as bad as they had been, but that was not because it was going well.

We'd lost several other kingdoms. More than a hundred locations since the beginning of the wars.

The reason I wasn't needed as much anymore was not because our enemies had been defeated... but simply because there were not as many of us to protect anymore.

Maybe I was bad at this.

Honestly I was probably better suited to stuff like this.

Fixing pipes. Not ending wars.

Which was funny, because I really felt like I was damned good at the latter.

"This war, Vim. It's not one I feel like we should be having," Merit then said, a little softly.

"Then don't have it? I'm here to obey your orders, Merit. I can't dictate your rule or kingdom. You have advisors for that," I said. She's lately been almost asking me to rule for her, and not just because she wanted me to be her king. She almost seemed...

Glancing away from the pipe I was about finished with, I studied the sad fish. She was looking down, and her bucket had fallen to her side. It was touching her dress, and I stepped over to grab it from her. As I did, I sighed as I noted a small glop of the putty on her dress. I went to clean it, as best I could, but before I could grab it she had grabbed my hand with hers.

"Vim," Merit said my name, and I winced.

Hopefully this wasn't another attempt to woe me. The last one had not gone well. It had made me leave early, even though I still had things to do. It was why I was now fixing pipes, I should have done this last time I was here.

"Merit," I said calmly.

"Am I a bad queen?" she asked.

"All rulers are bad, Merit. The question is not if you're bad, but if you're cruel. Are your people happy?" I asked.

She shifted and frowned at me. "They act like they are," she whispered.

"Then you're a good queen. At least, not a cruel one. And to me that's good," I said.

She took a deep breath, squeezed my hand and sighed. "I'm sending you and the rest off to war again. To kill. To slaughter. All because I don't want to share these waters with another," she said.

"They don't want to share it, Merit. They want to rule it. To own it. Even if they have to poison it with your blood, and the blood of our people. I'd not call that sharing," I said.

"Maybe so. But maybe it's because I'm too hardheaded. Too stupid, to find a better solution for us all."

I scoffed at her.

"Don't scoff, Vim! I'm being serious!"

"I can tell," I said.

"Then...?" she asked worriedly, tears in her eyes.

"Then nothing. Do what you think is best, Merit. I'll support you no matter what. As I always have. As I always will."

"Because you pity me. You won't, can't, give me your heart so you give me your loyalty," she said.

Well...

She wasn't outright wrong with that, which made it hard for me to say anything to it. Instead, I knelt a little and reached over to clean off the putty from earlier with my free hand.

"Why are these little problems bothering you so desperately, Merit? Although a headache, they are in the end just petty politics. Not worth your stress or tears," I said.

Her lips quivered as she squinted her little eyes. "Nasba's pregnant."

My eyebrow rose upward. "Okay...?" How was that bad?

Merit's eyes narrowed, and her tear stricken look suddenly became furious. "She's pregnant, Vim!" she shouted at me.

"Okay...! Yes. I'm happy for her. Why aren't you?" I asked. Unsure what was wrong. Merit always complained about Nasba, but there was no doubt of her love for her. Merit would sacrifice this whole kingdom, and even everyone in it, to protect Nasba. I knew the truth, even if Merit didn't.

"What if she feels it's not safe enough for her here? To raise her children?" she asked quickly.

Resisting a smirk that wanted to pry at my lips, I nodded. See? I had been proven right already.

"Then make it safe enough for that to not even be a thought?" I said.

"I've been trying! Yet I keep having to call on you for help! Because I'm too scared to send my own people to war, too afraid to lose the few friends I have, and...!" Merit began to ramble, but then went quiet... and I realized she had bit her tongue.

A tiny line of blood leaked from the corner of her mouth, so I hurriedly reached up to stop it from dropping onto her dress. She made an odd noise as I scooped up the little bit of blood with the same hand she still held.

"Have you talked to Nasba about it yet?" I asked.

"No."

"You should. For both of your sakes."

"What if she tells me she wants to leave...?" she asked worriedly.

"Then... either fix it, so she doesn't... or go with her? Really Merit, you're usually not one to hesitate to make such decisions," I said.

She sniffed at me and gulped, likely to swallow the rest of the blood in her mouth. "What would people think? If I abandoned them all just for that, after all this time?"

"Who cares what they'd think?"

"I do."

"Well, now you're sounding like me. Stop that." Merit finally broke a tiny smile, and I sighed as I stood and gestured at her. "Let me finish this pipe, Merit."

"Of course I'm not as important as a stupid pipe. That thing probably connects to some toilet or something too," she complained.

"Actually I think this is to the showers," I said. This hallway was the fifth floor, right? Then yes. The showers.

"Oh. Those are important. You wouldn't believe how smelly some of them get out here in the desert without those," she said.

I laughed at that and nodded. "I do know, actually."

"You would..." she mumbled as I finished messing with the pipe... and then turned to properly face the little queen of this oasis.

"Merit, I see you as a friend," I told her.

"I see you as something else, though you don't want to hear it."

I nodded, I didn't.

"My point was... I'll always support you. No matter what you do, or why you do it. I've waged war for you. I helped you make these lakes. I put up with all those who complain about how you are a part of the Society, yet not. Just as I do for Nebl, the ravens, Berri and so many others," I said.

"If you're trying to make me feel special Vim, it isn't working," she said.

I laughed at her as I brushed my hands on my pants, cleaning them of the putty and other gunk. "Yeah. I'm bad at this. Basically Merit... you just need to decide what you want to do. Want to wage war with the world? Let's do it. Want to tear it all down and run off, starting anew elsewhere? Not the first time. I don't know if you've noticed Merit, but half of the Society is gone. All the other kingdoms are falling, if not completely gone already. And most of them were far bigger than you, with a hundreds of our members trying to keep them afloat. Yet here you are, stuck in war yes, but otherwise perfectly fine? Your people are happy. Your cities healthy. You have no famine. No plague. You're not under siege, and your economy isn't collapsing around you... by all metrics you're doing just fine, Merit. Be more proud of yourself," I said.

Merit studied me for a moment, and then sighed. "Hearing you say such things makes my heart hurt," she said softly.

"Yeah, makes my head hurt too. Why is that?"

She scoffed at me. "What would you choose, Vim? Your kingdom or your friends?"

Hmph. "Well, that's a trick question for me... let's just say I'd make the wrong mistake, since I usually always do," I said carefully.

A corner of Merit's mouth curled upward. "Funny. I'll let that pass then, for now. After this war is over you and I will need to have a talk about this," she said as she rolled a shoulder, and went to adjusting her dress a little. Had it slipped...? I couldn't tell, but it must have considering the way she was tugging at it.

"Sure thing. I'm to assume that means we're going to leave soon?" I asked.

"In a few days. I have one last meeting with the others... I'm actually late to it. I had come down here to see if you'd come up with me, and be my king for once."

"Sorry. Just a plumber this time," I said with a tiny tap on one of the nearby pipes.

"Plumber...?" Merit mumbled the word but sighed and shook her head. She stepped past me, heading for the exit.

She only made it a few steps before she paused and turned to look at me. I smiled at her, and wondered what else she was going to say... then she gave me a prideful grin.

"I told you Vim. One day I'll make you jealous. You'll regret ignoring my affection one day," she said as she hurried away, her strange plant dress making odd noises as she did.

"I hope I do, Merit," I said softly as I was left behind, alone surrounded by pipes.

I really do.

Chapter 362 Two Visits Later

I wonder if anyone would have thought Merit's kingdom would be the last true one associated with the Society.

Of course I had hoped it would have lasted this long, and much longer of course. But I hoped that for any and all ventures of our people. Plus I liked Merit. I liked her friends, and I liked her way of thinking. She was human enough to be kind, yet nonhuman enough to be a realist. It made her a good queen, even if she always sniveled and worried about her rule when I was here visiting her.

Yet I remembered all the snide little comments so many had thrown her way back in the beginning. Even from some of those who were here now, singing a different tune. Most of the Society had not placed much faith in Merit, or those who had supported her. Even the kinder ones, those who had nothing bad to say, had not expected her kingdom to last long.

But look at her now.

Sitting on the edge of her castle's roof, I stared out at the sea of sails. There had to be hundreds and hundreds of ships, and most of them were so big that I wondered how they even got through the river channels around here. A few were even sea fairing... which was problematic, really. I probably should tell her to ban such ships from docking into her lakes.

Sea ships shouldn't mix with fresh water lakes. It was doable, of course, but eventually it would cause a problem. Either an invasive species would come from it or something worse.

For now though I simply enjoyed the peace and quiet. This was the first visit in... probably decades and decades that I've not had any pressing things to concern myself with.

No wars to be fought. No prophecies. No gods. No saints or schemes...

I didn't even have to worry about her pipe systems, or canals. Or the lakes around us.

All was right in the world.

Which was so strange, since the rest of the world was falling apart around the seams.

Taking a deep breath, I felt a little guilty. It almost wasn't right that I was sitting here, relaxing and enjoying the view of all the ships, while all the others suffered and stressed back up north.

Celine was dead. The Society fracturing. I've learned of more deaths in the last few moons than I had in years, and many of them had been good friends.

Some of them had hurt so badly it made me want to weep.

Which was why I was here, even if I'd never admit it aloud to anyone. Not even myself.

I wanted to make sure this place was still safe. And would continue being so. Since it might be one of the last sources of hope for our people.

A breeze flew past, and somehow it wasn't a hot one. And not just because my body had adapted to the weather here. It actually felt cool on my skin, as if I was not in the middle of a desert but sitting on a dock at the ocean instead.

Closing my eyes, to enjoy the breeze, I took a deep breath... and noted the smell behind me.

Opening my eyes as I leaned back a bit, to look behind me, I smiled at Merit.

"Where's your crown?" I asked. It was still the middle of the day, and she was all dressed up. She should be wearing it.

"I don't like to wear it anymore," she said simply as she stepped around me, and sat down next to me on the ledge of the roof.

"Hm... Heavy is the crown, as they say," I said.

"I hate that saying. It's not heavy, it's just cold."

I smiled and nodded. Cold. Heavy. Cumbersome. It didn't matter the feeling, the sentiments behind the reasoning was what mattered.

"Did you see Pierre? He was just up here with me a moment ago," I asked.

"I passed him. He's grown into a fine man. Better than his father, at least," Merit said.

"Klaus hadn't been bad," I said. I missed that weird old rat.

"No... I suppose he hadn't been," Merit whispered.

Glancing at her, I noted the sad look on her face.

She was depressed. Really depressed.

Why...?

Her kingdom was thriving. She now had hundreds of members living amongst her halls. Nasba was still with her, and her family had grown large. Happy. In fact... everyone here seemed happy. It was almost a sickening contrast to the cold halls back up north, like at Telmik.

Those hallowed halls hurt to walk through nowadays. All I ever heard was praying. The kind that made me feel responsible.

"What's wrong Merit?" I asked as I sat forward a little, to try and make myself seem a little smaller.

Merit didn't say, or do anything, for a moment as she stared out at the lake around us. I studied the way her eyes lingered on the horizon, and wondered if it was just age. She was old now, really old. Five or six hundred years old by now. Half a millennia. Even for our kind that was a long time. And the last few hundred years of that time had been with her as a queen. Ruling over a tiny nation, sure, but still one full of strife and its own problems.

It was hard to remember sometimes, since she appeared so young and was actually rather stable mentally... but Merit could very well just be exhausted. In many ways.

I knew I would be if I wasn't so... well...

Me.

So I just waited. I returned to looking out at the lake around us, and all the sails and ships. I liked studying them, even if many of them looked... terribly thought out. Who built such haphazard things?

"You gave up rather quick this time," Merit then said.

"Hm?" I had? About what?

"Asking what was wrong. Usually you try to make me laugh, or start telling me about some stupid story. To get me to open up," Merit said as she finally looked away from her kingdom and to me. She side-glanced me, and I wondered how long it'd been since I'd seen her with her hair down. My last few visits she's had her hair all bundled up properly, Nasba's doing likely.

"Didn't I just ask that?" I asked. Hadn't I? A few moments ago...?

Merit gave me a sad smile. "We've been sitting here for at least an hour or two, Vim," she told me.

Had we...? "Really?" I asked.

She nodded and sighed at me, but at least didn't seem overly depressed anymore. "I heard Trish's capital fell," she said.

"Hm. A few months ago. While I was on the coast," I said.

"Figured. And let me guess, none of them ran away in time?"

I shook my head.

Merit sighed again, but this time it was more of an exasperated huff. "I don't know how you put up with us, Vim."

I don't. "How's it feel proving them all wrong?" I asked her.

"Not good at all."

I nodded. Exactly.

We sat in silence for a bit, though not as long as an hour as last time. Merit then sighed and gestured at one of the far off boats. "I don't even recognize my oasis anymore," she said softly.

"Really? It doesn't look too different. Crowded now, sure, but it's still the same lake in a desert," I said.

"Only because you're stupid. Look, Vim. Half the lake's shore are covered in cities and docks. We used to be just a tiny island, with a few small little farmsteads in the distance. Now it's just building after building, as far as I can see," she said.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

Hm... she wasn't wrong. Most of the lake's shores and edges were indeed now covered in buildings and docks. One of the nearby rivers, where it intersected and joined with another that fed the other nearby lake, had a whole city resting upon it. Nearly as big as the little island capital we were in now.

"Isn't that a good thing?" I asked.

"It's supposed to be..." she mumbled.

Glancing at the tiny fish being so melancholic, I wondered what she wanted me to say.

Actually... the last few visits have been like this, haven't they? She's been slowly getting worse. More depressed. Stressed, maybe.

I wonder why. Was it really just time? Was it really the tiring daily running's of her kingdom...? Or was it something more?

Hopefully she wasn't sick. I didn't like sticking around her long, because it gave her funny ideas, but I actually enjoyed her friendship. Even more so I enjoyed listening to her and her friends bicker and tease one another. Particularly her newer addition.

"How's Sharp been treating you?" I asked.

"She's insufferable. Ever since she found out she can touch me and I'd be fine she won't leave me alone. I want you to take her back to whatever hole you found her in," Merit said with a cold tone.

I couldn't help it I laughed at her. "Really now?"

"Yes! She's worse than Nasba! I can barely handle her and now there's two of them!" Merit complained, a little loudly. She almost sounded serious.

"Hm... funny. It's your fault, for not bleeding and dying when she touches you like a normal person," I said.

"The next time you try and bring me someone else I'm going to demand a night in bed with you. From now on. I'm serious," Merit said stiffly at me.

Oh boy. "Uh..." I didn't know what to say to that, since it had sounded utterly serious.

Merit looked away from me and sighed, and not because I had just ignored her flirting again. She had been serious indeed.

Was Sharp really that big of a pain...? I had found Sharp to actually be quite sweet. Especially when considering the poor girl's life, and how she has had to endure it.

I had thought bringing her here had been the right choice. To let her find a semblance of normalcy. It was what the Society was meant for, even if Merit and so many others here claimed they weren't a part of it.

"She's fine, Vim. She's happy. And she is good at making Nasba laugh, so that's all that matters," Merit then said.

Hm...? I smiled softly at her as I nodded. "Good."

Yes. Very good indeed.

Merit's tiny oasis was growing indeed. Growing mightily.

Wonderful.

I was glad someone was doing well, at least.

Merit then coughed, and then glanced at me again. I watched her for a moment, wondering what was wrong, and then she sighed at me.

"What?"

"So uh... how're you feeling?" she then asked, a little awkwardly.

I frowned at her and wondered if she was actually blushing, or if that was just the sun playing tricks on her face thanks to the angle.

"I'm uh... feeling good? I guess?" I said. What'd she want from me?

Merit began to twirl her thumbs around each other, and I felt in danger all of a sudden. Please don't tell me she was going to try and seduce me again...

"I uh... well... I'm sorry, Vim," she then said, a little seriously.

"About...?" I asked. If she says something cheesy like, for this, and tries to kiss me I'm going to push her off the ledge.

"For Celine," she said.

Oh.

Feeling horrible, for expecting something else, I softly smiled and nodded. "Me too. But not for the reasons you think. It's become a mess with her gone. One I genuinely don't want to deal with," I said.

"I'm sure..." she said softly.

I sighed as I leaned back, resting back a little as to better look at Merit and not the world around me. "I'm fine Merit. Unlike you I don't take a month sabbatical to weep in my bed each time a friend dies," I said.

"What's so wrong with being emotional?" she asked angrily.

"Nothing at all. In fact I'm jealous."

She huffed at me, but I saw the smile she was trying to hide as she looked away from me. "Whose going to take her place, Vim? From what I've heard from everyone... it's chaos up there in the more normal lands," she said.

"I'd not call them normal. They're definitely not anymore, even if they ever were. And I don't know. The sisters have been doing a good job keeping most of the groups together... but there's a vote coming up. About searching out a new home across the sea or something," I said.

"Oh...? Do uh... do they want to come here? I'm sure we could fit most of everyone here if we had to," Merit offered.

I smiled and nodded. "I'll tell them of your kindly offer. But no, they seem serious about finding somewhere else. Without humans, supposedly. Good luck with that," I said.

"Is there even a place like that left anymore...? I feel like it was only yesterday that half the nations around us had been nearly empty of them, thanks to the famine and wars, and yet now they're full of them again. Half my court aren't even us anymore, but humans," she said.

"Right...? But who am I to convince them otherwise?"

She sighed at me. "You're too gentle with them all, Vim. Why do you tell me to just cut the heads off the dissenters, yet you won't even slap their butts?" she asked.

"Because that's the job of those in charge. I'm not in charge... I'm just a soldier," I said.

"A soldier capable of defeating entire armies."

"Still just a soldier."

She scoffed at me, but didn't press it further, thankfully.

Honestly I was tired of hearing such accusations and arguments. I got enough of them up north; I didn't need them here too. It was why I came running down here, to get away from all of that.

If I would have known Celine's death would have gotten me into such a strange predicament I would have never gotten as involved in the Society as I had. Honestly.

My fault really. I had genuinely thought more of the more active members, such as those like Merit who tried to make entire kingdoms or organizations, would have taken more charge... but of those left, the survivors were like her. Willing to just... sit in their little corners, happy and content.

Or well, maybe not happy.

A small breeze blew past, this time a tad colder than before. I glanced up at the sky and noted that it was starting to get redder. The day was ending already. Hadn't it just started...?

"Well... least this visit will be peaceful. But I guess that means I can't linger long, can I? Even if the wars are over, and half the Society are dead, I still feel like I'm constantly late to wherever I gotta get to," I said softly.

"I can... get you busy, if you'd like," Merit offered gently.

"Was that an innuendo?" I asked.

Merit sat up straighter and then her hand darted out. She punched me in the arm, rather hard, and made a noise at me.

I chuckled at her and nodded. "I appreciate it. But it's fine. I shouldn't neglect our pitiful members just because I'm growing upset with them. Plus I've already gotten a few requests from others, like Pierre," I said.

"Hm...? I see. Okay. Well... if you want what I offered to become an innuendo, just let me know," she said, half mumbling as she did, as if she had something in her mouth.

Smirking at her, I shook my head. "How can you be so old and still so..." I hesitated, and stopped myself from calling her innocent, or a virgin. Not because she wasn't one, but rather because there was a chance she was.

"Yeah. You better go quiet," she said with a grin.

I nodded. "Right?"

Merit sighed, but then chuckled. It turned into a happy giggle... and then she laughed full on, rather loudly.

Watching her laugh, I wondered why she had found that so funny. But it was better than the alternative at least. It's been a while since she's shocked me with her electricity, so I had kind of figured it was time for such a thing.

Actually... how long had it been? Since she last tried to electrocute me to death?

Not last time. Or the time before... maybe that time when that saint had showed up? I felt like she's shocked me more often than that, though.

Oh well.

As she finished laughing... we went quiet again, until she scooted a little closer.

Merit leaned over, plopping into me. She rested her whole body against me, and let out a deep sigh. One not of relief, but stress.

Usually I'd make a comment, or shift a little, as to stop such a thing... but for some reason I knew better than to do so.

If I pushed her away now, it might just push her away for good. From not just me, but everyone.

I had no idea what was actually wrong with her heart, but it didn't matter. The reason was not an issue. All that mattered was Merit's heart was heavy. Hurting. Broken, maybe. Even if she had just laughed like mad, I knew the truth. I had seen it moments ago. Heard it.

She was like me, almost. Maybe more than I wanted to admit.

Tired of it all.

So I just needed... to be here for her. Help her, even, if I could.

Hopefully it just didn't take more than I was willing, and able, to give.

She then sniffed, and I went still as I realized she was crying. Thanks to how tiny she was I couldn't see her, even though she was resting right up against me.

Unsure if I should say or do anything, I realized maybe it was a good thing she was leaning against my arm. Now I could use that as an excuse for not patting her on the back, or holding her. Even if it felt like the right thing to do at the moment.

It was such a hard line to walk sometimes. Since she was so odd. So... human, yet not.

What would my father have done in moments like this?

Something told me I didn't want to know.

Some several minutes passed, and Merit seemed to calm down a little... and I wondered if maybe I had, if not intentionally, made the right choice. The sky grew redder, and then started to grow orange and then dark, and for a small moment I thought I had escaped an electrocution this time.

It wasn't like I even really knew what was wrong with her. The Society was fracturing, and falling apart every which way... but Merit's Oasis was doing fine. Growing strong. Steadily. Without any real threat to

it. Plus her little family was growing. Nasba had children now. Newer additions like Sharp were not just good friends, but an extra layer of security and trust. They were reliable.

All was right here. At least, it felt like it should be.

Yet still Merit leaned against me... as if...

"You're supposed to feel bad for me and at least pat my back, Vim," Merit then said.

I winced. "I'd just been considering it..."

"Too late."

She shocked me anyway.

Chapter 363 Merit's Oasis

Approaching the capital of Merit's Oasis... I walked slowly through the hardened mud.

I had not needed a ferry this time.

Passing another ship, I stared at the way it was laying on its side. It looked... almost too clean. Undamaged. Which wasn't too surprising, since not only had this lake likely dried up very slowly... but the mud had likely taken weeks if not months to truly dry. Lake-beds rarely hardened overnight, no matter the conditions.

I sighed, at not just the situation... but the fact it had taken me this long to arrive.

