

Non Human 401

Chapter 401 Vim – Kaley's Grotto

Sinking down, I made sure to not brush against the coral and rocks as much as possible.

It didn't take long for me to reach the bottom of the pool, and upon landing I had startled some kind of eel. It rushed out from wherever it had been hiding and grabbed onto my shoulder with its mouth. It bit and tore at it for a moment, but released me quickly and swam away before doing any damage to itself.

Apologizing to the thing, I scanned the area as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. Not only was the world dark anyway, thanks to the dark storm clouds all over the place, but this hole was one that wined and turned. There was no direct path for any light to enter here, but there was a very faint glow of blue all the same. I'd never figured out if it was just the reflection of what little sunlight made it down here, or something in the water or life forms here, but it didn't matter.

Stepping towards the darker hole in the distance, I walked through thick coral and sharp rocks. There were hundreds of little fish and other creatures, urchins and the like, but most of them didn't even seem to recognize I existed as I walked and swam past them.

I must have landed right on that eel's home, for it to have startled so brazenly. Poor thing.

Reaching the end of the section, I slowly walked up a small section of stone. There was no air pocket this time, but it didn't matter. I found the metal box rather easily, and was pleasantly surprised to find that there wasn't much gunk on it. A few pieces of coral, a crab sat on its corner, but nothing too drastic.

I pushed aside the crab, letting it float to a nearby cluster of rocks, and pulled the metal box out of the small hole I had left it in.

Thanks to how utterly heavy the box was, I hadn't needed to secure it. No natural tide or creature could have moved this thing, and by the looks of the indent in the rock where it had been sitting all this time... my assumption had been true. It had dug a full thumb deep into the rock, which had only secured it even more in place.

Putting the box under an arm, I turned and headed back.

Walking slowly, I retraced my steps. I had stepped on and broke a few things, so I tried to only step where I'd done so before. To keep the damage I was doing to this sea cave as limited as possible.

Once back to the main shaft, I looked upward and found the best spot to climb. I could have swum naturally alone, not having to occasionally grab and push off the rocks and walls, but the box made it a tad difficult with its weight.

It took longer to get back up than it had to descend, of course, but I made good time and emerged from the pool of water. I took a deep breath of cold ocean air, and strode out of the pond.

As I left the pond I glanced over to the well-kept grave. The three headstones were weathered, but not covered in slime or dirt like most of this little inlet cave was.

Kaley wasn't here, thankfully, but I could smell her even through the sea covering me. She had likely been here yesterday, before we had arrived.

I was glad she wasn't here, since I wasn't entirely sure if Kaley would be upset with me or not for hiding something near her family's graves and in the pool she had once called home.

A part of me said she would have laughed and been annoyed that I hadn't just asked first... but another part of me worried she'd be offended.

She was odd in her own ways...

Though...

"Not like I buried it after meeting her," I whispered as I stepped away from the pool and headed for where I'd left my clothes.

I dried off and got dressed quickly. Maybe a little too quickly. I felt damp, and seawater rolled down my back as I put my shirt on, but I didn't want to linger. Just in case.

Once clothed, I picked up the box once more and headed out of this little grotto.

It was actually a neat place. There were pools of water everywhere, an underground cavern system, and even a freshwater waterfall deeper into the cave system it was connected to. But it was also a place I didn't like to come to. Because my only real memories of this place were of Kaley's heart breaking as she wept for hours on end.

I hated such places.

As I walked, I glanced down at the box I had recovered. It's silver look gleamed a little now that I was out of that dark cave, and although felt kind of slimy thanks to the long years underwater, it didn't have any rust or holes.

Pausing a moment, I decided to check on the contents first. Just in case. What if I left the cave and happened upon someone? Then I'd have to carry the box around longer, until I got away from everyone and...

"What is it?"

The box I had been about to open shattered. From being startled I had crushed it haphazardly. It popped open from an odd angle and several pieces broke, flying in all directions, as I turned and stepped back in shock.

"Wah!" Renn ducked a little as a piece from the box flew up and hit her in the cheek, drawing blood.

"Renn!" I dropped the now broken box, stepping over to her as she reached up to touch her face. As she did, I felt horrible as I found a half of her finger sized gash running down her left cheek, from her cheekbone to her jawbone. It was bleeding, but not too badly, and I didn't see muscle or bone but...

"Is it bad?" Renn asked worriedly as she lifted her face. She wasn't crying but had a frown that told me she wanted to. Though maybe it wasn't from the pain, but worry.

"No. It's a clean cut. But... I should probably clean it. That thing's been down there a long time, and though it has no rust the ocean can be nasty," I said worriedly.

"Nasty?" Renn asked with an odd tone as I gently grabbed her head and tilted it. She made an odd noise as I made her lift her chin and turn her head, almost to the point she had to turn her whole body as to accommodate me.

Yes. It wasn't too deep. And it didn't look like anything got stuck in her. It had simply sliced her as it flew past. And thanks to it being on her face, in the cheek no less, it looked worse than it was. Gently pulling on her skin, near her jaw, I watched the way the thin cut moved and adjusted to the pressure. Some blood leaked out thanks to my doing so, but I was able to see that it was just the laceration of her outer layers. Her muscles looked intact.

I wiped some of the blood away, and along the wound, and noticed the way the newer fresh blood didn't seep out as quickly as it could have. Telling me she'd likely heal up fine as long as we tended it properly.

"I think that's the first time you've ever actually hurt me, Vim," Renn said happily.

"Why do you sound so happy saying that?" I asked.

"Well..." she mumbled oddly as I released her and sighed.

"Come on. Let's get my bag, I got stuff I can put on it for you. It should heal quickly, actually, but let's not take any risks," I said.

"Sure..." Renn nodded as she reached up. I was going to tell her not to touch it, but she just wiped the blood that was now dripping down her chin.

Feeling horrible, I shook my head at myself and glanced at the box. It was in pieces, of course, but it had still dug into the soft ground where I had dropped it.

Damn thing. "Are you alone?" I asked as I looked around.

"I am. Meriah and Kaley are cooking. I'll be honest I'm enjoying them, but the two are acting oddly with each other and I needed a moment away from them. They... seem... kind of awkward with each other, though it's obvious they've known each other for a long time. I felt like they wanted to say stuff to one another that they didn't want me to hear, so," Renn said. As she spoke I noticed the way she had done so without moving her lips as much as possible. It gave her voice a cute tone, as if she was speaking through clenched teeth, but I couldn't enjoy it since I knew it was thanks to the pain from the cut.

"I see..." I said softly. I wasn't in the mood to tell her that Kaley and Meriah had history. Nor did I think it was my place to tell her about it. So instead I went to pick up the box.

"What is it?" Renn asked again as I stepped over to it.

I picked the whole thing up, and glanced around for any shards or pieces. I went about picking them up, the ones I could find at least, out of concern for Kaley. She frequented this place, barefoot most of the time, and I didn't need her hurting herself as Renn had.

"Another item I hid away. I left it at the bottom of that pond. The one near the graves," I said.

Renn hummed as she stepped away, and at first I wondered what she was doing... but then I realized she was just helping me out. She was also looking for pieces, having realized what I was doing.

"Don't touch any you find Renn. They're sharp, as you found out, and heavy. Possibly too heavy for you to pick up without hurting yourself," I warned.

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"Mkay..." she agreed.

"I actually left this box in that pool before I met Kaley, to be honest. It was how I met her. I had been hiding stuff, and while I hid this here I met her. She had been inside the pools, and saw me. She thought I was a fellow fish, since I was walking around on the bottom of the ocean without breathing," I said.

As I picked up pieces, I noted the odd silence coming from her. Usually upon being told such a thing she would have laughed, made a weird noise, or asked a hundred questions. Instead she was quiet...

I glanced at her, and found her half kneeled over, studying something. "Really...? Does Kaley know?" Renn asked, sounding slightly distracted. Then she made an odd sound. "Ah! Vim, here. Another one."

I see. She had found a piece but hadn't known if it was one or not.

Stepping over to her, I bent down to pick up the long piece of broken metal she had found.

It did look odd, amongst the wet rocks and sand. "She doesn't know about the box, as far as I'm aware. But she might, too, I don't know. I've never told her of it, out of concern of insulting her. You know... since," I gestured with the broken piece to the nearby graves.

"Right... burying it near her family's grave-site. Kind of rude, Vim," Renn said.

"I hadn't meant to! I put it there before I met her, like I said," I defended myself.

"You should have moved it. Afterward."

Holding her gaze, I felt horrible as I watched a tiny bead of blood drip down her cheek and to her chin. It wasn't bleeding as bad as before, already stopping, but it was a stark reminder... again... of how dangerous I was.

"Sorry Renn..." I whispered.

"Don't say sorry to me, say it to her. And there! Another one!" Renn hurriedly stepped away, sounding a little happy as she pointed at another piece.

I picked it up, putting it into the box that was now half-open, and sighed at her. I hadn't been apologizing for my desecration of Kaley's burial-sight...

It didn't take too long for Renn and I to gather up the dozen or so pieces we were able to find. I made sure to check the pool of water, and the graves, rather closely since they were what Kaley would spend most of her time around. Once finished, I dug out the smaller box within the box, pulling it out from the shards and splinters of the larger one, and handed it to Renn.

"A... another box?" Renn asked with a frown as she looked at the wooden thing.

"Inside is a metal plate. What you call a cast. Or a mold. Or well, there's four of them in there technically," I said.

Renn shifted the box, but didn't open it. Even though it was obvious where it could be opened, with the lid being larger than the rest of it. "Molds...? Like what Lellip and them use?" she asked.

I nodded. "Exactly like them, actually. Just... special ones."

"Can I see them?" she asked with a smile. As she did her left side of her smile was noticeably lopsided. From the cut.

Feeling terrible I nodded. "Of course you can. They'll not hurt you. At least, the molds can't. What is made from them could though," I said.

Renn hummed as she carefully opened the box. Her ears fluttered excitedly, and I realized she didn't have her hat on. A little shocked at the lack of it, since Kaley's home had humans who weren't a part of the Society, I wondered why she had failed to wear it... but then realized she did indeed have her hat. It was tied to her waist at her belt.

She had either taken it off upon finding me, or it had fallen off in the accident just now and she had picked it up when I hadn't been paying attention. Maybe earlier, when she had been kneeling oddly a few moments ago.

Renn handed me the lid of the box, and then the box itself, after pulling out the metal sheets. They were an inch or so thick each, and had pressed in molds of smaller parts.

"Well... this isn't what I was expecting. What are they? What do they make?" she asked as she studied them.

"A weapon," I said.

Renn's ear twitched and she stopped looking at the molds and up at me instead. "A weapon...?" she whispered.

I nodded. "It's not the whole weapon, of course. But those four pieces are the most integral parts. It took me years and years to perfect them. Dozens of brilliant minds helped me too, and we even had a

bunch of the originals to copy from. It had been difficult. And by the time we finished, I didn't even need them anymore. A pitiful waste of brilliance and time," I said, hating the things more than I already did.

They were now not only a waste, and a scorn on the world, but had hurt Renn.

Damn those things.

She shifted as she glanced at the four molds in her hand. "You... made them, only to not need them?" she asked.

"Yeah. I had hoped, planned, to use them in the war. Against the monarchs. By the time they were ready to be used... it hadn't mattered. I had no army left to use them, and the few enemies left wouldn't have required them anyway," I said.

Renn's face contorted into a weird frown, and I watched a tiny line of blood roll down her cheek to her jaw, then from there down the side of her neck.

She seemed to be lost in thought, ignoring the blood, so I reached out. I stopped the tiny blood droplet from reaching her collar, and thus her clothes, and I wiped upward as to get as much of the blood off her as I could.

"Thanks," she gave me a smile as I rubbed my now blood-stained fingers together.

"You startled me, Renn," I whispered to her.

She blinked a few times, and then gulped. "I did," she agreed.

How had she done it? I had even been looking around, on guard, because I had worried about Kaley seeing me.

Yet she had done it. No doubt.

I had startled. Dropped the box, and expected danger. An enemy even.

Because the only people, the only things, which usually were able to sneak up on me like that... were gods and monarchs.

Renn gave me a wry smile. "I enjoyed the look on your face... until I got hurt," she teased me.

"Yeah... I'm sorry about that Renn. Really, I am," I said.

"You should be! It's not often I get to see you unsettled, Vim. Though... lately it's been happening more often. I'm not honestly sure if I like that or not..." Renn mumbled as she shrugged.

Studying the way she squirmed and grinned, as if suddenly having the time of her life, I felt utterly defeated.

What was I doing to do with her? Myself, too?

Rubbing her blood between my fingers, I glanced at the box in my hand and wondered if I should just... toss it aside and grab her.

But to do it here, in this damp and cold grotto? It was pretty, but at the moment ill-fitting.

Plus if I kissed her now, it might hurt her. Thanks to that cut.

Damn me.

Renn was about to say something, but because of her happy grin she had opened her mouth too far. She flinched and reached up to touch the side of her face, at the cut, and I felt an ice cold dagger slide slowly into my gut and wrench itself around.

"Careful Renn. Come on, let's go get you some medicine," I said gently, feeling like an absolute ass.

"It oddly doesn't hurt. Until I move my face," she said softly.

"It's because of how fine a cut it is. You will regretfully not be laughing or crying for a few days as to let it heal, so ready yourself for that," I warned her.

"What...? That's not fair," she said happily, able to tell I had only spoken partly in a serious tone.

"You don't need to put them back into that box, Renn. I think I might just destroy them," I said as Renn went to grab the box for the molds.

She hesitated, and then glanced at the things in her hand.

"These can hurt monarchs?" she asked.

"And gods," I said softly.

Her ears fluttered, and I heard her tail squirm beneath her clothes. "Then... you shouldn't. What if we need them, one day?" she asked.

About to smirk at her and ask when we'd need a weapon to face such things, when they were now all gone, I went still as I realized something obvious.

They might not be.

If Elaine's prophecy was right.

Hesitating... I gulped and shifted a little. "Right..." I mumbled, as I glanced at the molds.

"Do you need them? To fight them?" she asked.

"No. I had made them to allow those like you to have a fighting chance," I said.

"Then even more so, Vim."

Right...

"Fine. Put them in your pocket for now, then. Don't tell anyone about them," I said.

She nodded happily. "Right!" she said as she went to hiding them away.

Once she did, and had her hat back on her head, she joined me as we left Kaley's inlet and grotto and we headed back to the village. It like usual was rather empty, and seemed... worn down and cold. Even more so than normal, thanks to the layer of damp snow everywhere.

I'd already walked around it before heading to the grotto. While Renn spent time with Kaley and Meriah.

It was likely only going to be a few more visits until I didn't need to check it at all anymore. Because only Kaley would be here.

"I asked Kaley if she wanted to go to Telmik. During the vote. You know... since she likes to uh... well..."

"Sleep around?" I asked.

Renn giggled, but then flinched. Because she had grinned. "Yeah. Well... she said no. She doesn't want to go anywhere," Renn said sadly.

"Hm. I assume by now Renn, you've realized those like Kaley are those we can only help distantly. Like... Trek," I said.

Renn nodded gently at me. "Yes, Vim. I have. Though it hurts... I get it. I really do."

Before reaching the village, I went ahead and tossed the now half broken box over a random ledge. It crashed loudly, eventually landing in a small pool of seawater.

"You really do like just leaving behind stuff that would shock the world, don't you?" Renn asked as she and I stared over the ledge.

"It's just a box, Renn."

"A box that sounded and looked heavier than even I could lift," she noted.

"And had been perfectly reserved even while at the bottom of the ocean for decades," I added.

"Right...! Wait... right?" Renn agreed hesitantly as we left the ledge and entered the village.

Patting her on the back, I glanced at her cheek. It was no longer bleeding, but there were a couple stains of blood running down her face and neck.

Gosh I was a bastard.

"I'm fine Vim... really," Renn whispered, noticing my gaze.

"You sure?"

She smiled and nodded. "I think you're more worried about me than I had been about you when I gauged your eyeball out," she said.

Well duh.

I could survive anything.

You couldn't.

Plus...

"If anything I should be happy! I snuck up on you, for real! That's an accomplishment I bet most don't have," she said proudly.

"Right..." I agreed softly, smiling at that.

"Plus now I get to tease you. Just think what Kaley and Meriah are going to say when they see it," she teased.

"Right..." I groaned softly, my smile fading.

Renn giggled at me, and grabbed my hand. "I love you Vim. I really do. Secrets and mistakes all," she said gently.

Warmed by her gentle declaration... I nodded. "I love you too Renn."

By her dried blood on my fingers, I vowed it.

Chapter 402 Renn – Saying Goodbye to Kaley and Meriah

"Remember what we talked about Renn," Kaley said with a grin.

"I will...!" I nodded, doing my best to not grin back at her.

My left cheek still hurt a little, and I didn't want to re-open the wound. It had scabbed up a little, though Vim had put some kind of ointment on it so I knew it'd not rip and start bleeding again easily, I was still being careful.

"You're in danger, Vim," Meriah whispered behind me.

"You have no idea," Vim whispered back.

My grin grew larger, and I flinched but hadn't needed to worry. The wound hadn't opened.

Ignoring the two behind me I stepped forward and gave Kaley a hug. The half-dressed woman had a blanket around her, since it was cold, but it didn't stop me from feeling her warm body as we hugged. "Goodbye Renn. Even if the Society falls apart and all, please visit sometimes. At the very least come back to let me know how he is in bed, okay?" Kaley whispered as we hugged.

I laughed at her and nodded. "Okay. Stay warm, Kaley. Vim thinks this winter will be a real bad one," I said.

"It already is, Renn! Look at all the white around us!" Kaley said as we separated.

There was no need to look around; I'd seen it all already. And in fact last night I had sat and watched the snow fall and fall alongside her and Meriah.

Vim had, after tending my wound and fixing a few things around Kaley's house, like usual let us be. A part of me knew it was because he wanted to give us three our time alone, but another part of me knew it was because he was tired of being teased over the cut on my face.

Neither of them had actually thought he had hurt me on purpose, but they had both been more than willing to tease him as if so. And although he had nodded and smiled through most of it, I had seen the slight hurt on his expression underneath his normal stoic demeanor.

Like always Vim took his own failures very personally. Especially when those failures involved the lives or blood spilling of those he felt he should protect and cherish.

I was so thankful my wound had not been too severe. I could only imagine the terrible sorrow he would have had to endure had it been worse.

I'll need to be careful from now on. To make sure he didn't accidentally hurt me. Not just for my own self safety too, but his. Or at least, the safety of his heart and soul.

"All-righty Renn, get going, or I'll want to cuddle with you to keep warm!" Kaley said as she smirked and stepped back.

Blushing a little, since I knew she was being utterly serious, I nodded. "Okay. Goodbye Kaley."

"Mhm!" Kaley waved as I stepped away... and waved back at her as I left.

Walking behind Vim and Meriah, the fresh fallen snow crunched under our feet as we left Kaley's village. A village that had so few people left, the very roads were still pristine with fallen snow. We were the only footprints that could be seen upon the roads as we left.

Almost as if the town was empty. And all that lived there was Kaley.

But it wasn't true. There were still a couple dozen families. A few of them even had numerous members. It seemed last year, somehow, they had been blessed with a large batch of children. Ones that had, in their opinion, surprisingly survived the winter.

Hopefully they'd survive this one too, if such a thing really was that big of a worry that it was seen as unnatural for them to all survive.

Kaley and I waved one last time, and then she turned and headed into her home. The little shack looked quaint covered in snow with the way the chimney was leaking smoke... though it looked like it was leaking from the side, and not the top. It had a hole in it, didn't it...?

Feeling a little sad, I turned away and picked up my pace. Meriah and Vim had grown a little farther ahead. They were chatting lightly as they left, about our next stop.

"You're going to skip Brozo?" Meriah asked.

"While in Telmik I got a list of people that I no longer need to see. He's one of them," Vim said.

"Huh?" I hurried up a little, to step up next to Meriah and join their conversation. "You did, Vim?" I asked. Why hadn't he said anything?

He nodded. "I've debated going to them anyway, to verify it... but well..." He shrugged.

"Would they lie about that too? That people don't want to see us anymore?" I asked.

"Not sure. A part of me says yes, because I don't trust them, but their schemes are deeper than that. If Vim verified they lied about that, their more serious schemes would be exposed... so I doubt it," Meriah said.

That made sense, I guess...

"How many had been on the list?" I asked.

"Thirty three. At that point, at least," Vim said.

At that point. That meant he needed to add Sheilla, the one who used to make him pancakes on his visits, who told him he no longer needed to visit to that list too.

Thirty four locations, then. Not people. Which meant it was likely at least double that number.

I wonder if any of them had been people I knew. I was scared to ask.

Feeling a little sick, I reached up to itch a little below my cut. The ointment on it was making the left side of my face feel colder than the right, and it itched a little.

"Don't touch it Renn," Meriah warned gently.

"Yeah... So we'll head to Tor, then I'll be heading south a bit to check on a few things before heading to Telmik," Vim said, sounding tired.

"Then I suppose we should split up here then," Meriah said.

"Wait what?" I paused, frowning in worry as Meriah also stopped walking. She gave me a sad smile as I glanced between her and Vim. Vim looked unsurprised.

"I'm not allowed into Tor's village without a reason. And I want to go check on the church Light and the rest supposedly stayed at after returning here from the other continent," Meriah said, explaining.

Shifting a little, I glanced between Meriah and Vim again... and wondered if these two had talked about this already without me. "I thought you'd come with us to Telmik," I said softly. Isn't that what she had said? That she would join us there?

"And I will. I'll meet you two there, though depending on how both of us travel I might be either late or beat you there," Meriah said, grinning as if we were now in a race.

"But..." I was about to complain, since I had been utterly enjoying her company. I still had so much to ask about, such as her faith and why it was so different than the ones I knew, and...

"I know you wish to find more proof, Meriah. And I'm thankful you're the type to do so. But I suggest caution," Vim spoke up; before I could find the words I needed to say.

Meriah turned and nodded at Vim. "I know, Vim. I'll be careful. I promise. I know there are several of them I'd not be able to handle, I've fought them before so I know," she said.

Gosh...! "You're doing something that dangerous?" I asked, worried now for a different reason.

She turned and smiled at me. "Maybe. I don't know yet. I just want to see if there's anyone there I know, or should know. Plus if I'm lucky I can talk to the humans there, the nuns, and maybe hear some interesting information while I'm at it," she said.

Wanting to argue against it, I glanced at Vim. "Why aren't we doing that Vim? If it's that dangerous?" I asked accusingly.

"I'm a more direct approach, Renn. I'd rather go straight to the Chronicler and Light and confront them directly. If I needed more evidence, then yes, we would have. I'd have gone to verify a lot of things, but the map written by the Chronicler is enough for me to take action directly so I'm choosing to do so," Vim said calmly.

"Then why risk it, Meriah? If Vim is going to confront them anyway?" I asked her.

Meriah gave me an odd smile as she shrugged. "It's how I am, Renn. I planned to investigate them anyway, no matter what Vim does or will do. After all he might chop off the head of the snake, but that doesn't mean there won't be others to track down or investigate," she said.

"Still..."

"Look, Vim, she's acting as if we're lovers bound apart never to see one another ever again!" Meriah said happily as she pointed at me.

Although I couldn't help but smile, I still grumbled a noise as Vim smirked and nodded. "She doesn't like farewells, no. You should be happy Renn, I think you're the only person she's stuck around so long with willingly, without a true reason to do so," he said.

"What? Not even a full month!" I complained.

"I know. I promise when we meet in Telmik we'll spend more time together. Who knows maybe I'll come with you two for a bit then too, wherever you end up going. I usually don't travel south or east, so maybe it'd be a good change of pace," Meriah said.

I nodded. "I'd like that."

"Good. Now give me a hug so I can go before you cry or something," Meriah said as she stepped forward, extending her arms as she did. She had pulled her broken arm out of her sling, and had done so in a way that told me it was already healing enough to the point it wasn't bothering her much.

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Wrapping her in a hug, she chuckled at me as I held her close. I made sure to not accidentally bump or harm her broken arm as we squeezed each other. She really was smaller than she appeared. Her robes and outer cloak made her seem bigger than she really was.

"If I'm not there and Vim ends up killing them or something, make you sure you watch it all with your perfect memory so you can retell it to me later," Meriah said.

Sniffing, I nodded. "I'll make sure to."

Vim huffed, but I ignored him as I closed my eyes and took in a few breaths of her scent. She smelled like a flower. I dedicated her scent to memory, adding it to the long list of smells of my friends.

