

## **Non Human 511**

### Chapter 511 Worthiness

I walked a bit behind Vim, but close enough I could reach out and grab him if I needed to.

I'd never say it aloud, and I knew Vim would never acknowledge it either, but I was stressed. Worried.

Unsure of myself.

And how could I not be...?

His whole village was gone. Not a single other survive had been found. And although Windle himself had not been harmed during the attack, he had watched with his own eyes his whole family get slaughtered. He had watched his village get burnt. His own mother set ablaze.

Watching such a thing happen hurt you somewhere one couldn't explain. Deeper than any wound of the flesh could.

I too knew that feeling. It was not a good one. It was the kind of feeling that made one... change.

And...

Groaning a bit, I reached over and grabbed Vim's shirt. I grabbed it at the back, and clung to it as we rounded a corner.

We were underneath the Cathedral. In Telmik. Although I had been banished, it had been for a reason I no longer was responsible for. I no longer had my wings, so...

"Vim..." I whispered his name as we headed down a quiet hallway, one I myself had never been down before.

It smelled like death.

"It is okay, Lilly," Vim said gently.

No. It wasn't. But I was glad he was willing to pretend it was.

Taking a deep breath, I firmed myself as Vim led me to a half closed door. I could hear shuffling of feet behind it, feet that went still when Vim knocked gently on the door.

"Ah, please come in!" Windle welcomed us, and my jaw clenched at the sound of his voice.

He sounded fine. Happy, even. Like always his voice was pleasant on the ears. Too pleasant. It almost sounded like a woman's.

Vim went ahead and gently opened the door... and once he did, my world went still.

Windle was standing across the room, having stood from a table. He too froze at the sight of me, and I went still as Vim stepped into the room.

I was almost dragged in with him, since I still clung to his shirt... but I held firm. His shirt tugged free from my grip, possibly ripping in the process, but neither I nor Vim noticed as he stepped aside... not even looking at Windle as he went to looking at something else.

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Vim messed with something on a counter, but I didn't have it in me to see what it was. All I could look at was Windle.

He looked healthy. At least, in the face. He was still tall and scrawny, as if he hadn't eaten enough. But he had always looked malnourished. But there was one glaring, obvious thing, which tore the entire idea he was fine out the window. Or rather, two obvious things.

I had already known they were gone. Vim had told me just before we had headed down these stairs. He had told me what Windle had done. What the fool in all his infinite wisdom had did.

Yet I hadn't believed it. Didn't want to. But here was proof. Before me was proof.

Windle had torn off his own wings.

"Windle... your wings..." I whispered as I entered the room.

Like me, Windle had nothing behind him. His large, dark, wings were gone. Completely. By the looks of the way his thin robe he wore fell upon him, he didn't even have little nubs like I did.

Windle without a word turned. At first I was offended, since I had thought he had looked away in shame... but instead he had stepped away. He walked over to where Vim stood, and he grabbed something. Something large. And long... and...

My stomach twisted as I stepped back, aghast over the wings he turned to face me with. They looked utterly huge in his arms, and so out of place it was ridiculous. He carried them over to me... and I felt my hands and toes clench up as I began to panic.

Was he about to offer them to me? Why? As if some sick joke? If he did...!

Windle then knelt down. I stopped breathing as my eyes went so wide they hurt as I glanced down... and watched him lay his wings at my feet.

"You would not join me in the skies... So instead, would you join me here on the ground?" Windle asked.

Without even thinking I flung a hand out and slapped him. Right across the face. I knew I had done it a tad too hard even before he fell over to his side, likely knocked out... and I didn't wait to hear Vim shout at me as I spun around and ran out of his room.

Running with all my might... I did everything I could to ignore the terrible panic filling me with dread.

He had not lost his wings during his village's attack. Vim had told me already. I had heard once we were here.

Windle had flown here. To deliver the message to Vim of what happened.

It was after he had lost his wings.

Purposefully.

With his own hands.

Pulled off.

