

## Non Human 491

### Chapter 491 Vim – Narli's Prophecy

"Vim!"

I put aside the little trinket I'd been trying to fix and stood from my seat in the living room. It only took me a few moments to reach Narli's room, where I found her sitting up on the edge of the bed and a worried Berri hovering over her.

Sighing softly at the troubled looking saint, and the ever growing worried mother of hers, I put a smile on my face and entered her room.

"See? Nothing to worry about," I said, doing my best to be calm.

Narli gave me a shy smile. The kind that told me something bad had happened. "Actually Vim... This might be worse than me not waking up on time," she said.

Glancing at Berri, who had went to grab a towel and glass of water from a nearby table, I wondered if I even wanted to know. I had to, in theory. This was the first prophecy she's had since her little incident... we had all been worrying she'd slip back into her strange coma again, but... Judging by the way they both looked concerned, and not just for Narli's health, maybe I should return to treating prophecies the way I normally did. But could I do so? What if it was related to her condition?

"Do I want to hear it?" I asked carefully.

"No. But... I fear what will happen if I don't tell you it," Narli said as she took the glass of water her mother offered. She quickly gulped the whole thing down, releasing a pent up sigh of relief after she finished.

Berri doted on her daughter, taking the empty cup from her and handing her the lightly damp towel in exchange. The young saint went to wipe her head and neck off with it, telling me that whatever she had seen... had likely deeply bothered her.

Prophecies didn't last long. Just a few hours ago we had all been having lunch, and then she had gone to take a nap. Odds are she had her prophecy not long before waking from that very nap. Yet I knew that even those few minutes of prophecies were enough to make one tired, and exhausted as if from great strain and effort. Though those ones usually were because the things they had seen had affected them mentally, either by seeing something terrifying or traumatizing.

I'd known more than a few saints who had broken, mentally, from the things they had seen.

It made me feel for the poor girl. She was not as young as she looked, of course, but she was still just a child. A girl who didn't know war or strife. Yet here she was, constantly going through things that would break even hardened warriors.

And now she needed to fear that each prophecy could be her last. Where she gets stuck in them, never waking. As if being sent into some perpetual prison of torment.

Damn the gods who cursed her so.

After she wiped herself off a bit, she gave her mother a thankful smile as Berri took the now sweaty towel.

"Well... tell me quickly then, before I run away like a little girl," I said.

Narli giggled at me, as did Berri though much softer, and she nodded.

She took a small breath, turned a bit as to face me directly... and then held my gaze.

I steeled myself, not so much in preparation for what she'd say... but to stop myself from accidentally breaking their home. Now that Narli had gone through another prophecy, and nothing had gone wrong, I was now able to leave without much worry. If I broke their house I'd be stuck here longer as I fixed it. I didn't want to do that.

"Renn meets someone who scares you. Enough so that you... kill so many of us, just because you see them together."

The floor creaked a bit as I shifted.

"Excuse me...?" I whispered as Berri went still as well.

So she hadn't heard the prophecy already. I had misread her worry. She had simply been stressed over her daughter's condition.

But no matter. I was now stressing enough for everyone.

Narli nodded. "I... don't know how else to explain it, Vim. A bunch of us are all together... more than I can even say. Hundreds, maybe? I only knew a few of them, but the me then was comfortable. Calm. I don't know where we were, or why we were all together, but I was near Renn. She and others were talking, and I was just listening out of interest... and then someone walks over. A young woman. She and Renn are obviously good friends, and even I feel calm near them," Narli explained, speaking slowly as she likely replayed the prophecy from memory.

Berri made a tiny noise as she looked at me, but I ignored her. I knew what she had noticed, because I had noticed it too.

Hundreds of us. Together.

The only logical answer to that was the upcoming vote.

Narli sighs as she lifts her hands, pointing to the other side of the room. Berri followed her point, but I didn't. "Then you enter the room. From one of the doors. People notice you before I do, or Renn does. I hear them whispering about you as you walk over to us. It's all... fine? You even say hello to me as you walk past me, to go to Renn," Narli said. My eyes narrowed as I watched the young saint then frown, as if suddenly her head hurt. "Then... you see them. The young woman. One moment I'm watching you say hello to Renn, teasing her about something, and then the next..."

My heart thumped a bit as I waited. Narli went quiet though, her eyes narrowing as she likely processed what she had seen. I didn't like the way she looked perplexed, and hurt. As if I'd done something utterly despicable.

"Then?" Berri asked as she stepped closer to her.

Narli blinked and nodded. "The next thing I know, I blink and I'm on the ground. There are screams... it's chaos. My head is ringing and the building is half destroyed, I can see the sun through the hazy smoke and ash. Even though I think we had been underground. There are bodies everywhere. Renn is screaming, and..." Narli then looked over at me. "And you're fighting that woman."

My heart slowed its thumping as I calmed down a bit.

That was it...?

"Wait... you said he had killed many of us. Here I thought you were going to say Vim would slaughter our own people," Berri said, breathing a sigh of relief herself.

"She's saying I attack this woman on sight, and by doing so get many of our people killed. She's not wrong," I said, processing what she's just told me.

Collateral damage.

Narli nodded. "It's horrible, Vim. I don't get very hurt, somehow... but so many others do. I don't know how I know, but I feel as if more than half of us die there. Many of them are women and children," Narli said, speaking with a dull voice... as if not really comprehending what she was saying.

Berri squeezed the towel that Narli had just wiped herself off with and glanced at me.

I took a small breath, and nodded. "What did this woman look like...? I assume you don't know her name, otherwise you'd have used it."

Narli frowns and shakes her head. "I've been trying to remember, Vim. That's what I've been trying to do this whole time. I'm not even sure if it was a young woman, I just... feel like it had been? I feel like I had heard her name, but..."

Great. That meant it could have been anyone. Light, one of her people, or someone I've never met before.

"I can't imagine Vim killing so many like that. He's able to kill people in the blink of an eye without harming anyone around them. I've seen it myself," Berri said, trying to reason the prophecy herself.

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"You said I had been fighting her. You saw it," I said, pointing out the likely reason.

Narli nodded. "Yes... I um... I'm not sure really how it went or goes, I was too focused on getting up and helping the people around me. Um..." Narli then sniffed, and shook her head. "I don't want to talk about it."

Berri stepped forward, immediately wrapping the young saint into a mother's embrace. Narli didn't hesitate to return the hug and bury her face into her mother's bosom.

Wonderful. That meant she had seen true carnage. A saint wasn't capable of just standing around while people died near them. Their divine powers tugged at them to help those people. Which was likely why she had not focused on me, or the one I had been fighting.

While Narli silently wept in Berri's arms, I bit back a few questions as I tried to consider my options.

There were of course doubts of this happening at the vote. Right now that was the only thing I could confidently say would gather so many of us at one location... but here in the future that would change. Light was bringing back well over a thousand people, so she claimed. That meant it might not be the vote at all, but something else. Something that happens sooner, or years from now after the vote. Decades or centuries from now, even.

That was one problem with a saint's prophecies. Narli, had she been more astute, might have been able to tell me a rough estimate in how long we had before this supposed disaster happened. For instance by telling if Renn had given birth yet or not, or her own condition at the time of the prophecy. But Narli might not have noticed any such details at the time, or cared to notice. Celine had been one of the best I'd known in being able to wring information from her dreams, and even she had overlooked such details often. And she had always been on the lookout for them.

"It's okay, dear. It's okay..." Berri whispered as she brushed her daughter's hair. I glanced at them, and wondered if it hurt or not. Narli was clinging rather tightly to her, and at the angle she was burying her face into Berri, her horn was likely stabbing her rather sharply.

Berri though of course didn't even show a hint of pain or discomfort. And never would. Not in this instance, in this way.

A lovely woman and an even lovelier mother.

Still...

So she saw me fighting someone. Someone capable of fighting back.

Just who could that be...?

"Vim..."

I blinked and looked back up. I had been staring down at the floor, at the rugs. They were a little too fluffy for my taste.

I found that Berri was lying Narli down. She had fallen back asleep.

Going to help, I helped her get Narli back into bed and under the covers. The girl curled up a little, falling deeper into sleep as she hugged a pillow. I noticed a few of them had little holes in them, and only a few were patched with sewing.

"My poor baby..." Berri whispered as she tucked her daughter in.

Stepping away, I left the room before I accidentally woke the girl. My mind whirled as I went back to the front room, to the chair I'd been sitting the last few hours.

I didn't sit back down; instead I just grabbed the back of the chair and... stood. In silence.

The reason I had killed so many is because the one I had attacked had been able to withstand it.

That was the only possible explanation.

Had to be a monarch, or rather someone who had absorbed a monarch's heart. Surely. But...

Why would Narli not remember what they looked like? Maybe because she had been focusing on other things? For a girl like Narli, who has only met a handful of people her whole life, seeing hundreds of people in one place was likely overwhelming. Too much information too quickly. Her senses had been overloaded.

Thus her being near Renn, I would reason. She had stayed near the one she felt most comfortable and safe with at the time.

Yet... she hadn't said if her mother or father had been there, had she...?

My eyes narrowed as I made sense of a few of the puzzle pieces, and didn't like how smoothly it had dawned on me.

"I must have died, Vim. Or Horn."

I nodded gently as Berri walked out of the hallway and over to me. She sniffed as she wiped a tear away.

Yes. That had been obvious, now that I looked at it from this angle. Narli wouldn't have looked so troubled, or had wept at her mother's embrace so readily otherwise.

It was why she had tried not to look at Berri while talking. She had just witnessed her mother's death, or both of her parent's. It was why she had hesitated, and why she had not focused on me and the one I had been fighting during the prophecy.

How could any daughter focus on the chaos around them when their parents were breathing their lasts, right at their feet?

"Possibly at the vote. Or something like it, not long after. I just... can't imagine me doing something so drastic at the mere sight of someone like that," I said as I tried to think of who, or what, could make me react so.

I've stood before many people that I've detested. And although I did indeed succumb to emotion, I just couldn't fathom it happening today like that. Not in that way.

Especially not with Renn standing right next to me. Or the one that made me so.

"Maybe someone did something terrible? Or she had misunderstood? Maybe it had been them who caused such chaos, and you just simply reacted," Berri reasoned.

"Either way a mistake. One I now will not make," I said. Now that I knew.

"Maybe you were right, Vim. Maybe we shouldn't move..." Berri whispered.

"Careful Berri. Trying to avoid prophecies like that usually results in something worse happening," I warned her.

"You do it all the time!"

"Because I can survive the consequences," I said simply.

Berri shifted a bit, and ground her teeth as she glanced away from me. "I don't mind dying, Vim. I'm not scared of death. But my daughter..."

I nodded. "Still too young, yes. Don't worry... I'll talk to her more about it. Alone. To see if she'll tell me more with you elsewhere," I said.

Berri groaned a bit. "I hate that. But you're right... I noticed she was trying not to say certain things."

"Let her keep it to herself, Berri. It's a burden she doesn't need to carry alone, but it's one she will anyway. That is the fate of those like her," I told her.

My friend's face scrunched up. "Now I'm going to cry more! Don't look at me," Berri said between soft heaves as she went to cover her face with the towel she still carried.

I looked away from her, and back to the floor.

"Just... who could it be?" I wondered.

Even if it was Light, Less or any of them. Martin. Landi. Lilly, even.

Not one of them was strong enough to make such chaos. To survive an attack from me that devastated the area around me in such a way.

It just wasn't possible.

Surely...

"Whoever it is, figure it out and kill them before they get a chance to meet anyone," Berri said between her little cries.

I nodded. Yes.

For a few moments I stood there, as Berri wiped her face and gathered herself. It felt... a little wrong to hear her cry so often lately. I had once promised myself to never let her cry in such a way again, and yet here I was. Letting it happen.

But what was I to do...?

"I'll... talk to her again when she wakes. And if she can't remember more, I'll go ask Light and the other saints. Maybe they'll know more too," I said gently. If it was an event as grand as this, where hundreds of members die... then there was a good chance at least Light would have had a prophecy about it too.

Berri sniffed. "You'd do that?"

I nodded. "Yes. I don't want to, Berri... but I will. For you," I said. For all of us.

"Mhm... thank you, Vim."

She reached over and patted my arm, rather gently, and then stepped away. She returned back down the hallway, likely as to check on her daughter once more. She'd be doing so for months, likely. I think she checked on Narli more than she did anything else anymore.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed it out slowly... and wished I too had someone to check on me.

I did, of course. She just wasn't here.

She wasn't where she was supposed to be. Or maybe I wasn't where I was supposed to be.

"Why do you keep getting involved in things beyond design, Renn...?" I whispered as I thought about what to do next.

I knew what I needed to do.

I just have been trying to avoid it. This whole time.

But fate was forcing my hand. Or at least, trying to.

Releasing the back of the chair, I sighed again at the sight of little indents. I had grabbed it too harshly.

At least it hadn't broken. In fact I'd not broken anything, even after hearing another prophecy. One that bothered me even more than her previous one.

The front door opened, and I stepped a few feet back as to watch Horn enter from it. He closed the door behind him, shivered a bit thanks to the cold rain falling outside, and went to take off his rain gear. "It's storming fierce!" he said happily, and loudly.

"Horn be quiet!" Berri shouted, just as loudly, from the hallway. I heard her hurrying down it, likely to tell him to stay quiet as to not wake Narli.

He flinched, dropping his hat as he did. It landed with a small splat sound, thanks to it being so soaked.

Where had he been? To get so wet?

Probably had something to do with the bucket he was carrying. Did I smell fish in it, or was that just wet narwhal, I wonder?

While the married couple bickered quickly, as Berri told him of what had just happened... I decided to leave in the morning.

It was time I escaped. Fate was already testing my patience, I didn't need to give it the opportunity to outright break it.

Chapter 492 Renn – To Hear Reatti's Request

There was a strange... awkwardness in the air.

And it wasn't because of me, for once.

Or well, maybe it was.

Since indirectly I was the cause of their... oddness.

"Here I was hoping their presence would... deter this kind of thing," Gerald said lightly as he dabbed his pen into the ink pot.

"That's your mistake. Even an idiot could have foreseen this," Brandy said from the other side of the room. She too sat at a desk, and although also had a bunch of papers and reports upon it, she wasn't writing anything. Nor was she reading. Instead she was just... staring straight ahead.

I turned a bit, to look at the thing she was focused on. The painting resting against the nearby shelf, having not been put up on a wall anywhere yet, was pretty... but also a little simple. It was just a painting of some quaint town, with a castle in the distance. It looked like it was heavily wooded, maybe somewhere farther north with its thicker trees, but otherwise looked...

Normal?

Not odd enough to make Brandy so odd, at least, on first glance. Maybe it was something special, or meant something, to her. Light had given it to her. Just a few moments ago.

A housewarming gift, she had called it. Which was funny, since I had thought it was supposed to be the other way around. Shouldn't Brandy have given a gift instead?

Gerald sighed as he put aside the letter he had just finished writing. He leaned back in his chair, drawing my attention thanks to the way the chair had not made any noise as he had done so, and rested.

He looked defeated, for some reason. As if he'd just been handed a very large bill.

"So... should I leave or something?" I asked, tired of feeling awkward.

"You think Light would move back out if she left?" Gerald asked.

"Honestly who knows anymore," Brandy said.

My tail twisted a bit, and I wondered if I should just feel offended... or simply stop caring.

They were bothered that Light had moved into the guild. From the church. Yet at the same time, I wasn't really sure they actually had valid reasons for acting like this. Light was... odd, and obviously scheming many things, but from what I could tell so far she was only really concerned with her own group and the cathedral they were building.

Outside of spending time with me occasionally, Light basically stayed in her room while here. She did come out to have dinner with everyone, when she was here for it, but even when she did it was calm and quiet. People spoke normally, as she did, almost as if she'd been living here since the beginning. If anyone here was actually bothered by her presence, truly, they didn't show it at all when speaking to her. Half the time I felt as if something was... off, because of how naturally Light had basically moved in. When I had first gotten here, the first time, and met everyone there had been... hesitations amongst the members. There had even been those like Liina who had outright avoided me, since I had supposedly made them uncomfortable. Yet Light didn't seem to have that problem at all!

It was made weirder because I knew people were bothered. And not just Brandy and Gerald, either. Merit was annoyed too, though she had a good reason to dislike Light. And as far as I could tell Tosh didn't like Light much either, though no one outright was rude to her or she them. Merit had even sat with me and Light last night and had dinner together, talking normally and calmly.

At this point I couldn't tell if people were just... trying to keep the peace, and not cause issues, or if people just put on a fake façade when dealing with her.

It made me wonder if people put on such fronts in front of me too. The thought made my heart hurt, since it was likely true.

"It starts with one and two. Then another will show up. Then more. And before you know it..." Gerald said with a small shiver, speaking lowly.

"I know Gerald! What do you want me to do about it?" Brandy asked her voice not low at all.

My ears twitched, and I once again wanted to leave.

Brandy had asked if I'd spend some time with her, to talk to her about some things but honestly this just felt like we were tip-toeing around the main subject. All I had heard so far was that they just wanted to voice their displeasure. To anyone who would listen.

Yet it somehow felt as if I was the one they really wanted to blame for all this. As if it was my fault that Light and the rest of her people had returned from... well, wherever they had ran off to centuries ago. I knew they didn't really think it was my fault, as Gerald had just said he had thought me and Vim being here would have kept Light and her people at bay. I understood why he had thought such a thing, but... well... Vim wasn't here now. So that idea had kind of fallen apart.

Though who was to know if she'd leave if he returned. Light seemed to actually like Vim, even if he detested her. Half of our conversations when together were about Vim. To the point I was firmly under the belief that Light saw Vim as either a father-figure, or maybe an older brother. Something similar to what Lilly did.

Or well, maybe. Lilly, even if she didn't ever voice it aloud, had a part of her that genuinely loved Vim. Enough so that it's been bugging me, and I wanted to talk to her about it.

I sniffed, shifting a little in my seat... and noted Lilly's scent. This morning I had gone to check up with her, since Light had left early to go deal with her church stuff. I had found her taking a bath, and oddly it had made her smell a little stronger than usual. I knew some creatures smelled differently or stronger when wet but hadn't realized owls did such a thing too.

It worried me because I didn't outright know if I eliminated smells upon me like Vim did. So far no one had mentioned it, but... what if they did, and they just assumed it was from before I arrived here? Would they then grow suspicious later on, once they realized it wasn't fading? What about Merit? Did they smell Lilly on her too? Or were there simply too many smells here for anyone to outright notice?

Since I didn't like such worries I instead for a small moment thought of the nubs on Lilly's back instead, as she called them. It made me wonder if there was a way to heal them, somehow. I had once seen Witch heal a woman's arm, one that she'd lost the use of. It had looked... decrepit. Boney and thin. Witch had used her power, and although it had not returned to normal it did heal enough that the woman had been able to use it afterward.

Could the same happen to Lilly? Could Light, a saint who was supposedly one of the most powerful to have ever existed, do something about Lilly's wounds? What about someone like Berri?

I doubted it; since Lilly's wings were long gone... and I'd think Vim would have gotten them healed already had he known how to do so, but...

"Renn."

I blinked and nodded, leaving my own thoughts as I glanced to Gerald.

"Do you have any idea when Vim will return?" he asked.

Shaking my head, I shrugged. "He had said he'd hurry, but no. No idea."

"Where does Berri live anyway?" Brandy asked.

Gerald glanced at her. "You know who she is?"

"The fact you don't is what's actually concerning, Gerald," she said back.

"She lives far to the east, kind of near the Crypt," is all I said.

Brandy didn't know...? That was concerning too.

I mean... it was obvious why. Narli was there. A saint. And they didn't want anyone to know. But it was very... telling, to learn who knew and who didn't.

As far as I was aware the only one other than Vim who really knew was Oplar. And she's known for a long time. The fact that she's kept it secret this whole time really proved that she could be trusted.

Yet... Brandy was the bookkeeper. She in theory knew more secrets about the Society than anyone.

Yet she didn't know of Narli. Or even where they lived.

It made me question a lot of things, since I could remember Berri's home on the Chronicler's map. It had said the Keep on it, though it hadn't said anyone's name...

The Chronicler had even said, alongside Vim at the time, that I could go there to be safe.

I wonder if that meant they didn't know who actually lived there. I probably should have clarified with Vim before he left... Why's he always in such a rush?

Brandy sighed. "Light returns, and now Berri is getting active again too...? I wonder if I should just start packing up," she said.

"Hm? What's this now?" Gerald asked.

"Berri had been the one to coordinate the five kingdoms. Basically she had been the archiver and bookkeeper back then," Brandy said.

Oh! I had known that Berri had been very involved back then, but hadn't known to what level!

And five kingdoms...? Merit seemed to not have known Berri, having only heard of her from others. That meant those five kingdoms hadn't included Merit's.

It was sad to think we used to be so big, so prominent. Maybe Light did have a point, to a degree...

"Ah... I never got to meet the archivers. Other than Oplar, I mean," Gerald said.

"Hm?" I perked up at that, and Gerald noticed.