The list was growing, yet I cherished each one as if they were the only one I had.

"Okay! She's sniffing. Time to go!" Meriah said as she released me.

I held onto her for a moment more, and then begrudgingly let her go. She smirked at me as she stepped back and nodded. Nodding back, I blinked a few times to keep my eyes from welling with tears as she turned to Vim. "I'm glad I didn't leave this morning before saying goodbye, look at her she's adorable," Meriah then added.

"Told you," Vim said.

"What...? You were going to leave without saying goodbye?" I asked, a little hurt to learn so.

"Well... I usually do. I don't like goodbyes either, Renn. They make me feel like I always forget something," she said with a sigh.

Right... that was kind of the feeling wasn't it? "Goodbye Meriah. Stay safe please. You still have a lot to tell me about your mother and faith," I told her.

Meriah shifted a little, her eyes narrowing a little... but then she nodded. "Okay... goodbye Renn. Vim. May the two of you feed the flames," she said softly, then turned and stepped away.

Frowning a little I nodded and waved goodbye as she headed for a different road. Vim and I were heading inland; she looked like she was to head south along the coast.

Vim and I stood there watching her walk away. The snow wasn't falling very hard, letting her stay in sight and her footprints be visible as she headed deeper into the town.

"Hm... you're not crying at all really. Just some sniffles. Did you not like her as much as I had thought you had?" Vim asked gently.

"Huh...? No...? I had really enjoyed spending time with her. I'm sad to see her go, but I expected it, I guess. You've all made it clear she comes and goes often," I said.

Vim nodded softly, studying me as I studied Meriah. The road she was on had rounded a little, and she was about to leave my sight. There was a home in the way. A rickety one that might not even be lived in, by the looks of it.

"Feed the flames, Vim?" I asked.

"Her faith believes her heaven is a place of great warmth. A fire, burning without end. That one's soul joins it, to bask in its warmth and comfort for eternity once they perish on this plane of existence. It was her way of praying that when we go, we join that flame in death. It was a kind, simple prayer," Vim explained.

I sniffed again. "What is this church she spoke of?" I asked as I watched her walk behind the house. Although now out of sight I still watched the area, waiting to see if she'd return for some reason.

"Supposedly Light and her group had spent some time at some churches in the south of the Nation of the Blind. We spoke of them before, remember? Meriah wants to see if any of them are still there."

"Right... but why?"

"You know why Renn. Meriah now sees them as enemies of the Society. So she'll treat them as such, regretfully," Vim said with a sigh.

"Why regretfully Vim... if that's what they are, then shouldn't we treat them as so?" I asked, finally taking my eyes away from the village and where Meriah had gone. I glared at Vim, waiting to hear his answer.

He held my glare for a moment with his calm look, and then slowly nodded. "You're right. We should. But only if they really are enemies, Renn. We do not know the whole story yet. Until I do, until we do, we cannot place blame or hold judgment. We must be impartial until the defining moment," he said.

"Is that your rules or the Society's?" I asked.

He blinked and smiled. "Funny. The old me would have said the Society's."

"And the you here and now...?" I asked softly.

Vim eye's softened a little. "Careful Renn. We've talked long and hard of my rules. Each one exists thanks to mountains of corpses. They did not come easily, or cheaply. I abide them for good reason," he said.

"I was not asking your rules, Vim. I know you better than that. You can obey your rules while believing in another perspective. To do one thing while wanting to do another. I'm asking of your feelings Vim, not what you will do or what your rules demand of you," I said.

Some snow flew past, in large numbers, telling me the snow was picking up. I watched as dozens of tiny snowflakes hit Vim in the side of his face, some melting into his hair and others sticking to him and staying in shape.

He then sighed. "Had I been unbound by my rules, or others, I would have gone to Telmik the moment I had been told of their potential betrayal. And before you ask, yes, I would have forced a confession out of them. And if that confession proved Meriah's claim, then I would slaughtered them all without any hesitation."

I gulped, since although he had spoken calmly without any malice... I had still heard and seen the fury he spoke of. I saw it in the way his eyes had gone cold. And the way his voice, although gentle and soft, had gained a slight hardness to it. His words had ended a little sharper than usual, as if he was about to snarl.

"Yet as odd as it may sound... I'm glad I am not that man anymore. I'm glad I'm no longer controlled by emotions. For if I had been who knows how many innocent souls would have been lost during my hasty judgment. I killed an innocent man, a father minding his own business, just from shifting my weight upon hearing the news, Renn. What chaos would I have wrought during such a moment in Telmik? In the Cathedral?" he shook his head slowly as he spoke, and released another sigh. One that had been strong enough to make some snowflakes dance around in the air between us.

Oddly, although it should have in my opinion, his breath hadn't gone white. Even though mine did occasionally when I spoke.

It was weird how in such little ways as that he seemed to be ignored by the world around him. It was so subtle sometimes you'd never notice if you didn't pay attention.

"I'm also glad you're not careless Vim... but I just wish you were able to find a middle-ground between your chaotic self and your strict rules," I said.

"Then find it for me, Renn."

"H-huh?" I startled, standing up a little straighter.

He nodded at me. "Find me that middle ground you speak of. Find me a position that allows me to do more good, to help more than not, while also keeping the chaos and discord my knowledge and strength can cause when mishandled. Find what no one else has been able to, not Miss Beak, not Celine... not even my parents," he said.

My mouth went dry at the sudden suggestion, and my mind began to sluggishly slog through all my memories. Mostly of our conversations in the past, concerning his rules and all the issues I had with them. There were many. His and my differences in opinion, for better and worse, was a common topic between us. Though it was only recently Vim has actually opened up about them, and allowed said conversations to survive more than a few sentences.

Yet... as troubling the topic was...

"I don't know how Vim," I whispered admittedly.

I wanted him to be better. So many of us did.

But I honestly didn't have an answer for it.

"I know. But I believe if anyone can find one... it'll be you. So go ahead. Spend time thinking about it. If you can do it before I officially step down, and it actually works, I'll rescind my decision and stay as the protector," he said as he nodded and stepped past me. To return to walking, finally.

I gaped a little, shocked at his sudden declaration, and closed my mouth when a bunch of cold snow flew into it.

Licking my lips I hurriedly turned and joined him, heading out of the village proper and heading for the nearby forests. "You're serious?" I asked.

"I am."

Great.

"Even if I find one, that doesn't mean the rest of the Society will accept it," I argued, trying not to feel the great burden suddenly placed on my shoulders.

"That's on them. We'll deal with that part of it later," he said.

"What if you don't agree with my decision?" I asked further.

"I will. I agreed to Celine's, even though I hadn't liked it, remember?" he said.

Oh. Right.

My heart fluttered a little, kind of like how my ears did, and it made me feel weird for a moment.

He was basically saying he wanted me to make a new contract for him. For him and the Society.

To replace the one Celine had made for him.

One that was better suited. One that would make the Society happy, while also keeping him happy too. Or at least, keep him from feeling like an absolute failure or from feeling like the Society wasn't worth his dedication.

He wasn't just asking me to help him re-shape his rules... he was asking me to...

Fix the problem.

Gulping a heavy heart, I wished my tail and ears weren't hidden away. They wanted to squirm and flutter like mad, and my heavy winter clothing wasn't really accommodating for that.

Did that mean he was just giving me the opportunity to...? Or was he actually hoping I could figure it out? Or did he himself already know of a solution, and was just giving me a chance to find it for myself? As to claim it was I who figured it out?

I did not believe Vim, even as nonchalant as he was about some things, would have suggested something so seriously without real meaning. That had not been an off-handed comment or promise. It was one I knew he'd fulfill as long as I upheld my end of the bargain. Vim kept his word, his promises, even if it sometimes took... time for him to do so.

"How... how did you and Celine reach your agreement, Vim?" I asked carefully as my mind twisted and turned every which way. Trying to make sense of my new task.

"Over years. I agreed to protect the Society, and all members, from physical harm for a few years until she and I formed a real agreement. Back then I felt so annoyed I almost walked away dozens of times, out of pure disgust and annoyance... and I think honestly that might be why I had agreed to certain rules I'd not have agreed to usually. I think I had simply grown tired of debating it," he said.

Great. "So there's a chance you'll not agree to what I propose anyway, since there might be things that go against your own beliefs," I said worriedly.

"Possibly. But that's your job to figure out. Personally I still think I should step down, even if Light and the rest are doing such despicable acts such as slaughtering our own people. I'll deal with them, deal with the vote, and then step down. All things end, may as well end it here and now before it gets worse and I end up ending it in a cruel way," Vim said with a sigh.

My stomach suddenly hurt as I realized that he really had given up.

He was not just tired of the Society and its bickering... he was now afraid. Afraid that, like this issue with Light, he'd have to end up being the one to actually destroy the Society. By his own hands.

And now I couldn't argue against it, since I could now see how it could happen.

If Vim really did end up having to punish Light and the rest... that meant he would likely end up destroying the Cathedral, and maybe even severely cripple the Church of Songs as a whole.

And that alone might bring down the Society. Since so many relied upon the Cathedral. It was where money, information, communications and so much more filtered throughout the Society. In theory Lumen might be able to take up the mantle, but there were many people and locations that were outright at odds with those in Lumen. Half of the members in Lumen couldn't even go to the Bell Church for crying out loud, which was why we had gone to the Clothed Woman when in need back during that chaos with those monsters and sewer people.

More than half the Society clung to the church too, being either utter subscribers to the religion or devotees to it, so making them our enemy wouldn't be a good move either.

"Basically you're giving me the chance to try, but you don't believe it will matter in the end, do you?" I asked plainly as we neared the forest.

"Indeed. But I'll do my best to help and support your endeavors anyway, Renn. As always," he said.

I sighed at him, but nodded.

Although his true belief had been said... I still didn't feel less pressured.

I'd find a way. Somehow.

Vim was giving me a chance at least, which was more than he was willing to give others at the moment.

And if I couldn't figure it out... maybe I could, together with the help of him and others, find a way all the same.

"Think hard and fast Renn. We'll be in Telmik in less than ten days or so. And I can't promise what will happen then," Vim warned.

"You should have said something sooner, Vim. To give me more time," I complained.

"Ah... but then I'd not get to see you so flustered," he teased.

"Careful. Kaley was kind enough to give me more than a few ideas on how to make you flustered in return," I warned.

He smirked and reached over, taking my hand. For a tiny moment I debated not accepting, but that moment came and went without thought. "Why, Renn. You think that's a threat, don't you? Adorable."

My face grew so hot the cut and ointment suddenly felt as cold as ice.

Chapter 403 Vim – Ointments and Debates

"What's the point in me trying if you just want the same agreement you have already, Vim?" Renn asked, a little upset with me.

"I'm not saying that," I said as I stepped over a large branch. I glanced back to make sure Renn was fine as she too stepped over it.

She didn't even notice it as she did, and I felt a little silly for always keeping an eye out for her.

Renn was not so fragile she needed such attention. And in fact, she was as capable out in the wilderness as even the most experienced woodsman or hunter. She had grown up in such dense forests, and it showed. Always had.

Yet I couldn't help my worry from always forcing my eyes to glance her way when we had to traverse rough terrain, or to check on her in harsh elements.

Right now the world wasn't that bad, really. It was snowing rather harshly, but we were under the cover of dense trees. A good portion of the winds were eased thanks to the thick canopy of the forest, and the many trees around us. Plus the snow was lessened too, since most of it fell and hit the trees before it reached us below their tops.

She wore her hood up, but didn't have her hat on. Likewise her tail was out and about, though currently hidden under her thick cloak and jacket. She was walking next to me, keeping pace, as we neared Tor's village. It wasn't far now, we'd likely reach it before the night arrived at this pace.

"You basically are. You tell me you hate the fact you impose your will on others, yet Celine demands you to require every Society member to at least once a decade inform someone of authority of their location and well-being. To give a census basically. Why do you think that being enforced is a necessity?" Renn asked.

"Because many of our members are unaware of the passage of time. If we didn't demand such a thing then there would be members who could go decades and maybe even centuries without making contact with other members. If they do that they could be at risk of being forgotten, overlooked, or even seen as enemies when they come to ask for help and no one remembers or knows who they are. It's to deter mistakes," I told her.

"Yet you allow those like the Summit to not be included in the maps given and offered to the general members?" Renn tried to pick holes into the idea.

"Their location is not shared, no. But they still partake in the Society's discourse and keep tabs appropriately. They don't hide entirely, they just don't want their general location known to everyone before verifying the members can be trusted. It's from the wars. We had lost a few locations to betrayal and spies back in the beginning, when we had allowed any non-human to join without vetting their pasts or personalities. A fault of Celine's. I was the one, or well... there were those like Nebl and the rest who demanded it to be a rule. I gave them my full support," I said.

Renn hummed as she studied a tree we passed. It looked like it had recently been struck by lightning. It was split down one side, and looked charred, though it must have happened a year or two ago at least.

"So... out of all of Celine's agreements, what is it you have the biggest issue with, Vim?" Renn asked as she looked at me, no longer finding the tree interesting.

As she did I noticed the cut on her cheek. I had recently put some more ointment on it a few hours ago, when we had stopped to rest a moment. To let her take a drink and watch the sunrise.

It was healing. Rather well, for what it was. It hadn't been as deep a cut as had originally seemed, but it had been deep enough that a human would have taken weeks to properly heal from it. It's only been two days and the scabbing and skin were starting to re-form and stitch together already. Odds are it'd be fully healed by the time we made it to Telmik, or only being a faint mark or scar by then at least.

I was glad for it, of course, but it was a stark reminder to how I needed to be more careful around her. Around everyone, really.

"I have many issues with my contract," I said gently.

"Name a couple," she suggested.

Right...

I sighed and nodded. "I don't mind protecting our people. I don't mind ensuring they have homes, or safe locations to rely upon. I also don't even mind how the system works, really. I travel around designated routes, only deviating from them when called upon in an emergency. It works, for our system. Since our people won't live together, or even closely enough to justify it, it's the best we can do. I also am perfectly fine with the idea that each member is free to pursue their own dreams. Those in Lumen have as much right to their lifestyle as those like Kaley do," I said, slowly going down the list of the contract in my mind.

"Yet you always complain about how Lumen treads into dangerous territory," Renn argued.

"Well... because they are? I'd advise against what they're doing, but I'd not stop them. Why do you think I help them out more than I do others? It's to try and curtail as much danger they get exposed to as

possible. But just because what I think they're doing is stupid doesn't mean it's wrong. They're as free to do as they wish as all the others have, and when consequence comes calling... I just hope I'm there to save them from themselves when it happens," I said.

"So you're okay with that clause too," she grumbled.

"Yes. I'd not change it. That's the point of free will Renn, you can't have one type and not the other," I said.

"So you wouldn't change how you travel and protect the Society. You wouldn't change your agreements with what you're supposed to prioritize, such as the homes and safety locations... you also wouldn't change how the Society imposes its rules on members, on what they do and how they do it, what then Vim? What am I supposed to suggest or change? The only other main agreements are stuff like how you're allowed to hunt and pursue monarchs, or other little things like finding Celine's daughter... which I am to assume is no longer an issue, what with Light being back now," Renn said, her voice sounding strained as if she had a headache.

Probably did, since she was dealing with the conundrum that was me.

"Hm... I forgot about that..." I admitted. I was supposed to have found her, huh?

"Wait... did you really?" Renn asked, her voice now sounding happy again. As if she delighted in my stupidity.

"Hm... funny. But yes, I'd not really change anything. I of course would like to set more limitations, and requirements, on how members do certain things... but if I did so, I'd be forcing my will upon them. So for as much as I'd like to better protect them, from themselves mostly, I can't," I said.

Renn sighed at me. "Then what is it you want me to do Vim? If you are upset with being protector, yet wouldn't actually change anything in how you perform such a role, what's the point of even trying?" she asked.

"That's on you to figure out, Renn. You know the Society's grievances. Even if Light and the rest are fanning the flames of the vote for their own designs, it doesn't change the fact that where there's smoke there's fire. People are upset. They're not happy, or have doubts. If those doubts are justified or not is of no concern, because they're real and they're emotional over them. It's your job to figure out how to find an agreement between the Society and myself that allows the status quo to stay the same," I said.

Renn was silent for a moment as I watched the way some of the tree limbs swayed in the wind. It was interesting to see how some did so smoothly, but others did so stiffly.

Some of the trees here were dying. Though from what I couldn't tell. Age? Disease? A lack of proper nutrients?

"Avoiding the fact you just used a couple words I'd not recognized... How would Celine have handled this situation, Vim?" Renn then asked.

Looking away from the trees, I glanced at Renn and her sad look.

"Well... we did have a few instances of internal conflict back in the beginning. Celine crushed them. She either sent me to kill the ones causing problems, or she outright banished and disowned them. She had no room for mercy for those who stroked the flames of war or dissent. Particularly amongst our own members," I said.

"Celine did...? I thought she was supposed to be some kind of gentle saint," she said, surprised.

"She is. Or was? But when it came to threats from within she was not kind or gentle. Many of our disagreements back then were similar to what is happening now, if not worse. She wanted me to be more liberal with my cruelty. To abuse my strength. Luckily though back then she had not been the only decision maker, Renn. There had been something of a council. At one point there were dozens of people upon it, each with a vote. Celine's vote carried great weight, being who she was, but there had been times she had been overridden," I said.

"A... council? Do we have one of those now?" she asked.

"No. There's no real leader of the Society anymore. Some see the Chronicler and her people as the governing body, but reality is they have no great authority. No more than what members simply give them," I said.

"Do you think that will change now that Light's back?" Renn asked.

I was about to say no, but realized that was wrong. "Right... I suppose you could say Light would be seen as a leader, yes. Being Celine's daughter alone would make a majority of the members follow her. Add her supposed respect in the religious members and that would only be further solidified..." I admitted.

"And you're about to kill her," Renn said softly.

The mushy snow beneath me crunched, since I had stepped down so hard that I had forced it into ice.
"Let's not assume, Renn. Please."

The story has been illicitly taken; should you find it on Amazon, report the infringement.

"Mhm...!" Renn nodded worriedly, then coughed and cleared her throat. "If... if you find Light and the rest are innocent Vim... what will you do?" she asked.

"Do you mean about the fact that there is likely still a betrayer within the Society, or Meriah who would have then accused an innocent member of something despicable?" I asked.

Renn groaned in more worry.

Reaching over, I patted her shoulder gently. "Let's not worry too deeply over that stuff just yet, Renn."

"How can I not Vim?" she asked.

"Not sure. I'm trying to not even think about it, honestly," I admitted.

"I can tell... Fine. Going back to your stupid choice of stepping down," Renn snidely said as she raised a gloved hand, to point at me with. "To what extent would you follow your rule of free will, Vim? If the Society was to, unanimously for example, vote to have you do whatever it took to keep us all safe from all dangers... would you do it?" she asked.

"You mean if everyone begged and pleaded for me to do what I had to, even force my own will and bend my own rules to do so, to keep everyone safe?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I'd bend a little... but there would be a point I'd not abide, Renn. And that point would be reached very quickly. Remember, I once allowed the Society to build entire kingdoms, and then I aided in their wars as they tried to keep them. I basically bent my rules to such a point already for the Society. If you had any idea how many thousands I had killed, or helped kill, back then just because they had been enemies of groups that were only distantly related to the Society it would make your skin crawl," I said.

Renn slowed a little, her tail making her cloak shift a bit as she turned to look at me. "If... if you went through such lengths already, back then, why do they now claim you're not doing enough?" she asked.

"I don't know Renn. Because maybe I'm not? You yourself claim I'm not doing enough, so what do you think I should be doing?" I asked back.

Renn's mouth quivered a bit as she hesitated.

I wanted to point out that was exactly the problem. That she, and all those like her who claimed I wasn't doing enough, really didn't have a good point of reference to give me.

Do more.

Well... how?

Gesturing lightly at her, I did my best to not sound disgusted or disappointed in myself as I spoke. "Over the years I have given more than I wanted to, and then also given less than I should have. I try to always do what is needed of me, and sometimes even bend and break my own rules in moments of severity. There are many members alive today who could be used as proof of such a thing. Yet... some of those very members are now claiming for me to be removed as Protector. In other words, Renn, I cannot win. So what would you have me do?" I asked.

"You're asking me to find a solution for you.... To find a way to reshape your contract with the Society, to redraw the lines and rules as Protector... but not even you yourself know how you would accomplish it," she whispered.

I nodded. "Thus my choice to step down, Renn. If my presence is so chaotic, that it causes such discord, then I am more cause for concern than I ease. And that's beside the entire point of my existence. The Society calls me its protector... what am I protecting it from, if all I'm doing is making them feel less safe and stressed?" I asked.

"But that's not everyone, Vim. So many members believe the opposite!" she argued.

"The ones we've been meeting recently have indeed been predominantly on our side, yes. My side," I corrected myself. "But you're either forgetting or overlooking on purpose the hidden truths of the matter," I said.

"Which are...?" she asked worriedly.

"Name one who has voiced their support, while doing so without a complaint alongside it."

Renn's ears fluttered as she narrowed her eyes at me. "Vim..." she groaned.

I gave her a gentle smile as I nodded. "You know what I mean, Renn. Rapti feels remorse of what she's done... and plans to vote in my favor. Yet at the same time she asks me, demands me to even, to stand up and take some kind of mantle as leadership. She wants me to because she believes, un-rightfully, that I am a higher power and thus deserve it... but it's a desire she possess all the same. She finds me, my current me, wanting. Elk and his family are furious of the vote, yet he did make a small comment on my lack of presence occasionally. Lilly, who I would say is one of my most solid pillar of support, also believes I don't go far enough. She hasn't since the beginning. Not to mention half her family will likely end up voting against me anyway," I said.

"What...? Half her family? You really believe that Vim?" Renn asked as she came to a complete stop, her voice picking up a little. Some small haze of white filtered up past her face as she spoke, telling me she was getting heated.

I nodded and stopped walking next to her. "Oplar. Brandy. Randle, even. All of them who claim they will vote in my favor, have grievances. Now... none of them agree in how I should fix the way I handle business, nor to the lengths I should go to do so, but the fact is even those who support me still find me wanting... and yes..." I slowly reached out and tapped her gently on her chest, above her heart. "Even you, too," I added softly.

Renn groaned as she shifted, the small layer of snow under her feet scrunching as she did. "You speak as if there's no hope for us at all, Vim."

I scoffed. "Hardly. I'm just saying I see the end of my position. I expect to still be involved in the Society, and will continue traveling and helping for as much as I'll be needed... but I don't expect my true position as it is now, or the Society as it is now, to exist by the end of the year," I said.

"Because of this issue with Light, or in general?" she asked.

"Both. I honestly don't want to believe Light and the Chronicler intentionally destroyed the fox village. I can see how they had allowed it to happen, because they hadn't gotten me involved properly or something... but that by itself is not enough for me to eliminate them. At least, not without the rest of the Society's permission first," I said.

"Let's hope you're wrong Vim, for once," Renn whispered.

Nodding, I sighed and glanced upward. At the treetops above us.

They were growing more violent. The snowstorm had begun to pick up in its strength.

The two of us returned to walking as Renn grumbled noisily. Her ears and tail were both very active as we rounded a large tree.

"Not to change topics too bluntly, Renn... but you do wish to meet Tor, right?" I asked.

"Huh...? Yes. If I can," Renn hurriedly nodded.

"Then we'll need to sneak in. With the vote and all this drama... I'd like to not have to deal with Silkie or her family if they try to deny you entry or something. She hadn't officially banished you last time, but she nearly did. I'd like to think you being my wife now would squash such emotional temper tantrums but chickens haven't ever been known to be calm and collected," I said.

"Hm... should the protector really be sneaking in a predator like that?" Renn asked, and I heard her grin in her voice. I glanced at her, confirming the wry smirk, and sighed at her.

"No. But I do have an excuse. Last visit Tor told me to make sure to bring you with me, so I can claim he summoned you. Silkie and the rest can't argue with him, since he's basically their leader. But if we can I'd like to avoid conflict and drama if able," I said.

"Right. We're going to that cave then, right? That's far enough from the village proper we should be able, shouldn't we?" Renn asked.

I nodded slowly. "Yeah... by the way, don't tell Tor about the heart you carry," I warned her.

"Hm...? Okay? Don't you feed him hearts though?" she asked.

"I do. Or I have. But like I've said, I don't think Tor can last many more. He used to be... timid. For a monarch. Lately though he's become very cocky, and it tells me the hearts he's been absorbing have started to erode his sense of self. So for the safety of everyone he protects, I can't afford to risk his morality or mind any more than necessary," I explained.