Not because of some terrible mistake. Not because they had been burnt off and torn to shreds from war, as mine had. Not because he needed to do so to survive amongst humans. Not even because they weren't working properly, or some other benign reason.

He had torn them off for one singular purpose.

For me.

To join me on the ground.

Since we were all that was left.

"Lilly!" someone shouted my name, but I ignored them. I ignored them all... as I ran from the man who had just proved himself worthy... and had done so in a way that would torment me for the rest of my life.

He had gone to such extremes because I had forced him to. Because he, like me, knew we were the last. And thus knew he had to be good enough, to become good enough, to justify my affection and love. And he had done so in the only way he had known how.

I had forced him to this. Because I had spurned his affection before. Because I had thought him lesser. Because I had been too proud and foolish, blinded by my own hubris.

They were right all along.

I was Lilly of the Skies... not because I belonged to the sky, or claimed them... but instead because I stole them from everyone else.

Chapter 512 Vim's Pursuing Thoughts

Wrong path.

Staring at the river, raging so strongly that I couldn't even make out the bridge that had been flooded over, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Calm, Vim. Calm.

There were three main paths to the Bell Church from Lumen. One went along the coast, and was the longest. Then there was this one, the shortest path, but... well... like this river, it had hurdles. The kind that wouldn't be too difficult to face when on foot, but during moments of bad weather became like this. Impossible to pass with wagons, or horses.

Odds are Light had foreseen this, and thus had taken the middle path. The one that led deeper into the forest, but heading more towards the mountains than the ocean. I was off by a few dozen miles.

My fault. I had of course been in the rain and storms all this time, running in them, but like usual I paid little notice to them. I'd never been bothered by storms, of any kind or severity, so didn't really take them into account. I had simply taken my normal path that I'd take when alone, uncaring to consider I was following not Renn or myself... but a group of people. Many of who would be burdened or weak.

"A stupid mistake Vim," I chastised myself as I spun on a heel and ran away from the flooding river.

If someone died or got hurt because of this, I'll never be able to forgive myself...!

I couldn't feel a monarch. Not yet. But I knew better than to think that meant Renn was not in danger. If Light hadn't actually seen a monarch attack in her prophecies, then that meant she was scheming something else. Either way, monarch or scheme, Renn was in trouble. Trouble she wasn't really prepared to deal with.

The only reason I wasn't panicking outright was because of her company. Renn didn't just have Lilly with her, but Merit as well.

Light had left a few of her people at the guild building, in Lumen, to compensate Merit's lack of presence. People like Reatti, who were not just stronger than normal but able to handle situations if they needed to. I was a little... disturbed by Light's obvious, so called unanticipated, takeover of the Animalia Company, but it wasn't my place to do anything about it. It was Gerald's and Brandy's job to handle that drama. I could only help once they actually asked for it... and so far, neither had.

Basically Light's flagrant intrusion into the company has given Renn extra security and protection, in the form of Merit.

Between Merit and Lilly, and Light and her people... Renn actually stood a very good chance at defeating this supposed monarch.

Especially if it's the same type I'd recently encountered myself. If the same god who had made Pinchie and that lizard had made this one too... then odds are it was just a larger, slightly stronger than normal, animal. And although it would be dangerous, utterly so, it wasn't a creature that normal people couldn't handle if given the right tools and experience.

Lilly and Merit were both hardened non-humans. Renn, too, had her own share of experience in hunting monarchs. Plus she's been training with me, Lilly and the rest... and had recently absorbed her ancestor's heart...

"She'll be okay..." I whispered as I realized I was once again trying to sell myself on the idea that Renn would be alright.

She had to be.

There was no way Light would willingly take Renn into such peril. She wanted our child. Our daughter. The saint to come.

Risking Renn's life before that child even had a chance to be born...? I couldn't believe it... but...

"Their prophecies are always wrong in the worst ways...!" I groaned as I ran off the path and into the forest. I ran through it, until I reached a section of hills that weren't as densely forested as the rest of the area. I ran along them, and over them, as I hurried to where I expected them all to be.

Why'd it feel like I was running in a panic so often lately?

