

Non Human 431

Chapter 431 Vim – Consequences of Sleeping In

Waking up in another's arms was not new, but it was when it was my head that was wrapped in them.

Shifting a little, I glanced and felt around without moving too much. I was on the bed still. It was intact. Renn was holding me. She was asleep. We were alone in the mansio still, and by the feel of the air it's been hours since the morning chill. The world outside was warm, but not very noisy. I heard no birds, or any wind. Off in the distance I could hear hymns, which told me it was midday.

I had slept the rest of the night, and the morning, away.

We should already be on the road right now. On the way to Lumen.

Instead I was in bed. Lying in her arms.

But somehow I wasn't too annoyed over it.

Renn's breathing was soft. She wasn't snoring, which worried me a little. She usually snored when really happy. Did that mean she wasn't happy? Even as she clung to me like this?

I took a small breath and slightly regretted it. I was facing her stomach, thanks to how she had coiled around me. It seemed since I had fallen asleep in her lap, she had laid down sideways at some point and

wrapped herself around me. The way she was curled around me reminded me of her bloodline. She was sleeping around me as a cat would another of its kind, maybe around its kittens.

Her hair was everywhere, and why I had regretted breathing too strongly. I could feel more than a few strands in my mouth. She needed to cut her hair, it was getting unruly again. What was most telling, at how deep of a sleep she was in, was not just the fact she wasn't snoring but also the way her tail wasn't moving or thumping lightly. It was coiled around my waist, as still as her.

As if she, even in her sleep, was doing all she could to not wake me up.

I did usually wake up first, but usually not in such a precarious situation. Though she had been clinging to me rather desperately lately, this made me feel more like it was I who was clinging to her. Especially since my arms were still wrapped around her.

What was I doing...? Really.

For a long moment I just stayed still. Although I wanted to get up, because I felt like I had things to do, I also... didn't wish to.

She was warm. She smelled good. I liked the way she was holding me, and I her. The bed was soft, and big enough to not make this sleeping situation uncomfortable. I also liked the way she was not fully naked, it wasn't often we slept in bed lately and she wasn't so.

Renn likely wouldn't understand, but she not being fully naked was sometimes something more seductive.

A deep, low tone, bell rung. Half a moment later it rung again, a little louder this time. It was the afternoon chimes. And...

Her tail shifted first. Then she tightened her grip around my head for a small moment as she woke up, only for her to become a little stiff.

I smiled a little as I felt her shock. She had been about to yawn and wake up, and now had gone completely still. She just realized she had woken up in a rather odd position.

The sound of her ears against the bed's blanket filled the room as the afternoon bells stopped ringing. Their chimes echoed for a bit, and I decided to not torture her. Knowing Renn she'd stay here, lying completely still, since she would worry to wake me.

"Don't go falling back asleep now," I said. My voice sounded muffled as she startled. She grumbled a wordless complaint as she slowly released my head, freeing me and allowing me to sit up.

Pushing myself off the bed, I did so a little quickly. I put some distance between us, and did my best to not glance her way as I rolled to the edge of the bed.

"Sorry, Vim," Renn mumbled. She sounded fully awake, so her soft voice had not been sleep but rather actual shame.

"Please Renn. That's one thing you don't need to apologize for, of all things," I said as I stood and glanced to the mirror nearby. From the angle I was able to partly see her. She had sat up straight, and was staring straight at me. She looked good with the way her shirt was half slipped off her shoulder, and her unruly hair.

Yes. Let's not look at her for a moment...

Renn giggled as I stepped over to the balcony. I didn't plan to open the doors that led to it, but I did glance around at the world beyond the little house. It looked... normal, really. A little warmer and brighter than usual, but nothing too drastic. We had arrived here alongside a storm, it was gone now. Another indication that we should have left this morning, since it'd not be long until bad weather returned. It was that season, after all.

She slid off the bed; her bare feet landing on the wooden floorboards with the type of silence that made me notice it. I listened as she walked around the bed, heading for the door. When she opened it, and left, I dared a glance behind me... and found her smirking at me.

My eye twitched as she blushed and stepped away, heading down the hallway.

Sighing at her, and myself, I reached up to rub my face.

At least I didn't feel tired anymore.

Pausing a moment, I frowned as I realized I actually did feel rather good. The tugging exhaustion had been lessening lately, but now I wasn't sure if I even felt it anymore. If it was there, it was so minuscule it may as well not be.

When had I begun to get better, I wonder...?

Maybe it had just been a fluke. Maybe stress...? But stress doesn't bother me, like it does others... so...

"Vim...!"

I turned, frowned at Renn's call, and headed downstairs. I didn't rush, since her shout had not been frantic... and found her kneeling near the bathroom door.

"Renn?" I walked over to her, right as she shifted a little as to show me what was wrong.

The little monarch, the multi-tailed creature, was lying on the floor against the wall. And not because it was asleep.

My eyes narrowed as I got closer and knelt down. Renn got out of the way a little as I reached out and touched the thing's side... and sure enough verified the blood soaking its fur.

"It's hurt...!" Renn said worriedly.

It was.

Very carefully, I laid my hand on the thing. Across the thing's wound, as to feel it. Through the very thick fur I felt cold blood. Blood that was thick, too thick. And beneath that thick blood was a gash of some kind, one that...

Lifting the thing ever so gently, I noted the way the thing didn't even notice or shift a hair as I rolled it over... and verified it had a similar sized gash on the other side of it.

"Was it stabbed...?" Renn asked worriedly.

"Looks like it," I said. Stabbed right through its middle. With something too big to have been an arrow, or small knife.

Either a sword or a spear.

"Is it dead? Vim?" Renn grabbed my shoulder worriedly as I gathered the passed out creature in my hands.

"No. It's just passed out. It's a tiny, frail creature, but it's still a monarch, Renn. It won't die easily," I said. Its tiny heart was thumping solidly, in its right leg.

"Who? Why? What happened?" Renn rattled her questions as I glanced around, looking for where it had come from.

Its wound was bad enough it should have left a trail of blood... yet I saw none. Neither from the hallway, or the bathroom... I glanced up, checking the walls and ceiling, and found no marks or blood there either.

"Vim?" Renn grabbed my arm as I tried to make sense of what had happened.

"Is the spear still in our room, Renn?" I asked.

"Huh...? Yes. It's resting against the wall, Vim, want me to go check again?" she asked quickly.

No. Her quick answer and confidence in it tells me it was a verification from her recent memory. She had just seen it upon leaving the room a few moments ago.

"Do you smell anyone? See anyone?" I asked as I stepped into the bathroom, both to check for blood and check for intruders.

"No...? I faintly smell Angie and Fizz, but their scents are old," Renn said as I opened the back door of the bathroom, to step outside and glance around.

Unauthorized content usage: if you discover this narrative on Amazon, report the violation.

I nodded as I verified no one was around the house, and that there was no sign of blood or what had happened. I went back into the house, and checked the front room and front door. Like before, I saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Vim...? The poor thing's hurt, we need to help it," Renn reminded me as I studied the distant gate to this courtyard. It was shut.

"It's a monarch Renn. It'll be fine," I said.

"So...? The poor thing's probably still in pain, Vim, it's not even awake that tells you how much it's hurting right now," Renn argued as she stepped closer, sadly frowning at the thing in my hands.

"Hm... Let's go to Hands. Go get our bags, and the spear, Renn. Don't leave anything special, just in case," I said.

Renn stood up straighter, frowned and nodded. She hurried off, and under her breath I heard her grumble. "I still need to go potty..." she whispered.

"Then go to the restroom!" I shouted at her.

"Don't listen to my private thoughts like that!" she shouted back as she went into the room upstairs.

I shook my head at her as I glanced down at the passed out monarch.

It really was hurt. I wasn't lying earlier, the thing was a monarch. It should, technically, be fine. Even with such a wound. But...

Renn was right too. The thing was out cold. It was breathing ever so gently, and I did hear the tiniest of wheezes as it did. Its wound was rather close to its lungs, odds are they had been damaged.

Could it die...?

Possibly.

I sighed. "Don't be cruel, Vim," I whispered.

"Yeah, don't!" Renn agreed as she hurried down the stairs.

"Your private mumblings are sacred but mine aren't?" I asked as she rolled a shoulder, shifting one of our bags as she did.

"Obviously...? Why Hands, Vim?" she asked as she bent down to put my shoes down before me.

Oh. Right.

I put them on, making sure not to bother the monarch much as I did so. "Hands is a surgeon. Plus he has stuff we can use to tend the thing, if it actually needs such help," I said.

"Then let's hurry already!" she said as she hurried out of the mansio.

"Don't you need to piss?" I asked as I went to follow her.

"I can't believe you're being so nonchalant about this, Vim! The poor thing is dying, come on!" she ignored my teasing as she hurried off towards the gate, as to open it for me.

I sighed as I closed the door behind me and hurried to follow her. She set our pace, making me nearly break out into a run as she did.

Thankfully we didn't encounter too many people, or even any members, as we made our way to Hands' office. Renn opened his door, without even knocking on it, as she ran into it. "Hands!" she shouted loudly. Likely as to be heard over the countless tick and tocks.

Entering after her, I shut the door behind me and locked it... right as I heard the clatter of a lot of things fall. Heavy things.

"Oh no...!" Hands' tiny shriek of worry came from the hallway that led deeper into his office, and shortly after he appeared as he hurried out.

"Help us Hands...!" Renn said loudly in greeting. His eyes went wide at her declaration, and I saw the raccoon begin to stress out... until he noticed me.

He visibly calmed down upon seeing me, but then panicked again upon seeing the tiny white creature in my hands. "Oh no!" he shouted again, this time with a tone of actual panic.

Stepping over to him, Hands hurried over and his hands fluttered mindlessly for a moment as he studied the creature. "Oh no! Stabbed! Right through!" he said quickly.

"So it seems. It's still alive, for now, I think its lungs might have been clipped. It's breathing with that familiar wheeze," I said.

"Hurry! Bedroom!" Hands wasted no time; he spun around and ran back down the hallway.

Renn hurried after him, and I followed her. It didn't take long for Hands to clear off a table, laying down a thick blanket upon it. I put the little monarch down upon it as he ran off, to gather up what he needed.

"I don't even know the little thing's name," Renn said softly as she reached out to pet the thing's head.

"It has no name, Renn. It's not like the ones you know, it can't talk or reason," I said.

"Everything can have a name, Vim," Renn whispered.

Nodding softly, I studied the way she stared worriedly at the thing. She looked protective of it. A little too protective. "I didn't mean it that way Renn. Just that it has no proper name that I know of at least."

"Vim! Vim! Water, please!" Hands returned, carrying both a box and a large sack. I nodded and stepped away, leaving the creature in not just his capable hands... but Renn's.

Like most locations for members, this was more than an office. He lived here. So it had been built with that in mind. There were plenty of rooms, access to upper and lower floors, and yes even multiple bathrooms and a kitchen. I gathered up two large bowls of water, and some more towels then returned to his bedroom. I found him with his face very close to the monarch, studying the wound carefully with a bright stone light.

Renn's ears fluttered as she glanced at me, her expression not making me feel good. She should be happy the thing's getting proper help, and maybe even confused or interested in the light source Hands was using... yet instead...

"Hands?" I asked as I brought the water.

He didn't answer, and then standing up a little straighter he went and stuck a finger into the thing's wound. Renn flinched as I watched Hands feel for something, and then upon finding what he sought... he turned to look at me and slowly shook his head.

Ah.

"I see," I said softly. So I had been wrong.

"See? See what? What's happening? What's wrong with it?" Renn asked, her voice cracking as it rose in volume. She had undoubtedly sensed and saw what Hands and I now knew.

Hands turned to look at Renn, and gently shook his head at her too. "I'm sorry, Rennalee... but the poor little thing's heart is missing."

"What...? It's missing its heart, Vim?" Renn looked at me, her eyebrows knotting in worry.

Oh. "Not it's monarch heart. Its actual heart," I said.

Hands nodded quickly. "Yes. The organ. The poor creature still has its lungs, but no heart. It's... an odd wound, Vim. As if it had been shot by something solid, not sharp," Hands said as he turned the creature over a little, as to get a better look at it.

Renn shifted and bit her lip at the sight of how Hands had moved it, and I made sure to keep an eye on her for a moment. That had been a flash of rage on her face just now.

She had felt he had not treated the little creature with respect, hadn't she? Or was she simply emotional at learning of its death?

"Yes. It's missing other things, and part of its spine. What's odd though is I don't see or feel any fragments of anything..." Hands said as he stuck a finger in again.

"Vim...!" Renn made a cry of a noise as she reached out and grabbed the blanket the little creature was lying upon.

"I'm sorry Renn. As I said... it's a feeble creature. It is, or was, stronger than any smaller animal like it, but it is still not a great and powerful monarch. I'm... shocked its dying, but also not, I suppose," I said, not really sure how else to say it.

"Can't you two do anything for it? At all? It's a monarch isn't it? Why can't it heal like you, Vim?" Renn asked.

Hands shifted and glanced at me, and I did my best to not notice his look. "Its heart is the size of a marble, Renn. Your thumb. It's not very powerful. It can heal, but if it's missing its actual heart... I doubt it will survive. It cannot re-grow parts, it used to have more tails. It's lost them over the years from injuries," I said.

Hands nodded. "Used to have eight."

Nine. But that was fine, it got the point across.

Renn began to breathe a little harshly, and started to cry. "Vim...!"

Reaching out, I went ahead and stuck a finger into the wound... to verify Hands's assessment. I didn't doubt the man, but how could I not at least make sure and try anyway when being looked at like I was right now?

"We can try, Vim... but..." Hands gestured gently at the thing, and I knew why he was not being his typical self. Usually by now he'd have simply put the thing out of its misery. Because he was like me. Too analytical and a realist. He was like his father.

Renn grabbed Hands' arm. I glanced at him, and was glad to see he didn't flinch from either pain or shock. "Is there nothing we can do? What about another heart? What if we put one inside of it?" she asked.

Hands finally startled, and quickly looked at me with wide eyes. "Vim!" he shouted worriedly.

"Calm down Renn. That won't work like that. Not for this one. It's too weak. It's..." I felt the coldness within it as I stopped searching for a heart. There was none inside of it anymore, and Hands was right, it was as if there never had been. "It's about to die in mere moments," I finished.

His initial assessment was rather accurately... actually... it wasn't like a stab from a sword or spear, but instead almost as if it had been shot by a giant nail or spike. That or a larger, high powered bullet, but that wasn't possible. Even if it had been shot outside of the Cathedral I would have woken up from the sound of such a weapon going off. The sound was too distinctive, too familiar.

"Vim..." Renn cried my name as I sighed and patted the small thing on the head.

"I'm sorry Renn. I really am..." Hands whispered.

Shaking my head at the thing, I gestured to the thing's leg. "Its heart is in its right leg. Would you please extract it for me, Hands? Once it passes?" I asked.

"Oh... um... yes, of course Vim..." Hands nodded quickly as Renn made a whiny noise as I debated cleaning my hands or not. They were stained with blood. Dark blood.

"Vim...!" Renn tried to get my attention, but I ignored her for a moment as I pondered the thing's death.

It was a monarch... so to be utterly honest I felt nothing for it. It was destined to die. If not like this, or from age, then from my own hands. But...

The thing had been harmless. It's been living here for hundreds of years. Been something of the local pet. People liked it. Cherished it. The church even saw it as a divine beast. A blessed animal, thanks to its longevity and extra tails.

People have tried to hunt it before. Many times. But it was still a monarch... which meant whoever had done this, whatever had done this, was someone not normal. Not a normal human, at least. Maybe even not a normal non-human.

Chaos never arrives alone, does it...?

"Come on Renn. Let us go find the one who killed it," I said as I turned.

Renn didn't hesitate as she hurried out of the room, before even I could.

"Vim...!" Hands got my attention as I heard Renn hurry out into the front office. I turned to him, and he gestured to the monarch. "The monarch. It made a nest. Near the archives below," he told me quickly.

I frowned at that and nodded. "Is it easily found?" I asked.

"No. It's hidden behind the tapestry, the one near the spiral stairwell. You'll have to break the wall apart to get to it, but I have no doubt it has hidden stuff there. It hoarded jewels and stuff," he said.

Right... "Okay. Thank you Hands. I'm sorry to bring death into your home, I had... not thought it was going to die, to be honest," I said.

"Vim! Hurry!" Renn shouted angrily at me as I heard the door open.

Hands smiled at me. "All is well, protector. I'll see to it, I suggest you go before your wife sinks her fangs into someone. Seems we both fell for ones with sharp teeth!" he said happily.

That we did...

Leaving his office, I followed Renn out into the Cathedral... a little unsure of who to confront first... but Renn decided for me.

"Chronicler!" she said, as if she already had proof.

"Let's go then," I said.

Chapter 432 Renn – A Chronicler's Tea

The door Vim had broken was fixed already. It shut rather smoothly as I hurried over to stand beside Vim, ready to shout angrily if I needed to... since I knew he wouldn't.

Unlike last time we'd visited the Chronicler didn't ignore us outright or be haughty. She put aside a letter she had been reading and frowned gently at us. "You're fine, but she's not. What is the matter?" she asked gently, sounding almost kind about it.

I stepped forward, clenching my fist as my tail squirmed beneath my pants. "Have you seen your monarch lately?" I asked before Vim could.

The Chronicler shifted a little, turning her head as she glanced at Vim... then back to me. "No...? Not since last night, I think. But she comes and goes, why...?"

"You don't know," Vim said plainly.

I groaned as I realized she didn't. Her dimly glowing eyes narrowed at us as she sat up a little straighter. "What... what are you saying?" she asked, sounding far too convincing to not be believable.

Great! It was wrong of me to think so, but I had genuinely wanted her to be the cause of the poor little creature's death. As to justify hating her... yet now...

Stepping away, I huffed as I reached up to cup my face. I was so horrible sometimes!

"Your little monarch has died. We found it in the mansio, collapsed with a hole in its chest and side," Vim explained.

For a few moments there was silence, so I turned to study the woman I was trying really hard to hate with justification, and found her staring at Vim with more shock than even when we had confronted her a few days ago. About far more serious matters.

A little surprised to see such emotion upon her, I returned to Vim's side. "We took it to Hands... but it was too late," I added.

"That's not possible," The Chronicler said simply, as if making a simple factual statement. As if she just told us the sun had risen today.

Glancing at Vim, I found him frowning at her. In a way that was rather telling.

"You sincerely don't believe it," he said gently.

For a long moment the Chronicler only stared at him... and then glanced down. Vim shifted his hands a little, to display the blood still staining his hands. The stuff was dried now, though dark.

"That's... No!" The Chronicler stood, her eyes glowing a little stronger as she did. "Vim! That's not possible! Mapple!" she added, and then shouted Mapple's name at the end. I flinched, since she had genuinely shouted it. As if for her life.

A little worried over her outburst; I shifted and wondered why she had screamed in such a way. Did she feel in danger all of a sudden...? As much as I would like her to feel such pressure, it wasn't like I actually wanted her to feel such a way. Until we had actual, verifiable, proof that she's done something worth such a punishment at least.

The door opened half a moment later as Mapple ran in... skidded to a stop, and gaped at us. She flinched at the sight of Vim, and hurriedly grimaced as she clenched her fist.

Oh no... Did she think she needed to protect her master from us...?

"Hurry and gather everyone. Have Tenure and everyone available search for the monarch or hint of it. And immediately summon a Society wide meeting, I want everyone counted for. Now," The Chronicler ordered as she rounded the table.

My ears shifted under my hat as I glanced around, and then watched Mapple nod and run out of the room... not even questioning the order.

"The monarch is with Hands," I said gently, reminding her.

"I know. I want them to think it's still alive, as to see what kind of response I get from them. If you would Renn, please go tell Hands to keep his possession of its body, and the knowledge of what happened to it a secret. Until we get to the bottom of this," she said.

Oh...? I nodded gently as I glanced at Vim, as if to make sure he was okay with me doing so.

"What kind of wound killed it, Vim?" she then asked softly, likely since the door to her office was still opened.

"It was stabbed through. By something with enough force to completely separate its heart and a part of its spine. Honestly I'm not sure what had hurt it, Hands thinks it was hit by something with great velocity, and I agree with him. As if it was hit by a large bolt or something," Vim said.

She frowned as she pondered that, and then sighed. "This is not good. At all. Is there any hope of saving it?"

"No. It's likely already growing cold," Vim said.

The Chronicler reached up, to cup her face. "So many things going wrong, too quickly..." she groaned.

A little surprised to see her act, and say so, I wondered what to say or do. I know I had to leave, to make sure Hands didn't make a mistake... but...

"This was not supposed to happen, Vim. That creature had a purpose. One that it now won't be able to fulfill. This isn't good," she then said.

"I'll go handle Hands. You stay with her, Renn, until I return," Vim then said as he stepped away.

"Vim!" The Chronicler and I both said his name, but he ignored us as he left the office.

I sighed at him, as she did... and then smiled softly at her since we had been in sync for a moment.

"He knows I know better than to bring up prophecies, yet he still acts like that. And he wonders why we have been leaving him in the dark. I swear Renn, your husband has more issues than he solves sometimes," she said.

Well... "You're not entirely wrong, I suppose..." I admitted.

She nodded. "Quickly, before anyone else gets back... anything else I should know about its death?" she asked.

I slowly shook my head. "We found it downstairs, near the bathroom. I think it had come in through the window of the bathroom, either to escape its attacker or maybe to get help... I think it was heading for the stairs, as to come to our bedroom. It was a little odd though; there were no blood stains or signs of its struggle anywhere around the area. Its wound was so great you'd think there'd have been a lot of blood everywhere," I said.

"An oddity, one that makes it clear there's something amiss," she stated as she stepped over to her desk. She picked up a small book and opened it, and quickly went to writing within it. I stepped over, glancing at what she was writing down and realized it was information. She was taking notes, of what Vim had said and what I had said.

She had said she wanted to see what people would say, concerning the monarch's death. She likely planned to compare everything, as to track the perpetrator.

"Hands tried to save it. I begged Vim too, but he said it couldn't be done," I said softly.

She nodded. "Vim's not cruel, and Hands has a duty. Neither would have allowed it to perish if they had the ability to save it. I have no doubt there," she said as she kept writing in the little book.

Really...? It was so odd, that so many members could... seemingly hate or dislike Vim, yet at the same time trust him so unequivocally like that. It made me wonder if I was slightly misunderstanding the fundamental issues of the Society.