"So... the hearts can corrupt a monarch too? Not just us normal creatures?" she asked.

"Of course they can. Not even the First Born were immune to the divine power of those madmen," I said.

Renn was silent for a bit as a strong gust blew by. It carried some thick snow, the type that really stuck to what it landed upon. I glanced at Renn after the gust finished blowing past, and found her wiping her face off.

Right... I'd still not found her a proper muffler or anything.

Why was it proving so hard to find something suitable? I had even checked some of the shops while in Nevi. I wanted to make her something myself, but would have been more than content with just buying something for her. None of the shops I had visited while getting the necessary ingredients for pancakes and her berry drinks had anything suitable for her. The best I had found were simple scarves, thin ones that wouldn't have really helped much. At least not during this kind of traveling and storm.

Had... had I left anything like it at the crystalline caves?

I used to keep it stocked, but I'd not been there in years. Decades maybe, even.

What was even there, I wonder? Some hearts, and other items similar, but not much. I didn't like putting everything in one spot. It made me uneasy.

I knew that no matter how well something was hidden, given enough time it would be found. I've lost things before thanks to such things. Humans particularly were very inquisitive creatures. There were many who would dare life endangering trials just to find out what was at the top of mountains, or the depths of caves. So I knew better than to rely on just natural protections... which was why I usually buried things I wished hidden. But even that didn't always work, since over time the world shifted. Earthquakes, mudslides, people digging up whole mountains for resources or something stupid...

"Vim?"

I blinked and looked at Renn, finding her pointing to her cheek.

It was bleeding.

Frowning at her, I stepped closer to her and reached out. She tilted her head and displayed her wound, and I quickly understood what had happened.

She had brushed the scabs open earlier, when she had been wiping her face free of snow.

Reaching around to pull out some ointment, and also find a bandage to wrap around her so this wouldn't happen again, I wondered what I was going to do with her.

"You're too old to be so negligent Renn," I said gently.

"But it itched!" she complained.

I bet it did...

Smiling gently at her as her ears fluttered annoyingly under her hood as I cleaned up the blood and applied new ointment, I wondered if she had been this bad when she had gotten hurt back at Lumen.

I remember her walking around with a limp, or her arm in a sling, for a long time... but I didn't really remember much else. I had tended to her as we traveled, but she had healed mostly by the time we had left Lumen. Enough to where she only had bruising and internal injuries, like broken bones, not cuts and gashes to worry about. So although I had been gentle with her, I had not been able to see how she had acted or treated her own injuries such as this.

"Do you often pick at your wounds?" I asked.

"Hm...? I don't know...? I usually lick the ones I can though," she said softly as I finished messing with the ointment.

Putting the little tin box of ointment away, I went to find the roll of bandages we carried.

I didn't carry such supplies for myself, of course. I only started doing so once Renn became something of a permanent attachment.

When was that, anyway...? Something told me I had started carrying this stuff long before Lumen, where we had officially declared a start to our relationship... But how long before? The Smithy? Telmik...? Surely not even before that, right...?

"Vim?" Renn noticed my thoughts as I found the bandage and showed it to her.

"I'm going to wrap this around you. To keep it safe from the wet snow and you. If I see you picking at it again I'll flick you in the ear," I warned her.

Renn's happy gaze turned into a scorned one. "You wouldn't."

"Try me."

It had only taken her an hour to do so.

Chapter 404 Renn – Meeting Tor

Following Vim ever deeper into the dark cave, I felt strangely anxious as even my eyes began to grow useless.

I could just barely make Vim out in front of me. I felt like I could see the walls of rocks beside us, but at the same time wouldn't be surprised if I stepped a few feet either direction and found only openness and not rocky points.

My ears kept turning every which way, since I could hear dripping water and the howl of distant wind, but somehow every time I tried to focus on the sounds... they faded away. As if they hadn't been there in the first place. The only sounds that were strong, steady, and seemingly real, were our footsteps... and my breathing.

"It's... kind of like the forest. The dark one, near Lilly's home. Even that mine near Lellip's home had more noise," I said softly, since I didn't like the way my voice echoed down here.

"Very astute," Vim said.

Hm... Wait...

"Wait, Vim..." I reached out a little, to grab at Vim's sleeve. He slowed upon my grab, and turned to look at me. "Are you saying that bear is a monarch?" I asked. I had thought he had once said it wasn't.

Vim glanced at me, at least I think he did, and I heard him chuckle ever so slightly. "No. It's a child of one, but not one itself. It's just... a special kind of existence. Kind of like those creatures in Lumen, or Bray's children," Vim explained.

"I see..."

"Tor is near. You'll start seeing mist and water soon," Vim said as he continued walking, and I decided to keep hold of his sleeve. I now doubted my eyes, because I could have sworn he was still looking at me, yet when he had spoken his voice told me he was now facing away from me.

"Hm..." I stayed behind him a little, since I wasn't sure if walking beside him would get me hurt or not. I couldn't see the nearby rocks well enough to gauge how much distance and clearance I had to walk... so...

Then I heard a splash. A loud one, that echoed, and didn't fade instantly from existence.

Glancing down, I frowned at the puddle I was now walking in. One about an inch deep, and...

Yes. That was some kind of weird haze floating above it. It swirled when my legs ran through it, like smoke more than mist. It reminded me of the thick fog that sometimes rolled in on marshlands or far north upon the inlets sometimes.

Looking up, I blinked and found Vim rather visible. Clearly so. As if we now had a light source.

Quickly glancing around, I hesitated a moment as I found us standing in a giant puddle. One that seemed to go on endlessly. The mist, the stuff rolling on top of the water slowly, was what seemed to give the area its light. It was almost as if the mist was reflecting a bright moon, but there was no moon to be shining.

"Vim...?" I whispered in shock. Where were we? I could see for quite some distance around us, thanks to the bright mist and water, and I didn't see any hint or sign of the cavern system Vim and I had just been walking through.

Even behind us, where we'd just come from, was only endless misty water. No signs of the tunnel like cave we had just come from and been in moments ago.

"Normally I need to walk for some time before you show up. Your preference for women is showing," Vim said as we both came to a stop.

A deep, hefty sounding, chuckle filled the world as more and more mist rolled in from the distance. As if coming down a mountainside the stuff flowed down towards us, and was honestly a little chilly. The voice was heavy. And big. It was clearly not a human voice at all, nor a non-human one. It was the voice of a creature far bigger than I or Vim.

"Tor...?" I asked, looking around for the source of the loud laughter.

"It is I. I'm pleased to meet you, Rennalee. The little I've heard of you has been pleasing to hear," Tor greeted me, and I frowned as I tried to find the source of his voice.

A part of me wanted to focus overhead, since it almost sounded like he was talking down to us from above... but my eyes kept wandering to the distant horizon of mist and water instead. As if he was actually far away, and not nearby at all.

"I uh... I'm pleased to meet you to...? Though I don't see you," I said.

"Hm... how interesting. Vim, did you know she no longer has a scent...? Yet I'm sure I had smelled her upon you on your last visit. She had smelled of the great northern forests, where the trees grow slower than the moss," Tor said.

Shifting a little, I glanced at Vim and found his typical stoic self. He didn't seem bothered or interested at all.

"She has indeed lost her scent. If you find it, please let us know," Vim said.

"You smelled me? On Vim?" I asked, glancing at Vim again and his odd statement. Was he trying to make light of the moment or something?

"I had," Tor said.

"So... does that mean you can smell Vim?" I asked.

For a small moment there was silence, and then Vim broke it with a small chuckle. Tor then joined him, his far deeper chuckle drowning out Vim's instantly.

Shifting a little, I frowned as they laughed at me for a few moments... until they stopped. "No. I cannot smell Vim. But occasionally I can smell scents that linger upon him, or the items he carries. For instance right now I smell a faint herb smell. Maybe some kind of medicine? I assume it was used on your cheek," Tor wondered.

I see... So he smelled things that Vim's strange ability to eliminate hadn't gotten to yet. He had put new ointment on my cheek a few hours before we had entered this cave.

Interesting.

"How have you been Tor? Have you heard the news, of the vote and whatnot?" Vim then asked, changing topics swiftly as he usually did.

"I have. A folly that it is, but it is to be expected of lesser creatures. It is of no consequence of my canyon or me. I expect you to uphold our agreement, no matter the state of the Society," Tor said.

Fascinated, I looked around again for any hint of the monarch. He sounded so close, thanks to how deep and loud his voice was, but at the same time distant... Was that him maybe? I squinted at something in the distance, but eventually noticed it was just a large clump of mist. It shifted and rolled downward, closer to the ground, and I had to begin my search anew.

"And your canyon...? I'll have to admit we did not pass through the village to get here. I've snuck Renn in, since I fear Silkie and the rests attitudes toward her presence," Vim said.

"Hm... that will not be a concern. I've already long ordered her to be allowed entry, Vim. Plus, Silkie passed away during childbirth earlier this year. Her eldest daughter is now my priestess, a young one with spunk. Her name is Frerit," Tor said.

A little stunned at the news, I glanced over at Vim so quickly that I made a mistake.

Flinching, I turned a little to look at my tail, and scowled at the water dripping from it. I had accidentally lowered it enough for most of the tip to get drenched.

"I see. I remember Frerit. I'll go say hello and introduce Renn to the village afterward, then," Vim said gently as he glanced at me as I squeezed some of the water off my tail.

I gave him a shy smile as I finished and brushed my now wet hands on my shirt. "Did the child survive?" I asked Tor, since Vim hadn't.

"Yes. I'd not allow such wanton death here."

A tad stunned again, I glanced at Vim who nodded. "Tor does more than parlor tricks," he said.

"Parlor...?" I asked.

"He's making fun of me. But it's fine. I like my tricks," Tor said.

"Wanton?" I asked again.

For a small moment no one spoke, and then Tor chuckled. "I see. I meant I do not allow senseless death. Not here in my own backyard. And parlor is the term for a small area inside an abode. Typically a place to gather in small numbers, thus the phrase. Parlor tricks are what you display to a small crowd, to entertain them or distract them. Usually it's derogatory, but I've always been a fan of the sleight of hand," Tor explained kindly.

"So Vim was just being his typical rude self, I get it," I said knowingly.

Tor chuckled again, and as he did I noticed some more mist flow in... and...

Glancing down, I verified that the water had indeed grown deeper. What had been an inch or so in depth was now two, maybe three. Which was likely why I had mistakenly got my tail wet. I had misjudged its height.

Would it keep rising...? I really didn't want to get soaked, since although inside here was relatively warm I knew the outside wasn't. It was snowing like mad outside.

Especially if I wasn't going to be allowed to linger in the village. I didn't know yet how I'd be received, so it was better to not assume I'll get a chance to warm myself by a fireplace or with a bath and bed.

"Very interesting indeed. You have met several of my kind, haven't you Renn?" Tor then asked.

Oh? "A few, yes."

"Hm... it is not often anymore I get to meet someone so well cultured. We have become so few, thanks to your husband. I believe it has me feeling sentimental," Tor said with an odd tone.

Glancing at Vim, I tried to tell by his expression if Tor was being serious or playful. Vim's expression didn't reveal the answer as Tor sighed, and in doing so a gust flew in from all around us.

I looked around, in awe, as mist flowed towards us from everywhere. It rolled along the top of the water, billowing wildly towards us. When the mist had reached us though, it had slowed down and dissipated a little. Making me feel almost as if the far distant mist I saw was far farther away than first assumed.

Though interesting... I kind of wanted to see something else.

Where was he? Would he show himself?

Vim had said he was a tiny rodent. Yet he sounded as big as a mountain... Plus it was as if his very breath affected the mist around us. Like that gust earlier when he sighed.

"Have you had any visitors lately, Tor?" Vim then asked.

"Hm...? Not really. A few members visited the canyon, Crane and Oplar and such, but none deemed me important enough to spend time upon. I feel neglected, Vim," Tor said.

He had to be teasing, surely. He sounded amused more than not.

"Can you blame them? You threaten to eat them half the time and even when you don't you trap them in your tricks for days," Vim said.

Tor chuckled, and I inched ever so closer to Vim. Just in case.

Tricks? For days? How did that work...? Was it like getting stuck in here?

Did that mean if I tried to run, in any direction, I'd not be able to escape...? Was this weird world of mist and water really as endless as it appeared?

"To be honest I've been hoping one of the indignant fools to come and try and claim my rights not my own. But alas," Tor said with a mighty sigh.

Glancing at Vim, he noticed and smiled at me. "He is a part of the Society, but in reality he doesn't care to be. He often wishes someone, like how Celine once tried, to come and command him. To demand he do something he didn't wish to. So he can eat them, or do whatever it is he does to those he considers enemies," Vim explained.

"I wouldn't eat them... I'd just... make them wish I did, is all," Tor said.

Great. Something told me he wasn't playing around.

Vim crossed his arms, his coat splashing a little in the water as he did. "That being said, do you have any requests for me Tor?" Vim asked his usual question.

"Hm..." Tor rumbled a little, and off in the distance I saw a ripple roll across the endless water's surface. I tried to follow the ripple, hoping to see the source, but it seemed impossible to do so. The mist hid too much past a certain point.

"If not we'll be leaving... unless of course someone in the village has something to ask of us," Vim added.

Did Vim not like Tor? He seemed to be playing along to a point, making jokes and smiling, but it seemed as if he was trying to end the conversation as quickly as possible.

I wonder why...? Did he not trust Tor? Or was he worried I'd ask something I shouldn't? He hadn't told me not to say or do anything before coming here, other than not letting Tor know about the heart I carried.

"I have a request of you, heart of hearts."

Perking up a little, I glanced around again for him. "Um... yes?" I asked.

Me?

And... Heart of hearts? Celine had called me that too. In her letters to me.

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"Beneath the capital. Underneath the castle where the Society was birthed is the carcass of my ancestor," Tor then said.

Vim shifted next to me, strongly enough to make large ripples in the water at our feet. "Careful Tor."

"Now, now, Vim. Don't interrupt. It's not comely to be jealous," Tor said with a tone that told me he was being playful.

"I'd agree with you Tor... but I've learned to trust Vim's warnings. Are you asking me to do something bad?" I asked.

Tor was quiet for a moment, long enough to make me wonder if I had insulted him somehow, but then he hummed with his deep voice. As he did the mist all around us shifted a little and began to flow again, as if there was suddenly a wind to be carried on. I felt no such wind, however.

"No. I don't think I am," Tor began saying, with a more softer voice than usual. "But you can deny my request if you like. I will not be offended... rather; I just know that Vim would say no, so a part of me had hoped you would do otherwise."

Rolling my shoulder a little, I tried to keep my tail from getting wet again in the water as it curled and swayed a little violently. "Can you... not ask someone else other than Vim? Do you not have a whole village who would do stuff for you if you not asked?" I asked. From what I had understood Tor basically ruled this village. And those here served him. He had just called Silkie's daughter, Frerit, his priestess. Wasn't that one of those nun things that served their gods?

Did he think he was their god? Or did he make them treat him as such...?

Tor chuckled. "You ask that before hearing what the request is?" he asked back.

"Well..." I frowned and wondered how to explain that the meaning of the request to me was more important than the request itself.

"I want the heart of my grandfather. As to eat it."

Oh.

Glancing carefully to my left, at Vim, I found him staring out at the distance with his typical calm expression.

Right. He had recognized Tor's request instantly. So he wasn't surprised.

"You don't want to give it to him...?" I asked softly as Vim finally looked at me.

"He fears I am not capable. That eating my grandfather's heart, the heart of a First One, will be the end of me. Or at least, my mind and soul. I... would like to believe myself better than that. It has been many years since my last heart, and I believe I am ready now. Plus, I would like to think I have the right to choose which and what I am to eat, at least, if anything," Tor said gently.

"Wait... are you saying that monarchs have to eat hearts?" I asked, decoding his words.

"A condition of joining the Society is we protect a location, or at least allow a location to be formed around us. And yes, another is to devour and absorb hearts, when capable and safely assessed to do so. Other than that we're pretty much free to do as we please, but as I'm sure you know Vim is a stickler for rules," Tor said.

Oh... I had not ever thought to ask Vim what kind of conditions monarchs had to be a part of the Society.

Maybe this was why Miss Beak had refused all that time to join. For either this reason of eating hearts, or the requirement to protect a location for other members...?

Though... what of that little one in Telmik...? Or was that monarch too weak for such a rule set? Or was there more to it than that?

"The heart of a First Born is not like that of others, Tor. The divinity that they are connected to, the sources, are like an ocean compared to a tiny puddle of which the hearts you've devoured before are. Their mere existence and presence bends reality around them, let alone when they're eaten and absorbed," Vim said.

I stayed quiet, waiting to hear Tor's response.

"I've no doubt of their greatness, Vim. I had only met my grandfather once, and only from a distance, and even from hiding I saw what you speak of. I warp reality today, and it takes nearly all my focus, and he had warped it like this in his slumber with ease," Tor said, speaking a little reverently... as if speaking of his god.

Maybe he was, to him. He sounded like he was in awe of whatever he had seen his grandfather do.

Though...

"Warp reality...?" I asked as I looked around.

"Is it not beautiful? Sometimes I can even conjure a beautiful moon, though I fear doing it now in front of Vim. He does not like it when I play god too strongly," Tor said, with a strangely prideful tone.

I nodded slowly and gulped. I see. So this was all... fake? Or maybe not fake, but... a result of his power. His abilities. His divinity.

Amazing.

"Is the water real?" I asked as I stared down at it. It was wet; I knew that, since I could still feel the slight coldness from dampness on the tip of my tail which had gotten dipped in it. It surely felt real, at least.

"It is, for long as we are within it," Vim said.

Oh...? I glanced at Vim as some of the mist started to rise up again, as if we no longer had any wind. "That is so. You could lie within it, getting soaked, but would be dry upon leaving my influence," Tor said.

"Fascinating," I whispered, since I wasn't really sure what else to say about it.

"Not really. True power, such as what my grandfather, or the gods, had been capable of much more. If it had been their water and not mine, you would have remained wet upon leaving," Tor said.

I didn't like the idea of that.

"Why then do you wish to devour that heart, Tor? If you're already capable of this, why would you risk it?" I asked.

After my question came and went, and a good patch of mist passed by without a word, I began to feel uncomfortable. I glanced at Vim, who was smilingly gently at me but likewise silent.

Had I said something wrong?

"To be honest, Rennalee, it is pure hubris," Tor then answered.

"Hubris?" I asked.

"Excessive pride. Over-exaggerated self confidence. He's saying he knows it's just his pride being woefully out place," Vim told me.

Nodding slowly, I remembered the few times Vim had used the word before. He had said them a long time ago, back before he and I had been close. Before I had asked such questions. "You just want more power then?" I asked.

"No. Rather, I do not want to share it. I wish to have it for myself, before another claims it before me," Tor said.

Huh... "That is a form of pride, I suppose," I agreed.

"It is the purest form of it," Tor said.

I wouldn't go that far, but I didn't voice my disagreement as I glanced around again.

Why'd it feel like there were now shadows in the distance? The world looked flat as could be, for as far as I could see, yet... it was almost as if I could see shadows dancing among the mist out of the corner of my eyes.

Maybe it was his powers doing their thing. He had basically said this place, this mist and water, were not real... illusions, basically.

Was it a similar type of ability to what Bray had? Vim and I when visiting her last time had changed locations oddly, like this. Going from a dense forest to an open field of flowers and grass. I wonder why they did this. Was it really just the fact they enjoyed doing it, or did it have another reason or purpose?

"What would happen... if you ate the heart, and were not able to absorb it?" I asked as I studied a far off cluster of mist. They were clumping together in the distance, as if trying to form shapes.

"Well... the end result would be that I would die," Tor said simply.

"Die...?"

Vim nodded next to me. "He'd lose himself. To the heart. He would then become a monarch without reason or thought, and become a danger to the world around him," Vim explained in more detail.

"Thus you would come and destroy him. Ending his life," I said, understanding Tor's original meaning.

"Exactly," Tor said.

Shifting a little, I ignored the fact that the water was now reaching the top of my boots. It'd not be long if it kept rising for it to reach my ankles.

"How would one tell if you're capable of doing it or not? Would you know if you held the heart in your hand? Before trying?" I asked, giving myself a possible out to this request.

"No. Not really. I'll not even know if I was capable until the deed was done, in fact. I could eat it, take years absorbing it, and at the very end... when I think all is well, I could then suddenly succumb anyway without warning."

Great. "So no way to test it," I said.

"Obviously," Vim said.

Right... if there had been he likely would have done so for me already. With the hearts I've held.

"I've come to respect Vim's rules and his perspective of free-will. If he would go so far as to deny you, denying your own will, I believe it is for very good reason. Why should I ignore that? Especially since it might make him angry at me too, or risk my own self... since I have no idea where your grandfather's heart is," I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Vim's smirk as Tor hummed deeply. Ripples ran all along the water, all around us, in such numbers and so scattered it was as if it was suddenly raining heavy droplets.

"Interesting. I had been told you flagrantly go against Vim when you can, as if it was your form of displaying your affection. Have I been lied to?" Tor asked.

I frowned at that. "Who the..." I was about to ask who was asking that, but Vim laughed, interrupting me.

"I can see how people think so. And in some things she does, and will. But she's too smart for her own good, as you see," Vim said, with an oddly happy tone.

A little happy to see, and hear, him smile and say such a thing, I smiled at him... only to feel my tail touch the water again.

Shifting a little, I glared at my tail hovering in the air between me and Vim. It was now even more soaked. And the water level hadn't even risen too much! I was just getting distracted.

Choosing to wrap the end of my tail around Vim's thigh, I sighed and looked back out at the misty horizon.

"Do you really not think him capable, Vim?" I asked.

"I couldn't know, Renn. Tor is actually rather mighty; he has been for some time. But I cannot stress the jump in danger from a normal heart to one of a First Born. Though... I'll admit if anyone could do it, he

would be the one. Being as strong as he is, and the fact he is a direct descendant as well," Vim admitted as he reached up to scratch at his chin.

"I'd be willing to wait to absorb it until Vim is ready. To do it only when he is nearby, so he can deal with me if I become an issue," Tor suggested.

A little surprised to hear so, I nodded. "That's... wait," I hesitated, and shook my head. "What of those who live here, Tor?" I asked.

Tor was silent for a moment, then I heard him huff. As if he had just nodded, I watched a bunch of mist roll towards us from a strong gust. "Yes. If I fail, this canyon will end up unprotected. There is no denying that fact. But it is no more risk than any other time I devour a heart. Plus, as Vim and I have already long agreed, this is not a permanent agreement. Eventually, no matter what happens, I will one day no longer protect this canyon or those within it. So although a loss, to me it is not one great enough to justify rescinding my request," Tor said.

"You speak very well, Tor," I noted.

Vim chuckled as Tor went silent. Then he seemed to clear his throat. "Thank you," Tor then said.

I nodded as I glanced at Vim's thigh, to make sure my tail was still there. It was.

"If he is willing to wait a few years until I can stick around as he absorbs it... until he finishes doing so, then I am willing to entertain the idea," Vim then said.

"Really?" Tor spoke up before I could, and sounded just as surprised as I would have.

Vim nodded. "Yes. There is a very good chance I'll soon be... not what I am anymore, anyway. So I'll have the time, for once," Vim said.

Wanting to groan and complain, I glared at the distant mist. I was now upset with Tor, even though I had been amused this whole time.

"If that is so I am more than willing to wait. Years. Decades. It matters not. As long as it can, and will, happen," Tor said, sounding rather happy as he did.

I nodded slowly. "Then I'll make sure the next time we're in Telmik, Vim grabs your grandfather's heart, Tor. We plan to head there after here, and a few other stops, so it won't be long," I said.

"Thank you, Rennalee," Tor said.

I smiled a little sheepishly at him. "I didn't agree, Tor. Vim did," I said.

"Ah. But I am no fool. You may have not agreed until he gave permission, but I know Vim better than that. If you had not been here he would have simply scoffed and glared at me, threatening me to try to take the heart if I wished to risk his wrath. Then he'd have left, unbothered and uncaringly, like his typical self. Your presence made the difference, so I thank you. I am in your debt," Tor said, speaking with his odd words and tone as he's been doing.

Shifting a little, I tried to not smile too broadly. So he too knew Vim well enough to know that my presence made him... different. Or at least, act differently. Though in odd, and little ways.

Others noticed far more often than I did. Since to me Vim was normal, having only recently become a little more open with me... but his personality was the same that I knew this whole time, since meeting him.

It was interesting to hear so many thought, and saw, Vim as acting differently thanks to me. Even if it wasn't true, it made me happy.