"Before taking over the mail system, Oplar and her family had been the ones to archive and protect all information for the Society. Stuff like census, religious texts, letters and whatnot," he explained for me.

I see! Thus maybe why Oplar was trustworthy and knew, then! Berri and them were all related, in a way!

Finding that very understandable, and an enjoyable revelation, I squirmed a bit and wished I had gone with Vim. I'd have liked to see them again.

Hopefully all was well...

"Do you know where Oplar is, Renn?"

"Somewhere south. We returned to Telmik right as she left... she could be back there by now, though," I said. It had been several weeks since then. More than enough time for her to have gone south and returned back already, she didn't linger at places long like Vim and I usually did.

"She's scheduled to be here before winter is over," Gerald said.

Considering that last night snow had fallen and not rain that meant it could still be some time before Oplar showed up here.

Brandy sighed again, though not as heavily as before. She leaned forward, as if to lean and rest on the desk. You'd think her whole world was falling apart, from the way she was acting. But as far as I was aware, Light and her people hadn't even done anything yet. They've not tried to take over Oplar's company, or even ask for money yet.

Studying her for a moment, I glanced away right before she looked up at me.

"Have you decided yet, Renn?" Brandy asked.

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My tail went still. "Decided...?" I asked. What'd she mean?

She frowned at me, and then glanced over at Gerald. He sat up a bit straighter, and coughed, at her look. "Oh... um... I'd not said anything yet, Brandy."

"And why not?" Brandy asked him, sounding upset.

"I've been busy!"

"You're always busy!"

I smirked at them as they bickered again. It was almost as if they were married, or maybe siblings. I wonder if there was something between them...? As far as I was aware there wasn't, but maybe there was? I've come to realize that many of our members sometimes acted indifferent to those they considered special to themselves.

"You... wanted to ask me something?" I asked.

The two glared at each other for a moment, but then looked back at me. Gerald nodded first. "Yes. I had already asked Vim, but knowing him he had forgotten to mention it. I've been told he plans to step down as protector, and that you two will likely be taking a break of sorts..." Gerald started, speaking as if we were now discussing a contract and not something far simpler.

I smirked a little as Brandy coughed, as to interrupt him before he could continue. "He wants you two to live here. Permanently," she said.

Raising an eyebrow at that, I realized what he had meant earlier. When saying he had hoped us being here would have kept Light and her people at bay.

He had not meant just here and now. Not while we were here.

He had meant for good.

"Live here...?" I asked softly.

Gerald nodded quickly. "I mean... there aren't many places anymore in the Society like ours. Telmik, the Summit... and well... both are not places I could see Vim sticking around, willingly, at least. Plus you have friends here, and your humans, and..." Gerald began to list his reasons, once again sounding like he was speaking of profit and loss.

Although he sounded a little... pushy about it, since he didn't seem to be speaking with pure intentions, I still found myself tearing up a little at the offer.

"I was nearly banished last time," I said softly. The only reason I hadn't been, in my opinion, was because they hadn't had the heart to do so outright. But to me...

"Well..." Brandy shifted in her seat, and unlike Gerald's her chair made noise as she did so.

"It's just an offer, Renn... you will always be welcome here. As I'm sure many have told you by now, we all regret what we'd done and how we had voted back then... we had been emotional and..." Gerald started to say, gesturing lightly at himself as if to apologize for a vote he himself had likely participated in.

I gulped a little, since I felt once again as if I wanted... maybe even needed, to run away and hide.

Honestly I hadn't wanted to confront the fact that they all had nearly voted to banish me. Just as Lughes and Crane had done so long ago.

Yet here he was... forcing it...

Or well... they both were.

"Just consider it, Renn. I'm sure Merit would love to have you here. If anything just having you here to make that grumpy old fish happy would be worth it alone," Brandy said.

I smiled at that. "She's not been too bad lately," I said. It was too bad I couldn't tell them about Lilly. They'd have been very shocked to hear how... friendly Merit was with her. And Lilly her.

"I've personally never had much a problem with Merit," Gerald noted.

"You're too spineless, Gerald. She leaves alone the ones she considers weak," Brandy said.

My ears fluttered a bit as I considered that. That wasn't true, was it...? Merit seemed very friendly with many people. Sofia was one of them, and she wasn't a predator or strong at all!

Maybe Brandy was just teasing, or maybe she and Merit had butted heads once or twice and I just hadn't known of it. It'd not be too surprising; really, Brandy was sometimes a tad too... well... Brandy.

"Thank you for the offer... both of you. All of you. I'll consider it. But honestly, until I know what Vim's going to do... what he's actually going to do...? Who knows?" I said with a shrug.

Brandy groaned a bit. "Isn't that the truth."

Gerald though shook his head. "I think you'll all be surprised at what he does. So many think, and expect, him to act rashly but... he's Vim. If this was enough to make him act rashly, he'd have done it thousands of times by now," he said.

My eyebrows met as I frowned at his words. Not because he sounded far too sure of himself... but sadly because I believed him.

"You forget how much he and Celine went at it. Light is just like her. She grew up to be as annoying as..." Brandy was about to; once again, go on a tangent about Light and her people but someone knocked on the door.

I turned, and decided to stand and open the door for the two. I was closest to the door, and I made sure to put my hat back on before I did.

Smiling at Jasna, I stepped back as to let the taller woman into the room. I tried not to notice the pretty woman's wink as she did. "Thanks Renn," she said as she entered the room.

Shifting a little, I glanced out of Gerald's office and was glad to not see anyone else. Not because I didn't want anyone else to be here, but because I could once again take my hat off since there were no humans here.. Technically it was too early for any human, one not belonging to the Society, to be out and about but I shouldn't be so sure. A few guards did still walk around at this time and their numbers would grow swiftly the closer we got to opening, and I knew if something odd had occurred there was a chance they'd have knocked on Gerald's door.

I was about to close the door, but before I could Jasna reached over to lightly tap me on the shoulder. The kind of tap that made me strangely conscious of the distance between us. It was a very similar tap that Vim would have done. Jasna was not flirtatious, if anything she was whatever the opposite was. But ever since I'd lost my scent, she's been far more comfortable with me. And it showed.

"Reatti was looking for you. I just passed her near the bank."

Oh? I hesitated a moment, but only for a moment. "Thanks for telling me," I said, nodding as I turned to leave... and then remembered why I was even here.

Turning to Brandy, I found her gently smiling at me. "We can talk later," she said.

I was about to ask if she was sure, but I knew better than to doubt the look on her face. Maybe whatever she wanted to talk about was something she didn't want to say in front of others, or well... someone other than Gerald.

"Later then. Gerald. Brandy, Jasna," I bid them farewell as I left, tucking my ears better under my hat and getting them comfortable as I left the office.

Closing the door behind me, I sighed a little as I felt the chill of the hallway. Although Gerald's office had a fireplace, it hadn't been lit, but it had still been warmer. Warm enough that I hadn't even noticed any kind of chill. Out here in the hallway though, I almost wanted to go grab a jacket or something.

"She's still here."

Pausing, I frowned as I glanced around. Whose voice had I just...?

"If only she'd stay forever."

The hallway got a little colder... as I realized who I was hearing.

Turning a little, I glared at the door. The door I'd just closed.

"Shouldn't have listened to the prophecies. Should have just let her stay here back then," Brandy said softly.

My heart thumped as I slowly reached up, and felt the hat still on my head. My ears were even angled downward, like usual.

I had good hearing. Very good hearing. But the doors and walls here in this building were very well made. Too well made. I'd never been able to hear through them before. Not this clearly. I was almost able to hear them as clearly as if the door had been fully opened...

Gulping, I glanced up and down the hallway to make sure no one was around. Luckily there wasn't.

"I warned you, Brandy," Gerald said.

"How was I supposed to know Light would come back!" Brandy said, a little loudly.

My jaw clenched as I realized what I was doing.

I was snooping. Eavesdropping. I was listening into a conversation they thought private.

I should walk away.

Quickly.

Before I heard something I shouldn't...

"Instead of blaming anyone, how about just admitting it? Before Light does?" Jasna asked.

Holding my breath, I kept my legs from moving. They wanted to step away. To run.

But I held firm.

I had to.

"Doing that now would just either make Light our enemy, or grant us Vim's wrath. No. We just need to... wait, somehow," Brandy said.

My stomach started to hurt, as I realized something terrible.

They were speaking about me. That was not too surprising. I had just left the room. I was a heavy topic lately, what with the prophecies and the way Light's been acting around me.

But...

"Honestly, even if we had not voted to banish her it might have ended worse anyway. How could they have fallen in love had we kept them from each other?" Jasna asked.

My legs finally won. I stepped away, quickly, as my heart began to beat wildly.

"Because it was fated, obviously! And...!" Bandy's voice still carried, thanks to how loud it was, but as I rounded a corner I finally got far enough away that it became drowned out. Faded.

Unrecognizable.

Breathing quickly, I leaned against the wall for a moment as my mind whirled.

The vote. My banishment.

They hadn't done it because they had been scared of me.

They had done it on purpose.

Because of a prophecy.

Why...? How?

"To keep us together...?" I whispered as my mind made sense of it.

It was the only obvious answer. Brandy, even if at odds with Light right now, had been involved with them back in the day. She was a sister. A member of their church, and group. In the thick of it.

She knew of the prophecies about me. Had known them.

My memory of our first meeting, the last time I'd been here, came and went. I thought of how I had opened my bedroom door, to find Brandy who had then led me to Lamp and her people. She had teased me over them being Vim's prize. His spoils from war. She had acted even from the first time we met as if Vim and I had been a pair. Even though back then we hadn't been. Not officially. And definitely not as we are today. What had she said, even...? On our first meeting...?

"Well look at you. I must admit, you're exactly what I expected," I whispered, repeating what Brandy had said upon first seeing me. I thought of the look on her face, the one with that knowing smirk.

I had assumed back then she had simply meant from hearing about me through rumors and whispers. Since she had met Vim and others before meeting me back then since they had returned to Lumen together, and as such had heard about me. But in reality...

She likely hadn't. She had returned with Vim, alone, after he had saved Lamp and her people on that pirate ship. There had been very little time between her return to the guild, and her meeting me. Lamp and her people had still been unloading themselves from the wagons they had ridden in on, when I had been taken to them!

Brandy had not been speaking of rumors about me, but instead prophecies.

Closing my eyes, I groaned as I both made sense of it... and hated it.

Vim was right.

Knowing wasn't worth it.

All it did was make you angry. All it did was make you distrust people.

How could I trust Brandy or the rest of them again? Just like Light, they were playing with my life as if some game! Even if it was for the better, even if they had good intentions in mind...!

"Renn...?"

Looking up, I sniffed at the sight of Reatti. The meerkat shifted at the sight of me, and looked terribly worried.

"Reatti..." I said her name, and didn't like how weak and sad I had sounded to my own ears.

"What's wrong...? What happened?" she hurried over, glancing me up and down and all around us as if to find whatever was bothering me so she could rip it apart.

Did she know too...?

Was that why she had forgiven me...? Was that why she had so swiftly overlooked the fact that her brother had died for me? Because of long told prophecies, before we'd even met...?

Was... was that why Brom had done it? Without a second thought...? Had he... had he known? Had all of them?

No.

Don't think like that Renn.

Because if you do...

"Renn, what happened?" Reatti asked as she grabbed my arm, as if to support me.

I didn't need it, but I accepted it all the same as I wiped my right eye clean of tears. "Sorry. I just... heard something that hurt my heart a little," I told her the truth.

"Heard...? From who?" she asked, and I nearly melted at the way she had sounded so offended. If someone had been here, and I had simply pointed at them, Reatti would have attacked without another word. She had sounded that offended for me.

Instead of telling her though, I shook my head. "It's fine. It's nothing... Jasna said you were looking for me?" I asked.

"Jasna...? Is she the one? I don't believe it! She thinks you're adorable!" Reatti went from offended to confused.

Laughing a little, I shook my head. "No! She's not even here! It's fine, really. It's not what you think, I was just... sad for a moment is all." Jasna thinks I'm adorable? Maybe I should read a little more into her little mannerisms.

Reatti gave me a look that told me she had simply assumed something, because she nodded knowingly. "I get that feeling. Sometimes I think I hear my stupid brother still, and when it happens..."

Great, now I wanted to cry for another reason!

"Please, Reatti. I'm already about to cry," I begged.

"Ah! Sorry! Come on! I wanted to invite you out to see something with me... which now that I think about it, might make you just cry some more... so maybe not..." Reatti groaned in worry, looking utterly troubled.

Smirking at her adorable face of worry, I wondered what she meant. "What'd you mean? Why do you want me to see something that will make me cry?" I asked, trying to say it as lightheartedly as possible as to make her not worry.

Reatti groaned again. "Well... I found them," she mumbled.

"Found who?"

"Found what," she corrected, smiling sheepishly as she did. "You uh... remember those spears? The ones Vim made me and my brother...?" Reatti asked awkwardly. She stepped back and grabbed her own arm, looking stressed all of a sudden.

I stood up a little straighter and nodded. They had been lost during the chaos. Left behind in rubble...  
"Of course I do...? Wait..."

She nodded. "I found them. At a shop. I was wondering if you'd be willing to help me steal them back."

"Let me go get a jacket!"

## Chapter 493 Vim – A Pinch of a Scale

"We'll be setting off for Lumen in three days, Vim. You sure you don't want to just sail with us?" Kevin asked.

I tried not to hear his hopeful tone. "I would if I had the time, but I promised Light I'd return quickly. Knowing her she has a reason for me to need to do so," I said, using Light as an excuse.

Kevin nodded knowingly. "Yes... it'd not be wise to assume wrongly, especially when concerning her," he said, finding that to be very reasonable.

Relieved he did so, I turned to smile to his wife. "I'll let Renn know of your request, Anka."

Anka smiled back and nodded. "Thank you, Vim. May your travels be smooth," she said gently.

I nodded, shook Kevin's arm in parting, and turned and left their home. They bid me farewell, and I was glad that their children and parents were still asleep. It was early morning, so not too surprising.

The two waved even as I headed deeper into the city, walking into snow and darkness. The sun was just now rising. They had stood on their doorstep, on their porch, to watch me leave... as if regretful to see me go. They were a good and gentle family. Although Kevin was a hardened sailor, like Anka's brother had been... they were not crass at all. They were a prim and proper family, one steeped deep in rules and honor. I actually enjoyed spending time with them, and was regretful that Renn hadn't been able to join me this time.

But I didn't have the time to indulge, even in good company.

I needed to return to Lumen, as fast as possible. I'd almost not even stopped in to check on them, and the only reason I had done so was out of Berri's request.

Horn had dropped off her letter, the one for me that Gerald had given me, off at their home. With Anka. They had been very kind to Horn, which had been a big deal to Berri because it turned out Horn had not been very... kind to them.

He had not been outright rude, of course. Horn was not that kind of man. He had simply been so concerned for his daughter that he had, in his haste and worry, kind of neglected to tell Anka who he was. He had simply pushed through her front door, uninvited and unannounced; loudly shouting he had a letter he needed delivered. He pushed the letter off onto her and then ran off, leaving them shell-shocked. He had scared Anka and her family, to the point her youngest daughter had passed out from the stress.

Horn and Berri had sent me with a new letter, one written in this land's language, with gifts of thanks and apologies. Kevin and Anka had thankfully not been bothered or offended at all, even though they had every right to be so. They had even wanted me to send their own batch of gifts and letters back to Berri and her family. Thankfully, by using Light's presence, I'd gotten out of that little side-quest.

Walking through the port town, I headed for the western exit. The one that would lead me back west, and then north alongside the coast of the inland sea. Back up to Lumen.

I was anxious to return. Although glad that Narli was fine, as much as she could be, I was nearly giddy at being gone from there.

It was one thing to linger for Narli's health and safety... but, thanks to who and what she was, such a venture had... dangers involved with it.

I'd heard three prophecies while tending to Narli. Or rather, simply waiting to see if she'd get better or not. And all three had been worse than the last.

A prophecy of someone shouting for help, and being lost.

A prophecy of Narli encountering a strange human. One she wanted me to keep away from her.

Both of those were... although upsetting, both understandable and something I didn't mind handling.

Someone was lost? I'll find them. Eventually.

Narli had someone that gave her the ick? That one day I'd have to put the fear of gods into, and make sure they never bothered her again? Also not a problem.

But the last one...

I tried not to even think of that one.

Leaving the port city, I groaned as I picked up my pace. Luckily it was early enough no one else was on the roads. Unluckily, although it was snowing, it wasn't doing so very strongly. I knew once the sun was fully risen, the road would become littered with travelers and merchants. The kind that made it hard for me to run too quickly without causing issues.

I needed to travel as far as I could, as fast as I could, before the roads became busy. Although Lumen was surrounded by forests, regrettably there were a lot of roads and little farmsteads and villages all around it too. It made traveling at my faster speeds... difficult.

Just as the previous days travels, I felt like I made good time. But I knew that wasn't the case. I simply had a lot on my mind. No matter what I thought about, I did so deeply enough that I barely noticed the miles come and go as I hurried along my path.

A storm came and went. The sun rose up, and then started to set again. The waves of the nearby sea were sometimes loud and rowdy, then other times quiet and gentle.

I was about half way to Lumen, running along a beach instead of the road nearby, when I found something tug me from my thoughts.

I frowned at the weird feeling, since it upset me. Not just because it had distracted me from the memory of Renn's drunken face, but because it was a feeling I'd not felt while traveling in... well...

Since Landi's. Since the nation of stone.

Slowing, I glanced around as I tried to tell where the feeling was coming from. A part of me wanted to say I felt it coming from the ocean, but...

It wasn't deep enough. Or moving fast enough to be some kind of fish. And instead...

Walking towards a large cluster of rocks, ones littered with ocean foam and life, I bit my cheek as I confirmed what I felt and knew, even if instinctively.

"Oh no...!" a tiny voice cried out, and then there were a bunch of little tips and taps as small pointed feet hurried away.

My shoulders tensed as I watched the colorful crab hurry up and along a wet rock. One that had just moments ago been doused by a wild wave. It skittered up the rock with such hurry that it actually slipped. The crab barely made it half way up the rock before sliding backward, and falling back down to the other rock below. The little pincers wobbled wildly in the air as it fell, rolling along the rock and onto its back. It landed harshly, even for a little thing as it was, but I knew better than to think a monarch would die from such a fall... even as little as it was.

"Oh no! Oh no, no!" the tiny monarch cried out with utter terror as it tried to roll off its back. The thing was definitely a crab, though not one I recognized. Not only did it have a colorful shell, of blues and reds, it had more legs and arms than crabs usually did. It had two sets of arms, each with pincers, and judging by the way they were flinging around in the air they were far more mobile than a typical crab's should be. Both them and its legs had extra joints it seemed.

In fact its limbs, with the extra joints and better shapes, should have allowed it to easily get back up off its back. It was simply panicking, and not thinking straight.

Stepping up onto the shore rock and off the sand, I kept my eye on the flailing crab... but also looked around.

I didn't feel any other monarchs. I felt no divinity nearby, other than the small crab trying to find its feet before me.

Yet.

"Please...! No!" it cried out, finally getting itself situated upright again. The moment it was back on its feet properly it darted off, this time instead of trying to clamber over the nearby rock as to get back to the ocean it instead headed for a nearby pool. One that was deep enough that I had no doubt it also connected to the ocean, even if between tight crevices between all the rocks around here.

Before it could get very far though I stepped over and placed my foot down.

My first instinct had been to crush it. To step upon it as I would a bug. It'd be normal. Natural. I'd have not lost a moment of sleep over it. Instead though my foot landed a foot or so before it. Causing it to come to a stop with a small skid, and nearly run right into my boot as it did.

"You seem to realize who I am," I said down to it.

The colorful crab went still... and then after a few moments it turned upward. The thing's four pincers all snapped, but not in a way as if to display displeasure or to be threatening... and instead as if to nod and acknowledge my statement.

Figured. It'd not have panicked as it had so readily otherwise. Even though colorful, and odd thanks to its unique number of limbs, it was still just a crab. Something that a normal human would likely ignore, or at the very most try to catch out of interest. Not something to be feared, not even by a monarch this small.

Though...

Thinking of the small monarch back at Telmik, the one Renn had found dying in the mansio, I sighed and pulled back my foot.

Standing up a little straighter, I felt strangely stupid as I stared down at the tiny creature. It was only about half the size of my foot.

Too tiny for a monarch. Maybe one of the smallest I'd ever seen.

Bending down a little, I tried to not do so too suddenly. The crab jolted, taking a few steps back even though I had kneeled down gently. I studied its little beady eyes, ones that looked not too unlike a normal crab's... and saw the intelligence within them. There was a depth to their tiny blackness.

"No kill...?" it asked with its tiny voice.

"Depends. Are you going to answer my questions honestly?" I asked it.

The thing's mandibles danced a bit, as if to mimic the way a person's lips acted when stressed and worried. "If I do... spare me?" it asked after a moment.

"Sure," I said.

Maybe.

Little bubbles filtered out of its mouth, popping as it raised its pincers up and shook them at me, as if to offer me them for a handshake as to seal the deal.