Probably was.

"Your Holiness," A woman entered, alongside a man. They looked human, and I didn't recognize them, so I stepped back a little as they stepped over to her. The Chronicler ignored them for a moment, and then stopped writing and nodded, telling them to go on. "Mapple and Tenure are mobilizing the whole cloister. We will find the little divine beast shortly," she said.

"I hope so. When was the last time either of you saw it?" The Chronicler asked calmly.

The two frowned and glanced at one another. I studied the man more than the woman, since I noted the way he was frowning... it was one not of confusion or thought but instead annoyance.

"Two days ago for me. I fed it a piece of an apple," the woman said.

He nodded. "About that for me. I saw it run along the banister near the second floor kitchens. It avoided me though, as you know your Holiness," the man said.

"Hm..." The Chronicler nodded, and I shifted a little.

"Why'd it avoid you?" I asked.

The Chronicler glanced at me, but said nothing as the man and woman turned to address me. The two studied me for a moment, and then the man gently smiled... and the woman answered for him. "The

divine beast does not like men, young lady. It avoids them, even sometimes nipping at them if they get close," she answered.

Oh.

Really...? I'd seen it with Vim many times, though.

Though he wasn't really a normal man, I suppose.

"I see..." I said in response as I glanced at The Chronicler. She was giving me an odd smile, as if amused with me.

Though I did note she and him spoke of it as if it was still alive. Something still here and not a memory of the past.

I wonder who had hurt the poor little creature. It had been adorable, and hadn't seemed dangerous at all. Even when it had tried to eat my ancestor's heart, it had only nibbled upon it and stuff. It wasn't like it stole it or broke anything as far as I was aware. It had even slept with me a few times, never bothering me or anyone at all.

Would someone have killed it in an attempt to get its heart... I wonder? If so why not take it from it? Or did it escape before the attacker had been able to do so?

Hopefully Vim and the rest could find whoever had hurt it.

"Go help oversee the search. While you're at it, may as well conduct a full review of the Cathedral. Let's begin our review, since we'll be scouring the place anyway," The Chronicler said.

"Understood," the man nodded and turned, leaving without hesitation. The woman though waited a moment, and then coughed as to clear her throat.

"Would you like me to summon anyone? Or have Mapple return?" she asked.

"No. I will be fine, I have Rennalee here if I need help, thank you," The Chronicler said as she turned back to her desk, and book, and went to writing in it again.

The woman nodded, bowed lightly, and then left as well.

Waiting until her footsteps were far enough away that I knew she wouldn't be able to hear me, I stepped a little closer to the Chronicler as to whisper. "Did she think I was dangerous or something?" I asked.

"What's in your hand, Rennalee?"

Startling, I glanced at it.

"Um... a spear," I admitted.

Did she recognize it?

She chuckled at me. "You don't even register it's there do you? Here I had thought all this time you were not the type to be so calm and adjusted to violence and all that it brings. But I suppose it's of no surprise... many of our greatest saints had been war maidens," she said as she kept on writing.

This tale has been unlawfully lifted without the author's consent. Report any appearances on Amazon.

"War maidens...?" I asked. That was a new phrase to me, though I obviously understood its meaning. She was correct, also. I had been so focused on the poor creature that I'd neglected to even consider the spear in my hand.

"Most saints are born for war, or become the cause of it. So it's only natural most become accustomed to such a thing. I was lucky, of all us sisters only I and Mapple's mother were able to avoid ever having to step foot onto a battlefield," she told me as she put her pen into the little pot of ink nearby, and turning to face me.

"You... all fought on battlefields? Even though you had Vim?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "Vim couldn't be everywhere all the time, Renn. He's of course the perfect soldier, but can only fight one battle at a time. Plus there were fights even he won't permit himself to participate in, so sometimes we are left to our own devices," she said.

"What... kind of fights?" I asked, a little surprised to hear so. I had thought Vim would always fight for our members, no matter the reason.

"The ones not for the Society or its members, of course."

Oh. I see.

That meant she spoke of things that the Society hadn't been involved in with at all. I wonder how that worked, since that mean members had been involved with them. Where was the line drawn, I wonder?

"I'd have preferred you to carry a sword, Renn."

I perked up at that. "Really...? Can I ask why?" I asked. Vim's told me a spear was better for war than a sword was.

"A sword can go into a sheathe. Such an act has many purposes. It allows one to not broadly display a weapon, while also it can be decorative and impactful. A spear is... well, it reminds one of war. A sword can remind someone of justice, or duty. A spear doesn't remind people of such things," she explained.

Although I had just thought something similar, I wasn't really sure what to say to that. I mean... what did it matter if I carried a spear and not a sword? "You mean it'd make it easier for me to blend in, than this," I said.

"Well... yes, it would. But I had not meant that directly..."

"You're... worried I'll be seen as dangerous?" I asked.

"In a way. For now it is of no matter. We can discuss such things another time," she said as she turned... right as Mapple arrived.

Frowning at her, I watched Mapple close the door behind her. "Everyone's searching for the monarch, and they've begun to let everyone know it's time for a review. It was started haphazardly, and they're prioritizing finding the monarch though," Mapple said.

"That's fine. Did you hear anyone say anything as you gave the order?" The Chronicler asked.

"Just that they don't understand why we need to search for it. I mean... it does sometimes hide for a day or two, doesn't it? Probably just curled up somewhere, sleeping," Mapple said with a shrug.

Oh? She seemed to really believe so. And...

I smiled gently at her as she once again glanced at me. She noticed my smile and shifted, looking away.

Now that I had been reminded of the spear, I knew now why Mapple was acting so odd. And likely why she had panicked upon running in earlier. It hadn't just been because of The Chronicler's shout. It had been the sight of me and Vim, and the spear I carried. I wonder how I could tell her she needn't worry, without just outright saying it. I pitied the poor woman, and even though one day we might be standing against one another instead of alongside, we technically weren't at the moment enemies. So...

"Did you harm the monarch, Mapple?" The Chronicler then asked.

"Huh...?" Mapple startled, and then glanced at me again, only to look back at her. "No...? Is it hurt?" she asked, with a little worry.

"It is. Vim and Renn found it. Collapsed," The Chronicler said.

Oh...? She trusted Mapple enough to tell her such a thing, but yet didn't reveal that it was dead? Or maybe that was a sign she didn't trust Mapple at all, and was using this moment to test her?

Mapple glanced at me again, this time with a face full of questions and not worry. "Really?" she asked me.

I nodded. "In the house we're staying at."

Mapple shifted. "I... don't understand. Who'd hurt that thing here? It only stays within the Inner Cathedral, and rarely even goes near people as it is," Mapple said.

"Thus our search."

"Oh. It ran off did it? It is a skittish little thing..." Mapple nodded, as if now everything made sense.

I bit my tongue, as to not correct her, and was glad I did. The Chronicler nodded, seemingly happy to allow Mapple to make such a misunderstanding.

So she really didn't trust Mapple... or maybe she just wanted Mapple to firmly believe such a thing, as to see what those she spoke to about it would then say or do.

Mapple though didn't seem to notice, she only sighed in relief. "Here I thought you made Vim angry again..." she mumbled.

The Chronicler ignored her as she gestured at me. "While we have a moment alone, Renn, we should speak," she said.

"Hm...?" I shifted at that, and gripped my spear a little tighter.

"Mapple, prepare some tea," The Chronicler said as she gestured for me to follow her. She was heading for the door.

"Oh...? Hm..." Mapple nodded, with that look of slight pain she got when The Chronicler was mean to her, and she hurried to open the door for the old woman. The Chronicler didn't say anything as she left her office, and I sighed softly as I went to follow her.

She hadn't told me why we were leaving, or give me a chance to agree or not... but Vim had told me to stay with her for now.

"Thank you Mapple," I said softly as I left the office, since Mapple had waited for me to leave first.

"Hm!" She perked up at that and nodded. I followed The Chronicler down the hallway, to a stairwell. She walked up it, slowly, and I followed her. Thanks to how slowly the old woman walked, likely thanks to the stairs, Mapple arrived, rejoining us, right as I was entering it. I held the door open for her, since she carried a platter.

We were a floor up, and not far from the stairwell. We entered another room that looked like an office, though this one had more chairs and even a couch. It did seem better suited to sit and have a conversation at least; it even had a nice window... which I realized overlooked the courtyard where the house we were staying was located in. I couldn't make out the entire of the house, but could see it well enough to know that someone could stand here and see who went in and out of it.

While The Chronicler situated herself in one of the chairs, Mapple put down a platter of cups and a pot and went to pouring the tea for us. There was a fireplace here, but she hadn't used it for the tea. And since she hadn't taken long to get it, I assumed there was some kind of kitchen nearby.

Did we just come here so she could sit comfortably, or was it for another reason?

"I'll be blunt Renn, since Vim will likely return in a few moments. I would like to give you a few letters. For Light, whom you will be going to see here shortly," The Chronicler said.

Shifting a little, I ignored Mapple's tiny groan she made inside the back of her throat as she went to hand the Chronicler a cup of tea. One that was sitting on a small blue plate.

"Sure? I'll be honest I don't know when we're going to leave... I think Vim had planned to leave today, but now who knows," I said.

"Yes. He'll stick around long enough to ensure there is no threat to the rest of us, and to find the perpetrator if able. I've already got most of them ready, I'll finish them up this afternoon just in case," she said.

"Okay then..." I agreed as Mapple then readied another cup of tea. She turned to look at me, hesitated and then gently smiled a little worriedly at me.

Ah. Right.

I went to sit down, across from the Chronicler, and then accepted the teacup from Mapple. I allowed my spear to rest against my chair as I did.

"Also I'd like to tell you of a prophecy. One that you now need to know, I think," The Chronicler said.

Mapple groaned again as she stepped back. "You got to be kidding..." Mapple mumbled.

Glancing at Mapple, I noticed the way she looked like she wanted to run away. She was on pins and needles. "Judging by Mapple's reaction, maybe I don't want to hear it," I said carefully.

"You did agree to hear them, last time, didn't you?" The Chronicler pointed out as she took a sip of her tea.

Well... "Yes... I did..." I admitted.

And in truth, I actually wanted to hear them. I knew Vim's aversion, and how much he hated them, but I myself wanted to know them. If anything so I could possibly know how to avoid such subjects, as to keep Vim happy.

Maybe if I knew the prophecies he wanted to avoid, I'd be able to help him do such a thing. At least, that was one of my reasoning's behind wanting to know.

Mapple though didn't seem to agree. "Can I... uh... leave then? I'll go take the census you wanted," Mapple asked.

The Chronicler nodded. "Yes. You may go."

Mapple hurriedly nodded, and with obvious relief she hurried out of the room. She shut the door to the office, and I heard her breathe a huge sigh of relief as she hurried away.

"At least she doesn't think I'd hurt you anymore," I said softly.

"Mapple knows you won't harm me. In fact she really doesn't care if you or Vim would anyway. What she fears is having to die trying to protect me, since to her it's a wasted death."

I frowned at that. "Then why even allow such a worry or thought to enter her head? Why make enemies out of us?" I asked her.

The Chronicler chuckled as she went to take another drink. "We're not enemies, Renn. No matter how much Vim wants us to be," she said, then took a drink.

I had a hard time believing that, but kept my thoughts to myself.

Taking a drink as well, I paused a moment as to appreciate its taste. It was... a little bitter, but it felt good going down the throat. It was a taste I'd never had before, and one I'd like to have again someday. I'll need to remember to ask what kind of tea it is, or how Mapple had made it, once I see her again.

The Chronicler likely knew, but I didn't want to ask her.

I wanted to be Mapple's friend. Not hers.

"A monarch will attack Light. One you will have to save her from," the Chronicler then said.

I groaned as I lowered the teacup. "I hadn't said I wanted to hear it yet," I said.

She nodded. "I know. But it might make the difference in Light surviving or not. Plus, if I don't tell you it now I might not get the chance to again before it's too late."

Wonderful. I had been hoping, expecting even, that it would have been a prophecy about something else... maybe about me and Vim.

But Light? The woman I was right now more upset with than the one in front of me?

"Is that... all you're going to tell me about it?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes."

"Then why tell me at all? Seems so... vague and unhelpful," I said.

"Because now that you know, you'll make sure you and Vim stick around her long enough to fulfill it. Had you not known, you would have allowed Vim to take you away from Light and risk her life. The rest

is of no concern. It will arrive. You will help save her, and then all will be well," The Chronicler said simply, as if it was as simple as making tea.

"I think I'm starting to understand why Vim hates it when people speak of such things," I said as my tail squirmed.

She chuckled at me. "I've no doubt over the long years you will come to be similar to him. Or well, maybe you won't? Who is to say?"

Shaking my head at that, I took another large gulp of my tea... and licked my lips once I finished what was left in the cup.

Yes. I liked this a lot.

It almost made up for the headache that wanted to attack thanks to this conversation.

"Did you really not expect the monarch to die?" I asked her as I studied the teacup. It was the same blue as the plate, and had little patterns in the color. The swirls were pretty, though dull with age.

"I'm still processing the sudden surprise, to be honest Renn. I'm old enough to know that this happens, but even still when it does I almost don't know what to say or do about it. No. I had not expected it. I still don't want to believe it. That monarch had a real purpose. One that will now need to be addressed, if it is has actually perished," The Chronicler said.

"You don't believe Vim and me?" I asked her.

"I do. I just don't want to."

Ah... that made sense.

She sighed as she lowered her cup, putting it on the plate and her lap. Her dimly lit eyes seemed to focus on me as she ran a thumb along the cups rim. "The question now is who had done it. Was it one of our own? A human? Another monarch? Or just a simple accident? It's a little concerning that it had happened after Light left, while also happening while Vim is here," she said softly.

"Because it shouldn't have with him here or because now he will be accused of doing the deed himself?" I asked.

The Chronicler smirked at me. "You defend him passionately, Rennalee. I like it. But yes. It's odd that someone was able to kill the monarch right under Vim's nose without him noticing something amiss. Some will use it as further proof of his lack of focus, while others will claim he did it intentionally. His hate for monarchs is very well known, so it's not a far cry to assume he did it himself," she said.

Shifting a little in my seat, I wondered what to think of the way she was talking so... calmly. It made me realize that all this time I probably could have been talking to her, if anything just so I could understand why and where she and the rest have done the things they're doing. Plus it'd likely help me understand better how to...

My eyes narrowed as I remembered Vim's warning. His words.

He had told me to use the knowledge we had against them. That their misconception, their misplaced belief that he and I had already consummated our relationship, was a tool we needed to use to face them. As to find out the truths they were hiding from us.

"The monarch... you said it had a purpose?" I asked as I focused on the same thing Vim had found so interesting.

She nodded. "It was meant to find an object. One that we desperately need. It was why we've kept it here all this time, keeping it safe. Light will not be happy with me, for this failure," she said with a sigh.

Oh...!

She just proved Vim was right!

Their prophecies were wrong. Ones they firmly believed in.

And also, that she... this old saint-like woman was not the leader at all.

She was obeying Light. Or at the very least, saw Light as someone above her.

Although glad to have verified such things, I still found myself a little upset and longing for more tea. I glanced at the pot Mapple had used, and stood as to check it. While I poured myself more tea, I hid a small smirk on my face from the dimly glowing eyes of the woman nearby.

Vim was right. As usual. Which was annoying in its own way... but was also upsetting to learn the prophecies could indeed be so drastically incorrect.

Did that mean there was a chance I wouldn't have a daughter...?

I didn't like that at all.

"So... what was it supposed to have found?" I asked as I turned around, as to offer her some more tea too, yet right as I did the door opened.

Vim stepped in, glared at me... and then glared at the elderly woman who was ignoring him.

"Come on Renn. We have stuff to do," he said.

I huffed at him. "I've wanted you to be possessive Vim, but this might be a little much," I teased him.

The Chronicler laughed so hard she spilled her tea.

Chapter 433 Vim – A Nest of Trouble

Most of the stuff the little monarch had hoarded in its nest was just junk.

Pushing aside some straw and other nest stuff, I grabbed a couple more of the small metallic objects. Most of them were shiny and round, making it rather obvious what its taste had been.

I bent a little, twisting as I did while reaching behind me, as to hand off the bundle of little trinkets to Fizz. She and I were squeezed into the small hole I had made as to get access to its nest. She giggled as she crawled backward out of the hole, pushing off my thighs and legs as she did.

The little monarch had made a small nest behind one of the larger bookshelves here in the library. The archive library to boot. Yet the spot it had made it in was not a place easily accessible. Once you got through the wooden shelf, and the foot or so of wood behind the shelf itself, you encountered stone. The hard brick that made up the Cathedral. It was why I had made the small hole and was digging out the stuff this way and not just accessing it properly. I didn't want to have to rebuild a whole wall just to clear out its junk.

"I feel like a rat!" Fizz shouted happily as I heard her put the stuff I'd just given her into a box. The stuff clattered as I moved the nest some more to grab the rest.

There wasn't much left. Some pens. Coins. A pocket watch, likely one of Hands', and what looked to be some kind of polished stone. I gathered them up, and handed them off to Fizz again.

"Dogs like to dig holes under fences, that's what it should feel like to you... not being a rat," Jelti said as Fizz put the other objects into the box.

"It's not the hole; it's the hoarding little shinnies! Or well, the hole too, I guess..." Fizz said as she crawled back into the hole next to me.

"I think that's it Fizz," I said as I ran my hand all over again, verifying I didn't miss anything in the nest or under any of the little crevices near the bricks in the wall.

"Oh? Can I see then?" Fizz asked excitedly.

For a moment I debated it. Part of the reason I was doing this and not her, who was much smaller than me, was because the Chronicler had worried it had hoarded something dangerous. Too dangerous for our weaker, younger, members to touch.

Yet it didn't seem like anything dangerous was here. A needless worry.

"Sure. Just don't get stuck," I said as I pushed myself out of the hole.

She giggled at me, barely waiting for me to get out of the way before she delved deeper into the hole as to crawl to the nest.

Brushing my hands and arms off, I sat up and glanced around... finding Jelti smirking down at me.

"It's just a bunch of junk, Vim. Think the fanciest thing is that pocket watch," she said.

I nodded as I slowly stood up. I made sure to keep an ear on Fizz as I glanced around the section of library we were in, and made sure we were alone.

We were. Particularly me.

Renn wasn't here.

Honestly I was a little worried, but I was doing my best to not let it bother me.

For Renn to ignore such an interesting thing as that monarch's nest, favoring something and someone dangerous instead...

I bit back a sigh, keeping it from escaping.

If Renn wanted to spend time with the Chronicler, that was her choice. She had every right to.

Even if it was making me antsy as hell.

"And maybe this. Is this what I think it is?" Jelti's question drew my from my thoughts as I turned to see what she was talking about. We had put a small table nearby, with a box upon it, as to gather up the

items. She held up a small hand-sized round thing from it, at least the size of her hand, and I frowned and nodded.

"Yeah, think that's a bone. One of the middle spine parts," I said. Hadn't even noticed I handed something like that off to Fizz.

Jelti shook her head as she put it back into the box. "It's definitely a human one. Either it dug into a tomb or grave, or it killed someone and took it as a trophy," she said.

"Hm," I was half tempted to tease her that it could be a pig's or something, but instead found my eyes lingering towards the exit.

Calm down Vim. She was safe. Fine. The Chronicler wouldn't harm her. Especially since they have plans for her. Schemes. Prophecies that she must fulfill.

And the one thing I could rely on was their utter dedication and loyalty to their prophecies. They were the types to sacrifice themselves, to genuinely die and kill others, to ensure their prophecies came to pass. So for now at least, Renn was safe.

Yet... I knew better than to think the Chronicler's threat to Renn was just that of physical.

What if she said something to Renn...? I wasn't sure yet what to think or do about Renn's personal beliefs when it came to prophecies. She seemed to not mind hearing them, and even desired to know of them. That meant she would happily hear any and all about her, and myself, and...

Closing my eyes, I bit back a groan as I imagined her stupid smirk when she showed up any moment now. Who knows what she's heard, or knows now!

I'd never deny her the right to do what she wants. Ever. But by my parents I wish I could enforce my own rules upon her...! Even if just that of prophecies!

"You missed one!"

Looking down, I frowned as Fizz crawled out of the hole under the shelf. She was covered in the thing's nest, straw and fuzz, which she ignored completely as she stepped over to hand me the golden object.

Jelti giggled at it. "They've been looking for that for years," she said as I took the fancy golden orb that had at one time been on top of a crosier.

"What is it?" Fizz asked as I studied the gems adorning it.

"You know those staves that bishops and other upper church people use? During their ceremonies and stuff? This goes on top of them. It's a part of the staff," I said. I wasn't going to go into detail as to its purpose, or religious importance.

"Oh...? So I can't keep it then, can I?" Fizz asked.

"Says who?" I handed it back to her, as to which Jelti groaned a sigh and Fizz grinned wildly.

"Thanks Vim!" Fizz happily bounced away, running off... but then skidded to a stop. "Wait. We're done, right? Can I go? Mom will want me to take a bath before we start cooking," she asked.

"We're done. Thank you for helping Fizz," I said.

She grinned, waved the priceless orb of gold at me and then ran off.

"The Chronicler won't be happy you gave that to her. That's one of the fancy ones," Jelti warned.

"So? Anything else of importance in that box?" I asked.

"No? Other than the pocket watch. The rest is all... junk, really. A few fancy items, gold and jewelry, but I definitely don't see anything that supposedly is important," Jelti said as she went to look again.

I joined her, and sighed at the contents of the box. There was a nice sized stack of items, likely well over a hundred, and most were as she said. Useless, or if valuable only valuable to a certain degree. Like coins, or basic jewelry.

"It's sad though. The poor thing was annoying sometimes, sneaking bites of food and stuff, but it wasn't mean or dangerous. It was in fact very cute. Who would hurt it Vim?" Jelti asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. And in fact, no one was.

The whole of the church, not just the Cathedral but even the other branches around the Cathedral throughout Telnik, have been looking into the monarch's disappearance. As it was right now only we Society members knew the creature was actually dead, the rest just believed it to be missing, but even almost a day later no one had answers.

The Chronicler had her people interrogated. They had done an actual audit of the Cathedral, using it as cover for the search of blood. To find where the thing had been attacked and hurt, and as of yet there had been no reports of it. If it had gotten attacked and hurt here in the Cathedral, it was in a spot humans didn't go. Or couldn't get to.