"So... can I ask for a favor in return?" I asked, taking the opportunity to do so.

Vim glanced at me, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed his look. He was shocked I'd ask something like this.

But I didn't hesitate, as Tor hummed at me. "What would you ask of me...?" he asked, his voice sounding amused.

"Can I see you? Or um... is it not possible?" I asked as I glanced around.

Tor and Vim were both quiet for a moment, until Vim sighed at me.

"Why would she ask this of all things, Vim?" Tor asked. He sounded perplexed.

"Only thing I can think of is that I've told her you are a small rodent. She might just want to see you because she likes small animals, or because she now doubts me and wants to see if I was lying or not," Vim said.

"If not it's okay... I understand," I said quickly. Maybe he didn't like showing himself? Or there was a reason for it?

Tor chuckled, and as he did I heard something huge move in the distance.

A massive splash came from in front of us, and I stood up straighter as I felt the ground shake. A huge ripple, nearly a wave unto itself, flowed wildly towards us... so strongly that it even caused the mist lulling above it to scatter and flow everywhere. Even upward.

A little excited as another loud splash, then another, echoed throughout the area... I awaited the monarch. I scanned the horizon, from where the splashing and noise seemed to be coming from... and grew ever more confused as the noises grew closer and louder.

I still couldn't see him. Even though it almost sounded, and seemed, as if he was just right in front of us... and...

"Renn," Vim whispered gently next to me, elbowing me lightly to get my attention.

I frowned at him, but didn't look at him. I stayed focused ahead, trying to strain my eyes and ears for any sign of the monarch who was causing such a ruckus. The waves flowing past me, from his mighty steps, were splashing me up to my waist! He had to be huge, to cause such commotion and...!

Then I saw it. Movement.

But not where I had expected it.

Slowly looking down... I felt my stiff shoulders slump as I watched a tiny white creature hop more than walk up towards me. It looked as if it was making tiny little leaps over the few remaining ripples in the water, then once it got closer it increased its pace and only walked... making tiny itty-bitty splashes with its little feet as it hurried our way.

Stunned at the tiny thing, which had to be no bigger than my foot, I leaned back a little and glanced around... Suddenly I was on guard, and expecting a shock. Was this maybe one of Tor's little parlor tricks?

The thing had little white spikes all over it, and although very tiny it looked as if it was walking on the surface of the water, or the water in front of me had all been pushed away by Tor's mighty footsteps and only a tiny layer was now left. It sounded, and looked, as if it was walking through a tiny puddle. The mist around it was thin, barely visible anymore at all, and the creature looked like its tiny little paws had the tiniest little claws and nails on it that could exist.

"Behold," the tiny creature squeaked as it stopped a few feet from us, and stood up on its back legs to look upward. As it did I realized the thing only had spikes on its back, and its belly was soft with a small layer of fur.

As out of place as it was, the thing was utterly adorable. Like some kind of spiky haired mole. It had a longer nose than one would expect, and it had a bunch of wry little whiskers that were dancing wildly as it stared up at me.

"Tor...?" I asked, not willing to believe it.

"Tis' I," he answered... though not with that mighty booming voice of greatness, and instead one that was high-pitched and squeaky.

Yet the voice was unmistakable. Although the complete opposite in volume and power... the tone behind it was the same.

"Is... this one of your tricks?" I asked, not willing or able to believe it. It had to have been! He had sounded so huge, and as he approached just now he had shook the very ground! He had splashed all the water and mist away, from his mere footsteps...! So...!

The tiny creature, Tor supposedly, didn't say anything and instead made its tiny little snout of a mouth tremble wildly. It made tiny little sniffs and sounds as if it was about to cry. His tiny little arms and claws clenched and shook, as if suddenly angry and with great emotion.

"It is you..." I whispered, realizing those tiny sniffles and sounds were far too real to be some trick or ploy.

Vim snickered, but I ignored him as I gulped and felt horrible.

"You said you found tiny creatures cute!" Tor said angrily.

"I do! You are cute!" I said quickly, nodding seriously.

"Then compliment me already!" Tor shouted with its tiny wheezy voice, making me want to laugh. I didn't though, even though it sounded far too adorable to be scary... even though something told me he hadn't said that as a joke at all, and was likely very upset.

Unlike me though Vim didn't seem to care.

He began to laugh aloud, like crazy, uncaring that every moment he did so I had to try harder and harder to convince the great and mighty monarch that he was not just adorable, but very proud and elegant looking.

Chapter 405 Vim – Bray and Her Pack

Patting the wolf on its back, I glanced over at the leader of this pack... and the leader of mine.

"I do not belong to the Society. Not properly," Bray told Renn.

"Why not?" Renn asked without hesitation, showing once again she genuinely didn't feel any fear in front of a powerful monarch.

She was sitting on the ground, in the tall grass and flowers. Bray was lying down as well, but instead was doing so on top of a large boulder not far from Renn. She was looking down at Renn, her ears twitching and fluttering as if in sync with Renn's. The two sounded as if they were just having a leisurely chat, but every question made one of my muscles ache in worry. It was almost scary, in a way.

"I do not wish to protect humans, or your kind. I want nothing to do with them," Bray answered calmly.

"I see," Renn frowned as she nodded, seemingly not too surprised or bothered by the monarch's answer.

Some heavy paws ran past, and the wolf I had been gently petting darted off to chase them. I watched the dark colored wolf nip at the tail of the gray one, running off together into the distance as they played with one another.

I watched the pair, and glanced around at the other dozen or so wolves within sight. They ranged in colors, but only a few were outside the norm. One was a pretty silver, similar to Bray, and another had an almost reddish hue to its fur.

Of them all, as far as I was aware, only three were capable of speech. The rest were as basic as the animals they looked like. Though I had no doubt they had more reasoning and sense than a typical wolf would. The red one, sitting not far from Renn and studying her with great interest, was one of the ones capable of speech. I didn't know its name, if it even had one. The other two I've heard speak before were nearby too. They were sitting together, resting against each other as if tired or weary. They were darker in color, and were actually a little smaller than their fellows.

"Do you too then have an agreement with Vim?" Renn then asked.

Bray tilted her head a little. "Yes. I do."

"Would Vim actually kill you if you didn't fulfill it?" Renn asked further.

Frowning at her, I wondered where Renn was going with this.

"Why wouldn't he? If I did not uphold my end of the bargain, then I would be a calamity. And if not Vim, another would rise to put a stop to me," Bray said, answering Renn's question smoothly.

"Another?" Renn asked.

Bray nodded deeply down at Renn. "The world does not take kindly to one breaking its natural order. It may be lazy now, since Vim is so proactive with his wrath, but if he was to step aside or disappear then it would simply return to its natural state and such contingencies would once again become common. It could be in the form of a human army, a group of non-humans, other monarchs or natural disasters but there is always something eventually," Bray explained.

Renn frowned up at the giant wolf, her tail squirming wildly behind her. After a few moments of deep thought she turned to look at me. "Is that what you are then, Vim? The world's... what? Corrector?" she asked both me and Bray.

"Corrector seems fitting, but I don't believe it's the title or if there is one for it. My mate believed it was just the natural order forcing itself back into place. Fate, or maybe providence," Bray said.

"I'm not a design of this world in that way, no. But I'd not mind it if I was, to be honest. Then though I'd have to admit there is such a thing as divine providence that forces the world back to its normal state when things get too out of scale, and I don't believe that to be the case. The gods would not have existed if that was the true," I said as I stepped forward, since it seemed I was going to be a part of their conversation now.

"Wouldn't your complete deicide of gods only prove it, Vim?" Bray pointed out.

"Oh! It would! If they really upset the natural order, then their annihilation definitely plays into the idea!" Renn agreed happily.

Bray nodded as well. "It would explain his fervent hatred too. It could of course be real, and sourced from a true emotional trauma, but there is no denying it is strangely overpowering of his other emotions. So another power, or fate maybe, further pushing those emotions within him could be an explanation," Bray continued, building off the idea.

"Now just wait a moment..." I tried to speak up, to stop the two from going down a weird path of topics I absolutely did not want them to traverse.

But the two ignored me, as if on purpose.

"It does seem strange for Vim to have such hatred. He's such a calm and even-natured man concerning all other things. Yet the moment one of you, or a saint or god, get involved it's as if he becomes a different person entirely," Renn said with a sigh.

"Is he not emotional in other ways? I'd always figured a man of such great abhorrence would likewise be a love struck fool," Bray asked.

"Abhorrence?" Renn asked.

"A word for my hatred. It's more disgust and loathing than just hatred," I defined the word for her.

Renn smiled and nodded. "That's a far better word for it, isn't it? You don't just hate them, you feel sick when you even think or see them. Maybe Bray is onto something? Is your feeling towards them not your own Vim, but something influenced?" Renn asked.

My eyes twitched as I glared at the woman happily smiling before me. She was sitting down, with her legs underneath her, looking as if she was having a picnic or something. The only thing missing was food, or something to drink.

Though maybe in this context I was the one being eaten, or drunk. Or rather instead, my turmoil and suffering at their teasing.

"Hm... I do suggest maybe changing topics, little Renn," Bray then softly said.

Renn glanced at Bray, and I watched as Renn's ears went stiff as they pointed upward as she looked back at me... and after studying me for a small moment she sadly smiled and nodded. "Seems so... Then... Can I ask about your mate, Bray? What was his name?" Renn, being her usual self, humbly changed topics.

Although relieved, I still felt the ache of annoyance as I shifted and looked away from the two.

Just great. Now such a stupid idea would be in Renn's head from now on.

Bray believing such a thing didn't bother me. Her opinion, her beliefs, meant nothing to me. It didn't change anything. But Renn?

I didn't want her to believe such a thing. Especially since it wasn't true. At all.

How could my hatred be fake? How could my emotions towards gods, and their likeness, be not my own?

Impossible.

There was no way that I could be some kind of... arbiter or balancer of scales. Not in that form or fashion.

The proof was obvious. Clear. As night and day. But to share it, to tell her why I had such proof that my hate was my own... would also mean I had to tell her the reason for it.

And I wasn't sure if I was ready for that yet.

"My mate had no name. He had been the son of a First Born, and Vim had spared him thanks to the aid he had given in the destruction and downfall of the god which created us," Bray explained.

I tried my best to focus on their conversation, as to distract my own internal debate.

To tell her now, or keep it secret?

It hurt. A part of me wanted to tell her, I really did. I had decided. I had chosen her. But every time such an opportunity came... I recoiled as if every fiber of my being was crying out to not do so.

"What um... what happened to him? As far as I'm aware not much can kill your kind, especially the ones so close to their sources," Renn asked.

I blinked, leaving my thoughts as I studied Renn who was staring up at Bray with a look full of wonder. As if she was a pup being taught a lesson.

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What a question. It told me a lot about Renn. Particularly it told me she was paying far more attention to the things I said than I wanted to admit. How many times have I even mentioned such things? Less than a handful, I'm sure. Yet she almost spoke as if she knew all about monarchs and their more intricate secrets.

"Simple age. Although the son of a First Born his heart had not been very mighty. Vim and I tried to feed him hearts, to empower him, however he was able to absorb but only three in his life. Not enough to make a difference," Bray spoke calmly to Renn, but not without emotion. I could hear, and likely so then too could Renn, the tender tone she was using. Bray was speaking as if to a young child about their late father, honestly but gently.

"I see. And... all of these are you children?" Renn asked as she looked around us. There were only half a dozen nearby now, the rest were off in the distance running around.

"They are. These are my direct descendants. They all have children too, but I don't like the lesser ones nearby. So they keep their distance," Bray said.

"Lesser ones?" Renn asked.

"The ones born without any of my blood within them. No hearts. No greater traits. Mere animals," Bray explained.

Renn's ears fluttered, and she glanced over at me. I noted the look in her eyes, recognizing the look of slight pain in them.

She had not liked how Bray spoke of them, it seemed.

Though if she was bothered by Bray's cold displeasure with her own descendants or Bray's outlook on life in general I couldn't tell.

"It bothers you, what I said?" Bray asked, having obviously noticed as I had.

Renn shifted a little as she looked back up at Bray. "A little."

"Why?"

"They're still your children, aren't they? Even if... lesser?" Renn asked.

Bray hummed, her huge silver tail swishing along the rock she was laying upon as she studied Renn.

"So... if you gave birth to what would basically be a human, you would love it all the same?" Bray asked.

Renn nodded. "I'd weep, and... feel terrible, but I would yes. It wouldn't be their fault they were born without our traits, and they would still be of my own flesh and blood," Renn answered.

"I find that difficult to understand," Bray answered without missing a beat.

"How so?" Renn didn't either.

"They may be of our flesh and blood, but they obviously lack something else. Something just as, if not more so, important. In my case, if they have no heart I can understand. Their father, my mate, his heart had been feeble as well. So it is not a great sin to be lesser in that sense. But to not be greater? To not have our strength, our lifespan, our knowledge and insight? To be just as basic as the creatures we devour and subsist upon? That means they are no more than food. Something to be eaten or tossed aside, nothing more," Bray said, explaining her very... basic perspective on life.

One that was, or at least had been, very common back in the day.

And not just among monarchs either.

"But I don't eat humans. So to me I'd not see them as food, no matter how... unlike me they were," Renn argued.

"Hm... that might be a factor, I suppose. To me a human would be a meal. But, so too would a normal non-human. The only reason I'd not kill one of your kind on sight is because within your veins flow the blood of my own kind. So I suppose in my perspective it would be simple pity that I'd spare you, on normal circumstances," Bray reasoned.

Renn hummed as she absorbed Bray's line of thinking. "Tor doesn't think much differently than you do. Though I feel he values them more than you do, but that might only be because he sees them as his property. He cherishes them not because of who or what they are, but simply because they are his," Renn said as she understood.

"Tor is a tiny creature who believes his worth is in his power and how far that power reaches. My mate should have eaten him when he had the chance," Bray said as she showed off some upper teeth, snarling ever so lightly.

"He had the chance to eat Tor?" Renn asked, finding that interesting enough to ignore the snarl.

"Twice. Once even with Vim's permission. My mate was as foolish as he was weak in the heart. Pfa," Bray scoffed, making an odd noise as she did. She shook her head a little, as if she had gotten spit somewhere it wasn't supposed to be thanks to her scoff.

Renn glanced at me, and as she did another wolf appeared. One with brown fur. It hurried over to me, huffing a little as it dropped something from its mouth next to my foot.

Ignoring Renn's look, and the obvious questions littered upon it, I looked down to the thing the wolf had brought to me.

A stick.

"Really?" I asked the wolf, as it sat up and began to wag its tail like crazy.

As it did I looked over to Bray, found her staring intently our way, and for the smallest moment I wondered if the poor wolf was about to find out the hard way about its mother's distaste for what she considered lesser activities and beings.

Bray was proud to be a monarch. To the point she looked down even on the full-blown wolves in her own bloodline. Creatures that were still huge when compared to their fellow kin.

She had just told Renn how she felt about creatures that acted beneath her station. What she hadn't told Renn was that she actively ate or killed those she deemed inferior, even her own children.

And this thing had not just acted far beneath that station, but instead more like a tamed dog.

Instead of doing anything though Bray simply looked away, sighing as she returned her focus to Renn.

The wolf sitting nearest Renn however, the one with reddish fur, kept staring at the wolf patiently waiting for me to throw the stick. It looked pissed.

Ignoring the wolf still panting next to me, and the stick, I kept my focus on Renn as she too looked away.

"You've been around for some time, I'm assuming. Did you ever meet Celine?" Renn then asked.

"The panda? No. I would have eaten her had I been given the opportunity. I've met a few of your fellows over the years, some monarchs, and those who have wandered into my den on mere happenstance, but as I said I do not really belong to your society... nor wish to," Bray explained.

"Wandered in?" Renn asked, picking that to focus on.

Bray nodded, her tail swaying in amusement as she likely thought of the ones who've mistakenly entered her domain without realizing it over the years. As she did, the wolf next to me drew closer. It lowered its head, grabbed the stick and then dropped it again. This time close enough to fall upon my right foot.

I continued ignoring the pup as Bray shifted a little, causing many of the wolves to look up at her. "Sometimes there are those who find their way here. Into my domain. Either by complete accident, or strange coincidence as if by divine intervention. I try to spare the ones who do, since I feel they must have some greater purpose... even if whatever that may be is beyond me and my ken."

"Ken?" Renn asked with a frown. She had said it like a name.

"Knowledge," I told her.

Renn nodded without looking at me. "So you firmly believe in fate then," she said to Bray, continuing their conversation.

"Of course I do. Only a fool would deny its existence. Now... I'd be willing to argue and debate with you its ability and power, but I feel there is no point considering who your mate is" Bray said.

"Are you..." Renn started to say something, but a loud bark shut her up... and made the whole area go quiet.

Shifting ever so slightly, I ignored the eyes staring at me. From not just Bray and Renn, but the whole pack. Even the ones who were distant, that had been playing or doing whatever they were doing, had all gone still as to stare.

Slowly turning my head, I felt rather bad as the wolf that had just barked to get my attention perked up at my attention. It stood up straighter, arching back and forth on its legs as if giddy with anticipation.

"Throw it already," Renn said.

Bray chuckled, but only for a few moments. "Yes Vim. Throw it," she ushered.

Just great.

Sighing, I reached out and grabbed the wolf by the back of its head, right behind one of its ears.

It went still with a tiny yelp, and I met its eyes. "I'm sparing you. Run along and leave me be," I said, threatening it.

Letting it go, the thing didn't wait a heartbeat to spin around and dart off. Its tail firmly tucked between its legs as it ran off, heading for a distant patch of trees.

Shaking my head at the thing, I returned my attention to Bray and Renn... and found Bray smirking at me and Renn looking at me as if I had just slapped the wolf instead of saving its life.

"Why'd you do that Vim?" Renn asked, sounding upset.

"I had a moment of mercy and you're upset with me," I said, feeling suddenly tired.

Renn's upset look turned into one of uncertain worry, as Bray chuckled again and drew her attention. Bray's smirk was plain to see, even on her mighty wolf face. "Had Vim thrown that stick, and that fool of a daughter had chased it, I would have eaten her before she had been able to catch it in the air," Bray told Renn.

Renn's tail stopped swaying, her eyes narrowing a little as she understood. "Oh..." she whispered.

Bray chuckled some more and I wondered if maybe it was time we left.

I'd come here to check on her. Since it had been both on our path and because Bray had recently eaten a heart.

She wasn't ready to absorb another heart. I still felt the one I'd just given her on our last visit within her. It was pulsing very, very slowly, but the multiple out of sync heartbeats from her told me it was still formed enough to not even consider giving her another anytime soon.

And although Bray didn't really know anything too drastic of my past, I worried about what kind of strange things Renn could pick up from her in their conversations. Not just about me, but the world and beyond. Like that earlier conversation about me being some kind of tool used by fate to right the scales of the world.

"My elders had been like you. Several of them had tried to kill and eat me," Renn said softly.

"Funny," Bray said.

"How so?" I asked as I stepped forward, planning to end the conversation once I could.

Bray shifted to look at me, her eyes glowing ever so slightly. She was amused, it seemed. "She's your mate Vim. Today none would dare to snip at her throat, at least no one with plans to see the'morrow," Bray said.

I scoffed at that.

Renn laughed too as she slowly stood up. She reached out, grabbing onto my sleeve for support as she did. I was going to ask what was wrong, since I'd not yet tried to end the conversation, but she gave me a happy smile and nodded. "I think Vim's ready to go," she then said as she released my sleeve.

"Hm. And here I was wondering how long he'd endure. Farewell, Rennalee. May your pack grow strong, but not too large. Take it from me, there can be too many," Bray warned with her farewell.

Scarily, Renn actually nodded with a serious expression... as if taking the monarch's warning to heart.

Chapter 406 Renn – Crystal's Home

Following Vim deeper into another cave, I wondered if we were going to meet another monarch so soon.

We were in the Nation of the Blind, a few days deep into it actually. Unlike last time, when we had traversed through large open fields and prairies we were now traveling through mountains and canyons. Though right now we were in a cave, located in one of those very canyons, one that had been so hidden and out of the way that on a few occasions Vim had needed to help me traverse the rough terrain.

Unlike the cavern system where we'd met Tor in however, this one was... strangely not very dark. The caverns and tunnels were more open than usual it seemed, and even though Vim and I had been walking deeper and deeper for the good part of an hour I could still make out nearly everything in the cave.

The stones were lighter in color, which probably helped keep it brighter, but it felt a little odd... We had rounded enough corners and gone through entire sections of tunnels and cave systems that there was no way any of the sunlight was peering this deep into the cave to reach us here.

"Vim... where are we?" I asked, unable to contain my curiosity any longer. I had held back for the last day or so as we came here, but I couldn't any longer.

The cave seemed normal. I didn't smell, or hear, anything unnatural. And Vim had never mentioned another monarch in this area before, so...

"I found these years ago. While hunting a god," Vim said.

Found...?

"A god?" I asked as I stepped over a large rock. It was jutting out of the ground oddly, as if it had poked outward. It was sharp.

"Hm. In fact I found this place before officially joining the Society. Though not before meeting Celine," he added.

"Huh..." I continued following Vim as we rounded another turn. The rocky walls around us became... sharp and littered with similarly pointy rocks as the one I stepped over earlier.

Fascinated by the sudden change in appearance, I wondered why some rocks were sharp and why some were smooth. And why they seemed to change so drastically so quickly.

Didn't water smooth rocks...? Did that mean no water has ever been in this section of the cave?

I had to walk carefully for a short time, and was thankful I could see so well. Some of them were very definitely sharp. Not just at their points either. Almost as if there were ridges along their pointed sides, intentionally formed to be dangerous...

"Are we not here to meet someone?" I asked. He was speaking almost as if he was talking about a thing, not a person.

"No. No one's here. At least, there better not be," Vim said.

I see...

Blinking quickly, I smiled gently as I became suddenly very excited.

What was he going to show me? It wasn't often, rarely in fact, that Vim took me somewhere not related to the Society.

Though we might just be getting another one of those items he's buried throughout the world... which would be fine too, I guess. After all even though he was gathering them for a reason I didn't wish to indulge, it was fun to see and learn about things Vim kept secret from everyone else. Since the very fact he told me of them, and showed me them, was only further proof at how much he cherished me.

"I'm glad that Meriah got all antsy. We would have had to pass by here otherwise," Vim said gently as we rounded another corner... and seemingly came to a dead end.

So he was glad that Meriah had left. That explained how he had gotten a little... calmer after she had parted with us at Kaley's Hamlet. Here I had thought he had just been happy for us to be alone.

"Don't want her to know about this place?" I asked as I followed Vim to the end of the path, if you could call it a path. It was so littered with rocks and sharp points that it almost felt... wrong to even walk through it.

Hopefully it didn't grow dark here, else I might end up hurting myself. I'd not be able to traverse this place without sight, that was how problematic the sharp rocks were.

"I don't want anyone to know of this place, no," Vim confirmed as he stepped over to a wall.

"Not even me?" I asked happily as I watched him. He paused a moment, to glance back at me.

Smirking at him, I waited for his quip or his attempt to tease me in turn... which normally worked, since he was so good at it.

Instead though he only sighed with a small smile, and then he turned back to face the wall.

Before I could say anything, to tease him even more, Vim reached out and placed his hands on the wall.

Hesitating, I wondered if he was about to break the wall or something. Should I worry? The roof was littered with pointy and sharp rocks... would they fall on me if he did?

Vim's hands and fingers made noises as he began to push on the wall... and I flinched as I heard stone scrape stone... yet instead of a loud bang, or crack, the scraping sound only grew louder and louder... as he simply pushed a giant section of the wall deeper into itself.

A little stunned, I realized he was pushing a huge rock. A giant boulder, far bigger in height and width than the wall even was. And as he pushed it... light started to become visible.

"The outside...?" I mumbled in awe, wondering if we had maybe walked through the mountain already. The canyon we had entered in had been deep, and near some smaller mountains. It hadn't felt like had walked a great enough distance down here to pass through one of those mountains but...

Gleaming lights came into view, and I felt my shoulders slump in awe... as a world of pretty glittering lights came into view.

Stunned, I slowly walked forward... following Vim through the large hole-like doorway he had just opened up. Vim stopped pushing the rock after a moment, and turned and smiled at me as I walked past him and entered the new section of cave he had just revealed.

It was a massive room. Big enough to have an echo and more... and the walls and roof were absolutely covered by giant gems.

Glowing blue ones. Very similar to the giant gem at the Armadillo's home.