I didn't accept them, as the crab raised and lowered its body a bit, as if dancing. "Okay! Okay!" it said, sounding rather happy.

Maybe it was simple. Not too uncommon for monarchs, especially small and tiny ones such as this... but...

Glaring at the thing, I noted the tiny... almost unnoticeable bump in the rear end of its shell.

The thing had a heart almost too big for its body.

It was small now. But it wouldn't be for long... almost as if...

Clenching my fists, I quickly contained my own fears and thoughts as I calmed myself.

"Who are you?" I asked it.

"Pinchie!"

Of course you have a name, and of course that's what it is.

"Why are you here?" I asked. I've been up and down this beach hundreds of times and I'd never sensed this monarch before; I liked to run along it while going this way. It was far enough from any roads or towns that I could run without having to worry about being seen, and the nearby ocean was full of reefs and rocks in this area. The kind that kept boats and ships away too, so I was safe from both land and sea from distractions. Jokes on me.

"Was resting!" Pinchie said, and then danced again for a moment. "I am looking for a nice beach! One to call home! Searching hard!" Pinche then said.

My eyes narrowed. "You're looking for a new home...? What happened to your last one?" I asked.

"Never had one...? Or are you saying I did? Did I not know of it? Do you know where it is?" Pinchie asked.

I felt a deep pit in my stomach as things started to make sense. Or well... things began to become verified, and my assumptions granted validation.

"How... old are you?" I dared to ask the tiny thing.

"Youngling! I'm just a few moons!" Pinchie happily answered.

Closing my eyes, I felt and heard my teeth crack under pressure.

The feeling of them shattering, particularly the back molars, hurt a little... but I ignored the pain as I took a very deep breath... and held it in.

Better my teeth than this whole region.

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

For a few moments I just... remained still. Not really thinking. I rolled some broken teeth around in my mouth, and after a few moments... once I became calm enough, I opened my eyes to see what I was hearing.

The small monarch, Pinchie the crab, had stepped closer. It was tilted some more, as if to get a better look at me. Even while kneeling I was still just too big for it.

"Are you okay?" it asked worriedly.

Swallowing my broken teeth, I slowly nodded. "Yes. Thank you for asking," I said softly.

The crab lowered again, as if about to dance up and down once more. It didn't though, and instead made small noises with its pincers.

Oh Renn... what am I to do?

What would you do...?

Staring at the colorful creature, I felt a little sick. As if the teeth I'd just swallowed had been poisonous or something. They weren't, of course, but it was a funny thought.

I knew what Renn would do here and now. But that was because she'd not understand the true meaning of what I'd just learned. She'd not have understood the circumstances. The full picture. Of what I'd just been given proof of.

But... was that this creature's fault...?

No. It wasn't. And it wasn't as if Pinchie was the only proof I've been given lately. Far from it.

But it took this level of proof to finally make me admit it, and face it, it seemed.

I've always been a bit of a coward for certain things, but I had not thought myself so when concerning gods. Not like this. Maybe I was getting old. Too old.

"Do you know who I am, Pinchie...?" I asked it, trying not to sound as tired as I suddenly felt.

"Nope! But... you scared me for some reason! Earlier!" Pinchie said as they raised their little claws up to point at me.

"Sorry about that. I've been... on edge lately," I said admittedly.

"Hmm...!" Pinchie bubbled at me a bit. "Maybe need good sleep! I like sleeping on warm rocks! Can't find any lately, though!" Pinchie said as it lowered one of its claws as to tap on the wet rock we stood upon.

"It's still winter, Pinchie," I said.

"So it is!"

I sighed at the creature, and reached up to rub my eyes. My teeth were already re-growing, and so I blamed that on my headache... but I knew it wasn't the healing that was causing it.

What do I do?

That human's prophecy. Elaine's. About the birth of a monarch. Narli's strange prophecy. Light and the rest returning from the other continent, guided by prophecies themselves.

Renn... somehow involved with it all...

I used to rampage over scenarios like this. I used to rage and destroy, until nothing could taunt me like this again. There had been a time where just a single prophecy would have sent me into motion. In which case, in this scenario... Elaine's? So many months ago? Even back then I'd almost panicked enough to do something stupid. It had been why I had clung to Renn all night long that day. It had been my way to keep myself from doing something stupid.

The me today though...?

With my hand still covering my eyes... I lowered it a bit as to peer down at the small crab. Pinchie wasn't alone. A smaller crab was walking past, a small red one. It seemed to be ignoring Pinchie and me, but it still had its pincers raised up a bit as if to threaten Pinchie. As if to tell Pinchie to back off, even though it was the one nearing us. The two standing near each other only further showcased how special Pinchie was. Its legs and arms did indeed have an extra set of joints, and it seemed Pinchie had far better motor

skills too. Pinchie had raised pincers, snapping them defiantly as the crab got closer. The other crab must not have liked what it saw, for it scuttled off quick.

The monarch bubbled and huffed, and turned back to me. Pinchie rose up, as if to puff out its chest while expecting praise. It looked like it was praising the sun. Probably was.

Very typical of a monarch. To have sentience, yet still... act like the simple creature it was. Even Miss Beak in all her wisdom and glory occasionally acted... well, like a bird.

But it was very obvious how young it was. And not just because of its small size, or how it talked. The thing's body wasn't even fully formed yet. It was hard to tell, but from what I could tell and feel... based off the size of its heart, and how strong it was, this little crab would one day grow into something rather serious. Not just in size either. I could feel the pulsating heart in the air. And in fact, those pulsations were seemingly what made it dance. Pinchie lowered and raised itself, in sync with the pulsations of the heart within it.

And that heart forced me to acknowledge what I didn't want to.

It was a monarch.

One recently born.

It was a newborn monarch.

That was troubling in many forms. More than I wanted to admit.

"Pinchie..." I got its attention, since it had gone to focus on rubbing its face with a claw. It stopped doing so and turned to look back up at me.

"Hm?" It bubbled a bit.

"Were they there...? When you were born?" I asked with a whisper.

Pinchie's little eyes tilted inward a bit. "My creator? Yes?"

More teeth cracked. Somehow this time, none broke.

With unsteady breaths, I nodded. "Are they... nearby?" I asked. I didn't feel them. But I knew better than to trust my senses right now.

"Nope! Far away!" Pinchie said happily.

Breathing out a small breath, I wasn't sure if I should be relived... or furious.

"What was the order they gave you, Pinchie?" I asked carefully.

The small crab stepped a few steps to the left, and then danced a little. "Upset. No order," Pinchie said, for once sounding not very happy.

"None...? At all?" I asked. Upset?

"No. Pinchie too small. Too weak. Not good enough. So was left," Pinchie said.

"Mhm..." I nodded, understanding full well what that meant. I'd heard such things before. Many times. Especially back during the wars.

Gods didn't always create what they wanted. Their powers weren't omnipotent. They failed often. In a certain theory that was why non-humans even existed. And why places like the Summit had been created.

And also why I had been able to kill them, too.

Though it seemed I had missed one. Somehow.

"So looking for home! Will build home! Will grow! Get big and strong! Then will get orders!" Pinchie then said, making noises with its pincers happily as it did.

Frowning at the little thing, I nodded. Yes. Odds are the god had not specifically said such a thing... but that would indeed be how a monarch would interpret its purpose. If a god simply... abandoned its creation, then said creation usually believed it was by design. That it was meant to simply do whatever it felt like doing, until it was time for it to fulfill its true purpose.

It has been hundreds... maybe even thousands of years, but Pinchie was not the first like this I've encountered.

Though... Pinchie might be the first I actually felt pity for, at least in such a moment. During the moment.

Back then I'd not really given the monarchs a chance to be pitiful, after all...

"What do you eat, Pinchie?" I asked the monarch, trying not to think of anything too painful.

"Tasty little snacks! I really like the little blue ones the most!" Pinchie said happily, pointing off to our right. Towards the ocean.

Little fish and stuff then.

"And what do you do when humans see you?" I asked.

"Huh...? Aren't you human? I do what I did now! Panic and hide!" Pinchie said. The crab lowered to the ground, and crossed its arms and claws. As if to make itself as small as possible. Surprisingly it did so rather well.

"Have you met many?" I asked.

"A couple! Most on boats! I leave them alone... just like I do the bigger fish and stuff," Pinchie said, sounding depressed again. The crab then pointed at itself, thumping its armored body with a heavy claw. "Tiny. Small. Weak. Stupid," Pinchie described itself. The way it said those descriptors was rather telling, too. They had been words not decided on his own, but ones he had heard said by someone else.

Those were undoubtedly what their creator had called them. I too knew the tone gods used during such moments. And I knew very well how much it hurt the soul to hear them said. To them, to monarchs, gods were more than parents. They were their purpose. So when they heard them speak down to them in such a way... it hurt. Enough so that I had seen many monarchs kill themselves because of such neglect and abuse. They hadn't been able to take it.

In a way hearing it had treated this tiny creature so only further confirmed it was the truth. Only a god could be so cruel to its own creation.

I nodded gently at Pinchie. "Humans are big, huh," I said, making sure not to linger on what made it sad.

"Very!"

I sighed a little, and licked some of my new teeth that were growing. They felt odd, and made me want to break and rip out all the rest now so that they'd all be new together. Maybe I should.

My heart weighed scales as Pinchie stepped away a bit, as to grab at a little sea-louse that had been crawling along the rocks. Pinchie promptly ate it, then went to grab some more nearby.

It was a monarch.

A newly born one, yes. Weak. Small. Pitiful... abandoned by its creator for not being good enough.

I didn't doubt its words. At all. Nor did I doubt its intentions. It very likely did plan on just finding a home, as to spend time growing.

But what I did doubt was its future.

Right now it was harmless. But it wouldn't be in time. If it did get lucky and survive long enough to grow big... it'd not be long until it was a terror of the deep. Something that plagued the people that lived on this sea, or subsisted upon it. Even if it never grew too big, it was still a monarch. It'd only need to grow to the size of say... an average man, to be strong enough to kill any person and sink nearly any ship. Not to say the least of any abilities it would undoubtedly gain. Its heart wasn't just big enough, but it was pure enough... and... And that was nothing to say the least of its creator.

At any point the god who made Pinchie could give it orders. Or endow it with more powers. And once that happened... I didn't even need to think very long to imagine the hundreds of terrible outcomes that could follow such scenarios.

But all of those possibilities were simple hypotheticals. There was no true guarantee it'd grow bigger. No honest proof it'd become great and almighty. It might grow to be a very large crab, bigger than any natural one, but at the same time simply always live in the sea... never bothering anyone or anything.

Pinchie hurried to catch another sea-louse. The monarch almost slipped and fell in haste, but caught it.

While watching it eat... I debated.

On one side of the scale... I placed the creature's life.

On the other... I placed all I believed in.

"Tasty!" Pinchie happily said as it ate another little bug. This time it had been some kind of spider looking thing.

Right now it was harmless.

But in the future... maybe only months or years from now... it'd be a true monarch.

I could kill it to potentially save lives.

Or I could spare it, and bet on it never becoming a threat.

I could kill it, take its heart, and possibly track down its creator with it.

Or I could leave it alive... and use it as bait, as to do the same thing.

Yet, if I did kill it... the god who birthed it would know. That might make them come search me out, and depending on when and how that happened... That might only get more people harmed than I was willing to let happen. What if the god attacked me while I was in the middle of a city? At a Society location? In bed with Renn?

But... there was no saying the god didn't already know where I was. After all I'd likely been circling around them for some time now. There was no doubt in my mind that the one who had created Pinchie had also created the monarch that had started those fires. The ones that Elaine had prophesied and I had ran around in.

If they had been that nearby all this time, there was little doubt they already knew of me.

So...

"Here! Here!"

I blinked as Pinchie hurried over. A claw was held out, and in the pincer was a very large bug. One half squirming, but not able to do much else.

Gently holding out my hand, I allowed the monarch to place the bug into my hand. I closed it before the bug could scamper off, and escape. The thing wiggled wildly inside my hand for a moment, until I crushed it.

"Thank you," I said gently, and went ahead and ate the small bug. I barely tasted it.

"Tasty, huh!"

I nodded as Pinchie went to gather up more.

I didn't want to spare it.

I didn't believe I should.

Not just because it could grow into a terrible calamity... but because of its meaning. Its purpose.

Right now the god that had made it had abandoned it.

But that god was still alive. Which meant anything could happen. Anything at all.

The variables were too big. Too dangerous. Too... divine.

Yet...

Mother would spare it.

The teacher she taught me to be would... but the general she made me into wouldn't have.

Father wouldn't spare it.

The philosopher he tried to make me would have, though.

Rennalee would spare it.

The husband she so cherished would spare it too.

The warlord I had become to would resort to even torturing the thing to get the god that created it.

The fool who had made his mistake would hesitate, and likely make the wrong choice.

The Society's Protector...?

"Another!" Pinchie hurried back over to me, with two bugs this time.

I only took one, as to let it eat the other. I knew monarchs, unlike myself, needed actual sustenance. Especially one as... small and weak as this one. Especially a newborn. Odds are it needed to it several times its own weight per day.

Pinchie ate the bug with gusto. The tiny crab made bubbly sounds as it ate, making me wonder if its ability somehow related to those bubbles. Crabs did bubble, but did they do it as often as this one was doing?

Blinking heavy eyes, I faced a fact I had been trying to not confront.

Did I not plan to step down as protector? Did that not mean I'd no longer act as him? No longer bound by those rules? If I did that... wouldn't I return to being me? Bound by only my own rules, no one else's? Did that mean I should... return to who I had once been...?

Who even was that, exactly?

The warrior? The general? The coward who ran to those islands? The one who had spared Miss Beak, or the one who had slaughtered hundreds just like her?

If not them, did I become someone new? Something else entirely? Renn has softened me, but has she changed me to that big of a degree already? A part of me hoped so, but I knew better than to believe it. I was too set in my ways. Too... old.

Why did it have to be so tiny and friendly? Why couldn't it have been something cruel? Like Landi's monarch had been?

"Ah...!" Pinchie saw another bug. This time some kind of isopod. It tried to roll up in a ball as the crab grabbed at it.

Some light rain started to fall, which both I and Pinchie ignored as I watched the monarch eat. If not for the little noises it made, the words it said occasionally, and the way it danced happily in joy at the tasty things it was eating... you'd never know how special it really was.

Watching the little crab snack on the small insects was... soothing. If my internal discord could be soothed, that is.

I had to be careful. Returning to the man I had been, so long ago, would be easy for me. Especially now that my old enemies were back. It was after all the real me. The man I had been raised to be. The man who had succeeded. That man had rid the world of their chaos and freed the world from their torment... Even Miss Beak, for all the faults she had found in me throughout the years, had not hesitated to say I had been exactly who the world had needed back then.

Yet... I knew better than to think it was fine for me to return to being him.

That man had made a terrible mistake. And I refused to do that again. No matter what happened.

Because if I did that again... here and now...

I'd lose more than this strange peace I've nurtured all these years. I'd lose the Society and all the headaches it held. I'd lose the friends I've made. The purpose I had. The woman I've come to love... I'd lose it all. This place in this world, my place, would be lost forever. Taken by my own hands.

So...

Clenching my fist, I made my choice.

"Stand Tall, Vim..." I whispered.

Chapter 494 Renn – Mono

Merit and I both stood silently, watching the wall being built from a distance.

Well over a dozen people were working in this room, mostly focused on the wall being put up. It was interesting to watch, since I'd never seen a real wall being made before. They used not just wood and metal, but some kind of mixture of mud and other materials too. The stuff smelled weird, weird enough

that I didn't want to get too close to them or offer to help. Which was too bad... pretty much everyone here was a non-human. A member of the Society. So I really wanted to meet them all and talk to them. But, like Light, they were all so... busy. Always working, as if ushered by some great purpose. They were all in such a hurry to finish this cathedral that I was barely able to converse with them, since it made me feel rude to interfere.

They were focused, and working hard. Talking to them and distracting them made me feel...

A man with wide shoulders entered the room, pushing a wheelbarrow. He took it to one of the workbenches near the wall, and started to unload it. The supplies he placed near the workbench were quickly taken by the other workers, and promptly used to build the wall.

It was a little humbling to see so many people so... good at what they were doing. It was like watching a bunch of Vims, almost. They all seemed to know exactly what to do, and how to do it as swiftly and efficiently as possible. Most of them hadn't even said a word the entire time, even though they had to work together sometimes as a group and thus should need coordination.

Their efficiency explained how they'd be able to build this supposed cathedral in a few years as they planned. This cathedral was going to be far bigger than I had assumed. I'd not really seen much of it yet, since most of it wasn't built yet, but there were already several floors and maybe a dozen different buildings. They were building over the spot that monster had emerged from, and it seemed thanks to the all the damage to the surrounding area they had been able to acquire several blocks worth of land. They basically owned the equivalent of several city blocks, and all of them were in a good location. We weren't far from port, not far from the markets, and the edge of the cathedral's expected reach was opposite of the entrance to the noble's section of the city.

Almost as if it had all been by design. It made me wonder who had been the one to swiftly move in and take advantage of the situation... it had to have been Brandy, right? I wonder if she had been warned ahead of time, or if she had simply taken the opportunity to profit the moment she had been given it.

Some footsteps drew my attention from the wall and the hard workers, and I found Tundra. She ran into the room, almost knocking over one of the tables in the process.

Merit flinched at the sight of her, but held her ground alongside me as Tundra ran straight at us... and then straight into me.

"Oof," I kept my footing as the young wolf tackled me with a hug.

"Morning Renn!" Tundra happily said as she gave me a great squeeze.

Smiling at the young girl, I returned her hug... though not with the same vigor. The young girl was strong, but for some reason I felt like I needed to be careful with her. "Morning to you too Tundra," I said.

The young girl giggled, her ears flapping under her little headdress's hood, and I couldn't help but sigh a little.

"And morning to you too, Merit!" Tundra exclaimed, quickly unwrapping her arms from me as to turn and hug Merit too.

"Don't!" Merit shouted, stepping back and raising her little hands as to defend herself.

Tundra paused, her arms outstretched in preparation for a hug. I couldn't help but grin at them, since the two looked like young sisters. Which was adorable, especially since Merit looked like the younger one in this situation.

Merit though wasn't joking around, or playing. The look in her eyes told me how serious she was being, but if Tundra noticed that or not...

"But you're so huggable, Merit!" Tundra complained, her fingers twitching in apprehension.

"And you're conductive!"

Tundra tilted her head at that, her ears fluttering inside her hood... and I couldn't help but smirk.

"She's threatening to shock you. Careful, I'd take her warning to heart and wouldn't discount it. I've personally seen what her shocks can do," I said.

Tundra glanced at me, gave me a sad frown and then looked back at Merit. "Really? You don't want to hug me?"

Merit shifted a bit, and I was a little surprised to actually see hesitation in her glare. She was actually feeling bad for once!

"Maybe some other time..." Merit finally grumbled after a few heartbeats of her hesitation.

Tundra sighed but nodded. She lowered her arms, which went to drooping sadly as if her heart had just broken. "For a predator you sure are stingy!" Tundra complained.

Merit's eye twitched, reminding me of Vim. "And for a wolf you sure are clingy. You're supposed to be a solitary creature, act like one!" Merit responded.

"What? We form packs!" Tundra defended herself.

Enjoying the exchange between the two, I felt far happier than I had a few moments ago. Yet as happy as I was... something felt off.

Glancing around, I went a little still as I realized we were being watched.

By everyone in the room. The whole group of people who had just been diligently working, paying Merit and I practically no mind at all, were now staring at us. No one was moving. Some had even paused right in the middle of whatever they were doing; one had a saw still half stuck in a piece of wood. Another was in the middle of climbing a small ladder.

I gulped at the oddness, and before I could even process what was happening... they all returned to their work.

"Ignore them, Renn. They're all prey," Tundra then said.

Blinking, I turned and frowned at the young wolf. "Huh?"

She nodded and gestured at those who were now fully focused on their work. With renewed vigor. "All of them are small creatures. They can't help but stare when they hear loud noises," Tundra said simply.

Shifting a little, I glanced at Merit... who now had a sad look on her face. Her eyes met mine, but for only a single moment before looking back to the wolf. "That's what you get for being loud," Merit said.

"How could I not be!? You probably don't understand, Merit, since you've had her and those like her all this time but I haven't! Ever since mother died I've not had anyone else to hang out with!" Tundra said.

My ears fluttered beneath my hat, since I had heard a strange tone from the loud and proud girl. She had spoken calmly, and with surety, but I had heard something from her I'd not heard before.

Sadness. Genuine pain.

"I don't understand your mind. How can you claim to not have fellows when you have Less and the rest?" Merit asked, not as bothered by the young girl's tone as I had been.

"They're predators... I'll admit it, but it's not the same. They don't have any backbone!" Tundra tried to explain.

"How do you explain her then? Renn's strong, I'll admit, but she's as soft as jelly," Merit asked with a point to me.

I grinned at that, since it was true.