And though most of the day had been sunny, it was now storming. Heavy rains were falling upon the Cathedral, which meant there was no point in me or others checking the rooftops now. The blood would be washed away, if it wasn't already. I still planned to check them, just in case, but knew it'd be pointless.

The worst part of it all was Renn had found it in the mansio, yet there was no sign of it arriving there before then. No trail of blood anywhere. Not in the house, the courtyard around it, or the Cathedral around that. I had checked everywhere, even places that people couldn't get to.

We had no idea who had killed the thing... and no clue where or when it had happened.

Basically we knew nothing. And had no way to figure anything out, unless I was willing to start hurting people randomly as to interrogate them.

At the very least no one else was hurt. Everyone in the Society was accounted for, and fine. Even the human members.

Jelti picked up a few objects, and then promptly put them back down as she shook her head. "What am I supposed to be looking for Vim?" she asked gently.

"I don't know, Jelti."

This content has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

"Something tells me I don't want to know anyway, but still..." she said with a sigh.

Isn't that the truth...?

The Chronicler had been hoping we'd find... whatever it was she and Light had expected the monarch to acquire, but I wasn't really sure what to look for either.

I had thought maybe a heart, at first, but not only was there no heart in its little nest... there was nothing else of importance either. I had even scanned the surrounding area, checking nearly every room, rafter, basement and hidden corridor, for any hint or sign of a heart or something special. I had found nothing. If the creature had another nest somewhere... and no one has found it yet, odds are we never would.

Picking up the pocket watch, I turned it over and found the little mark the raccoon family used on certain works. "Yep, Hands'," I said.

"That's good. He'll be happy to get it back; he doesn't forget anything he makes. He's weird like that; watch when you give that to him he'll ramble on about the day he made it, what kind of weather had been at the time, and then tell us exactly what he was thinking at that moment... Gah! Just thinking about it makes my stomach hurt. Please Vim, give it to him for me will you? Don't make me do it!" Jelti begged.

I laughed at her and nodded. "I'll do it, Jelti. It's..." I spoke softly, and paused as another entered the room. I glanced at the door, and found Randle... followed by Renn.

Breathing a slight sigh of relief, I pocketed the pocket watch as the two walked over.

"We saw Fizz. She's so dirty she's hardly recognizable... so why aren't you?" Renn asked me with a smirk as she glanced me up and down.

I looked down, as Jelti snickered, and I wondered if the light layer of dust on me wasn't enough for her. "Dogs attract dirt better, I guess?" I said.

Randle scoffed at that. "More like she rolled around in the nest, likely. Is this it then?" Randle asked as he stepped over to the box.

As he did, I noticed Jelti had stepped back from his approach. She did it a little awkwardly, but also with a slight rush.

She had just stepped back because she no longer felt comfortable in his presence.

If Randle had noticed he didn't show it, and so I pretended to not do so either, as Randle went to rummaging in the box. Renn hurried over to do the same, smirking happily as she did. She placed the spear she now carried religiously against a nearby pillar, a stone one, and went to join Randle in studying the box's contents.

"Fizz found the most important piece, I think. Vim let her keep it," Jelti said.

Randle paused a moment, glancing at her and then me. "Oh? The one The Chronicler wants?"

"No...? I don't think so. It was just one of your artifacts. The little orb you find on top of your rods for your ceremonies," I said.

"Wait... really?" he turned to look at Jelti, who startled but nodded gently after doing so.

"I'm glad I no longer need to worry about such headaches you bring, Vim," Randle then said as he returned his attention to the box.

I smirked at that as Renn glanced at me. "You gave her something important?" she asked.

"He did. And valuable. That thing could buy a whole block in the noble's district," Jelti said as she stepped over to Renn, as to look into the box with her. It seemed she was more comfortable near Renn than she was Randle, which was a little odd... since Renn was now carrying around that spear.

But it shouldn't be odd. Not to me. Randle's actions, justified or not, were drastic. Or had been drastic. Those like Jelti would of course been bothered by his attack of Light, and the subsequent results of it. If anything it should be a miracle that they hadn't demanded his immediate banishment, instead of giving him the season to prepare and recover from his wound.

"Little thing liked gold," Renn said happily.

"And round things. Likely as to hold them as it slept, it seemed to like wrapping itself around stuff," Randle said as he remembered the creature.

"Do you know what The Chronicler was looking for, Renn?" Jelti asked.

Her ears beneath her hat twitched as she glanced my way. "Kind of," she admitted.

"If it's very important I may as well know what it is, Renn, since odds are if anyone will run into it it'll be me," I said.

Renn slowly nodded. "A silver coin. One that supposedly sings," she said.

I frowned at that, and the way she had answered me.

She had spoken with a slight tone of hesitation. And not just because she knew I hated speaking of prophecies, and the things they entail.

But it was likely just because she was omitting something. Something that I didn't want to know. Which was fine. She had told me enough.

"A coin...? That sings? What's that mean?" Jelti asked.

"I'm to assume she means literally. It must make music of some kind," Randle said gently, unbothered by learning of a prophecy.

Renn nodded. "Yeah! Isn't that weird...? I thought maybe she meant the sound metal makes when you clang it together just right, but nope? She means actual singing," Renn said excitedly.

I sighed at her. "Well, there are coins in the box. Any of them singing?" I asked as I stepped forward.

For a moment I watched Randle and the two women gather up all the coins, even the non-silver ones. They all frowned as they studied each one, lifting them to their ears or looking for anything odd about them.

"I uh... don't hear anything? Just in case I suppose I'll take them all to the Chronicler. Maybe it's something only a saint can hear," Jelti said.

"Ah. I had not thought of that," Renn said with a quick nod.

Please.

I kept my own thoughts to myself though as Jelti put all the coins back into the box, and then lifted it up. "You okay with me taking this then, Vim?" she asked.

"Hm? Yeah? Go do what you have to," I said.

She smiled a little sadly and nodded. "Later Renn..." Then she hesitated and glanced at Randle, who she then pursed her lips at. "Randle..." she then added, and then hurried off.

Renn glanced around a bit, having noticed Jelti's oddness, and Randle sighed softly as Jelti left the room and hurried down the hallway.

"I never once in all my years thought I'd be a man that scared people with his mere presence," Randle said softly.

"It's fun huh?" I said.

Randle smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Please Vim. Even for you that was in poor taste."

"Yeah...! Don't be mean, Vim," Renn agreed.

I sighed at the two and glanced at the nearby hole in the wall. I knew I'd need to fix it, since this library was one of the ones that humans weren't really allowed into. But I also knew boarding it back up right now might just be more pain than it was worth. I wasn't sure yet if I would need to check it again later, after all.

"Did anything new come up, concerning the monarch, Renn?" I asked before Randle could allow his self-pity to become the focus.

"Huh...?" Renn startled, and then I heard her ears flutter beneath her hat again. "No. She, The Chronicler, is actually very upset Vim. She keeps interrogating her people, to the point that Mapple and others like Tenure are worried. I'm not sure why a singing coin is so important, Vim, but it must be with the way she's acting," Renn said.

Randle shook his head. "No. The Chronicler, like her siblings and ilk, get like this when one of their prophecies fail them. What you're seeing Renn is not her panicking but her lashing out because she, like the rest of them, cannot comprehend that their dreams are not foolproof," Randle said.

I nodded. "I do believe that's the smartest thing you've ever said in my presence," I said.

Randle ignored me and gestured lightly at Renn with a tired arm. "The coin could well be important, I'm not saying that, but don't for one moment believe her actions right now aren't motivated by emotions. And this is not a man scorned recently by her saying this. I could give you hundreds of instances where she and those like her did the exact same things, because their prophecies ended up being wrong or misplaced. Most of them they end up blaming Vim on, to be honest," he said with a point at me.

Renn glanced at me, and I shrugged. "I'm an easy thing to blame."

"Are you at fault though?" she asked.

I smiled at her. "I'd love to say yes, but no. Usually I'm not."

"Usually," she said softly.

"Nevertheless, Vim did not kill the monarch. He had no reason to. I'm sure even the Chronicler isn't blaming him for this one," Randle said.

Renn quickly nodded. "Right. She's not. It's kind of weird, actually... she really does trust you Vim, probably more than I can even imagine. How is it someone can be so willing to put their whole trust in you, yet at the same time plot against you?" she asked.

"Because to her she's not plotting against him. She's simply working around his... what they consider to be at least, less than desirable personality traits," Randle said.

"He'd know," I agreed.

She frowned at us, and then gave me an odd smile upon noticing my stare. One that made me flinch, since it was damn near the exact one I had thought of earlier. When thinking of what kind of smile she'd wear when she arrived, teasing me over prophecies I knew not about.

I looked away, like the coward I am, and found Randle absentmindedly scratching at his arm. The missing part of it. About where his elbow would have been.

"So... are you going to say it, or will I?" Randle then said.

"Hm? Say what?" I asked.

Randle though wasn't looking at me, he was instead looking at Renn.

She shifted, and I heard her ears flutter again. This time even stronger than the last. "I'm assuming you mean about the coin," she said softly.

He nodded.

My eyes narrowed as I studied the two. They were staring at each other as if they both knew a dirty secret, and wanted to say it but weren't sure had the right to say it first.

Great.

Renn then looked at me, her frown contorted into one of worry... and she slowly nodded. "Can I... tell you, Vim?" she asked.

"Do I want to know?"

"I believe you should Vim. You always say we should tell you if a prophecy concerns life and death," Randle said.

"Is it really about that, though?" Renn asked.

"From my experience, it's better to expect that it is than to be unpleasantly surprised later," Randle said.

"Wait... if it's really a prophecy, I'm not..." I raised a hand, to stop them, but Renn didn't seem to notice or care. She turned, shifting the spear enough to tap it onto the wooden floor in the process. I noted the way it jolted a bit, and then came to a rest.

Damn if it didn't look good in her hand.

"The letter Celine left for me. She mentions this coin," Renn said.

I flinched. "Renn..." I groaned.

"Listen to her, Vim. Its warning is one worth noting," Randle said.

For a long moment I debated just... leaving. But knew better.

Renn should know by now what it meant to risk my ire. And Randle knew especially. Even in his slightly distressed state he knew better than to tread so lightly.

So...

"Okay... let's hear it," I said.

Renn shifted again, her expression brightening a little as she nodded quickly, as if happy to hear me say so.

"Celine's warning was that when I one day find a silver coin that sings, that I should put it back where I found it," she said.

My eye twitched, and I ignored Randle's heavy stare. He was waiting apprehensively to what I'd say, or do.

Glaring at the excommunicated priest, I did my best to ignore the happy gleam in Renn's eyes. She was waiting apprehensively too.

"How is it you know of this, yet The Chronicler doesn't?" I asked Randle.

"I was the one who preserved Celine's letter to her. I had to re-write it a few times, as to keep it legible, Vim," Randle answered calmly.

"Wait... how'd you know The Chronicler doesn't know about it, Vim?" Renn asked.

"Because if she did she'd not have allowed you or I to participate in the looking for it. Because she'd know we'd not give it to her, then," I said.

"Ah..." Renn nodded, as if that made sense.

I sighed a little, since it confirmed for a fact that Celine had indeed left Renn prophecies.

I wonder how many...?

"So... conflicting prophecies," I said.

"Interesting, isn't it?" Randle nodded.

No. Not really.

"You have no idea, Vim," Renn though said.

Glancing at her, and her happy smirk, I reached up to clasp my face. As to squeeze it, and block her grin from my sight.

That smile told me more than words could.

This coin was not all she's learned of, it seemed.

"Have mercy," I begged.

She giggled at me.

Chapter 434 Renn – To Reflect and be Reflected

Hurrying up the stairs, I quickly walked down the hallway to our room.

I found Vim in the room, but not on the bed. He was instead sitting at the desk with a bunch of little wooden and metal pieces in front of him. He was making something again, and he had a little curved knife that was paused in the air as he glanced at me.

"Renn," he greeted me, and I felt a huge smile plant itself on my face as I entered the room.

"Angie and the rest left for the night," I said as I studied the little things he was working on. They weren't familiar to me, so they weren't my pins or anything... but there were lots of little pieces. I wonder what he was making?

"Hm. It did suddenly get quiet," he noted.

I nodded. It had. "I'm actually really glad, Vim. These last few hours almost felt... normal. Everyone was happy, talking normally, and there wasn't any bad drama or yelling or anything. It was as if nothing at all was going on, and all was well," I said.

"People adapt quickly Renn. You all had your weeks of drama, now it's time to return to normal life. Or at least, attempt to do so," Vim said.

Right... "Define normal," I said as I glanced at the bed. It was made, which meant Vim had made it. I had left it in a little bit of a mess this morning.

Vim didn't define it for me as he went back to messing with his little objects. I heard him shave some wood with his knife as I walked over to the nearby windows that led to the balcony. I glanced out them, to see the courtyard and gate below in the distance.

It was shut, and no one was there.

My tail squirmed for a moment as I studied the gate, as if it was odd for some reason. It wasn't, of course, it looked the same as it had since I first saw it... but it still kept my eyes for some odd reason.

Why was it, I wonder? Was it because we were going to leave soon, so I wanted to remember such little details? Just in case we never returned here again? Or was it because the gate was something of a semblance of meaning to me? What if the gate meant something to me, deep down, like... this strange feeling of loneliness I now had, now that everyone had left?

"What are you stressing over?"

I tilted my head and turned around, as to look at Vim's back. He looked... oddly fitting sitting there in that chair. It was a wooden and plain one, but had a cushion on it. That cushion didn't fit him, really. "Is it that obvious?" I asked.

How had he noticed? I knew I had likely sounded happy, and had undoubtedly looked it, moments ago. I had felt my smile, and heard my joy in my own voice. I had vastly enjoyed the dinner I had just participated in with everyone. It had been their way of saying goodbye, since the two of us were to leave in the morning. For real this time.

I had enjoyed every moment of it. Everyone had come, though certain members hadn't stayed for long. A few of the human members had even come, such as Oplar's girls. Laura particularly, as to remind me to keep an eye out for a potential mate for her.

"I've come to believe you tackle stress and worry on purpose, after experiencing great happiness. As if it's your way of washing such euphoria down, or something," Vim said as he lifted one of his little projects up, as to stare at it closely.

Smirking at that, I stepped away from the balcony windows and towards him... but instead of approaching him, I instead paused in front of the mirror.

Studying myself, and the way my tail twitched behind me... I wondered why I hadn't changed much since our last visit.

Honestly it wasn't just the last visit, the one a few months ago, but even the visit before, years ago. I looked nearly the same. My hair was a little different, as was the smile on my face and my tail was smoother... thanks to my constant combing of it, but...

"Have I changed, Vim?" I asked him as I turned a little, to see my side and back in the mirror a little better.

"Hm?" he turned, to see what I meant and what I was doing... and then frowned at me. "You mean appearance wise?" he asked.

I nodded. I knew I'd likely changed a lot, personality wise, but... "I don't think I look any different at all? I mean... maybe a few little marks and stuff, like on my cheek," I said as I reached up to touch the very faint scar on my left cheek. From when I had startled Vim at Kaley's Grotto, and got hurt from the box he had shattered on accident. "But otherwise I look the same!" I said as I felt more and more like it was confirmed.

"It's only been a few years, Renn. You're very thick in the blood, you'll not change much... if it all, really. Odds are you won't change at all until something drastic happens, or you near the end of your years," he said.

"Drastic?" I asked. What'd he mean by that? A loss of an arm, maybe, like Randle?

"Pregnancy, or extreme stress and wounds. Something to severely affect your inner workings," Vim said calmly.

I blinked at that and glanced back at the mirror.

Pregnancy...

Taking that into account I began to undress.

Since I'd spent the last few hours here, safe in the mansio, I hadn't been wearing my outer gear. None of the leathers, or my hat or anything. But I was still wearing multiple layers, since it was still cold enough to warrant it. So as I undressed, I took my time to check in the mirror each time I removed a piece of clothing. As to see if I noticed any changes from my memories of my previous years.

"Renn... what are you doing?" Vim asked as I took off my undershirt.

"I want to compare myself," I said.

"Naked," he stated.

I nodded as I went to take off my lower layers too. "Yeah. I did last time I was here too. Or well, not the last time before we went to Lilly's. The time before that. There's no point comparing myself from a few months ago, I think," I said.

"Hm..." Vim shook his head and turned back around, to refocus on his little projects as I got naked.

"Worried I was doing this because you mentioned pregnancy?" I asked, teasing him a little.

"Not really. This place fits a few of your requests but fails several more. I know you don't want anything to happen here," he said calmly.

Although Vim might not have been trying to outright tease me back, I still felt as if it had been one of his best attempts yet. I felt not just my face flush, but most of my body, as I glared at the back of his head for a moment.

What a jerk, using my own words and emotions against me like that! Especially since it made me want to laugh and giggle over it!

Looking away from him, I refocused on the mirror and its reflection. I stepped over to it, and hummed as I glanced my body up and down.

Yep... I had a few more faint scars that I hadn't before, mostly thanks to the events in Lumen, but I looked pretty much the same...

I gripped a few parts of my body, trying to tell if I had gained or lost weight... and couldn't see or feel any different from the me in my memories of not just a couple years ago, but many.

"Seems almost wrong, to be honest, but I guess that's just how it is," I said lightly.

"Funny," Vim scoffed.

Glancing at him, I smirked. "Right. You never change at all. Not even your hair... actually you did say one time your hair and nails did grow, just slowly. Does that mean if I wait long enough you could grow out your hair, Vim?" I asked.

"Yes. Back during the wars I had long enough hair to tie it up," he said.

"Huh? Really?"

He nodded as he turned a little, as to look at me. "Not very long, but it reached my shoulders when not tied up, yes."

"So... does that mean you went that long without it getting burnt or cut?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh. No, my hair will re-grow to the current state it's at, Renn. So if it was long and got all burnt off or something, it'd just grow back to its long length until it was back to normal. So that isn't why it's short now," he said.

Frowning at him, I pointed at him. "Then why's it short now?" I asked, a little offended. I wanted to see him with longer hair!

"Because I want it to be?"

"Why!?"

"It's better this way. I don't have to deal with it, don't even need to comb it, and this era most men have shorter hair. Only those in the clergy have longer hair, like Randle," Vim said.

Gah! "So if I make longer hair more expected and normal in today's culture you'll let your hair grow out again?" I asked.

Vim's eyes narrowed a bit. "Well... yes... I suppose. As to blend in better, yes."

"Fine," I nodded and huffed... though wasn't really sure how I'd accomplish it.

He smirked at me. "You're an odd one, Renn."

"Says you? If we normal non-humans break the rules of normalcy I don't even know what to say you do to them," I said as I looked back to the mirror. I turned a bit, as to look at the spot where my tail came from.

Vim was silent for a moment as I checked my body for anything odd or out of place, and decided all was well. It was a little upsetting that I didn't see any real visible differences between the me now and the one in my memories... but as Vim said, it was normal for those like me.

If anything seeing a difference would likely be a bad sign. Or at least a worrying one.

Though not if it was because I was pregnant...

"Hey Vim," I spoke up a little as I studied my frame from the side, and imagine my belly growing larger.

"Hm?"

"You were right you know?" I told him, as to slightly distract myself from my thoughts. They were straying into places I didn't want to focus on at the moment.

"About?"

"Their prophecies. The Chronicler brought up a few times while I was with her and Mapple that she was looking forward to seeing my children soon. You were right. She thinks I'm pregnant, or about to be," I said as I glanced at the mirror again, imagining it.

"Is that why you spent so much time with her?" he asked gently.

I nodded. "I wanted to... understand. I want to hate her, them, for what they are doing... yet at the same time, I wanted to know why you seem to be so forgiving when it concerns them. It's because even if they're doing it for the wrong reasons, or because they're stupid, at the end of the day... they just want what's best for themselves and our people. To them they're not doing anything wrong, they're just trying to help all of us in their own way," I said.

"Am I hearing genuine understanding, or the words of an adorable newly-wed wife who likes to hear of happy prophecies?" Vim asked.

My whole body tensed a little as I felt blood rush to my face. "Don't call me out like that!" I shouted, a little loudly.

He chuckled at me as I groaned. How does he realize such things so easily! Was I that easy to read!? Gosh!

"I'm still upset with them! Don't get it wrong, Vim! I just... well..." I waved my hands around a little, unsure of what to say or how to say it. I felt flustered now!

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

"Yes. It's hard to actually hate them, because they genuinely aren't hurting anyone on purpose," Vim said for me.

I nodded. "Yeah... The Chronicler sees Light as some kind of boss. She's worried Light will be upset with her, for allowing the monarch's death before it fulfilled its purpose. She's given me letters to give her, I think she's sending apologies and stuff," I said.

Vim was quiet for a moment, and then sighed at me. "So Light really is being seen as the new leader then," he said.

"Seems so," I said.

Vim didn't seem to like that much. He frowned in a way that told me he was bothered, but I wasn't sure how deeply just yet. I studied his face for a moment, and noticed he had a bit of dust in his hair, near his ear. It was a tiny little bunch, barely noticeable. Odds are it was from when he was crawling in that monarch's nest.

"Did you play along then? When she spoke of such prophecies, or about you being pregnant?" Vim then asked as he re-focused on me.

Standing up a little straighter I nodded. "Yeah. I uh... didn't confirm it or anything, but I didn't deny it too. I just... blushed and played it off, as I would, normally anyway, I think," I said. Honestly The Chronicler hadn't even really spoken about it too deeply, or much. The times she had done so had just been off-handed comments while she grumbled or spoke of other things.

"Were many prophecies mentioned?" he asked further.

"Just a couple. Want me to tell you of them?" I asked.

"No."

"You had me tell you about the coin," I countered.

"In one perspective that prophecy is a failed one, since the monarch is now dead," he said.

"The one I told you had been about me though, not that little creature," I clarified.

Vim's eye twitched. "Let me indulge in my little loopholes Renn, stop ruining it for me."

Oh! I nodded quickly. "Okay...!"

He sighed, and for a moment looked away. Then he looked back. "I do suppose we need to lay down some ground rules, don't we?" he asked.

"About everything? Yes. We do."

"Right... we'll do that on our trip to the Smithy," he said.

"Please!" I nodded quickly, happy to hear it.

Gosh, finally! There were many things we needed to talk about, more than just the prophecies! Thank goodness he was finally willing to do so!