"Gems?" I asked as I kept looking around. Some of them were so huge, they were as if trees themselves. Many of them were thicker and wider than Vim, and many times taller. They all glittered faintly, though from a light source I couldn't place. Did they glow from within, like hearts? Or from another source of light?

"Crystals actually. Similar, but not. Come on, let me push this back and seal it up while you enjoy the sight," Vim said gently as he patted me on the rear, ushering me away from the stone he had just moved.

I stepped forward, leaving him behind as he went to push the rock back into place. The sound of him pushing the rock, scraping the rock it slid into, was deafening but I ignored it as I approached the nearest crystal. It was sticking up out of the ground at an angle, like a fallen tree, and was about my size in width.

"Can I touch them?" I asked softly as I stared into the blue crystal. I could see through it, as if it was made of glass, but it had countless little streaks of white things inside of it. Those white lines glimmered and glistened, like icicles in the sun.

"You can. They're just rocks."

Reaching out, I placed my hand onto the crystal... and found that it was strangely warm. Nowhere near as warm as a monarch heart, but far warmer than I had expected it to be. Especially since they genuinely looked like giant ice crystals.

"It's warm, Vim," I whispered in awe.

And strangely smooth. It looked as if it had grooves, yet as I ran my hand along it I felt none of them. It felt as smooth as glass or ice.

"Some of them are, yes. Weird huh?" Vim's voice sounded close, so I turned my head a little... tearing my eyes away from the beautiful thing to find he was now standing next to me.

Blinking at him, I turned and found the rock he had just been messing with. It was now back in place, sealing this cavern from the other.

"Is that um... the only way out?" I asked. The rock was massive. A huge boulder, as big as the hut Nory and I had lived in.

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Vim really was a monster.

"Yes."

"Don't die then, Vim. I'll be stuck here," I said as I returned my attention to the thing before me.

He chuckled at me as I reached up with my other hand... and realized I had my gloves on. I quickly took them off, and found that the crystal was even warmer than I had originally thought.

"They're beautiful..." I whispered, and glanced down the crystal a little. I stepped a few feet away from Vim, so that I could step up against another section of the crystal... to put my face up against it.

Resting my cheek against it, I closed my eyes and sighed at the warmth. It felt good, especially on the cut that was still healing.

Plus it made me relax a little. Which felt even better, since this place stunk terribly like that pit from my memory.

I wasn't sure if it was because we were underground, or if it was just mere coincidence... but ever since Vim had moved that boulder, I could smell nothing but that pit. The one my family used to throw me into as punishment.

It was so strong of a smell, so terrible, that I was barely able to even focus on the wonderfulness around me.

"They are, aren't they? There aren't many places like this in the whole world. Or well... there probably are a lot more than I think, but good luck finding any of them. And even more so good luck getting to them, too," Vim said.

Right... If this place really was sealed, except for that rock Vim could move, I doubted anyone else could get here. It was under a mountain. Near a canyon. It had taken us over an hour to get here, walking through caves and tunnels...

"Come on, Renn. We're not there yet," Vim then said as he stepped away from me and the crystal I was growing to want to depend on.

Pulling my face away from the warmth, I frowned as I hurried to follow him.

This wasn't what he wanted to show me? Really? What could be better than these things!?

As I followed Vim through what felt like a forest of the crystals, I began to notice slightly different colors amongst them. They were mostly the same shade of light blue, but a few had a pinkish hue, or a green one. Though...

"Are they actually colorful, Vim, or are they just... reflecting what's around them?" I asked, as I realized the green ones had grass or moss around them, while the blue ones didn't.

He chuckled at me. "You really are observant. Yes, they seem to reflect their surroundings. There's an aquifer below this area, one that a lot of these crystals are connected to and are submerged in. It's a mineral heavy lake. Thus their blue color," Vim said.

"Huh..." I nodded, finding that to make perfect sense. Though... "What about the pink ones?" I asked as we passed one of them. It wasn't as big as the one's around it, which were a mix of blue and greens.

"The honest answer is the stuff inside the crystal. There are tiny parts of different minerals and stuff inside that give it that color. Most of them are actually a type of white, a see-through, which you'll see up here in a moment," Vim said, explaining gently as we walked.

I hummed as we approached a huge crystal that emerged from another cluster of smaller ones, and was so big and long it hit the other end of the cavern wall, in the ceiling. Vim had to duck as we walked under it, though I only had to slightly lower my head.

As we walked under the huge thing, I found myself strangely happy. "You really are taller than me, Vim," I said as I watched the way he stood back up once we were out from under it.

"Hm...? Not by much," he said with a little shrug. He didn't seem to care either way, really.

For some reason it made me happy to be reminded he was though.

After a few minutes of walking we rounded some larger crystals and came to a new tunnel. One lined with crystals, though most were so big they ended up being the walls and roof of the tunnel, with the rock of the mountain only peering through occasionally between them.

"How did this form, Vim? It's as if they had all grown around this area we're walking through," I said as I noticed the way the crystals around us were formed. Some of them were so flat against the wall, it was as if they were the wall itself. Decorations, maybe.

Vim smirked at me. "Because it had been? There had been a huge crystal here, that they all were growing against and around. I removed it, to make this path," Vim said.

Slowing a little, I stopped midway through the tunnel and looked back and forth... and realized he was likely being serious.

I could see it. Where the hundreds of smaller crystals, some as big as me, had formed around a larger one. In fact some of the crystals even looked... broken or impacted, as if they had been pushing up against something bigger and stronger than themselves.

"Where'd you put it?" I asked as I returned to walking.

"The crystal...? I broke it a bunch, to get it out. It's in pieces somewhere around here," he said.

Oh... "That's too bad," I said. It would have been neat to see a big one in full. Were they elongated and so perfectly shaped all the way to their source? Or were they like trees, where once you dug under the ground you found a wry mess of roots beneath them?

"Hm..."

Leaving the tunnel we entered another large cavern. This one though wasn't as littered with crystals, and had more grass... and...

Staring at the building on the other side of the cavern, I felt my tail twitch like mad at the absurdity of the sight.

"Vim...?" I asked, doubting my eyes.

It was a house. Undoubtedly. Made of some kind of dark colored stone. It was such an appalling sight here, amongst all the pretty crystals, that it offended me.

"Why do you look offended?" Vim asked, pausing mid step.

"Why's a house here? Look, it doesn't belong at all!" I said as I gestured at the pretty crystals lining the walls and scattered around. There were even a few sticking out of the ground and grass, pointing upward to the ceiling.

"Hmph. Fine. You can sleep outside," Vim said as he turned away, smiling gently at me as he headed for the house.

"I could! Staring up at them would be wonderful!" I said. I'd almost said sleeping against one would be nice, since they were so warm, but I was glad I hadn't. Since they were, even if warm, hard like stone.

"Really? They're bright, so it annoys me..." Vim said as he frowned.

Oh...

Glancing around, I realized Vim was very right.

This cavern was so bright it was almost as if we were outside. Some of the crystals were even glistening and glowing as if lanterns.

Yes... Vim was right... it would likely be possible to sleep, but it'd not be as easy or comfortable as I had first assumed thanks to how bright they were.

"Are you here to sleep?" I asked carefully as I followed him up to the house.

A part of me was hoping not. Although I was already getting used to the smell of this place, it was still bad enough that it bothered me. I wasn't sure if I'd even be able to fall asleep here if I wanted to.

"Hm... actually, to be honest, I've not been very tired lately. That's odd, how come I hadn't noticed?" Vim slowed as he turned to look at me, tilting his head as if I could answer such a question.

"You haven't felt sleepy?" I asked, a little excited to hear so.

Vim shook his head a little, frowning at me as he did.

"That's wonderful, Vim. I have noticed you haven't really yawned or anything lately, too," I said. I had simply thought he'd been doing it without me noticing, or that he had been more aware of himself since we'd been traveling with people lately.

"Haven't I?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Not lately," I said.

"Huh... Well, like I said, I feel fine actually. Which is weird, since I've not really slept much recently. We've been busy, and all," he said as he stepped forward, towards what was likely the door to the house.

Likely, since it had no door at all. It was just... an open doorway.

The house was raised a little, built on the grass but with a layer of the brick beneath it for foundation. It made the front door a slight step up to get in, not something commonly seen. It was high enough that one could even justify using a stepping stone.

Stepping up into the house, I noted the stone it was made of.

"Is... this the same stuff that bridge is made of?" I asked. "The one near Lumen?"

"Yep."

Shaking my head at Vim, and his strange secrets, I followed him into the building. The hallway was slightly small and felt... weird. It reminded me of the Keep a little. There were no rugs, no furniture, only stone. Grayish stone, all cut perfectly to shape.

How long has this been here, I wonder? Vim had said he found this place not long before joining the Society... I wonder if he had made this building about then, too.

"You made this, right?" I asked as we passed another open door. I slowed a little to study the small room. It was full of stone boxes and crates. Made of the same bricks the house was, but slightly different in color.

At least, they looked like boxes. They had metal strips near their tops, and had little latches upon them. They looked like the metal latches that locked large gates, though didn't seemingly have any actual locks upon them.

"I did."

I turned, and found Vim was no longer in sight. His voice had come from another room. I had stopped, to study the weird stone boxes. A mistake. Hurrying a little, I found Vim in the next room... one that was in fact, an actual room.

Vim was unhooking a bag from his back, standing in front of a large couch looking bench. He was absentmindedly putting stuff onto the bench. Slowly entering the room, I glanced around at the furniture. The room was a large one; probably a little bigger than the one I had been given in Lumen. It had several couches, chairs, tables and dressers. There was even a huge mirror hanging on one of the walls, adorned by racks of pegs where one could hang clothes and items... though they were all currently empty.

"Vim..." I whispered his name as I studied the home, which looked far too clean.

"What?" he asked as he turned to look at me as he untied another bag.

"Does someone live here?" I asked as I glanced at a nearby dresser. It, like the rest of the place, wasn't just empty looking... it was clean. Too clean.

I stepped over to it, and ran my hand along the top of its surface. It came away as clean and fresh as if I'd just cleaned it up myself.

Not a speck of dust.

Maybe I shouldn't have been offended by this home so haphazardly. As weird as it was, made of solid brick... it was strangely interesting. Plus this room, thanks to it being so well furnished, it now felt homely. Though there was no bed here. Was there another room? Or was there no bed because Vim didn't need sleep?

"No one does, Renn. The reason it's clean, and there are no bugs or anything, is because of the stones. They repels such things," Vim said calmly as he returned his attention to undressing himself.

Wait... undressing?

I hesitated as I watched Vim not just take off his bags and outer layers, but even his inner ones. He stripped naked, rather quickly, and nodded as he pointed to the hallway we'd just come from. "I'm going to take a bath, if you'd like you can join me," he said.

"Say so sooner...!" I shouted.

He laughed as I threw my bags and clothes off, hurrying to join him.

Smell or no, I'd not miss such an opportunity!

Chapter 407 Vim – His Failed Attempt

Renn's tail twitched wildly as she stared into the crate of stone.

"I lined them with leather from the same monarch our bags are made of," I explained as she stared down at the collection of eggs and hearts.

Leaning against the crate, I smiled as I watched Renn's eyes focus on the hearts and eggs. She looked adorable, somehow a mix of fascination and utter anger. As if she was having fun, yet also furious with me.

Why was that...?

"It keeps monarchs from sensing them," she said, understanding. She had to stand on her toes to see fully into the large crate. This was one of the bigger ones.

I nodded. "Yes. As you noticed neither Tor nor Bray noticed your heart. Neither did Elaine, by the way," I said.

She nodded slowly, her tail coiling a little... and then her lips quivered ever so gently before she looked over at me. "Why the eggs, Vim?" she asked.

"To be honest, I'm not sure. As far as I'm aware, none have ever hatched. I always expect to lift the lid, and either find a corpse or a very... angry monarch," I said as I glanced down at the two dozen eggs. They were all different sizes and colors and shapes, with the hearts littered amongst them, making them glow a little thanks to their inner light.

"Do you want them to hatch?" Renn asked.

"Not really, to be honest. Most monarchs are not the kind we can be friends with. But... well..." I shrugged a little. "Today I keep them around; because of the contingency I might need a monarch some day. As weird as that sounds," I explained.

"To eat other hearts, in case the ones you have now start failing you... like they possibly are," Renn said, understanding further.

I nodded. "Yeah. I know. I'm a cruel bastard. I'm keeping the eggs to, if able; down the road use them for the very thing I hate them for. Hypocrite, thy name is Vim."

Renn leaned back a little, away from the crate and lowering to her feet. "Is that also why you allow that egg at the Weaver's?" she asked.

"Yes."

She hummed a little, still looking half happy and half furious.

Really. Why was she being so odd? Was it just the situation? Or had our little bath not been to her liking? I had thought she'd have loved it. Not only had I invited her, and spent time in it with her... it was a hot spring. A pure spring, surrounded by crystals. It glimmered and glistened in ways no natural bath ever could.

She should have felt like a princess or something while in that bath, yet instead she seemed... offended, for some reason.

Renn didn't actually seem furious with me. She was speaking calmly, and had a small smile, but... There was no denying she was not as happy as I had expected her to be. I had thought bringing her here, to this cavern of crystals and secrets, she'd have become... well...

I had thought we'd be able to have a lovely little atmosphere while here.

Wonder what I was doing wrong.

I mean, really! Here I was showing her all my secret little artifacts and stuff, and all I've gotten so far are cute little hums, or twists of the tail! Where was the blushing? The glossy eyes? The tears, or smirks?

"What's in this one?" Renn asked, uncaring of my internal strife as she stepped over to the next crate.

Keeping a sigh from escaping, I shut the lid to the crate we'd just been examining and then went over to open the next one. Before I got a hold of it though, Renn grabbed it and tried to open it.

I stayed my hand for a moment, to see if she could do it or not. The thing budged, scraping a little as the stones bumped and shifted, but it didn't open.

"Huh...!" Renn groaned and shifted, she spread her feet a little more for better anchoring and leverage, then she grabbed the lid with both hands and used her legs and back to open it.

It creaked open, barely, and I hurriedly shot a hand out to grab the lid right before she slipped. I held the lid open as she groaned and lowered her arms, shaking them as if they were burning in strain. Likely were.

"Careful Renn," I said gently as I lifted the lid. Had I not grabbed it, the lid would have slammed shut on her hands.

And that would not have been pretty. At all. And any hope I would have had at turning this moment into a lovely one would have died instantly.

"How are they so heavy?" she complained to me.

I winced, and nodded. "It's the stone. It's... a mixture of special materials. Gods made them, originally, these are my attempt to mimic their creations," I said as I pushed the lid all the way up, until it latched into place.

Renn glared at me for a moment, and I tried to ignore the way it wasn't one of her happy ones. She then sighed and stepped closer to the crate, and peered into it.

Unlike the last one, she didn't need to stand on tip-toes to see within this one.

"Rugs?" Renn asked as she reached in for one.

"My vain attempt to once lure a monarch from its nest," I said as I helped her pull out one of the more colorful ones.

"What do you mean?" Renn asked as she immediately went to unroll the tightly rolled rug. It, like all the ones I'd made, was elongated. Far longer than they were wide. This one was a colorful red and blue, adorned with countless fractals and similar geometric shapes.

"The monarch had been nested deep in a very tiny place. Think a burrow. It was too tiny for me to get to, since it had modified its nest into an impossibly hard material. One I was not able to easily get through. Yet it had a strange fascination for soft material, such as rugs. So I made these, hoping that it'd roll around and love the feel of it so much it'd leave its nest and come out into the open. To where I'd be able to grab it," I said, explaining my method.

Renn was silent for a moment as she ran her hands along the rug, which was now half on the floor and the other half still rolled up against the crate. I knew without bending down to touch it that it was likely one of the softest rugs she's ever felt.

"Did it work?" she asked.

"No. A young girl who had been with me at the time had been the solution. She sung as she bathed in a nearby lake, and it had been drawn out of its home to listen to her voice," I said.

Renn stopped messing with the rug. She was leaned forward and down, since she was kneeling down on the rug, so I couldn't see her face... but I saw the way her ears fluttered and twitched.

Uh-oh. I had just annoyed her again.

Jeez! How come I wasn't doing well at all?

I was trying so hard to be open with her. To not withhold information, and to be as calm and gentle as possible...

What had annoyed her? The fact I had tricked a monarch in such a way, using its fascination with a girl's singing to take its life, or something else...?

"The monarch had not been a good one, Renn. A whole village had been eaten by it before I had tracked it down," I said carefully.

Renn sighed as she sat back up straight, though did so on the rug so couldn't roll it back up yet. "And the girl?" she asked.

Hm? "She was fine? I grabbed it before it could hurt her. Though it might not have hurt her anyway. It had been fascinated by her singing," I said.

"Who was she?"

Oh.

Wait... was that was she was upset with? Really?

"A young bunny. Jelti's mother. The village in question had been theirs, or hers. Technically Jelti wasn't born yet, though she had been in her mother's belly at the time," I said.

"Jelti's mother? Really?" Renn perked up at that, and I felt a little relieved. She really did like to hear about her friends, didn't she?

Sometimes she was far simpler than she seemed. Yet other times, like now, I had no idea what made her tick.

"Really," I said with a nod.

Renn hummed for a moment, and then stood up. "Why'd you make so many?" she asked.

"I had only made one in my attempt. The others are just... ones I've made throughout the years, for one reason or another. I think one or two I had made for gifts, and maybe one or two for this house. Like for the hallway," I said as I rolled the rug back up.

"Why not lay one out then?" she asked.

Hesitating a moment, I frowned and nodded. "Pick one?" I suggested.

Renn's tail twitched wildly as she smiled and stepped over to the crate. She quickly went to touching and feeling the different rugs, pulling some of them at the edges as to try and see the patterns upon them.

She eventually picked a blue one, so I put the first one she had pulled out away and handed the blue one to her. She hurried out of the room, and rounded the corner to go to the main hallway.

I followed her out, leaving the crate open and behind. It didn't take long for us to lay the blue carpet out, and Renn smirked and nodded at it once it was fully unrolled and in position.

It was a tad shorter than the whole hallway... but it fit rather well, all things considered. Plus the blue hues fit the gray stone well, somehow. "Very nice," Renn said about it.

Instead of staring at the rug, I stared down the hall at the other end and at her. She had her hands on her hips, standing tall and proud as if she had just made the rug herself.

Such a smirk and stance suited her. She looked good wrapped in pride.

Especially thanks to the way her thin undershirt shifted and hung upon her. It was all she had on. We were both long dry from the bath, and this cavern was more than warm enough to not need much more than that, but somehow it made me a little conscious of her. Yet I knew the moment I asked her to get dressed, or at least put on pants, I'd be the one to ruin the moment and or make it awkward.

"What else was in there?" Renn asked happily as she ran down the hallway, her steps making soft sounds thanks to the rug as she did. She passed me and hurried back into the room with the crate, to go back to digging through it.

Smiling gently I followed her back in, and found her lifting a bundle of yarn.

"Yarn, Renn," I told her what it was.

"I figured... but why's it so..." she shifted it, glaring at the golden gleam as if doubting her eyes.

"Because it is what you think it is. That's gold," I told her.

She startled, almost dropping the thing. "Really...!?" she squeaked in surprise.

Smirking at her, I nodded. "Really. It's light because it's thinner than it looks. Gold can surprisingly be very thin," I said.

The trick was making it in a way that kept it from flaying or separating. A typical thread of yarn would have torn and ripped from Renn's rough handling. This one though was fine as she shifted it and studied it closer.

After she studied it for a bit she put it back into the crate and grabbed at another item. She seemed to ignore the fanciest and more priceless item, and opted instead to pick up a box of buttons and other crafting supplies.

"Buttons?" Renn asked as she tilted the see-through box, to look at the hundreds of different items within.

"That amongst other things. This is my craft box? I guess? At least that's what most of the stuff seems to be," I said as I glanced in at the couple dozen items. Everything was either material to make something, like a rug, or a completed object. There was even a stuffed animal in the corner, squished by a rug.

"Do you... not even know what you have, Vim?" Renn asked as she lowered the box of crafts back down, putting it down gently.

"Weird, I know. I remember the important things, but yes... for instance that box has a weapon, but I don't remember what else is in it," I said with a point to a smaller chest nearby. One that rested on top of another. I pointed to another chest, one similar in size to the one we were rummaging in now. "That one has books. And the one behind it has..." I hesitated as I remembered what was in that heavier box.

"Has what?" Renn asked, excitedly.

Great.

"I don't remember," I admitted.

Renn sighed at me as she stepped over to the box in question. I helped her open it, and we found more boxes. Though these were wooden ones, of varying sizes and colors.

She grabbed one of the larger boxes on the top of the bunch and grunted a little as she lifted it. It clanked loudly as she put it down onto the edge of the stone crate, and she fumbled with the little iron latch that held the box shut. Renn got it open, and frowned at the prize within.

"Hm. Money," I said at the bundles of paper rolls and metal coins.

None were the currency of any of the nations around anymore. It was interesting that some of the paper currency was even unfamiliar to me. What nation had that been from, I wonder? I liked the designs on them.

"Hmph." Renn was not amused. She shut the box and pushed it aside to grab another.

The next box was smaller, and only had a few books within it. She opened one of the books, but found them to be written in a language she couldn't understand. "Those are old. That's the old language, before the era of humans," I said.

"Why the scraggly lines?" she asked.

"Just how they wrote their words. Each little symbol means a word, instead of many letters making one. It was annoying, honestly, because they eventually started modifying their little symbols to mean different things... so I, not paying attention, every so many centuries had to relearn the language almost entirely because of how vastly they had changed them," I said.

Renn hummed as she put the book back, and shut the box. "How come they're not all decrepit like usual?" Renn asked as she put the box down onto the other, the one with money in it, since it was smaller.

"The area, and how they're sealed. This cavern system is very still, and these stones keep bugs and mold and stuff away. Plus these stone chests are airtight. This is the first time the elements have touched this stuff in... well... possibly hundreds of years," I said as I thought about it.

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She hummed in thought as she grabbed another box. Another larger one, which had two locks on it. She opened it, and finally smiled for once.

I studied her smile for a few moments before looking into the box, to find what had given her such a lovely look. Renn lifted up a dress.

"Clothes?" I asked, a little surprised.

"They're pretty," Renn said softly as she pulled out the dress fully, unfurling it before her with outstretched arms. She studied it in a way that told me she was seeing if she could wear it or not.

Although a part of me hoped she would do so, since it'd look great on her and cover her up, I couldn't help but be confused all the same.

She was happy... over clothes? Not the wealth or books of science? Not the monarch eggs or hearts? The rugs she had found interesting too... but she looked far happier now finding these than upon finding them.

Sighing quietly, I dug through the rest of the chest to see if it really was just full of clothes.

It was. The thing had probably twenty odd full sets of clothes. Most of them were high end stuff that a woman would wear, like to some kind of fancy dinner or event. Many of them were fashions and designs long lost to this era, to the point that even if Renn wore them to only special occasions she'd still be seen as odd.

I didn't like such attention, but...

"Um... Vim. How do I get this, uh..." Renn mumbled worriedly, and I found her stuck half way dressed. She had tried to slip the dress on overhead, and was now stuck within it.

"Other way, Renn," I said as I went to help her. I got it off her, undid the necessary zippers, and helped her get the thing properly situated.

"It's... a little tight," she mumbled as I zipped the back of it up for her.

Frowning at her, I glanced around her body, searching for the part she felt was too tight.

It wasn't. At all. In fact it fit her quite well... "Tight where?" I asked. The thing looked almost as if it had been made for her, so what was she talking about?

Renn pointed at her waist.

"Oh. That's how it's supposed to be, Renn. It's supposed to be tight there. You're just not used to such a thing because the clothes you're used to have a different idea of fashion," I said.

"Really...?" Renn didn't seem to believe me, but then she remembered something and hurried around me. She ran out of the room, and I knew she was likely going to the main living room where the mirror was.

Smiling at her, I went ahead and gathered up the chest of dresses and carried it with me to join her. Odds are she'd likely try each one on here shortly, so may as well.

Entering the room, I found her standing closely to the mirror and staring at her chest.

"So... people wore stuff like this? Before?" she asked, cupping her own breasts. The dress didn't just accentuate the waist and fine curves of its wearer, but amplified certain parts too.

"In today's era it'd seem... a little promiscuous, yes. But back then it was considered very fancy, and normal. Royals and commoners both wore such things," I said as I put the chest of clothes down onto the table near her.

Renn continued studying herself in the dress, smiling gently as she did. I wasn't sure if she simply found it pretty, or just plain interesting to see something not normal upon her, but I enjoyed the sight anyway.