Tundra glanced at me, frowned and shook her head. "Jelly...? I mean... maybe. But not where it counts. Plus I've heard of what she'll do! No one able to do that would be spineless!" Tundra said happily.

I tilted my head at that and glanced at Merit again. She scowled a bit. "I'll take her and leave if you start talking about prophecies," she warned.

"Oh. Sorry...!" Tundra immediately flinched and glanced at me with worry. I nodded gently to the girl who genuinely looked apologetic.

"It's okay," I said.

She still frowned with worry, and then glanced around a bit. "Right... Light just yelled at me earlier too. It's your fault! If you'd have just accepted my hug I wouldn't have forgotten like that!" Tundra said with a point at Merit.

Merit huffed. "Not very predator-like. Shifting blame whenever possible is something I'd expect from a jellyfish, not a proud wolf," Merit teased.

"Wha...!" Tundra flinched as if she'd just been slapped. She spun a bit, to gape at me while pointing at Merit.

"She does have a point," I said gently.

The young wolf's eyes immediately swelled with tears. "I didn't mean it that way!" Tundra said worriedly.

"Doing it again? Really?" Merit asked as she put her hands on her hips.

Tundra let loose a terrible whine, one that made the hairs on my ears stand up. Had her heart just broke!?

"I... I didn't...! I mean...!" Tundra began to shake, but not from rage. I suddenly felt horrible for helping Merit tease her just now, as the young girl looked to be on the verge of weeping.

I'd been told she was young, by Martin, but I hadn't realized just how young!

"I'll go repent...!" Tundra then shouted, and darted away. I reached out to stop her, to grab her by the arm and tell her it was okay, but she was too quick. In a blink of an eye she ran out of the room, hurrying down the hall as she ran away.

A little stunned... I glanced at Merit and groaned. "Merit..."

"What! I didn't realize she was so fragile! She acts all tough!" Merit defended herself with a gesture to the door the girl had just run through.

Reaching up, I rubbed my face. Poor girl! She had definitely been crying! I had just wanted to tease her a little with Merit, in hopes of making her realize what she'd just said earlier had been a little rude. But... to go that far...? If Vim was here he'd sigh at me and call me a bully!

And repent...? I wonder what that meant... hopefully it wasn't anything like what Abel did back at the Crypt...

"The heathen made her cry..."

I flinched and glanced over to those working on the wall. None of them had even glanced our way, and were all focused on their work still... but now there were small whispers amongst them.

"It's Merit, what do you expect?" another said.

"Might do the girl good, to be honest," a man whispered.

"Gossip where we can't hear you!" Merit shouted.

They all flinched and went quiet.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Feeling my face grow hot, for many reasons, I reached over and grabbed Merit's arm. She let me pull her out of the room and into the hallway... but I didn't know which way was to go. Tundra had ran that way right...?

"What! Renn I won't apologize," Merit said as I headed the direction I thought Tundra had gone.

"You don't need to. I'll handle it," I said simply.

"Just because she's young doesn't give her the right to be so snarky, Renn. You heard it too didn't you? She basically badmouthed all of them; she's one of those that think they're better than anyone else just because she's a little strong!" Merit said as we walked down the hallway.

My tail squirmed as I tried not to blatantly agree with her. I had indeed heard it, and saw it. I just... had been hoping to ignore it.

I slowed a little, but didn't stop. We weren't far enough from the room we just left, and the people within it, yet. I could still hear their whispers, and they were almost as infuriating as everything else going on. Although I did want to go find Tundra and make sure she was okay, their comments had been why I had left that room. I had been about to shout at them myself, if Merit hadn't done so already.

I mean really! Yes Merit didn't believe in their faith, but to call her a heretic!? Isn't that what they called the ones who believed in that Epoch faith? The very people this church, those people here, hunted and burnt on crosses!? Did that mean that's how they saw Merit? Like that? As if some kind of enemy?

"Ignore them Renn," Merit said simply.

Coming to a stop, I glanced down at Merit. She had a gentle look on her face, the one she usually had when we were talking about something sad. Like her kingdom, or her love for Vim.

So she could still hear them too...? Of course she could...

"But..." I mumbled, unsure of what to say.

Merit had just tried to defend them. Tundra had basically insulted them, in her own way, and that had been why Merit had teased her. To try and make the girl realize she was being hypocritical. Yet here she was... being called a heretic, and...

Though I was stressing, it seemed Merit wasn't. Her small, gentle, eyes held my own with a strange firmness. One that told me she really was fine and not bothered by what they were saying about her.

"If I cared what people like that said about me, Renn, I'd have run away years ago. It's okay," Merit said.

Hesitating... I decided to just nod to my friend. "Okay," I said.

Merit smiled at me and nodded. "It's not. And I can tell you think so too. That's all that matters."

"Mhm..."

My small friend sighed as she crossed her arms and looked around. "What now? Either go find her or let's leave. I'm tired of being here," she said.

Right... I kind of wanted to leave now too. We had come to see Light, and to kind of just... look around, honestly, and we had been here for a few hours now. If we left no one would find it odd, if anything people would likely even be happy about it.

Many of the people here seemed to be interested in me. But whenever I wasn't alone, like with Merit, they all became... distant.

I knew it was because of their pasts. Many of the people here were old. Only a few were like Tundra, or Martin. Most didn't just remember Merit, several had actually known her back when the Society had been... well, more important.

Merit herself would have never come here under normal circumstances. The only reason she did was to accompany me. So it made me feel a little rude, since it made me feel like I was forcing her to have to endure and meet people who she didn't like... and who didn't like her.

"I'd like to talk to the girl before we leave, if that's okay," I said as I returned to walking.

"Just follow the smell of dog, that way," Merit said with a point down a new hallway.

My lips tightened a bit as I nodded. Yes, she did have a rather noticeable smell, didn't she? I had been trying to not say anything about it, since I knew it wasn't the girl's fault. It was just... whatever she was. She had fur, enough of it to be noticeable... even if hidden by robes and clothes.

It was the same kind of smell that I had. Or well, once had. That smell which made most of our members weary of us.

It was undoubtedly why the poor girl had such an outlook on life. She saw people as weak, without backbone, because when they were near her... they did indeed become meek and timid.

The poor girl's attitude was a byproduct of her environment. And it sickened me that no one was willing to acknowledge it, or do anything about it.

"I'm not sure why you're bothered, Renn. Most predators are like her. In fact she's actually not that bad, considering," Merit said.

"Not that bad...? The only reason she likes me is because she thinks I'm strong, or whatever! That's insulting!" I said. From the moment she had realized I wouldn't treat her differently, or flinch and shy away at her mere look or presence, Tundra had latched onto me. It was the same reason she had tried to hug Merit just now. Because although Merit had flinched and stepped away from her hug, it hadn't

been out of fear. Merit just didn't like to be touched, by anyone. Tundra had obviously noticed that, which was why she not only liked Merit but had taken Merit's words so sincerely.

Merit's little teasing had likely hurt a lot. Because to her Merit was an equal. And that bugged me too. I didn't want to be liked so... purely, just because I treated her normally. It made me feel weird.

"It's only insulting to you. I liked Vim because he was strong, in the beginning, is that insulting too?" Merit asked.

I slowed again and glanced at my friend. She had a small grin tugging at the corner of her mouth, which made me want to hug her.

"You teased her to teach her, didn't you? Doesn't that mean it bothered you too?" I asked.

Merit sighed and nodded. "It had... but I honestly wouldn't care if she learned or got better. For as long as she doesn't get worse or hurt anybody, who cares how she acts and sees people?" Merit said.

Well... "That's very Vim of you."

Merit smiled at that.

"The poor girl is a lost cause anyway, Renn. Growing up amongst these idiots? She didn't have a chance," Merit said as we rounded the corner and walked down the hallway that smelled like Tundra.

"That's no reason to be mean to her, or ignore her, Merit. If anything that should be all the more reason to do the opposite," I said.

Merit made a noise as she sighed, but didn't argue.

"Oh my gods...!"

Merit and I both paused and turned, as I once again firmed my footing as I was ran at.

"Again...!?" Merit grumbled as she stepped back and behind me, as to not get targeted.

This girl wasn't as tall as Tundra, though she was dressed in the same gray robes. Unlike Tundra though... she had a very peculiar trait. One that made me hesitate, even as she ran right up into my arms and into a hug.

Her eyes were glowing brightly.

The saint wrapped her arms around me, giggling happily with great joy as she squeezed me. As she did, I noticed right away this girl was more normal than not. She didn't have half the strength that Tundra had.

"You're here! The one! Oh my gosh...!" the saint screamed in joy, squealing as if she'd just happened upon the best thing ever.

Although I had no idea who she was, or what she was talking about, I couldn't help but return her hug and grin happily as well. Her joy was utterly contagious!

Giving the girl a hug, I spun her around a bit as she laughed. Once I stopped, and her feet landed back on the ground, she immediately separated from me and spun to look at Merit.

"And you! You're as tiny as I am! Haha!" the girl darted forward, making Merit startle and raise her arms to defend herself.

Before I or Merit could say or do anything, the girl had wrapped Merit into a hug. A big one, to the point she had lifted Merit off the ground and started to spin her around... just as I'd just done to her.

"Oh boy..." I groaned as I then heard it. Tiny little pops and crackles filled the hallway, and then without warning a flash of white and blue sparked out from Merit.

The saint yelped, going still as Merit shocked her.

I panicked at first, since my only experience with Merit's shocks were from back during the chaos. When she had used her ability to kill those men who had been chasing me. The ones from the sewers.

"Merit...!" I shouted in worry as I stepped forward, as to grab them and separate them... but before I could the girl put Merit back down and released her.

"Wow! That hurt!" the girl shouted loudly, as if stunned. I grabbed her by the upper arm, to steady her as Merit quickly stepped away.

"Renn...!" Merit whined, glaring at the girl as she put her back to the wall... as if now fully on guard.

The saint blinked a few times and then shivered, as if cold. "I'm all tingly now, haha!" she then said.

Although still worried, I couldn't help but breathe out a sigh of relief. She was still alive, at least...

Maybe Merit could control how badly she shocked people...? I couldn't imagine this tiny girl surviving what those hardened men had. Now that I had her arm in my hand, I was able to feel just how tiny she was. She was taller than Merit, but not by much, and just as scrawny. She felt more like bone than anything else, was she sick or something?

"Are you okay...?" I asked her as she reached up to rub her cheeks.

"My mouth's all tingly!" she said, though she spoke fine.

"Touch me again and you'll feel more than tingly!" Merit said, loudly.

"What's that feel like...?" the girl asked as she actually stepped forward towards Merit. I firmed my grip on the girl's arm, stunned at her audacity.

She had just tried to hug Merit again!

"She doesn't like being touched," I said, sternly.

"Aww..." the girl moaned a bit, as if disappointed.

"Mono...!"

I turned as Martin hurried over. The son of the knight huffed a little, telling me he had ran swiftly and from a distance. He too reached over and grabbed the girl by the arm, though not the one I held.

"Martin! She really can shock people! It felt great!" the girl told him.

"By the gods you're...!" Martin bit back the word he wanted to say, and then hurriedly turned to look at Merit. "I'm so terribly sorry, Merit! She had said she had foreseen herself getting shocked if she hugged you... So I had thought she'd know better than to do so!" he said quickly, as if worried he'd be the one in trouble and not the saint who had hugged her.

Merit glared at the two, her back still up against the wall. "Mono...?" Merit mumbled.

"That's me!" the girl said happily as she tried to raise her arms up, but both Martin and I held them in place.

I kept hold of her since he still did too. The fact he had his hand on her, a man who was considered a knight for saints, told me all I needed to know about this girl. She was as uncontrollable as Tundra was, it seemed. Maybe even worse... considering she had foreseen Merit's shock and had still done the deed.

"It's nice to meet you Mono... but I hope you'll not annoy Merit further, otherwise the two of us will have to leave," I said to the girl, hoping to make my point.

Mono glanced up at me and nodded. "Oh, I won't! Now she won't shock me anymore, since she now knows who I am... thanks for that Martin, you jerk," she said as she turned to glare at the knight.

He didn't seem to care at all about her look, or tone. "I'd chastise you for not realizing how dangerous your antics are, but the sad fact you do indeed know how dangerous your mistakes are make me question the gods' intelligence in giving you sight," Martin said.

The girl laughed, but I only shook my head at them.

Releasing the girl, I stepped back a bit as to put myself slightly between her and Merit. Just in case.

"You know her, Merit?" I asked. They had just said Merit recognized her name, basically. Which was odd... Merit hadn't brought up this person before. Mono...? Don't think I'd ever heard that said by anyone, not even Vim.

"Rather, she likely knows her parents. Anyone who has been in the Society long enough would know what her name means," Martin said, his hand still on the girl's arm.

My ears fluttered a little as I processed his words. They made me feel, once again, as if I was some kind of outsider to them.

The girl stepped forward a step, but only because that was all she could do. Martin kept hold of her, and he didn't budge. "I'm a celebrity! Like you! So let's get along!" Mono said as she held out her other hand.

A little hesitant, I frowned as I went ahead and took the offered hand. It was small and oddly cold considering it was covered in sweat.

Maybe Merit's shock had hurt her more than she was letting on.

"Renn... What's that...?" I asked her after introducing myself.

The girl tilted her head in a way that told me she didn't understand my question.

"She means someone famous. Basically she's well known, like you are," Merit answered for me, from behind. Martin nodded, confirming it.

"I'm famous...?" I asked, not liking that at all. Because it likely was meant in a bad way.

Mono giggled as she leaned a bit, as to look past and around me at Merit. "It's nice to meet you too, Merit! I liked the shock, I've never felt anything like that before!"

"You're definitely her daughter..." Merit groaned.

The saint beamed us a mighty smile. "Really!?" she shouted. She looked and sounded absolutely ecstatic, as if she'd never received such a wonderful compliment before.

She let my hand go as she tried to step forward, and she reached out to grab at me. I panicked at first, thinking she was going to try and round me and hug Merit... but then I realized she was simply trying to hug me again instead.

Martin though kept hold of his arm. "You're bothering them, Mono..." Martin said with a voice that told me he was likely the one being bothered the most right now.

"Mhm...!" Mono nodded, but didn't stop trying. She tugged and pulled her arm, doing all she could to reach me.

With a small sigh, and much to Merit's disappointment... I stepped forward as to accept the saint's hug.

Smiling at Martin, I nodded to him as to let him know it was okay. The girl giggled happily as Martin finally released her, and she once again gave me a hug.

Mono buried her face into my stomach as she hugged me, which made me feel a little weird. Was she trying to smell me...?

"You really don't smell at all! Haha" she said with a muffled laugh, telling me that was indeed what she was trying to do.

Martin groaned, covering his face as if in shame... and Merit then groaned too, though in annoyance.

Smirking at them all, I sighed as I patted the girl's back.

So many new faces. So many new troubles... but honestly...

This was what it was all about. The Society. And I'd not trade it for anything.

Chapter 495 Vim – A Monarch's Lagoon

Slowly walking up the rocky beach, I made sure not to step on the large starfish that I passed.

"Here? Here? Really!?" Pinchie excitedly asked from my shoulder.

"Hm. Should be here," I said. It honestly might not be. I'd not been here in... well...

Who knows how long it's been, honestly. Decades at least.

"Home! A home!" Pinchie happily said while making noise with a pincer. Three of them were clinging to me, my hair and shirt, so only one was able to be used to make noise at the moment.

Exiting the ocean fully, I stepped onto the rocky beach and glanced around. The island wasn't too big, but it wasn't small either. There were thousands of trees, and even a small hill looking mountain. One that was probably a couple hundred feet in height, judging by the shadow it was casting over half the island.

I headed for the northern section of the island. I had to walk deeper onto the island, into the thick forest area, since the beach I'd swam up to ended and giant boulders and trees blocked the path.

"Look! Pretty birds! Like colorful rocks!" Pinchie said as we passed a large tree. One that had dozens of multi-colored birds upon it.

"Hm... this area isn't very tropical, but it's still wilderness," I said.

"Tropic?" Pinchie asked.

"A term for a region down south, where more sunlight is found," I explained gently.

"Mhm...!" Pinchie danced a bit on my shoulder as we walked past the noisy tree. The birds were all squawking at us as we passed, likely not used to such large creatures on their island.

Glancing around at the grass I was walking upon, I noticed the patches that were longer compared to the rest. Odds are there was some kind of smaller herbivore here, eating the grass constantly. I could hear mostly birds here, and the hum of bugs, but not much else.

Though Pinchie really shouldn't have to worry about such predators, I still took them into account. Although a monarch, the crab was kind of small...

But where else would I take the creature? It wasn't like I could just put Pinchie in an aquarium or something.

I smirked at the idea, since it reminded me of some of the god's creations. One of the floating islands had that huge aquarium, with even giant sharks and whales. That had been neat, in its own way.

Such a memory... I'd not thought of that in a long time...

It didn't take long before I found the inlet I'd been searching for. On the north of the island was a small recessed inlet, not much a cove or even an inlet, but it was the best description of it. It was a recessed beach, that had a deep lagoon, as if something had scooped up a part of the island a long time ago. There were small beaches around the circular cove, but most of the lagoon was surrounded by rocky cliffs. Parts of those cliffs extended out into the sea, forming a small circle around the cove, which only further implied something had either impacted the area or gouged it out a long time ago.

And in fact, that was kind of what had happened. At one time this island had extended for many more miles north, though that was all gone now.

"Is this it!? Is it?" Pinchie asked excitedly as I stepped up to overlook the cove. We were a few dozen feet up, not far from where the hill descended to the nearest beach.

I nodded, and gestured to the lagoon below. "Can you see it, Pinchie?" I asked.

Pinchie tugged on my hair and leaned forward, dancing up and down while studying the clear ocean beneath us.

The water inside the cove was a brighter blue than the ocean that fed it. Plus it was clearer, clear enough to see the huge reef that encompassed most of the bottom of the deep lagoon. And right in the center of it, a faintly white existence amongst dark blues and greens... was a giant clam.

"What is it?" Pinchie asked excitedly.

"A giant clam. It's not like you, it's a creature of normalcy, but it is still unique in its own way. Not only is it huge in size, it's also old. Probably the oldest thing around," I said.

"Older than you?" Pinchie asked as I turned, and headed for the nearby slooped cliff so I could take the monarch down to the lagoon.

"Probably not, but it could be," I said honestly. I didn't think clams lived too long, but who was I to know? Maybe it was as old as the island itself.

"It's huge!" Pinchie said as we descended the hill.

"Very. It's bigger than these trees," I said as we passed one that was at least thrice my height.

"Will it eat me?" Pinchie asked worriedly as we reached the beach.

"Clam's are filter feeders. They eat the tiny stuff, as long as you stay out of it there's no way it'll harm you," I said.

"I eat the little stuff too!"

Smirking at that, I nodded.

Reaching the beach, I didn't just walk out into the clear and pretty water. Instead I stopped a few feet from it, near some rocks.

Reaching up, I held out my open palm before my shoulder and waited for Pinchie to step out onto it. Pinchie's tiny, but pointy, feet felt a little odd as they stepped upon me.

Holding Pinchie up a little, I gestured out to the lagoon before us.

"Of all the places I know, at least in this region... I feel this would work best as a home, Pinchie," I said.

The monarch danced around my hand a bit, looking every which way. "It is clear! The water! So pretty! And colorful!" Pinchie said.

"The clam, they're giant filters basically. Will keep the water clean and pure," I explained.

If Pinchie understood, or cared, they didn't seem to register it. Instead the monarch nearly fell off my hand as they tried to look down, in a hurry to check it out for themselves.

I knelt down, gently letting the monarch clamber off my hand and onto some rocks. The small monarch hurriedly stepped to the edge of the rock, to look out to the gentle waves crashing into it. The lagoon was peaceful, but it was still connected to the sea. It had tides and waves, which right now were gentle but still likely wild to one as small as Pinchie.

"So clear...! So pure!" Pinchie said while examining the waters.

"Mhm," I nodded, unsure if I should explain the reason for the water's clarity again.

The small monarch seemed simple in some ways, but intelligent in others. So I didn't want to be rude and assume it didn't understand, when it likely did and was just... happy. Happy and simple.

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Simplicity didn't outright mean idiocy, after all.

Pinchie walked off the rocks and onto the beach instead. I followed the small monarch as it stepped out into the waters, but not so deeply that it submerged.

"This far out in the sea will keep you from being bothered by humans, too. I bet you can go decades without seeing even a ship on the horizon out here," I said as I glanced out to the sea. It was dark, thanks to the storms, but not so dark I couldn't see for miles. There wasn't a sail in sight.

"And so full of life!" Pinchie exclaimed.

Glancing down, I found the small crab dancing in front of a small shell. It wasn't moving, but I could tell from the sand around it that it had just been crawling. It was likely some kind of crab or snail. Maybe a limpet? It was still, likely hiding from Pinchie who was dancing around it.

"The corals will be full of life, Pinchie. Plenty of food for you, and with their great numbers you'll be able to blend in and be safe as well," I said as I looked out to the colorful lagoon. Even from here I could see the schools of fish all over the place.