"Well... that all being said please keep putting up the act Renn. Though it won't last long, they'll start to question and notice once months and months go by and your belly doesn't change," he said.

"We could always fix that," I dared to say.

Vim ignored me, completely. "Also... we need to talk about your hearing of prophecies, Renn."

My ears were still, but my tail squirmed wildly to make up for it. "What... do you mean?" I asked.

Vim nodded gently at me. "I do not, nor ever will, want to limit you. Free will is absolute. Especially so, even, for you."

"You're... asking me to do what you do? To avoid or not allow them to be told to me?" I asked.

My husband slowly shook his head. "No, Renn... I don't want that. I do not like prophecies, I have my own rules about them, but I'm not a fool. I know that they're powerful tools, and can even save lives when handled properly. I myself have saved countless lives, or stopped terrible disasters, thanks to them. During the wars I had used them too, they had been some of the best weapons I had at the time against the gods," Vim said. My ears finally fluttered. He didn't notice, or if he did didn't show it as he continued. "So no. I'll never force you to live by my rules. If I was that type of man, I'd already have instilled them into you. I want you to do what makes you happy, Renn, no matter what it is."

For a long moment I stood there, suddenly feeling more naked than I actually was. Then I took a small breath and nodded. "You're saying I'm free to choose. If I involve myself with them or not," I said.

"Obviously."

"Then why bring it up, Vim?" I asked softly.

"Because I want you to know where I stand on it. That I'm okay with it. We'll... set some rules for each other, for when how and why you should tell me of them and such, but for now just know I'm okay with it."

"Yet it bothers you deeply, doesn't it?" I asked.

"Of course it does? But so does you flirting with pretty women, or falling in love with humans. You do many things that scare me, why should this be any different?" he asked.

I laughed at him. "Yes, my flirting is so terrible and world changing as prophecies," I said. I wonder who he was speaking of?

"It is!"

The two of us smiled at each other for a moment, and I found myself no longer feeling naked. I liked the odd feeling I had all of a sudden, I felt warm and...

Reaching up a little, I touched my chest and wondered what this feeling was. It wasn't joy, or pleasure, but... maybe some form of relief?

I wonder why I felt relief such as this all of a sudden? Was it just because he just told me that he was okay with me learning about prophecies...? In a way I had already known such a thing, what with his belief in free will, so... why?

Pondering it for a bit, I decided to put the feeling and thoughts aside for a moment and ponder them later. I needed to take advantage of this moment, this atmosphere, before it was ruined. By my own design, or another's.

"Do saints share their dreams?" I asked, going back to topic.

"Dreams? Their prophecies you mean?" he asked.

I nodded.

"No. Not once have I ever heard, or been shown proof otherwise. Each saint receives their own prophecies. Their own dreams. A saint can have the same dream again and again, for their whole lives even, but they are theirs alone. However, other saints can have prophecies about the same things. Take your Elaine's prophecy for example, of that chicken monarch. The one that led us to her. She saw its birth, and the inferno that came from it. Other saints will likely, if not already have, prophecies of that same monarch. They though will see different fires, or from different locations and times. No one else other than Elaine will have had, or will have, a dream about that monarch's birth," Vim explained as I looked back at the mirror.

Shifting a little, I wondered how it felt to have a belly reach out as far as they did. I bet it felt silly. "Why is that? Aren't they all from the gods?" I asked.

"Honestly Renn I don't know. It is odd, and I've thought long and hard about it as have others. There are many theories, but none seem valid to me. In my perspective they're all connected to the same divine conduit, if by different means. That shared connection should justify the ability to share prophecies... yet at the same time, the connection also justifies their lack of it. If their dreams really are all given by a power or god, then that same power instilling such rules makes a lot of sense even if we can't comprehend the reason for such a rule," Vim said.

Huh... he was being rather open about this. I dared a glance at him, and found him studying my body almost as heavily as I had just been doing. I looked away, back to the mirror, as to try and hide the slight blush that followed.

"So... what separates a normal dream from a prophetic one?" I asked.

"Their lucidity. The prophetic dreams are very vivid. So real that during the dream, during the prophecy, the saints don't even realize it's a dream. Even though they should. It's not until they wake up that they realize they had just had a dream, and not actually living those moments. It's why so many die or break while young, they can't comprehend or handle the things they see and experience. Imagine living a hell, or experiencing a brutal death, while very young. It's one of the reasons most saints are... odd or weird. They usually need to mature quickly as to withstand the mental burden, and it corrupts and skews their personalities in the process," Vim explained.

"Aren't all dreams vivid...?"

Vim was quiet for a moment, long enough to be odd, so I glanced at him again... and found him frowning at me.

At first I thought, with a slight panic, that he had noticed something odd about my naked body... but instead he simply shifted a little as to better face me. "You're an oddity Renn. I'm sorry for not taking that into account. Odds are your dreams are... very vivid. Thanks to your mind. A normal person's dream, a normal dream, is hazy and only partially remembered. Most people don't even remember their dreams at all, and some don't even dream in the first place," he said.

"Don't dream? How is that possible?" I asked.

"Rather easily. It can be from exhaustion, or trauma, or who knows what else."

"Hm..." I frowned at him, and felt my tail squirm as we stared at each other for a moment.

Vim didn't show if he was dreaming or not, when he did sleep, but he's told me he did. Though he said he had nightmares. Terrible ones.

My own nightmares were very memorable. I occasionally had dreams that I did forget... but the real bad ones seemed to never disappear from my mind. Though lately I've not had such dreams, anywhere near them in fact.

Actually...

Glancing at the bed, I wondered if this bed was in fact one of the last places I'd had such a nightmare. Though I had some bad dreams since, such as when we were at Lumen or when Vim and I were separated... none of them had actually been what I'd consider nightmares. At least, not like the ones that terrified me and I kept locked away deep in a dark corner in my mind.

"You're the one who brought it up, and now you're all sad. What's wrong Renn? Why ask such a thing?" Vim asked.

My ears fluttered as I nodded and smiled. I liked it when Vim noticed such things. "I was just thinking of how long it's been since I've had one of my nightmares," I said.

"Ah..." Vim thought for a moment and crossed his arms. "You used to have them a lot; yes... you had some during your fever in the south. And you've whined and stuff a few times since, but probably not as bad as you used to," he said as he pondered his memories.

My smile warmed. "Whined?" I asked.

"You sometimes let out a small whine. Lately though you just giggle and slobber all over, which I'll be honest I'm not sure which is worse," he said, teasing me a little.

"Slobber!" I laughed at that. I knew I did, since I sometimes woke up and had to wipe my face... or whatever I was sleeping on, like a pillow or him.

"So? Why the question, Renn?" Vim asked, forcing us away from this lovely little topic.

"Ah... you mean the prophecies? I was just wondering if the prophecy The Chronicler had about the coin is the same as the one Celine gave me," I said.

"No. It's likely not. Why'd you think such a thing?" he asked.

I noted the way he asked. He was trying to see where and how I had come to such a conclusion.

"The Chronicler asked me again to find it, or if you found it to make sure you gave it to her. She seems to really firmly believe it is needed to be found, and soon," I said.

"And Celine told you to put it back where you found it, implying to leave it be," Vim said.

I nodded, and then noticed Vim's eyes slide downward from my own, though only for a few moments. I felt a little stiff all of a sudden as I wondered where he had looked for a moment. My breasts? Shoulders? Stomach? Thigh again, or my tail maybe?

Of course I did not mind Vim looking at me. In fact... I wished he'd do so more often. But it also worried me, a little too much to be honest, that he found certain parts of me... disappointing. Over our journey together so far, I've seen Vim stare and flirt with many women. But all had been different. None had been similar enough to give me an idea of his true preferences, or desires. And I'm too scared to ask him about such things even though I knew he'd likely answer me honestly if I did. But there was one thing he seemed to always notice, or point out, when he had an opportunity... or even when he didn't really mean to.

And that was women with large breasts.

Though, when he did do so he usually did it in a way as if he was teasing me. In a playful way. So I wasn't entirely sure yet if such things were what he really liked the most or not, or if he was just using them to tease me since he knew I stressed over his noticing of them.

I didn't like such thoughts, so I tossed them aside and gestured at Vim with a light wave.

"Would you do me a favor Vim?" I asked.

His chair made a small noise as he tilted his head.

"Would you stand next to me? I want to see our reflection," I asked.

For a moment Vim only frowned at me, but then he slowly stood. "Not what I expected, but sure."

"What did you expect?" I asked happily as I stepped back a bit, as to stand where I thought would be best for what I wanted to do.

"Here fine?" he asked as he took his place beside me, and I nodded as I looked to the mirror.

And found myself a little embarrassed again.

I was naked. He wasn't. It made us look odd. But I put aside that oddness for a moment as to study myself next to Vim.

"You feel taller than me sometimes, yet it seems with my ears we are about the same height," I said as I had my left ear flutter, to better display such a fact.

Vim nodded.

Shifting a little, I reached over and grabbed his hand. I enjoyed the way we looked comfortable holding hands, even with Vim smirking gently at me.

I've seen a lot of partners look... a little off when standing beside one another, holding hands. Because one was too tall, or another too wide. It seemed we looked as comfortable as I felt when holding his hand, which was good.

"What are you searching for Renn?"

Stepping a little closer to him, I laid my head against his shoulder... or at least, as best I could. It was a little odd at this angle.

"Everyone lately has been talking about how we flirt and act funny together, I'm just... trying to see what they see," I told him.

Honestly what I was more-so looking for was what made people whisper quietly about their jealous feelings when they saw us. I'd heard it from more than just a few people recently, and have even heard it from passer-by's when we were out walking and traveling.

What did they see to make them so jealous? We looked like a couple, sure, but was that really something to be so envious of? Many people had partners. Most did, in fact. Yet even those who did

have someone else, still sometimes mentioned such jealousy. So... what was it? Where was it? Could I even see it if I tried?

Vim smirked at that and then blew into my ears. Not too roughly, but thanks to how close we had been the tiny little blow of air had been very effective. I let out a little yelp as I shifted away, my ears fluttering as they began to itch like mad.

"Vim!" I shouted as I reached up to brush my ears and hair. I felt like I had a bunch of bugs in them now!

He chuckled at me, but didn't release my hand... though I hadn't released his either. "Who cares what they see, Renn?" he asked.

"Gosh... I just wanted to know..." I mumbled as I kept itching my ears. Not because they were still bothered, but because it was a good excuse to hide the huge smirk that wanted to plant itself on my face.

I wanted to be upset with him, not fall for that dumb smile on his face!

Then, before I could say more, Vim pulled me over towards him. He spun me around a bit, until I ended up standing right in front of him, with my back turned to him and facing the mirror.

"Vim?" I laughed a little, wondering what he was up to, as he then wrapped me in a hug from behind. It was slightly awkward, since we still held hands, but he accomplished it... and then...

Staring into the mirror, I felt the world become a little quiet as I stared at something I'd never seen before.

It was still a little silly, since I was naked and he wasn't, but suddenly the scene reflected in the mirror was... different. We were still standing together. We still looked comfortable, and serene. We still held hands, and we were both still smiling even! But... it was now... sensual, yet not. It was in fact something I'd seen many times throughout my life, though only from afar and only rarely.

He was holding me as if I was the only thing worth holding in the whole world, and somehow without even doing anything... I made it look like I was worth it, and belonged in his arms.

"Well?" Vim asked, smiling gently at me in the mirror.

"I see it," I admitted... as I sighed a little in defeat.

Anyone could.

Chapter 435 Vim – Southeast Expectations

"I can't wait to see another baby!" Renn happily said as we left Telmik's gate behind.

I slowed a little, frowning at her as I wondered what the hell she was on about now. Was she trying to tease me again about those stupid prophecies...?

"Ah... yes. Pram's baby will have long been born by now," I said as I remembered. She had indeed been pregnant last time we'd been there, only a short time away from giving birth.

"Another so quickly! I wonder who will be next? Someone at Lumen? Landi?" Renn giggled happily as she spoke, fully excited.

Right... many such possibilities...

Renn turned, as to look at me, and I noticed the way the spear on her back moved. It was angled at the right spot that she'd not accidentally poke anyone's eye out with it, even if she spun around without warning, but it was still a little dangerous. But it was better than having the spear's tip pointed downward, since unlike a normal spear it couldn't be properly sheathed.

There was nothing that spear's blade couldn't slice apart, so there was no point wrapping it or covering it. At least, not for purpose. It was still covered, with a small leather pouch-like piece, if just for appearance only.

"Where were all the babies during our last trip, Vim? It's not fair!" she asked.

"Gestating."

"What's that?"

"Being formed. In the bellies. Or being made," I said.

Renn blushed at me, and then looked away as she giggled lightly. I basked in both her sounds and her presence as we drew farther and farther from the large entry gate into Telmik. It wasn't too noisy, being so early in the morning, but there were still people out and about. In fact Renn and I were being some of the more noisier patrons on the road at the moment. I was a little surprised to see how few carts and people were on the main road we were on, heading southeast.

"We're going to make a small stop before you get to hold your next baby, though," I warned her.

"Hm? We are? Last time we only stopped at Trek's place, and well..." Renn went a little quiet at that.

"I received a request. There's a pair of birds that live in a smaller river village a few days south, which is why we're leaving this way. We'll stop there then head back north as we head east. Passing through Nebl's mountain as we do," I said.

"Are there a lot of members living around Telmik, Vim? I met Cari and her husband, supposedly they live in one of the nearby towns too," Renn asked.

"Cari?" I asked.

"Cari and Apso. They're dogs, or some kind of them," Renn reminded me.

Right. The ones that blame me for their lack of children, for whatever reason. "There's a couple dozen, actually. Some don't like the hustle and bustle of Telmik, others like Apso and his wife don't like the Cathedral or its faith so live apart because of that instead. I don't visit any of them too often, since they live so close to Telmik and because they're so adapted and capable of living amongst humans that I don't really need to worry about them. Same for folks near Lumen, there's actually a few dozen families that live near them too, mostly around the inland sea," I said.

"Like Kevin the boatman," Renn said with a nod.

I nodded back. "Yeah. Like him." Had she ever met him?

She hummed as we passed a smaller cart. One with only a single horse and man, one who wasn't even on the cart or the horse pulling it. He studied us for a moment as we passed each other, but only a moment.

"You studied all those maps and don't remember such things?" I asked. Not only had she studied Windle's, she's now studied Randle's and The Chronicler's too. In a way she was likely one of the few left who knew everyone's locations and numbers anymore.

"I do of course; I just wanted to confirm it. There are discrepancies, Vim," she said.

"Discrepancies...?" I asked.

She nodded as she raised her hands, as if to start counting them off. One by one. Instead though, luckily, she didn't. "Windle's has some that the Chronicler's doesn't. Randle's lacks ones from both of the others, but seems to have the most up to date numbers for certain locations. There's dozens of places

that all have different numbers between the three different maps, such as at the Bell Church or something," Renn said.

"Hm... just information not being properly distributed, I suppose," I said.

"Hopefully," she stated.

Right...

"Did that fake saint's map have anything too odd about it? Or did it include Light's numbers, you think?" I asked.

"I thought of that, which is why I asked her to let me see it. She has a few locations along the coast that the others don't have, but they all just had one or two members there. I didn't, or couldn't tell at least, of any obvious number differences to tell me where Light and her people are. I thought maybe that was why her numbers were different Vim, but the numbers that are off are only by ones and twos. Nothing too major," Renn said.

"So possibly Light and the rest, but likely not," I said. Since Light had dozens of people with her, supposedly.

Renn nodded. "I'm looking forward to meeting her, by the way. I'm not sure what to expect, honestly, so it's exciting!" Renn told me.

I smirked at that. "Have fun with that."

"I will!"

I bet you will.

We walked for a bit in silence, and not because we were nearing anyone. There was some distance between us and the next group down the way, and no one was behind us. The closest person behind us was a large wagon, one too big to ever really catch up to us. It was being pulled by several oxen.

Glancing at it, and the large capital of Telmik that loomed behind it... I wondered why I felt restless.

I was relieved to leave, of course. Every moment spent in that stupid town only gave opportunity to disaster. That little monarch's death was proof of that. The sooner I escaped the sooner I kept the world at peace.

Yet... I felt like it was a mistake, somehow.

Usually I didn't feel like this when leaving the Cathedral. Hopefully I wasn't making a mistake by leaving... but I had to, didn't I? Not only did I have to confront Light and the rest, I did still have duties to attend as the protector. I had two letters, one of which we were heading to handle as we speak. It was not fair to allow them to gather dust without just reason.

And although that monarch's death had been startling... it had not been too disastrous. We had not found the perpetrator, of course, but I had spent a week longer there just in case. No new information, or any other event, had occurred while there. In fact the only thing that had happened was my wife becoming more and more involved in the very people I was trying to keep her away from.

Renn had spent more time with the Chronicler and her people than I had wanted her to. To such a point even Randle and others had brought it up to me, asking if I was sure letting her spend so much time with them was wise.

Well... no. It wasn't. But what was I supposed to do about it?

Renn was free to do whatever she wanted. That was kind of the point.

Plus... she knew better than to get herself too involved in something dangerous. At least, I was sincerely hoping she did.

I'd never really thought of it much, but maybe I was a bad influence... what if Renn ignored certain dangers, ones that should be obvious, because of me?

She was my wife. Plus I was the protector. Of non-humans. So what if she ignored, or at least didn't take as seriously, certain threats because of it? What if she simply assumed she'd always be safe, thanks to me being near her, and thus risked her life needlessly?

Or what if my nonchalant and aloof attitude towards certain things also influenced her... making her too act similarly? Even though she shouldn't, being normal?

"Vim?"

I blinked and glanced at her, finding her a little closer than before. Not so close that I expected her to grab my arm, but close enough the spear was only a foot or so from my head. I was in no danger, even if it did stab me, but maybe I should think of a better alternative for her. I had thought making it so she could carry it on her back would ensure she'd be more comfortable, but if she accidentally hurt someone carelessly she'd likely weep...

"Yeah?"

"No matter what happens... will you be okay?" she asked all of a sudden.

I frowned at her, since she had spoken rather seriously. Her current tone, and demeanor, were a far cry from the jubilant giddiness she had earlier. I wonder what had caused her mind to drift so drastically? Or was she just being her typical pendulum self, or if us leaving Telmik and being truly alone had simply given her the opportunity to ask a question she's been simmering for days now?

"Okay how? Physically? I'm always okay, regretfully," I said.

Renn softly smiled, but it looked like a sad one, as she slowed a little as to walk even closer to me. "You plan to step down, no matter what," she verified.

I nodded slowly. "Yes...?"

"And your plan to help Randle and Angie... it's something you'll do, but you have no plans to linger there always. So that too is just a temporary measure," she continued.

Wondering where she was going with this, I nodded again. "Yes."

"So... that means you're going to willingly allow the members who won't ask you for help anymore, to be on their own... right?" she asked.

Ah. So this was where she was going. I nodded once more. "Yes Renn. I'll be okay with stepping aside, knowing that people will likely get hurt or die because of it," I told her.

Renn's face contorted into one of utter worry and hurt. "Really Vim? How could you say that?"

"Because I can...? Have you never thought of it, Renn? Look at all I know. All I'm capable of. Do you know how many lives are needlessly lost around me at any given moment? Regardless of the type? How many millions of humans have died from famine, or disease? How many non-humans from their lack of knowledge? I stand back all the time and don't save lives every day which I could with ease. Why would this be any different?" I asked her.

Renn slowed to a stop, and I realized we hadn't had such a conversation before. Or if we had, it had not been very in-depth or honest. A shame and my own fault. Something like this should have been brought up ages ago.

"I'll not lie and say it doesn't bother me, or weigh on my soul even... but I cannot save everyone, and I also know not to try. When you try to save everyone, no one gets saved," I added softly while staring into her beautiful eyes. They weren't judging me, but by my parents I could see the hurt. The pain. The sorrow. The disappointment.

"You focus on too many, you miss the few," she whispered.

Hm? "Yes. A very apt way of saying it," I said, wondering where she's heard that before.

This story originates from Royal Road. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

"But... You've been watching over all these people for so long, Vim. Hundreds of years. And you're doing so because of the guilt from your mistake right? Why the sudden change?" she asked.

"Because I know nothing lasts forever. It might sound... hypocritical, coming from the closest thing to an immortal there is, but it's the truth. Nothing lasts forever. Lives. Ideals. Promises... nothing," I said softly. I omitted love, since I knew she'd get upset with me if I said such a thing. Especially since it wasn't true. Love could last forever, I had proof of that. I've seen it many times outlast even the minds and bodies of where it inhabited.

"What about love?" she then asked, smiling gently at me.

"Reading my mind are you?" I asked back.

She blinked and frowned as she shook her head. "No? I don't know how. You said that so seriously, is there a way to do it?" she asked, suddenly excited over the idea.

"No. Thank goodness. Even the saints who had been gifted such abilities could not do so perfectly, or without great cost. No, the reason I said that was because I was indeed thinking of love. I had not included it in that list, because I believe it to be one of the few things that can last forever. Or at least, close enough to be included in such a phrase," I said.

She smiled at me in a way that almost made me want to kiss her. "That's lovely Vim."

I shrugged. "I had not meant it to be that way. It is the simple truth. I've watched people thousands of years old, so old their very minds and bodies have deteriorated and broken against their own wills... yet still they remember and cling to their love. Whether it be of their parents, siblings, children, or partners matters not. I've witnessed it. Love can indeed outlast even time," I said.

"Why is that, you think?" she asked as we returned to walking.

I was a little surprised for her to do so, but happy too. I joined her, and noted the way she lingered close to me. She likely wanted me to take her hand.

Before I did though, I answered her question. "My theory is its simple purity. Hate erodes. Greed is a desire that always leaves one unfulfilled, same with lust and pride and all that... so at the end, when everything else fails us like our minds and bodies we cling to the one thing that remains. Love," I said.

"You speak of people you've watched decay over the years. Over centuries," she whispered.

I nodded. "Who else, what else even?" I asked.

"Gods, maybe," she whispered again.

Ignoring her tiny whisper, since she had said it quietly enough to justify doing so, I went ahead and grabbed her hand. She turned a little, smiled happily at me, and then looked back ahead.

"Anyway... yes, Renn. I'll be able to step away if it comes to it. Though I do hope it is for the right reason," I told her.