"It actually looks very good on you," I told her.

Her right ear fluttered, and she glanced at my reflection in the mirror. "So... why do you have these clothes?" she asked.

"I likely have lots of sets of clothes in those boxes Renn. For all types of situations. Over the years I've just... gathered stuff, when I can, I think. Some of it I may even have gathered because I had needed it, but forgot all about them, or had needed them at one time and hadn't had any and these stores are my way of trying to avoid a similar predicament in the future. Other than certain things, like the monarch eggs and hearts, there isn't much meaning to most of the stuff here. I use it as a vault, a storeroom, but honestly it's not like I ever come here anymore," I said.

"How many of these places are there, Vim?" Renn asked.

"There are two others that I remember. One's on another continent, far to the southeast. And another is closer, but it's currently deep underneath the inland sea. The one that Lumen rests upon. I can go to it myself, but I think if I open it the place will flood, thanks to how I built it," I told her.

"That you remember," She quoted me. "Do you mean you've lost or forgotten such places before, Vim?"

I nodded. "Obviously. Though not of hearts. I remember where all the hearts are," I said, making sure she knew I wasn't so unaware as to make such a mistake as that.

She studied me for a moment, and then gestured around us. "Then... why not make a home here? Or were you serious when you said you wanted multiple locations for us, for me?" she asked.

"I do. I am. But because of what's here, I can't just leave it open Renn. That large boulder not only keeps things out, it hides it. I don't think you're ready or able to move that thing just yet. I'll eventually modify it for you, I'll make a system that will let you come and go, but I'll need to do it later. That will take me a few weeks to do properly, and I plan on us leaving in a couple days," I said.

"Wait... days? Really?" Renn asked, focusing on that instead of the rest of what I'd said.

I nodded. "Unless you don't want to, of course," I said.

"I see..." she mumbled, a little sadly.

Suddenly very aware that I might be misreading her a little, I hurriedly began to really consider our last few hours here. She had seemed off a little, since arriving. Maybe she didn't like this place? I had thought maybe I had simply said or did something to upset her, but she wasn't actually acting as if she was angry with me. It was more like she was bothered, but by something else... something...

Wait...

Shifting a little, I hesitated a moment and then realized what might be the problem.

"Renn um..." I was about to bring it up, but Renn had stepped over to the chest. She was pulling out more clothes, looking for the next one to try on. She paused to look at me, holding a blue shirt close to her. "Are you uncomfortable...?" I asked.

Her tail danced a little under the tight dress she wore. I felt like looking down, to watch the way it slithered under the dress, but couldn't take my eyes off hers. They had gone a little wide, shocked at what I'd said.

Renn coughed, lowered the blue shirt a little and then nodded. "Well... a little," she admitted.

I nodded too. "I'm uh... assuming it's because of where we are. Am I wrong?" I asked.

"No. You're not. I'm sorry! It's so stupid, I should be so happy and excited, but..." Renn began to speak quickly, and I calmed down a little as she did so.

So I was right. Something was bothering her, but it wasn't me.

It was nothing I had done.

Thank goodness.

"Is it... because you don't like cramped places?" I asked, referring to her fear of wells. I had thought this place would have been fine. It was a cave, yes, but it was bright and warm. Plus it wasn't cramped; at least I didn't feel like it was. The cavern we were in now was big enough that even Miss Beak could have stood up fully. In fact, she had at one point.

"No, it's the smell," she said as she shook her head.

Smell...?

Frowning at her, I spent a small moment to study what this place smelled like.

I smelled dirt. Water. The stones. Her. Especially her.

"Ah..." I felt an odd weight lay against my heart as I realized what it was.

"I'm so sorry, Vim. It just... smells like the pit they used to throw me in, so..." Renn sounded absolutely defeated as she explained, her ears drooping lowly as she hung her head. At least she wasn't crying.

"No... I'm sorry Renn. I uh... hm..." I panicked a moment, since I had planned to spend a few days here with her. Since I knew our upcoming days, once we confronted Light and the rest, could be full of sadness and turmoil. I had wanted to give her a little semblance of normalcy and joy, if even for just a couple days.

Hard to do now, especially if this place smelled of her old prison. Of her old trauma.

"I think I can get used to it! It's not as bad as it was when you first moved that boulder! I only notice it really every so often now, I think I can get over it... and...!" Renn, per her usual self, tried to adapt and be kind. But I wasn't going to put up with it.

"I'd offer to burn some incense or something, since I think I have some around here somewhere... but you're not a human. Your sense of smell would be strong enough that no matter how many candles and stuff I burn you'd still catch a hint of the scent that's bothering you. So... let's just leave." I felt horrible as I quickly tried to re-assess my plans.

We'd have to leave... so what should I grab? What should I leave behind? The stuff I'd gathered, for one, like the molds from Kaley's and the box from Lilly's... Maybe I could get Renn to leave her stuff too, like that heart and the book she got from that saint.

"Vim...!"

I looked over at Renn, since I had been about to step away.

She looked distraught now. Which only made me even more upset with myself.

"Vim please... I want to see more. There are dozens of those crates and...!" she said as she stepped towards me. She still clung to the blue shirt in her arms.

"But you're uncomfortable," I said. I could see it even still. The way her ears were drooping, even during such a moment of sadness, she still had a bit of stiffness to them. They weren't fluttering as much as they should be. The little hairs upon them sticking up, as if from static. Now that I understood what was wrong, it was obvious.

"So? I can put up with it! It's really okay, I promise," she said.

No it wasn't.

Because I hadn't brought her here just to show her the stuff I'd collected over the years. I hadn't brought her here just to deposit the few unnatural items we'd gathered up.

What I had planned required her to be not bothered at all. On any level.

So this wouldn't do. This wouldn't work.

"What...?" Renn shifted a little, narrowing her eyes at me.

Whoops. I probably had an odd look at the moment. I quickly calmed my mind a bit and gave her a gentle smile. "Nothing... go on then. Explore the rest to your heart's content. Once you're done we'll leave," I said gently, deciding to just let it be.

I'll just need to figure something else out. Though if I could do so before we reached Telmik was unlikely.

Hopefully nothing too drastic happened during my confrontation with Light, then.

Renn sighed, drawing my attention back to her. She no longer held the blue shirt...? Where'd it go?

Glancing around, I found it on a nearby chair. When had she tossed it there?

"What is it Vim?" Renn asked as she stepped closer.

Shifting a little, I tried not to notice the way she had held her arms behind her back. Did she realize what such a posture did with that dress? If she did, was she doing it on purpose? Or was it just something instinctual? She was scary sometimes.

"I should be asking you that," I said defensively. She had stepped closer, staring up at me with a weird smile.

Why was she suddenly trying to seduce me? I mean, that was what I had wanted this whole time, but...

Renn frowned at me, which made my eye twitch. I had been enjoying that smile. "I really am fine. It's... annoying, Vim, and it makes me feel on edge. I can feel all the little hairs on my ears and tail are standing up, but it's not like I'm going to have a panic attack or anything. I promise. I'll be okay," she said.

I believed her. But... "All the same Renn. I know what it's like to despise certain smells. How they can remind you of something terrible, so..." I tried to speak calmly, even though I suddenly felt on guard. She hadn't gotten any closer, but she was now close enough I could smell her rather strongly. How was she able to even notice the smell of this cavern? She smelled delicious.

"Hm... right. Your snails, huh?" she nodded, remembering.

My eye twitched again, being reminded of those damned things. For a tiny moment I could smell them, thanks to her mentioning of them. "Yeah..." I grumbled an admittance.

What a waste of a moment. To think of those things and smell them and not her.

Renn giggled for a moment, and I was glad to hear it. So she really was okay. Or at least, not doing as bad as I had thought.

Good.

"Is there a bed here, Vim?" Renn then asked.

"There is. Upstairs."

"There's another floor?" Renn paused a moment, and I knew why she had sounded surprised. From the outside it hadn't looked like there was another floor. Plus she hadn't seen the stairs yet.

I had built it that way on purpose. Same with the hidden basement too. "There is."

Renn hummed as she crossed her arms, her tail squirming in thought beneath her dress as she looked away.

Although glad she had seemingly relaxed a little, I was now worried for a new reason. "Wondering if you can sleep even with the smell?" I dared to ask.

She nodded gently. "I don't know, Vim. It's... well..."

"It's fine Renn. We can leave in a few hours, after you've had your fill of trying on outdated fashion," I said.

"But..."

"I'll even let you take one or two if you want. Though don't blame me if you're stared at or laughed at. You'd look good in anything Renn, but this world... especially the nation we're in now would think otherwise," I said, wondering what kind of reception she'd get walking into the Cathedral wearing such a thing.

Renn grumbled for a moment, glanced at the nearby mirror... and then sighed. "Fine... and here I thought you'd finally make a move," she complained as she stepped away, grabbing the blue shirt off the chair and going back to the box of clothes.

Although stunned for a moment, I quickly collected myself. Smirking at her, I did my best to not sound too excited. "I'd hate for such a memory to be joined by a smell you don't like," I teased her.

"Or it might have overridden the meaning of the smell, too, Vim," she said calmly as she went to undress, as to try on another. "We'll never know now," she added, glancing at me as she went to put on the blue shirt.

"Want to try?"

Renn dropped the blue shirt, startling in shock as she spun to look at me.

Holding her gaze, I clenched a fist and hoped I'd not just made a mistake.

What if she said yes? And ended up regretting it? What if the smell did ruin the moment? And all I'd done is force the matter and...

"No."

Breathing a sigh of relief, I nodded.

Renn made an odd noise, and then began to cry.

Stepping forward, I felt utterly useless as Renn sniffled as she bent down to pick up the blue shirt. "I'm sorry," she whimpered as she messed with the shirt, as to get ready to put it on. I could tell by the way she was sluggishly moving that she was only getting dressed now as to distract herself. She didn't even glance at the mirror to see her reflection once it was on.

Feeling rather foolish, I decided to give up before I felt even more of an ass. "Don't cry Renn... let's just... blame me, okay? It's my fault. I'm a jerk," I said carefully as she stepped over to the box.

She stared down at the mess of clothes within it, and sighed at herself. She didn't seem to even bother wiping her face of tears as she nodded. "Mhm. Your fault," she agreed.

"It is," I said with a nod.

"Utterly," she said.

"Entirely so."

Renn pulled out a blue bundle, and as she messed with it I realized it was a skirt. It was obviously the other piece to the shirt she wore, but she didn't seem to realize what it was or how to put it on. She kept shifting it around, looking for the place where one would either slip into or wrap around oneself. She couldn't seem to find it.

Stepping forward, I smiled gently at the woman who glared at me as I took the skirt from her. "I had planned to seduce you here," I admitted.

"Mhm..." she made an odd noise as she nodded.

"If not for the smell... would it have worked?" I asked as I went to wrap and tie the skirt around her. Although she had sniveled about how tight that last dress had been around her waist, this one was the opposite. I had to tie it rather tightly as to make sure it didn't slip off her.

Who had this dress been for? Renn was thin, blessed with her thick blood she rarely gained unneeded weight, but this wasn't just a size or two difference...

"Completely. Though what would you have done for food and drinks?" Renn asked as I studied the way the skirt clung to her. Even with my attempt at overly tying it, the thing still was slightly askew and off center. It wanted to slip off her.

"There's good drinks stored underneath, but you're right on the food..." I admitted as I looked away from her waist and up to her. I found her smiling warmly at me. The very smile I had wanted to see, and had planned to force onto her face for the next few days had everything gone well. "I'll make sure my next attempt has good food and drink," I added carefully.

"Good. Also make sure there's a good bed. One that doesn't stink. Preferably also one that doesn't smell like birds either, for some reason those ones just makes me hungry," Renn said as she nodded and turned, to study herself in the mirror finally.

As she did, I couldn't help but smile at her.

"Normal people plan their weddings, not their first night together," I teased her.

"Kaley likes to plan every night, she even plans how many kisses and stuff," Renn said as she turned a little, to study the way the blue skirt looked from behind.

"I bet..." I mumbled, not liking the fact that she had reminded me that Kaley had indeed given Renn some tips and pointers concerning such things.

The fact she had wasn't the problem. Rather it was the fact Renn had been the one to ask for them.

"Hm... I don't like this one," she decided as she went to take it off.

"Why not?" I asked for future reference.

"It doesn't fit. Plus, the blue although cute is really bright. I'd be noticed instantly in the forest, or a crowd," Renn said as she deposited the blue clothes on top of the tight dress she had just tried.

"Right..." I nodded, agreeing with her... and was a little saddened to hear such a realistic perspective from her.

Such a thing was just another reminder that our world, the one we lived in, was still... not safe. For those like her. To the point even something as simple as clothing was a concern.

And she was someone who really shouldn't bother or worry over such a thing, by all rights, being who she was. Being my wife.

"What's this?" Renn then asked, lifting a fan.

"Open it. Slowly," I said. Has she never seen a decorative fan before...? I tried to remember all the places we'd been, and people we met, and sure enough couldn't remember her seeing any. Maybe they weren't very common anymore, they used to be so common nearly every woman had them... even men used to have some too.

She did, and as the detailed fan emerged and displayed its fancy lacy artwork her happy smile grew larger and larger. "How neat!"

As Renn continued to fascinate herself with the clothes, and eventually the rest of the stuff scattered away in this long abandoned hideaway... I made sure to indulge her, and in her, as much as I safely could without crossing a line.

If the smell bothered her so much that even she had turned me down, having basically offered for the first time ever, then there was no denying how serious it was to her.

So I needed to respect that. Though it only meant my next attempt would have to be even better. Even more prepared, and suitable.

Which might not have been an issue before. But now...

It was a scary thing. Since I suddenly I found it far more difficult than ever before.

"Well?" Renn twirled a little, wearing a new dress. One made of silk, and so old fashioned and ugly that I was surprised it even had been stored away with the rest. She had that silly little fan still, and was using it to cover half her face. As if she had instinctively known how to use it perfectly, without being told at all of its purpose.

"You're making this very hard for me," I said, unable to deny she really did look good in anything.

Renn found that hilarious.

Chapter 408 Renn – An Embarrassing Crumb

"Do you think Lilly is there yet?" I asked as I waved to the older couple we were walking past. They were sitting on a log on the side of the road, seemingly resting.

"Hopefully," Vim said.

As we walked farther away from the older couple, I frowned and looked back ahead. Off in the distance was a town, though it wasn't Telmik. Vim had said we were still a couple days away from the capital. Yet this road we were on was as busy as if it was a capital. I remembered the roads here being busy last time we were here, but it felt like they were doubly more so now. Maybe it was the season, or the route we were taking this time?

"Is uh... is now a good time to talk about it?" I asked.

"About what?" Vim asked with a weird glance at me.

"Not that! The stuff concerning Light and the rest!" I said, doing my best to not let my face grow too hot.

Vim smirked at me. "That's too bad. My list is only half a mile long, I was looking forward to more things you wanted to add to it," he teased me.

"Oh shush about it already! You're the one who asked!" I shouted, my face growing hotter.

It was all his fault anyway! He had been acting so weird about it, back at that crystal cave! I was trying to be nice, to make the moment feel less serious and...! I mean, really! It wasn't like I was being completely serious! I had just been so embarrassed, so worried he'd take it the wrong way that I kind of just... prattled on and stuff...

Growing even more upset, I stepped away from him. Closer to the edge of the road. It made no sense for me to be so bothered by his teasing, since I was actually very happy he was finally willing to talk about, or even consider, taking our relationship further but yet at the same time it was really bothering me.

"You're supposed to be nicer to me," I complained quietly. I hated the fact my tail and ears had to be hidden, they were squirming something fierce under all my clothes and hat.

There were just too many people on the roads now for me to even risk it for a moment, however. Even now in the distance I could see a wagon heading our way.

"I have fifty eight reasons to prove how nice I'm being," he said, teasing me further as he reminded me of how many things I'd told him to make sure of to handle on his next attempt.

Wait... "Fifty-eight?" I asked. Not so, surely? I could only think of at most maybe forty that I'd said... so far.

"I'm including a couple other little things you've not said, but yes. Fifty-eight. That's a lot you know?" Vim said, smirking at me.

Great... he was not going to stop teasing me over this was he? Would he bring it up in front of others...? I couldn't imagine how embarrassing it'd be for him to tell Lilly or Meriah about this...

Or Oplar! Gosh! She'd then tell everyone else!

Reaching up, I cupped my face and squeezed it. As if to squish out the absolute shame leaking from me. "Is it really that bad, Vim?" I groaned.

"Hm...? Not really. I'd not tease you so happily if it was. Though I will admit you having so many little requirements just to make love is rather funny," he said.

"So it is!" I squeezed harder.

He laughed at me, and although his laughter made me want to find some hole and bury myself in it, I clung to it all the same.

His hand patted me on the back, or rather my shoulder, since my bag was covering the rest of it. I lowered my hands, as to look at him. He looked far too calm considering I felt like a mess, and we were mere days from possibly splitting the Society into two.

"Is it really weird, Vim...?" I asked worriedly. Although it sounded like a lot of things, most of them I had thought had been simple and understandable. Like having a nice bed, and for us to be alone. I didn't want anyone around when it happened... after all.

"No, Renn. It actually fits your personality rather well. Plus I know a lot of those little things will fade away with time," he said.

"Fade away...?" I asked. What'd he mean by that?

He shrugged, and pulled his hand away. I glared at it for a moment, and felt foolish.

I had stepped away from him, as if to get angry at him, and yet here I was upset he had stopped touching me. I really was a mess.

"Concerning Light... I'll be honest Renn, it could go any way. I would like to ask you to not get involved though, just in case I actually do have to get violent," he said, changing topics before I had really wanted him to.

But it was my fault. I had asked. I had brought it up first.

Nodding slowly, I did my best to not get too upset with myself. After all, this was a conversation we needed to have. Almost as necessarily as we did the previous one.

"Plus I'd like to think it won't get to that point. I'm not saying I don't believe Meriah's accusations, Renn... because I do. But I just hope, and think, there's more to it than simple animosity. Odds are they screwed up, but not so badly I need to outright slaughter them all," Vim said.

"But if you do have to?" I asked.

"Then I do."

My stomach felt strange for a moment, as it tightened and hurt for a moment. "If you do Vim... what would actually happen? Afterward?" I dared to ask.

"The Society would split. Because there will be many, like those who support Light and don't support me, who will not believe anything I or anyone else say concerning their betrayal. They'll not believe me. They'll claim I made it up, or used my status to try and eliminate someone trying to depose me. It's all politics, but it's reality. So... the end result will likely be a large portion of the Society fracturing. There will be doubt, schemes, rumors and more. People who have any doubt at all will no longer believe me or request my assistance; the ones who hate me will only have further evidence against me to fuel their own doubts and hatred. And the few people who are on our side, like those like Lilly and Meriah, would only get caught in the wake of all the drama. They'll end up likely leaving the Society, or at least fracturing away from it and becoming distant out of mere necessity. In all honesty, a part of me would say to not harm or call out Light and the rest even if they are guilty. Just purely to keep the Society functioning smoothly," Vim said.

"You'd actually do that? Forgive them, and leave them be, just to keep the Society intact?" I asked, a little shocked to hear so.

Yes he believed in free-will, but there was also a part of him that seemed... unlikely to do that, ever. Like Tim. He had punished and ended that man's life instantly, the moment he realized how awful he had actually been. It was hard to imagine Vim wouldn't do the same if Light and the others had actually gotten Lomi's village destroyed, accident or no.

"I don't know yet Renn. I'm just saying there's a part of me that knows that would be the lesser of evils. There would be ways, after all. Such as I forcing myself into their circle, to keep better oversight of them. As to not allow it to happen again. If I was able to guarantee they never harmed another member, would you be able to overlook their past transgressions as to secure the safety and longevity of the Society as a whole?" Vim asked me.

Hesitating a moment, I barely noticed the wagon pass us by. It was a small one, and the man sitting in the seat holding the horse's reins didn't even glance at us as it went by.

"You're saying more lives would be saved by forgiving them, than punishing them," I whispered as my mind whirled at the idea.

"Yes. Possibly thousands of lives could be affected, or at worst lost, if I punish Light and the Society fractures as a result. They should be punished, but is that cost worth it?" Vim asked me.

Feeling suddenly horrible, since I'd spent the last couple days flirting with Vim and enjoying life and not worrying about this... I wondered how long it had been since Vim had realized such a thing.

Likely the very beginning. Since he was undoubtedly speaking from experience.

Which terrified me.

Reaching up, I grabbed at my shirt. My chest hurt. "Quite a moral issue, isn't it?" I whispered.

"Quite," Vim agreed.

"What would you do?" I asked.

"Well I plan to step down, honestly, so that means there is only one option," Vim said.

One option...? Oh... "You won't be there to ensure they won't commit atrocities such as that again, so you'd punish them," I said, understanding his meaning.

"Right. Hopefully someone else will step up to take over, as some kind of leader. To keep a majority of the Society as a whole and together, if able," Vim said lightly.

Don't mention one of Celine's prophecies so suddenly like that, Vim!

"You sound far too calm about this Vim..." I groaned, doing my best to not let my ears wiggle too much in stress. Gosh my chest really hurt all of a sudden...! The pain and tightness was almost enough to make me wonder if I had hurt myself somehow.

"Well... I know not to really worry yet. Until we confront Light and the rest, most of this is just talk. We don't know what will actually happen, Renn," Vim said, reminding me.

I nodded, and although knew I should feel better... I didn't.

"I don't want you to step down, Vim," I whispered as another cart came into view. One much bigger than the last.

Vim was quiet for a few dozen steps, but then he reached over to grab my shoulder. He gently squeezed it, and as he did I felt my chest relax a little. I took a relieved breath, glad that it wasn't as tight anymore. "I know, Renn. It will be okay. We'll figure it out. Together. I promise," he said.

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I nodded. "Together," I agreed.

He smiled at me, and I was half tempted to ask for a kiss. Even though the moment didn't seem fitting for it, I suddenly wanted one.

Maybe our last couple days of flirting was starting to get to me.

Really... why hadn't I been able to just overlook that smell?

Feeling stupid, I looked away from Vim and sighed at myself.

For the last few years I'd been complaining over his lack of interest. And the moment he actually seems to try, even if in a very gentle and roundabout way as he had, I was the one who had ruined it.

Of all things for that place to have smelled like. Of all moments...

Taking a deep breath, I sighed again... and was glad to feel my chest was no longer hurting. Though now it felt tight for a new reason. Or well, not a new one... just a different one.

I now felt utterly worthless.

Hopefully Vim understood. He seemed like he did, he really did, but...

Glancing at him, I wondered how much teasing I'd have to endure if I asked him about it. I wanted to know if he was really bothered by my actions back at that crystal cave or not, but knew if I asked I'd have to endure untold hours of teasing. Although I actually enjoyed that teasing... I also didn't want to endure it either. Because it made me feel utterly terrible. I should have just kept my mouth shut. I should have just... ignored the smell... no matter how bad it had been... even if it had tainted that memory forever for me. After all, what's a single memory? Wouldn't I eventually have thousands and thousands more with him to enjoy instead? Enough to maybe even forget the...

No. I wouldn't have been able to. If the smell actually bothered me that much during such a critical moment, I knew it would have bothered me forever. Even hundreds of years later, the moment he kissed me or something I'd remember that smell and then smell it again, no matter where we were or what we were doing. My memory did that sometimes.

I did not want such precious memories to be tainted in such a way. Thus my turning him down.

Vim squeezed my shoulder again, reminding me he was still touching me. I glanced at him, and found something being held out to me.

Taking the wrapped item, I smiled and sighed as I undid the little cloth and found a bunch of cookies.

"Where'd you get these?" I asked.

"The last town we walked through. While you were talking to that woman," he said.

I see. I had spent a few minute stalking to the owner of an open front store that we had passed by. He must have bought them from one of the nearby stores while I got to hear how she had decided to open a store selling beds. I'd never seen a store just for beds before. I mean... it made sense, but a whole store just for them? And the town that we had been passing through hadn't been that big either, barely half the size of Ruvindale. The town ahead of us was much bigger than it.

Though I'd not admit aloud, not even to Vim, that I had only walked into the store and talked to her because of my current predicament.

I had told Vim I had wanted a nice bed. For the next time he tried. I would have been unable to just walk past such a store on a normal day, let alone one such as now.

Eating one of the cookies, I smiled at the slightly bland taste. They weren't old, or hard, and weren't disgusting but they were definitely not very tasty.

All the same I ate them happily, since Vim had gotten them for me.

While munching on the cookies, the larger wagon passed us by. This time the one holding the reigns had stared at us, rather openly too.