I felt as if I was trying to sell beach-front property to someone. It was kind of silly, since I was basically trying to sell a beach to a crab... and you'd think that not be too hard.

Yet I knew if this failed I'd likely be forced to spend more time on this than I wanted to, more than I was willing to. And I wasn't sure what I'd do if...

"I love it!" Pinchie though put an end to those thoughts as the crab turned around and bubbled up at me.

"Do you?" I asked, feeling a strange sense of relief upon hearing so.

"Oh yes! Splendidly!" Pinchie declared.

Frowning at Pinchie's fancy word, I nodded. "I'm glad to hear so."

Pinchie made happy little noises, dancing a bit before my feet. "Thank you ever-so much! Forever my friend you will be!" Pinchie happily declared.

I couldn't help but smile down at the happy little monarch. Hearing it so... purely say such a thing made me glad I'd not culled it.

Kneeling down, I ignored the wave that washed past Pinchie and my feet. Pinchie didn't even budge from it, even though it had been almost big enough to cover the small crab completely.

"I'm glad you're happy, Pinchie. I'll not visit often, maybe not for years at a time, but I'll make sure to swing by occasionally and say hello," I said.

"Please do! I'll gather treasures to give you, as thanks!" Pinchie declared.

"Treasures...?" I asked. What an odd thing for a monarch to say. I wonder if its creator had said such a thing.

"Little pretties! Like this...!" Pinchie then reached behind with one of its claws, grabbing at something behind its shell. A moment later it was holding out a red shell, one so vibrant it stood out even in the red claw that held it.

Smirking softly, I reached out to accept the tiny shell that Pinchie offered.

"Why that is a lovely color indeed. Are you sure you want to share it?" I asked as I studied the small shell. It wasn't even as big as my pinky's fingernail, but it was rather colorful and detailed. Nothing was in it, though.

"Tis'! For you! As thanks!" Pinchie happily said. Lots of little bubbles came from the monarch's mouth as it danced a bit, likely from excitement.

"Thank you, Pinchie. I shall cherish it, hopefully as much as you do your new home."

"Hehehe!" Pinchie laughed, sounding oddly human for a moment. I'd recognize that embarrassed giggle anywhere. That had likely been Pinchie's first experience at being thanked in such a way.

It was hard sometimes, to remember these creatures could be so... young, in their own ways.

Closing my hand around the tiny gift, to make sure I didn't accidentally drop it without realizing it, I nodded down to the small crab.

"Then I shall be on my way, Pinchie."

"Ah yes! We both have stuff to do! May we both fulfill our purposes well!" Pinchie happily declared.

Smiling at the crab, I nodded. "Yes. Let's hope we do."

Standing up, I watched Pinchie turn around and face the lagoon. The small monarch wasted no time in stepping forward, walking quickly into the clear waters without hesitation.

The sea was cold here, yet Pinchie obviously didn't mind at all. It didn't take long for the colorful crab to disappear amongst the colorful reefs only a few feet out into the water. I had a general idea where the monarch was, thanks to sensing the heart within it, but didn't really know its exact location.

Sighing gently I stepped back and away from the beach. I needed to head eastward, and although it'd be easy to just swim out to the sea from here I didn't want to bother the lagoon. It was Pinchie's home now, after all.

Heading back to the beach on the other side of the island, I rolled the tiny shell that Pinchie had given me in my hand. The small thing was cool to the touch, and smooth. As if a tiny bead.

"From mighty monarch hunter to what...? A relocater? Someone who houses them...?" I whispered, and then shivered at the thought of being some servant or something of a god's creation. The mere idea of being some plaything to the gods made me sick to my stomach.

Shaking a bit, from disgust and anger, I did my best to keep calm and collected. I didn't want to break this island. Not only was it old, it was important now. This island would keep Pinchie safe, and also isolated. If this island got destroyed... who knows where'd the monarch would go. At least with it here I'd be able to keep tabs on it. To a degree, at least...

"Plus maybe one day I'd be able to track its creator down too," I mumbled as I rounded the large rocks from before. I stepped up to the rocky beach, and noticed the large starfish had moved a bit. Likely bothered by my earlier presence.

Glancing down to my hand, I studied the little red shell. It was an angled spiral, and the bright red of it gave the thing a strange polished look. Renn would like it. Hadn't she one time told me she had spent a few years living on a beach? Collecting shells and such? I wonder what she had done with all of them...

I blinked at the thought of her, and felt... tired all of a sudden.

I missed her. I'd only been gone for a couple weeks, yet I was thinking of her in a way as if I'd not seen her in years. It made me wonder if I'd even survive being apart from her for that long. Hopefully I never found out if it was possible or not.

Wonder how she was doing. Hopefully Light and the rest weren't bothering her too much... but I knew better than to actually think so.

"She's probably having so much fun I'm not even a thought in her mind," I whispered as I went to put the little shell into a one of my smaller monarch leather bags. To keep it safe, so that I'd not lose it during my swim back to mainland. I had a distance to go, at least twenty or so miles.

There was no denying I wanted to hurry back to Lumen. Not only did I want to see Renn... I knew there was a lot I needed to handle there. I needed to find out more on what Light was doing, and why they were being so active all of a sudden. Plus I had to prepare for stepping down... and soon we'd have to escort Randle and the rest up north, alongside Lellip and so many other little things...

I didn't know what was worse. I stuck around Renn and the others and nothing but drama and headaches appeared. Yet whenever I separated from her, the world became... worse, somehow. Why was it each time we separated, something bad happened? Not just to me either. She and the others were attacked by those bandits when I'd been gone, so it wasn't as if the disasters were limited to me. Which worried me greatly.

I'd been trying to slowly prepare for such disasters. Thus why I had asked Lilly to accompany us to Lumen, even though she wanted to go home. She needed to, really, with her family having issues and Lellip wanting to go meet her son. I was being... cruel to her, to keep her from such things. But who else could I trust...?

Merit maybe...? She did seem to really like Renn, for some reason. But could I trust her to do whatever it took to keep her safe...? Lilly would kill even our own members to keep herself and Renn safe, but would Merit...? A part of me said yes, but...

It was too bad Renn wanted to be so involved in the Society... otherwise I could just keep her safe somewhere quiet and isolated. Either at the Keep or Lilly's home. But who was I to try and stop her from enjoying the Society? Her utter devotion and desire to be so deeply involved in the Society was part of the reason I loved her. It was so rare for someone like her to be so willing to dedicate their lives to such a simple purpose. She had no grandiose plans like Light or Celine. No schemes or hidden purposes to her actions, like Landi. She just... loved the people in the Society, and wanted to always be with them.

Who was I to deny that? Who was I to not support such a thing...?

Yet here I was... wanting to step down...

Sighing at myself, I turned around and glanced at the forest. I could still feel Pinchie, even from here, though it was distant.

Damned creature. Hopefully I wasn't making a mistake leaving it alive. A part of me wanted to kill it, in hopes of drawing out the god who had created it, but I knew that was likely a folly plan. The god had abandoned Pinchie, finding the small and weak monarch not worth the effort or time. Killing it would

likely not do much at all, since Pinchie was small and weak enough to die from even natural reasons. The god might simply think Pinchie got eaten by a larger fish, or caught by a human or something.

So culling it would only stop the potential danger it'd bring in the future. And make me feel better.

Neither were good enough reasons.

At least, that was what I was telling myself.

Stepping out into the ocean, I took a deep breath as I dived into the sea and went to swimming.

Chapter 496 Renn – To Help A Meerkat

Although we were doing something a little... wrong, I couldn't help the huge smirk on my face as I followed Reatti through the alleyway.

It wasn't as late at night as I had expected. I had figured we'd be doing this in the dead of night, when no one was awake. Instead Reatti wanted to do it not long after the shop closed, when people would be eating dinner and getting drunk. I understood her reasoning, especially since the shop we were going to steal from didn't have any houses above or around it. It was one of the rare multi-floored buildings that had only more shops and warehouses above and around it. An oddity considering it was in the area that nobles shopped.

We rounded a corner, and the light rain that fell around the world masked our presence. The rain wasn't falling too hard, but still hard enough to make the world noisy. There were puddles, and all the water collecting on the rooftops of the buildings around us loudly drained and fell off the roofs and canopy's around us. Every so often we walked under one of the sections that had water pouring from it, which

Reatti oddly walked right through and under instead of just around them. As if she wanted to get soaked.

Following her across a street and into another alleyway, I tried to think of the last time I'd stolen something. Before joining the Society, for sure, but how long before that...? I could remember stealing some clothes and a fishing pole from some knights not too long after Nory and I had built our cabin, but was that really the last time I'd done so?

Back then I had stolen things out of necessity. Usually the stuff I stole were clothes, since I was just so terrible at making them myself and I needed them to blend in with the humans. If I wanted to earn money, and buy stuff, I first needed to have the proper attire. To hide my ears and tail, at the bare minimum. But sometimes my thievery extended beyond clothes, and included metal or crafted items such as fishing poles... knives...

Feeling bad about my past, I slowed as Reatti stopped at the end of the alley. She peered around the corner as I walked up behind her, but didn't peer around the corner myself. I waited to see and hear what she'd say and do, and after a moment she turned around to whisper at me.

"It's all shut up and dark," Reatti whispered.

I nodded. "So we're going to do it?"

"Last chance to back out, Renn," Reatti said.

"Please," I said, wanting to scoff.

Back out? Not only was this utterly thrilling, it was important.

Their spears were in there. Those belonged to Reatti and Brom. To the Society. Vim had made them, and they were special.

I'd not allow them to be held by that rude man any longer. The jerk displayed them in his craftsman shop and had the gall to claim he was the one who had made them! Plus he wasn't willing to negotiate at all. Reatti and I had both tried to purchase them, properly and honorably... for great sums too, and the darn idiot smugly refused each time.

"Mhm. Okay then. Like we planned. We'll climb to the second floor and enter through that balcony on the side, okay?" Reatti whispered.

I nodded. We'd gone over this several times, and had scouted the building and area out rather well too.

We knew the owner of the building and his five or so workers left very quickly after closing shop. They didn't make their products here in this building but instead on the other side of town, at a blacksmith some noble family owned. The shopkeeper was a proud man but he himself didn't make anything as far as we could tell, he was simply related to the noble who owned both enterprises. Reatti believed he was married to one of the daughters or something.

I myself didn't care much for their circumstances. They had found those spears in the rubble during the aftermath of those creatures last year. I didn't blame them for picking them up, since they were special... but I did not like the idea of something Vim made, for my friends... one of which who had died

protecting me, was in the hands of people who neither respected nor understood their value. Though even if they had, I'd still want them back. At the very least Reatti deserved to have her brother's...

Reatti peered around the corner of the alley again. It didn't take her long before she glanced back at me and nodded. "Let's do it. No one's around."

I nodded back and hurried with Reatti out of the alley. There was an alley on one side of the building we were about to break into, but it was tiny and full of boxes. Although cramped... it was the perfect location for what we needed.

We ran into the alley, and Reatti quickly went to the spot we'd already looked at and planned to use. She put her back against the wall and turned to me, cupping her hands in front of her. I wasted no time, I stepped up onto her open hands and she pushed me up just as I leapt upward a bit. I grabbed onto the balcony, but before pulling myself up I turned and reached out for Reatti. She jumped up, grabbing my hand, and I pulled her up the rest of the way.

Reatti clambered up onto the balcony first, and then I followed. I couldn't help but grin at how easily it had been. Reatti and I had tested this method already, helping each other climb up onto a second floor and honestly I was surprised at how capable we were at it.

Had I always been this strong? I had lifted Reatti rather easily, as if she'd not weighed anything. And I had done it while hanging off the balcony, holding my own weight too. It made me feel kind of good, to know I was so capable.

By the time I had got myself over the balcony's ledge, Reatti had already broken into the wooden door that led into the building. I heard tiny metal sounds as she pushed the door open slowly, trying not to make much noise.

She had simply pulled the metal handle with enough strength to break it. A rather... obvious method, but it made me realize how worthless a simple lock on a door was.

Reatti was strong, but not the outright strongest. The fact she had so easily broken an iron door-handle in such a way told me that even a human, with the right tools, was probably capable of doing it too.

The home we'd build up north, the orphanages and stuff, will need better security. I'll have to talk to Vim about it.

Reatti entered the building first. She did so while crouched a little, so I mimicked her and entered the same way. I felt kind of like a cat as I slowly prowled behind Reatti, leaving the rainy outside world and entering the shop that smelled like metals and oil.

Just as we figured, this floor was full of crates and shelves. In the darkness of the night I could see the gleam of dull metals, such as iron and brass, but there wasn't as much as I'd have expected. The room we were now in actually kind of felt... empty, somehow. As if it was not being used properly, or something.

Why didn't they at least have a table and some chairs? What if someone needed to work on something in here?

"I don't smell or hear anyone," Reatti whispered.

I turned to look at her, and found her kneeling in front of the room's door. The one that led to the hallway.

Pulling off my hood, I turned my head a bit and listened to the world around me. I heard the rain pittering-and-pattering up above us. I heard drips from leaks and cracks in the roof. There was a mouse somewhere nearby, in one of the walls... and...

I nodded carefully. "I don't hear anyone either," I said. It was hard for me to smell much, since all I could smell were the items around me. The metals and oils.

"I'll go first, just in case," Reatti whispered as she opened the door.

Although I didn't much like the idea, I didn't argue. All I'd accomplish by doing that would get us in trouble, by alerting someone.

Reatti stepped out of the supply room slowly, looking all around as she headed down the hallway. About half way down it was the stairwell, the one that I knew led to the bottom floor behind the main counter. It was slightly hidden behind a wall, but I'd glanced up it while Reatti had distracted one of the workers the other day.

I left the room as Reatti glanced back at me and nodded, telling me it seemed clear. I followed Reatti down the stairs, slowly, and flinched a little when Reatti made one of the floorboard steps creak a little loudly.

We both went still... and for a few quick heartbeats, there was silence. Even the mouse upstairs had gone still.

But the silence continued, and the rain grew louder up on the roof.

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If there was anyone in this building... they'd not heard or moved.

Reatti sighed ever so slightly, and then continued down the stairwell. She reached the bottom and turned to head into the main lobby of the shop, and I quickly followed her.

The shop was just as I remembered it from the other day. The whole room was a large square, with a circular shelf in the center of it. The shelf had a bunch of metalwork items, ranging from knives to even pots and pans, but there was only one thing we were focused on.

Not too far from the stairwell, hanging up on the wall behind the counter, were the spears. They both were hanging on little metal hooks, gleaming brightest amongst all the tools and weapons. It looked like the man had polished them, or something.

Reatti didn't waste a moment. She stepped up to them and reached up, since they were hanging up near the ceiling as if so they could be seen from a distance, and she tugged them off the hooks.

I pulled around the small bag I had, and dug out the dark blankets we'd prepared. I laid them out, unfurled, onto the counter in front of Reatti and she went and placed both of the spears onto them.

We both quickly wrapped the spears up, and then I went to helping Reatti put them into the spear holder she had on her back. It was cumbersome, since it hadn't been made with spears wrapped in a thick blanket in mind, but we eventually got them situated in place.

"Ready?" Reatti whispered, once the spears were secured to her back.

"Yeah," I said excitedly. I hurriedly went to cover my ears again with my hood as Reatti hurried back up the stairs, heading for the room we'd broken in from.

Although I hurried to follow her... I paused a moment before the stairwell. I glanced out at the shop we'd just stolen from, and wondered if maybe I should have brought some coins. To leave on the counter as an apology.

I decided against it, before coming here, because I didn't want to risk it. What if somehow those coins led the shop owner or the noble back to the guild? Or me? I couldn't bear the thought of them getting hurt again all because of my negligence. Yet I still felt a little bad... maybe I'd return later with Vim and buy some stuff, or something.

Reaching the balcony, Reatti paused a moment first to make sure the alleyway below was clear. Once she confirmed it was, she gracefully clambered over the railing of the balcony and leapt to the ground below. I waited a moment for her to move out of the way before I too jumped off the balcony.

I landed a little too loudly in my opinion, but did so without any trouble. Reatti nodded to me, stood up straighter... and simply walked out of the alley and onto the road. I quickly followed her, as to walk side-by-side.

"That went well," I said, feeling a little bit of a rush from a job well done.

"Hm. Almost feels wrong that it's so easy, huh?" Reatti said.

I nodded at that. It did, a little. Just as I had moments ago thought about how easily Reatti had broken that door handle... the reality is the whole thing had been easy. Odds are if we wanted to, we could rob nearly any building in this city. And that included the places guarded by actual knights and whatnot.

"I used to stress terribly upon stealing clothes when I was younger. One time I spent almost three days just... planning how I'd grab a shirt off a drying rack, behind a large household," I said as I remembered the moment. It had been not long after I had left Witch, after I'd killed her. I had not been in the best emotional state, to be honest...

"Hm... I luckily never had to resort to that. Me and my brother were found by Vim rather quickly after our families chaos," Reatti said.

Right... Wish I'd been found too, like that.

Though if I had been, would I have become Vim's partner...? Probably not. He distanced himself from those he saved like that, oddly.

We rounded a corner, heading down a slightly busier street. There was even a wagon being pulled by a pair of donkeys, and the men leading it looked tired and exhausted. One was even dragging his feet.

"Thanks Renn, for helping," Reatti then said.

Oh...? "I'd help you anytime, Reatti. Especially for something like this," I said.

Honestly I was super humbled that Reatti had asked me for help. As she'd just proved... it wasn't as if she had actually needed me. Though maybe she had, in her own way. As far as I could tell she hadn't felt comfortable asking anyone else for help, since no one else would have approved of the deed or even thought acquiring the spears worth the effort. To her they held sentimental value, but to the rest of the Society they were but simple spears. Weapons. And most of the Society hated those even on a good day, let alone ones that were associated with the death of one of our members.

"All the same, thank you. Honestly I probably shouldn't have let it bother me so much... but!" Reatti lifted her hands, shaking her fists as if angry.

I nodded quickly. "Yeah! He was a jerk!" I agreed.

Reatti huffed, rather loudly. "This is what he gets for not just selling them to me. Stupid fool of a human..." she mumbled.

I noted her tone, and wondered if that was actual malice I heard... or just her being emotional. Something told me I was hearing it right, which made me even more glad that I'd accompanied her.

Odds are if that man had been in that shop tonight... he may have died, had he tried to stop Reatti from regaining what was rightfully hers.

Though if I would have actually stopped her or not was up to debate. I was starting to really question some of my own moral limits.

I used to think I couldn't harm anyone unless the need was great... but now...? To me, helping a friend... especially a fellow member of the Society, regain their sentimental object of their fallen sibling was great enough to justify such a thing. And that kind of scared me a little. After all it wasn't as if the man had actually stolen them from Reatti... he had simply found them in the rubble. The man had done nothing outright wrong to us. He hadn't killed Brom. He hadn't been involved in that fiasco at all.

More importantly, Vim wouldn't have allowed Reatti to kill that man... but Vim also would have gotten the spears back too, though how he would have done it I didn't know. Maybe I'd ask him when he got back.

"I'd offer to take you somewhere nice, but it'd be best to not be seen with them for a while," Reatti said with a point to the spears on her back.

I nodded. "It's okay. I've been told Light plans to..." I hesitated and groaned.

"Hm?" Reatti slowed a bit as to give me a look.

I reached up to rub my left temple. "She wanted to have dinner..." I said as I remembered.

"Hm..." Reatti frowned at that and glanced up at the sky. "Well, it's late but not too late. If we hurried back I guess you could make it."

Nodding, I sighed a bit. "I didn't agree with her that I would have dinner, she just suggested it."

"Well... she's important, isn't she? People who are important get what they want, even if you don't outright agree with it. Brandy's like that too," Reatti said.

Amused at her perspective of it, I reminded myself that she was young. Although not actually young, she wasn't old enough to have known Celine or the Society back in the day. So her saying such a thing told me a lot about how she saw Light and her people.

Many in the Society saw a hierarchy. Even if there wasn't actually one. It was interesting to learn who did and who didn't, and was even more confusing that usually the ones who saw the Society in such a way were those like her. The stronger ones.

"If you don't like her just say so...? You're Vim's wife, that gives you some leeway," Reatti suggested.

Frowning at her, I wondered why she'd say such a thing... but realized she'd likely saw my thoughts on my face. About how she saw the Society, and interpreted them wrongly. It was kind of her to try and give me advice, and for it to be that type.

"Vim wants me to not cause problems, while he's gone," I said.

Reatti nodded. "Right... easy to say, hard to do."

"Right?"

She chuckled at me as we rounded a corner and headed for the district the Animalia Guild was located in. As we stepped onto the new road, I glanced behind us... to check and make sure we weren't being followed. It didn't seem we were, but it was a little hard to tell because there were people out and about. Most had cloaks on, since it was lightly raining, so it was even harder to tell what who was doing what.

I wonder if Lilly was nearby. I had told her about what we were doing, and she had offered to help... but I didn't want to risk it with Reatti. Though that didn't mean Lilly wasn't nearby, keeping an eye on me.