"Do you like to help people Vim...? You seem to not mind doing so, even for those we don't have to. Like the humans we occasionally help," Renn asked softly.

For a small moment I frowned at that. "I do? I don't know if I've ever told you before Renn, but I was brought up to be a teacher. A leader. A general, as much as a builder. Basically it was instilled in me that since I was born with such mighty gifts, I should pity and be merciful to those who did not get as many. My mother called it noblesse oblige, my father called the obligation of the haut monde," I said.

"Hot what?" Renn asked with a smile.

"Basically he was teasing my mother. He didn't like fancy words. It means the same thing as my mother's, that the privileged should be generous with those less fortunate. I'm privileged, being what I am, so I should always help and be gentle with everyone else... so they believed," I said, explaining.

"Hm... a source of your rules then," she noted.

I nodded. "One of the main ones, yes."

"Do... do you consider me to be privileged Vim? Or am I as pitiful as the rest?" Renn then asked.

Slowing a little at that, I glanced at her and found her staring at me in a way that bothered me.

She had not meant that as a joke at all. She had asked that rather sincerely.

"I pity you in certain ways, Renn... but I do so out of love. My pity is not in the sense that I see you as a lesser being or anything, but rather the simple fact that I wish I could have found you centuries ago," I said honestly.

"Found me...?" she asked softly.

I nodded as a young woman passed us by. I tried not to stare at her too much, since she was an oddity. Such young women traveling alone was not normal, even here in the Nation of the Blind. "I feel regret over your youth. Your upbringing. How your family treated you. And how long it took you to find the

Society, and thus friends. But... to be honest Renn I have the same pity for most our members. Since most have suffered similarly, at least in a way, as you have," I told her.

"So you do pity me like you do the rest, then," she stated.

"Not really, Renn. It might sound like it, but trust me it's different. Let's take Angie for example, since we just said goodbye to her," I said with a gesture behind us. Randle and Angie had been the only ones to see us off this morning. Randle I had understood, but I had been slightly surprised by Angie... until I had seen her and Renn hug each other as they said their goodbyes. They had parted as if siblings, not just friends or acquaintances. "I pity her, and feel bad, for not being able to save her family. For her current life. In my perspective she is clinging to those kids, those orphanages, as a pillar to support herself. There's nothing wrong with it, but I genuinely hate it when our members get entangled in humans. It never ends well, even if there's nothing inherently wrong with it. It makes me sad to think that she'll have to endure heartache and loss over and over again, until it eventually breaks her. She's latched onto something that will keep her alive, from the loneliness and despair from her loss, yet that same cure is a poison," I said, explaining it a little.

Renn deeply nodded. "That's why you panic each time I get close to a human, like Roslyn or Lamp," she said knowingly.

"Yes. It scares me. It makes me pity you. But... do you see me actively trying to fix it? Or really voicing any concerns over it?" I asked her.

Renn thought about it for a moment, and then shook her head. "If anything you're supporting it. You've fully agreed to help Angie and Randle move and set up another orphanage up north," she said.

"Exactly," I said, glad she understood.

"But... Vim, you didn't stop me either. You in fact were supportive with me, too! You helped me with Lamp, you allowed me to be selfish with Roslyn... even Hark and Elisabeth too! You did nothing to stop me!" Renn argued, her voice growing louder for the first time in a moment.

I smirked at her, and her eager voice. She was emotional, yet having fun it seemed. "Yes... but you knew full well my thoughts on it, didn't you?" I asked.

Renn hesitated. "Well... yeah...?"

Shrugging, I gave her a happy smirk as I nodded.

"Wait... you're saying that I'm the only one you do that with...?" she asked.

"As far as I'm aware? Yes? I don't force my will, Renn. On anyone. That's kind of the reason we're in this mess in the first place, isn't it?" I asked her.

She groaned at me. "Somehow I feel cheated!" she said.

"Cheated...?" How so?

"I'm the love of your life, right? Your wife? Why would you not support me as fervently as people who are basically strangers to you?" she asked angrily.

Oh.

I chuckled at her. "Please Renn. I complain, but as you said I've always supported you right? In fact on several occasions I've even broken my own rules, or the Society's, for you. So don't go saying that now," I said.

Her ears made noises under her hat as she made an odd noise and squinted at me. "You... basically have, haven't you?" she admitted.

"I have," I said.

For a small moment she only glared at me... and then sighed and smiled as she returned to facing forward.

I squeezed her hand a little, and gently bumped her arm with my own.

"The entire point I was making Renn... I pity you, but not in the way I do others. My pity for them is more like the one my parents instilled in me. My pity for you is far more powerful, deeper in a way. Plus in other ways I don't pity you at all, you know? If anything I pity myself sometimes," I said, teasing her a little.

"Yes, yes. Because I'm so terrible," she said with a smirk.

"Absolutely horrible."

She laughed at me as a pair of horse-riders neared. They weren't wearing armor, but one had a small flag flying from the saddle. An insignia of one of the noble families in Telmik.

They ignored us as they passed, seemingly in a hurry.

Once Renn stopped staring at them, and they were far away, I gestured lightly at her to get her attention again.

"Please don't forget Renn... I once ran away. For an unknown amount of time. You can call it cowardice, foolishness, cruelty or whatever you want... but it's the truth. I've done it before, and so that means I might do it again," I said gently.

"Mhm... just remember you promised to take me with you next time, Vim," Renn said.

"I did. I will," I promised.

And meant it.

Which was why I was willing to promise something else.

"If the Society does... end up not needing, or wanting me anymore. And I do step down, Renn... in any manner. Then why not give your little idea a try? We can set your little matchmaking inn up near Randle and Lilly. It's a little close to Telmik, but that will be kind of the point I think. You'll want somewhere centralized... and as of right now that's either Telmik or Lumen. And I'd rather not be near the inland sea if we're going to be at odds with them, since they seem to plan on making that their new headquarters," I said.

Renn squeezed my hand. "Really!?" she asked with a hurried whisper.

I nodded. "Yeah? It'll let people still reach out and ask me for help too, if even only under the guise of asking you instead," I said.

"I've thought of that. Making myself the one they talk to, or send letters to. They can hate and fear you all they want, but none of that matters if I'm the one they deal with," she said happily.

"I'm glad we're on the same page," I agreed.

Renn stepped closer, bumping into me. "Plus it'll let me be near Elaine and the rest too!"

Yes. I know. That's why I suggested it. "And Lilly, and Angie, and Twin Hills so you'll be near Lomi too... I'll feel bad about being so far from Berri and the others, but they're already far as it is... and I doubt they'd be willing to relocate even if we asked," I said.

"We should anyway! What if they would, Vim?" Renn asked excitedly, in a way that told me she's likely already thought of such a thing and simply hadn't had the chance to bring it up... or had been afraid to.

"You can. We can. But there's a reason so many of our members are separated Renn, it's not something they usually respond well to. So be gentle when you do press it upon them," I warned her.

She nodded harshly, almost enough so to dislodge her hat. "Right!"

"In fact, even if nothing goes wrong... and I end up staying the protector, or some form of it, why not do it anyway?" I suggested.

Renn's upbeat smirk diminished a little. "Could I though? If you're still the protector, you'll be so busy," she said gently, sounding hurt.

"It's up to you Renn. It's not like we couldn't find a way to do it that allows you to join me in-between people visiting and stuff. Or who knows? Maybe you'll get bored going around doing the same thing forever. Most of the time my little circuits through the Society are boring you know? I travel around for years, fixing houses and delivering letters and stuff. Hardly anything interesting," I said.

"Those boring visits are the best, in my opinion Vim," she said softly.

I shrugged at that. In a way they were mine too, since it meant nothing bad as happening... or had happened. But at the same time I did admit it sometimes got boring. Monotonous, especially. "I suppose

it is different for you. You have a lot more fun visiting than I do. Half the time I just say hello, ask a few questions, fix a few things and then leave. Before you showed up I was sometimes even ignored, even. You recently complained over Sheilla not giving us pancakes... but the entire reason I even remembered her doing so was because that was rare for me. Usually I don't even get invited to dinner or anything," I said.

Renn was quiet all of a sudden as I pondered who else, other than Sheilla and those like Berri or Nebl who were friendlier to me than normal. Only a few names, and even fewer locations, came to mind. And... most were gone now.

Surprisingly I thought of people I'd not remembered in a long time, which somehow made me feel like a jerk.

A tiny sniff drew me from my memories, and I frowned at Renn.

"Renn...?" I asked. What was wrong? Why was she suddenly crying? I quickly glanced around to make sure all was well, and figured it was. There wasn't even anyone near us, only a distant wagon on the horizon in front of us.

"And you say I'm pitiful," she whispered as she reached up to wipe her eyes.

Oh.

Smiling at her, I tugged gently and drew her closer to me. "I didn't mean it like that Renn," I said as we went shoulder to shoulder.

"I know. And I've known it for a long time... I've just been trying to not bring it up," she said as she sniffed again and stopped messing with her eyes and face. Luckily she wasn't actually crying, she had just gotten emotional.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I want you to keep being the protector. If I keep reminding you how much you're disappointed in them all, and how rude and ungrateful they are, you'll just become more dead-set on stepping down," she said simply.

I chuckled at her. "You're going about that all wrong then. If anything you being so lovely is what will make me want to step down before anything else," I said, teasing her a little in an attempt to get her to smile again.

She did, glancing at me as if I had just tickled her. "What the heck?"

"It's true! Randle and the others even think I'm abandoning them for you, you know? How does that make you feel?" I asked.

"Horrible!" she said seriously, though with a slight smile.

"Well..." I groaned as I accepted that yes, she likely did feel so.

"Are they really saying that, Vim? Really?" Renn began to worry for a new reason, and I felt like an ass again. She was no longer smiling about it, now having thought about it deeper.

"I suppose this is when I should tell you that I've also been told on many occasions they are glad I've fallen for you. They hope that you'll make me..." I hesitated a moment as I wondered how to word it.

"Less you? Yes. I've heard that plenty too," Renn said with a sigh.

Oh? "Yeah? That's a good way to put it, I was going to say something meaner," I said.

"That was pretty mean enough, so I can only imagine what you were going to say..." she mumbled.

Smirking at her, I lifted our hands and arms so I could wrap my arm around her. I held her as we walked, and I did my best to not get annoyed at the spear hanging on her back. I'll need to shift its angle a little, moving the strap it hung in, later. So that I could hold her like this and not be as bothered by it. Odds are it was digging slightly into her side thanks to me holding her.

"Vim?" she asked softly, smiling weirdly at me.

"Yeah this is awkward, probably because we got such thick clothes and so much luggage," I admitted. It was doable, but not as good as it should have been.

She sighed at me. "And whose fault is that?" she asked.

Mine.

Always mine.

Chapter 436 Renn – Gary and Planci

They reminded me of Crane.

I sat at the dinner table with the two birds who had requested Vim's aid, though we had long finished dinner. They were both calmly drinking the leftover after meal tea, and it seemed most of our conversations had come to an end.

They were a quiet, simple people. They lived in a modest two-story house, not far from the river the smaller village they belonged to was situated upon. They didn't have any obvious non-human traits, such as feathers or anything, but they had that presence of... oldness, that our more older members got sometimes. I'd been sitting here with them for almost half an hour now, and not a word had been said between us... though not because they were being outright rude. They simply were at peace, with themselves and the world.

When Vim and I had arrived earlier, we had found them cooking lunch. I had been a little excited to meet new members, particularly ones that had sent a request to Vim during this time of drama, so I had been a little... bubbly when I first got here, as Vim would say. I had asked questions, been my typical self, only for me to realize that they were just... quiet people. They had not been talking when we had arrived, had only said a few words to Vim; telling him of their request and if he'd also check on their roof while he was here, then after introducing themselves to me had gone quiet again.

These birds were not the chatty type.

They answered my questions, when I asked them, but I had yet to get asked a single thing myself. Not just about me, either. They've not asked about the Society, Vim, any of the other members... not even about the weather!

I knew better than to actually feel offended, but it made me feel a little awkward all the same. Some people just... weren't the types to really engage in conversation. Hopefully at least they didn't feel uncomfortable because of me, or something...

Shifting a little, I glanced over to the corner of the room. A small dog was sleeping on a wooden bed with a fluffy cushion upon it. The thing had woken up to greet Vim and I when we arrived, but had lain back down and went back to sleep not long after. Even during our meal it hadn't woken up, which was unusual for a dog. Didn't they usual beg? It looked old, it had a lot of gray and white in its fur, so maybe it was simply at that age.

"He's nearing his end," Gary said softly.

Perking up a little, I nodded gently. "It doesn't take long for them to do so, does it," I said softly.

Gary's wife glanced at the dog and nodded too. "No, it doesn't," she whispered.

"He wandered in years ago, soaking wet. We think he had either been dumped in the river, or fallen in, as a pup. Nearly died then, so he's gotten far more life than he would have otherwise," Gary said as he

moved his cup of tea a little, moving it a few inches from where it had been sitting before, as if to distract himself.

Planci nodded. "A very long, lovely life," she added.

I smiled at the two. They looked hurt, sad, that their pet was dying... yet at the same time looked proud. As if glad to know their simple kindness had given the creature a happy life.

I knew that feeling. Animals didn't like me much, at least they hadn't before my lack of smell, but I had still raised a few myself over my life. My hawk had been the one I had wept the hardest over, but that might have been thanks to the fact I had to put it down myself.

About to say something, to tell them of the hawk I had raised, a loud knock drew my attention. I glanced up, twitching my ears as to better focus... as I heard Vim begin to hammer on the roof above us.

We were on the first floor, so he was actually on the roof above me and the second floor, but he was being loud all of a sudden.

"Seems he's getting busy," I said gently, using him as an excuse to talk.

"There are quite a few leaks, yes," Gary said simply.

My toes twitched as I tried to not be bothered by his tone. He had almost said such a thing in a way as if it was Vim's fault, or something.

"Does the river flood? When it rains a lot?" I asked carefully.

"Occasionally," Planci answered as she took a drink.

Gosh...!

I was almost half tempted to excuse myself and go help Vim. A part of me wished they'd just start to act bothered by my presence, just so I could do so without feeling bad about it.

Yet they obviously weren't. Neither of them seemed bothered by me at all. They were just...

Picking up my cup, I took a small sip of its contents. The tea was good, at least. Even if growing cold.

Maybe it was me. Maybe I'd grown so used to people who were noisy and talkative, and thus became one myself. Maybe I needed to slow down a little, not that they needed to become more active.

I mean really, Renn! You used to go years and years without saying a single word to someone! Though, I suppose I did talk to myself a lot... and the trees and birds and stuff...

It was weird to realize that I was likely someone who really desired, and maybe even needed, friendship and community. Didn't people always say cats were loners? And Vim had even said that I, a jaguar, was a great hunter who did so alone. He had even told me that they didn't really partner and pair. He had teased me once that jaguar's separated after doing the deed, as if to justify his lack of effort on his part. Although he had been teasing about it, I knew Vim's teasing came from a semblance of truth. Just like he had once feared taking that next step with me would diminish his love, so too was it true that this so called jaguar cat was a solitary creature.

Which meant this deep rooted desire to mingle and talk was not something from my bloodline. Maybe instead of thinking I should be used to being quiet and alone, thanks to my long years before the Society, I should instead think it is precisely because of those solitary years that I now desired the opposite.

Yes. Surely.

As I pondered my own personality, and all its flaws, I took one of the last few drinks from my cup... and once again noticed it was cold.

"Hm..." Gary stood, reaching over to grab the bronze teapot we'd been pouring from. He wordlessly took it with him to the other room nearby, the kitchen.

Oh...? I wonder if my thoughts had been visible on my face?

Smiling softly, I decided to just... let it be. They weren't upset with me, or bothered by me. They were just quiet, simple people. I needed to accept that sometimes those we visited would be like this.

Not everyone wanted to be involved in the great workings of the world, or hear stories of it. Some people were just... happy and content to live their lives.

I was too, in my own way, so I knew the feeling.

"So... you two want to build a new dock?" I asked as I heard Gary messing around in the kitchen.

Planci nodded. "Hopefully they'll allow us to," she said.

"Would they actually tell you not to?" I asked. Sure this river had a village upon it, but the river was of decent size. A small dock would not bother it at all, in my opinion. Up north many rivers had such things everywhere, sometimes even out in the middle of nowhere. There were even entire villages built not just around rivers, but upon them! Vim and I had passed through such a town a long time ago, which had been having a festival. They had floated little boats made of paper and wood, with candles upon them, down the river. The center of that village had been built on top of the very river itself, on bridges and docks.

"It is possible. Thus our request for Vim, he's a good negotiator," Planci said.

I nodded slowly. He was, sometimes.

"Who um... who do you negotiate with?" I asked as Vim banged on the roof again for a moment.

"This time it will be the local noble's son. He's to inherit his father's position, so he's been taking on more duties lately. A good lad, if young around the ears," Planci said as she went to drink down the rest of her tea. Likely because she knew here in a moment her husband would be returning with a fresh pot.

I too went to do the same, quickly drinking the rest of the tea as I wondered what it would be like to live in such a town as this.

They had to ask the ruler of this town, the noble family that owned it I guess, for permission to build a dock...? And needed Vim to negotiate it?

Would we have to do the same up north with the orphanages? Was that why Vim had gathered up those boxes of coins? Would we have to pay such fortunes just to build a building?

If so how did people ever build anything...? Take a business for example, if it cost such money to even have the right to build the building, how did one start such a shop without the funds? Maybe that was why so many people desired to have such things, such as their own shops, yet didn't do so. They couldn't pay the fees.

Or maybe each town was different. Different towns had different taxes and such, after all...

"Do you plan on getting a boat or something?" I asked as Gary entered the room, carrying a now pot of hot tea.

"Our neighbors, those who live away from the river, wish to fish the river for food. Times are hard for them. But the river's bank is not one easy to fish, since it's so sleek and muddy," Gary said as he filled up his wife's cup first, and then offered me some more fresh tea too.

I accepted, and smiled gently at them. "Thank you," I said as I studied the new tea.

Knew it. They weren't bad people, I just felt awkward with them since they were so... distant, and quiet.

"That's kind of you," I added.

The two didn't acknowledge my statement as Gary poured a new cup of tea for himself. And a new cup it was. It wasn't the same cup he had been drinking from earlier.

I frowned at that, since I wasn't sure why he'd done such a thing, but I didn't comment on it as he went to sit back down at the table across from me.

"Anything other than the roof, then...? Vim sometimes doesn't ask enough, so people forget to tell him before he runs off," I asked as I sipped the new tea.

It was new and not just because it was a fresh batch. This tea had a different taste. A starker one. I liked it. Though I could still taste the lingering remnants of the previous tea, so it felt a little muddled.

Maybe that was why he had changed cups, so the previous tea's flavor couldn't taint this one?

"Not at the moment," was all Gary said.

I nodded gently, and felt the uncomfortable silence arrive once more.

For a few long minutes we sat in silence again, nurturing our drinks... as Vim continued to bang and make loud noises up above.

He was making so much noise it sounded as if he was replacing the whole roof...! I wonder just how bad the leaks had been for him to need such repairs?

Studying the two birds, I wondered why they like so many seemed to not be able to fix their own little problems. It didn't bother me that they asked Vim for help in such ways of course, not at all, but... I mean...

A roof? A leaky roof? Even I could patch such a thing. I've done it before many times. The hut Nory and I had lived in, had needed such repairs often, though to be honest I had never done a very good job... half the time when I did so, it wasn't me fixing a leak but rather a previous fix that had not lasted the wear and tear because I wasn't very good at it.

Though maybe they had simply asked Vim since they knew he'd be here anyway, having requested him for the negotiations with this village's lord. Two birds with one stone kind of thing...

Actually a lot of our members asked him to handle things that weren't very important. Some were like Kaley, who he helped without her requesting it since she never had anything to ask of him and he felt bad for her... while others were like these two birds here. It did make it feel like Vim was more carpenter and builder than protector, honestly.

Though as Vim would say, this was better than the alternative. He preferred them to ask such favors instead of actually needing him because their lives were in danger.

While I slowly nursed my tea, time passed. Minutes of silence turned into an hour. Then another.

Occasionally I tried to ask a question, or make small talk, but each time I gave up. They answered questions, and were not rude about it, but being the only one to engage at all felt... lonely, somehow.

Then, when night finally came and the married couple went to prepare for dinner... I heard Vim enter the house.

I perked up a little, relieved for an odd reason I couldn't explain properly, as he stepped into the room and glanced at me.

He studied me for a moment, and I noticed he didn't look very dirty or grimy, which was odd. He'd been working all day, and although he didn't sweat like a normal person he usually got filthy all the time... I complained often about how he didn't take care of his clothes, yet it looked like he'd not just worked around the house for a moment. Maybe the roof had been clean? It did seem to rain a lot in this region.

"Oh my, done already? Will you be joining us for dinner then, Vim?" Planci noticed Vim, and I was a little surprised to not just hear a question from her... but see a smile too.

"Your roof should now last you a few decades more. And I've prepared the area by the river for your dock. I plan to go shortly into the nearby forest to find suitable trees... So..." Vim then looked at me, and gestured lightly at me. "I came to see if my wife would be willing to help me. You don't mind if I steal her from you, do you?" he asked.

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

"To think you'd be the kind of husband to steal your wife, Vim. Really now. Go ahead, I'll make sure to put away her meal for her later," Planci said as she nodded and turned away, without even glancing at me. As if she either knew I'd never deny Vim's request for help... though I knew in truth it was likely because she didn't care at all if I did or not.

Slowly standing, I nodded gently at Vim who turned and stepped out of the room, heading back outside. I followed him, though making sure to grab my hat at least. I didn't grab any of my other outer-wear, even though it was cold. It wasn't raining, and if Vim really did need help with something I didn't want my heavier attire to get in the way.

Grabbing Vim's spear, which I had leaned against the coat rack where my outerwear was all situated, I nodded and went to follow him.

Leaving the house, I found the sky still had a faint tint of blue to it. The sun was setting, and it'd be long dark by the time Vim and I got to the nearby forest, but it was still bright enough that I was glad I had grabbed my hat. This was a small village, but I'd seen people coming and going. Most of them worked the river, or around it, so I knew better than to think I'd be safe with my ears out around here.

"This way Renn," Vim said gently as he led me towards the river nearby.

I followed, and noticed the ladder and tools he had been using earlier were gone now. Most likely put back into the shed behind the house.