"Why'd he stare so much?" I asked after he and his wagon left us behind.

"You, Renn."

"Me?" Had I made a mess while eating? I wiped some crumbs off my face, realizing I likely had.

Feeling a little silly, I smiled at Vim who was staring at me. Half expecting him to tease me, either about my messy eating or something else, he instead looked away from me.

A little disappointed, I was about to say something to give him the opportunity to tease me but before I could he pointed ahead of us.

"We'll be arriving there about dinner time. I don't want to stay the night, not when we're so close to Telmik, but would you like to have a proper dinner for once?" he asked.

"Oh! Yes, sure!" I nodded quickly, and ate another cookie as I did. The thought of dinner made me hungry all of a sudden, and the cookies tasted slightly better thanks to it.

"Good. I'm actually in the mood now, after watching you stuff your face like that," he said, teasing me a little.

Although happy he had done so, since I'd had originally intended to get him to do so earlier anyway, I frowned at him anyway.

"Do you actually get hungry, Vim?" I asked.

"Lately I have been," he said, speaking gently.

"Really?"

He nodded slowly as he glanced at me. "Thanks for that by the way."

Hm...? I licked a finger and the cookie crumbs upon it as I wondered what he meant.

Was he saying I made him hungry...? Maybe my constant eating of snacks and stuff reminded him of such good food, making him long for it too?

Licking my lips, I wondered if it was likely him just teasing me... but I knew better. Vim did tease me. He enjoyed doing it. But he did so with a grain of truth behind it.

Even if he had been simply teasing me just now, he had been truthful about it all the same.

But the idea of him getting hungry just by watching me eat was slightly ridiculous. Vim wasn't so easily influenced like that, I believed.

Which meant it was likely not really hunger her spoke of...

"You enjoy eating with me...?" I asked, realizing what he most likely meant.

"Who wouldn't?" he asked back, as if it was obvious.

Smiling at him, I once again felt half tempted to kiss him. But I knew not to, since I still had crumbs all over my face.

"You've become very smitten with me haven't you?" I teased him, feeling similar myself.

"Rather you're just a good distraction. Without you I'd be fuming right now. Do you know how hard it is for me to walk through towns while furious? Actually, you probably have an idea..." Vim said as he frowned and nodded, realizing I did.

Or well... I did now.

"Would you actually destroy a whole city Vim? In anger?" I asked. I could imagine it, after all. He had only shifted a little too harshly, and broke not just a whole house but a giant ship too back at Nevi.

"Not usually, but it's happened," he admitted.

Hm... "How will we be intimate then?" I asked. He himself has told me it wasn't just anger that made his strength get out of his control, after all.

Vim flinched and glanced at me. "That's the first thing that came to your mind?" he asked, shocked.

"What! No! I mean..." I felt my face go hot again, enough so that I could feel exactly where the crumbs I'd missed from earlier were now.

He laughed at me. "For your information it'll be fine. You'll be fine. Unlike you I've had plenty of practice," he said.

My hot face grew cold. "Why do you always bring that up! Such a thing! You could have instead teased me another way, you know!" I said as I pointed my last cookie at him.

"I hadn't meant it that way!" Vim defended himself, and the two of us were forced to calm down as we passed a group of people. They all had large backpacks, carrying goods.

They had undoubtedly heard us shouting at each other, which only made my face go hot again as they passed us. They stared hard at us, whispering amongst themselves as they did so.

Vim sighed at me. "In all the years we've been together Renn, how many times have I hurt you?" he asked.

I pointed at my cheek. It was mostly healed now, no longer even a scab remained, but it was still there. I had not only seen it in the mirror, a faint line of a mark on my cheek, but I could feel the skin still healing. It tingled sometimes. "Just this," I said.

Vim frowned at me. "Really...? Have I never hurt you when we sparred? I thought I smacked you a few times with the sword and stuff," he said.

"Well... you had. You also flicked my ears a few times, too. But you hadn't actually hurt me that way. No broken bones, or cuts or anything," I said.

"But bruises?" he asked.

Oh... I nodded a little begrudgingly. "I... suppose yes. You have left bruises when we spar, though they rarely last long," I said, hoping to defend him a little.

He sighed at me. Again. "I have over a millennia of experience of controlling my strength Renn. I do sometimes slip up, yes, but I know how to be careful. Especially during such intimate moments," he said.

"I wasn't doubting you... I was just wondering, is all..." I whispered as I went to eat my last cookie.

As I munched on it, I waited for the awkward atmosphere to dissipate. I knew Vim was likely not as bothered, but I felt absolutely embarrassed.

How had he changed so swiftly? It was almost as if overnight he had become more open with me.

I knew it hadn't happened that quickly... since it was obvious this change in his personality had come from that night at Elaine's, where he had acted all weird and held me all night. Whatever had happened then had shocked him enough to become... softer, it seemed. Odds are if Meriah had not met us at Nevi, these conversations would have happened weeks ago. In fact there might have been an opportunity for him to have made his attempt before that crystal cave, too.

Though... maybe it was before that night at Elaine's...? Maybe his willingness to be more open with me about such things had come even earlier? Maybe it was when he had decided to step down as the protector of the Society...?

It made me wonder how much he'd change in the future. If he was already like this now... what would he be like in a hundred years with me?

My face grew a little warm again, since for some reason I could somehow imagine it.

Quickly eating the rest of my last cookie, I sighed in relief once I was finished.

A little disappointed there were no more, I glanced at the nearing village. It looked like it was still a few hours away.

Wonder what our dinner will be.

Feeling a little gluttonous, for many reasons, I glanced at Vim. He was staring down at the road, on his side. I followed his gaze, and found some kind of mark in the road. Maybe from a wagon or something being dragged by one. It was a wobbly line, as if someone had dragged a stick behind them.

Maybe a kid?

I followed the line for a short distance, and was a little surprised at how far it went. It went on for so long I couldn't see the end from here.

Licking my lips, I realized I needed to clean my face again.

As I did, I realized something a little important.

Looking back at Vim, I felt my ears twitch under my hat as I wondered if I should ask or not.

He had been kind enough to ask me, and listen to my long list of desires... fifty-eight, he had said.

That was a lot.

Yet did I know a single thing he'd want? I had a few ideas, but...

"Do uh... you have any Vim?" I then dared to ask.

He glanced at me. "More cookies? No. that was all of them," he said, not realizing what I had meant.

For a tiny moment I debated just... allowing his mistaken understanding come and go... but knew if I didn't ask now, I'd likely not get to.

There was not only no telling when Vim would try again... there was also no telling when we'd even get the chance to be alone again here soon, once we reached Telnik.

So...

Gathering my nerve, I made sure check if I had any crumbs left on my face or lips before asking. Once sure I didn't, I nodded to myself and reached over to pat Vim gently on the arm. As to get his full attention.

He turned to look at me, looking away from the line in the dirt road, smiling gently as he waited for me to speak.

"I meant um... you know. For your next attempt... is there anything you'd like me to do? Or prepare for?" I asked. It was only fair, after all! I had asked for so much, so...!

For a few steps Vim only smiled at me... and then he reached up to cover his eyes.

"What...!" I panicked for a moment as Vim groaned, barely hiding his smirk beneath his hand and arm as he shook his head at me. "Vim...!" I groaned, feeling all the blood rushing to my face as he took a deep breath and sighed.

Lowering his hand, I felt a little stunned as he gave me an odd look. One with eyes so gentle I nearly stumbled at the sight of them.

"Just be yourself Renn. That's all I want from you. Ever."

Gulping... I nodded. "Okay..."

Okay.

Chapter 409 Vim – A Cathedral's Unwelcome

Renn was walking a little stiffly, but I knew better than to blame her or tell her to calm down.

She was likely expecting me to do something drastic, after all.

Rounding a corner and heading deeper into the Cathedral, I wondered why I felt so calm and collected. I've always been a rational man, but even I could grow furious. Even I could become blind with rage, under the right conditions.

Though maybe that will happen once I actually confront them, and not during these moments leading up to it.

"Vim."

"Hm?" I glanced at Renn, finding her slowing down.

I stopped walking alongside her, and noted we were alone in the hallway. Plus we weren't near any doors, and the nearest ones down the way were closed firmly.

We were alone, at least as much as one could be in such a place.

"Don't um... take this oddly, okay?" Renn asked softly.

Frowning at her, I wondered what it was going to be. Either it was something silly, or very serious. A part of me would wonder why she wouldn't have asked it earlier, before we got here, if it was too concerning... but I knew her well enough to know she sometimes hesitated on such things. She was an emotional person, so sometimes it took those very emotions to spur her to action.

I nodded at her, to let her know it was fine.

"Do you want me to confront them?" she asked.

Shifting a little, I was about to smirk and scoff... but realized she was not just serious... but being genuine in her concern for me.

"You ask that now, Renn?" I asked. We were only a few minutes from the Chronicler's office.

She nodded, unashamed or afraid to do so.

"I see..." I whispered as I glanced around again, to make sure we really were alone. Once I did I looked back to my wife and reached out to cup her face. She smiled at me as I did, and I heard her ears beneath her hat. "I will be okay, Renn. No matter the outcome, I promise I'll be okay. Thank you for offering, though," I said.

"You sure...? We've not really talked of it, Vim... but she is Celine's daughter... and..." Renn whispered.

"It will be. It is. I promise if there's any way to handle this peacefully I will strive to do so. I'll only... act rashly if it's utterly required of me. And if I need to do that, then you also need not worry. I don't take kindly to those who hurt and threaten those I care for Renn, kind of the whole reason I am the way I am," I said.

"What of Celine's promise?" she asked.

Promise...? "Oh... you mean finding her daughter? Technically that was just to find her, and she seemed to have found herself. Likely hadn't been lost in the first place," I said with a sigh.

Renn reached up, grabbing the back of my hand. "Still, Vim..."

Shaking my head, I shrugged. "It is what it is Renn. Though in the very off chance this all goes horribly wrong, just let me vent to you later, okay?" I asked.

She smirked at me. "You. Venting."

"Be ready for it. Miss Beak used to fly away sometimes when I got in one of those moods," I said.

Renn laughed at that. "I bet! I look forward to it!"

Nodding, I wondered if I should kiss her or not.

It felt like a good moment to do so... but...

Renn's laughs turned into gentle giggles, and I enjoyed the feel of her cheek as she grinned and laughed. It was the same cheek I had hurt earlier at Kaley's, though now healed enough to be just a tiny almost unnoticeable mark on her skin.

She healed well. The ointment and care we'd given to the wound had likely been a big factor, but there was no denying her thick bloodline. She had healed practically fully in less than two weeks.

Considering we've been traveling in harsh weather, her tendency to itch at it, and the location of the wound it was clear she was a healthy person.

I ran my thumb along the faint scar, and wondered how long it'd last. She did have scars, but the cut had been too flawless. Even though it had been a little deep it had been too clean, odds are in a few months it'd fade completely from sight.

An odd part of me was a little offended. As if I had wanted her to keep the scar, since it had been from me.

"Vim?" Renn asked as she tilted her head.

About to tell her what I'd just thought, to see the look on her face as she heard it, the world decided to annoy me instead before I could.

"Vim...!"

I paused, and Renn startled as we turned to watch the one who had shouted at me hurry over.

Relaxing a little, I smiled and nodded as I lowered my hand, and Renn released it. "Karma. It's been awhile," I said, greeting the pigeon.

"Light...!" he shouted, panicked upon doing so, and then got closer as he lowered his head in worry. "Light is back...! With the others! They're alive...!" he quickly rambled, speaking with a hushed but hurried voice.

I nodded, smiling softly at the frantic pigeon. "Yes. I know. Though I've not officially met them yet," I said.

Karma glanced around, and I was a little surprised to see him somewhat ignore Renn. "They left. For Lumen. A week ago," he said with a hush.

Frowning... I felt strangely relieved. "All of them?" I asked.

Karma shrugged. "... don't know Vim. I don't even know what to think...! And no one is any better! Everyone is either avoiding talking about them, or doesn't want to! How is this possible Vim, they've been alive all this time? Did you know too?" Karma asked, suddenly a little accusational.

"No. I too had thought them lost until recently. I learned they were alive last time I was here, a couple months or so ago," I said.

Karma relaxed a little at that, sighing and nodded. "Right... I knew it! I knew you weren't involved, and..." then he went quiet, his beady eyes going wide at the sight Renn.

Renn coughed, raised a gentle hand and waved at him. "Hello...! I'm Renn..." she introduced herself, and did so a little stiffly. She likely was worried since he had gone completely still.

"She's one of us Karma. You're fine," I said gently, telling him it was okay.

"Ah... right... um... I've heard of you! I've actually been looking forward to meeting you, Renn. My name is Karma... I'm a priest, as you can probably tell, and um... well..." Karma held out his hands, taking Renn's in greeting a little gingerly. The two shook hands, Karma using both of his to do so, and I smiled as Renn glanced at me carefully.

"I've heard you recently went on a date, Karma. How did it go?" I asked, doing my best to calm him down some more.

"Huh...! Um!" Karma, instead of calming down, panicked even more. He glanced at Renn, his eyes going white at the sight of her, and then he looked back at me in pure fear.

Woops...? "Karma?" I asked. What was wrong? Why had he looked at Renn and gone all terrified for?

"Vim... um...U-u-I-I'm..." he began to stutter, rather badly, and I found myself a little stunned.

Karma's always been a skittish, weak willed man. Something similar to Link. But had he always been this bad...?

"Deep breaths Karma," I said gently.

He nodded as he began to do so. He breathed in deeply, letting it out quickly and then slowly, as he tried to calm down.

Renn shifted next to me but remained quiet as we waited for him to collect himself. Once he had, or at least had done so enough for his own needs, he gulped and nodded. "I... I had. Thank you, Vim. I had enjoyed it. For as long as it had lasted, at least," Karma then said.

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Right... "I'm glad," I said, choosing not to dig any deeper. If simply asking about it had bothered him that much... then I'd just let it be.

"I um... I'm so sorry, Miss Renn, but I really need to go lay down now... maybe later we can talk again, I would like to speak to you when I can," Karma then said to Renn.

"Ah! Yes...! Sure. Of course. It's okay, Karma," Renn spoke gently, but quickly, as she nodded.

"Thank you. Bless you. And you, Vim," Karma then bowed a little, and then hurried around me as to leave. He nearly tripped as he did so, but he collected himself and ran off half a moment later.

Watching him go, I shook my head and sighed. "I'll never understand birds," I said.

"He's a bird?" Renn asked quietly.

"A pigeon. He's always been odd, but that's likely the worst I've ever seen him," I said.

"Was it my fault, Vim? He had seemed fine until he noticed I was here," Renn said, like usual noticing such a thing easily.

"Maybe. It was a little odd how he had looked at you so much in his panic... though... hm..." I went quiet as I wondered what could have been the source.

Was he just stressed from the drama? Or was it something more? Renn being a predator, and bothering our weaker and more timid members was natural... but her smell was now gone. A lot of that should be not as drastic anymore. Our short stay at Tor's canyon had been proof of that. Not even the chickens had been bothered by her presence.

"Hey Vim..." Renn got my attention, speaking quietly as she grabbed at my sleeve.

I glanced at her and nodded, and wondered why she'd been doing such a thing so much lately. It seemed most of the time she wanted my attention she now grabbed at my clothes, or just outright grabbed my arm or hand. I didn't mind, of course, I liked her touch... but it made me wonder if she had simply grown tired of my ignoring her.

"He acted as if he hadn't known about anything going on. Why wouldn't he know? He's a priest here, right?" Renn asked with a whisper.

"Randle hadn't known either, Renn," I reminded her.

"Ah... true, I guess..." she nodded as she released my sleeve.

"Plus... Karma's not well liked. At least not by most here. He's..." I hesitated, and wondered if maybe this was why Karma had just acted so strangely.

If so then that made me feel bad. Since it was partly my fault.

"He's what?" Renn asked.

"Like Jelti, Renn. Which might be why he had just panicked. Maybe he had been hoping to keep his little affair a secret, and I had just exposed it," I said, regretting the decision to do so.

"Oh... he likes men?" Renn asked, surprised.

"Yes. I had heard he had gone on a trip along the coast, sailing, with a sailor. It's why he hasn't been here the last couple years," I said.

"Huh..." Renn nodded, but had a strange frown on her face.

Studying the frown, I wondered why she always found our member's relationships so interesting. She did want to play matchmaker, oddly enough, though I've luckily been slightly avoiding such a topic and desire lately. Though she had agreed to bring one of the moles here during the vote, a daughter, so she could search for a mate.

I was about to tease her, to tell her she didn't need to play matchmaker for him, but before I could a new voice rang out in the hall.

A loud one.

"You're back! Good!"

Turning, I frowned as a nun hurried towards us.

"Who...?" I whispered, glancing at Renn. Maybe she'd know. Had she made human friends last time she was here? Likely had.

Renn grinned as she raised her hands to wave. "She's Oplar's. Her name is Laura she works with her family in Oplar's Mailroom," Renn whispered to me.

Oh.

Relaxing a little as Laura hurried over; I watched as she and Renn clasped hands... and then hugged. "Thank goodness you're back in time! Oplar plans to leave any minute, you two should really talk to her before she does!" the woman said quickly even as they hugged.

So she was back here already? "Where is she?" I asked.

"With my mother. I'll go let her know you're back!" Laura didn't even say anything to Renn, or give time for Renn to say anything, as she spun around and ran off... leaving Renn with her arms spread out a little and a sad frown on her face.

"At least I got a hug, I guess..." Renn mumbled softly.

"Hm... come on, let's go just in case she misses Oplar," I said. "If we don't catch her before she leaves then I'll have to chase her down. Especially if it was imperative we meet her, and judging by that human's reaction it was likely so."

Renn nodded, agreeing. "Hopefully all is well," Renn said worriedly.

"Can't get much worse, can it?" I asked.

"Did you really just say that?" Renn asked, now upset with me.

"What...?" I asked as we walked forward, to follow the nun that was now gone.

"Why even put that out there, Vim? Now the world will hear it, and do who knows what to make sure it happens," she said angrily.

"Oh don't you get started too...!" I said. Damn Tor, Bray, and Meriah and all the rest who put such stupid ideas into her head!

"I will!" Renn didn't hesitate to argue back, which made me smile at her.

She smiled in return, and I sighed and shook my head. "How's it feel to hug nuns, by the way?" I asked.

"Huh...? It had felt good. She smells good, she smells like paper and ink," Renn said, smiling as she thought about it.

Right... mail-room. "Were they as big as they looked?" I asked.

Renn's smile instantly died. "How come in that bout of things said and done, that's what you always seem to notice first and foremost? And focus on?" she asked, now with an even louder and more upset voice than before.

Woops. Great.

"Did you notice or did you not?" I asked, not willing to back down just yet.

"I had! They were huge!" she said as if it was obvious.

"So!?"

"So they felt great! Be jealous!" Renn and I rounded a corner, just as she shouted such a thing. We happened upon a group of priests, who were all staring at us with wide eyes... so the two of us calmed down a little and walked past them without saying anything further.

Once around a corner, heading to Oplar's Mailroom, I reached out and elbowed Renn lightly. "Look what you did," I teased her.

"Me...? Vim I'm going to add another fifty things if you're not careful," she threatened back.

"Please don't..." I groaned. I barely knew how I was going to fulfill the ones I had already...

She smirked in victory, pleased with herself.

The two of us smiled at each other for a moment... and then she began to laugh. She noticed quickly how loud she was being again, so went to cover her mouth but all that had accomplished was turn her laughs into adorable sounding giggles and snorts.

Enjoying the moment, I sighed.

Giving her a few minutes to enjoy herself, I waited until she calmed down before saying anything.

"Should I be happy they're gone, Renn?" I asked gently.

"I am. Maybe. Let's see what Oplar and the rest have to say first," Renn said with a nod.

"Right. Plus the Chronicler is likely still here. I need to confront her too," I said.

"Hm..." Renn nodded somberly.

The two of us rounded another corner and entered the deeper section of the Cathedral. The part that was more administrative than anything else. Few if any non-church folks wandered around here.

Though it seemed... oddly normal, from what I could tell so far.

I didn't notice any lack of people, visitors or people of the cloth alike. The numbers seemed the same. There didn't seem to be any real stress amongst them either. The groups of nuns and priests we passed only stared at us with simple indifference or slight annoyance. Nothing uncommon to see here.

If Light and her group had taken more than the ones they had brought it didn't show. And if they had caused any real chaos, it also didn't show either.

But I knew better than to base a location's health purely on appearance. Particularly just an hour or so of looking around it too.

While we walked, I paid close attention to those we passed. I kept an eye out for any of the familiar faces, and even those I barely remembered like Less and Light.

It was a little odd to not see any of them as we entered neared Oplar's Mailroom. I didn't see Mapple, Jelti, or any of the ones who usually wandered around constantly. And although I didn't feel like anyone had followed us, or stared too blatantly at us... I did notice a few of the priests and nuns glance at us and frown or narrow their eyes. A little more than they should have.

Odds are the Chronicler would be notified we were back soon.

Not that it mattered. It's not like I was going to catch them in the middle of betraying us...

"Deep breaths, Vim," Renn whispered as we rounded a corner and entered the hallway where Oplar's Mailroom was.

"I'll be okay," I promised.

"I hope so. If you do have to go all crazy, do we still get to sleep here tonight?" Renn asked.

I smirked at her. "I'm not sure. That'd be a little brazen don't you think?"

"Don't know. I'd probably be too stressed to sleep, but at the same time I'd really like to have a nice bed for once..." she said with a sigh.

Right... and that was likely not her just trying to tease me about one of her requirements.

It's been a while since she's had a proper bed. Tor's village, Bray, the trip here, Kaley's hut and the trip down the coast had all been... rather rough, really. Most nights we had slept on the ground.

And before that, Lilly's place was the last real place she got to sleep comfortably at. That saint's village had been kind of... plain. The beds had even smelled a little.

So it's been a couple months now since Renn's had a chance to actually rest. It was one of the reasons I had hoped to spend a few days with her at the cave of crystals.

Feeling like a failure, again, I decided to do all I could to make sure she wouldn't be too bothered in the upcoming days.

"I'll see what I can do," I promised.

She nodded. "Please do."

Reaching over, I patted her gently on the lower back, below her bag. "Stay close Renn. Just in case," I whispered as we neared Oplar's door.

Renn hesitated a moment, glancing at the door and then back at me. We could just barely hear voices beyond the heavy door. At least I could, I wasn't sure if Renn could since her ears were hidden under her heavy hat. "Even with her, Vim?" she whispered back worriedly.

Holding her eyes... I slowly nodded. "From this point forward, trust only me and Lilly," I whispered.

Her face scrunched up. "I hate that, Vim."

"I know. Me too."

Chapter 410 Renn – To Stand Tall Amongst Steeples

My world shook for a moment as Oplar squeezed me in a huge hug, swinging me around a little as she did.

"It's good to see you too, Oplar!" I said happily, unable to squirm my arms out from under her great hug as to return it thanks to how she had grabbed onto me.

"You! Let me look at you...!" Oplar shouted, and then placed me down. I wanted to return her hug, so felt a little awkward as I stood up straight as she held me out at arm's length, holding my upper arms as she looked me up and down.

Feeling like a product to be sold or something, I stood still as Oplar lifted my arms, checked under my cloak, peaked under my hat and even checked my teeth.

She turned my head, tapped my left cheek and made a—tsk sound. "Now, now! What's this Vim? I told you not a mark, not one!" Oplar said, sounding upset as she turned to look at him.

"So I don't get my deposit back?" Vim asked.

Deposit?

Oplar broke out into a huge grin as she erupted in laughter. "Not a chance!" she happily shouted, and then stepped forward and wrapped me in a hug once more. This time though she gave me a chance to at least return it and she didn't lift me up and spin me around as if I was a child.

Feeling strangely happy, I breathed a sigh of relief as I gave her a tiny squeeze back. "I'm glad you're doing good too," I said.

She had looked fine. And sounded fine. And was oddly warm. Though that might just be because I was bundled up a little more than usual, since it was winter. And because of how happy I was at the moment.

It really felt good to be greeted and welcomed so warmly. To see familiar people again, and still be welcomed with open arms, literally, even months or years later.

This was the entire reason I originally joined the Society. Here in my arms.

"Hm...! I'm glad I was lazy this morning, otherwise I'd be on the road and would have missed you!" Oplar said, her loud voice booming in my ears. During our hugs my hat had slid off, getting stuck in my thick hood behind my head.