Merit knew too, but hadn't seemed too worried about what we were doing. She had only asked where the store was, and a little about our plan of attack. After I'd explained the plan to her, and the store's location, she simply nodded and changed topics. Either finding it not worth her time to worry or maybe to Merit doing such things was... well... normal? She didn't act it, but I knew Merit had lived a wild life before we'd met. She had grown up under a monarch, had traveled the world outside of the Society before joining, and then went ahead and became queen of a whole kingdom. Merit was... very experienced, with a lot of worldly experience. More than I had, at least.

I had expected her to want to be involved, if anything just to keep an eye on me, but Merit hadn't seemed too interested. It made me wonder if stealing some spears from a random human's shop was just... not very unique to her.

Glancing at Reatti, who had a very content and happy smile on her face, I felt rather... relieved. I had worried that even after getting the spears back, Raetti would have been agitated. Yet it seemed she was already feeling a little better.

"It's a little too bad that had gone so well, huh?" Reatti then asked.

My smile, which had been warm and gentle, flinched. "Um... yeah?" I said, unsure of what to say.

Reatti sighed. "Maybe I'll burn their building down later or something..." she mumbled.

"Would Brom do that?" I asked.

Reatti flinched and glanced at me, with a small glare. "Don't do that, Renn. That makes me feel sick."

"Sorry... I hadn't meant it that way, I had been genuinely wondering..." I said quickly. Brom to me had seemed like an affable man, not the type to be so vengeful.

Reatti groaned and looked away from me... and after a few dozen steps she finally nodded. "No. My brother wouldn't have even stolen these back, he was a passive man."

"I see..." I whispered. So I had pegged Brom correctly, then.

"Fine... I'll just let it be. For now," she said.

Smiling at her, I reached over to pat her gently on the shoulder. Near the spears that hung upon it.  
"Want to bury his? At his grave with him?" I asked.

Reatti slowed... and we both came to a stop, as I wondered if I shouldn't have said such a thing. But it was something I would have done, had I been in her shoes. I had figured it to be a good gesture... Then before I could say anything else Reatti looked at me, with blurry eyes, and she gently nodded without a word.

Holding her gaze, I nodded back.

Chapter 497 Vim – A Lizard, A Mistle and A Beetle

Damn this world and all its creators.

"Noooo...!" the monarch screeched as I pushed my foot down harder onto the back of its neck, pinning it to the ground.

I'd already broken its back, and who knows what else, so it didn't have much control over its body. Yet even as broken as it was, the lizard still tried to claw its way out from under my heel. Four mighty claws, each with talons as long as my forearm, were twitching and digging into the soft earth beneath it. But that was really all it was doing, since it couldn't move its limbs more than a few inches at a time thanks to all the broken bones.

The lizard let loose a hiss as one of its own talons cut into its face. I watched a spurt of dark blood drench the grass around its head, spraying so far it hit a nearby fence post about a dozen feet away. The thing must have clipped a rather thick artery.

It was pissed.

But so was I.

"Who made you?" I asked as I kept pressure on its neck, keeping it pinned to the ground.

"Nooo!" the monarch shouted some more.

Was that all it knew? Since finding it, and attacking it, that's all it's said. Even when I was breaking its back it hadn't said anything else.

"Where's your parent?" I asked, speaking a little louder as I pushed ever so slightly down with more strength.

"No!" it screamed defiantly, its back legs kicking a little harder than before. I noted the way they dug into the ground and kicked upward, trying to drag itself free from under my foot. The legs were moving with more strength and surety.

It was healing already.

Taking a deep breath, I bit back a bunch of curses and growls... and glanced away from the monarch. I looked the opposite direction from the trail of blood it had just spewed, and over at the nearby farmstead. A quaint little house with a nice little garden all around it. The small one story house looked worn down, and you could tell with just a glance that this place was old, but well loved. The house was surrounded by green grass and flowers. There were crops growing not far from the house, surrounded by makeshift fences, and there was an area of culled trees past them. You could tell that this place had been lived in for years, maybe even generations.

And its inhabitants were all strewn all over the place. In hundreds of pieces.

The sight of the carnage made the world go dark for a moment as I bent my neck and cracked it. As I did, I felt the ground shift beneath me... and the monarch released another scream of pain as I pushed its head and neck even farther into the grass and dirt. I heard bones that had been trying to heal break again.

"No!" it screamed as its tail thrashed just once. I knew it had likely tried to just hit me with it, but it didn't have control over its tail anymore. That had been why I had originally broken its back, as to stop it from trying to whack me with that spiky thing. Well, that and my rage at seeing a monarch eating a bunch of people.

"Stop screaming and answer me...!" I growled down at the lizard, doing everything I could to keep it alive.

I was mere moments from just... ending it. It was a miracle I was holding my strength back enough as it was. At any moment I'd just... push down a little harder, and it'd be over. Even if its heart wasn't directly under my foot, near the base of its skull, the attack would have killed it.

This monarch, though far bigger than Pinchie, was just as young. Just as weak. Outside of its size, and the sharpness of its claws, teeth, and the spikes on its tail... it was in the end just a giant lizard. At least it had a normal color scheme, unlike Pinchie's rainbow of colors. This green lizard looked almost normal, other than its mighty size. It was likely some kind of monitor lizard, but I was much too angry to try and put a proper name to its subspecies.

"Answer!" I shouted at it.

"No!" the monarch shouted into the dirt, spurting out blood as it did between its sharp teeth.

Maybe that really was all it knew. That single word.

I'd given it plenty of chances. It knew it had no chance against me. I've put it through agonizing pain... yet still all it did was thrash and scream that single word.

I recognized a simple beast when I saw one. It was a monarch, and thus capable of sentience, but nothing more than the most basic of thoughts. It acted purely on instinct, and thus spoke only on instinct. It likely didn't even comprehend I was asking it questions. It only knew I was an enemy, and that I was hurting it.

Taking a small breath, I glanced around again... hated what I saw, and looked back down to the squirming monarch.

"Last chance. If you tell me what I want to know, I'll spare you," I offered.

For a tiny moment I expected it to say something, since it didn't just outright scream at me... but instead it just kept thrashing around, trying to free itself.

"Well!?" I shouted as I put a tiny bit more pressure upon it.

I got only a hiss in return. Not even a hiss in response, just a hiss from the extra pain it was now feeling thanks to my squishing its head.

"Fine."

A blink of an eye later the whole lizard went still. Although it had already been mostly lying on the ground, it still made a loud thump as it fully relaxed and stopped moving... as I crushed its head and neck under my foot.

I kept an eye on the creature as its brains and gunk splattered around my foot, and noted that not even a single talon twitched as it died.

"Worthless creations," I mumbled as I shifted my foot, pushing it deeper into the mushy earth, and felt the hard orb beneath it. Scraping my foot backward, revealing dark dirt that was soaked in blood... I saw the slightly glowing orb within the dirt and gunk, half sunk.

Bending down, I picked the heart out of the gore. It was a smaller one, maybe even smaller than Pinchie's had been, and instead of being green in color was some kind of mix of purple and black.

It was a weak heart. Weaker even than the small heart Renn had just recently absorbed.

"No denying it now, is there?" I grumbled as I stared at the thing.

It made no sense, for a god to be making such... incomplete monarchs. Ones so weak and useless. But there was no denying that was what was happening.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I stepped back a bit from the corpse of the monarch. It took a few more steps than I had thought it would to get away from the gore, and I went to scrape some of the lizard's skull off my boot on a nearby patch of grass. I took care to make my foot and leg look as... presentable as possible. It was a little difficult, since basically my whole right leg under my knee was now stained with blood and gore, but I still tried my best.

Usually I'd not care much for such a thing. I'd just wait until I could bathe, or get a new set of clothes... but I had a reason to be as presentable as possible.

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Taking another deep breath, I slid the lizard's heart into a pocket and headed for the house nearby. I tried not to look too deeply at the carnage all around the house, but it was hard. There were even pieces of the people who had lived here up on the walls and roof of the building, as if they'd been exploded from inside out. It was hard to tell thanks to how gruesome the scene was, but it looked as if there were at least half a dozen people strewn all over the place.

That monarch had not eaten cleanly. At all. Almost as if it'd not been eating in the first place, and had just killed to kill. And it hadn't thought of eating until after the deed was done, which was why I had found it gnawing on one of the pieces, and as such had not approached it as I had Pinchie. I had attacked it before saying a word, which might have ruined any chance I had at conversing with it... but I didn't care. Not anymore.

Stepping into the house, I hesitated a moment at the door. It had been propped open by a fallen chair and because of that I had expected the house to be just as gruesome as the outside. To imply the monarch had broken in and chased the people within out as they tried to run away. Instead though... I found a perfectly clean, and tidy, home.

Other than the fallen chair blocking the front door, which I gently moved out of the way and placed down upright, the house looked fine. No blood. No carnage. No chaos.

It was a stark difference than the world beyond the wooden walls, to the point it almost felt unnatural... as if not real at all... but I knew better than to think such a thing. The very air stunk of death, and not just that of the monarch's.

Glancing around, I carefully strode deeper into the home... searching for the one I had heard earlier.

I couldn't hear them at the moment... which worried me. Had they ran off or something? Maybe slipping out the back door or a back window...? I'd not fault them, at all, but...

Then I heard it. A sniffle. Tiny, quiet and alone.

Walking down a short hallway, I ended up at the last door. It wasn't closed all the way, just barely shut, so I was able to softly push it open. It creaked a bit on its hinges, and came to a stop about half way since it rubbed up against a floorboard. One that was just slightly uplifted from age and wear.

Inside the room was a bedroom. One that looked like any you'd find in such a homestead. There were only a few shelves and drawers, two medium sized beds, and something of a curtain was hung up in the center of the room. I could tell by the little hooks in the walls that one could wrap the curtain around one of the beds, as to grant a little more privacy. A typical bedroom for a family too big for their home. Odds are it was the children's bedroom, and one child was significantly older than the others... judging by the small stuffed animals on one bed, and the books and trinkets on the desk near the other.

I heard a tiny noise, not so much a sniff but a whine. One too high-pitched and small to come from an older child. Unsurprisingly... it came from under the bed that didn't have the stuffed animals upon it.

Stepping into the room, I made sure not to do so too quietly. I allowed my footsteps to be heard, and made sure to make even more noises as I knelt down next to the bed they were hiding under. I huffed a little, on purpose, as if exhausted or hurt... even though I wasn't.

Waiting a small moment next to the bed, I listened to the one hiding beneath it. From what I could feel, and hear, it was likely a small child. Though were they alone...? I had thought I had heard two heartbeats upon entering the room...

"Don't hurt me..." a tiny voice whispered.

My jaw clenched as I knelt further down, and lifted up a bit of the blankets that had hidden the bottom of the bed... and found a young girl, holding a cat.

Ah. Two heartbeats indeed. The cat's eyes were as wide as hers, though surprisingly the cat's heart was beating thrice as fast as the girl's.

"I won't hurt you. My name is Vim... Are you okay?" I asked the young girl. She looked to be about ten years old, but it was hard to tell since she was curled up on her belly. I wonder how the cat was being so calm, even though its heart was thumping so harshly. She was holding it rather closely, almost squeezing it, yet the animal didn't look like it was even thinking of escaping.

The young girl sniffed and nodded her head. The cat's ears flickered, reminding me of Renn, thanks to her movement... but still it didn't try to escape her clutches.

I gave her a gentle smile, and pushed the bedding farther over the bed, so it'd stop trying to fall back down and block my view. I didn't want to startle the poor girl, or the cat she held. "You hid real fast, didn't you?" I asked her.

She blinked a few times and then nodded. "I... I heard the screams so... so I..." she stammered a little, and the cat meowed as she shifted. She must have squeezed it a little tighter.

Screams of her family, or the monarch as I killed it, I wonder?

"What's your cat's name? Mine's named Renn," I asked.

The girl gave me a weird look, as if I was the one curled up under a bed and half a moment from having a panic attack and not her. "R-renn...? That's a weird name for a cat. She's Beetles."

"Beetles...? Likes to eat beetles does she?" I asked.

She nodded quickly.

"Well nothing wrong with that. I don't mind a beetle every now and then myself," I said.

The young girl's face quickly scrunched up in disgust.

Smiling at the girl's obvious disgust, I gestured lightly at her. "What's your name?"

"Mistle."

"Mistle...? As in mistletoe? Or the bird?" I asked.

The girl's face of disgust contorted into confusion. "... I don't know?"

Right.

Switching tactics, I tilted my head and gestured for her to crawl out from under the bed. "Why not come out...? Everything is okay now," I said.

"Is... is the monster gone...?" she asked worriedly as she looked past me, to the door not far from me.

I nodded. "It is. It's dead."

She frowned in a way that told me she didn't believe it... yet she still started crawling my way. As she did she let the cat go, and although it too crawled out of the bed... it didn't run off or hide. It quickly went to licking its own paw near my feet, completely unbothered by me or the girl who joined it.

"Your cat is very brave," I said as I stayed kneeling, even as the girl stood up next to me.

She was probably a tad older than I had thought her. Early teens or maybe even in the middle of it. Maybe this had been her bed, and not the one with the stuffed animals as I'd assumed.

She was just scrawny, and shaken. Scared. Shocked. It made her look far younger than she was.

Couldn't blame her for such a thing, though. Even if she had hid the whole time... she had heard it all. I didn't need to imagine to know the kind of screams she had borne witness to. I knew them well. Too well.

"Beetle is brave," she whispered as she stared at the door to the room, as if unable to take her eyes off it. She either expected the monster to walk into the room at any moment... or knew what she'd find just outside it.

"Then let's be just as brave, shall we?" I said as I slowly stood.

Mistle finally looked away from the door and up at me, and she grabbed at her dainty dress she wore. It was likely something one wore to bed... had the monarch attacked in the morning, before they all were up and ready...?

If so that meant she'd been hiding under the bed for hours. Nearly half the day, at least.

Poor, poor girl...

Reaching out, I offered my hand. "It's okay. I'm here," I said gently to her.

Her little lips quivered a bit, and she glanced again to the door. "The monster..." she whispered.

"It is dead. I killed it."

She looked back up at me, her eyes full of hope. "Really...?"

I nodded. "I'll show you. But before we do... how about we gather up some clothes, Mistle?" I suggested.

She sniffed. "Clothes...?" she asked.

"Do you have any relatives that live nearby, Mistle? Family?" I asked, as if I hadn't heard her question.

Mistle tilted her head a little. "I do... Mommy's sister lives with the rest, in town," she said, answering me even though she couldn't comprehend we were talking about this here and now.

Glad to hear it, I nodded. "The town near the river?" I asked. I had been rounding it not too long ago, before I had sensed the monarch and came here. It wasn't far at all, just a few miles away. I didn't know the village's name, but I'd passed by and through it often enough during my circuits around the Society.

She nodded as the cat started to stretch. It clawed a little at the rough wooden floorboards as it did, without a care in the world.

"Then let's go to them, shall we...? Why don't you help me gather up some clothes and stuff for you, okay?" I said.

"Why...?" Mistle asked as she took my outstretched hand, finally.

"The monster is dead... but it's blood might draw other monsters here. You know how bugs and animals come when you cook something? It's the same thing," I said carefully.

"Oh... that's not good...!" Mistle said worriedly as she gripped my hand tighter.

"No, it's not, is it?" I said as we quickly, though gently, gathered up a couple bags of clothes and items for the girl. Strangely I didn't even have to pick up the cat as to bring it with us; Beetles had followed us dutifully even as I carried Mistle out of the house, leaving from the back door, and left her home behind... and all the carnage alongside it.

Chapter 498 Renn – A Light's Visit

Lilly's home in Lumen was still rather empty, but now it smelled like her at least.

We were sitting together at the only table she had, near the balcony window. It was pouring rain outside, and we'd started to hear the rumble and roars of distant thunder though haven't seen any flashes of light yet.

"She's very... pushy about me spending time with Vim, alone," I said as I reached up to scratch my right ear. For some reason it had been itchy lately, maybe it was the pillows I was using? I didn't feel fleas or anything, but it was itching beyond normal.

"Undoubtedly for a reason we can't discern yet, Renn. As much as I'd like to believe their reason is as simple as them wanting you to spend alone time with him just to pop out their saint or whatever, there's no way I actually can. They're stupid, but not that simple," Lilly said.

I sighed and nodded. "Right? The worst part is she's so willing to just admit it and speak about it, which makes me question everything. If my daughter is such a destined thing... why try to force it anyway? And why make a big deal out of it?" I said, telling Lilly my worries.

"What they probably want is for you and Vim to simply get out of the picture for a bit. Though their reason for it so odd... they want the Society to realize they need him? Yet don't? Maybe Light's gone senile in her old age," Lilly said.

My tail swayed as I smiled at the owl who was older than Light was. "Yet she keeps mentioning that she'd love it if we stayed here. With her," I pointed out.

"That's the weird part... she wants you gone, yet doesn't. I wish I'd been able to talk to Vim about this before he ran off," Lilly said with a sigh.

"It's not like I got to talk to him much either. I think he was trying to not talk about it, like usual," I said.

Lilly nodded. "He hates such things. He got super lucky that he was needed elsewhere," Lilly said.

I wasn't going to mention I didn't see it that way, since the reason he had left was to go help Narli.

"Do you know Berri, Lilly?" I asked.

She nodded. "I also know of Narli. I've only met her once though, not long after she was born. They went to live in solitude after the girl was almost killed, not that I blame them," Lilly said.

"Killed...?" I asked.

Lilly nodded again. "Berri's half covered in burns right? They were betrayed by those she trusted; they tried to sacrifice Narli to some god. Vim saved them, barely, before it happened," she said.

My tail squirmed beneath my seat. "Why does it seem so many of such scenarios are because of such betrayal?" I asked.

"Because they are...? We're as bad as humans, Renn, even if no one is willing to admit it. In fact we're worse in our own ways."

I didn't like hearing that, but knew it was the truth. "Vim likes Berri. He thinks highly of her," I said.

Lilly frowned at that, but after a moment of thinking nodding. "I don't blame him...? Berri and I weren't close, but I respect her too. Though I hear she's become rather religious, I suppose I can forgive her for that considering her circumstances," Lilly said.

"She hadn't been religious before?" I asked. That was news to me.

"Not at all. She joined the Society because her people died from some kind of disease. She joined to find a cure, never did as far as I am aware."

Oh... "Again, something common. We all seemed to have joined in sadness," I said.

Lilly shrugged. "Life is sad, Renn. What do you expect?"

It to not be, of course.

"Are you sad Lilly?" I asked as a flash of light lit up the empty house.

Lilly didn't seem to register the lightning, or the subsequent thunder, as she crossed her arms and thought about my question for a moment. It took her until another flash of lit up the room again before she spoke. "Sometimes, Renn. I'm usually happy to be honest... though I'll admit lately I've been more worried than not, thanks to my children."

"Worried you're losing them," I said gently. We'd spoken of this before.

She nodded and sighed. "Even if the vote is pointless, even if Vim doesn't step down or does... it won't change the fact that they'd vote against him! Which would be the same as voting against me! I know that children are supposed to give us grief and whatnot, but how am I supposed to think of ones that outright betray me?" Lilly asked, her voice getting louder as she spoke, and not because of the increasing rain and thunder either.

I nodded slowly, since we'd already talked about this... and I too came to the same conclusion. It was fine if a child wanted to do something different, or go a different path than you... but to actually go against you? It was as Lilly said, even if nothing great came of the vote if they still went ahead and voted against Vim... well... that was akin to a betrayal in a way. Because that meant they believed in completely different things than you did, to the point it was unsettling. If they'd vote against Vim... did that mean they'd vote against Lilly herself? Would they banish her if given the chance, if it came to it?

"And worst part of it is I don't even know what I'm supposed to do about it! If I tried to yell at them, or stop them, I'd just be forcing my will on them... yet am I supposed to just let them be? Ignore them? It's like watching them play with fire; shouldn't I at least try to stop them from hurting themselves...?" Lilly wondered.

Hurt themselves... Did she mean physically and literally, I wonder? Or was she just speaking figuratively? "Have you actually talked to them about this yet?" I asked.

"Just briefly... they were all happy to go meet Root, even Crown in her depression got all happy over it. But I'm not stupid, Renn... this has been a problem from the start. They're all too like Windle," she said.

And the only reason Windle wasn't a problem was because of his love and loyalty to her. Quite a thing, that... it only made me respect the man even more, honestly. To go against his own internal beliefs and values, to be what he isn't, out of pure love was rather...

"Why are you smiling?" Lilly then asked.

"Ah. I was just thinking how lovely it is that Windle loves you so dearly, is all."

Lilly blushed and groaned. She leaned forward to cover her face with her hands as she rested against the table.

I giggled at her funny reaction, but before I could tease her some more... someone knocked on the front door.

The room went silent, and somehow got colder, as Lilly and I both turned to look at the door. I could just barely see it from this angle, but I knew Lilly had full view of it.

My ears fluttered as I tried to listen for any signs of who it could be. The pouring rain outside was masking anything obvious, and...

"That's not Merit, they knocked too high," Lilly whispered.