Because I have been.

Glaring at the world that was a blur around me, I picked up my pace as I tried to ignore the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Why was the world falling apart around me...? Monarchs. A possible god. Prophecies. Light returning...!

The hills ended and the dense forest returned. I ran between two trees, ones too dense to usually do so. Branches shattered and broke, flying all over the place as I ran through thick forestry. I didn't slow. I kept running, even as I ran through bushes and brushed against trees to do so.

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If this all goes bad I'll break everything. I swear it.

"Stop, Vim," I whispered at myself as I leapt over a small creek. I scared a deer that had been drinking from it, but didn't glance at it to check if I'd hurt it or not as I kept running.

There was no point growing angry. Not yet. Wait until it's time. Until it's proper to do so.

Right now I was simply grasping at straws. To keep my fury in check. Because I knew it wasn't like the world was doing this intentionally.

I wanted to blame it, as if it was. As if some invisible hand was messing with my fate, but it simply wasn't possible. It wasn't true. I was using an easy excuse as a scapegoat, just so I could not admit the fact that... well...

The reason life had been so simple for so long lately, without such strife and chaos, was because I had been indifferent all this time.

I wept when members died. I felt terrible when I failed them... but I got back up and kept on going. Because I tried the best I could, in my own way while not breaking my rules or the ones I'd agreed to. It hurt and bothered me when tragedy occurred... but I knew such things were the way of the world. A location being lost? A kingdom falls? A member gets sick and dies? Natural disasters? A monarch rampages somewhere in the world...?

All typical things. To be expected. Just a part of life. A part of the world. For not just me, but everyone.

It's just... now...

Now there was someone special. Someone I didn't want to be affected by such chaos. Someone I wanted to keep safe, and at a distance from all those terrible things.

And she should be. And not just because I loved her, and wanted and should keep her safe. But Renn was no safer from such tragedies than anyone else. She was still a normal person. A non-human, sure...

thick in the blood? Of course. She had even absorbed a heart... but she was still normal. She was still bound to and stuck in the laws of this world. She was no god. Not a monarch.

Not me.

Gritting my teeth, I ran past a bear. It had gone utterly still at my approach, and hadn't even moved as I ran past it. The thing had been huge, far bigger than me even with it on all fours. Normally I'd have laughed at seeing such a large creature go still from fear and shock, as typically a human would do such a thing instead upon meeting it in the woods, but I was in no mood for such absurdity.

As I ran I slowly calmed down. I stopped outright panicking over the idea of Renn being killed or something, and instead focused on the comforting truths I'd been ignoring.

Celine and the rest have had prophecies about Renn. I didn't want to admit such a thing, but here and now it helped ease my mind.

They had foreseen us together. And the children which would come from such a bonding.

That meant, in theory, Renn would have a long life. A healthy, and hopefully happy one.

So I shouldn't panic. I shouldn't worry.

Yet I was.

"Come on...!" I groaned at myself. Not that I wasn't running fast enough, but rather because I was acting like a child.

I was far too old to be so...

So what...?

Running along a new creek, I felt oddly uncomfortable as I realized I wasn't even sure what to call my current state.

Was I being a baby? Weak? Self-righteous, maybe? Selfish, since the only reason I was really upset was because Renn was in danger? What about all the others...? Lilly? Merit? The rest? Should I not feel for them too, they who will be at even greater mercies than Renn will be? Since they won't have me right next to them as often?

Or was I just being a hypocrite. Only caring finally because it was someone I loved who was at risk?

All of the above?

What would my mother say... if she saw me now...?

I slowed a little, since I actually remembered the exact face she'd have at this moment. That scowl. That look of disappointment, as she waited for me to do better.

To be better.

To stand tall, where and when others won't...

Renn had that same look lately. Back before leaving Lumen, to go check on Narli, I had been able to tell Renn had held back in her complaints. I knew she had so much to say and ask. So much she wanted to talk about with me... concerning so, so much. But she didn't. She held back, for my sake.

Renn was keeping her own feelings and fears inside, because she was being gentle with me.