"Was the roof bad? You were banging a lot," I asked.

"The holes were rotted. They're lucky they put leather over the holes else I'd be replacing far more than just the roof," Vim said.

I smiled at that, and the way he had spoken.

He sounded tired, but not annoyed. I liked that about him, even if it upset me sometimes over his lack of getting frustrated with people.

I really liked how he was so... gentle with everyone. Even though he could be everything but.

"They're a quiet people," I said softly.

"They are, but they're even quieter today," Vim said as the sound of the river became louder.

"Really...?" I asked. Was I the real reason then...? And here I had been trying to convince myself this whole day that it hadn't been me!

"It's not you, Renn. This time... it's actually me," Vim said.

Frowning at that, Vim and I came to a stop a little before the riverbank. He pointed at a section of freshly cut grass and foliage. "You're going to build the dock there?" I asked.

"That's my plan. They want a elongated one, that will let dozens of people fish off and multiple boats dock at, so I'll make two sections, so that people can dock boats right up against the bank too, in-between them," he explained.

I hummed at that as I envisioned it in my mind. Oddly I had expected something different. Vim was going to make... an actual dock. A large one, it seemed. Many long feet of grass riverbank had already been cleared and prepared. There was even a tree that he had trimmed down, though had not cut down completely. It was likely what he meant by two separate docks, since the tree was close enough to the river itself that it would have gotten in the way. He likely planned to use that as the section that would open up, to separate them.

But... why? Vim could remove that tree rather easily. He had the strength to do so with his bare hands. And I knew better than to think he wasn't doing it just because he was being lazy or something. Vim was many things, but lazy was really not one of them.

Pointing at the tree, I felt my tail twitch beneath my clothes. "Why not remove the tree completely?" I asked.

"It and its roots are what will hold the foundation of the riverbank together. Removing it would work for a bit, but over years the roots will then wither and decay. Then so too would the bank," he explained.

I nodded, finding that to make perfect sense.

Another point I liked about him. He thought not of the today and now but the future. The long future, even.

Even I found that difficult to do... I wonder how he did it so easily?

Though to be honest I feel like part of the reason I've been so focused on the today and now, is because of how much fun I've been having. It was hard to think of years in the future, let alone decades, when every day was such a wondrous new journey for me.

"So... what'd you mean by it's your fault?" I asked, going back to topic.

"Their letter of request also included their vote. It was not in my favor," he said simply as he studied the river, as if judging if his choice of placement for the bridge was correct.

I gulped as I closed my eyes and understood now the odd atmosphere.

"They're ashamed," I whispered.

"No. Not really. Just unsure of what to say or do," Vim said.

Taking a deep breath, I felt my chest and neck get a little hot. "Yet they have the nerve to ask you for help? To fix a roof and build a bridge?" I asked.

Vim chuckled at me. "Please Renn. Don't be petty."

"It's not being petty! I wasn't saying you can't, or shouldn't, nor that they should either... but really!" I turned, to glare at the house.

Vim was quiet for a moment as I stared at the first floor windows. They had drapes over them, but the light from within made them glow a little. You couldn't make out shadows, but you could see there was movement. And not just from the dancing shadows of lamps and candles.

"You should have told me before we got here," I said. It would have saved me the many hours of trying to be their friend.

"There's no reason to get worked up over it Renn. Their vote was not to banish me, just to voice in favor for a change in my agreements. Basically they want the Society as a whole to restructure, with me being the focal point of it. Out of the many votes against me I've read so far theirs has been rather agreeable. I wasn't offended," Vim said as he gestured and turned, telling me to join him in walking again.

Hurrying to keep up with him, I walked on the side of him that put him between me and the river. Not because I feared it, or falling in or something, but rather the opposite. I was interested in it, and right now I wanted to focus on him. Not the river.

"I'm not getting worked up!" I complained... but then begrudgingly admitted, "Not very much, at least."

He chuckled at me as we headed along the river, following it downstream. Not far in the distance, past a few other farmstead looking houses and ranches, was a large patch of trees. The beginnings of a dense forest that ran up and into the mountain range in the distance. The same mountain range Lellip's home was located in, and Lumen beyond.

For a few moments I simmered in my emotions, but eventually decided it wasn't worth getting too angry over. Vim was right. There was a reason he was calm and collected, and not bothered by their obvious audacity.

Vim believed everyone had a right to their own beliefs and choices. Even if they were stupid ones. And lately it sure did seem like most of our members were stupid.

He had once said a part of him hated, or at least was disgusted, by our members. Because of how they are, and how they act. I had not thought it was as bad as this, but it was starting to become obvious that it was. These birds weren't the first to act so, and wouldn't be the last.

Vim's choice of stepping down, to avoid further conflict... even if the drama concerning the vote and Light and her people ended up fizzling out and not being very important, was becoming more and more the most likely result of this. And not just because it was what they wanted too.

Even if there was a point in protecting people who didn't want said protection... he wouldn't force his will on them now as is, how could he do such a thing in future when they outright deny him the right to even check up on them? Like Sheilla?

Vim had told me to find a solution. To fix it. But I now was starting to believe that he had only done so out of compassion. To give me the opportunity... and also to keep the door open in the off chance I succeeded.

But lately...

Shaking my head, I groaned as I realized I had been about to admit it, and I didn't want to do that.

I didn't want to agree with him, even though they kept proving him right.

"Vim I'm getting upset... can I change topics before I actually start to cry or something?" I asked.

"Hm? Of course you can," he turned a little to look at me, looking suddenly worried. For me.

I liked that look, even if it bothered me to know I likely looked like a mess right now for him to have it on his face.

Tapping the spear against the soft grass beneath us, I gestured at it. "This was made by your mother, right?" I asked.

"Was wondering how long it was going to take you to ask about it," he said gently.

"I was trying to be considerate, but now I really need something very interesting to distract my heart or else it'll break. So here it is," I said as I gripped the spear tighter.

He smiled at me and nodded. "Yes. My mother made it. Remember how I told you I only have a few things left from them? That's one of them. The funny thing is I've lost that thing several times. I found it during the wars, in a soldier's hands. Imagine my shock. I took it from her and put it in Celine's tomb since no one knows where it is, and it's somewhere I visited often," Vim explained.

Absorbing all the information, I smiled gently at him. He was being so open! I wonder if he was doing so out of concern for my well-being, or if he genuinely wanted to talk about it?

"Other's mentioned that no one else knows where Celine's buried... like Meriah asking for her tomb's location. Why is that? I thought she was special?" I asked.

"She is. Was. That's why her body is kept guarded. There are many who believe a saint's body, even the long decrepit corpse of one, hold power or can grant it," he said.

"Then... why keep it secret from our people? I mean most don't even know about those underground tombs in the first place," I said. I had shocked Angie with them when I took her down there, to wait for Vim.

"Because they're some of the ones she had worried about. She was an odd woman; she hadn't wanted anyone to defile her corpse. I don't blame her, I guess, though I wouldn't be bothered if my corpse was used after I was gone. Not like I'd need it anymore," Vim said.

I walked quietly for a moment as I studied the man I called husband, and noticed the faint smile on his face.

He was remembering her.

My heart hurt for a different reason all of a sudden, and I gripped the spear tighter once more. Gosh, Renn! Don't be jealous!

Especially since I knew I did the same when I thought of Nory or the kids... or Witch!

"Quite the hypocrite considering how many corpses she had defiled. But anyway... the only other person who knows where it is Nebl. He helped me build it," Vim said.

"Nebl...? Really? Not Randle, or Hands, or anyone else?" I asked.

"Why does Nebl surprise you?" he asked.

I shrugged lightly. "I'm not sure. He's your friend, so it makes sense... and you can trust him, and he's good at building stuff, I just... found it odd for some reason," I admitted.

"Hm..."

We had to step a bit away from the river, since a large patch of thorny bushes had appeared on its bank. They were half my height, and didn't even look like they had berries or anything on them to justify their existence.

"Why did your mother make you a spear, Vim...?" I asked carefully since he had gone a little quiet.

Vim for a moment didn't answer, but before I could panic and think of another question to pose he glanced at me... or rather the spear I held.

"Because I had needed it, Renn. The world I had been born into had not been a good one. Look at the world today... all its troubles and dangers... and I feel like it's far more tame and safe than it's been in a long time, to be honest. Compared to the one I had been into, it's a daycare honestly," he said.

"Daycare...?" I asked. What a weird word.

He chuckled at me. "A place for little kids to play during the day. Imagine a place for people to drop their kids off, kind of like a school, where you know they'll be watched over and kept safe... while also entertaining them and stuff. Basically a place meticulously prepared to be so safe even a young child could be left unattended and you wouldn't have to worry about them," he explained.

I laughed at that. "So like the orphanages! Hm... I suppose to you this world would be seen in such a way, what with you being basically immortal," I said.

Vim frowned at that, then after a moment he nodded. "Yes. I suppose you could say that."

Right...

Honestly I'd never thought of it. What the world looked like through his eyes. I've thought of how he loved the world, or the world loved him. I've imagined being him, traveling around and helping people and such... but I've never considered to look at the world through his perspective in such a way.

"You probably don't really fear anything, do you?" I asked softly as I realized it.

"Please, Renn. I fear more things than you can imagine."

I'm sure he did... but he likely meant things more... deeper than how I would perceive them.

Like losing me, or losing the Society. He likely feared things he couldn't control no matter what he did or how strong he was. Stuff that would break anyone, not just him.

Me though...? I worried over humans seeing my ears and tail. I worried that I'd wake up one day and find myself back in that pit, young and at home again... finding that this had all been some crazy dream. Or

even simple things like drowning, or falling into a well, or losing the precious things I've collected over the years... just to name a few.

Vim sighed softly at me. "I was born when the world was a different place. It was a world of gods. Where magic permeated the air, fantasy was reality, and there were rules I couldn't comprehend... and they were getting broken constantly," Vim said as he slowed.

Slowing alongside him, I grabbed the spear with my other hand too, just in case I needed something to support me... as I stared apprehensively at him.

He was staring at the nearby river, but I could tell he was lost in his thoughts. Likely thinking of his youth. Of this world of gods and magic.

"It lasted a long time, but to me it was a blink of an eye. Then the wars came. Chaos. It was a world of death and destruction. If a god wasn't wreaking havoc, their creations were. If not divine then natural. The world had been... distorted. Wronged. Tainted. That too had lasted a long time, though it had not passed quickly in my perspective," Vim continued.

My breathing grew quicker, and I tried to not move. To not even flinch. I didn't allow even a single twitch of an ear or tail, as I waited for him to continue.

"That spear... amongst other things my parents had prepared for me, was how I had survived. It took tools like that to survive back then. Or at least, survive in the way I had done," he said as he pointed at it.

Glancing at the spear, and the red cloth dangling not far above me, I wondered if that meant I was holding something... well...

Those in the church would call it a holy relic.

Others, like the pagans I knew, would consider it a magical artifact.

But was it really...? It was obviously a special kind of metal, since it was so light and sharp, but what if that was all it was?

Before I could ask anything, Vim continued as he sighed and shrugged. "Then the gods fell. Their creations took over. Some ruled, like kings, others hid away. Most continued on the warpath their creators sent them on, slaughtering and destroying everything and anything. I spent a long time hunting them, and as I did I watched the civilizations come and go. Mostly because of the destruction, though. Not so much time alone. There had been humans then, but they had been fewer. Imagine the numbers reversed, with the humans being the ones needing to hide themselves. It had been like that for a long time," Vim said.

Oh...? Must be the time my elders spoke of. When my ancestors had hunted humans, if not for sport then by order of the god who made us.

"Eventually non-humans started to wage war. Amongst themselves, with and or for monarchs, or against the humans. I tried not to get too involved in those, unless it was too one sided. For instance I stepped in a few times when non-humans had been needlessly cruel. Then, before I even realized how or why... I blinked and," Vim gestured around us, though I didn't look away from him. I knew what he was implying.

"The humans took over," I said softly.

He nodded. "In the blink of an eye. At first though it hadn't been completely. Back then there had been just as many of you as them. Somewhere along the way... that just all went wrong. I think it's a combination of many things, but in reality it's destiny," he said.

"Destiny...? You're talking about the fact we all end up giving birth to humans eventually," I said. He's mentioned such things before.

Vim frowned as he glanced at me and nodded. "Isn't it amusing? So many try to remain pure, but it seems to be the inevitable end. The goal. The result that was intended from the beginning," he said gently.

"Is... is that why you're giving up so readily...? Because you've expected this? That we, our kind, was going to... just disappear anyway one day?" I asked. If so that made a lot of sense.

Vim nodded softly at me. "Yes, Renn. I mean... I'm not saying non-humans will cease to exist completely. But one day, maybe even not long from now, it might get to the point where only a few dozen bloodlines remain. And even then they will be muddled... like your little fox friend, or our owls... or them," Vim said as he gestured behind us, to the house of our members nearby.

Taking a small breath, I nodded. I knew where he was coming from. Understood it. After all... it was obvious. Even I had to admit it, and could see it clearly too.

Even the places like the Summit were becoming... pretty much human entirely. Most of the people there had no non-human traits at all.

Really even I was proof of it. My siblings, my parents and grandparents, had far more traits than I. They had pads on their hands and feet. They had fur all over. They had sharper, pointier teeth and nails and so on and so forth.

"I... hear where you're coming from, Vim... but I don't like the idea of giving up. Even if inevitable. Even if it is destiny, as you say. I... love them," I said softly.

Even those birds. The ones I had just been furious over, for having insulted Vim so blatantly.

They were our people. Members of our Society. People who even though disagreed with us... still invited me into their home. Offered me meal and drink. Even now I had a meal waiting for me!

Such a thing was so precious. So important. The dozens, if not hundreds, of years I've lived without such a welcome was proof of that.

That deserved some form of respect and compassion. At least.

Vim softly nodded as he held my eyes. "I know, Renn. I'll... try. I promise."

Sniffing softly, I nodded back. "Please do Vim. If not for them... for me," I said.

Holding his gaze, I watched him become slightly blurry. "For you," he agreed.

Chapter 437 Vim – A Dock, A Duck, A Cheek

Well that didn't take as long as I had thought it would at all.

Not even three full days. And that included the half day from when we had arrived.

Staring at the dock I had just finished making, I wondered if maybe I had taken it a little too far.

Not only had I built two separate docks, I had even made it multi-leveled. I had built a lower section that was just barely submerged, perfect to use as to get up out of the river if swimming or having fallen in. Or just to relax, I guess. On the next level, the main dock section, I had built a railing. Up against it were some crates and boxes that I'd made with the excess wood to be used for storage and such, and even built a small canoe too. It was currently tethered to the larger dock, floating quietly.

The whole package. I'd even made a few buckets. The only thing I hadn't made was the fishing poles.

Honestly I hadn't needed to make it so nice, but I knew it was likely the last thing I'd ever do for these people... so I had wanted to do it justice.

Plus it let me stay busy and not have to deal with the awkward atmosphere.

Leaning against the railing I had just made, I sighed as I stared down at the dark river. It was deep, but its current wasn't too strong. The perfect river to not just fish but swim in.

"Too bad it's so cold, otherwise I'd invite Renn," I said softly as I thought about it.

Speaking of Renn... I wonder where she was. Usually by now she'd come out to talk to me.

Glancing up at the sky, I studied the lazy sun half hidden by clouds. It was about lunch time, so maybe she was helping Planci prepare it.

I had to give Renn credit, at least. She's kept trying to be friendly with them, even though they still were being distant.

Probably because they weren't being actually rude. They were just... unsure of themselves.

I remembered the two being the type to tell jokes. I usually only visited when they had requests, but I've never had any problems with them. No real ones, at least.

Like this one. This dock. Or the few repairs they had asked of me while here.

The negotiations for it had been easy. Simple. The young man who had arrived a few days ago had only wanted to see where we'd build it, and receive the signature and tax fee for it. He had left after, turning down their invitation to dinner. He had seemed... tired. Likely from overwork. He was new to his position, I guess.

Honestly they hadn't needed me. At least, not for the negotiations. And the fixes and bridge could have been handled in other ways too, such as hiring craftsmen. The Society did such a thing often when I was too busy or too far to get the job done.

Oh well.

"Now what..." I grumbled.

The dock was done. I'd fixed all the little things around their house and little gardens...

Maybe we should just leave? It was early enough in the day that they'd not find it weird. Plus, with them being so awkward right now it'd be a welcomed action...

"Might as well," I said with a sigh.

I was honestly trying to not rush to Lumen, even though I wanted to run there. So this had been a godsend in a way. I also hoped that Nebl would have some tasks for me, but I doubted it. The damned man was too prideful to ever ask me to do something as basic as fix a roof or something.

Right as I turned to head back to the house, I found Renn hurrying over. She had a wooden basket in her arms, with a cloth draped over it and was smiling happily.

I felt my body relax a little as she grinned at me and picked up her pace. I didn't need to smell the contents of the basket she carried to know it was our lunch.

"Few more hours won't hurt," I whispered. How was it she always seemed to know my hidden desires?

Renn slowed as she approached, her grin turning into a mischievous smirk as she lifted the basket to show it off to me. "A thank you! Some kind of pie!"

"It does smell good," I said as she pulled back the cloth as to reveal the treat. Or well, treats.

There was far more than a pie in there. A wine-skin, some bread and other baked goodies... and...

Reaching in, I pulled out the little letter. The one that had their stamp in the paper itself. Their little feather design of a quail.

"Oh? I didn't see her put that in," Renn frowned at it as I turned it around, since it was more like a postcard than anything else. Not a normal letter.

"Thank you for everything. For all these years. I hope no matter where we all go, you and her find true happiness," I read the small note.

"What...? That's like a goodbye letter. Why would she put that in now?" Renn asked as she shuffled the basket, as to grab the letter from me.

I exchanged with her, taking the basket. She took a deep breath and sighed as she read what I had just said aloud, shaking her head softly at it.

"She knows we'll be leaving here in a few moments. She's likely been making these all day, preparing for it," I said as I reached in to grab one of the little bread items. It looked like it was caked with honey.

"Oh... I thought maybe we'd leave in the morning instead," Renn said as she glanced past me, to the dock behind me.

"No reason to linger Renn, especially when I make the people here uncomfortable," I said as I took a bite.

"You do... but they don't hate you Vim. Not really. They opened up a little to me, not much, but enough. Plus no one would make someone they hated a gift basket!" she said as she smiled at the thing in my hand.

"On the contrary. You'd be surprised at what people will do for those they despise," I said.

Renn sighed at me. "Let's not talk about that. I want to eat some too, can we sit on your dock and eat?" she asked happily as she stepped past me.

"S'not my dock..." I mumbled between bites as I went to follow her.

She paused before it, where there was dirt and grass before wood, and studied it for a moment. I wasn't really sure what she was looking for, since she'd practically help build it with me. She did indeed try her best to be friends with the birds here, but she had also spent most of the time here with me. Either helping me build the dock, or just simply sitting and watching me as I worked without saying anything.

I kind of liked it, oddly. I was used to being watched, or receiving a lot of questions, while I worked around a member's home... but usually it's the young who did such a thing. Nowadays even my friends, like Nebl, didn't really talk to me much anymore. A part of growing... old.

Renn though didn't just like to chat with me, she'd help or just sit and be near me with a happy smile on her face without complaint. Although it worried me that I was being... neglectful of her, in a way, I honestly wouldn't have it any other way.

I enjoyed her presence. Whether she was as silent as a cat during its stalking or yapping away without a care in the world, both were pleasant.

"Can we sit on the edge?" she asked as she went to sit down. She undid the little strap that held the spear in place on her back as she did, so she could lay it down next to her as she sat. She dangled her legs over the ledge, under the railing I'd built.

"Why couldn't we?" I asked her as I went to join her. I sat next to her, but kept enough room between us as to put the basket there.

Unlike Renn I had to slouch a little, as to not bump my head into the railing piece right above my head.

"You're not going to break it right?" she asked as she quickly went to putting away the letter from the birds and went to digging out food from the basket.

"I'll not break it, no," I promised. I'd made it rather sturdy, but I knew better than to tell her that. She knew full well nothing was sturdy enough. No matter how it had been made.

All the homes of gods I'd broken over the years were proof of that.

Before she had finished the pie and went to work on the other little snack items, some ducks had arrived. A few dozen showed up, noisily quacking up at Renn in a way that told me that they were likely very used to being fed.

"Are they ducks Vim? They don't smell like Nasba," Renn asked as she grabbed one of the smaller muffins from the bag, as to break it into tiny pieces and throw it to the animals not far from our dangling feet.

"Those? They are ducks Renn. Yes," I said, smilingly gently as I teased her.

Renn shifted, glanced at me in disbelief... and then laughed. "I meant Gary and Planci, Vim! Sheesh!"

"No. They're quails," I told her.

"Ah... those little birds? I wonder if that's why they're so... odd," she said softly.

"Hm," I shrugged as I watched one of the largest ducks in the group hurry forward, pushing aside others as to nibble at the pieces of bread Renn was feeding them.

Odds are these things were fed well. Planci and Gary must feed them, based off the way they're so used to it.

"They seem used to being fed," Renn noted, thinking the same thing.

"Well... they are birds," I said.

Renn giggled at that and nodded.

For a long moment we sat there as I watched her feed the small animals. I was a little surprised to watch her tear up and feed them not just a few muffins, but even parts of the nicer snacks. Like the ones made with care and honey.

I didn't stop her though. Especially since I liked the happy smile on her face as she did so.

She paused a moment as she tore up another piece of bread, but instead of feeding the ducks she went to feeding herself.

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

"Am I stupid, Vim?" she then asked.

A little stunned by the sudden question, I glanced around a bit to see if something had happened or something. Once I confirmed nothing had, and no one was near, I placed my full focus on her.

"No...? Not at all. You're actually a little too smart for your own good, to be honest. Why?" I asked.

"Because I don't understand people, Vim."

Understand people...? "You mean them," I said with a small nod to the house behind us.

She nodded. "And so many more. How can they vote against you Vim? And then have the gall to ask you for help? What are they going to do when they need help again, and now you're not there to help them? How come so many of them can't see it? Do they see something I don't?" she asked seriously.

"You can't explain emotion, Renn. And that's what most of it is," I said.

She gestured at the ducks. "Look at these things. They saw us sit down, never have seen us before, but they knew that if they came over they'd get fed a little bit. Even little animals like them have common sense," she said.