Damn those fools. Making me spend months away, just because they were so damned petty. Why had the rest voted to allow me to escort them to the other side of the ocean? What was the point in helping people that had abandoned us?

No matter. That was over and done with. And I had agreed to it. So...

Gulping, I felt as if I should have a dry mouth. The world around me seemed desolate. As if it hadn't rained in decades. But I could tell from the mud beneath me, even if hardened, that the truth was it had likely rained not too long ago. Maybe a month or two ago at latest.

Shaking my head at the capital city before me, at least what was left of it, I wondered how many I'd even find left here.

It looked completely empty. The boats that remained were all on the lake-bed, resting on their sides or even upside down. The houses looked empty, I saw no smokestacks, and all of the greenery was gone. It was now just a bunch of stone buildings amidst a mud pit. Or well, a dried mud pit.

There didn't seem to be any birds. No fish. No life at all. Not even a tumbleweed was in sight to roll by and make me feel the irony.

"Poor Merit," I mumbled.

For her kingdom to fall over no real fault of her own... Just simple time and bad luck. Bad weather.

But what was one to do...? It was a miracle this oasis lasted as long as it had. I doubted even I would have been able to have stopped this.

Approaching the island the city sat upon, I found it a little funny that I could see a path. Footprints were in the hardened mud, though they looked old. I followed them up the path of least resistance and onto the docks of the city. Once on the docks, I took a moment to look around and felt... odd. The city itself actually didn't look too bad. Not like it had been ransacked, or just survived a pillaging. In fact there were even still boxes and crates upon the dock, which looked as if they were still full. I didn't check them though as I headed for a stairwell, one that would lead me up the island city and to the castle up top.

A castle that looked... strange and tiny. Thanks to the fact it no longer had vines or trees all over it. What little bit of them I could see was just their husks. Broken and dried limbs and trunks, hanging over the edge of the roofs. Died and dried.

As I walked through the now abandoned capital, I listened for anyone... and well, anything.

I heard nothing. Nothing more than the hot desert air as it whistled through the alleys and buildings, as if making music and living the life now that there were no people here to disturb it.

While walking... I remembered the lively city. Roads that were cramped, but full. Clean. Market stalls had been scattered between houses and community buildings, as if without plan, but it had strange comforting sense of reason behind its development. Even things that seemed out of place had been put there on purpose.

Walking past fountains, that were now dry as a bone, I wondered if I'd even find anyone here. It looked, and smelled, as if this place hadn't gotten water in years. We, rather I, had built a reservoir underneath the castle... pulling from a deep spring, but something told me that it was run dry. And not just because the rest of the area was dry. That thing had been tapped hundreds of years ago. Who knows if it had even lasted this long. It may have dried up before the lake did.

It didn't take long to reach the castle, thanks to the empty roads, and I found the door was open. The front gate was a solid stone one. One that had been made with defense in mind. It was fully opened and...

Stepping into the castle courtyard, I sighed at the sound of silence.

Was no one here? Really? If so where'd they go?

I'll feel absolutely horrible if I never find out what happened to them. What was I going to say to Lilly if I lost her fishbraind friend?

Entering the castle proper, I wandered the halls for a moment until I heard a relieving sound.

Voices. And not just one or two.

Heading for them, I slowed as I approached a hallway that was noisy. As I got closer, my heart became heavy as I failed to recognize any of the voices.

Squatters? Surely not, right?

I calmed a fast beating heart as I rounded a corner, and found a few familiar faces.

Glad that no one noticed me for a few moments, I breathed a heavy sigh of relief as I watched Nasba hand another duck a basket. There were a few kids around, some with duck tails and some without, and a few other older members.

"Oh!" Nasba finally noticed me, and thankfully it was after I collected myself as I nodded at her. She rushed towards me, and I almost expected her to wrap me in a hug, but instead she just skidded to a stop right before me. "Finally! I'm going to go pack, right now!" she shouted, and then ran off.

A little stunned, I laughed as a bunch of the kids hurried off too, though not all of them ran after Nasba.

"Welcome back Vim. Been a while," Hafni said in greeting. She looked twice as old as I remembered her.

"Hafni. It has," I admitted. At least a decade.

She gave me a sad smile and pointed to the hallway I had just come from. "Down the hall to the right. You'll find her."

Right. That was either a go do your damned job already, or a gentle kindness to her queen.

Probably mix of both.

"Pierre, how you been?" I asked the young lad before turning away. He was sitting at a table nearby, and had a strange look on his face.

He sniffed, and I realized that strange look was him crying. Or at least, about to. "Fine... are we leaving now?" he asked.

"Yes. Once he goes and sees the queen already," Hafni said with a huff, glaring at me.

Right. Right.

I nodded and left the room. Following her instructions, I found myself at a corner of the castle. It was a little quieter than the section I had just left, but I could tell people frequented it. The hallways were a little clean. The rooms I passed still looked lived in, and most importantly there were a few plants here and there still alive. Though they were few and far between, nothing like the wall-covering amount that used to exist here.

Eventually I found the little fish. Sitting at a small table, she wasn't alone.

Sharp noticed me, and her eyes lit up a little as she stood up straighter.

"Sharp," I greeted the urchin as I entered the room.

Merit startled at my voice, spinning around to look at me. She had been sitting with her back to the entrance of the room, and upon seeing me... she broke.

She nearly face-planted her face into the table, and went to covering it up as she began to shiver and sob... making me feel like a complete ass. When was the last time someone had broken down and cried so heartily just by looking at me?

"Feh. She was doing so good too. Why didn't anyone warn us you were here?" Sharp said with a sigh.

Merit didn't say anything as I strode up to the table. Sharp crossed her arms, glaring at me as I frowned at her.

What?

"If she shocks me I'm going to hold onto you until you're nothing but red meat," Sharp warned.

"Rude," I said.

Sharp huffed at me as I glanced down at the crying Merit. She still hid her face and head in her arms and the mess of her hair. "Now, Merit. Where's your fancy dress?" I asked. She was just wearing a plain and simple outfit. Nothing like what she used to wear.

Her crying just got worse.

"Gods you're as abrasive as I am," Sharp said with a disappointed tongue.

"I'm going to ruffle your hair if you don't play nice," I warned her.

She stood up straighter. "If you do before taking care of her I'll genuinely hate you."

I sighed at her and nodded. Right. Stupid friendship thing.

Reaching out, I patted Merit on the back. Her tiny, scrawny body, felt a little weird. Was she malnourished? It was hard to tell since she's always been skin and bones even on a good day.

"It's okay Merit," I said gently.

"Are you literally incapable of being nice for once?" Sharp asked.

Jeez! What did she want me to do!?

I shook my head at the crying Merit, and ignored Sharp. "If you keep this up people are going to think weird things, Merit. Do you really want the world to know my mere presence can make you weep like this? That's not very meritable," I said.

Her tiny cry turned into the faintest laugh as she scoffed. "That was worse than the first attempt!" she said.

Ah. But it made you laugh.

I smiled as I watched Merit slowly raise her head upward, sniffing as she looked up at me.

"I'm here to pick you all up, Merit. Stop wallowing in the mud, even if you had been born in the stuff. I thought we broke you of that already," I said.

"That's a little better. It's cute, goes back to your origins with her. Maybe there's hope for you yet!" Sharp said happily, as if we were some show to admire and critique.

"She's become fascinated with romance novels," Merit warned me.

Reading on this site? This novel is published elsewhere. Support the author by seeking out the original.

"That somehow makes a lot of sense," I admitted.

"What...? What's that supposed to even mean?" Sharp mumbled as I studied little Merit.

She looked exhausted. She had bags under her eyes, and it almost looked like her full, thick hair, was... thin. Even though it wasn't.

And yes. She did indeed look skinny. Too skinny even for her. She had shallow cheeks.

Hopefully that was just stress. Surely they weren't that desperate for food and water... right? Why not just leave then? It's not like they had actually needed me to escort them elsewhere. Merit and Sharp alone would have been enough to protect them. The two were some of the strongest left anymore.

For a moment we stared at each other, and I decided to sigh and shake my head at her.

"What...?" Merit asked angrily as she wiped her nose.

"Lilly said you'd be a mess. I hadn't believed her."

"That birdbrain...!" Merit was immediately offended, but had a smirk as she slowly got up and out of her chair. As she did, I noted what she had been working on.

Were those letters...?

Letters to the Society.

I tried not to linger on them, as Merit sighed and gestured at me. "Have you said hello to everyone else yet?" she asked.

"I saw Nasba and a few others earlier, yes."

"That's not saying hello," Sharp noted.

"Well..." She wasn't wrong.

"Sharp would you please go get everyone...? It'd be best to get it over with so we can leave," Merit then said.

"Mhm... okay. You can handle her then, Vim. You're doing a poor job of it, but at least you're doing it," Sharp said with a grin as she walked past me and out of the room.

"Nasba did mention she's already gone to pack. Is it that dire?" I asked Merit.

"Verily."

Glancing back at Merit, I frowned at the sullen girl. She looked nothing like a queen no more. Not even a defeated one.

"I'm sorry for taking so long, Merit," I said gently.

"It's fine. I heard what they did. What's not fine is everyone else ignoring my request for help," Merit said as she glanced at the table.

"Who was ignoring you, Merit...?" I asked carefully.

"Everyone...? Or at least, anyone I know how to contact. Telmik, particularly. But... well... maybe it's not their fault. The world has become chaotic. And the Society is all weird now. Maybe they just haven't responded to me yet," she said.

No. They had.

It was why I was here after all.

I had been told by the Chronicler to come help. That they needed me.

And not because of a prophecy either.

I shifted, and wondered what to say or think. Was Merit right? Was the negligence just because of the chaos? Because the Society had split...? Or was it more? Something crueler?

I didn't want to think about it as I gestured to the table. "What kind of requests were you sending?"

"We need new homes. I was asking where I could send people."

Ah...

How pitiable.

"How... how many are here?" I asked softly, almost afraid to find out.

"Forty-nine. No. We didn't lose everyone. Not because of the fall of my kingdom. A lot of them left to go back to places they came from over the years. I'd say we only lost... well..." Merit shifted, and then sniffed as she shook her head at me. "How long have you been gone Vim?" she asked softly.

"At least a decade."

"Hm... then we've lost fifty-two. But many of those were from age. Maybe a dozen to a rebellion. Then another dozen just... disappeared one night. They all left. They might still be alive, I think." Merit spoke gently, but I could hear the hollow heartbreak in them. Hell, I could see it. Clearly.

"Forty-nine. Including you?" I asked, hoping to get her off mind and away from the people who had abandoned her, or were lost and not worth thinking about anymore.

"No. So fifty...? But a few are humans."

"Still, a mighty number. To still have that many after all this, after it got to this point... well done, Merit," I said, praising her genuinely. A lot of the other places had fared far worse.

She shrugged. "Whatever, Vim."

Hm. That had been a rather serious dismissal.

For a few moments we stood there, and I tried not to worry over the number she had just told me.

Fifty people.

Where was I going to take them all...?

There weren't many places left anymore. And most of those here, like Merit and Sharp, were unique. Nasba could probably just be taken to her family, the Weaver, but the rest...?

Talk about a headache. What was I going to do about this...? Maybe I should just help them make another home somewhere. Not another kingdom, of course, that was not something I wanted anyone to do again... for a long time. But at least a little home, maybe in a forest somewhere. Somewhere cooler, and not as hot...

"Where will I go, Vim...? What will I do now?" Merit then asked.

Hm. "Nothing lasts forever, Merit. Your kingdom had stood for centuries. A mighty feat, that even generational rulers haven't been able to claim. But... like all things, good and bad, it's time to move on," I said as I glanced around. Where was her crown...?

"I didn't ask that, Vim. I asked where I should go."

Pausing a moment, I noted the dry voice. That hadn't been her just being snarky, or upset with me... that had been...

Glancing at her, I held back the flinch that almost followed.

She was staring at me. With empty eyes.

Dead ones.

Fitting for a fish, though terrible to see all the same.

Great.

Honestly I wasn't surprised she was so disheartened. Her whole home had just dried up and collapsed. Her family, her Oasis, was getting ready to split and fracture. She knew, as well as I did, that the Society wasn't in a position to accept them all at the same place. She knew they'd be split up. And would likely never see those who didn't go where she would end up again. In today's world traveling was not easy, nor safe.

But even more-so... I knew Merit. I knew how she self-loathed herself during her failures. And right now...?

She felt like a failure. A fool.

And I knew there was little, if anything, I or anyone else could say or do to change that feeling. Justified or no.

Still...

I had to try.

Stepping over to her, I kneeled down. She flinched at me, giving me an odd look as I got eye level with her. I knew she hated this, since it made her feel like I was treating her like a child... but that had been the point.

I'd rather her to be angry at me, to hate me, than to be so desolate and empty.

Yet she didn't grow upset. Her hands didn't even clinch up, nor did she produce any static. She simply... frowned and stared at me, as if she was indeed but a child. And I her parent, about to tell her something sad.

"I don't want your stupid pity stories," she warned me.

"I know."

She sniffed at me. "I deserve one."

Oh...?

Feeling a little hopeful for a moment, I watched as her eyes watered up. She suddenly looked a little more angry. Maybe there was hope after all...!

"I'll give you plenty as we head north," I said.

"Nasba and the others are going to Nann."

"Aye. They do have family there. We can stop there and rest a bit," I said.

Honestly it was also a place she herself could, and likely would, stop at too. Nasba and her were close. In a way, too close. I couldn't imagine them separating.

At least not willingly.

But... many at the Weaver's Hut... were well...

Hm...

"Pierre wants to go to another lake," she then said.

"There's a few to pick from," I nodded, thinking of the five I knew off the top of my head.

"Sharp wants somewhere quiet. To read books."

"Plenty of those places now, with how few of us are left," I admitted.

Merit shifted, her tears leaking now in full force. "Hafni wants to live on the coast."

"We got four to pick from," I said.

"Lopto has a friend up north," she whispered.

"I'll take him to them," I promised.

"Everyone has their own plans..."

"And we'll help them fulfill them. Each one of them," I agreed to help.

As I always would.

Merit nodded... as she lowered her head and began to weep again.

Taking a small breath, I nodded gently at her.

I knew that pain. Knew it well.

Her kingdom had fell. She was no longer able to provide, secure, and give anyone a home. A proper one. So everyone else had to go out on their own, and find it themselves elsewhere.

Leaving her behind.

"So... Where do I go...?" she cried.

"Wherever the waters take you, Merit. Just like all the times before," I told her.

She shook her head, sniffing loudly. She didn't seem to like that idea. At all.

Funny... since before she had settled here, that had been her entire life philosophy.

"You will be sad about this. For a long time. It'll hurt. But... you'll eventually realize you did well, Merit. You ruled well. You were a good queen. You treated your people well. And the proof is right outside this room," I said gently, hoping no one could hear me. I could hear distant voices in the hallway. Sharp was already bringing people back.

She had not done so immediately, so I had thought we had more time. Now Merit was going to get caught like this, which would just make her even worse.

"Huh...?" Merit looked up at me, with a filthy face as she kept crying.

I gestured behind me. At the noise approaching. I knew she could hear it too, even in her state.

"Your oasis has dried up Merit. Your castle empty. Your capital fallen. No food. No stores. No more armies. No more docks lined with boats filled with goods. No one wants to invade you anymore, either, even. No more lavish parties or delegations..." I said gently.

Her eyes narrowed, and a tiny spark danced from her fringes.

I smiled at her. "Yet... you still have dozens of loyal friends. People who still remain, even after it got to this point," I added.

She scrunched up, and whined. "People who will now go their separate ways," she barely got out.

"For now. But they'll still be a part of the Society. They'll still remember this. You. Each other. And who knows...? Maybe you'll do this again someday," I said.

She sniffed. Loudly.

"They're your oasis, Merit. Not this place," I said.

She nodded. "You sound like Nasba and Sharp."

"Even dumb birds and fish can be smart once in a while," I said with a shrug.

She chuckled as the group got even closer. They did so noisily, talking happily. They were already looking forward to their trip north, to find greener pastures.

Before standing, I reached out and grabbed her hand. She clenched it tightly, clinging to it.

"You're not a queen no more. So it's okay to cry in front of everyone," I said.

"Already have done so. Many times," she admitted.

"Good."

"No. It's not. But okay."

Right.

"Now come on. No more crying. Otherwise you'll fill your oasis back up with your tears, and that's just gross," I said.

She laughed and squeezed my hand... and then kissed it. I shifted a little, and was glad that no one had reached the room yet.

"Thanks Vim," she whispered.

"Hm... Don't ever tell anyone that I complimented your rule. It's embarrassing," I said.

She scoffed at me. "Usually by now you'd ask where my crown is, as to put it on my head," she said.

"Yeah where is it?"

"I'm done with that. I don't need it anymore."

"Okay then," I nodded. That was that then. Too bad. She didn't know, but some of the jewels I had used to make that thing had been literally priceless.

"As we guide them to their new homes, I'll give you one last chance to earn my affection," Merit then said.

I paused, and my eye twitched as the group finally arrived.

"See! I knew she'd be a mess!" Pierre shouted, sounding worried. At least he didn't seem to tease her.

"Gosh Vim! Move!" Nasba hurried forward, pushing me aside. Although she did so, and went to wiping Merit's face with a cloth, Merit still held my hand.

"Stand tall, Merit. Okay?" I asked.

"Okay," Merit nodded.

"Idiot. You should have kissed her," Sharp chastised me as I stood, our hands separating.

I said nothing, and instead just ruffled her hair. Roughly.

She let out a groan of a yelp as I did, making the group laugh and back away... as to not get caught in our antics.

While I messed with Sharp, I glanced at Merit... who was laughing too. Even while Nasba was cleaning her face free of snot and tears.

Yes. She'd be fine.

She'd hurt. Weep. And will be sad for a long time...

But she'll be okay.

They all would.

I'll ensure it.

Somehow.

Chapter 364 Schemes Under Branches

"Such a scene makes me feel like crying," Lilly said softly as we stared out the window together.

"In a way it does, doesn't it?" I agreed, though maybe not entirely.

Off in the distance, near the large tree this whole forest grew around, was everyone else.

Fly and Renn were sitting on the ground in front of Windle. He sat upon a stump, and was playing his favorite flute. I could faintly hear the musical notes from here, but they were mixed in with Root's happy giggles and laughs as she watched her father from Fly's lap.

Although the scene was wondrous... to the point I wanted to bottle it up and store it forever, I still found my eyes sliding away from it. I turned just enough to look at the stubborn owl next to me, who was smiling warmly at the scene... looking as much a fool as she ever has or likely will.

"You've grown sentimental in your old age, Lilly. But I like it. It suits you," I said, teasing her a little... but meaning every word all the same.

"Shush Vim. You're the one who needs to learn how to be sentimental," she grumbled as she looked away from the scene.

"Impossible. I'm always sentimental," I said.

Lilly sighed at me and stepped away, to go sit down in one of the chairs or couches.

"She's lovely. Your wife has her own issues, like we all do, but she's a good person. A lovely person. I don't like at all how much she cares for humans, or can care for them I guess, but I understand the reason behind it. It's not the humans in general she likes; it's the people she cares for. She loves and cherishes those she deems important, family basically, and that is something I can fully respect," Lilly said, continuing her conversation about her assessment of my wife.

I nodded as I too turned away from the window, but I didn't sit. Not right away at least. Instead I simply stood there; hand on the backrest of one of the couches as I stared at the owl.

"I remember a young owl getting hurt often. For trying to be friends, and help, people she had instantly trusted and liked without waiting to see if they were worth such devotion too," I said.

Lilly groaned at me. "I was young back then," she defended herself.

"Indeed."

"Your wife is older than you think, by the way. I don't know if she told you or not, but thanks to those humans she was able to figure out how old she might be... or at least, for sure is," Lilly then said.

"What do you mean?" I asked as I finally decided to sit down. This type of topic was worth sitting for.

Lilly shrugged. "The humans. They went through their lineage. They kept good records, what with the saints and all. Your cat is well over four hundred years old. At minimum. That's how long ago her saint friend had died... and from what Renn's explained to me, it could have been centuries before she even ever met that woman," Lilly said.

Sitting back a little, I felt oddly shocked.

Renn...? Four hundred years old...?

I mean... it wasn't impossible. I believed it. Renn sometimes acted, or said certain things, that made her seem... well... archaic. Though lately she'd not seemed so, in the beginning she definitely had. Back then I had attributed it to her thicker predator blood, and possible lack of education, but now I knew the truth.

Renn was old. Older than I thought.

"Is it that surprising?" she asked, likely noting my sudden dumbfounded self.

I nodded slowly. "I don't know...? Yes? I guess? A part of me is happy, because it means she's closer to my own age, but a few hundred years doesn't make that much a difference really... while another part of me is sad over it," I said.

"How so? Because now she might grow old and die faster?" Lilly asked seriously.

I shook my head. "She's never had children. And as far as she tells me, has never been in a real relationship either. It's sad to think she's gone so long alone. It was bad enough I had thought she had spent a century alone, genuinely alone, but now that number could be twice that? Thrice? It's sad," I said.

Lilly was quiet for a moment, but eventually nodded. "I guess I get what you mean."

Taking a small breath I sighed. "Explains a lot about her actually," I said.

"It does. Yes."

Scratching the back of my head, I decided to ponder it more later. "Since we're talking about that saint again... Anything you'd want to say about her? While we're alone?" I asked.

She had mentioned already that she had believed the saint. Or at least, believed the saint to be saying stuff she had believed in, but had said those things in front of Renn. Or Windle. Or while knowing they were nearby, and could possibly hear her.

I wanted to verify her true feelings before I assumed my own.

Lilly though nodded. "Yeah. She's odd. I don't like some of the stuff she said... but, and this hurts me to admit it, she's probably not our enemy. She foresaw Renn showing up, amongst other things, but that's typical for a saint. They see the future of the ones they are close to, like always... and although she'd not met Renn until now, her ancestors have. So that makes sense. It's believable. I don't think I'd ever see her as an ally, but I didn't feel like killing her after meeting her at least," Lilly said.

An honest, and likely the best type of assessment I could get from Lilly and maybe even the only kind I should I have wanted to hear.