I nodded. I had been about to say the same thing. They had knocked on the upper part of the door, Merit would have had to jump to do so and she wouldn't have done that. Her pride wouldn't have allowed it.

Which meant it was someone we didn't know. Only Merit knew we were here.

Slowly standing from my chair, I reached over and grabbed my hat. I put it on as Lilly stood too, and I gestured for her to stay out of the way a bit. I could tell Lilly had planned to open the door, but I wanted to do so. Just in case it was someone from the Society.

Taking a small breath I walked over to the door, and wondered if I should steady myself and brace for danger. I'd been trying not to think of it, and no one else had brought it up, but there was a very good chance that some of the people I'd encountered in the sewers a year ago were still alive... and they would not hesitate to attack me if they knew I was back. But it might just also be a human. Maybe someone from the noble's office? Was there a problem with our purchase of the building, maybe? Merit had said she'd handled it, but sometimes things went awry...

Grabbing the latch that secured the door shut, I unhooked it and slowly pulled it open. The heavy rain got louder as I opened the door, and was met by a hooded figure. One I instantly recognized thanks to the glowing eye hidden under a bandage.

"Light..." I whispered as my heart fell.

We were caught. Great.

"Rennalee. Can I come in? It's cold," Light asked with a smile.

I heard Lilly groan behind me, but I didn't know what else to do... so I simply nodded and stepped back. There was no point trying to hide Lilly now, since Light could probably sense Lilly and smell her too.

Light entered the house, taking off her hood as she did. I waited a moment, expecting Less or someone else to step up the stairwell to join her... but no one came. I peered out a bit, enough so that the heavy rain fell upon my head and shoulder, but I saw no one else around. In fact the street looked rather empty, though not too surprising thanks to the storm.

"I'm alone, Renn," Light said.

Oh...? Really?

"Should I be thankful?" Lilly asked with a tense voice as I shut the door.

Light giggled as she walked deeper into the house. "And hello to you too, Lilly."

Hurriedly latching the door and locking it, I turned and went back to the front room. I took my hat off as I walked past Light, so I could properly put myself somewhat between the two. I had absolutely no idea what Lilly or Light would do, and the last thing I wanted was for anyone to die or get hurt. Though if I'd be able to actually stop either of them was up to debate... not only was Lilly very fast and deadly, Light was a powerful saint. But I decided to try anyway, if it came to that.

"Whew... I like it when it's stormy, since it lets me wear hoods and whatnot, but it gets so stuffy," Light said as she reached up to peel back the layer of bandaging she had wrapped around half of her face, as to hide her glowing eye.

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Lilly glanced at me, and I noted the look of worry on her face. I nodded gently at her, hoping to tell her I understood and was on guard too.

"What're you doing here?" Lilly asked, rather bluntly.

Light didn't say anything for a moment as she tugged a tuft of hair out from under one of the bandages, and once she seemed comfortable with the state of her hair and head she smiled and nodded at Lilly. "I came to see you two, of course? I'll have you know this is my third attempt, I got caught the other two times!" Light said, sounding a little too happy over such a thing.

"Caught...?" I asked.

Light gestured lightly at Lilly. "I know she's banished, and so isn't supposed to be here. So I didn't want to let anyone else know she was here, so I wanted to come alone. Well... sadly when you surround yourself by half-competent people, sometimes keeping secrets like this is a tad difficult," Light said.

Lilly sighed, rather loudly. "She must have had a prophecy and known all along," Lilly said as her shoulders slumped a little, as if in defeat.

I frowned as I glanced at Light, who simply smiled warmly at Lilly as she watched the owl go and sit back down at the table.

There were three chairs, since Merit sometimes came here with me, but honestly I wasn't in the mood to just... sit down and go back to chatting all nonchalantly. Wasn't this serious...? Lilly being caught here in Lumen meant she could get banished. From the Society as a whole, not just from this city.

I knew deep down Lilly didn't care about that. But I did. If she got banished because of me...

"It's okay, Renn. I have no intention to tell anyone about this, and in fact would like it if you kept it a secret that I was here too, if you would," Light then said.

"Hm...?" I didn't like the sound of that. My tail twitched a bit, and I flinched.

I'd not hidden it when opening the door. Stupid of me. What if it had been a human? I was growing far too comfortable lately. Maybe it was the stress? Why hadn't I hid it?

"Secret from whom?" I asked as I swatted my tail that was coiling and swaying wildly. Stupid thing was going to get me in trouble if I wasn't careful.

"Everyone? I'd not mind people knowing you and I met in a secret little place far from anyone else, Renn, but my doing so with Lilly would result in the spread of terrible rumors!" Light said happily, as if from a joke.

Lilly made a weird noise, a mix of a scoff and laugh, which made me smirk happily for a moment. That had been a cute sound! I'd not heard it from her before!

"So...? What are you here for? If you're here for dinner you're out of luck, we already ate," Lilly said, and I could tell she was trying to not smile beneath her scowl.

My smirking grew at that, I wondered if Light had heard the lie or not. We'd in fact not eaten yet.

"Hm... how long have you lived here Lilly...? It's so barren! Even for you," Light ignored her question as she glanced around.

Lilly dropped a half-closed fist on the table, though not so loudly it banged. Light ignored her as she walked over to the table and pulled back a chair... the one I'd been sitting in earlier. She sat down, with a gentle grace you'd expect from someone dubbed a saint, and went and crossed her arms on the table... as if about to negotiate or something.

Great. That meant she was here for a reason, wasn't she? Vim wasn't going to like this...

Walking around Light, I went to the last chair. I sat in it, and immediately noticed it was cold. Why'd she have to take mine?

"I'm only here to keep an eye on her while Vim is gone. I'll leave once he's back," Lilly then said with a small nod to me.

Light nodded with a knowing frown. "Makes a lot of sense... not that you're a child who needs such a thing, Renn, just that Vim cherishes you is all!" Light said.

"What...? Is that how people would normally take such a thing? That I'm like a child who needs guidance or something?" I asked Lilly. Was that why Vim always tried to leave me under someone's watchful eye when we were separated...!?

She smirked at me a little, which made me feel better. She had been on edge earlier, but was already calming down. "You run off, trying to make friends with everyone and everything you meet. What do you expect?"

Gosh! I wasn't that bad, was I!? Other than the events here in Lumen... well... No... I'd befriended Elisabeth too, and Roslyn... Lamp, too, maybe? And of course Fly... and even before that I'd gotten us involved in some human issues, such as with Melody and her family...

"Look at her, she's thinking of all the things she's done," Light said lightly.

"It's a long list," Lilly said.

I sighed at the two. Really! Weren't they some kind of enemies? Why were they teasing me as if longtime friends!

No... I shouldn't assume that. Lilly has known Light for hundreds of years. They hadn't ever gotten along, but that didn't mean they were outright enemies. Just as Vim didn't care for her, yet was still kind and cordial... so too might Lilly be.

Remembering that they've all known each other for so long that they were able to have such smooth conversations, even after not seeing each other for hundreds of years, made me swell with envy. Gosh I wished I had such a thing too, and knew what that was like. The feeling of inadequacy only became worse as I noticed both of them smiling gently at each other, without saying a word. As if long lost friends or something.

"So? Why are you here alone, then?" I asked. I was feeling a little left out all of a sudden.

Light giggled. "Now she's upset! Adorable."

"Careful. Tease her too much and she'll start to smile and squirm, blushing and stuff," Lilly warned.

"I won't!" I argued, though I felt a small smile start to tug at the corner of my mouth. Gosh now I was not just jealous, but feeling included too! Vim would have sighed something mightily had he been here right now!

Light happily smiled at me, and the room lit up from a bright flash. A heavy, ear fluttering, boom of thunder followed... and once it left Light nodded. "A monarch will attack me. While I'm heading up north to the Bell Church in a few days," Light said.

Lilly and I both sat up a little straighter, and I glanced at her... who glared at the saint. She didn't say anything though, even after a few seconds... so I spoke up first.

"Then... wait until Vim gets back? Before going north?" I suggested.

Light shook her head. "I can't. If it doesn't attack me, it will attack the village. And right now the only ones there to fight it are too old and weary, they'd not survive."

My tail went still as I realized exactly the purpose of her visit... and that Lilly had realized it from the get-go. My friend looked angry, but understanding. The way her eyebrows met as she frowned, and the way her large pupils glared at Light, told me full well Lilly's thoughts.

"Exactly, Lilly," Light said gently.

"Wait! Then... why'd you let Vim leave? If it was that serious?" I asked, trying to avoid the obvious.

"Because then something terrible would have happened. Far worse than a single village being lost to us. Something I cannot allow to happen, and will never allow for as long as I live," Light said simply.

Wanting to groan, I sat forward as to rest on the table... I suddenly felt a little sick.

"I'm sorry. I actually thought this to not happen now, but much later... but then I noticed your scent on Merit during their visit yesterday," Light said with a gesture to me.

So this was my fault!?

"It's not your fault, Renn. This is how saints are. They invite such disasters," Lilly said with a flat tone.

Light didn't say anything; she just sat there with a soft smile... obviously used to such comments. And she should be used to it...! She was basically here to ask Lilly and I to go with her, wasn't she? To fight this monarch? Why else would she be here? To come alone like this?

"This is very..." I groaned as I didn't know how to properly express how disgusting this was.

"Expected? Yes. You come back and bring with you chaos. Surprise, surprise," Lilly said, finishing for me.

Light didn't even flinch. "I come back to try and stop the chaos, Lilly. Thus why I am here. If you come with us, and help Renn and me, we can subdue the monarch and save many lives."

"Wait, wait...! This is actually happening?" I asked.

Light frowned at me, but it was Lilly who answered. "As I said, Renn. This is how saints are. They just waltz in and expect you to sacrifice your life for some greater good that only they can see. Very typical," Lilly said with a light shrug.

"You say that, yet look as if you've already willingly committed to it!" I said. She looked bored all of a sudden!

Lilly shrugged. "Because I must? If you're going to be involved, I have no choice. You're family."

My face flushed hot, and I quickly turned to look at Light. She sat up straighter, her glowing eye becoming brighter as I glared at her. "I don't like this!" I shouted at her.

"I can tell... You are both used to saints, and not one to cower... so what is it that is bothering you so, Renn?" Light asked gently.

"You should have told Vim! He could have hunted the monarch before leaving. He's able to track them," I said, holding her gaze. He could have just hunted and killed it on his way to Narli! She should have known that! She knew what Vim was capable of, or at least knew enough!

"As I said. If I had allowed that, something worse would have happened. We would have all died, not just a few."

My glare faltered... and I glanced at Lilly, who also now looked troubled.

"All...?" I asked with a whisper.

Light slowly nodded as she glanced down to her clasped hands. I now noticed they were trembling slightly, as if she was cold. It was a little chilly, but not anywhere near enough to shake in such a way. The storm was keeping it slightly warmer than usual. "All I can say on the matter is I am walking a very fine line right now. If we step too far off said line, all that we find is death. Utter destruction and death. I can't allow that, I just can't."

I didn't like the tone of her voice. That had not just been surety... it had been utter fear.

"Just what have you seen, Light...?" Lilly asked with a whisper.

The saint's eye dimmed a little, and then glowed brighter as she glanced up to meet Lilly's gaze.

"I can't say it. Not aloud. And not here and now. Just... please. If you two help me, we can handle this without any great cost. Without your help, well..." Light simply shook her head, going quiet.

Wanting to shout some more, I instead just groaned and rubbed my face. Had Witch been like this...? I didn't remember her being so frustrating! But of course, back then, I also had simply just believed every word she had said... I had followed her like a lost puppy, even into battle...

"Vim's not rubbed off on you enough, Renn. You should be angrier than this," Lilly said.

"Why aren't you?" I asked as I rubbed my eyes. They felt heavy all of a sudden.

"I am? But what do you want me to do about it? She can have all the schemes she wants, and likely does, but the reality is she's not lying. She doesn't need to in this manner. If she says a monarch will attack, and without us many will die, then it is simply a fact of life. If we don't help now, and people do end up dying... then well..." Lilly went quiet, as if she didn't want to say the rest.

"Then it'd be the same as us taking their lives ourselves," I finished for her.

Lilly only nodded.

"A tad dramatic. But yes," Light agreed.

"Why didn't you say anything earlier? Why not yesterday, when you noticed Lilly's smell on Merit?" I asked.

"I didn't want anyone else to hear about it," she said.

"Why?" Lilly asked.

"Because of whom they are. As you know Renn, though you might not Lilly, I'm not the only saint here right now. Not only is there Mono, but Glasses is here too. If they heard of what I have foreseen, they might have their own prophecies and dreams because of it. I can't risk branching paths right now," Light said.

"Glasses...?" I asked. I hadn't met them yet. Mono I'd met, and although I hadn't liked how she had tried to mess with Merit I had found her rather cute. She reminded me of my younger sister a little, though I wasn't outright sure as to why. Their looks and personalities weren't the same at all.

Light turned to tell me, but Lilly interrupted her. "Can't risk it because only your path is the only right one, is it?" Lilly said.

The saint simply smiled and nodded. "Mono and Glasses are not as... adept at filtering what they see, yet. And they're not the greatest at keeping secrets either. If they foresaw something terrible, even if it was something avoidable, they would tell everyone and cause panic. I can't afford such panic right now. Not yet."

Not yet...? "You mean to say such panic can and will happen later, when it's time?" I asked worriedly.

Light's eye dimmed a little as she gave me a sad look. "We have much to speak of, Renn... in time," she said softly.

"I don't want to talk if it's about such sad things as that," I groaned. No wonder everyone always felt on edge near her!

"Gah... enough! Just tell me what you need, before I simply pick Renn up and run away!" Lilly said, her frustration growing.

Light sat up straighter and nodded. "I need you, Lilly... and you Renn, with your spear. Or rather, Vim's. If you both accompany me, and you bring Vim's spear, we can avoid a lot of needless death."

I cupped my face and groaned, almost loudly enough to drown out the thunder that boomed angrily all around us.

Chapter 499 Vim – A Lumen's Calm, Distorted

Entering the Animalia Company building, I breathed a small sigh of relief as it looked to be completely normal.

I entered through the banking area, and the long lines of people waiting to talk to one of the tellers told me both how good business was in Lumen and how calm life was here. It was raining, a tad bit too much, so for it to still be so busy even with the weather told me how well the city was doing.

As I walked through the banking area, heading for the center of the building towards the houses, I passed a few of the members. They were all busy with work, and most didn't notice me, but the few who did like Pierre waved in greeting.

Usually a few of them would hurry over to talk to me, but I knew to them I had just been here. I'd only been gone a couple weeks, and for our kind that was well... The same as just not seeing each other for a day or so, in respective.

Pausing before an intersection, one that had a set of stairs and also led deeper into the building... I debated my next move for a moment.

Renn, should, be here. I'd really like to see her. I had a lot to say, and... Climbing a set of stairs, I decided to see if Gerald or Brandy were at their offices first before finding Renn. As much as I wanted to see her... I had something important I needed to do.

I had a small letter in my bag, one I'd written myself. To remind me so that I'd not forget. It concerned the young girl, Mistle, and her family. The letter had their names, where they lived, and some of the information pertaining as to the why I wanted to send them some money. I planned to hand it off to either Gerald or Brandy, whoever I saw first.

The poor girl had lost all of her immediate family. Because of unnatural causes. From a monarch, made by an inept god. She had extended family, particularly an aunt who had far more children than she could properly take care of, so I worried for the girl. I felt partly responsible for the tragedy that had fallen upon her small shoulders. If I'd done a better job... if I was doing a better job, such things wouldn't be happening anymore.

It was one thing for someone to suffer from a disease, war or famine... but to suffer by the hands of a creature beyond normalcy? Her and her family could have made decisions that altered normal events.

Made choices that affected the world, even. They could decide to support, or flee, a war. They could plan, or not plan, for a bad winter and for their crops to fail or their farm animals to suffer disease and die. They could even decide if they perished to simple mistakes, or accidents... such as falling off a cliff, or being bitten by a venomous snake. So all such things were natural, and things they could control... even if only by luck and chance. But to die by the hands of the divine...? A god's creation, likely made on a whim...? There was no control over that. No freedom. Not even luck was able to factor into play there.

And such a thing infuriated me beyond comprehension.

Rounding a corner, I was glad to find Gerald's office open, but not very happy to find him alone. He wasn't even paying attention as I walked in, so I knocked lightly on the door frame as I did.

Gerald sat up, frowned at me and then smiled. "Vim! Welcome back," he greeted me.

I nodded, relaxing a little at the way he was smiling. If he was smiling all happy like that, nothing bad must have happened while I was away.

"Got a minute?" I asked as I went to shut the door. I noted I didn't smell Renn in the room, though I did smell others. Brandy. Merit's noticeable and distinct smell was also in the air, which told me she'd been in here recently too.

"Of course," he stated as he promptly dropped his pen. He didn't put it away though, and simply left it on the desk before him. I knew that meant he was busy, so I decided to keep this short. I stepped into the room, debated taking a seat and chose against it.

"I'd like to ask you a favor, if you'd be so kind," I said.

Gerald frowned at me. "I've never been told I was kind before, but I can give it a shot."

I smirked at him. "I'd like you to do two things for me. First, I'd like to send a little money to this family," I said as I dug out the letter. I handed it off to him, and he was about to open it as to read it but hesitated. He glanced at me and I nodded that it was okay for him to do so. "Particularly the young girl, Mistle. I'd prefer it if you made sure she got a comfortable position, or job, once of age as well," I added. Actually she might even be old enough already. Today's era had kids entering the work force rather early, but I wanted her to spend some time with her family for a bit. She just experienced something traumatic.

"We always need more help," Gerald said lightly as he went to opening the letter, though did so very slowly and lazily. He was more focused on me than the letter.

I nodded. "I'd appreciate it. She's just a human, but..." I wasn't sure what to say, so instead just shrugged.

The bird seemed to understand. "I recently helped a destitute family myself, Vim. You'd be proud of me," he said.

"Oh?" I tilted my head at that.

He nodded. "Was near the port a few months ago. Not sure how it really happened... but I ended up watching a man get mugged. At least, the end of it. I watched as the sailors ran off, leaving him in the alley to bleed," Gerald said.

Ah... "One of the homeless or...?" I asked, wondering if it had simply been a matter of someone owing someone money or something.

"Yes. Before I knew it some kids had crawled out from wherever they had been hiding, trying to help the man to sit up. Turns out he's one of the victims of the disaster. The building he had lived in got destroyed during the chaos, and the children are the offspring of all those who died in it. They had all been elsewhere when it happened, on some kind of venture to the market. Basically he's the only adult left who even knows their names, and is trying to take care of them," Gerald said.

Oh boy. "I had thought you all set up relief for such people?" I asked. Hadn't Brandy overseen all of that? There was supposed to have been a massive effort to re-house everyone and even give financial aid too.

"We had. But thanks to how humans are, many slipped through the cracks. The children had no one to claim them, and they didn't know what to do with them... No parents, no ownership, no way to claim housing or financial aid. And so they were getting fed at least, until the aid programs stopped that is," Gerald said.

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

"They're lucky they didn't just get taken by slavers," I said.

"The man's efforts. Anyway... long story short I took them in. Well, turns out the man has fallen to the abuse of drugs. I think, because he knows the children are now safe and will be fine, he fell into depression or something. So now I have nine children of varying ages and education that I'm not really sure what to do with..." Gerald said with a sigh.

I smirked at him. "And no orphanage here to properly care for them," I said. Brandy had always wanted to make one here, but Gerald and others didn't want to allow it.

The bird frowned at me, knowing I had just blamed him for his own stress. "There are a few such institutions here in Lumen... but well..."

"Human ran. Likely full of abuse and neglect, yes," I said. Especially here in the land of coin.

He sighed and nodded. "Exactly... And the worst part is I'm getting small comments from other members about it," he said.

"How so?"

"They worry we have too many human members. Not workers, but members," he said.

Ah... I nodded. "Because of Renn," I said, understanding.

He gave me a gentle smile as he nodded again.

Basically those Renn invited, the ones that Merit had taken to watching over, were seen as genuine members. Not just workers. And as such, the non-human members were now considered a minority.

Especially if they all thought these kids would be considered members too, since brought in by Gerald. A quaint problem to have, in a sense. It wasn't as if it actually mattered... human members were members, but not given full right to voting or making important decisions. Though it did possibly increase the odds of something bad happening, such as being betrayed.

"I hope you didn't let Renn know about them," I said.

He blinked and shook his head. "Don't think so...? Your wife has been busy. If she's not with Light she's off doing whatever with Merit or those humans," he said.

Although upset at hearing her being with Light was considered not just a normal thing, but an expected thing, I was glad to also hear she had been spending time with Merit and the humans. Better they than Light, any day.

Still... "Well... I'll let Brandy know too, about the kid. It's not pressing, if you'd rather just give her some money that's fine," I said. I wasn't going to force the issue, if they were already having issues. Even if I would have much rather preferred the alternative. Money didn't last forever, after all. A good job, in a good setting such as here at the guild, was far more valuable. Money on its own usually caused more problems than it solved, honestly. Here she'd safe, earn money with her own labor and thus feel more confident about it, and to top it off it'd ensure she'd live a full life.