I laughed at that. "Who am I in this scenario? The duck or the pretty cat feeding them and lulling them into a false sense of security?" I teased her.

Renn's hat shifted as her ears fluttered. She turned to gawk at me for a moment, then laughed loudly. "Vim!" she shouted between her laughs.

Yes, yes. So funny.

But I had been slightly serious too.

Once she calmed down she sighed. "I'm just trying to comprehend it, Vim. It's why I talked with The Chronicler and the rest of them. To try and understand. But even after doing it, I just can't. I get it, they have prophecies and ideals and dreams... but even if those prophecies were true, even if they desired a perfect world or whatever... why not still be realistic? Why not still acknowledge that you're more useful than not?" she asked.

Although I didn't want to have this conversation again, since we'd been having it a lot lately... I knew better than to change topics or avoid it. The fact she kept bringing it up was proof of how badly it was bothering her. And that meant, as both her protector and her husband, I had a duty to quell those turbulent fears and emotions.

But how?

"Well... I can't answer it, Renn. Other than the fact that, as I've said many times, in their perspective I am in fact more trouble than I am worth. So to them their reasoning is justified, and not based entirely on emotion," I said.

"How do they justify you being more trouble than you're worth Vim? What have you done to make them think that?" she asked as she gestured at the basket between us, telling me who she was speaking of.

"Honestly I don't know, Renn. Same with Sheilla. Or many of the others who have voted against me. But that's just it, me knowing what I did or didn't do does not change the fact that I have done something. I've erred somehow, and that's all that matters. Whether I know how I did so or not doesn't matter," I said.

Renn tossed a piece of bread at me. It hit me in the forehead and bounced off, then off my knee and into the water. The ducks splashed around as they all went to eat it.

"Am I wrong, Renn?" I asked her.

"No... you're not. That's the problem. I can't argue with you, not really."

I nodded. "Thus why we Stand Tall, Renn. Or at least, try to," I said softly.

She nodded back. "Right... for jerks who don't deserve it," she mumbled as she went to tossing more pieces of bread into the water.

Possibly. But I'd not voice such a thing aloud here. Not now.

"You do not have to do what I do, Renn," I said softly.

She paused mid-throw as to glance at me. "Hm?"

"You can choose a different path, you know. Apart from mine. It is your right," I told her.

Renn blinked at me a few times, and then frowned at me. "You mean... do what you won't? Or do you mean literally? As in if you step down as protector, I could take your place or something?" she asked.

"Either way. Just whatever you do, make sure it's what makes you happy. That's all I ask," I said.

Renn smiled at me. "I like how you try to tell me your opinions while doing so in such a round-about way, Vim."

I sighed at her. "If you realize what I'm doing, don't admit it so openly. That ruins the point," I said.

She chuckled at me. "I'm just venting Vim. I was going to latch onto your lap like you did mine, but I don't want to do that while you're wearing clothes," she said.

I reached up to cup my eyes, sighing at her.

For a moment my world was just her happy giggling, the ducks quaking, and the sound of the slow flowing river... but eventually an odd silence enveloped the world.

Glancing around as Renn slowly finished feeding the ducks, I wondered if it was going to storm later.

I didn't want it to. I planned to take Renn the long way to Nebl's from here, as to show her the field of flowers. If it was too nasty weather wise then there was no point doing so.

Looking down at the ducks, I studied them. They looked like the typical water fowl you found in this region, and looked healthy. And not just because they likely got a steady supply of food from those like Planci and Gary.

They were a good sign of how healthy this region was. Its ecosystem was strong.

A good thing considering not far north just had tremendous fires. Right now they were likely still wastelands, but that'd not be the case for long. In only a few years time lush forests would return, and all the life they brought.

"Hey Vim."

Glancing away from the ducks, I found her looking at me from under some messy bangs. Usually she parted or tucked them under her hat, but it seemed they were getting so long that it was more trouble than it was worth to do so.

Honestly I liked it when her hair was unruly.

"What should I say to Merit... when we see her?" she then asked.

Merit...? An odd thing to bring up here and now. But... it made sense. We were heading to Lumen, even if it'd be several days before we got there.

"Why not just hug her or something?" I asked.

She smiled at that and nodded. "I plan to. I read a few of the letters she sent you, and Lilly and Windle told me she's sent letters to them talking about how she's concerned for me too... so I know she's not upset with me. Not really. But I still... feel like I've wronged her," Renn said.

Oh.

"You didn't steal me from her Renn. I was never hers to begin with, not in that way," I said carefully as I understood her meaning.

My wife slowly nodded, but her smile began to fade away. "I know, Vim. I do. Really. But... still! You're so much older than me, and you've had relationships before... plus you've dealt so well with emotional things, with people, such as with Tosh and stuff... surely you have an idea? Any advice for me at all?" she asked.

I'd tease her if not for the fact she looked like she was about to weep.

Reaching over, I patted her gently on the back. "Just be her friend, Renn. All the years I've known Merit, there is only one factor I can confidently tell you about and it is her desire to cherish those she considers friends. The entire reason she had made her kingdom back then was for them. She herself hadn't even really liked being queen. So if you just be a friend, a very good one, I'm sure she'll be happy beyond measure," I said.

"How do you be such a friend, Vim? And even then shouldn't I still say something? Apologize? Or should I just... tell her I understand? Or...?" Renn hesitated as she lifted the remaining bits of bread, making the ducks noisy for a moment... but she didn't toss any of it to them. She was too focused on our conversation to notice them, even as noisy as they were with their quaking and honking.

"Hm... honestly Renn I'm not sure what to tell you. Merit's wiser than most give her credit for. So I don't think you really have to worry about it anyway. She's old enough, as you should be, to know not to allow the awkwardness of the situation ruin a genuine relationship. Especially since for her, such things are all that matter to her anymore. Or at least all that did matter to her," I said.

Renn sighed at me. "You're not being much help, Vim."

I nodded. "Well... I'll be honest Renn, I've always made sure to keep a small distance from Merit. You see she used to be very... pushy about her desires. After she was willing to admit it, even to my face. For a bit there was a time I couldn't even go near her without feeling terrible. Once she learned that I wasn't going to return her feelings, and accepted such a fact, she became much more bearable. Now she just pretends to hate me, as you've seen," I said.

"So... you've just allowed her to choose how you two act with one another? You take your rules and ethos to such lengths?" she asked, sounding a little annoyed over it.

"Kind of. I've always been gentle with Merit, Renn. I try to be kind with all of our members, with everyone. But I've always had a soft spot for those who were abused for long periods of time. Merit is one of them. I've always considered her feelings for me to be thanks to her trauma induced issues. Which makes me feel like an asshole, thus why I avoid it when I can," I admitted.

Renn shifted a little. "That doesn't explain us, Vim. Why don't you avoid me then?" she asked.

Oh...?

Wow. So she did know full well of her trauma and the cracks it had caused in her psyche. Fascinating.

"For one you didn't fall in love with me as a way to hide from your trauma. Or an excuse for it. And secondly... everyone has trauma, Renn. Just in different shapes and forms is all. Just as everyone faces them in different ways," I said.

Renn had issues, but they weren't that type. At least, I didn't believe them to be.

She smirked at that. "Who says I didn't, Vim? I'll have you know you're basically my medicine, and I've considered you such nearly since we met," she said.

"Medicine...?" I asked.

Renn sat up a little straighter, and squished some of the bread in her hands as she began to mumble as she looked away from me. "Well...! I didn't have a good word for it, so just used that... I mean... well..." She distracted herself for a moment by crumbling up the bread over the water, for the ducks. Once she ran out and only had crumbs left over, which she went to brushing off, she nodded and finished. "You. This life. The life we have together, now. It's everything I've ever wanted, and needed. It's so wonderful that now I can't even imagine not having it, or having you. I'll be honest Vim... a few times in my life I've thought about dying. Just recently I realized such thoughts now sicken me, and make me hate the me I used to be. You and the Society are what fixed that, so..."

Deeply humbled, I realized there was no point in holding back at this moment. I leaned over, slightly pushing against the basket as I did. The way I had done it so smoothly must have been startling her as I went to give her a kiss, because she sat up so quickly she had bumped her elbow into one of the pillars of the railing, flinching as she did.

I paused a moment as she glanced at her arm and elbow, glaring at it, then she turned to look at me again. I noticed the way she had tossed aside the pain and shock swiftly, so knew it was okay to continue. Before I could reach her lips though, a duck leapt up at us. It flapped its wings, quaking like crazy as it headed for Renn's lap, where it likely believed more food lay in wait.

Renn turned to look at it, startled by the thing, making my lips miss their mark. She startled again, turning to look at me as I sighed at her and myself.

I reached out, pushing away the duck that was flapping wildly in front of us. It hurriedly turned and flew off. Scared that I had reached out and touched it.

"Did... you just kiss my cheek?" Renn asked as she reached up, touching the spot that I'd just kissed.

The tiny white scar that she ran her fingertips along made me feel weird. As if I was a failure in more ways than one.

Of all the spots...

"Hm... the world really doesn't want us getting intimate does it?" I said as I glanced down at the few remaining ducks. Many of them had swum off during the commotion, likely thanks to the lack of food being given.

"What...! Vim!" Renn shouted at me, but laughed as she did.

Basking in her laugh, I sighed and wondered what I was going to do with her... and myself.

So my wife had thoughts of suicide before, had she? How very sad.

I'm glad that her life now was so wondrous she didn't have such thoughts, but I knew how quickly that could change.

Maybe I should just suck up my disdain and put my anger aside for now. Stay the protector, and ignore and forgive Light and the rest for their stupid schemes and failures.

It'd go against my own rules, in a way, but... it'd keep her happy, at least.

And right now wasn't that all that mattered?

"Vim."

Turning to look at her, I found her smiling gently as she lifted her chin a little, waiting expectantly.

"A kiss on the cheek wasn't enough?" I asked.

"It was! That was the first time you've ever done that. But I barely felt it or noticed, since I was distracted! I hit my arm, then that duck... So I want another, this time I'll pay full attention to it," she said.

First...?

Wait.

"First time? Ever?" I asked. Surely not, right?

"Hm?" Renn nodded as her happy expression softened a little, but at least didn't turn into a frown.

Impossible, right?

I've not kissed her on the cheek? Not once? After all this time...?

And instead of asking for a real kiss, she just wants another on the cheek? It was that important to her?

By my parents maybe I really did have a problem. A real one and not some misplaced one I tried to use as an excuse, too.

Maybe there really was something wrong with me. Usually I was quite a flirt with those I got close to.

My excuse for not wanting to take it too far with her was no longer a valid one. I didn't fear anymore that I'd lose interest in her, or she me. So...

Renn patiently waited, lifting her cheek to me as she tried her best to not grin too wildly. She looked like she was having the time of her life. A stark contrast to her worried expression and topics mere moments ago.

Which was why I obliged her... because it was a small price to pay to keep such sorrows at bay.

Chapter 438 Renn – A Golden Flower's Petal

"Where are we going Vim? Shouldn't we be heading around that mountain instead?" I asked as I stared up at the looming peak. It was covered in white, and looked even more snow covered than it had last time we had come this way.

"We should be, yes. Your memory scares me. We're making a small detour," he said.

"Oh...? Another hidden home?" I asked, becoming a little excited.

Maybe this time it'd not smell like that pit.

But even if it did I was going to do everything I could to ignore it. To not let him notice.

So that hopefully...

"No. Just a small piece of nature I wanted to share with you," he said as he glanced at me.

Frowning at him, and what he'd said, I wondered what he planned on showing me in this dense forest.

A piece of nature...? Maybe it was something interesting like that cave, then.

Although I enjoyed being alone with him, and even more so was interested in all he had to show me... I honestly wanted to get to Lellip's as soon as possible. Not only did I want to see my friend, and Vim's friend, I also wanted to see their new baby. Plus, I wanted to see if Lilly was still there. I wanted to talk to her about something and...

"Hm...?" I slowed as we neared a strange looking plant.

Or...

Vim slowed as well, turning to watch me as I walked up to the thing. "Is it a flower...?" I asked as I stared at the thing that was nearly as tall as me.

It had a thick, but in comparison to other things its height, thin stalk. It looked slightly prickly, and had leaves and other stuff upon it... but the thing that drew the eye was what it was blossoming at the top of it. The flower itself.

A ring of golden yellow, larger than my head.

"It's called a sunflower. For many reasons. They're why we're coming this way," Vim said as I studied the thing.

"Because it looks like the sun?" I asked. It had a center spot of darkness, but the rest of its pretty flower part was a large circle of yellow. Though some of the tips of its outer petals were greenish, maybe this one was still growing? Or wilting already?

"And because they usually face the sun. Or at least, so they are rumored to... but they do not. They become fixed after a certain point," Vim said.

"Fixed...?" I asked. Did... did he mean they moved? Like, got up and walked around or something?

"The head, this part. When they're young, growing, they sometimes turn towards the sun throughout the day. But it's only a little bit, and doesn't last long," he explained with a point at the large yellow flower at top.

Oh. That made a lot more sense. I felt a little silly for thinking they'd have actually moved.

Stepping back a bit from it, as to get a look at the whole thing... I felt slightly awed again.

The world really did have lots of things, didn't it?

I mean, it was just a flower. One of countless. But it was so different than usual ones. So big, and oddly shaped...

"Come on. The field should be near," he said.

Field...? "Of these things?" I asked as I went to follow him. I kept my eyes on the sunflower as we left it behind, and I wondered if I could take it and plant it somewhere else.

That thing near a home, or rather near a window of said home, would be wonderful. It'd be pretty to look at while sitting at a table drinking tea, or from my bed.

"You know Vim I think that's the biggest flower I've ever seen. I didn't even know they could get that big," I said as I followed him far enough that the sunflower left our sight, getting hidden by trees.

Before I could feel bad about it, another came into view. This one was half the size of the other.

I hurried past Vim to go up to it, and smiled at the smaller version of the other one. It was...

"It looks almost exactly the same, Vim," I said as I stared at it. Other than some of the petals being a little different in size and their locations...

"Hm?" Vim stepped up next to me as I studied the thing. I compared it to the one I'd just seen, in my memories.

"It's the same shape and style. I think it even has the same number of petals, though they're slightly different in size and also not in the exact same locations. Though that might just be because it's not as fully grown," I said, pointing at it as I concluded such a thing.

"Well... aren't all flowers practically the same?" he asked.

"Hm... I guess. Maybe I just figured they'd be different, being so big," I said.

He was right. Most did grow rather similarly, at least of the same types. Why had I found it so odd, I wonder?

What had I noticed? Why had my first instinct upon seeing this one been of comparing the differences, and thus notice the lack of them?

I pondered it for a bit, but decided there was no point to it. I must have just seen something that piqued my interest.

"Are there a lot of them here, Vim?" I asked.

"Yes. You'll see."

Good. Maybe I can find a few that are about to wilt, or have fallen over or something. I'd like to carry them around for a bit, I kind of liked their smell. It wasn't anywhere as strong as most flowers, even though so big, and it was kind of soothing. It was an earthy scent, which somewhat reminded me of home.

Vim stepped away, and I followed him. It didn't take long for more of the yellow flowers to appear, of varying sizes. I noticed that most of them did seem to face one direction, but there were slight differences to the exact angle. That angle wasn't towards the sun though.

"Why aren't they everywhere Vim? I've never even seen them at any of the markets or anything. Something so big would sell well there," I said.

"They're not native to this land. This area used to be where a monarch lived, one that had cultivated them. Its creator, the god that made it, had liked them," Vim said.

Oh...?

"Wait... so they're only here? Nowhere else?" I asked. Surely not, right?

Vim though nodded. "Yes. At least on this continent, as far as I'm aware."

A little stunned at that, I slowed as we passed a grouping of them. Most were my height, but a few were half the size and only came up to Vim's knee. I studied them for a moment, wondering how it was they all still existed.

If a monarch had tended them... then they surviving for a long time made sense. No one would be able to have cut them down or anything with such a monster defending them, but... that had to have been years ago! Maybe even decades or centuries.

They were far too interesting to have avoided human's attention. Or anyone's, really.

"How are they all still left alone, Vim?" I asked carefully as I picked up my pace. He had gotten a bit ahead of me since I had slowed to study the things again.

"This area is not one traveled often, Renn. It's near a ravine, and then that mountain range. Most people who traverse this way use the bridge and path north of the Smithy, it's the safest way... and really the fastest too. There's not much south of here for a long ways, so no point to come this way. Basically it's still somewhat uncharted land, for humans at least," Vim said.

Was it...? It had only taken us a few days to get here from the small village that Planci and her husband lived in. And from what I could tell we were only two or so days from Lellip's home from here too. Which meant Lumen was only a few days over those mountains, from what I could tell.

"Humans of this era don't really remember our kind, or monarchs. But they do still have the stories and legends. Look at what happened in Lumen. That will spark generational legends and tales, to foster fear and carefulness. Humans used to not venture too deep into forests or mountains, out of fear of what they'd find in them. They feared encountering those like yourself, or your ancestors I guess," Vim explained.

Slowing a little, my ears twitched a little wildly as I realized how right he was.

"You're right...! Humans are like that...! Some still don't even go out in the dark, because they're scared," I said. I've met many who were like that. I couldn't count how many villages and small farm towns I'd passed through when younger, doing so during the night because no one had been willing to dare the darkness. It was how I sometimes was able to find clothes and stuff, because I'd steal them from forgotten baskets or drying lines.

Thinking of those memories hurt, since it made me feel horrible. I quickly decided to spend a moment later to remember each house I'd stolen from during that time of my life, and see if I could somehow repay them. It has been so long they were likely long dead, the ones I'd stolen from, but their descendants wouldn't be. Maybe I could leave a few coins on their door-front's or something.

"Indeed. Haven't you noticed while we travel how quiet the roads get? Look at all the people we pass at night on the main roads, what with them setting up camp and stuff," Vim said.

I nodded quickly as I did indeed remember the many we've passed. He was right. And he was likely also correct that it was because they feared the dark... or at least, what they'd find within it.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

To them we were monsters. And in a sense our ancestors, the monarchs especially, were! So of course they'd be hesitant to venture into places that might hide those such as we!

It was so obvious. How had I never really realized it before...? Was it because I was one of those said monsters? Because I wasn't scared of the dark? Because I knew there weren't actually monsters such as that?

Or well... no. I couldn't say that. There were monsters out there. Like those things in Lumen. Or monarchs... or...

Glancing at Vim, I frowned at him.

"Here we are," Vim then said, before I could talk more about this odd revelation I was having.

The trees thinned, but the greenery didn't. Rather it did, but it had simply made way for the yellow.

I slowed a little as I took in the sight of not just hundreds, if not thousands, of sunflowers... but one that towered over all the rest.

In the center of the field of sunflowers, was a tree. A tree that had a huge circle of yellow on top of it.

"Um..." I wasn't sure what to say as I stared up at the huge sunflower. It was as tall as some of the trees nearby, and they were huge. Old. Towering.

But its height wasn't what made it seem truly huge. It was the massive flower. The orb of yellow was so big it made me feel a little unsure of myself. It looked big enough that if it collapsed and fell upon me, it'd squish me without question. It was so big it was casting a deep shadow over most of the field, as if a giant umbrella.

"Neat isn't it? They can grow massive, naturally, but this one is an anomaly," Vim said next to me.

I nodded. "Anomaly?" I asked. I figured the meaning meant unique, thanks to how he had said it, but I wanted to be sure.

"In this case the word meant irregular. An oddity or rarity. The thing is non-standard, it shouldn't be possible for such a flower to grow to such height and size. It is likely the only of its kind and the only one that ever will be," he explained.

I nodded again, glad that I had basically understood his meaning just from hearing it.

"Basically all the little sunflowers you see here, the normal ones, are its children. Every so often I come here and find them all dead and withered, from either weather or disease, then I come back and it's like this. The huge one isn't just big, it's sturdy. They usually need supports to grow big. But it's to be expected from a god's creation, they break the rules of normalcy," Vim said with a sigh.

"A god made it?" I asked, glancing at him as I did.

He nodded. "Yes. As I said. A monarch used to protect it. Yes, I killed it. Yes, I leave the sunflower alone and yes I know my rules contradict themselves you need not say it," Vim said.

I smiled at him. "I was indeed going to ask why you'd kill the monarch but not destroy the flower, if you hate the creations of gods so much why is it you let some be, Vim?" I asked.

"Because the flower doesn't harm anything. One could argue it affects the forest around it, absorbing nutrients and whatnot, but to me that's not a justifiable reason to destroy it. The monarch however had been. It killed anything that came close to the flower. And it was not willing to join the Society and abide by the rules so I ended it," Vim said.

Hm... I wonder what kind of monarch it had been. Must have been able to communicate at least, from the way Vim was talking about it.

Stepping forward, I hesitated a moment as I neared the first batch of sunflowers in the field.

They were taller than me.

"It's safe Renn," Vim said next to me, he had kept pace with me.

"I'm sure... I was going to go up to the big one, but now I wonder if there's any point. They're so big they'll block the view, and even when I get up near it... it'll just be like looking up a huge tree, won't it?" I asked as I studied its... what? Stalk? Trunk?

It looked like a giant tree. Though it had what looked like fuzz or something all over it. Plus it had giant leaves up and down it, not actual branches... though some of the leave's stems looked huge enough to be branches.

Vim chuckled at me. "Would you like me to carry you to its top? It's sturdy enough we can go on top of it if you'd like," Vim offered.

Although the offer was lovely, and a part of me wanted to accept... I slowly shook my head. "No... let's leave it be. Can I pluck one, Vim?" I asked as I stepped over to the closest one. One that looked fully grown, without any green on its petals.

"Take as many as you like. I planned to gather some up anyway," he said.

"Hm...? What for?" I asked. He wanted some of these flowers...?

"Couple reasons. Firstly, I figured a batch would be a good gift to Pram, they're unique and their home is close enough that if planted properly they might just grow and thrive as they do here," he said as he went to undoing one of the bags he carried.

My eyes went wide as I turned to look at him. "Right! Yes! They would be lovely gifts!" I said happily.

Why hadn't I thought of that! He was right, he had mentioned it before! That it was common for a newlywed couple to give gifts to those who had supported them!

Plus it would be nice to give gifts anyway... I rarely got to do such a thing...!