Though it was a little regretful I'd not be getting permission to slaughter the saint before I even met her.

"And of this monarch? That supposedly she had foreseen and sent a bunch of meek humans to face?" I asked.

"Oh she not only believes that fully, she fears it's just the start. I'll let you speak to her about all that. I know how you feel about talking about their dreams," Lilly said.

I nodded, though almost didn't want to.

That meant Lilly had heard the prophecies... and, like Renn, was keeping them secret because they knew what I'd say and do upon hearing them.

Great. That meant they were bad. Nothing simple, such as foreseeing a meeting with Renn.

That meant if they were telling me that, there was more. More concerning Renn.

Just great indeed.

"I will say this though... if you do plan to kill that saint, maybe speak about it with her first. Don't lose the first woman you've ever tried to court over a saint, Vim. no matter how much we hate them, they're not worth that price," Lilly said.

I laughed at her. "Wise words! But no. If she really didn't have anything to do with those fires, the supposed monarch, or anything... I won't harm her. Especially not if she's Renn's friend. And as much as I hate to admit it, having a saint as a friend is a powerful tool. It could keep Renn safe down the road, if we nurture such a thing," I said.

Lilly nodded. "My thoughts exactly. She seems kind of stupid, to be honest... this Elaine. Renn could probably easily get her on her side, our side, if you tried," Lilly said.

That was the plan. For now, at least.

"Either way, I'll be seeing her soon. If I don't like what she has to say then... Renn's wrath or no, I'll deal with her there and then," I said.

Lilly smirked at me. "I'm glad to know your kindhearted wife hasn't softened you that much just yet."

I scoffed. "Regrettably I fear she'll be doing the opposite real soon. Something tells me this vote may force my hand," I said.

"Because of her, you mean?" Lilly asked with a frown.

I shrugged, not sure yet how I wanted to phrase it. "For her, may be a better way to say it," I decided to say.

"You'd... break your own rules for her? I mean... it makes sense, Vim. I'd break mine for Windle and the kids. Love is a powerful thing... but..." Lilly seemed a little shocked. She had even leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, as to talk more seriously. With a lower voice.

"Rather than break my own rules, I fear the actions of others will break the rules I've long set," I said.

"What rules Vim?" she asked.

"The laws of this world."

Lilly went quiet, and remained so for a long moment. During the silence, I heard the sound of the flute grow in strength. Windle had started a more upbeat song, with higher notes.

I turned a little, to look over the couch I sat upon and out the window. From this angle I could only make out Fly and Windle, but I found Fly was now standing. She was swaying a little, slowly spinning. She was likely dancing, and holding Root in her arms as she did.

Lovely.

"Beware Lilly," I said as I watched Fly dance.

"Hm...?" Lilly made a noise as I heard her half stand up. She had misunderstood my warning, thinking something was wrong right now.

Support creative writers by reading their stories on Royal Road, not stolen versions.

"Beware Celine's daughter," I said as I looked back at her. Lilly blinked and slowly sat back down, nodding as she did. "The church. Of anyone, everyone, in the Society. Don't trust them. Doubt them. Even more than you've been doing all this time," I warned her further.

She shifted a little, as if suddenly itchy. "Are we alone this time, Vim?" she asked softly.

"No. I don't think we are. I don't believe we are... I hope we aren't," I said.

"That wasn't very convincing," she said with a soft smile.

I know.

"Would you send a letter to Merit for me? You'll likely reach Telmik before I will, since I'll be heading along the coastline. Plus I need to find Meriah too, she's looking for me, so who knows what she wants," I said as I remembered.

"Meriah...? That's not good."

No. It wasn't.

She only sought me out when she needed me.

And Meriah only needed the protector when all else had failed.

"I plan to head to Telmik once I have my children home... or at least have heard back from them, that they're on their way. I don't want to go start a war before they're safe under my wings," Lilly said.

I nodded, agreeing. "I wouldn't ask you to do anything else, Lilly."

She smiled gently and shrugged. "Plus...I got more kids now you know? Two new daughters."

I smiled back at her and nodded. Yes. She and Windle had agreed to adopt Fly.

It was kind of them. Verily so. And... in fact... it was something I had not expected.

They had spoken of it, but I had not expected the two to actually do it.

They had never done it before, after all. Even with those who had needed them. Those I had bought here, hoping they'd take, all those years ago. There had been more than a few that we've lost over the years... that I firmly believe would still be around today had Lilly and Windle been willing to adopt them. But I could not force such a thing. Particularly not the emotion of familial love.

Though I suppose one could argue I was as much at fault for such a thing. How many more would be alive today if I simply would have just kept them nearby? It was a sickening thought, so I tried not to let it live.

Either way, I was very pleased with Lilly and Windle. I wasn't going to ask what had changed, since I knew it was likely just age. They were older now. Softer. Kinder.

And who was I to complain about a good thing?

"Still... Merit? What do you plan to have that fishbrain do?" Lilly asked.

"I'm going to ask her, amongst others, for help. So that if what you and I seem to think is going to happen, whether we try to stop it or not, then... well..." I shrugged softly.

"At least we'll have allies while it happens," she nodded, finishing my own statement.

"Yeah. Please make sure you use Oplar. She herself, none of her human messengers," I asked.

"Can I read it?" she asked.

"Not only do I want you to read it, I'll want you to add to it. To send your own with it," I said.

"Sure. I do still need to respond to the last one anyway. Last one had been about some pirates or something Renn had sent to Lumen. Merit was annoyed she kept sending her such annoying headaches to take care of," Lilly said.

Oh. Right. I'd forgotten to mention to Renn that Merit had been the one to take care of not just those eastern girls, like Lamp, but the pirates too.

"Forgot about them..." I mentioned as I wondered what to do with that.

If I summoned Merit here... to Telmik, to stand by Lilly's and my side... then that meant those people would lose their support. Their attachment to the Society. The only one who probably cared anything about them.

Maybe I should include in the letter, that if Merit thinks it best, she should bring the humans she trusted with her. Those who had earned that level of trust and loyalty, at least.

But then I'd just be summoning humans to war. A war they'd likely not survive, or endure.

It'd be cruel to do such a thing.

"So... just Merit, Vim? I'll be honest if this is actually going to happen I'd like a few more. Is Landi still up to task?" Lilly asked.

I sighed and leaned forward too, to mimic Lilly. I rested my elbows on my knees, and then my face in my hands.

"What...? It's true Vim. You may not care, or notice, how dangerous some of those church idiots are but there's more than a few who'd put me to test," Lilly said honestly.

"You're not wrong, Lilly, I just hate that it's come to this. Where I need to even think about it," I said.

She scoffed at me. "It's long past thinking about it Vim. It's time to act, not think."

Possibly. A part of me still hoped this was all just... far too much preparation for a slim possibility, not a surety.

"I'll write more letters then," I said, accepting the fact of life.

"Hmph."

Leaning back again, I shook my head at myself as I wondered what to do. Or say.

Lilly wasn't wrong of course. I myself had been thinking this conversation had needed to happen. That action was needed, not words.

But...

Now it felt as if I was scheming. As if I was doing the same thing they were.

Me.

Scheming.

It was one thing to scheme against real enemies. Real threats. I'd scheme any day to avoid a real disaster.

But this...?

I was scheming against the very people I had sworn to protect.

Sickening.

And the worst part is even as I was here conniving with Lilly... making plans and schemes...

I'd not once told her the biggest step of it. I hadn't told her what I was going to do. What I planned to do, as to try and stop any and all bloodshed or chaos from occurring.

I knew it was rude. It was cruel. To not reveal to her something that might endanger her down the line.

But it wasn't time yet. I wasn't ready yet.

Because I knew the moment I did it... the moment I said it aloud...

Everything would change.

Everything.

"Do you think Leaf is amongst them Vim?" Lilly asked quietly, startling me.

Her question hung in the air for a moment, and I felt a strange sense of unease as I realized what she'd just asked me.

She had... just asked me if Leaf was alive? Her firstborn daughter?

Not just alive, but... with Light and the rest?

For a tiny moment I wondered if this was some kind of joke... but Lilly's face was serious. She was serious.

"I... I don't know Lilly," I said carefully. "I only saw a few of them before leaving Telmik. I tried not to encounter them, directly, on purpose. As to not start anything I didn't wish to end," I said. I tried my best to speak carefully. Gently. As if I was tiptoeing not just on broken glass, but also souls. A misstep could do far more than hurt.

"Even if she is... does it matter? If she's still alive after all this time, then..." Lilly though didn't notice my uneasy self as she sighed and shook her head, as if disgusted.

"Then she may as well be dead to you. Yes. Though... there would be some joy, and hope, to be had at the thought at least. I'll find out for you, if I somehow make it back there before you," I said.

She nodded, but with a sad smile. "Even if I get there before you I may not be able to figure it out. It's not like I actually will go into those hallowed halls," she said, a little sarcastically.

"Banished. If it makes you feel better about it I always wished I had been too, funnily enough," I said.

She laughed at me. "Hard way to get your wish, Vim!"

I nodded, and was glad she had not lingered too long on her daughter.

Really. Hoping she was still alive.

Poor Lilly was broken in her own way too, wasn't she?

"Oplar's mailroom. One of the humans who works for her, a human named Bless, lives outside of the Cathedral. I'll give you directions to find her house. She'll be able to get you in touch with Oplar and Randle, depending on whose there and who isn't," I said.

"A human...? You sure?" Lilly asked.

I nodded. "She knows of the Society. Is a part of it, her whole family is. She's completely and utterly at Oplar's disposal. Oplar has earned their whole families loyalty. The type that makes humans scary. She can be trusted to be discrete, since they see Randle and the rest as enemies. Since Oplar does too. Though they'll tell Oplar about anything you tell them, or ask them to do, so only inform them of anything you want Oplar to know about," I warned.

"Great. That's almost not worth the risk," Lilly said with a grin.

I smiled and nodded. "Oplar's a headache, sometimes, but she's okay. For now. And who knows? Maybe she'll end up being one of the few allies we have in this situation."

Lilly sighed but nodded, agreeing and accepting it... even if she too didn't like to think we were that desperate.

Oplar really wasn't that bad... she was just weak-willed.

She was useless in a fight. Any real one, at least. Which was why Lilly found her useless.

But Oplar wasn't useless. Far from it.

After a few moments of us listening to the distant flute noises... Lilly smirked and scoffed. At random.

"We're really doing this, aren't we?" she asked, as if in disbelief.

"You can always say no, Lilly," I said gently.

"And miss out on possibly getting to see you destroy those ugly towers of faith? No chance."

I sighed at the woman who had been far too serious in her joke. Too serious indeed.

Though...

She wasn't wrong, was she...?

That was what I was doing, wasn't I?

Planning for something like that.

What else would I be doing, otherwise? Talking about all this. Making these plans...

For a moment I pondered my decisions, and didn't like how I regretted each one of them.

I hated doing that. That was what had made me run away last time. I had fled to the sea.

This time where would I run...? Where would I go...?

And would Renn come with me if I asked?

A part of me wanted to say she would, but...

Renn loved the Society. For good reason. But that love was not the concept, but the people within it. The members.

Those like Lilly. Fly. And so many more.

She'd not be happy at all with me if I abandoned them. Even if they had been the ones to ask me to do so.

Would her love last me breaking her heart? Somehow I doubted it. Just as I could not endure my partner breaking my cardinal rules, so too could I not expect them to do the same for me.

Standing, I turned and stepped over to the window. I found Renn now holding Root, as Fly stood upon the stump with Windle's flute. She was being taught how to use it, with Windle gently showing her where to place her fingers.

It was the type of scene that should be everywhere right now. In every corner of the Society.

Yet... because of my failures, my lack of action and even more so my lack of oversight...

It was now a rarity. Even at places with large numbers, where there should be many children, such sights were rare. Hard to come by.

All because I'd allowed discord and doubt to not just plant seeds, but sprout. Everywhere.

"Renn's wanted me to act since we met. To be better. To do more. So have you, all this time. So many of you have complained about me," I said as I watched Renn clap, which made Root clap too from her lap.

Lilly stepped over to me, and I heard her gulp... but she said nothing.

Taking a small breath I nodded. "Maybe it's time I did so. Better late than never, I guess. Or as my father would say, better late thy neighbor," I said.

"That makes no sense Vim," Lilly whispered.

I smirked and shrugged.

"Never did to me either."

Chapter 365 Lilly's Departure

"He sleeps sometimes. I think he does it half the time just to avoid talking to me in bed, though," I said lightly as I handed Fly another dish.

We were on the bottom floor of the house, in the room behind the kitchen. Doing dishes.

"Talking or something else?" Fly asked nonchalantly as she went to scrubbing the plate.

Glancing at the young bird, I couldn't help but smirk at her. This wasn't the first time she'd made such an innuendo.

I couldn't remember her making such jokes, or talking about such things, back in Lumen. So maybe this new topic of interest was from the Bell Church.

It was cute of her though. She was trying to tease me in her own way.

I didn't want to admit that the reason Vim rarely slept was because of his strange exhaustion. How he didn't need to sleep, yet did. So this was far better a thing to talk about.

"You seem to be going to bed early lately, though, Fly," I said as I handed her another plate. This one was smaller, about half the size of the others we'd been cleaning.

In fact I had seen her yawn a little bit ago. We had just had dinner, and it wasn't nightfall just yet, but it seemed she was starting to get tired already.

"Hm... I don't know why but once the sun goes down I get tired. Used to be the opposite back at Lumen, I wonder what happened?" she wondered.

I assumed it was exactly because of her lifestyle in Lumen, but I didn't mention it as I watched her scrub the smaller plate.

Her arms were covered in feathers, as were parts of her hands. I worried a little over them getting so wet, especially with the soap, but it seemed she didn't mind or care. But I guess she had to get used to such things anyways, even if such water and bubbles did bother her feathers. She'd need to clean them even if alone, after all.

Though I suppose many birds got wet... maybe I was just being overprotective. After all my ears and tail got wet all the time, and although it took time to dry them off it didn't matter much.

"Do you stay up late Renn? Being a cat and all?" she asked as I handed her one of the last plates. We had a small stack of bowls left, and a large pot, but nothing else.

"Sometimes. I can go a few days without any real sleep without much effort... but I enjoy taking naps and being rested, when I can, so I try to do so," I said.

More so lately I'd been trying to sleep as often as I could, as to try and get Vim to do the same. With me.

"Cats are usually lazy. You don't seem lazy," Fly said.

I smiled at her. "I can be sometimes," I said. I used to be, I think, before joining the Society.

Or well, maybe not lazy... just bored.

"Hmph... oh!" Fly perked up a little and turned to look at me. I smiled at her, since she had some bubbles on her cheek. "On our trip here, I met Lomi and the rest! Your friend," she said.

I nodded. Vim had told me. "How was she? I've been hoping I could go see her before Vim makes us leave the area, but I'm afraid I might not get a chance," I said.

"She's great. I had fun with them... I don't really know what a fox is, but I'm told it's kind of like a dog? But the only dogs I ever knew were the mutts in the sewers. They were mean, always biting at people," Fly said.

"Lomi did bite Vim once," I said as I remembered it.

Fly laughed at that. "Good! But no... It was fun to visit them. All the kids back at Lumen were kind of mean, and the Bell Church didn't have many my age so..."

Oh...? I thought the Bell Church had kids. Maybe most had been too young, or too old, in Fly's eyes. "How long did you stay there? At Lomi's?" I asked, hoping to discard the bad taste of the current conversation.

"Three days. Or well, two? We left on the morning of the third," Fly said as she thought about it.

Hm... And Vim said they had been here for only a few days before Lilly and I got back.

Fly had told me about the few stops they'd made on the way here. A strange family where Vim had to fix their house with a wheel on it, which I assumed was a mill of some or a river-wheel like at the Summit. And they had met Brandy, alongside Vim taking her to a few stops where he had done odd things. Like digging up a book, or something.

I'd not yet found out what that was about, but I had a small assumption. After all, he had dug up something weird nearby too. A box.

It was strangely solemn to know what Vim was doing... and the meaning behind his actions.

He was gathering up things he's hidden away. Because he knew, here soon, he might either need them or be unable to easily access them without permission.

I wasn't sure yet what to think of him also grabbing the item he had hidden here. Since I didn't see how Lilly was a threat. Even if Vim got voted out of the Society completely, I doubted Lilly would ever ban him from her home... so I was unsure of what to think about his lack of trust in her.

Did he think it would get so bad that even Lilly's home wouldn't be available to him...? Or was it something more?

Finding myself very concerned with it, I hoped I'd soon get a chance to talk to him privately. So far, even though I'd been back for over a day already, I'd yet to get the opportunity. I had taken a small nap last night, after we had all talked through the night after Fly and Root had gone to bed... but before I could sneak off with Vim and invite him to my room he had disappeared. I had searched the house for a few moments, until I realized he didn't want to be found for a reason. He hadn't been in the house at all, likely, and since everyone else was including Lilly, I decided to just go get some sleep while I could.

Vim was a little rude sometimes. I was supposed to be his wife, right? Why'd it sometimes feel like I was being neglected?

Even at Telmik, although we had spent time together and he had even invited me himself as to do so, it still had felt like I had not been his main focus.

Though... I suppose that was just what I had agreed to upon claiming him. He had warned me... that he'd always place the Society before me. Even when he didn't want to either.

"Renn," Fly snapped me out of my slight daze, and my thoughts, and I hurried to help her lift the pot. She had finished the bowls while I had been deep in thought.

We both cleaned the pot, and then finished cleaning up the small mess we had made. I dried off the large basin, dealing with the few remaining bubbles, while Fly dried her own feathers off.

"So uh... Renn," Fly stepped closer as I placed down the towel I'd been using. I smiled down at the bird who glanced around the room, as if to make sure we were alone, and then she leaned closer. "Where do you live?" she asked.

Oh.

"Well... technically nowhere. I just travel around with Vim, we never stay in one place long," I said gently.

The young bird's eyes softened a little, and I realized I had just likely squished a tiny little flame of hope within her.

Grabbing the side of the basin we had used to clean the pots and dishes, I felt suddenly weak as I realized what was happening. Right now. Right here.

"I see..." Fly looked down, blinking slowly as she did. She seemed lost in thought as she turned a little, as if to return to doing dishes... but there were none left to clean.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

I gulped, and felt horrible. "Sorry, Fly..." I whispered.

She glanced back up at me, tilting her head as she did. She smiled at me. "What for?"

"For not having a home for you," I said honestly.

She blinked again, and the moment her eyes reopened they became full of tears.

My own welled alongside hers as she stepped towards me. I not only accepted her hug, I returned it in full as I bent down to wrap my arms around her.

"It's okay!" she said as she buried her face into me.

No. It wasn't.

"It's okay," she said again, sounding a little steadier this time. I felt her small squeeze as she took a deep breath. She really wasn't very strong... not physically, at least... but everywhere else?

Fly took another deep breath and we separated as she smiled up at me. "It's okay, Renn," she said again, without a tear in sight. Though her feathers around her face did look a little stained.

I smiled and nodded. "Okay... And yes. It will be. I promise," I said as I grabbed her shoulders. I gave them a tiny squeeze, not hard enough to harm her, and vowed to find her a home. If Lilly and Windle wouldn't accept her, or she them, then I'd find her one myself. Even if I had to build it with my own hands.

Though I likely had nothing to worry about. Lilly and Windle had mentioned a few times last night during our conversation that they were already considering it... and a few of the things they had said had implied it was already a done deed. Not so much a maybe, but an inevitability.

Fly smirked up at me. "You got snot Renn," she said with a point at her nose.

Ah.

I nodded as I reached over to grab the rag we'd been using to clean the dishes. I used it to clean my face, and had Fly check to make sure I was fine now.

"Why'd you cry harder than me?" she asked with a grin.

"It'd be stranger if she hadn't."

The two of us turned to find Vim. He was standing just beyond the doorway, in the kitchen, and staring at us with a look of utter annoyance.

How long had he been there...? He must have seen and heard everything.

"Maybe she cries so much because you don't at all?" Fly asked.

I shifted a little, since I knew such a thing wasn't true. Vim did actually shed tears. Just... rarely, and not like most of us did.

"Maybe. Are you two done playing with bubbles?" he asked.

"We weren't playing!" Fly complained as she looked back at me. "He's been very rude lately you know?" she told me.

"Has he...? Really?" I asked. I wonder how so?

Fly shifted as her feathers puffed up a little... and then she glanced at Vim, only to look back at me real quick. "Well... no. But still!"

I smiled and nodded. I see.

"Stop being mean to Fly, Vim. You're mean enough to me, you don't need to be mean to everyone else too," I said, taking her side in her little attempt to tease him.

"Yeah! Wait... you're mean to her too? Really? Your own wife?" Fly asked, crossing her arms as if in disappointment.

I smirked at her as Vim sighed at the two of us. "Lilly's leaving. You two should go say goodbye, may not see her again for a time," he said.

"Wait... already?" I asked. Yea we had talked about it last night... but...!

"Lilly doesn't waste time. You could learn that from her," he said as he stepped away, heading into the kitchen deeper as to leave.

I grumbled as I went to follow him. Fly quickly joined me, but not before I tossed the towel into one of the small baskets near the door. The one used for dirty cloths.

If Lilly was leaving already... that likely meant Vim would have us leave soon too. That was too bad. I had hoped to stay here for a little bit. Both to spend more time with Lilly and Fly... and well...

Glaring at Vim's back, I was half tempted to start interrogating him right here. Even if Fly, and who knows who else, heard everything as I did.

"Where's Lilly going?" Fly asked as we followed Vim through the kitchen and to the hallway.

"To get her children. They live nearby but it'll take her a bit to get them, I guess," I said.

Fly hummed, and I knew she wanted to ask why... so I simply pointed upward. Where I knew Windle and Root were likely located. "She likely wants to let them meet their new sister," I said.

"Oh! Right!" Fly nodded quickly, finding that to be perfectly believable.

Honestly it wasn't an outright lie, but it felt like a good one to make at the moment.

Fly did know of the vote, and the circumstances... but I didn't want her fretting over it. Not at the moment anyway.

She had just cried over finding out I had no home. Because she had been hoping to ask to live with me.