As if I was some kind of child.

"You'd have liked her, mother," I whispered as I thought of Renn. The two were different, yet so similar.

The creek eventually turned, but I didn't follow it. Instead I emerged onto a new road. A larger one, one that was big enough for wagons and carts... and sure enough, in the damp and slightly muddy dirt path I saw the indents of wheels. Ones not too old. Maybe a dozen hours or so old, judging by the way the curves of the dirt and mud had sloped and softened from the rain.

Found them. Had to be them. This path was not frequented at all by humans. It was considered too out of the way. It didn't even go very far, since it led to a now abandoned village. There were only a few farmsteads out here.

Hurrying down the road, I picked up my pace and tossed my thoughts... again, out of my mind.

I could feel it now. Distant. Ahead of me. Probably a mile or so away.

My steps grew louder as I ran harder, hurrying to the sensation.

That was either the monarch, Light, or Renn. Or another divine power entirely.

Didn't matter.

One way or another, whoever or whatever it was... would lead me to where I really wanted to go.

To Renn's happiness.

Now if I'll get there peacefully, or by wading through gore... well...

Wouldn't be the first time it, would it?

#### Chapter 513 Renn – A Red Monarch's Death

The thing leapt off the wagon, breaking wood and metal as it did so. It landed a few dozen feet away, off the road, and onto the grass nearby. It roared in defiance a bit as it spun around, its puffy ball of fur at the end of its tail danced wildly in the air behind it as it glared at us.

Holding my sword's handle firmly, I gulped as I stared at the red cat. It was about the size of a small bear, but it was made larger by its huge puff of fur and fuzz all over its body. It had a crazy mane of red, the kind of red that was... too bright to be real. Not even its blood, leaking from arrows and cuts on its sides, was as bright a red in color. It almost looked fake. What predator was so brightly colored? It was if it was mocking the world around it. As if it was saying that it didn't need to blend in with the environment. That it wanted the whole world to see it, at all moments. As if it was saying its existence was so powerful, so strong, it was the king of the world and none of us could do anything about it.

Yet as loud it roared, as much as it drew eyes, and as strong as it acted... we were still holding our own against it.

Lilly huffed as she stepped forward, raising the spear again. She had been the one to get it off the wagon just now, since it had seemed to outright ignore all the arrows that Light's people kept shooting at it. She had stabbed it in the side.

Glancing down, around our feet, I frowned at the dozens of arrows everywhere.

How come none of them could pierce its skin? The cuts, bleeding profusely on it, weren't just from Lilly and the spear. I myself had cut it, in its rear right flank. I had stabbed it with my sword as it had focused on Lilly and Martin. My sword had dug deep, rather easily too. As had Merit's own sword, and even Martin's hammer had broken its skin.

Maybe it was the tools. My sword, though not special like Vim's spear, was still made by him. Steel, not iron.

"Focus, Renn!" Merit shouted at me as she hurried up next to me, and I blinked as I looked up... and found the monarch had moved. I panicked at first, expecting it to attack me or near me, but instead found it running away from us... to the other group.

"Shoot!" Lilly darted off first, chasing after the monarch as it charged at Light and her group. Martin was there at least, but he was hurt. And the few others who seemed capable, or even willing, to fight at all didn't look very capable from here.

All this time we'd been trying to keep its focus on us. Since Light and the rest weren't as capable. Martin had gotten hurt rather quickly in the fight, and so had retreated a bit to the other group but it seemed to have finally backfired. Maybe there were just too many of them in too close a huddle, and it had drawn the monarch's attention and wrath.

Several people shot arrows at the monarch as it charged at them, and Martin readied his large hammer-like weapon, but I wasn't able to see the result of its attack. It leapt out at Martin, snarling as it did, and I was at an angle that only showed me the monarch's rear and back as it fought Martin.

Running over to help, I cursed my slowness when Lilly got there first. She didn't hesitate a beat. She jumped straight up onto the monarch, causing it to roar in surprise as she went and stabbed the spear down into its back.