"Have you given her some before?" I asked as I watched Vim put the bag he had just taken off down to the ground and open it. He rummaged in it for a moment before pulling out a large cloth, one I didn't recognize. When'd he get it? It almost looked like a thin brown blanket. I didn't remember such a thing in his bag, which was funny since I had packed it for him.

"I've given gifts over the years, yes. But not these. I've never given anyone sunflowers before. Like I said they're not natural here. I try not to... mess with anything that's not natural. I may be a hypocrite but I try not to be such a brazen one as that. Here, let's dig up a few," Vim said as he laid the cloth down on the ground, flat.

Ah. He wanted to put them in the cloth so he could wrap them. To keep them safe and easy to carry.

"Yeah!" I happily agreed as I pulled out one of the little knives Vim had given me a long time ago. I joined Vim, digging into the ground with the knife as we gathered up half a dozen of the huge flowers.

As I dug at the roots though, even while being very careful to not harm the plant too much, I found it was likely not going to go well.

"Vim... their roots are deep," I said worriedly. It made sense, with the flowers being so huge, but even when I dug what I assumed was deep enough I still didn't find the typical bundle of roots one found when digging up such plants. The lack of them right beneath the flower told me it was deeper, deeper than I was digging for.

"Yes. Odds are they won't survive. It's fine, it's the thought that counts. Plus, as I said, it's just the first reason we're gathering them up," he said.

"Hm? You have another plan for them? Are they good for tea or something?" I asked as I placed one of the flowers I'd uprooted onto the cloth, joining the three others Vim had already placed there.

He chuckled at me. "I honestly don't know if they make decent tea or not. No. We're after their seeds. These," Vim said as he pointed to the center of one of the flowers with his knife.

"Ah... those are the seeds?" I asked as I stepped up to one that was just the height for me to draw close to it.

Sure enough I could see what he meant. I touched them, finding them hard.

"We're lucky. They're about to wither. They make a good snack, you'll see," he said with a nod.

Studying the flower, I wonder how he could tell. Was it just the colors of the petals around the dark center? The tint of yellow? Or maybe it was the seeds themselves... some were really dark, while others were starting to yellow themselves. Or maybe they were yellow before they became darker in color?

I smiled as we finished gathering up the flowers, Vim began to gather up some of the flowers themselves. He cut the giant orbs of yellow off from the top, about a hand's width below at the stalk, and tossed them onto the pile of other flowers.

While he did so I went ahead and cut one as he had. Instead of putting it onto the cloth though I kept it, as to smell and hold it for a while.

After smelling it for a moment... I went ahead and took a bite of one of the golden petals.

Vim had said these things were a snack, so I was sure it was fine to eat. But as I chewed it, I realized it tasted just like most other flower petals I'd eaten before.

Once finished Vim tied up the cloth, carefully. He picked the bag he had gotten the cloth from back up, putting it on his back, and then lifted the bundle of flowers to his shoulder. As if it was a great burden to carry.

Vim turned to look at me, and I smiled at the way he frowned at me. "Are you... chewing a flower?" Vim asked.

I nodded as I grinned. "It's not very tasty, but it's not gross either," I told him in-between chews.

He sighed softly at me. "If you try to take a bite of the seeds, be careful. They're in shells, and they're not dried out yet properly. So they likely won't be tasty or even easy to eat," he warned me.

"Ah... m'kay," I nodded quickly, since I had indeed been about to take a bite of that stuff too.

"Hm. Well? Would you like to sit here for a bit or shall we continue?" he asked.

Oh.

I glanced at the field of gold, and then looked up to the giant flower looming over it all. As if it was a sun.

Dedicating them all to memory, I slowly nodded. "We can go. We really shouldn't linger, Vim. We have things to do," I said.

"Okay that's just creepy. How come you know I'm trying to waste time?" he asked.

Giggling at him, I went ahead and took another bite of a petal. I chewed on it for a moment as I nodded and went to step towards him, so he could lead us back onto our proper path. "I noticed it while in Telmik. You wanted to hurry, to rush to Lumen and confront Light... yet didn't. And you kept making excuses, in a way, to not do so. We spent over a week there after the monarch died, waiting for something to happen. I think you knew we could have left not long after, but didn't want to admit it," I told him.

Vim had also seemed to build that dock for the quails rather slowly too. He had added a bunch of other stuff, like a small boat, for them as well. Even though that had not been a request of theirs. Vim was a good man, and gentle in many ways, but even he usually didn't go that far for people. Which only further told me that he was trying to not rush us to confront Light.

He didn't want to confront her. Even though he knew he had to.

It was... Very Vim. A man of rules, who was usually swift to act... but also gentle beyond belief.

I knew that Vim likely didn't want to hurt, let alone kill, Light. Celine's daughter. She was someone he had promised to protect, after all. And not just because she was a member of the Society.

Vim turned, leading me around the field of sunflowers as we started to head towards the mountain in the distance. Almost the same direction we'd just come from, nearly.

"Am I that easy for you to read now, Renn?" Vim asked me gently.

I shrugged at him. "Kind of, Vim. For some things, at least," I told him honestly.

He hummed at that.

Taking another bite of a petal, I tilted my head a moment as I realized something important.

"Vim," I got his attention.

He glanced at me, raising an eyebrow as he waited for what I had to ask.

"The flowers. Will you ruin their smell? While carrying them?" I asked.

His raised eyebrow lowered as he frowned... and then he sighed and nodded. "Yes. Since we're about a day and a half away," he admitted as he slowed.

I smiled as I gestured for him to give me them. "I'll carry them, then. Trust me, giving a woman a bunch of flowers that don't have a smell won't go well," I said.

"No doubt..." Vim agreed as he took the sunflower I carried from me, and then handed me the bundle he had been carrying. He did so by putting it on my shoulder for me, and holding it there until I got it situated properly.

Smiling a little as I steadied the bundle, I was glad to find it wasn't too heavy. I'd not be bothered by it... though...

Glancing behind me, at the spear that was pushing harshly into the bundle, I worried for it. Its tip, though wrapped in a small cloth, wasn't far from the bundle. If I wasn't careful...

Then the spear shifted, slipping away as Vim took it from me.

"Hey..." I complained as Vim undid the wrap on the spear, freeing it from the holster it sat in.

"Just while you carry those, Renn. I'm not taking it from you, I promise," he said.

"You better not be."

He nodded... as I noticed the way he shifted the spear, holding it in his left hand next to him.

Studying him for a moment, I dedicated the way he held it to memory.

He suddenly looked like a soldier.

"What?" he asked, noticing my look.

"Nothing... let's go then, before I eat them all," I said as I turned as to return to walking.

He chuckled at me, and then suddenly was offering me something. Something yellow.

Smiling at the petal he had plucked and proffered, I went ahead and ate it from his hand.

While chewing on it, I happily hummed as we left the field of golden flowers behind.

Chapter 439 Burden of a Princess

Slowly opening the door to father's study, I tried keep my breathing controlled. I gulped ever so lightly, as I shifted the bundle of papers I'd spent the last several days meticulously preparing.

The door opened quietly, being well made even if old, and for a moment all I saw were there shelves and tables. Then I finally saw the desk. The huge desk, so big one couldn't reach all its corners even if you lay upon it.

Father was alone. He sat at his desk, leaning over it with his head in his hand.

He looked tired. Angry.

Thin.

I gathered my nerve as I stepped into his study, making sure to tap lightly on the door as I did. Father slowly glanced up at me, and upon our eyes meeting all of his exhaustion disappeared.

"Brandy, why are you still up?" he asked, sounding upset.

I didn't let his tone, or the disappointed frown on his face, stop me. I continued deeper into his study, and lifted the bundle of papers a bit as to show him.

"Father...! I think I have a solution!" I said excitedly, my voice cracking and making noises as if I'd not drunk anything in days.

My father noticeably sighed as he sat up a little as I went to put the papers onto his desk. I had to stretch a bit to do so, since I wasn't tall enough.

"Brandy..." father said my name, sounding annoyed. I tried not to hear the exhaustion creeping back into his voice, or see it show on his face either.

"Look, father! The eastern shipping lane is still open, and recently the nation of..." I quickly went to try and explain, shuffling the papers as well as I could to find the main document that showed my findings. It was hard to find it when not able to fully see over the edge of the desk; maybe I should have sorted them first before coming.

"Brandy!"

I flinched, even though he hadn't shouted too loudly.

He had leaned forward a bit, as to look down at me from over his desk. I tried not to shrink down and hide as he glowered at me.

"This is no time for games, Brandy. Please. Go to sleep. You and your siblings have an important task tomorrow, you will need your rest," father said, speaking calmly again.

Now instead of exhausted or annoyed, he simply looked hurt.

Which only made me feel even more terrible.

"But..." I started to say, about to point again at the papers, but father wasn't listening. He didn't want to listen.

He stood, rather briskly, and rounded his desk. I felt the tears come as he stepped over to me, and started gathering up the papers I had just placed onto his desk.

"Please, child. I have lots to do, and little time to do it. If you won't sleep, at least go bother someone else," he said as he got all my papers together. He then gently grabbed me by the shoulder and back, and turned me as to lead me back to the door.

Unauthorized use of content: if you find this story on Amazon, report the violation.

I tried to resist for a moment, but gave up. He was pushing rather firmly, and...

"But father, I have an idea," I tried to say as we reached the door.

If he had heard me, he didn't show it. He instead just handed me my papers, pushed me a little bit so that I would backstep out of his room... and then sighed and nodded down at me.

"I'll spend time with you later, Brandy. Once this is all over. I promise. For now, please, give me time," he said... and then shut the door.

Squeezing the bundle of papers to my chest, I heard the sound of the lock being latched. Through the thick door I heard father then sigh, mumble something I couldn't make out... and then I heard only silence.

Blinking tear-filled eyes... I glanced around the dark hallway. It was deep in the night. No one else was awake. Father and I were likely the only ones up at this hour, especially thanks to how hectic the world has been lately.

Taking a few deep breaths, I decided to just... place the papers down by the door. In front of it, so he'd notice them upon leaving. His door opened inward, so they'd not get stuck or ruined, but he'd have no choice but to see them again when he stepped upon them while leaving.

Gathering them into a nice little pile, I did my best to ignore the tears that fell upon a few of the papers.

I wasn't going to cry. Not really. I wouldn't let myself do so.

I knew why father had become so brunt and rude. I understood it. Even if the rest of my family, and our retainers, didn't.

Our kingdom was bankrupt. Broke. We couldn't even afford to pay salaries, let alone buy the necessary supplies and resources that kept our country running. Not only would we not be able to pay even our guards and servants here within a moon, we'd not be able to ensure the stores of food for winter would be full once the weather became harsh.

Thus my plan. My little idea, one that although might not work completely... it would at least alleviate the struggle. We'd not be able to fully restock our treasury with it, but at the least it'd pay the salaries and bills. It'd let us buy stock and food, and...

Some loud sounds startled me. I stood up quickly, and backed away from the door... as I heard things clatter and break. Things fell to the ground, and what sounded like a cup clanged and bounced along the floor inside father's study.

A loud, low, groan then followed... and I began to tremble as I realized what had happened.

Father had just acted out violently. Rashly. Either he had hit stuff off his desk in a fit of a rage, or knocked over one of the many tables and shelves.

Further proof of how bad it had gotten.

Father never acted with such anger. Even though he, like most men in this era, was something of misogynist... he was not cruel. Not mean. It was why so many people, family and servants alike, have begun to spread terrible rumors of him. That he'd been cursed, or fallen prey to some weird disease or disorder... since he was acting so uncharacteristically for a man such as him.

He was a wise, gentle, king. Not one to succumb to wrath or fury.

Taking a deep breath I decided to leave.

Maybe I was too late.

Maybe I had waited too long to try something. I should have put in effort, more effort, and helped him and our people find a solution a long time ago. Months, maybe even years, ago. Before the situation got this bad.

Maybe it was too late for him to see or hear reason.

But if that was the case... what do we do? What do I do?

No one would go against him on his court, or amongst his advisors. Not with him acting so emotional lately. Not since he had banished and threatened to hang poor Davidli.

I sniffed at the memory of that gentle old man, with the silly beard. He had looked so utterly lost and confused when father had banished him, just as we all had.

"Maybe they're all right... maybe father has been cursed..." I whispered as I rounded a corner... right as more shouts of anger echoed from down the hall. Coming from his study.

Maybe mother would have a better idea of what to do now. I'd not really talked with her about it yet.

Hopefully she'd be willing to speak of it. Especially since all of our lives, our kingdom and more might be dependent on us finding a solution.

Since he obviously wasn't able to.

Chapter 440 Brandy's Mother

Finally.

Walking into the smaller parlor, I sighed at the sight of my mother.

She was dressed rather plainly, thankfully, but was messing with a bunch of flowers. She was standing in front of a small table, one decorated with hundreds of different flowers of every shape and size. She seemed to be re-arranging them, as if to make a design. Whatever it was she was planning to make, I couldn't tell yet. Though I wasn't sure if that was because she had just started, and I couldn't see even the hint of the final design, or if I was simply that out of touch with such little whimsies.

"Mother," I greeted my mother as I passed her head servant. The older human woman bowed her head gently as we walked past each other, but I paid her no mind.

"Hm... little Brandy, here to receive your scolding are you?" mother asked as she lifted a flower, a large blue one, out of the bundle. She studied it closely for some reason, as if it was important.

"Scolding...?" I asked. Why was I going to be scolded? I had requested some time with her, as to speak of father and our kingdom's issues... not anything...

"Your father. He's told me to keep you away from his section of the palace. That you keep bothering him, while he's busy," mother said gently as she put the blue flower back into the huge bundle of flowers.

Did... did she put it right back in the same spot where she'd taken it from? It had looked like it.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, mother... Father, he's," I started to say as I stepped up to stand beside her. Before I could continue though, mother turned to hand me a flower.

I took it, a little begrudgingly, as she then went to hand me a few more. Not because she was giving them to me as gifts, but instead so that I would hold them as she moved some of the smaller flowers around in her design.

Wanting to sigh at her, I kept myself in check.

This isn't her fault; don't get too angry with her. This was how she was raised.

"Your father is a busy man, Brandy. He's king. And right now he has a lot to do. Just... leave him be for a while. If you keep annoying him while he's in these odd moods of his, you might get hurt or worse, so just stay away from him," mother said.

Ah! So she at least recognized he was being weird!

"He's acting weird because of stress, mother," I said.

Mother paused a moment... and then glanced over at me. "Hm...?"

I nodded, rather firmly. Enough so I caused one of the flowers mother had handed me to prick my hand, it had thorns. "Father is stressing out over our finances. The kingdom is broke," I said.

Mother blinked at me... and then turned a little, to look across the room. I followed her gaze, wondering what she was doing, and then realized she was looking at the door.

Oh. Right. I probably shouldn't say things too loudly, huh?

"I see... so my youngest daughter is more than she appears, is she?" mother then asked as she looked back at me.

I shifted a little, and was a little surprised to see the smirk on her face.

"Mother...?"

Mother sighed, and went to grab the flowers she'd just given me. She took them, and simply placed them on the table next to us. The way she basically dropped them down, haphazardly, made it almost seem as if she no longer cared about the flowers at all. Or ever even had.

"Who taught you, Brandy?" mother then asked.

Taught...? "You mean which teacher? I've had three. Right now it's Miss Trentibi," I said.

Mother frowned at that. "Who was before that?"

"Well... first was when I was a baby. I don't really remember her. Last one was Klafa, but she got pregnant and stepped down to give birth and raise her child," I said. I missed Klafa. She used to make treats for me during our lessons. Not that Miss Trentibi was a bad teacher, or rude or mean, at all.

Mother crossed her arms as she hummed and studied me further.

Great, why was I being judged all of a sudden...? I need to get mother back on track. "Mother, this is serious," I said.

"Yes. It is. What a pity. I should have noticed your intellect before this..."

Oh...? I frowned at that as mother sighed and uncrossed her arms. She stepped closer, and knelt down.

I felt the hairs at the back of my neck, the ones that went down a bit below my shoulders; stand up a little as mother got close. We were suddenly eye-to-eye, which was weird. I'd never been this close to mother, or ever seen her act like this... or well...

Staring into my mother's eyes, I was a little surprised to see such depth to them. She was holding my gaze, and she didn't have that silly looking, stupid tinted, smile on her face.

This mother was not some absentminded woman at all. Who was she? Where had she been all this time?

"Do you know what a patriarchal society is, Brandy?" she asked.

"It's what ours is. We women don't have as many freedoms as the men do. We can't hold any political power, or authority."

Stolen content warning: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

She nodded and smiled at me. That smile quickly turned into a smirk. "Yet you still think you can get through that idiot's thick skull? Being a woman, a little girl, no less?"

My brow furrowed. "Are you... saying father's been ignoring my advice because of what I am?" I asked.

"That amongst other things. I now wish I hadn't allowed them to burn your papers. What had your plan been, Brandy?" she asked.

Burnt my papers...!?

Taking a deep breath, since I was now angry and offended, I nodded at my mother. "To make a new textile product. One we can make cheaply, quickly, and is currently in fashion amongst both high-born and low-born peoples of our surrounding neighbors. We have excess cotton, more than we can sell, and no one to buy it. Not at this time of year. But we can sell..."

Mother raised her hand to stop me; I went quiet... since my voice had been growing rather loud. I had been so happy to have someone finally ask about the details!

"Yeah... that's not going to happen, Brandy. Even if your father had been in his right mind, they would never have been willing to risk such a venture. You're talking about dedicating workers to a singular task, for a product untested and one we're not sure would even sell?" mother smiled softly at me as she shook her head.

"I have proof it'd work!" I said quickly.

She blinked.

Digging into my pocket, I pulled out the only coin I ever earned.

Showcasing it to mother, I smiled happily, as if already victory was assured. "I spent five bronze coins total! And two of those had not been needed, wouldn't have been needed, had I been able to use our own employees!" I happily told her.

Mother slowly frowned as she reached out to take my coin. She held it, studying the weight, and softly shook her head. "How'd you make this? If you sold something to another nation, you..."

"I dealt with a merchant on credit. Using our family name," I said.

She sighed. "Which merchant, Brandy?"

"Liverstom."

Mother visibly relaxed and smiled. "That's a good choice. Why'd you pick him?"

"I..." I hesitated a bit. "I don't really know," I said. I had spent a few weeks talking and studying the merchant families our own dealt with. Of the eight of them, Liverstom seemed not just the most trustworthy but also the most capable. Plus he traveled with his own family, his wife and children. I liked that. It made it more... real to me, somehow. For him it wasn't just about the money, it was about living a lifestyle with his family.

Mother ran her thumb along my coin for a moment, and then she held it back out to me.

"Keep it close. Don't let anyone know you have it. It might be all you will be able to take with you, after all."

I almost didn't take it back, thanks to her words. "Mother...?"

Since I had hesitated, mother forced the coin back into my hand. She cupped my hand with her own, forcing my hand into a fist over my recently earned golden coin.

"I'm sorry Brandy. Maybe you're right. Maybe it would have worked. Maybe it still would have. But it's too late."

"No...! We have two months reserve if we stretch our resources, and in that time I can do three shipments and...!"

Mother though simply shook her head. "No, Brandy. We don't have two months. We don't even have two weeks."

Shifting a little, I wanted to shake my head. I had just the other day checked the ledgers! Even though only the men in the family were allowed to withdraw from the treasury, and sign for anything binding, we women still had access to the ledgers. We could see who took what, and for what reason. There was no way it had changed that much in just a couple days!

"Then we can just operate on credit...!" Just as I had to earn this coin!

Mother smiled at me. "Honey, our family hasn't had access to credit in over a year. Odds are the only reason Liverstom agreed to help you was out of the kindness of his heart."

My own heart sank. A year...!?

Then we were in far dire straits than I thought! That meant...!

"Ah... you really are wise. Far beyond your siblings!" Mother leaned forward, and grabbed my face. She cupped my cheeks, squeezing them as if I was a young kid again.

Or well, to her I still was. Being non-human I, like most of my siblings and other family members, didn't grow as fast as normal. Although old enough to be an adult in human terms, I was still tiny and young looking like a child.

"Mother..." I groaned as she kept squeezing my face. Why was she being so odd all of a sudden?

The mother I knew was a fickle, somewhat uncaring, person. One more focused on her little hobbies, such as growing flowers or tea-parties, than us children. I think this might be one of the first times she's ever actually touched me like this, so openly...

I tried not to notice the tears that welled in my eyes, since they were brought alongside a sad truth. One I'd honestly never really cared to notice, not really.

"I'm sorry for being a terrible mother, Brandy," mother then said.

"Mhm..." I didn't dare say a word, since I didn't trust myself. Was I about to cry...? Surely not, right?

Even if it was true. Even if she apologized, and started acting kind and gentle... it wouldn't really change anything would it? Other than I'd be happy, I guess. Happy that my mother would finally be someone I could...

Mother then released me, and took a deep breath as she sighed. "But it's too late. Too little, too late," she said as she turned back to her table of flowers.

Reaching up, I rubbed my cheeks that she had rather forcefully squeezed and pinched. I did so not really because it had hurt, but instead to wipe a bit of the tears that had snuck out of my eyes.

"Mother..." I whispered.

"I'll send someone to explain and tell you what to do, Brandy. For now... just prepare. You're smart. Smarter maybe than even me, so you'll be okay," mother said as she continued to mess with her flowers.

Prepare..? "Mother? What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Our kingdom's end. We're about to be invaded, because your father and the rest picked a fight," she said with a stiff voice.

A fight...? So our economic troubles weren't just because of ill-management and bad happenstance...? Was someone waging economic war against us? Who? Why? We weren't a large nation, nor powerful or wealthy, but we'd always been well-liked. We had hundreds of years of history and...

"Wait... invaded...?" I whispered as I realized what she'd just said.

Mother glanced at me, right as she picked up a pair of scissors. She didn't even look at the flower arrangement as she went to snip off a large flower. The blue one she had been studying earlier.

"It's all their fault, Brandy. You hold no blame. None of us do. Your father and his fellow cronies could have saved us. They had given us an olive branch. We could have been saved. But they'd rather the kingdom fell around them, and we all die, than ever admit they're not good enough," she said flatly.

New panic began to surge within me, as I realized how serious she was being. And how serious the comments she was making were.

We were about to be invaded.

Because father and the rest had done something stupid.

And here all this time I had simply thought we were insolvent.

"So..."

"So we'll escape. We all will. Stop planning to save them, or this land, and instead start planning to save yourself."