Someone with those kind of concerns didn't care much about anything else, I'd bet. Plus I didn't want her, who felt like she had no home at the moment, to have to worry about any possible homes being taken or lost to her all because of a vote by people she didn't know.

"How old are the kids she's going to get?" Fly asked as we followed Vim down the hall.

I smiled at her. "Older. One even was married, or had been...?" I said softly as I wondered how to phrase it.

"Yes. Her husband died," Vim said. I noted he didn't mention he had been human.

"Oh..." Fly made a small noise, and I knew she was now more upset she had said something insensitive than finding out Lilly's children weren't around her age.

"Bark isn't much older than you Fly. He's the youngest son. He's... well..." Vim slowed a little as we neared one of the larger rooms, which branched into other rooms. He turned to look at us as we slowed and stepped up to him. He frowned at Fly, and nodded. "He's kind of like those at the Bell Church."

"Oh..." Fly again made that noise, this time she sounded genuinely sad.

"He's... still Lilly's child, right? Surely he can't be that bad," I said.

Vim's soft glance at me told me the truth as he turned and headed for another hallway. One that I knew would lead us to the front of the house. "Some say he is," is all Vim said about him.

Great.

Fly and I glanced at each other as we were led to the front of the house, near the front door. Lilly was alone in one of the larger rooms next to the front door, sitting on a couch and fastening her boots.

"Are you really leaving Lilly?" Fly asked as she hurried into the room to stand near her.

"Yes. My children don't stay in one place too long, so if I don't it'll just make the task harder for me down the road," she said as she went to finish securing her other boot.

"Hm..." Fly made a small noise as she hummed, and I wondered why she seemed so bothered by it. Maybe our earlier conversation about her children, particularly Bark, had made her worried of their soon-to-be arrival.

"Take care of Windle and Root for me Fly. I should only be a couple weeks at most, but you never know nowadays," Lilly said to the young bird.

"Oh...? Okay! Sure!" Fly nodded without hesitation, and I wondered if she even realized what had just happened.

I glanced at Vim, and found him smiling gently at Fly. We were standing behind her, so she couldn't see us, and I felt my own smile grow and become warm too.

"Windle will write a letter for my other children, Vim. If you would also maybe check on Branches... but Windle has a connection with him, via letters, so you may not need to go find him too," Lilly said as she finished with her boots and glanced up over Fly and at Vim.

"Of course. It's not fair he gets to have all that fun anyway," Vim said.

Lilly laughed as Fly turned to look at Vim, frowning at him.

"I'd ask if you'd like to come with me Renn, but I think if I did he'd break my wings," Lilly said with a sigh as she stood.

I smiled at her. "He'd be offended, yes, but not as badly as that I think."

"Keep it up and I'll make her stay here forever," Vim said.

Fly was the one who laughed at that. "He says that as if it's a threat!"

Well... to him it was. He liked Lilly, a lot, but I knew Vim well. He didn't like anyone enough to linger near them too long. Though... for not so obvious reasons.

"With that being said, stay safe Renn. Keep near him, he's a fool sometimes but Vim's the safest place to be in the whole world. If you do find my flock, send them home," Lilly then said to me.

I nodded slowly. "Sure... Stay safe as well, Lilly. Stand tall," I said as I watched her bend down to pick up a small bag. She slung it over her shoulder, and reached over to pat Fly on the head.

"Don't stay up too late," she warned Fly.

"What...? I don't?" Fly though didn't get the joke as Lilly smirked and nodded.

"Is Windle not going to say goodbye? Or Root?" I asked lightly as Lilly stepped around Fly, as to walk between Vim and I and head for the exit.

"Already did. It's a mother's job to gather her children, so it's all good. Later Renn. Vim, remember what we talked about," Lilly said as she slipped between us and left.

"Fly well," was all Vim said as Lilly opened the door and then stepped out of it. Half a moment later the door was shut and she was gone.

Feeling strangely cold all of a sudden, not just because of the small breeze of cold air that had rushed in from the door, I wondered what to say or think of Lilly's sudden departure.

It hadn't just been quick; in my opinion... it was a little unceremonious.

"She'll be fine. Unlike you Renn she stays out of trouble," Vim said.

Fly giggled at that. "I bet that's true!"

I crossed my arms at them. "I've been doing rather well, lately, I thought? If anyone's been getting in trouble it's you," I said to Vim.

Fly giggled some more. "That's probably true too!"

Vim sighed but smiled.

Chapter 366 The Beginning of Question, and Their Exhaustive Answers

The house was finally, relatively, quiet.

Somehow Lilly leaving had made it a tad louder. Fly and Renn had spent the day with Root, noisily distracting the baby from the fact her mother had once again disappeared. If Root had even noticed the last time, I'd not been able to tell.

In fact Root rarely seemed to cry. Since being here I think I'd only heard her do so three or four times. And even then those cries had only been for a few moments and not the very loud shrieks that babies usually wailed.

Root had inherited more than strength from her mother, it seemed. I looked forward to seeing what she'd accomplish. It was rare for such strong personalities to be born anymore in the Society, especially so to those with such strength and such parents.

Hopefully Windle will be able to keep too many rough edges from forming.

Slowly walking down the hallway, I listened to the soft snores from above. Fly seemed to snore, even when not exhausted. Not too uncommon a trait, but considering she was such a little thing it made her loud snores all the more unique.

Windle was awake. I heard him mumbling softly as he wrote at his desk. Root was likely asleep in the small crib-like bed I had helped make with him today. They already had several cribs throughout the house, but he hadn't had one for his office. Usually it wasn't that big a deal, since Lilly was normally here to help, and also because he usually didn't have to visit his office as often as he did now. But the world was not as peaceful anymore... So instead of having to constantly move a crib, I had went ahead and made another for him. One that would let him spend the next week or two mostly in his office, while Lilly was gone.

It had also kept me occupied for the day. A strange thing that I had felt like I wanted and needed, yet the entire time I had been doing it I had felt... well...

As if I was wasting time. As if I was supposed to be elsewhere, doing something else. Something more important.

And in truth, I probably should be.

The Society was in a strange state at the moment. Even if I ignored the vote, and the Chronicler's strange schemes, the Society had issues. It always had issues. Not to mention Meriah wanted to see me, which was usually a pressing matter on a normal day.

I really should return to my route. Renn would be a little upset with me, but it was time we left. I'd lingered too long as it was, and I still had to spend a few days out of my way going to that saint and speaking with her.

"Not looking forward to that either," I mumbled. I hated saints.

And this saint... this Saint Elaine, was related to Renn. My wife. In more than just familial relations too.

Slowing a little, I noted a new sound in the house. One that was smooth, slow, and gentle.

At first I couldn't place the sound, but after a few seconds I realized it was Renn.

Or rather, the sound what she was doing.

Reaching the end of the hallway, I paused before Renn's bedroom door.

She was alone in her bedroom, thankfully. I had come here a few hours ago, to sit and talk with her, but had found she had been sitting on the bed with Root. Just... sitting there and talking to her. About everything and anything.

It had been adorable, but that was the problem. It had made me feel strangely awkward, so I had decided to leave her be. Even if the child would not have understood anything Renn and I would have talked about, I hadn't wanted to do so in front of the child.

Which only made me feel even more awkward. As if I had planned to have weird conversations or something, when in reality I had simply wanted to talk about us leaving tomorrow.

Now, later in the night, Renn was alone. Fly was asleep. Root with her father, and he was busy writing letters.

And, to make the moment even more perfect... the outside world was growing noisy. A new storm had arrived, though right now it was all wind and no rain. Although the house was relatively quiet, thanks to how well built it was, I knew the wind would mask Renn's and my voice. Windle, especially while lost in his letters and Fly's snoring, would know we were talking but not what we were talking about. As long as we spoke softly.

Which meant for the first time... in a very long time, it felt, Renn and I had a chance to be alone.

This was a perfect time to have a conversation.

Taking a small moment to collect myself, I reached out to grab the door's handle. I grabbed it slowly, quietly, and opened the door.

Renn didn't seem to notice me at first. She was sitting on the bed, her tail wrapped around her waist and laying on her lap. She had the comb I had made her and she was slowly, methodically, combing her tail... with a rather serious expression on her face as she did so. As if what she was doing was very important and needed all of her focus.

For only a few seconds I stood there. Enjoying the scene before me. But then Renn's ear twitched and she looked up, finally realizing I was here.

Without any hesitation a huge smile planted itself on her face, all because of the mere sight of me. It made my heart swell with pride, and so I turned as to close the door behind me. Turning away from her for a few moments, both to try and stop myself from smiling back at her with what I knew was a stupid grin of my own, and also to keep myself from just falling into her arms.

To receive such a welcome, without a word spoken, so instantly and purely made me feel unfathomably lucky. And it felt wrong somehow to be so.

"Hey Vim!" Renn finally greeted me as I turned back around after shutting the door. She still sat on the bed, but had paused in her combing. Instead she had sat up a little straighter, and her tail had gone to happily flapping on and around her lap, making her seem more like a dog than a cat.

"Rennalee," I said, greeting her as I glanced around for a chair.

I knew this room. I had helped build it. But I'd not been in it for who knows how many years, so it took me a moment to find one of the chairs here. Every bedroom, the ones not claimed by Lilly's family members at least, had three chairs. One for a desk, and two for a small table. This room though, Renn's,

seemed to have all three in odd places. One was on the other side of the bed, resting against it, which meant someone had been sitting in it before. Maybe Cat or Fly. Another was near the door to the bathroom, where Renn's hat rested, and the last I was pulling out from under a desk. One that had a bunch of little things littering it, notably amongst it all the little blue box that held Renn's nail stuff.

Renn giggled at me as I pulled the chair over near the bed, as to sit and face her. "Rennalee? Are we about to have a serious conversation?" she asked happily, as if excited for one.

"Hm...? Not really. I just felt like saying your whole name to you, for some reason," I admitted.

Renn blinked at me, and then her grin turned into a strange smirk. "Really?"

I nodded.

She seemed to like that, since her smirk turned back into that lovely smile. The one that made my heart feel weird.

"Let me guess, you want us to leave tomorrow," she said.

I nodded. "I'd like us to, if you're okay with it."

"If I'm okay with it?" she asked.

I shrugged slowly, unsure why she had responded with my own words. "Yeah...?"

Renn shifted a little, turning herself on the bed as to face me directly. Her tail disappeared from my sight for a moment as it hid behind her, then it reappeared in front of her. She grabbed at it without looking, and I noted she had almost missed it in the process. "If I asked to stay longer, you'd be okay with it?" she asked. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the way she was holding her tail. She was doing so as if nervous, and trying to keep it from squirming wildly.

"Well... I suppose so. But I really should get back on the road. Would you like to stay here while I do? I would prefer if you at least came with me to your saint, if you would, you could always come back here after if you'd like while I go check on everyone else around here," I offered.

As I spoke though, I noticed an odd feeling. One in the back of my throat, almost.

I blinked as Renn hummed in thought as she returned to combing her tail. She tilted her head, flickering her ears as she did, and half-closed her eyes.

While she pondered my statement, I realized the feeling I couldn't place was some kind of worry. Maybe even a fear.

It was almost more terrifying that I'd realized what the fear was, than the fear itself.

I was worried she'd say yes. That she wanted to return here. And not stay with me.

My eye twitched, but only for half a heartbeat, as I quickly got my own feelings and thoughts under control.

Don't be so shamefully greedy, Vim. Don't be cruel.

If being here instead of with me was what she wanted, it was what she'd get.

"Can I ask why you seem so bothered by the idea...?" Renn then asked.

Shit. She had noticed.

Of course she had. Just because I had allowed that strange fear to take over for a few moments. That was all it had taken for her to see it, even while she was lost in thought.

"I had been bothered, but more so for another reason," I tried to fib.

Renn's smile shifted a little, and I knew I had failed rather obviously. So I sighed and reached up to cup my face. I rubbed my face, as if to mold clay into a more bland shape.

"Vim?"

Nodding, I lowered my hand and smiled at the woman who looked amused. "I'd been upset. Over the idea of you not coming with me," I told her honestly.

Renn blinked... and though I expected her to laugh at me... she instead stopped combing her tail and her shoulders lowered in a slump. Her smile remained, but it was now small. Tiny. Faint.

A little bothered by her sudden change in demeanor, I was about to say something but she beat me to it. "I love you too, Vim," she whispered.

My back tightened, and I was glad I sitting on something I'd built myself. The chair creaked, but didn't break, as I shifted ever so slightly.

"Well... yeah," I mumbled, a little embarrassed.

Yes. I loved her. Thus my being upset over the idea of her not being with me. But that wasn't really something to be proud of. I was not supposed to be a selfish man. Not like that. My parents had wanted me to, made me in fact , to be everything but selfish. Yet here I was, wanting to monopolize her, even at the cost of her own happiness and the good of the Society.

Renn giggled at me, looking happier than ever all of a sudden. I liked the way she grabbed her tail and shook it, as if it wasn't attached to her. She wagged it at me, as if it was some kind of stick or toy. I enjoyed the sight, especially since just a few moments ago she had looked forlorn and worried. Not many people could be so vivid in their emotions, let alone such emotions one after another as she did. She was boisterously happy in one moment, then depressed and weeping the next... only to laugh and giggle half a moment later at something else entirely.

Some would see such a thing as a spark of insanity. Others would just frown and shake their heads, bothered by it but not so greatly that it forced their hand. I though...?

I fell even deeper in love because of it.

Who was worse I wonder? Her who was a pendulum of emotions, or me who was the cause of it? Or rather, I who felt weak and small over a single one? I wish I could face so many emotions at once like her without hesitation. It was rare for me to feel more than one at a time, and even then only distantly. A fault of not just my age, but my parents. They had raised me to be understanding and gentle, especially with those like Renn, but at the same time had made me... not as susceptible to such emotions, to say the least.

"I'm okay with leaving tomorrow Vim. We have a lot to do, don't we? It's best we didn't dally too long," Renn then said.

I nodded slowly, and did my best to not notice she hadn't said if she'd keep going with me or come back after meeting her saint.

"We do... but there's always a lot to do, Renn. So if you would like to rest here for a bit more, I can always come back and get you later. In a few months, if you'd like," I offered anyway.

Renn smiled and shook her head. "No, Vim. I'll go with you. As much as I'm enjoying this... in ways I can't explain, not knowing the words, I'd rather be with you. Plus I'd like to see everyone else too. Crane and Rapti, Kaley, and everyone else. I'd also like to meet Tor this time, if I can. He's a monarch right? One of

the few in the Society? I'd like to meet him," Renn said, revealing she's actually been thinking about our upcoming venture rather deeply.

I nodded slowly. "I'm sure we can work that out," I said. Silkie and the rest would throw a fit, but there were ways around that.

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"Plus..." Renn shifted again and leaned forward. She placed her hands on her ankles, and with her crossed legs she suddenly looked a little smaller than usual as she drew closer, as if to whisper. "I think I'll not be able to leave, Vim, if I don't soon," she admitted.

I nodded slowly, again. "Yes... it is hard to leave, sometimes," I agreed.

Her smile grew softer, sadder, as she nodded back. "I love it here. So desperately so. So if you don't take me, you'll have to drag me away and that'd be embarrassing," she said.

"Only for you."

She laughed at that. "Probably!"

"Still... all the same, consider it. It is... not often, Renn, that one can enjoy such an atmosphere as this. Especially in today's era. Especially today," I warned her.

Renn's laughter faded away as she studied me, and then she scooted forward again. This time she reached the edge of the bed, and her legs unfurled so she could dangle them over the ledge. "I know Vim. I know... I really do. I've been traveling with you this whole time, utterly astounded at how lovely so many of our locations in the Society are. Even more so, the people at them... So I do know how precious this all is, I really do. But it's exactly because of how precious this place is, these places are, that I need to go with you. So that we can keep protecting them... and if able, maybe, find a way to keep ourselves welcomed at them all too while we're at it," Renn said.

A little stunned, I hesitated as Renn smiled and nodded at me. She had spoken so well, so purely, that I was at a loss for words.

After a few moments of silence, I sighed at myself. "How are you able to say so easily what I can barely admit in my own heart?" I asked.

"Really Vim? You say sweet things all the time, don't belittle yourself," she teased.

I scoffed at her and noted the way her feet had started to dance a little in the air. As if swaying her feet like a kid, excited and full of wonder.

It was so rare for our kind, especially those at her age, to act like she did. Even more so those who had suffered.

Thank goodness she was still so lively. Hopefully I could keep such spirit safe, for as long as I could. For as long as possible, humanly and divine.

The wind outside was finally joined by rain, but it didn't add much to the noise. This house had thick walls. The type that could withstand even the harshest winds, even from natural disasters. I had honestly gone a little overboard building this place, if one thought about it.

"Listening to the wind?" Renn asked, noticing where my attention had one. Away from her.

I nodded. "It's that time of the year. Storms, aplenty."

"There was a rather bad one. Last time I was here, before you showed up. The house didn't even shake. I don't think there's a single place in this whole house that whistles even during the crazier winds," Renn said.

"Soon it'll be snow. Some years the snow is so bad here they walk out from the second or third floor balconies," I said.

"Ah! That's why some of them have little gates on them!" Renn said happily.

"Well... no. It was because originally Lilly and Windle had their wings, when we had first built this place. They had landed on those balconies using them like front porches when returning home."

Renn's happy joy diminished a little. "Oh..." Her feet stopped swaying, going still.

I didn't like how I had made her sullen. I hadn't meant to remind her of something that broke her heart so blatantly. Why did I do that so often?

It was strange, honestly. I felt as if I was so careful with Renn, so mindful of what I said and how I said... yet at the same time when speaking with her, I rarely put much thought into my offhanded comments and answers to her questions. As if I was just instinctively honest and open with her, to a fault. And that honesty, my honesty, was usually painful to hear. Not because I was blunt with it, or rude, but because of the implications behind it.

My honesty revealed the harsher truths to the world. Ones most people not only didn't speak aloud of, but genuinely tried to avoid... sometimes even instinctively. Over the years I've lost many friends because of how callous I sounded sometimes. So usually I kept myself in check, yet like always here I was... not even thinking before speaking with her.

The sad thing is she'd likely prefer me to be honest with her like this. To her this was better than the alternative. Even when it made her sad.

"You know Renn..." I started to speak, as to try and bring that happy smile and demeanor back, but hesitated.

She tilted her head at me, and gave me a gentle smile. One that I recognized well. She wore it often when waiting for me to find my nerve, or at least attempt to. She somehow enjoyed it when I was struggling to be... better.

I shifted again, and leaned a little forward... as if to join her in whispering. But I had no plans to whisper lowly, since if I started doing that I would probably start whispering sweet nothings.

"I trust you, you know?" I told her carefully.

She blinked and nodded, rather slowly as if she was still in the middle of processing what I'd just said. But I knew that wasn't the case. Renn had a far quicker mind than most people could imagine.

"I really do. Along our journey together... I've watched you. Studied you. I've seen how you are with our people. How you've kept their secrets. How you've wept for them, with and alongside them, while also staying strong when needed," I went further into detail. Renn's face contorted a little, becoming a mix of happiness and confusion. She remained quiet as I nodded and sighed. "I can't properly explain it. I judge everyone. I watch how people act around those weaker than them. Or those stronger. A lot can be told about a person by the way they act and speak amongst strangers, or long time friends," I added.

"Hm..." Renn softly nodded, only making a tiny noise as she did.

"Sometimes it's something as little as how fast someone opens up to someone. How quickly they'll reveal secrets, or speak about stuff that might seem... awkward to say to someone they've only recently met. I can't properly explain how or why, but I do it for everyone," I said, explaining further.

"For what purpose Vim?" she asked.

"None really. It's a trait I picked up a long time ago... Back when I had been at war. There had been many people, people I needed or trusted, who had betrayed me. So I had just instinctively started studying people, always keeping an eye on those I deemed untrustworthy. As a way to protect myself and those around me," I said.

"Oh..." she made another small noise again.

I nodded as I took a small breath. "Today, I do it more so as a way to keep tabs. To tell who may become a threat to the Society, even if hundreds of years down the line. One can usually tell by a person's personality, or their desires. Basically I just... monitor certain people, and take notes on their finer personality traits over the years as I interact with them. As to better know who may one day cause problems, and those who won't," I said.

"And by leading this conversation with the fact you trust me, are you saying I'm one of those troublesome people?" Renn asked with a smirk.

I chuckled for a few moments and shook my head. "Not really. You are dangerous Renn, as I've said many times, but your danger is to me. Only me. You are no threat to anyone in the Society... or the world even, to be clear. The only way someone could become endangered, or a target of your wrath, is if they've earned such a thing. In which case odds are they'd have earned my wrath too," I said.

Renn's smile warmed a little as she nodded. "Then... what are you trying to say, Vim?"

I shrugged ever so gently. "I'm just saying... I've been watching you recently. When I can. From afar, it feels, thanks to how busy we've been. I watched you at Telmik with Cat, and others, like Angie. I watched you here with Fly and Root, and of course Lilly and Windle. I'm just... well..." I hesitated again, and felt... silly.

Just say it Vim.

Say it and get it over with.

I blinked, and found my eyes had wandered away from hers. I looked up from her knees, a strange place for me to have focused, and found her patiently waiting for me. Her smile grew a tad, upon our eyes meeting, but she remained silent... letting me once again gather my nerves.

Damn.

"Basically Renn... I'm saying you're probably one of a handful of people I've ever known, in my long life, that... is genuinely a good person. I know without any doubt, beyond reason, that I could entrust you with..." I gestured lightly. "Practically anything! And not only would you not betray me, you'd likely do everything in your power... even go through hell itself, to accomplish whatever task I set you on."

Renn slowly sat up a little straighter, and I noted the way her tail had gone still. Her smile remained, but it seemed a little empty all of a sudden as she simply stared at me. As if she was stunned.

"I have known countless people Renn. I've known the greatest people, who changed history, and I've known the simplest. I can't really explain what I'm trying to say, since I know it doesn't make much sense, but... well..."

"Are you saying you love me because of this trust? That you have in me?" Renn then asked, before I could find more words to say.

For the tiniest of heartbeats, I hesitated. Was that what I was trying to say...?

No. Maybe.