Gerald slowly nodded. "Sure...? You must have gotten side-tracked then, if you're doing this for some humans. May I ask what happened?"

"They were attacked by a monarch. And thus the rest of my request... I'd like you to keep an ear out for rumors. Gossip," I said.

He slowly lowered the letter, which he had opened but hadn't read yet, and studied me. "Gossip of...?" he asked wearily.

"Monsters. Monarchs. Miracles."

The bird closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I see."

I nodded, and knew I didn't need to specify. Gerald was old enough to know the meaning of my words.

There were monarchs on the loose. I wanted to hunt them, so he needed to help me find them. And the best way to do that, other than me just... running around everywhere, was for him and those he oversaw to start taking note of rumors. Of things the sailors or traveling merchants heard in bars and inns. In the beds of prostitutes and amongst the whispers in a church before a sermon.

I'd be asking the same of Brandy, and even Light, once I saw them.

"Um... can I ask what happened, Vim?" Gerald asked carefully.

"I ran into a monarch. One in the middle of feasting on a human family."

He flinched. "That's not good. She survived then? This girl?"

I nodded. "Not good at all. And particularly odd... why do you look like you just ate something sour?" I asked. The man had half-closed eyes, as if being beset by a sudden headache.

"Because I just realized I likely have to be the one to tell you... um... well..." Gerald glanced up, looked away, and then looked back at me.

My mind dulled a bit as I realized he was struggling to tell me something. Hesitant. Which could only mean one thing.

"What happened...?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"Well... Light left. To go north for a bit. To the Bell Church and stuff," he said quickly.

Oh...? I relaxed a little. Thank goodness.

Before I could really enjoy the relief though, Gerald continued. "She took Renn with her. She had foreseen them encountering a monarch on the way and..."

I slapped my hand over my face with such force it silenced him. The sound rung my ears, which meant it was ringing his too, as I groaned and squeezed my own face.

By my parents I am going to bury Light alive!

After a few moments of not breathing... I lowered my hand and found Gerald opening and closing his mouth. He was trying to pop his ears, likely because I'd just made them ring.

"Sorry Gerald," I apologized.

He shook his head, blinking quickly. "I'm fine. I think. I uh... I'm sorry, Vim. I should have told you right away, figured you knew."

Obviously not. Great. "When'd they leave?"

"Yesterday. Not long after sunrise."

Knowing Light they had taken a lot of her people, and supplies and whatnot. Light never traveled lightly. So they were likely escorting wagons and carts, and as such were not even half way there yet. I'd be able to catch up to them promptly... as long as I left now.

"Do you happen to know the finer details?" I asked.

"Brandy was told more about it. I'll be utterly honest Vim... I've been avoiding Light and her people. She moved in not too long ago, so..."

Right... I couldn't blame him for that. I would do the same in his shoes.

But still... "Where's Brandy?" I asked.

"Probably resting. I'd check her room, or her office," he said.

"I'll do just that then. Thank you Gerald, I'll probably leave right away then. They might need my help," I said as I headed for the door.

"Figured. Safe travels, Vim."

Leaving his office, I tried not to rush too quickly as I hurried to find Brandy. I'd speak with her, then leave immediately.

I knew, likely, that Renn wasn't alone. She had Lilly, or at least should have her. Though Lilly would be forced to keep a distance... and that might put undue risk to them all...

"Though odds are Light knows I'll catch up to them in time," I whispered.

Light would do that. She'd take Renn with her, to ensure I'd hurry to their aid. Celine would have done similar. That was how they tried to manipulate me... by making me act without telling me outright of what they wanted me to do. By moving the people around me, since they couldn't move me myself.

As I hurried to find Brandy... I tried my best to ignore the growing seed of doubt I was trying to keep hidden away.

But at this point it wasn't even a seed anymore. It wasn't even a bunch of weeds and trees.

It was the whole bloody forest.

Another monarch...? So soon...?

"Gods..." I groaned in disgust.

Chapter 500 Renn – A Monarch's Sensation

Walking slowly, I couldn't help but grin at the moment.

We were about half way to the Bell Church, in the dense forests north of Lumen. There were two wagons, rather big ones, and nearly a dozen of us walking alongside them.

Light was sitting on one of the wagons behind me, and as such most of her people were there with her. Martin, the son not the father, was guiding the first wagon. He was oddly alone, which made me wonder if Light's people didn't like him much.

Though it might be our fault. We were walking right in front of his cart, a bit to the side of it but still within earshot of it.

"What do you think is so special about it?" Merit asked as she studied Vim's spear.

I was walking a little behind her, so as to not get accidentally bumped or poked by it. Lilly though didn't seem to care or worry, she was walking right up next to Merit as she too studied it. "It's really sharp?" Lilly suggested.

"That doesn't make it special, not really. Think of how strong monarchs are, or even gods? How does something just being sharp let you slay gods?" Merit asked.

"I don't think that's the right way of looking at it, myself," I said.

The two glanced back at me with frowns. "What do you mean?" Lilly asked.

I gestured at the two. "I mean... we know Vim used it to slay gods and monarchs. But... he does that without it too? Are you sure it's not just a tool he uses because it can withstand his strength? Maybe it's not that the spear can kill monarchs and gods, but rather that it can survive Vim's ridiculous abilities. It won't break or snap when he uses it, thus why he wields it," I reasoned.

The two slowed a bit as they glanced at each other... and then they both looked back at the spear Merit held. "That makes a lot of sense..." Merit mumbled.

I smirked at them as even Lilly nodded, seemingly agreeing with me.

"That means it might not really be much help against this supposed monarch, though," Merit then said as she handed it off to Lilly.

Oh...

I paused a moment, frowning at that realization.

Right... Light had said the spear would help us kill the monarch which was supposed to attack us tomorrow. But... if the spear itself wasn't really special, other than its sturdiness and sharpness, then...

Lilly spun the spear a bit, and then it came to a stop on her shoulder. She rested it there, point upward, as if she was just some random town's guardsman on patrol.

Studying her, and how comfortable she was with such a weapon, I wondered if my earlier assumption was correct.

Glancing behind us, past the first wagon and Martin who looked tired, I noted the distant looks from hooded figures near the second wagon.

They were scared of Lilly.

Enough so to keep their distance from her.

Looking back ahead, I sighed a little.

I knew the reason they were slightly scared of her. Lilly was spoken of with a whisper even amongst the members here, on this land. So I could only imagine the kind of stories and rumors that were about her amongst the people who had left to the other land. To them she was someone to be wary of. To be on guard with.

Which was insulting, since she had joined as to help protect them.

And Merit wasn't much better. She had shocked Mono, the young saint who had returned with Light, and now it seemed she was being treated with the same respect that Lilly was receiving. The type that didn't feel like respect at all, that is. It wasn't hard to fault them for putting up barriers, since I understood it from their perspectives. Lilly was a known troublemaker from the past. And so had Merit been. And then they find out that Lilly was banished from Lumen...? And Merit shocks a saint? Strongly enough to hurt her? Couldn't blame them for being wary at all...

What to say or do about it, I wonder...? Merit and Lilly didn't care if they were seen as friendly, but they also didn't care if they were seen as dangerous either. It made me wonder if I was making some kind of mistake, or doing a disservice by not... keeping the peace between them all.

But...

"Renn?"

My ears shifted under my hat as I glanced at Merit, who had slowed a bit as to walk beside me. Lilly too was on my other side. Now that they weren't messing with the spear, they didn't mind drawing closer to me.

I smiled at my friends, and decided to just let it be. It didn't seem to bother Merit or Lilly, so I suppose I shouldn't let it bother me too much. Even if it did, deep down.

"What is it?" I asked, since the two seemed to just be staring at me.

"Tired?" Merit asked.

"Not really...?" I said with a shake of the head.

"She's not been sleeping much," Merit said to Lilly.

"Sap was the same," Lilly whispered.

"You two act as if I was lazy before," I said with a huff, and glanced at Martin. The man still looked bored, but I knew he could hear us.

The two noticed my glance, and they both sighed at me. "I guess it's just us seeing her as a cat, because I guess she wasn't, huh?" Merit said.

"I wouldn't know...? I only got to spend a couple days with her back in the beginning, unlike you," Lilly said.

"Who's surprised over that? I'm way more fun," Merit said.

"Fun...? Fun to throw maybe," Lilly said with a scoff.

Smiling at the two as they went to bickering, I glanced around at the forest we were walking through.

It was midday, and thankfully not raining, but it was still wet. Cold. Damp. But not the kind I was used to back home up north. This wetness was cold, but not so bad it chilled bone. Instead it was just... annoying. I even felt a little too warm under my clothes, making me consider possibly taking a layer off in a little bit.

Though was that because it was actually warm... or was it because of the hearts I've now absorbed, I wonder?

Glancing down at myself, I touched my stomach and wondered if the small monarch heart I'd swallowed was absorbed or not yet. It worried me a little to think that I hadn't done so fast enough... and well... lost it, I guess.

It was a strange thought, but I had to think of it. After all it was what happened after you ate something. Or did a heart somehow not get digested...?

"Now she looks hungry," Merit commented.

I flinched. "I kind of am, to be honest..." I admitted.

"I'm not going to hunt. Last thing I need is to leave you all and for the monarch to show up. Vim would give me back my wings, and then tear them off again, if that happened," Lilly said with a huff.

"We brought food, idiot. What do you think those wagons are carrying?" Merit asked with a gesture behind us.

"The weak?" Lilly said.

Merit smirked at that, and I heard some clothes shift nearby. I glanced out the corner of my eye, keeping my head still, and saw Martin shift uncomfortably on his seat.

He'd definitely heard that.

"Speaking of the monarch... are we so sure it'll show up tomorrow and not today?" I asked.

"No. But it's not like we can do anything about it. Just stay on guard," Lilly said.

"We could have done something. We could have not come," Merit said.

Glancing down at my small friend, I wondered just how serious her little comments were. She's said such a thing a few times since we had left Lumen, though had not hesitated to join us once told of our task.

Would she have come had I not been involved, I wonder...? Merit was one of the main guards at Lumen, like Reatti, but did that mean she'd go out of her way to help protect Light and the rest...? I honestly wasn't sure, and it was kind of upsetting that I didn't know. Merit was a prickly person, but I didn't think she was so cruel as to abandon others out of pure spite. Yet... could I blame or fault her for not wanting to risk her life against a monarch...? That was not some small task. It wasn't as if we were going to be attacked by brigands... we were talking a monarch. An actual monarch.

"Letting Light get eaten would have been funny, but we'd still have to deal with it eventually," Lilly said.

"Vim can't be too far behind us. I'm worried the timing, what with this happening while he's gone," Merit said.

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"Then at least we know if we all die and get eaten here we'll be avenged, yeah?" Lilly said simply.

"Go get eaten, bird. I refuse to be something's snack," Merit said.

"That's all you'd be anyway. Just a snack," Lilly said back.

Unable to contain it, I laughed... which made both Lilly and Merit glance at me. Thankfully neither looked offended, particularly Merit.

"Speaking of eating... has Vim ever cooked a monarch for you, Renn?" Lilly then asked.

My hat shifted a little as my ears squirmed. "Hm...? No. He's uh... mentioned that before, though," I said. I didn't want to mention he had brought up the idea of eating Miss Beak's tongue, though had decided against it for some reason.

"I've only eaten two. Vim's weird about it," Merit said.

"Wait what? Is this some kind of neat thing I'm missing out on?" I asked.

Lilly lifted her head, smirking proudly as she did. "I've eaten several."

What!? "What do they taste like...?" I asked, fascinated.

I'd never thought of eating them. When Witch and I had hunted the few we'd chased down, she had treated them with such reverence the idea of eating them hadn't even been a thought!

"They taste like normal animals, Renn. There's nothing special about them," Merit said.

"Hey! It's still important!" Lilly argued.

Merit shrugged at her, as if she didn't care if it was important or not.

"Important how...?" I asked. Vim's said it was difficult to prepare a monarch's flesh and bone, since they degraded so quickly after death. And I knew they were special, since I myself carried pouches made from such leather. The pouches were special; they were somehow able to hide things from knowing eyes. Such as a monarch's heart from a saint. Yet Vim had never said if eating a monarch, in that way meant anything or did anything... but maybe it did...? If their skin, their leather, had such affects maybe so too did their flesh?

"It's a sign of Vim's trust!" Lilly though said, thumping her chest with a balled fist as she did.

Oh...? I see. She was seeing it not as important or special in a literal sense but a figurative one. It wasn't what was being eaten, but the how and why.

"I see," I said with a small nod.

"Nothing to see, Renn. Lilly just got lucky and was near him more than us during such moments. Nothing more," Merit said.

"Just how many monarchs has Vim slain?"

I tilted my head as both Lilly and Merit did the same at me... and then we all turned to look at the speaker. Martin sat up straighter, looking slightly worried as we all stared at him.

"Um... well... I mean..." he began to stammer, panicking, and I couldn't help but smile at him. At least he tried!

"You're Martin's son, right?" Lilly then asked.

"Huh!? I uh. Yes. I am...!" Martin nodded quickly.

"He had a spine. Why are you so on edge?" Lilly asked.

Merit scoffed and then laughed, rather boisterously, and I couldn't help but smile too. Lilly was so... well, Lilly, sometimes!

"Um... Well!" Martin tried to speak, but seemed to not want to do so while Merit laughed like mad.

"I have no idea, Martin, and honestly I'm not sure how anyone could know. Though Light might have a good idea at least," I said. She had said her mother had kept very good records of Vim's achievements, even the ones before he joined the Society... and the ones he had tried to hide from them. She had said most of those records were at Telmik.

"Light...? How would Light know, Renn? She didn't even join until the wars started, and all the monarch hunts were before that," Lilly said, sounding almost offended I'd even say such a thing.

I frowned at her and shrugged. "Celine kept records, supposedly? Figured Light would know then."

"Feh," Lilly waved that off, as if it wasn't worth even considering.

"The fact that you don't know, Renn, tells us that no one does. It's foolish to even try and assume. Vim's been around a long time, and was hunting monarchs even before the Society was a thought in Celine's dreams. The legends say there were more monarchs than people back during those times, so... well... do the math," Merit said.

"More than us...?" Martin whispered.

"I don't believe those legends. They also say the gods had huge kingdoms in the skies. Yet we're also told there were only a handful? Why have huge kingdoms if there's only a few of you? Waste of space," Lilly said.

Oh! Vim had mentioned those floating kingdoms before...!

"You don't believe what's right in front of you either, doesn't make a difference," Merit said.

"So what do you believe then, Merit?" I asked.

She hesitated a moment, and Lilly snickered at her as she looked away from me... as if in shame. "It's not that I believe in the same thing as her! I just know better! She's too stupid to realize how she came to such a realization is all!" Merit said, defending herself.

Grinning at her, since she just admitted she had simply said such a thing as to make fun of Lilly and not because she believed otherwise was very hilarious to me. Why were they so at odds with each other, when in truth they were such good friends? It was like a game to them.

It made me want to play too.

"There weren't any monarchs on the other world," Martin then said.

The three of us slowed a bit as to glance at him. "Huh?"

He nodded and frowned at me. "It's why we went there, I guess. There's none left over there."

"You mean the lands you went to," Lilly clarified.

"Yeah. The other continent. Sorry, I just... call it that, I guess," Martin quickly apologized. I wasn't sure what to think of the difference in how I was treated compared to Lilly and Merit. A part of me was happy he wasn't scared of me, yet another part of me felt a little insulted all the same.

"Wonder how that works. Wouldn't you think it'd be this continent, the one Vim's running all over on, that would be empty first?" Merit wondered.

"Maybe it's tiny. Like an island," Lilly said, making a good point.

"It's not. It's huge, though uh... I don't know if it's actually bigger than here or not," Martin said quickly.

"Are there humans there too?" I asked. I'd heard there weren't, but I wanted to make sure.

"Nope? Weren't any of us either. We were the only things over there, other than the animals and bugs."

"That's weird. Maybe the place is sick or something and you all stupidly went to live on it. Cursed," Lilly said, nodding as if her idea made perfect sense.

Martin looked upset, but he didn't say anything as he glanced around... as if in hope to find someone to help him articulate why such a thing was ridiculous.

I wasn't going to be the one to help him. "Maybe that's why Vim took so long back then? He hunted them all?" I suggested.

Merit twitched, which I noticed Lilly noticed too. She glanced at me, and I gently nodded and flinched. Right. I shouldn't have said that in such a way. Merit faulted them for the fall of her kingdom. And rightfully so. Vim could have helped her, helped them all, back then... and he had been missing.

"Vim didn't linger at all...? In fact they tried to get him to stay, to help build the first city. He refused," Martin though spoke up, dispelling such a thought.

"Oh...?" Merit turned and perked up at that, blinking large eyes up at the knight.

He nodded with a frown. "I wasn't born then, of course, so... I could be wrong. But I remember hearing people complain about it," he said, going into more detail.

Reaching over I gently nudged Merit on the shoulder. She glanced at me, and I smiled at her. She gave me a tiny smile back as she nodded and then looked forward again.

How wonderful. I knew hearing such a thing had likely really touched Merit's heart. She, like I, knew what it meant for Vim to do such a thing. He had broken one of his own rules. He had chosen us over them, something he himself didn't believe he should do. He had turned down their need for help as to hurry back here, to help those he had known he had left behind.

"I've always wondered what would have happened if we had all just gone with them," Lilly mumbled.

"Would you have? Would you do it now, knowing what you do?" I asked.

"No. I'm just saying I've thought of it."

"She's a birdbrain, Renn. Her mind jumps all over the place, unable to focus on one thing long," Merit said with a huff.

"For someone who was just smiling all cutely, you sure are quick to spit poison!" Lilly said.

"Don't call me cute!"

"But you are!" I said, happily joining their little back and forth.

"Gah! Don't become like her, Renn!" Merit shouted as she pointed at me, likely noticing how eager I had been to accompany their little game.

"Too late. Cats may eat fish, Merit, but they perch up in trees all the time like us owls. We're more alike than you are!" Lilly said, happily teasing her.

Merit groaned and stepped away from us, as if we suddenly both stunk. "Vim said she's a type of cat that likes to swim! And cats can't and don't fly!" Merit argued.

"Neither can I anymore, so there!" Lilly said with a point at her back.

My smile faltered a bit, but I knew she had said it in good nature. But Merit groaned at it and reached up to rub her head, tugging at her thick hair as she did.

About to say something, to join in the fun once again... I went still as I felt something odd.

Stopping, I tilted my head as I wondered what it was I was feeling. Was that a tingle...? It almost felt as if the left side of my body had just gone numb... or maybe warm? Was something wrong with me...?

The horses and wagon walked past me, as Merit and Lilly kept teasing each other... and I heard a mumbled Martin's voice. He had asked what was wrong. But I ignored him as I turned and stared into the dense tree-line nearby.

Turning my body to face the trees, I realized the warm numbing sensation shifted. It went from my left side of the body... to the front. It was such a weird feeling, it was ticklish yet... oddly comforting all the same.

"It's here!"

I flinched as Light's scream echoed in my ears... and something roared in the distance. Something beyond sight, hidden in the forest... but close.

Too close.

And drawing closer.

"To arms!" Martin shouted as he jumped off the wagon... and I realized exactly what I was feeling.

This was what Vim said he felt. When he felt monarchs or saints, or those with hearts, wasn't it? If I focused... I could almost feel the heat. My body wasn't what was hot, or tingly, it was something else. My body was reacting to something before me. The feeling was akin to standing in front of a fire, or near a window covered in sleet and snow.

I turned as the feeling did. Following the tree-line, I searched for what I felt. What I knew was just beyond the trees. I could... sense it. Running. Circling us.

"Renn!" Merit shouted my name, and before I knew it she and Lilly were standing in front of me. A moment later, Martin was in front of them. He had a huge hammer looking weapon, and I couldn't help but praise the man. Even though he seemed so meek in front of Lilly and Merit, he was now standing between them and a monster.

I wanted to tell them I could sense it. Likely just as how Light was, and had. I wanted to tell them that it was running north along our path, and would likely cross it and round behind us. But right as I took a breath, the world became loud.

Before I could say anything... before anyone could, a creature roared. Loud enough to scare the horses. To scare the people around them. Even Martin flinched.

And I knew no one would fault him for doing so. Because the roar hadn't just been loud... it had been very understandable.

A loud declaration of intent. Of war. One telling us we were being hunted.

I hurriedly reached up to pull off my hat, though I didn't need to. The roar had been loud enough that I had heard it clearly... and even if I hadn't, it didn't matter.

It had been unmistakable.

One a little too familiar.

"Knew this would happen...!" Lilly mumbled as she gripped Vim's spear, readying herself.

"It's coming!" I shouted, as the tingling sensation grew stronger... and then a flash of red darted out onto the road in front of us. The horses panicked, and behind us I heard shouts and screams of shock at the sight of it... but I had no time to think anything else, I didn't even have time to properly register the creature because it ran straight towards us.

The monarch was here.