I didn't worry about it though, since the only people here were members of the Society. It was Vim and I, Oplar, and Laura. Her sister and mother weren't here either.

"Where are you hurrying off to?" I asked, and laughed since I had been about to let her go but she had pulled me back into the hug, squeezing me again. To the point she had even lifted me off the floor again.

My feet dangled again, and I laughed at the feeling of her great hug. It felt wonderful, especially since so few of our members were willing to display such emotion physically. Even Vim was sparing with such things with me.

"I'll be heading south. I sent one of my people to Landi a month ago; she should be getting a letter any day now. I plan to deliver a few letters down there and meet up with them, hopefully getting Landi's response as I do," Oplar said as she finally released me.

I huffed a little as we separated and I was returned to the ground. I reached up to brush some hair out of my face and nodded. "Least it'll be warmer down there?" I said.

Oplar grinned and nodded. "Warm enough, aye."

We smiled at each other for a moment and I wondered what to say or ask. While coming here I had hoped we'd find her, and although I had thought of so much to say and ask... right now my mind just didn't feel like cooperating.

"You look well, Oplar. Have you found a husband yet?" I asked finally, after a moment.

Oplar's grin broadened. "Think I'd still be here if had!? Really, Renn! No. Not yet. Did you?" Oplar asked.

"She needs a new one already?" Vim asked as he stepped around me, heading towards the center of the mail-room. Likely to look at the maps and letters pinned to the center pillar the room was built around.

My bear friend laughed. "You know what I mean, Vim!" she said happily.

"No, Oplar. Sadly this trip I've only added to the list of those also looking for a husband, not the other way around," I said.

Oplar's grin softened a little. "Yeah...? That's a bummer. I'll have you know Renn, I expect our special friendship to give me priority! Don't be forgetting about me first, okay?" Oplar said with a small point at herself.

Laughing at her, I nodded. "Of course, Oplar."

"What's this about finding husbands...?" Laura asked a little quietly, reminding me she was here.

I shifted to smile at her as Oplar turned and gestured at me. "Renn's kind enough to not get lost in her own happiness like so many other wedded women, and is willing to help me find a mate," she told the human.

Laura slowly glanced at me, and then glanced over at Vim for a moment... who was studying a paper in his hand. It looked worn, for some reason. Maybe dirty. Then she looked back at me, and gave me a shy smile. "Do you just um... look for those like yourself?" Laura asked.

Oh...? "I'd never discriminate like that, Luara," I said with a smile.

Oplar sighed. "Aye. I've even told her a human would do, worst case scenario at least," Oplar admitted.

Laura slowly nodded, and then with a slightly blushed face she pointed at herself. "Then me, too, please. If possible."

"Really now? What would your mother say?" Oplar asked, and although had spoken gently I had heard her serious tone.

For a small moment I stayed quiet, and did my best to not get noticed as Laura and Oplar looked at each other. The two looked a little serious for a moment as Laura gently nodded. "I know, Oplar... but... I mean... Bless spends all her time anymore with her husband and family, mother and father are so focused on their project, and I'm always left alone and..." Laura had started speaking rather firmly, but it ended up becoming slight mumbles near the end. At least her blush hadn't gotten too strong.

"I don't mind keeping an eye out for you Laura. But um... actually, nuns are allowed to marry? I had thought that wasn't allowed?" I asked. It did seem like many of them did have partners, like Jelti. But I had thought it was not something they did.

Oplar chuckled at me. "The church doesn't outlaw it Renn. It's one of those things they kind of just don't acknowledge and look the other way when it happens. Certain folk do submit to the idea of staying chaste or celibate, but most don't. Honestly I'm surprised it took this long, little Laura here is far older than the other women in her family usually are when they get the itch to multiply," Oplar said with a point to her.

Little...? She was my height, and bigger in more than just one way. "A very non-human way of speaking, Oplar," I noted.

Actually I did remember Bless, Luara's sister, commenting she had married very early last time I was here. Maybe that meant such a thing was common amongst their family, and Laura was the odd one amongst them.

She didn't seem too old really. Though it was a little hard to tell with most of her covered in her robes and headdress.

Laura nodded. "It was. But it's fine, that's just the way she is," she said with a smile, telling me she more than used to Oplar and didn't feel offended in the least.

I was about to ask Laura some questions, to find out just what she was looking for in someone, but Vim spoke up from the other side of the room. "Oplar, have you been in contact with Lilly?"

Oplar flinched and hurriedly turned to look at him. "Sorry Vim... I wasn't ignoring you. She was here for a couple weeks, scoping out the place. She stayed with Bless and her family while here, and then decided to head to Nebl after Light and the rest left," Oplar quickly said.

Oh...? I glanced at Vim and found him frowning while staring down at a desk. One littered with letters.

"How long ago since she left?" Vim asked.

"Eight? Nine days ago? She left the afternoon after Light and the rest did that morning. She wouldn't actually confront them would she have...? Less and the rest were with them, Vim, surely even Lilly isn't that crazy is she?" Oplar asked.

"Yes. She is."

My tail squirmed as I worriedly frowned.

Hopefully all was well...

The air suddenly felt rather heavy, so I gulped and glanced around.

"Is Nebl okay?" I asked, since Vim didn't.

"Yeah? I think so, at least. I think Lilly just wanted to follow Light and watch them, and used him as an excuse. I'll uh... well, to be honest Vim I didn't really want to really question her... you know..." Oplar said carefully.

"It's okay. Thank you Oplar, and make sure to thank Bless and her family for letting Lilly burden them while she was here. I'll make sure Renn gets them a gift as a thank you," Vim said.

Smiling I nodded quickly. "Yeah!"

"Aww... wish she could've stayed with me instead..." Laura whispered.

"She can't come into the Cathedral, Laura. You know that," Oplar told her.

Laura nodded, but sighed as she stepped away. I watched her walk over to a desk and open a drawer. She grabbed a few letters and stepped over to Vim. "Here, Vim. Since our great leader seems to be blinded by your wife too much to do her job properly," Laura said as she handed him some letters.

He smirked and nodded. "Thank you Laura. But I can't fault her, I'm blinded by her all the time too so it's only natural," Vim said as he went to glancing at the letters, as if to see which was needed to be opened and read first.

Laura perked up and hurriedly glanced at me, and smiled happily. "How sweet! So he really does flirt!" she happily said as she hurried back over to us.

"I told you. You and your blood always doubt me, but I swear it always ends this way," Oplar said with a sigh.

Smirking at the two, I nodded. "I said so too, remember? He flirts with me all the time," I said.

Vim paid us no mind as he went to opening one of the letters. I was of course interested in it, and my eyes kept wanting to look at it, but I stayed focus no the two before me.

They were important too. More important even than little pieces of paper and dried ink.

Though I did want to know if any had been for me. When we had left Telmik last time, I had left a few letters in the bin. For Oplar, and a few others. I doubted that there were any responses to any of them yet, since we'd not been gone too long, but I still slightly hoped there would be one or two at least.

"Don't let Renn fool you, Laura. She's a flirt too. And not just with Vim! You should see the things she had written me in her letter!" Oplar said with a huge smile.

My ear twitched. "I expect a nicely written one in return, you know!" I said happily.

"Aye I bet you do! Well, good for you because there is one! But I'm not giving it to you until I leave!" she said back, loudly.

"Why not?" I asked a, a little sad over it.

"Because it's embarrassing..." Oplar mumbled as she looked away.

A little stunned by the sudden shift in her attitude, I couldn't help but laugh happily. "I look forward to it, Oplar," I said.

"Aye, I bet you do. Hmph..." Oplar grumbled, looking ever more adorable as she reached up to scratch at the back of her head.

She was embarrassed. Actually embarrassed! How adorable!

How come no one's tried to catch her heart yet, I wonder? It just made no sense at all...

Before more could be said, someone knocked on the door.

I hurriedly reached up, putting my hat back on. Vim turned, his cold eyes scanned the room as waited for the door to open.

"Enter!" Oplar said after a moment, likely because she had waited for me to make sure my hat was situated.

The door slowly opened, and I calmed down a little at the sight of Randle.

"Father Randle...!" Laura greeted him first, and did so with an oddly surprised voice. I glanced at her, and narrowed my eyes at the way she seemed genuinely shocked to see him.

Why was that...?

"Come on in Randle. Please shut the door behind you, rats might be in your shadow," Oplar said gently.

Randle smiled softly and nodded. "True indeed..." he said softly, and as he stepped into the room, and turned to close the door... I noticed the way he did so.

He had shut the door with his right arm, but the way his body looked under his robes...

"Wait... what? Randle? What happened to you...?" I asked as I realized his left sleeve looked far too wobbly and empty to be normal.

Randle didn't just shut the door, he latched it. He turned and gave me one of his gentle smiles and then nodded. "Rennalee. It's good to see you're well. I stuck my hand where it did not belong. Regretfully," he said gently as he lifted his left shoulder a little, and I noticed he had a part of his arm still. It looked like it ended not far from where his elbow should have been. The sleeve hung listlessly from it.

"Randle..." I groaned, and glanced at Oplar. The look on her face told me she had known already. And...

Was that fear...? Terror?

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"Oplar...?" I whispered, worried for her. She was even trembling! She looked utterly terrified! What for? Why?

Even if Randle had lost an arm, it seemed he was alive and fine. It wasn't like there was any current danger here, especially what with Vim here and...

Then I noticed Laura. The human nun, dressed in the typical robes here, had her head hung low. She had clasped her hands together, and with half-shut eyes was doing everything she could to be as small as possible. Her shoulders and arms were slumped and pulled inward. Her legs bowed a little... as if trying to pray, or hide herself.

Looking back at Randle, I frowned at the way his eyes were wide. As if in shock. As if he'd lost his arm just now.

"Guys...?" I asked, my worry growing rapidly. Just what was wrong? I mean, obviously something was, but...

Turning, to look at Vim and see his reaction, I went still... as I realized why everyone had suddenly gone weird.

It hadn't been because of Randle's condition. Or rather, not directly.

Vim stepped forward, and I flinched as brick and wood creaked and complained. Dust fell from the ceiling, landing on Oplar's shoulder. She didn't even twitch as a handful of dust fell all over her shoulder and rolled down to the ground.

He took another step. It had looked smooth. Gentle. Almost as if he was walking lazily... yet the nearby desks lining the wall all banged together and chairs fell over, causing me to panic. The very bricks that made the walls and floor were making terrible grinding and rickety noises, protesting at Vim's weight! As

the tables shook and rattled, the papers and little containers which rested upon them flung around. Some fell off the tables, others flew into the air as if someone had pushed them aside violently.

Oplar and Laura flinched and lowered their heads, both of them trying to outright ignore the chaos around them. Even as dust fell upon them, and papers landed near their feet.

"Vim!" I shouted at him, loudly, as I stepped forward in hopes of making him realize what he was doing. He blinked as he paused... and with a tiny shift of his head he nodded. The rattling and banging of the furniture and the building around us seemed to calm down, as one of the huge wooden beams on the ceiling creaked in stress.

"Hm..." he seemed to collect himself, thankfully, and then he took the last few steps needed to stand in front of Randle. By the time he reached Randle, the whole room had gone quiet... with only dust swirling in the air, with a mess of moved furniture and papers on the ground left for proof of what had just happened.

"Really Vim..." I groaned as I glanced around, to see if there were any cracks in the foundation or along any walls. I didn't see any, but there were a lot of desks and shelves everywhere and even boards hanging on the walls so it was hard to tell.

Before I could even fully assess the situation, Vim reached a hand out, grabbing Randle by the remaining bit of his left arm. I watched as Vim studied it for a moment, and then he took a deep breath.

"Who?"

The room suddenly felt cold; though I wasn't sure how Vim's single word accomplished such a thing. Especially since I still wore all my heavier clothes, and my heart was beating rather quickly.

"I'll not tell you unless you vow to stay your hand over it."

"Not a smart time to play priest, Randle," Vim said.

"Ah, then it is the perfect time to do so, if you think so," Randle said with a smile.

A little stunned by Randle's reaction, I found myself a little awed by him. He had been shocked at first, what with those wide eyes earlier, but now he looked... calm. Collected.

At peace, even.

He was smiling at Vim as if he had absolutely zero worries or fears in the world. No pain. No sorrow.

It was the look of a man content and at peace with himself. A stark contrast to the glowering rage on Vim's face. And the complete opposite to Laura and Oplar's expressions of panic and worry.

The next few heartbeats were heavy. Hard. Vim released Randle's arm, shifted ever so gently... without causing the world around him to break thanks to it, and then sighed at the priest. "What'd you do, Randle? Why didn't you wait until I was here?" Vim asked.

Oh...!

Was it really related to the drama recently? Light and the rest?

Randle slowly nodded. "That may have been the wiser choice. But when one faces a tribulation they do so alone, Vim. Even when in a crowd. It would have made no difference," Randle said.

My ears twitched, and I reached up to take my hat off. So that I could fully focus and be aware of the situation.

Holding my hat in my hand, I glanced at Oplar and Laura. Laura was still praying, seemingly doing her best to not be heard or seen. Oplar looked hurt, but was focused entirely on Randle and Vim. As if ensorcelled. She didn't even notice my look.

"Who tended the wound?" Vim asked.

"What wound, Vim?"

Vim scoffed at him. "I've had more limbs blown off by divine power than you. Don't try and tell me there weren't any burns," he said.

Divine power...?

"Wait...! Did Light do that?" I asked, stepping forward.

It made sense, but how had Vim known? So quickly, too!? We'd been together since our arrival, no one has said a word about this to us yet!

Randle glanced at me, and for the tiniest moment his look softened. "I did this, Renn. My actions, no one else's," he said.

"Priests aren't meant to lie, Randle," Oplar said stiffly.

Glancing at Oplar, I found she had crossed her arms. She looked upset now.

"Hm. So they aren't. Tell me, Rennalee... what makes a priest?" he asked.

A little startled at being asked such a thing, I quickly scoured my memories of the bibles and gospels I've read.

"Utter dedication to the faith. To spread the doctrine and preach to those who won't hear," I said, quoting one of the tenants.

"Hm... not a mention of needing to be ordained by the holy see or church?" Randle asked. There was a section about that, actually...

Vim shifted, and spoke up before I could. "What are you saying Randle?" he asked.

"I've been excommunicated. From the church proper," Randle stated.

Frowning at that, I glanced at Vim in hopes to realize how big a deal something like that was. Vim though didn't show his thoughts on his face, only the silent anger that was boiling within him was visible.

"What happened, Randle?" Vim asked softly.

Randle sighed. "I confronted them. About their schemes. The changing of the gospel, the strange locations they've been sending our clergy off to without explanation, even the removal of people I've trusted and placed into positions myself decades ago! Basically Vim it all grew too much and I had no choice but to confront them. When I did they gave me an ultimatum," Randle said.

"I shouldn't be listening to this..." Laura groaned as she lowered her head farther and lifted her clasped hands as if to cover her face more.

Randle ignored her as Vim gestured to his arm. The missing one. "You call that an ultimatum?" Vim asked.

"He attacked Light, Vim..." Oplar whispered.

My ears fluttered. "You attacked her?" I asked, really?

Vim shifted, and the door popped open. It did so with such force that I had jumped backward, ready to see someone charge in and attack or something. It banged against the wall, then swung back inward enough that it almost shut again.

My heart was beating like mad as I studied the door, and the little bit of space I could see through it.

I saw no one outside.

Randle sighed, and did so loud enough to make me shift and relax a little as he turned and stepped back to the door. He shut the door, firmly, and nodded. "In a sense, yes. I did," Randle admitted.

"Randle..." Vim growled the priest's name, and I groaned as the memory of Tim flashed before me.

Rather, the last moment of Tim. Right before Vim decapitated him.

Randle turned back around, smiling gently at Vim as he nodded. "Thus why I ask'd for your vow to stay your hand," he said lightly.

So... he had not been asking Vim for mercy for someone else or whoever had hurt him and took his arm... but himself...!

Hurrying forward, I felt my heart leap into my throat as I put myself between Vim and Randle.

I had spun a little, to face Vim, and kept Randle at my back. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Oplar step forward, reaching out for me. She had an aghast expression on her face, and seemed stunned. She had likely tried to stop me but hadn't been quick enough. The fact she had noticed my movement and reached out for me at all was a testament that she was more than she appeared.

"Wait...!" I barely got out, but then had to gasp for breath. My heart was beating like crazy, and I suddenly felt a little lightheaded.

What was I doing...! Vim's cold expression was now directed at me!

With a dry mouth, I gulped and nodded. "Wait... Vim...!" I finally got out as our eyes locked.

"How adorable," Randle whispered behind me.

My tail squirmed wildly beneath my cloak, and I wished it hadn't been hidden away still. I wanted to wrap it around his neck and mouth and silence him. He should know better than to make light of the situation...!

There was no denying Vim's current attitude! The look on his face, the cold eyes, the fact the whole building around us... an actual castle, a massive Cathedral, was displaying Vim's lack of control! That door had not flown open thanks to a ghost or some trick, but Vim's strange abilities! They only ever got that bad when he was actually furious, which meant Randle was in danger.

Randle had just admitted to attacking Light, a member, and as such being excommunicated from the church. His church, that he had help found and grow nearly for a thousand years. That was how terrible the crime he had just admitted to was!

It was why Oplar and Laura had panicked at the sight of him. They had known. They all did.

We all did.

There was only one recourse for a member that attacked another. At least, to the point of drawing blood and loss of limbs.

And Vim did not hesitate. Not even against those he should do so with.

"Careful...! Renn...!" Oplar hissed worriedly, her arms slightly outstretched as if in an effort to reach out and grab me. But her legs didn't seem to want to cooperate. She was too far away.

"He'll not harm her, Oplar. I on the other hand may not be so lucky," Randle said lightly.

"Randle, please!" I said through clenched teeth as Vim's eyes narrowed.

At least he was still staring at me.

Could Vim kill Randle with me standing between them? Likely so. I had no doubt he could. But would he risk it? Vim cherished me dearly. It was part of the reason he was so careful with me. Even just giving me a hug, or holding my hand, was something he did so vigilantly and only under certain situations. Even though he claimed he had a lot of experience in being gentle, and holding back his strength and abilities, I knew the truth.

Vim was terrified of hurting me. Beyond what should be normal, even for a man such as him.

So...

Just maybe...

"Were you banished, Randle?" Vim then asked.

I shivered at the cold tone. And flinched.

That was the same voice he had spoken with back then. At the Crypt.

To Tim.

Stretching out my arms, I raised my hands a little as if to cover more of Randle than I was already doing. I glared back at Vim, and even tried to get my ears to perk up as straight as possible. Randle was taller than me, so I knew I needed to use every bit of self to guard him from Vim as possible. Should I stand on tip-toes? But what if I needed to move quickly?

Could I cover him enough to get him out of the room...? To what end? How far could I take this, before Vim would be forced to punish even me...?

"I have been excommunicated from the Church of Songs... and yes, also banished from Telmik. I have until the end of winter to leave, and relocate. Light was merciful enough to give me time to heal and prepare, considering," Randle said, speaking calmly as I heard his robes flutter and shift. He had likely lifted his missing arm as he spoke, and gestured to it.

Although I couldn't believe how calm Randle was speaking, I still found myself relaxing a little thanks to it. And not just his demeanor either.

He had till winter...

Maybe that would keep Vim's wrath in check...!

"Foolish..." Vim whispered.

"Ah, but it was. I was told if I wanted to stay in my position, and to keep the orphanages especially, then I needed to tow the line. I refused," Randle said.

"And just because of that you attacked Light? Randle, you are not a violent man," Vim said as he blinked.

I blinked in return, since we were still staring at each other.

"No. I'm not. But I did grab Light's collar in anger... I had been rather furious, really. To be honest I should not have waited so long to confront them. I had allowed my disgust and disillusion grow to the point of boiling over, and had lost control," Randle said with a sigh.

"He had hurt her, Vim. Enough to make her use her power. His arm literally exploded all over, you should have seen the mess, it was something you would have left behind," Oplar said.

"You had been there?" Vim asked as he turned his head a little, as if to look at her. He didn't though; he kept his eyes on mine.

"Huh...! No. But I had seen the aftermath. I had been summoned to take care of him, Light said it was because I was a neutral party and so I could be trusted with him... so..." Oplar spoke quickly, but at least didn't sound too scared.

But I knew the truth. Oplar was a timid creature. Odds are the only reason she hadn't run off already was because she knew Vim would only hurt, or kill, Randle. She would be fine. Since she hadn't broken any rules.

My arms suddenly felt a little heavy, and I felt silly as I slowly lowered them. Not completely, but just enough to hide their trembling.

I was scared. Terrified.

But not of Vim.

Never of Vim.

So I didn't want him to think so, by accident upon seeing my trembling arms and legs.

Plus...

Vim still looked furious... but he's shifted and moved a little and nothing has broken or done anything crazy around us for a bit. Not since the door. Although his voice sounded empty, he did seem to be... at least...

"Don't Vim, please," I whispered as my eyes watered a little.

My husband's eyes narrowed a little, and they finally left my own as to look behind me. I took a breath and tried to stand up straighter, extending my arms a little more once again, as Vim glared at Randle.

"I wanted to be the first to tell you. That I've been banished, and what I'd done, Vim," Randle said gently.

"You attacked a member. To the point you forced her to use her divine power. Within her own halls, your own halls," Vim said, speaking slowly. Carefully.

My heart began to beat quickly again as my eyes became blurry. Oh no!

"I did," Randle admitted.

Gritting my teeth, I was half tempted to turn around and slap him.

Why was he making it worse for himself! Stupid priest! I thought he was supposed to be wise!

I had expected, or at least somewhat planned, to possibly try and stop Vim from doing something crazy when we got here... but I had not expected this at all!

I had thought I'd be asking Vim to spare someone I'd never even met, not someone I actually knew and felt was a friend to us!

Vim then took a step forward. A single one. It was all he had needed.

Stepping back, I ran into Randle. The tall, thin man who had recently lost his arm had felt like a brick wall. He didn't budge at all as I pushed back up against him, and even reached behind as to cover him a little. I held Vim's gaze, standing up tall as I glared him down.

"Vim!" I shouted his name, and dreaded the next few moments.

He'd not hurt me. I knew it. But I also knew he'd do what he had to. I knew he would. He's done it. He's told me, and threatened me before. He's made it clear to me during our journey, that he would always place the Society and its rules over me. That he'd do what he had to, even if it meant it'd break my heart or ruin our relationship.

Will my heart be able to handle the feeling of Randle's blood splatter my back? Will I be able to handle the feeling of it drenching my hair and head? Will I scream? How much will I cry? Will I be able to look Vim in the eye again after the fact...? Will I be able to hold him as we slept?

Vim stood right before me. Close enough if I just reversed the angle of my arms, I'd have wrapped him in a hug instead of Randle. I felt squished between the two, and my whole body was wobbling in worry as tears leaked and...!

"It's my fault Vim. I deserve what happened, and what will," Randle said softly, his warm breath tickling my ears.

No...

"No, Randle," Vim said.

My stomach churned and my whole body went still as I stopped breathing, and with wide eyes watched Vim's arm reach out over my shoulder.

Unable to do anything, not even move or blink... I felt Vim grab Randle's shoulder.

It was a heavy grip. One that would have made me flinch had this been another moment, happening in another way.

A long, solid heartbeat passed with Vim's arm resting on my shoulder. Which was ridiculous, because it felt like my heart was beating faster than ever.

Expecting the sound of something squishy being crushed, or a yelp of pain, or some other weird noise... I was not ready for the sigh that came from Vim as he then patted Randle's shoulder, rather gently.

"It's not your fault. It's mine." My breathing resumed as Vim then glanced at me and stepped around us. With wide, blurry eyes, I heard him open the door... which now sounded very squeaky and wobbly, and then he left the room.

Laura collapsed. A bundle of robes and woman fell to the floor, completely. Oplar panicked, jumping over to grab at her. "Laura...!" Oplar rolled her over, gently lifting her shoulder and head and it was obvious from the way she was slumped that she had passed out.

"Hm... you should go Rennalee," Randle then said.

Shifting, I slowly turned and looked upward. We were still very close, since I suddenly felt stiff... and very sweaty. We were so close it was actually a little awkward now, but I was feeling awkward myself. I didn't trust my legs just yet to keep me upright if I stepped backward.

"Huh...?" Oplar asked for me.

"Please. And if maybe you can feel gentle enough to do so, do for them what you just did for me," Randle said as he reached out with his only remaining hand, grabbing my stiff arm and shoulder with it.

"Do what...?" I whispered, barely able to process what was happening.

"Find mercy. Or rather, find Vim's."