"Rather... I'm saying I love that I can trust you. That you are who you are. I would have loved you no matter what, but I'm... happy. To have someone I can rely on. For not just small things, but the most important things, stuff I've not relied on others for... in well... longer than I can remember, if ever," I said.

Renn grabbed her knees and squeezed them, and I noted the way her tail started to twitch again. It was no longer doing it in joy, but apprehension... as if she was about to jump off the bed.

Likely was. She had likely wanted to hug me, thus her grabbing her own knees. In an attempt to stop herself.

Which was too bad. It's been a long time since I'd hugged her.

"I don't even know what to say to that Vim, other than thank you. And that I love you," Renn then said, a little stiffly.

I smiled and nodded. "Mhm. I love you too. And you don't need to read too deeply into it, I just... wanted to say it. I thought about it on the way here, with Fly. I... well..." I hesitated again, for a new reason, but knew I had to say it now. "I had been worrying about where to take her. Or who to take her to. The few options she has, are ones that all come with negatives. Tor's village is full of prey. Nann and them are a danger to themselves. They've grown too large, and mingle too much with the surrounding villages. They will eventually suffer a tragedy. The Crypt would accept her, but I fear she'd just become a loner like Sharp. So... well..." I shrugged, as I pointed at her.

"Wait... you were thinking of me... For Fly?" Renn mumbled, realizing what I was saying.

I nodded. "You're perfect Renn. You could live with Fly, protect her, guide her and teach her. And she would have been happy too, to boot. And that's what bothered me. My very first instinct, upon realizing you'd work perfectly, was that I had grown upset. I had detested the idea. And... I shouldn't have. There would have been absolutely nothing wrong with it, and," I started to explain my feelings, and how I was trying to apologize for them, but before I could finish Renn rushed forward.

She wrapped her arms around my chest and shoulder, one arm under my own and another around my neck, and had ran into me with enough force to make the chair skid backward. I basically half-stood, as to keep the chair from simply shattering under both my weight and her violent movement.

Glad that the world outside had grown more noisy, with the storm; I sighed as I slowly sat back down and accepted Renn's hug. She squeezed me with what felt all of her strength and then some... and it felt good.

For a very small moment, I felt the exhaustion tugging at the back of my mind take over. It rushed forward, making my eyelids suddenly feel very heavy. But as quickly as it came, it passed, as I blinked and took a small breath... a little shocked over the strange sensation.

I had nearly fallen asleep just now.

Holding Renn, I glared at her tail as it wiggled and thrashed in the air. She was making tiny noises as she hugged me, since she was squeezing me with such great effort, and it was all a good distraction for what had nearly just happened.

She'd probably laugh and enjoy my falling asleep in the middle of hugging her, but I'd never live it down. How awkward it would have been to do so.

Hopefully it was just the moment and this wouldn't happen every time we hugged from now on.

"Windle and Lilly chose to adopt her," Renn then mumbled in my ear.

I resisted the urge to shiver at the feeling, and nodded. "They have. A change I had not expected. I always hope, have many times, they'd do such a thing... but this is the first time they've ever done it," I said.

Renn's squeezing softened a bit, but she stayed in my embrace. "You've brought others before? To see if they would?" she asked, realizing my meaning.

I nodded again. "Yes. Children too, like Fly. And a few have been birds, and... like I said, I always hope, but never expect it. And so far they've never done such a thing. So I'm... a little shocked they decided to do so," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Well, Lilly and Windle aren't known for their gentle natures and—" I started to explain, but she giggled and leaned back a little, making me go quiet as I found our faces rather close. She still held me, but only gently.

"Why would it shock you Vim...? That they'd finally become better?" she asked, clarifying her question's real meaning.

"Well..." I wasn't sure what to say to that. And not just because I was lost in her eyes.

She had a lovely smile on her face, the type that made me feel jealous somehow. As if I wanted it for myself, even though I knew it was for me.

"Well what...?"

I sighed at her and looked away from her gaze. Why was she so darn happy?

For a few moments we were quiet, until she started to giggle. She laughed for a moment as she released me, a little slowly, and leaned back as to sit on the edge of the bed. Although no longer clinging to me... she hadn't let me go. Not fully. Her hands had slid down my arms, finding my forearms, where she gently clasped... and I realized she was trying to imitate an old method of greeting. One she'd likely seen me use on a few of our members, like Lawrence.

I returned the handshake, grabbing her arms as well. It was a little awkward, since we were both sitting down and we weren't clasping directly but instead on top of and under each other. But it was fine. Somehow it was fitting.

"I'm happy our friends are becoming nicer too, though... it may also simply be the fact the Society is now at a point where they have no choice, Vim. The other situations you speak of... back then, how many other locations had been available? Fly for instance, back in that time, how many more places could she

have gone?" Renn then asked, sounding rather lovely as she spoke. Why'd her voice sound so nice all of a sudden...?

Nodding gently, I admitted and acknowledged what she was saying. "Yes. I know. I know back then they had not done so because there had been other, maybe even better options. There had been," I said.

"Mhm," Renn nodded, as if glad I was willing to accept that fact.

But of course I was. I wasn't a fool. But... well...

"To be honest I don't know what I was saying," I said.

"I do. I think you were trying to imply somehow that my presence made Lilly and Windle more open-hearted. Or minded? Open-minded? But that's a silly notion, Vim."

I frowned at her and wondered if that was what I was trying to say. Surely not... right? I rarely expected anyone to change their ways, especially those who were old. Like Lilly and Windle. So...

Renn giggled again, and reached out with her feet. She pushed her feet against my shins, though only very gently. As if she just wanted to rest her feet against me. "I'm glad you thought of me though, for Fly. Even if it annoyed you," she then said.

Shrugging, I kept my mouth shut as I focused on our touch instead. How did our hands and feet touching somehow feel more intimate than our earlier hug?

"And although I would have happily lived with Fly... I'm also glad Lilly and Windle kept us from having to do so. But that being said, I do have a question. Or well, I have many questions like usual, but this one might be a tad odd even for me," Renn then said.

"Hm?"

"Do you think Lilly and Windle would be willing to let me build a home here? For us? Even just a small house?" she asked.

For once I didn't know the answer to one of her silly little questions... though I suppose this one wasn't silly in the slightest. "Honestly I don't know. My first guess would be no. They're private people. They don't live here, away from everyone else, just because they're banished and hated by most of the Society. They do it because they want to."

Renn's smile softened, but didn't go out. She must have expected my answer. I'm glad she had asked me first.

"That being said, though," I said, before she could speak up. "It would also not surprise me if they agreed to it. Lilly seems to really like you, and strangely enough so does Windle. He doesn't even shy away from you when you two draw close," I said.

"He did in the beginning. When I first visited, those years ago," she said.

I nodded. "He's a coward. A real one. Kind of like our other more skittish members. The fact he's so calm around you is rather telling of his view of you. You should feel complimented," I said.

"I do," she said without missing a beat.

Good. I knew Lilly and Windle would never mention it so I wanted to make sure she knew. After all it wasn't like anyone else would ever be able to tell Renn such a thing. There were only a couple people left who even spoke to them anymore, let alone spent time with them and knew them well. Merit was one of those few.

Glancing around the room, I felt my eyes get drawn to the bed. I suddenly felt like taking a nap.

How long had we been talking? I had come in here to say a few things, like us leaving and giving her the option to stay if she wished, but somehow I felt we'd been talking all night already.

Taking a small breath, I sighed a little and nodded. "Okay. No more weird topics for a bit please, I'm exhausted all of a sudden," I said.

Renn found that hilarious.

Chapter 367 His Sudden Openness

"I usually wouldn't ask Vim, since you've already said your intentions several times... and I know you're not the type to just break your word like that... but I worry all the same, since this is the Society we're talking about. And monarchs, and saints, which are even more weird when you're concerned," I said

carefully as we rounded a half-broken tree. It must have snapped in one of the recent storms, based off the fragments lying around and the pointy pieces of bark and wood on the broken ends. They were sharp and bright white, not dull and rotten.

"The only reason I'd harm her, or kill her, is if she tried to threaten our Society or plans to aid a monarch in wreaking havoc. Far as you, and Lilly, have told me that is not a concern. So you need not worry Renn. I promise," Vim said as he stared ahead. He didn't seem bothered at all by our current conversation, or my slightly rude worries.

I did trust him. I really did. But that same trust was counter-weighted by the reality that Vim would do anything he needed to as to protect the Society and those within it. Even if it meant breaking my heart, he would do it.

I knew a day would come it would happen. It was an inevitable eventuality. But I hoped this was not that moment.

Which was why I had asked, to verify... even though we were only a day or so away from our destination.

"What if you find her wanting though Vim? Would you just... do the deed, or would you at least talk to me about it first?" I asked.

Vim frowned and slowed a bit. "You mean... in the off chance it actually happened? That I needed to take action?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Hm..." Vim pondered that for a moment and then nodded. "I'd likely act without speaking first... but that would require her to say or do something extreme. So extreme even you would not be able to get truly upset with me. So let's say she did something just a tad offensive... like for instance, tell me of her plans to give birth to as many saints as possible or something, then yes. I'd sit and talk with you. To find a solution we can both live with, within reason," he said.

"Why would giving birth to more saints be something to force your hand, Vim?" I asked, unsure if I should be bothered with that a lot or just a little.

"Well... I just wouldn't like it, I guess. Giving birth to as many saints as possible implies you're trying to once again force the world to bend to the divine rule... It was just the first thing that sprung to mind that would cause me great concern, but not so much I'd not kill her on the spot if I heard it," Vim said, shrugging as he did.

Great. Why was he so strange? "What would be wrong with the world once again... bending to the divine rule?" I asked carefully.

Vim hummed softly, and I was glad to hear it. It was the hum he had when he wasn't bothered, or concerned. In fact it was the same one he usually had when we were talking about something not very important, and sometimes silly. "Well, to do so would require the gods return. Though I really don't know how they'd accomplish it, saints or no, I've honestly always wondered if it was possible," Vim said.

My brows furrowed in frustration as I tried to comprehend what he was talking about. Gods returning, made sense I guess. But that implied they were gone, or had left. And that they could be brought back? Or he thought they could be? Enough so to make him worry over someone trying?

And them returning was a bad thing. At least to Vim.

I firmly believed Vim's parents had been gods. Or some type of them. Maybe something like what had ruled over the Summit at one time. Beings we called gods, but Vim said weren't.

If it was they who he spoke of... why wouldn't he want such people back? He seemed to really respect and cherish his parents, from what I'd been able to tell, so...

"You didn't have to go all quiet Renn, I was willing to talk more about it," Vim then said.

I blinked and went still for a small moment, and with small glance at him I nodded. He was serious!

"Okay. Uh... have there been other saints? Or people, I guess, that have tried to bring them back?" I asked.

"Of course. Most saints feel the desire to, so I'm told. Though as far as I am aware none of them know how to accomplish it. A few have tried to claim that saints are the gods' eyes and ears. Their way of seeing and monitoring our world. So a few have tried to use such information as to draw out their gods or their wrath at least," he said.

"Their wrath...?" I asked. What did that mean?

He nodded. "Saints are either revered or hunted. More than a few I've found, being used, suffering from torture and other such things. By people, or even other saints, who believed that a suffering saint would be the needed beacon, or alarm, for the god they are connected with to act... sometimes they genuinely hoped the gods would return with anger, since even if in anger it was better for them to return than not at all. At least in their opinion," he explained.

The sad fact that I could see very well how someone could resort to such disgusting methods made me sick to my stomach. "I could imagine how some of the more... fervent believers could do such a thing," I said.

"It wasn't just the believers, Renn. It was the insane. The atheists too. Some just used it as an excuse to torture a saint, a holy figure. People are cruel and disgusting sometimes, it's just a fact of life," Vim said.

I sighed and nodded. "If saints are such pitiful existences, from what I can tell, why do you hate them so much Vim? Is it just because of what they represent? Their prophecies?" I asked.

Vim for a moment didn't answer, and I wondered if I had finally strayed too far from what he was willing to talk about... but instead Vim shifted his shoulder, and then pointed at himself. "Do you think I'm a god, Renn?" he asked me.

I slowed a little and shook my head. "No," I said. I believed he was the child of something great, and thus great himself, but he was no god. He made too many mistakes to be some kind of higher power. Too flawed.

"How about the saints you've known? Your Witch. This descendant of hers. Or Narli. Do you think they're above you? Greater than you?" he asked.

Hm...? Where was he going with this? "Greater than me...? I wouldn't say that exactly, if you're trying to ask if I think they're more important than I am or not... because in a form I guess I would say yes? But that's because I treasure them. I'd have thought the same whether they were saints or not, since they're my friends and I love them," I said.

Vim frowned at me but nodded. "So to you they're just people."

"Special people, I guess, yes?"

"Ah. Special. But how so?" he asked.

I lifted my hands, as if to display just how... but obviously had no way of doing so, so I simply shrugged and waved them about a little. "They have special powers, Vim! If they use them properly they can do so much good! They can heal, or foresee terrible disasters, and who knows what else? It's far more than I can do, or anyone else. Even you can't heal with a touch, Vim," I said.

He chuckled at me. "No. I can't."

"So...? They're special then. In their own way," I said, nodding at the fact.

"I suppose," he said.

"You don't agree. Do you?"

Vim's face looked neat for a moment as he seemed to frown, yet a smirk was tugging at it all the while. He oddly seemed to be enjoying our conversation. "I suppose I do have to agree that yes, their abilities can make them... unique. And thus, special, in a certain sense. But what I was trying to say is... well..." Vim slowed, and then we came to a full stop.

I stopped walking next to him, and studied the way his eyes lingered on the ground nearby. He was lost in thought for a moment, and I was enjoying the way he seemed suddenly conflicted.

He had wanted to make a point, yet was now acting as if unsure what point that was in the first place. Maybe he had lost the true point of his topic, or I had distracted him somehow.

Or...

Shifting my head, I listened a little closely to the way his heart beat within his chest. It was a slow, quiet heartbeat, but noticeable. Especially in this dense, but empty, forest. Especially now when the world was somewhat still, without any heavy winds.

He was of course not strained, nor was his heart beating quickly or anything... but it did seem a tad off from his usual heartbeat. Was he upset? Anxious? Maybe this conversation, or rather all of them for a while now, had been bothering him more than I had thought?

"Basically Renn..." Vim found his thoughts, and turned to look at me. I stood up straighter as our eyes locked and my own heartbeat tripled. "A saint is akin to a monarch. They have a heart, similar to how a monarch does. That heart grants them powers, their abilities, just as a monarch gets from theirs. The

factor of power varies from individual to individual, but the one constant amongst them all... even the weakest of saints, are their prophecies. Their dreams," he said.

I nodded slowly, transfixed, as he continued.

"Those dreams. These prophecies break any and all rules of foundation. To be able to see into the past would be one thing, since it's come and gone. It's set in stone, but to see into the future is something... far beyond any and all reason. It's the same rule-breaking power the gods had. It breaks reason. The laws of physics, even. Because they don't just see what does happen, but what can happen," he said.

"What can happen..." I mumbled, as I thought of the prophecy Celine had given me. The one I had burnt after Vim had asked me to do so.

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He nodded. "Yet they're normal people. As you've said. They're corruptible. Influenceable. They can misunderstand what they're seeing. They can misinterpret what they know. They can be led astray just as easily as the rest of us, yet they are burdened and host to a corrupted power that even the gods themselves couldn't properly control," Vim said.

Ah. So he hadn't lost his point. At all.

He was telling me why he hated them. Why he had hunted them. Why he himself despised saints, in their purest form.

"You hate them because you pity them," I whispered.

He nodded gravely. "Yes. They suffer, or they make others around them suffer. Because they are tainted. They are corrupted, and don't realize it or don't want to. I'm... not saying all of them suffer, or fall prey, to their abilities. Narli is a good example. She's a sweet girl, who does her best to ignore any and all prophecies as much as she can. Thanks to her mother, she now knows the full price of believing in them," Vim said.

My ears fluttered as my heart sank. Poor Narli and Berri!

"I'll not deny, Renn, that my hate is... tainted too. I hate them because they're offspring of the things I despise. Just like monarchs. I'll not pretend and say my hate is entirely justified... but at the same time I'll also not allow my pity for them to stay my hand. Most monarchs are simple beasts. Without reason. Like the one that had plagued Landi's nation. That thing had no words to speak because it had no concept of them. Yet look at all the chaos it had wrought," Vim said with a small wave around us, as if we'd even now see lines of dead bodies. "Landi can be blamed for antagonizing it, of course, but it would have risen eventually anyway. It would have found its way to the world, and done the same thing it had done, because it knows nothing else. Some would argue with me that hating them is wrong, because they're pitiful. They're creations, just as us, suffering from their creator's malice and stupidity. But how can I not hate such evil? Such wrongness? Saints are the same. Other than a few rare exclusions, most of them do far more harm to the world around them than good. And their reach is far beyond a normal person's ability, even when taking into account us non-humans," he said.

A little stunned still, since it had been a very long while since Vim's been so open and honest with me, especially about a topic such as this, I did my best to resist the urge to step forward and wrap him in a hug. He deserved one, after having spoken so deeply about something he hates to even think about, but I knew the conversation wasn't over yet. If I hugged him now, it'd end... because then he'd focus on me.

"The world had suffered at the hands of the gods, Renn. They had saw this world as not a thing to keep safe, or upright, but rather something to destroy. Something to play with, like a toy without value. Like a cat with a full belly would a mouse," Vim said with a small smile.

I was going to tease him back, saying he was the mouse in this scenario, but instead I asked a daring question.

"Is that why you destroyed them?"

Vim's eyes, which had been holding my own for more than a few moments, narrowed at me.

My tail went still behind me, and I held an apprehensive breath as I waited to see what he'd do. Turn and start walking again? Continue talking as if he hadn't heard me? Tell me to ask another question...?

"Yes."

The world went oddly fuzzy for a moment as I blinked, unable to believe what I just heard.

He nodded, and I found his eyes still held my own. They hadn't left mine. They hadn't unfocused, or looked away. "I did what I had to, Renn. You can claim my hate for saints, or monarchs and others, is unjustified... but trust me when I say, my hate for those who made them is not."

I gulped, and wondered what had changed. Why was he suddenly being so open with me...? Originally I had simply asked about Elaine's safety out of concern. Yet here we were... talking about things he's always tried to avoid, or tip-toed around.

"Back at the Summit. There's a mural. On a mountainside, or a cliff I guess now," Vim started to say, and I smiled at him.

"I saw it. Oplar showed me," I said.

He frowned at me. "Really? They seem to think I don't know about it, so I had figured they'd keep it a secret from even you... what with you being my wife and all," he said with a small smile.

I nodded, a little proud to have surprised him... even in such a little way as this. "I had wondered how you hadn't known of it. It's huge, and you always walk all around every location each time you visit. All those years and you never passed by it? I had found that hard to believe," I said.

He smirked and nodded. "Yes. I avoid it on purpose now. Let them have their silly little secrets, if it keeps them happy."

Hm... I nodded, agreeing.

For a few moments we were quiet, and then I realized why he had brought it up. "Are you saying their god's cruelty had been on display there in that mural?" I asked. I had noticed it had looked like they had been implying such a thing, but it had also more so seemed to be a representation of Vim's actions. How they had felt about what he'd done. They knew it had been necessary, but felt he had been too cruel about it. That he had done the deed without any respect, for their god or them.

"Well... somewhat. Those at the Summit had been victims, more than most. They had been created from guinea pigs for a reason, after all," he said.

Hm. He had said something similar once. "I don't know what those are Vim, so I don't know your meaning," I said.

He nodded. "I know. They had been created to be experimented on. Cruelly. In rather disgusting ways. Many gods had abused their creations, but few had done so out of pure malice and debauchery. Imagine being created for the sole purpose of torture. For debase means. That god, her experiments, had been so disgusting there had even been other gods who had tried to stop her in the beginning. As far as I'm aware she's one of the few who their own had turned on," he said.

Gosh!

"What?" Vim noticed my burst of emotions, and I tried to hurriedly get them under control.

If I did, I couldn't tell, as I shook my head. "I'm just... shocked, Vim," I admitted.

I was shocked not just over what he had said, but all the information laced within it. He has lived a life beyond what I could imagine, hadn't he?

Compared to him...

"Hm... My point though, was those gods are the source of a saint's power. A monarch's power. They are the source of all a saint is. So you tell me how something good can come from something like that?" he asked.

My toes curled as I held back a groan.

I couldn't. I couldn't argue, and not just because I wasn't fully aware of the rest of the circumstances or situation.

He was saying a saint's power was sourced from something evil. Something cruel. So then, by extension, they became cruel too. Though he wasn't claiming the individual, the saint herself, was evil. He was saying they got corrupted, or did evil without realizing it, thanks to the power within them.

"How long has it been, Vim... Since... uh..." I wondered how to phrase it... and after a few moments, Vim answered for me.

"At least a few thousand years."

Jeez. He really was old.

Then was I really just... something to distract him? As so many in the Society seemed to believe?

His life, his deeds, were so great. What he's been doing for the Society all this time alone elevated him to something astounding. Yet even before the Society existed, he had been doing all of that? Slaying gods, and facing such evil? Correcting it? Wiping it off the planet?

How could someone like me even stand beside him, then? How did he not get bored of me? How was I special enough to...

I tucked those thoughts, and fears, away for a moment since Vim took a small breath and continued talking.

"I'm just trying to say Renn... I've got thousands of years of wrath inside of me. Directed at beings, and creatures, of great power. Beings who use that power for cruelty and evil. So it's... difficult for me to look beyond such details. Verily," he said.

Nodding gently, I did my best to not laugh at him. He was being so honest with me, I would hate to make him feel like I had not taken it seriously. Because I was, and forever would. But his displeasure, his disgust, with saints all this time had been this? The simple fact they were related to gods? Creatures he despised? And he himself was willing to admit his hate was somewhat unfounded, since it was so engraved into him? That must be why he hated to talk about it, to admit it. Because he knew it was flawed, yet couldn't get himself over it.

Although he had, obviously, good reason for such hate... it was such a very... human-like thing to be the way he was. To hate something so fiercely, yet not know it wasn't entirely justified. It made him more normal, somehow.

He simply hated them because he hated their creators. The source of their powers.

Was... was this hate, and all of this, related to his big mistake? The one that had made him flee to those islands out in the ocean? To hide away, alone, for what had possibly been hundreds if not a thousand years?

Should I ask? It was risky, but... maybe he'd answer, right here and now, with the way he was being so open with me.

It'd make sense. This strange hate he had for those gods was something fierce. Even if it didn't show the way a normal man's hate would. He didn't glare or speak through clenched teeth, but he may as well be. Since he, even today thousands of years later, occasionally had to stop himself from killing a saint on sight over it.

It was almost... scary, to think that Vim had such hate in him. He's always seemed so gentle. Even when he acts out in emotion, such as when he killed Tim at the Crypt, he never seemed furious. Or wrapped in such fury, at least.

Though...

"Does that mean you hate all of us too, Vim?" I asked, unable to toss aside the earlier thought.

"Hm...?"

I shrugged lightly as I pointed at myself. "We were all their creations too, right? So...?"

He himself has said so. Not only has he told me such things, I'd overheard him saying similar to others. That we were indeed created by the very gods he so despised. Just like the monarchs.

That would explain his distaste for some of those in the Society. The way he hated how some of us were. Maybe it was more than just our moral failures, or personalities. Maybe it was more akin to his hate for monarchs and saints.

He smiled at me. "No, Renn. I pity you. You are descendants of monarchs, their first creations. I pity those like you with all my heart, just as I pity the humans who had suffered similarly," he said.

Oh...? Had the humans suffered in a unique way, back during the reign of gods...?

A few memories of listening to my grandmother's stories came and went. Back when she had told me how our ancestors had hunted humans, alongside their elders. Those like my great-uncle. The monarch. The one whose heart, at least possibly his heart, was in the little pouch on my waist.

For a few moments I considered Vim, and realized he was likely ready to be done with the conversation. He had finally looked away from me, as to look out into the distance... and he looked tired now.

I wanted to ask more questions, a lot more, but knew better than to abuse him. He was obviously opening up to me, far beyond anything before, so I just needed to take it slow... else he'd just bottle it all up again.

So instead of asking another question, or even changing topics, I stepped forward and did what I'd wanted to do for a while now.

Wrapping him in a hug, I felt strangely giddy as I pushed my head and face against him, as to angle my ears just the right way as to hear his heartbeat.

It thumped a little quicker for a small moment, letting me know my sudden embrace had affected him. Even if ever so slightly. It quickly returned to its normal, slow and steady thumping. If I hadn't been paying attention I may not have even noticed the quick change since it had only lasted a couple of beats.

The sound made me smile, and feel a little weak for some reason, as I clung to him and he returned the embrace.

He sighed, but did so a little strangely. As if not in annoyance, but relief.

Squeezing him, I pushed my face into him and hoped one day to help him get over this strange hate he had. This pity. This hatred that had obviously caused him so much grief over the years.

Because, whether he realized it himself or not...

That same pity extended to himself.

He hated himself.

He pitied himself.

All because he was just like them. These creations of gods, as he called them.

"It'll be okay, Vim," I said as I tried to keep myself from crying.

He patted my back and I felt him nod. "It will, Renn."

It would be.

Chapter 368 Troubled Worries By Lakesides

We were near the saint's home.

Renn was humming lightly next to me as we walked, no longer sounding or looking worried. I'd blame the weather, since she seemed to like the current light rain that was falling upon us, but I knew it was because of our conversations on the way here.

She was... simply happy. That we were traveling again, together. And she seemed even happier over the fact I'd been a little more open with her.

But why wouldn't I be? I had decided, after all.

I had decided many things.

All I could hope for now was that I'd decided correctly. Only time would tell, though.

"Once we round this lake, there will be another. We'll start seeing signs of their farming and harvesting of trees soon, and then the village will be there! We're almost there," Renn said happily as she pointed at the lake we were walking alongside.

"Hm," I nodded, not really wanting to join her in the strange joy that had filled her.

"I used to fish these lakes... though I'll be honest, they look a little different. Some are bigger than I remember, and others gone entirely. I could have sworn this was half the size, back when I lived here," Renn said as she studied the lake.

"Likely is," I said. And not just because I didn't doubt her memory. Lakes did indeed grow and dry up over the years, especially over hundreds of them.

"And these trees, I used to hide in them. In fact I think that one I used to sleep in," Renn said as she pointed at a larger tree in the distance. One that rested not against the lake, but a few hundred paces from it.

"Sleep?" I asked. Really? So she really was a cat.

She giggled at me, and I turned to look at her. She had to lean a little for our eyes to meet, since she wore a heavy hood upon her head. She hadn't wanted to get her ears and hair wet, since we'd be entering the village soon. She wanted to be able to hug those she was about to meet, and not worry about getting them wet in the process.

A strange kindness and worry, but not one I'd begrudge.

"Witch found a husband. I didn't like sleeping in the house with them during certain nights," she told me.

Ah.

Right.

"Having good hearing is indeed a pain sometimes, huh?" I agreed.

She giggled again, but I knew this time it was at me and not what I'd said. She had likely been hoping to tease me a little, over the topic.

"Oh. Not to change the topic, Vim, but I forgot to tell you. I haven't told anyone in the village who I am, or what I am. They think I'm just a distant friend of the saint, and came to visit," Renn then said.

"What...? Wait what?" I slowed as I tried to understand what she was saying.

Renn slowed too, and smiled up at me from beneath her hood. I liked the way it looked on her, half hiding her. It made her mischievous smile look all the more adorable. "It was Lilly's idea originally. Until we could trust them, really trust them, to keep who and what we are a secret. So only Cat, Elaine and her daughter know who and what I am. The rest just think I'm some random human who came to visit an old friend. She's a saint after all, they know she's odd so odd stuff happening isn't odd...?" Renn's voice became a little odd as she finished speaking, because she wasn't sure if she said what she was trying to say properly. She had though.

"Another reason for this," I said as I reached up to lightly tug on her hood.

She laughed as I covered her whole face with the hood for a moment, before letting it go. She reached up to readjust the hood, and her ears beneath it. She still wore her hat beneath the hood, after all, so it was likely uncomfortable. Or well, maybe it wasn't. She had a nice smile on her face. "Yeah! We're getting close, they fish these lakes and stuff, so didn't want to be caught unaware," she said.

I nodded, understanding well. "I'm glad you've done such a thing... but I'll be honest Renn, I had expected the opposite," I said.

"Hm...? Why? Because they're my friends?" she asked.

I nodded again.

She smiled at me and reached out. She grabbed my wrist, which at first I thought meant she wanted to hold my hand, but instead she simply squeezed my wrist and shook it a little, as if a child. "You're so sweet sometimes, Vim," she said happily.

Sweet...? Was I? Why?

Although I wasn't sure what she meant, I smiled and accepted the compliment all the same. "I'll remember that next time I'm crushing a man's skull beneath my boot," I said.

Renn laughed at me. "What a weird thing to say!"

"Not as weird as you," I said.

"Me...? I'm not very weird, am I?" she asked as we both returned to walking at our normal pace.

"Verily. But it's fine."

She huffed but had a smile on her face as we started walking away from the larger lake, and towards a smaller one.

"Honestly Vim... I do want to tell them. If anything so I can apologize to them. Even though Cat and Elaine both say I have nothing to apologize for," Renn said.

"You mean for killing Witch?" I asked, clarifying what she'd need to apologize for.

She nodded.

"You did it out of mercy, Renn," I said gently, since I knew she was now not as happy. Her hand had slid down into my own, from my wrist, after all.

"I know. And I know they know. But..."

"But it still hurts, yes. I know that feeling well," I agreed.

Renn nodded as she glanced at a large frog staring at us from tall grass. It seemed to be heading for the lake we'd just left, and we were in its way.

"Still... do what you need to Renn, so that you can sleep at night. If that means keeping a distance from them, then do so. If it means opening up and telling them, even at risk of alienating them from you and us, then so be it too," I said.

Her hand tightened its grip as she nodded. "Mhm."

"Hey at least you haven't killed their god," I teased.

Renn snickered as she finally looked at me, doing so with a weird glare. "Vim!" she said as she started to laugh.

"What? It's true."

"It is...! But still!" she continued to laugh for a moment and I basked in it. It made this cold, rainy day, feel warm.

Listening and watching her, I studied the way she covered her mouth with her other hand. As if to contain her laughter, and hide it away. A sad thing, but what I noticed more importantly was her neck and face.

She was bundled up rather well, considering, but even with the large jacket and thick hood it was clear she likely still felt the chilly wind and air thanks to how unprotected her neck and face were.

Maybe I should make her some kind of muffler, or face covering.

As I thought about that, while Renn calmed her laughter, I glanced around at the dense forest... and realized I was in the perfect place to make such a thing.

Yes. I'll do so.

A nice fox would do. It'd work as a scarf, something she could wrap around her under that hood. It'd keep her warmer when we eventually encountered the harsher colds of not just winter but the higher elevations of the north we would soon be traveling to.

Liking the idea, I decided to keep an eye out for a suitable fox. Maybe I'll get lucky and find one that's started to get its winter coat. They looked prettier when they were silver or white. It'd suit her. Very well.

It's been some time since I'd made her anything. I make her those pins for her hat every so often, and she saw them as gifts, but I didn't. Those were almost a necessity for her, so not something precious to be cherished.

Though a muffler or something like it would be a necessity too...

"Vim."

I blinked and glanced at my companion, who smirked at me.

"In my defense I had been thinking of you," I said, defending my lack of paying attention to her.

"Of that I've no doubt," she teased, and then pointed upward, as if to the dark sky above us. "When we leave, heading north to find Lilly's daughter, will we pass Twin Hills?" she asked.

Oh. "Not really... but if you want you can head there instead, and I can come pick you up after I find her," I offered.

Renn smiled at me, a little sadly, as she shook her head. "No... If you'll forgive me Vim, I don't want to leave you so soon. I'm tired of being apart, it really bothers me," she said.

Oh...? "Does it?" I asked.

She nodded and sighed. "Very. I know to you we've only been together for a short time, a blink really, but to me it almost feels like it's been forever. The only reason I can even consider it is thanks to the fact I've been with people I love, like Lilly and Oplar, or Cat," Renn said.

Feeling strangely humbled, I wondered what to say to such a declaration of devotion. It made me feel... almost inadequate, to not just outright tell her I had been feeling empty without her too.

"Plus, whenever we separate, I feel like I miss out on something important. Though... I did enjoy staying with Lilly and them. Root was worth it, and I'd probably have regretted not spending more time with her had I gone with you instead of coming north myself with Cat," Renn said as she pondered her own emotions.

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"Children, particularly babies, do sometimes make a difference," I agreed.

"Mhm...! She's adorable. Lilly says if she's anything like her siblings it will take years before she can walk or talk, far longer than a human would. It makes me hopeful, that I'll be able to hold her again as long as we don't spend too long away," Renn said.

Right... Lilly and her flock did grow up slower than most others. Even their weaker members had taken some time to grow to full height.

Maybe if I was lucky Lilly's child would be enough for Renn, for now. So far she hasn't really hinted or brought up anything lately, concerning my lack of progressing our relationship, but I worried it was soon to come.

If we had been normal humans, it would have come a long time ago, so it wasn't like Renn didn't have ground to stand on.

Glancing to our left, I studied some of the trees around us. Only a few had been recently cut down, and I could tell many of the trees nearby were younger. Ones cut a decade or so ago, roughly. Typical of a northern village. They only took what they needed, from the places that could survive it. They were good caretakers of the forest.

A poor distraction from my own disgust with myself.

"She's the first, you know," Renn then whispered.

"Hm...?" I glanced at her and wondered if I had ignored her again. Surely not, right? I had been lost in my mind, but not to the point I would have not noticed her talking, even with that whisper of a voice.

"Root. She's the first non-human baby I've ever met. Ever held," she said.

Oh.

"Did you not have a younger sister?" I asked, surely she had said so, right? One with a long name, like herself. Fellisee.

"I didn't meet Fellisee until she was able to walk on her own. My mother had children away from everyone, and then brought them home with her once they were strong enough. I think she did it to keep them, us, safe," Renn said.

I blinked at that, and was forced to remember her parents... her family, had been like those from the beginning. So long ago.

More primitive than not.

It was so strange today to hear of such people. So few existed anymore. That family Fly and I had visited on the way here were similar, but they weren't primitive in a cruel sense. Not like Renn's family.

It was even more shocking when one considered how Renn was. She was so wise, level-headed and gentle. A far cry from such savagery that had birthed her.

She was a good example that the apple could in fact fall far from the tree.

I gave Renn's hand a tiny squeeze. "You'll get to meet many more Renn. Over the years. I think I've mentioned to you before that every trip throughout the Society I usually encounter one or two new children," I told her.

She slowly nodded, and I noted the sound as she did so. Had her hat shifted a little? It almost sounded like her ears were brushing against the thick hood.

"I know... I just..." Renn slowed a bit, so I did too. I hardened my heart as I realized this might be it.

I had just been worrying about it, and here it was, wasn't it?

We both came to a full stop, not far from the next lake, and I kept my heart from leaping into my throat as Renn turned to look up at me. She looked sad all of a sudden, which hurt... since she had just a moment ago been so happy. She had even been humming!

"She reminds me of what I've lost," she then said.

I shifted, and wondered if I should feel relieved or even more distressed. "Lost...?"

She nodded. "Lujic had children. I spent time with the first generation, Ginny and the others... and then of course Witch had children too, so many we're now heading to a village full of them!" Renn said as she glanced away and gestured towards our direction.

Slowly nodding, I watched Renn huff, as the rain grew a tad colder as it started falling a little more heavily. Renn ignored the increased rainfall and shrugged helplessly at me, as I realized what was actually bothering her.

"Life is not always perfect, Renn. You should know this. Your lost time with them, although painful and sad, was just a part of life," I said gently.

"No it wasn't Vim. It wasn't like I spent time away from them because I needed to," Renn said, and I heard her tears. She had started to cry.

"Did you not tell me that you left those human children because the village they had settled in had started to notice your lack of aging?" I pointed out.

"Well... yeah, but..."

I smiled at Renn, who sniffed loudly. "That's a rather important thing, Renn, even if it hurts you to admit. What if by your staying near them for any longer you ended up getting them hurt or killed? They would have been targeted as much as you, had the humans decided you to be dangerous. They don't know mercy when it comes to things like that," I said.

"What about Witch and her family...?" she asked with another gesture at them. At least this time she hadn't shouted.

I nodded slowly. "One could argue you could have remained with them. Being used to the odd, thanks to the saint bloodline, but who's to know or say? Plus did you not tell me you didn't meet Nory or the kids until after you left this village?" I asked.

She nodded, but said nothing as her lips quivered, about to cry some more.

Why'd she look so adorable while on the verge of a full blown breakdown? It wasn't fair. To her, or me.

"It hurts doesn't it?" I then asked, stopping my attempts to convince her otherwise.

She nodded quickly, some snot leaking from a runny nose as she did.

Hopefully that was just her heart acting up and not because she was getting sick. I reached up to wipe her face, which she allowed.

"I have no words, Renn, to act as balm to such a sting. The pain of missing out, of lost time, is one that can't be explained. Even those who have experienced it can never properly put it into words," I said.

"You were trying to stop me from crying, now you sound like you're inviting me to weep in your arms," she said with a small smile.

"Because I am. I know exactly what you're weeping over, Renn. You missed out on watching them grow. Loving them as they grew up, growing old, and having children themselves. As if you were some kind of weird parent of them all, you feel as if you made a terrible mistake... that you failed not just yourself, but them," I said.

She simply nodded.

"Thus why I always worry each time we go to a new location. Or you meet someone neat. How do you think I felt watching you leave with Cat back at Telmik? I can't even begin to describe how stressed I was," I said.

Renn sniffed as I finished cleaning her face and went to wipe it on my pants. Before I could though she gave me a strange smile, one that made me go still in shock.

"I knew you had panicked! What would you have done had I fallen in love with them? Wanting to stay there forever?" she asked as that weird grin grew even wider.

O' Mother, grant me strength to endure.

"I'd weep, but accept it," I said softly... and then smiled at her, though not to convince her. Her own smile was just too lovely to not return the favor. "I'd weep, but survive it. As you have done yourself," I pointed out.

Renn's smile faltered just a tad, and then she sighed. "Here I was expecting you to say that you'd burn their village down and take me back," she said.

"What...? Do you want me to be possessive like that?" I asked. She had almost sounded serious.

"No. But it would have made me smile, even if you said it in jest."

"I hadn't figured this was a moment for jests," I said.

Renn huffed as she reached up to wipe her face off herself. I watched the way she cleaned her eyes of tears, and rubbed her nose against her sleeve. She was like a child sometimes.

"Thanks Vim," she then said.

"For being possessive? No problem."

She laughed and shook her head, then finished cleaning her face off. She gave me that weird smile again, and I once again felt my heart stop for a moment.

Really. What was with that smile? Why did it stun me? Surely I'd seen it before, right? Was that a new smile? One I'd never seen before...?

Why? When? Where? And how did I make sure to get it again, every day, for the rest of my life?

"For not mentioning I had killed Witch. Even though you could have... for using it as a reason for me to not return or stay here," she then said, a little somberly.

"I mentioned it earlier though?" I reminded her. Hadn't I?

She nodded. "You did. But not in this context. I'm just saying... well... I'm not sure why I'm thanking you. I just liked how you hadn't used that as a reason, I guess," she said as she frowned at herself, as if unsure of what she was saying.

Hm...

For a long moment we stood quietly, listening to the rain falling around us and the wind in the trees. Every so often I heard a frog croak, or a splash from the nearby lakes. Although cold, it wasn't so cold that life had gone to a standstill just yet.

Though the world around me was noisy... I focused my whole attention on the woman before me. She had reached up to her face again, to mess with her nose. It must still be running, maybe she was getting sick.

"I'm sorry I'm unable to let you enjoy all life has to offer, Renn," I said softly to her.

Renn tilted her head as she glanced up at me, and then smiled at me. "That's an odd thing to hear from you, Vim. Considering all the joys in my life right now only exist thanks to you," she said.

I blinked and shifted, and ignored the sound of a distant rock breaking beneath us. Renn's eyebrows twitched, as likely did her ears, as she glanced around.

She had heard the rock snap in two, but had no idea where the sound had originated from.

Before she could ask about it, I reached out to grab her. My first instinct was to wrap an arm around her, to kiss her or something, but I stopped myself from falling that deeply here in this moment. Instead I simply grabbed her forearm, as if she was an old comrade of mine from the army. I slinked my other hand out of hers and repeated the motion with her other arm, and smiled at her as she shifted and glanced down at our now locked arms.

How did I say it? How could I say it?

I had so much to say, really. About me. About who, and what I was.

I had decided to tell her. Just as I had made a decision about the vote, the Society, I had made a decision about her too.

Yet here I was, unable to say a word... even as I fell ever deeper for her.

"I meant it Vim," Renn said, before I could find my own heart amongst the chaos within me.

I took a small breath as she squeezed my forearms, and I felt her warmth even from beneath the thick layer I wore. She was strong, but even in that strength there was a gentleness. As if she could squeeze me strongly enough to break bone, yet no bones ever even cracked.

"My life has been a wonder lately. Thanks to you. The Society. Everyone. And all of them only exist, or I've only met them, because of you. My relationship with you has granted me all of this... Yes, even the stress and worries too," she said, adding the last bit with a quirky smile.

"I am stressful I'm sure," I said with a nod.

"You are!" she agreed happily.

Yet...

Feeling tiny, almost as tiny as that gleam in her eye, I bit back my miserable excuses I wanted to give her.

She was happy. She really was.

But she didn't realize that her happiness was... well...

Normal.

She was happy over a family. Friends. A place to belong. A community. Me, Lilly and her family, Cat and her friend's descendants. All of those shes met along the way here, from Oplar to Merit, and every little place we'd visited too.

Things most of even the Society took for granted nowadays, were the things that made Renn so happy. So full of joy and love.

Yet, although precious and what I struggled and killed to protect... they were all also simple things.

All of those things were normal. They were expected. Everyone had such things. Everyone.

She was bliss itself for simply having what so many others are born into. Something most took matter of fact.

So although her happiness was joy itself, and made me so happy and proud to hear it...

I couldn't help but be sickened all the same.

Because it meant her long life all this time... hundreds of years, had been full of nothing.

Empty and void.

In her hundreds of years she had only four names. Four that she ever spoke aloud, or went to, when telling me of her past and the experiences within.

Witch. The kids, Lujic and Ginny. Nory.

Wonderful moments for her. Painful or no, they had defined her. To become the woman she was today. Guided her here, before me.

Yet she should have so much more. It was as if her story had just begun, yet she was as old as most of our elders. She was possibly as old as Lilly and Merit, if not far off.

I had so much more to show her. She had so much more to enjoy. The world was full of wonders, and not just of the Society either. How come I haven't been taking her to the unique places I've found throughout the world? Did I not too long ago think about taking her to those crystal caverns? We weren't far from there now. She'd love those beyond reason, likely.

But would she love them more than spending the simple days with this saint and her human friends...?
Or with Lilly and her children?

I'd love to see the look on Renn's face when she walked into the Owl's Nest and found the whole flock there. They were a noisier bunch than she likely realized, when all gathered together. She'd likely fall even deeper in love with the owl family once she saw such a thing.

Squeezing her arms back, just as gently, I smiled at the woman who was smiling happily at me.

I may lose everything else...

But I swear, upon the graves of my parents, that I'll not lose her... not just she herself, but that smile.
That happiness. That simple joy and love she so cherished.

I'll find a way to protect it all... even from myself.

Chapter 369 A Saint's Home

I know he had promised, yet still I sat on the edge of my seat.

Sitting a few feet behind Vim, I tried to ignore the sound of my tail and ears twitching and moving as I watched the man I loved glare at the woman I wanted to love too.

Elaine, being a saint in more than name, simply sat across from Vim in her own chair... smiling sweetly at him. Her glowing eyes had gone a little bright at the sight of him, upon their meeting, but they were now back to their slightly duller brightness. Like a moon that was hidden behind thin clouds.

We were alone in Elaine's house. Her daughter, Grenna, was outside with Cat. They were talking with hushed voices about me and Vim. They both had noticed Elaine's eyes grow bright at the mere sight of him, and he was now a heated topic.

I ignored their quiet gossip and wonder though, as I studied the way the man in question studied Elaine.

He was studying her as if she was a piece of metal to be forged. A leather strap to be fashioned. A block of wood to be shaped into a comb.

"I've heard of you, O' Great One," Elaine then spoke, for the first time since we met.

She had greeted and hugged me, but had done so strangely distantly. She had not been able to take her eyes off Vim the moment he had entered her vision. Supposedly, per Grenna and Cat's words, she had stood from the dining room table not long before we entered the village. She had stood mid-meal and stared wide-eyed at the nearby wall, as if stunned.

She had sensed our arrival. Though if she had sensed me, or Vim, was another question entirely.

I had thought Narli had said she couldn't see Vim. Or maybe she simply wasn't able to tell what he really was? Maybe they could see him, since even Vim admitted Celine had seen prophecies about him. Though he, and Lilly, claimed she had lied and manipulated those prophecies as to keep Vim close and control him.

"You'd do well to keep whatever you heard, or at least think you have heard, to yourself."

I sat up a little straighter at Vim's tone and choice of words. I was half tempted to stand up, as to step closer... just in case, as to put myself between him and her, but remained seated.

He had promised. He really had!

Elaine didn't look bothered at all. Especially not as much as I felt, as she tilted her head and studied Vim. "I'm told you killed my children. My Knight," she said, specifying.

"I had."

My ears fluttered at Vim's honesty. I really loved him for it, but I wished sometimes he wasn't so blunt with it!

When I and Cat had told her what had happened I had cried over it. He had just admitted to doing the deed without a blink of an eye! Where had that soft, gentle man go? The one I had just been walking and talking to? The one who had just opened his heart so dearly to me?

"I had heard it had been an accident. That it had bothered you so much, you had nearly wept. I'm starting to doubt these ears that hear only truth," Elaine said.

I gulped as Vim's frown deepened. He didn't glance at me, but I knew he likely wanted to.

He thought I had been the one to tell her such a thing, but in reality the culprit was outside. Still gossiping about him to Elaine's daughter. They were now talking about the way he had broke her hip.

"I'll admit I had felt bad... but more-so for myself than they," Vim said.

"Yourself?" the saint asked, just before I could.

Vim nodded and sighed, and then gestured towards me with a shrug of a shoulder. "She hasn't scorned me for it yet, but eventually she will. Regretfully not much can hurt or bother me anymore, but she has a distinct knack to know how to make me feel like a complete piece of shit when she wants to," he said.

I couldn't help but smile at that. I'd not really talked to him about what he'd done to the people Cat was with, except hearing his side of the story, but I knew better than to really fault or blame him for it. His strength was... unnatural. The kind that gave birth to such terrible accidents. And from what I'd been told, by him and Cat, was the situation had been rather peculiar. They had attacked Vim, and he had thought them involved with the fires at first. Just as they had thought him an enemy as well.

"Hm... She does seem to like the idea, by the looks of that smile," Elaine said, looking at me for the first time in a long while.

Shifting in my chair I grumbled. "Vim doesn't like killing people for no reason. I have no doubt had circumstances been just a little different, Vim would not have hurt them. And although he acts all

indifferent... his actions afterward speak of his true self. He had cared for and delivered Cat to me, who was then able to bring her home here. Had he truly been evil I doubt he would have done such a thing," I said, giving my own opinion.

It was honestly the same one I had given her already. When I was here last time. But I had wanted to repeat it, word for word... and not just for her ears either.

"Hmph," Vim made one of his noises as he crossed his arms.

Elaine hummed at him, and me, and then she frowned and glanced at me. Her eyes glowed brighter a bit for a moment, before settling back down into their dull natural color. "How strange," she mumbled.

"Hm...?" What? What'd she just see?

"I hear truth from you, Renn. Blatant truth. The same I hear from everyone, and anyone, else..." Elaine spoke gently, but had a serious tone hidden within it. She then glanced at Vim, her eyes growing brighter again. "So why do I not hear any at all from you?" she asked him.

Huh...? Was she saying Vim was lying?

I had such a hard time believing that! Vim could, and would, lie if needed but this was not the time or place... and so far I'd not heard anything that implied such a thing at all!

"She means in general Renn, not that she's hearing me lie. She can't tell if I'm lying or not," Vim though said, before I could voice my own concerns.

"Huh!" I still made noise as I leaned forward, trying to understand.

Elaine nodded. "It's very strange. It's almost as if I'm not hearing a man speak at all, but something else... something..." she went quiet, and I noted the way her eyes grew brighter, and stayed brighter... almost as if she had just realized something dire.

"Many of your kind believe me to be a monarch," Vim said.

I nearly bit my tongue as I glanced at him.

"Yet you're not, are you?" Elaine asked with an odd voice. Was that awe...? Surely not, right?

"No. Tell me, what kind of monarch did you see? In the dream that caused you to send your people as to slay it?" Vim then asked, answering and ignoring her question all at once.

Elaine though still seemed calm, if now a little bothered, as she smiled at him. "Your wife warned me to not speak of prophecies to you."

I nodded, glad she remembered.

Vim ignored me, and her almost it seemed, as he uncrossed his arms and grabbed his right knee. As if it was stiff from the cold, and damp, but I knew that was impossible. "I don't want to hear them. But in this instance I need to know at least this. If you must know, I can and do bend my own rules when the lives of others are at stake. But as you noted, I did not ask what happened or how it happened. I don't want to know the past, or the future, just the reality. The things set in stone. Not the possibilities. I simply want to know what this creature appeared to look like. I don't even want to know what it was doing, just its appearance," Vim said.

Oh wow... I had not expected him to be so brunt, yet also so open too. Though I guess there was really no other way to ask about it. Even Lilly and I had asked in similar ways, though... we had heard the whole prophecy. Not just something like a description.

"What a wonderful loophole you've fashioned for yourself," Elaine though said, instead of answering.

"It is, isn't it?" I agreed happily.

Vim ignored the two of us as we smiled and nodded at each other, agreeing, and then Elaine looked back at him and opened her palms outward... then cupped them, as if to make a bowl.

"I saw a great circle. One of lights, that rose upward into the sky over the mountains and..." she began to tell him, and I was about to speak up and warn her, but Vim beat me to it.

"Wait!" Vim shouted as he stood, hurriedly.

I panicked too, standing up as my heart slammed up into my chest.

How would I stop him? Would covering her with my body work? He'd not hurt me, but...!

As I stepped forward, to latch onto Elaine in hopes of staying Vim's wrath, I went still as Vim did. He had stood, but hadn't stepped forward. The chair he had been sitting on had been knocked over from his quick motion, and it landed with a crunch.

I ignored the broken leg on the chair that rolled along the rug, and glared at Vim... who was staring strangely at saint Elaine.

Was... was that fear?

"Vim...?" I whispered worriedly, unsure what to say or do. Elaine thankfully hadn't seemed too distressed by his actions or outburst, but I knew it was likely simply because of how old she were. It wasn't like she'd be able to escape even if she tried.

A few heavy moments followed, and I felt my stiff shoulders creak as I glanced between Elaine and Vim. The two were staring into each other's eyes, and there was no doubt both of them were bothered. Her eyes were glowing brighter than ever before, and Vim looked almost as if he was in pain.

Was she doing something to him...? Or at least trying to? Surely not, right?

"Explain the lights," Vim then said.

My eyes narrowed at his cold tone. He had just given an order. One I hoped Elaine didn't scoff or laugh off, considering how serious it had sounded.

"Well... I don't really know how," Elaine started speaking, and strangely did so calmly. As if she couldn't see the bundle of tension a few feet from her. "I felt like I was staring down upon the world, like a bird on the wing. Then down below, amongst the great expanse of forests and mountains, I saw a huge wheel. A wheel of light. The world I had seen had been one of dusk, the type of dull light from the end of a day, and this wheel of light lit up the world beyond even the greatest summer sun," Elaine thought went ahead and tried to anyway.

Shifting on a heel, I frowned as I listened in awe. She had told Lilly and I she had seen a bright light, before the birth of this monarch, but had not described it like this.

"The wheel of light then begun to spin. It spun around, while rising up into the air towards me, and as it did it spun faster and faster. Then from the center of the wheel of light, once it was high in the sky, a ball of blue flame fell to the world below. The wheel of light then shattered, like lots of tiny pieces of glass, and fell upon the world as if snow... and moments later the whole forest erupted into a blaze. The fires roared and grew, unquenched by the snow falling upon it, and without any sense of normalcy spread far beyond the limits of sight... covering the whole world without warning," Elaine said, eventually ending her explanation with a similar one she had given Lilly and I.

That ball of flame, the blue one, was supposedly the creature she had spoken of. The monarch, as Vim called them.

Although it had all happened quickly to her, she believed it had taken days if not weeks and months. She had believed if her people, her knight, had been able to find that ball of flame before it grew they would have been able to destroy it. Before it had burnt down the whole world.

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

Elaine huffed as she nodded, finishing. "Then right before I woke, I heard a great sound. One that at the time I hadn't recognized, but upon waking and hearing a rooster cawing at the morning sun, I recognized it. I believe the being of fire to be a giant chicken, or something like it, though I hadn't actually seen it other than its fire," Elaine finished telling him of the prophecy.

A prophecy told in full. Even though he had originally asked for only the description of the monarch.

But he hadn't stopped her. He had even asked her to describe the light.

Stepping forward, I didn't outright put myself between him and her, but I did draw close enough that I could do so in a moment's notice if needed. I stood a little to Vim's right, and Elaine's left, as I studied the man who looked suddenly lost.

His left eye was half closed, and his right was strained... as if he wanted to close it but couldn't. He looked similar to how some men got when really drunk, as if he was about to start tumbling around without control of his legs.

"Vim...?"

His eyes twitched and he returned to normal, and right as he did things broke again.

I flinched as two loud snaps filled the room, and I panicked for a brief moment as I hurriedly looked to Elaine.

She was fine. He hadn't hurt her, or killed her, in the blink of an eye as he had done Tim.

So what had he broken...?

"Fascinating," Elaine whispered as I found what he'd snapped. It had been the floorboards, beneath his feet.

Three, maybe four, were now broken and snapped. We were standing on a rug, so it was hard to see them, but I could see the indents beneath him and the rug was being pushed up in several places.

"Vim... don't keep breaking their home, it's rude," I said worriedly. Hopefully he'd fix it all for them before we left!

"I'm sorry..." Vim whispered an apology, but I could tell it had been for my ears not hers. He hadn't spoken loud enough for Elaine, a human, to hear.

"It is quite alright. I see though, now, this is how you killed Brave... this strength," Elaine spoke calmly, as usual, and I watched as she frowned and studied Vim's feet. His left foot was now half sunken into the floor. He really should lift it and move it, less he rips and breaks the rug he stood on.

"Vim, don't ruin their rug too," I warned him.

He shifted without a word, and stepped back a step... away from both Elaine and myself. The floor creaked a little as he did, but didn't snap or break anymore. The creaking may not be from his strange abilities but just the simple fact it was now broken nearby, and the rest of the floor was strained.

"How utterly wrong of you... How do you touch any of us without destroying us?" Elaine then asked him.

"Very carefully..." Vim answered with the same soft whisper.

"I bet... while you're startled, I'd like to ask you to not touch any of the rest of my furniture if you'd be so kind. Their loss is of no greatness, but our little village can't make such things so readily," Elaine asked of him.

I nodded alongside Vim, agreeing with her.

"He can help fix what he's broken, he's good at that," I offered for him. He seemed docile enough that I didn't think he'd find it offensive, for now at least.

In fact he simply nodded at my words.

"Well, living so long and breaking things so often would eventually grant you mastery over such crafts, I'm sure," Elaine said with a small chuckle.

Oh!

I blinked and felt oddly silly as I realized that was likely it. That was why he was so good at making stuff! It was because he was always breaking them!

Vim sighed, reached up to rub his face, and then once finished he stood up straighter and seemed... back to normal. Almost.

"Really Vim... Lilly and I had told you what she had said," I told him.

"You had not described it so perfectly," he said.

"We hadn't, but she hadn't really gone into that level of detail either," I defended all of us against his strange tone. Was he tired or annoyed? It sounded like a mix of both. For a few moments I studied him, but eventually realized something really was wrong. "What's wrong Vim...?" I asked. Something he had heard had obviously disturbed him, greatly.

"You are not upset that my prophecy had been a real one... nor are you upset over the type of creature I had seen, or the fires it terrorizes the world with... you became like this over those lights," Elaine said, noting.

I nodded. He had. He had shot up to his feet before she had even mentioned the fires, or the monarch.

"Have you had any similar dreams?" Vim asked, and I didn't like how I still couldn't hear any surety in his voice. Not like his usual self.

Vim always sounded calm. Sure of himself. Even when we were flirting, and he got all adorable and unsure of himself he still had a firm voice. It didn't crack or break, even when he hesitated. Yet here and now, he looked... and seemed, almost like a different man.

I'd not seen him like this before. It was as if he was now a Lughes, or a Windle, almost. Someone who would flinch and shy away at a loud noise.

"Recently I've only seen more dreams of the fires. I see them overtaking more places, more forests and lands... endlessly. But other than those dreams, those I'd consider prophecies have been simple. A nearby lake will flood during winter, a village nearby will suffer a terrible incident of violence..." Elaine slowly shook her head as she shrugged, implying she had not seen anything like it lately.

"And how about before? In your youth maybe?" Vim asked further.

"No. I've seen dreams of great creatures before, but they never come again and again like these fires. I once dreamt of a huge snake swallowing a giant bear, when I was but a child, but that dream never told me what I needed to do or why... and it never returned or showed itself again since," Elaine said.

Vim smirked at that.

Oh? He recognized that. Would he be bothered if I asked about it right now, or should I wait until later?

Elaine must not have noticed his smirk for she shrugged again. "Really the world has been quiet... as usually it is for me. I rarely get dreams of great importance or note, if you don't view the lives of the few humans around me importance enough," she said.

"You'd call the whole world being set aflame quiet?" I asked, smiling softly at her.

"It won't burn. The dreams I see are possibilities, yes, but not guaranteed outcomes. I expect many to suffer, many to burn from them, but I highly doubt those fires will genuinely engulf the world. Especially now that I've seen him. I'm much more confident now," Elaine said with a small gesture to Vim.

"Hm...? Just by looking at him you can tell he's going to handle it?" I asked, a little happy to hear such a thing. Maybe she had seen him dealing with the fires?

"Well, no. But I've heard of him. The Great One. Now that I've confirmed he really exists, I no longer need to worry too desperately and..." Elaine started to explain, but Vim sighed and stepped forward.

"Hey...!" I warned him as he approached Elaine. I stepped up next to him, staying with him, as he neared her.

Glaring at him, I studied his expression as he stopped in front of her. I didn't see any blood-lust or anger on his face, but I did see the exhaustion... the annoyance. There was a chance, even if I didn't want to believe it.

"My name is Vim. The Society's Protector," he introduced himself.

"Yes. So I've been told," Elaine nodded up at him, staying seated.

"I cannot invite you to the Society. Though... not because you are unworthy," Vim started as he glanced at me. I perked up as he continued, "But rather, instead, the opposite," he added.

"Vim?" I asked what he meant as he looked away from me and then knelt.

A little stunned, I hesitated as Vim kneeled in front of Elaine. She smiled at him, her eyes growing brighter as he stared into her eyes. With him kneeling, he was just a tad shorter than she, but now she didn't have to look up at him as he stood.

"Regretfully the Society is at ends with itself. There is internal conflict... a type that hasn't been seen in hundreds of years. One that just started, and may not end for many hundreds of years more... or at least not until the Society is destroyed," Vim told her.

"Then I do not wish to join it. I and my people are simple folk, Vim. We would not do well in such chaos, we would only suffer," Elaine said calmly.

He nodded, as I did too. I agreed fully there.

"I agree... but, all the same, I'd like to extend a branch to you. If you'd be willing to accept," he offered.

Oh...? Maybe I really hadn't needed to worry at all!

"What kind of branch?" Elaine asked, smiling gently as she did. Seemed she was as amused as I was.

"One of friendship. Friendship that comes with certain perks, and support, you'd never find elsewhere," he said.

Elaine chuckled and gestured to me. "I already have the friendship of your wife. She is my ancestor's sister. I could even claim family bonds if I wished to," she said, smirking as she did. Was she teasing me, and him, or was she trying to make a statement?

"Yes. You do, and can, claim her. She claims you, or at least she'd like to, anyway," Vim said with a small smirk of his own.

"So...?" Elaine asked, telling him to hurry up and tell her what he meant then.

He nodded as he reached out. She seemed to know what he wanted, and as such lifted her hand. He took it, gently, and cupped it as if she was the frailest thing in the world.

"I've taken your knight. I've taken Renn from you, who would have otherwise been your knight in any other scenario... so what I offer is simple. I cannot place you above the Society, but I can place you in my heart alongside her. From now on, whenever you have such prophecies... whenever you need to send someone to handle such chaos, do not send your people. Do not send Renn. Send me," he asked of her.

I shifted as my eyes shivered.

"Vim..." I whispered as I reached out and grabbed onto his shoulder. Both to keep myself from going weak in the legs, and also to let him know how deeply his words just now had affected me.

Had he been planning this the whole time? Really?

"You're offering to be our knight," Elaine said as she understood.

"I'm already hers. So she sending me off to aid you should not be that much of a shock," Vim said.

I sniffed as I nodded. Yes. That made perfect sense.

Elaine studied him for a moment, and then reached out with her other hand. She cupped her and his hand with the other, and I heard her frail old bones creak as she squeezed. "You really would do this, wouldn't you?" she asked.

"It was what I was made for," he said simply.

I squeezed his shoulder myself, noting the words he had just used. He had said similar before.

So it wasn't just a thing he believed in, was it?

He was being serious when he said such a thing.

"I've known many like you. I know your fates. I know how some of you fight them, and how some of you accept them. I also know the way the world tries to call out to you. What I offer, what I ask, is that when it does... you let me face it with you. I am very adept at handling such situations. And, alongside my assistance concerning these prophecies, I can also aid your people in more natural ways too. I can tell your village likely doesn't need much, being who you are, but if you ever find yourselves needing food, resources, or aid in more simple forms I can offer all of that as well. Renn wouldn't like it much if you all froze in the winter, or starved to death, anyway," Vim said.

"I wouldn't," I said.

Elaine sighed. "It almost feels like you're trying to feed me a poisoned apple."

I smirked at that. "Hear that Vim? You're more trouble than you're worth."

He huffed. "The only real downside to my assistance is that I travel so much. I may only visit once every few years, depending on need. I can give you ways to contact me, when in dire need, but it won't happen quickly. I have many duties," Vim said, honestly.

I nodded.

"I see. A problem of age. You suffer it too, Renn, we all know the stories," Elaine said with a sad smile. I shifted and tried not to start crying again. Why'd such a simple fact hurt so bad? "All the same... I accept your help in facing those monsters any day, Vim. I'd almost be willing to pay any price, if not for me and my own people but the whole world. We have a duty to stop such disasters," Elaine said, agreeing to accept Vim's offer.

He scoffed as he slowly stood, yet she still held his hand. "The only payment you need offer is your continued friendship with Renn. As I'm sure you know, or can see, she's a frail thing. Sometimes we need to force her to sit and enjoy life's simpler pleasures," Vim said to Elaine.

"Huh?"

Elaine chuckled as she nodded. "Yes. The poor girl wishes to stay and ask so many questions, but keeps them all in. I can only imagine what it's like for you, being her husband," she said.

"Hey," I wanted to complain about them talking about me in such a way, but couldn't help but smile all the same.

Vim chuckled, but then realized something. "Oh. Actually there is something I guess you could use to pay me, if you want," he then said.

"Hm?" Elaine and I both tilted our heads at him.

He smiled at her for a moment, and then glanced at me... and for the tiniest moment I felt warm. Happy. As if nothing was wrong with the world.

"I'd like to build a home. Here. If you're okay with it, too, of course," he said to me.

My heart skipped a beat as I stared into his eyes, and I almost didn't notice Elaine stand from her chair. She glanced at me, and with a strangely foggy head I heard her laugh.

"You wish for us to be a safe haven. For her," Elaine then said, speaking as if she saw something she shouldn't.

I gulped as I glanced at her, and found her staring at me too. Her eyes were glowing again.

"Keep proving why I hate your kind and you'll learn to regret it," Vim warned.

Elaine scoffed. "Such threats won't work anymore. She's now an official family member. Welcome Rennalee, as you always have and always will be. With warm and open arms," Elaine said as she reached over to grab my hand.

I barely registered anything as Elaine pulled me into a hug. I felt... strangely empty for a moment, of thoughts and emotions, as Elaine hugged me and I stared over her shoulder at Vim.

He had a sad smile on his face... and I knew it was because he was happy, but not.

He wanted me to have a home. All this time. Yet now that I had one... well...

While Elaine hugged me, he reached out. I reached out to grab his hand, and I squeezed it with all the warmth I could summon... as I returned Elaine's hug.

I felt like I wanted to cry, but instead all I could do was smile.

This explained his strangeness the last few weeks.

All those conversations.

He'd been planning for this.

When I had been worrying about what he'd say, or do, he instead had already decided.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded at him... thanking him.

For more than he knew.

Chapter 370 Vim – An Achille's Heel

Ice was slowly forming upon the small pond's surface.

It was a very thin layer. Maybe even one of the first layers of ice to form this season. It was growing cold enough that I knew soon the humans; even those here in the northern lands that were used to such temperatures, would begin to keep their homes heated throughout the day with lit fireplaces. And when they ventured out of their hearths they would do so firmly bundled up, as much as possible.

But as of now, at the moment, it was cold but not cold enough for such lengths. The ice I was watching form was as thin as a fingernail, and not a complete layer. It was forming around the edges, but likely wouldn't reach the center of the pond... and the nearby lakes, the larger pools of water, were most likely still too warm for any ice to form at all.

"Ice," I scoffed at the thing I was trying to distract myself with.

When was the last time I had been cold anyway? Actually cold?

A few monarchs had abilities related to the cold. A few gods had been able to call down ice from the sky, like falling stars. Others had been able to freeze any body of water instantly, with a mere touch. But outside of those incidents, have I ever actually been cold? From the natural elements?

If I had been I couldn't remember. I could feel cold, of course. I knew when it was cold... but that didn't mean I was actually bothered by it. I never felt the desire to get bundled up, as everyone else did, at least. Even if my very skin froze and decayed, I didn't get frostbite or anything. My body adapted too quickly for such ailments to affect me.

The only reason I ever even wore heavier clothes during winter was to not be weird when traveling.

I shifted as I watched a leaf that had been floating upon the small pond's surface go still. The water around it had solidified, going still itself thanks to chilling and becoming frozen.

The thing was rather green. Not like the browns of most of the other fallen leaves, which meant it had fallen recently and likely from the harsh winds. It was about the size of my hand, open wide and spread fingered, and it looked like it was full and intact. It didn't look as if it had been eaten or chewed on by anything.

For a few strange moments I felt an odd kinship with the leaf.

Having just fallen off from where you were meant to be. About to decay, but still alive enough to not realize it. All the while being stuck in a strange freezing puddle, unable to even float aimlessly. Completely at the mercy of the world around me.

It was a stupid thing to feel, but it was the truth.

I felt helpless. Maybe even worthless.

It was a feeling I knew well, I was used to feeling it often... but not usually for this reason.

Usually I felt like this, melancholic, when someone I knew died or got hurt. Like those in the Society. I had felt this way when Miss Beak died. I had felt like this when I had killed Tim in anger. I had felt like this when Reatti had attacked me in Lumen, after killing that creature. I had felt like a failure then too.

Yet this time these feelings of worthlessness wasn't from a failure on my part. At least, not in the standard form.

I hadn't outright failed the Society. Members hadn't died, or suffered, and especially not because I hadn't been good enough. No locations were lost to us. No strange drama was occurring... at least, not at the immediate moment.

There was the vote, of course. The Chronicler's and Light's schemes. Lilly and Randle's, too. And my own. But those were not at the forefront of my mind. Not anymore.

Some water splashed before me as a layer of the ice shifted against a not as formed layer. A tiny splash splattered out from a few feet away, and the leaf that had been stuck moved. It shifted, rocked, and then went still again as the ice settled and only solidified even more.

Studying the leaf, I decided I hated it.

It only seemed helpless. Unable to do anything on its own. But the truth was the opposite.

It was doing exactly what it was supposed to be doing.

It would degrade. Be absorbed by this pond, and this ecosystem. Stuff will eat it. Stuff will use it for their beds, their nests. And eventually it will form into dirt and other specks, to be used again by the world around it.

It had formed, and did its duty while attached to its branch and tree. And now was finishing up the last cycle of its life. One could theoretically argue it had fallen off early, being so green, but by all rights and sense the leaf had done its job... and was doing it well.

The leaf was not a failure. Even if it seemed to be.

Stuck in ice upon a small pond, deep within a dense forest... completely unknown to the world. It didn't need acknowledgement. It didn't need to fret. It was done, finishing the last bit of its life and purpose.

In that sense... was I any better than this leaf?

Could I claim I was doing what I was meant to? What I had been created for? Was my purpose being fulfilled, and was I doing so properly?

"Not if they're still here," I mumbled as the layer of ice shifted and splashed again. This time not on its own violation, but because of me. I had shifted a little, and my weight had caused a crack to spread out from the bank of the pond and out into the ice. Thanks to the crack, and the ice moving, I was able to see how much of the pond had frozen off. Nearly all of it.

It was colder than I thought.

I sighed as I looked away from the pond, its ice and leaf, and behind me. To what I should be focusing on, even though my mind wouldn't let me.

The saint's house was lit up. Shadows danced on the curtains covering all the windows. I knew within the house Renn, that saint, Cat, and the saint's daughter were all finishing up their dinner.

Not far from the saint's house were other houses. Not all of them had similar lit up windows, since it was late enough at night that a few were quiet from slumber. Off in the distance, past trees and small hills, I could see other houses. Most had chimneys, and all of them were leaking smoke.

Yes. It was colder than I had first assumed.

Maybe I really should find a fox or something for Renn. I liked the idea, and it would help distract me. At least for a moment. Longer than the ice and the leaf stuck within it had done, at least.

"Prophecies," I scoffed the word and looked away from the house.

The mere thought of them made my blood boil.

It was one thing to hear hints, and be teased, by those like Narli or Celine. They knew better than to say anything too serious. They would typically smirk at me, while beating around the bush, but would never outright tell me anything. It annoyed me, but I was able to live with it.

This human saint though, this Elaine, was old. Too old.

She knew I hated prophecies. She'd been explained it, by not just Renn and Lilly but myself. Yet in her old age she simply... spoke of things without much thought.

And I had made it worse by directly asking for more information. The type of information that I usually avoided. The type that usually forced my hand.

If she hadn't been Renn's friend, or basically family in her eyes, I would have killed her on the spot the moment she had mentioned those lights.

The thought of them made me wince, enough so that I actually reached up to rub my eyes.

"A monarch's birth," I groaned at the levity of the situation.

There was no denying what she saw. Or well, what she thought she saw. To her it had been bright lights. Lights that preceded a creature of great power. Of flames, and death.

What she, and most saints, couldn't comprehend was the meaning behind such things.

Monarchs did not just spring forth from nothing. They needed a source.

And if not born from a flesh and blood parent, then... well...

More ice shifted and broken, splashing louder, as I groaned at myself... not willing, or wanting, to even think of it anymore.

The worst part was I couldn't even wish for it to have not happened.

I can't even wish to not have ever come here. Because if I hadn't, then I wouldn't have learned of the truth.

And that would have sickened me more than anything else. Even this.

A familiar sound of an old door being opened, and then closed, drew my eyes. I watched as the woman who had led me here to this headache granting moment stepped away from the front door of the house and looked around.

For a few moments Renn looked all over. She had her heavy clothes on and her hood over her head. I couldn't tell from here if she had her hat on or not, but I knew in this darkness it didn't matter. No human would be able to make out her ears from under that hood, especially not in the dark.

Honestly she didn't need to keep her hood on. The village was practically asleep. The few houses that were still noisy, were already quieting down. People were finishing up their meals, and pastimes, and heading to sleep. A few of the homes that had been lit up were now dark.

Renn eventually looked my way, and I raised a hand to make sure she noticed me.

I couldn't help but smile at the way her whole body jolted at the sight of me. She spun a little, as if on a heel, and hurried my way. Nearly breaking out into a run as she did.

I'd worry about her quick approach if not for the obvious gait she had. It was one of her happy ones.

Renn didn't take long to reach me at all. As she drew closer she slowed a little, and I noticed her happy smile beneath her heavy hood.

"Cat's worried they've offended you," Renn said before she even stepped up next to me.

"Hm...?" I frowned at her as she came to a stop before me, and then reached up to take her hood off. Right before she did however she glanced around again, as if to verify we were alone. She removed her hood, revealing her ears and lack of hat, once she confirmed we were.

"You didn't have dinner with us, Vim. Even Lilly had dinner with us the first night we were here," Renn said, clarifying what she meant.

"I have a lot on my mind Renn. Plus, it's the wife's job to placate the in-laws," I said.

Renn's ears fluttered and a wry grin planted itself on her face. "In-laws? Placate?"

"Basically it's your job to keep the peace when I act weird, or offensive."

She giggled at that, and I was glad she didn't take offense to it. "It is, isn't it!" she agreed happily.

I nodded... and although in the back of my mind I had expected her presence to slightly bother me, since my head was full of terrible thoughts, I instead found myself relaxing a little... as if she was a balm on a wound, I felt the strange melancholy quickly fade to the far corners of my mind as she laughed.

"I'm sorry Renn. I have a lot on my mind... I would not have been pleasant conversation," I apologized again, meaning it this time.

Renn's giggling died down as she nodded at me. "I know. It's okay. It was... obvious what she'd said had bothered you. Even Cat and Grenna had noticed," Renn said.

Grenna...? Oh right. The daughter. I wonder if the name was similar to Renn's on purpose or mere coincidence?

"Hm. I'm sorry," I mumbled as I watched the way her left ear twitched a little. It didn't seem to be doing so on purpose, and there was nothing around us making any odd noises as to demand it, so I assumed it was a simple twitch. Maybe the fur upon the ear, or in it, had been bothered by the hood earlier.

"It's really okay, Vim. I know you don't like saints, so... it's okay," Renn said gently, with a tone that told me she'd likely forgive me for anything if I simply asked her to.

But that wasn't okay. At all. And I knew it.

I knew my hatred of saints was wrong. It went against my own code of ethics. I hated them for things they couldn't control. I hated they who suffered a lack of free-will. It was cruel. Unusual.

But I hadn't ever been able to get rid of it. Only suppress it.

While I thought about my own character flaws, Renn stepped a little closer... at first I thought she was going to round me, as to look at the pond behind me, but she simply drew closer to me. "So... Vim," she said my name, and clasped her hands behind her back. The movement was an adorable one, made special thanks to the thick clothes she wore.

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

"Hm?" I studied the eyes staring into my own. They gleamed a little, reflecting from the little moonlight peering through gentle clouds.

"How long have you been planning this?" she asked.

"Planning what?" I asked back. Lately it felt like I'd not been planning much of anything. Too little, in fact.

"You're... going to try and make this place somewhere I can stay, aren't you? A safe place to rest. One away from the Society, at least without them knowing about it," Renn said with an odd smile.

Ah.

I nodded. "Yes. I thought of it when bringing Cat to Telmik. I figured if they really were the descendants of your friend, and really did see you as some kind of guardian deity, then it'd be a safe place that you'd also feel comfortable at. Such a place, distant from the Society and its plots, is valuable right now," I said.

Even if it was right next to a saint.

"What'd you just think right now? At the end there?" Renn quickly asked, and I felt my eye twitch because of it.

She had noticed.

"The saint. I'm upset that this so called safe haven houses a saint... but I'm not stupid. She can be another layer of safety for you, as long as used properly," I said.

Renn laughed at me. "I figured...!"

Hmph.

I allowed Renn to laugh for a moment, but before she settled down and found her next question or way to tease me... I went ahead and continued.

"This isn't the only place either. I've already asked Berri for permission to send you to them if you need it. I also left letters to be sent, one of which will go to Merit, for a similar purpose. Honestly, although I asked for permission to build a home... this place is not my first choice. I do like how close it is to Lilly though, at least. In fact, I really like your idea of making you a place next to Lilly and her family, though I'm not sure how I'll get them to accept it," I admitted.

Renn shifted, her ears perking up a little as she stared at me. I tried to not notice the way her pupils had gone a little thin, as she was so focused on me, and that a slight blush had formed on her face. Hopefully that was just from the cold.

"Vim..." Renn whispered as I sighed and nodded.

"We'll give this place a few years. Maybe a decade or two. I'll build a home, and let you stay here occasionally. Let you test the waters amongst the villagers. Maybe you'll get lucky and more saints will be born too, ones you can kind of imprint on as they grow up. If it works out this will be a nice little waypoint for you, for us. But if not it's okay. We have Lilly, the Keep, and even a few other locations too. I've thought of a few places we could set up camp at, if you approve of them. I figure this next circuit we make we'll detour a little here and there to let you choose which ones you'd prefer," I said.

"Vim...!" Renn reached out, grabbing my wrists.

I shrugged gently at her. "It's not just for you, Renn," I said.

She made a noise at me, her hands gripping my wrists tighter. "What do you mean?"

"What Celine's daughter and the rest are doing... is dangerous. Even if this vote doesn't go badly, the Society may still suffer from their actions. It may once again split. People may once again become fractured, and become at ends with one another. If it comes to that... I'll need to help build another network. Another system. Another Society, nearly, for those who will still wish to retain our loyalties and services. Though don't be surprised if it's not the people you expect. Last time this happened, I had ended up siding with the group I had not originally planned on helping. So who knows how it'll go this time too," I said as I shook my head.

"You mean you'd side with the Chronicler and them? If they went against everyone else?" Renn asked worriedly.

I wanted to nod, but knew if I did I'd be lying.

After all, I wasn't going to give them that option this time.

But I wasn't ready just yet to tell Renn why. Or rather, the how.

"Basically Renn, for now, I'm focusing on a few things. I'll be honest... I'm not sure what to focus on first. But I like the idea of making you a place to call home. A place to be safe at. Whether I'm there with you or not," I said. Not only was it a perfect distraction, it was also something actually useful.

"You just ignored my question Vim," she whispered.

"I've not done it in a long time, but I usually do ignore a few here and there don't I?" I asked.

Renn made another noise. This time it was a sad one. "You do. You have. But I had hoped that I'd wiggled deep enough into your heart such things were behind us," she said.

I couldn't help it, I found myself smiling at her. Wiggled? How adorable to phrase it in such a way.

"You have. That's why I outright ignored it. Because I'm scared of answering you at the moment, and need to build up my confidence first," I said.

"Then just say that, Vim. Don't just ignore me, not anymore," Renn said as she shifted her hands, and then found my own with them.

I took her hands in my own, and nodded. "Hm... a reasonable request," I admitted.

"Is it?" she asked, as if for verification.

Nodding, I took a small breath and held it in for a moment. "Yes. It is. I'll... try my best, Renn, to be better. A better husband," I said.

"Mhm... I'll try to be a better wife too," she said, nodding back at me.

Hm...? Where had she been lacking lately?

Before I could ask what she meant, her ears fluttered for a moment as she glanced down at our clasped hands. "Can I ask about what happened in there? With what Elaine had said to you? The prophecies?" she asked.

I gulped. Damn my promise this time really bit me in the ass! Already! Mere moments I had lasted!

I knew she would have come out here and asked. Even though I had felt like I had done well in there, hearing about something that had shaken me to my core, I knew Renn would ask of it. At least once. Because it had concerned her friend. Because it had bothered me that desperately.

If anything I knew Renn would have asked of it, in hopes of confirming I'd not harm her saintly friend over it.

So it was only right I told her. It was that dire. That important. Plus I needed to let her know I had no plans to hurt her saintly friend. She was old, her mind was fading, but she was not a threat. Not a real one, at least. No more than any other person of uniqueness would be.

Keeping my heart steady, I nodded. "You can... and you should be able to. So uh... well..." I hesitated, and suddenly felt... strangely sick.

I blinked a few times, feeling almost as if I was about to shed tears. But I wasn't going to cry. Nor was I actually in pain, or sick. I was just...

Renn, with all her lovely patience, waited for me. She smiled as she waited, looking not as if she was enjoying the moment or teasing me... but instead as if she was hearing happy news. The smile on her face was almost as sweet as the one she had when holding Root, Lilly's baby.

I loved that smile. It made me jealous. It wasn't often it was directed my way.

It almost made me want to not answer her. To break a promise I'd just made with her.

Almost.

"This is... silly to say, for me, but uh... well..." I hesitated, again, and felt stupid. As if I was a boy on his first outing with a woman. Was that sweat I felt on the back of my neck? Surely not.

Renn's smile turned into a larger grin, and I wanted to groan. Now she was teasing me. Or at least, enjoying the sight before her.

"I know you don't tell anyone. You don't share the stuff we talk about. Even without ever really saying it, you know that some of the things I say are secrets. The type that could... well..." I started to explain, both to let her know how important it was to keep what I was about to tell her a secret, but also that I loved how she had known to do so all this time without me outright telling her. I honestly did like how she kept so much secret from everyone. Especially when she was basically an open book about herself, and so much more, with anyone. Such secrets, kept safe, told me how much she valued me.

Her grin softened a little. "I'll not tell anyone, I promise," she said gently, seemingly not offended at all.

"Sorry. I know. I just... felt like it needed to be said," I said.

"Hm," she nodded at me.

"Plus it let me gather my nerves, before actually saying it, too," I admitted.

She giggled at me. "I figured!"

Smiling at her, I took another breath and felt a little better. I no longer felt as if I was going to throw up... I only felt like someone had repeatedly stabbed me in the stomach with something sharp and jagged.

"Your saint. Elaine. The thing she witnessed in her prophecies, are exactly what she thinks it is," I said, and felt a rush of relief at admitting it.

Renn blinked at me a few times, and then I felt her nails slightly dig into the back of my hands. Not because they were long, or sharp, but instead because she had squeezed suddenly a little harder.

"Vim...? What's that mean?" she asked, and I could tell by her frown that she meant it.

I shrugged at her. "The prophecy. She thinks it was the birth of that creature. The monarch. Well... she's right," I said.

Renn's frown deepened. "Uh... okay...? And why's that bother you so much? Didn't you know that? Didn't we know that? You knew that all along, didn't you?" Renn asked.

Ah. Great. She's not understanding.

But how could she...?

No one could.

Not anymore.

I had seen to that.

Taking another deep breath, I nodded and looked up at the sky. The clouds were rolling past quickly, even though there wasn't much wind here on the ground.

Renn was silent as I gathered my thoughts for a few moments, all the while staring at the lit up clouds thanks to the moonlight.

Once I decided the moonlight, the sky painted with clouds, was not as pretty as Renn's eyes I looked back down at her.

"The lights she spoke of. The wheel of lights, as she called it... can only be one thing, Renn," I said.

She nodded slowly, staring at me as if I was professing my love to her. She was entranced.

"The birth of a monarch," I told her.

Renn's entranced look of love turned into a glare with a single blink. "Vim."

Right! "Right!" I flinched and nodded. "I mean the creation of a monarch. Those lights mean that a monarch had been created. That's what it looks like when they're created from nothing," I said, explaining.

Renn's glare shifted as she tilted her head at me, studying me as if I was now talking about something ridiculous.

Holding her look, I softly shook my head at her. "Renn... only one thing can make a monarch," I whispered.

"A god...?" she asked, with an even quieter whisper.

I nodded. She had realized it immediately. I knew her mind was quick. Odds are I'd only mentioned such things a few times with her in our years of traveling.

For a few long moments... I watched Renn's mind prove its abilities.

Her eyes unfocused. Then they hardened. Then her look of shock turned into one of doubt, only to be quickly followed by cold understanding. I heard her tail go stiff beneath her clothes, and her ears both perked upward and away from each other... as if she was suddenly fully alert of her surroundings.

"You're saying a god made the monarch that set those fires aflame," she whispered as she understood.

"That's the only thing those lights can mean," I said as I nodded.

The saint had described them perfectly. Even though she had not seen their importance, or known anything about their meaning, she had seen them clearly and plainly.

Renn's hands became limp in my own, yet I still held onto them. Her fingers felt a little cold, since she wasn't wearing gloves. Renn glanced down, away from me, as she got lost in thought. I knew her mind was whirling, and likely was now in a similar state that mine had been in earlier... when I had heard the news too.

"Elaine didn't realize it. Doesn't. Because she doesn't know what it means," Renn said as she understood.

I nodded. "No one would. Not anymore."

"No one but you..." she whispered as she looked back up at me.

I nodded again.

Renn took a small breath, and then let it out real slow. "... I don't know what to think about this. I feel shocked, but... well..."

Right. She doesn't realize what it honestly means.

How could she. Why would she?

Did I...?

I blinked as I realized I wasn't sure if I did either.

After all... it was I who had thought the gods were gone.

I had thought they were. Believed they were.

After all this time, I've not once seen or heard of them. Not only have I not sensed them, I've not sensed their creations. I've not felt their powers shifting the world to their whims. Not only have I not seen their miracles, I've not heard of anyone else seeing them either. None of the greater first-born monarchs had ever sensed or felt their creators either.

"Vim... what does this mean?" she asked.

"It means I failed, Renn," I stated.

"Failed...?" she whispered, but I only nodded.

After all it was the only thing I was sure of. The only thing I could be sure of.

I had failed.

I had been tasked with eliminating them all, and I'd failed to do so.

At least one of them had slipped through my grasp.

And I knew where there was one, there were likely more.

And the fact they had finally shown themselves now... after all this time...

Gripping Renn's hands a little tighter, I found a new fear. One far beyond anything I'd ever known.

Feeling as if my head had just been split open, I felt my heart go still and my lungs collapse at the sheer shock of the truth.

The whole world seemed to shift, and go still, only to return with a vengeance... as I recognized a terrible, if lovely, truth.

One I should have realized long ago.

And it was terrifying beyond reason.

I saw in Renn's expression what I knew had planted itself on my face.

Utter terror.

"Vim...!?" Renn panicked, rightfully so, but I didn't have the heart to tell her the reason for it.

Closing my eyes, I lowered my head as she stepped closer. She worried for me, having obviously seen the sudden shock that had just nearly broken my soul.

"Vim?" Renn continued to ask for me, for my condition, but I instead of answering pulled her into me.

Wrapping her into a hug, I clung to her. I held her close. As if to defend her from the world around us.

"Vim! What's wrong...? What happened? Vim?" Renn wiggled in my grasp, but I didn't let her go. I feared doing so.

With wide eyes, I saw nothing, as I realized something terrible.

There was no threat greater.

Even more terrible than my old enemies having shown themselves once again in this world.

Far more dangerous than the vote.

Beyond anything Light, or any human or non-human could conjure and scheme.

Than even a god who had hidden themselves all this time.

Never before had such a dire threat exist in this world.

Until now.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I groaned as I kept all my strength at bay. So that I'd not crush Renn to death in my grasp, as I tried to shield her.

Suddenly all my plans meant nothing. All my ideas were pointless...

Nothing I'd been doing, or had planned to do, mattered anymore. Not in the grand scheme, anyway.

The problems of the Society were inconsequential compared to that of the gods.

I had felt lost lately. Unsure of what to say, or how to say it. In more ways than one.

That feeling was nothing compared to this one. Now I really was lost.

Clinging to the very thing that had made me so.

"Vim..." Renn seemed to calm down, as her arms wrapped around me. She squeezed me in return as she sighed into my chest. I could hear and feel her resignation in that sigh. She knew something was wrong, but could tell I'd not say it. Even if I was willing to, I'd not give it life beyond my own heart and thoughts.

How could I...?

After all, I just found my Achilles Heel.

My Heart.

Had it now against my chest.

In my arms.

Found at last.

Which meant the gods had too.

Even if they hadn't found her yet, they would.

Unless I found them first.