The monarch continued to roar as Lilly kept pushing the spear deeper. The kind of roar that hurt, and not just my ears. I flinched, but powered through the pain in my bones as I hurried forward. Lilly was still

on the thing's back, trying to push the spear deeper into the monarch... likely trying to stab it in the heart.

It spun, roaring as it did, as it tried to spin around to swipe at Lilly. It was surprisingly agile and limber. It jumped a bit, spun around and swiped at her with a huge paw. It hit her, sending Lilly off its back. Before the monarch landed on the ground, it spun back around and landed on all fours... with the kind of quickness that seemed almost impossible.

I arrived right as it stood back up, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Lilly roll and flail on the ground nearby. The spear was still stuck in the thing's back, and it was trying to look behind itself, likely in an attempt to see the spear and why it was hurting.

The way it acted was as if it was a basic creature... yet then during moments like this it seemed to have a hint of intelligence. It looked as if it was about to bend and contort, as to bite at the spear and to tug it out. Yet before it could, I reached it.

Swiping my sword at the thing's face, since it was distracted, I kept running past it even as my sword connected. I felt the metal hit flesh and what felt like solid stone. The thing's bones were as hard as rock. Yet that stone bled. It hissed in pain as I ran past, after dragging my sword along its face for a few heartbeats.

I didn't even wait to see if I had done any real damage or not. I ran straight for Lilly, who was struggling to get up off the ground. At least she was moving. She was alive. She looked in one piece.

Martin wasn't.

Skidding to a stop, I felt my heart skip a beat at the sight. The large hammer was a few feet away, and the hand that still held it was not where it was supposed to be. There was a trail of blood, left behind by Martin who was now near the other wagon. Being pulled back by Light and the others.

The sight made me realize just how quickly it could happen. The monarch was that deadly.

A roar made me spin back around, and ready my sword. I hadn't needed to though. Merit was now the one standing on the monarch's back. She had a hold of the spear, though unlike Lilly who had tried to push it deeper instead tugged it free. The monarch flinched and hissed out with a shriek of pain, probably the worst one yet, as Merit jumped off its back before it could flail around and swipe at her as it had Lilly.

Merit landed nearby, and turned to look behind us. "Get up birdbrain!" she shouted.

"Trying...!" Lilly's voice sounded strained. I didn't like the sound of it.

She was hurt.

And we had no time to wait for her.

The monarch rushed towards us, or rather towards Merit. I didn't go to stand between her and the creature, because I knew better now than to think Merit actually needed such help. For such a tiny thing she was strong. Probably as strong as I was.

But I still stepped forward. I still helped. I'd not abandon my friends and family.

The monarch had its full attention on Merit, as if it knew the spear she held was the main cause for its pain and concern. Again it showed its intelligence as it roared at her, and went to trying to swipe at her with its huge paws. It seemed afraid to charge at her too haphazardly, opting to attack with its claws instead of teeth as it had just done to Martin.

Merit, likely thanks to how small she was, swiftly dodged the swipes. She ducked and danced under and around them, backpedaling as she did. The spear she held scraped against the grassy ground as she did, the point pointed down instead of up. A part of me feared the spear accidentally cutting her more than the monarch's claws, which felt ridiculous but too real.

I didn't leave Merit to her own devices. I hurried forward and went straight to the thing's rear. The tail was akin to a cat's, somewhat like my own, but at the very end of it was a huge bundle of fuzz. It was dancing and flailing around like crazy, like a fast flying bug zooming back and forth in the air. I focused on the ball of fuzz and swung my sword at it.

Although I didn't feel my sword connect with anything, I knew it had. The monarch roared and suddenly spun around, leaping at me.

Its attack had been instant. One moment I had been swinging my sword at its tail, the next a huge set of bloody teeth and claws were right in front of me. But I had been expecting it. The monarch didn't always respond so to injuries, but it did when they hurt it. And I had just hurt it. I had cut off its tail and I knew from experience how badly it hurt us when our tails were involved.

Stepping forward, not back and away from its attack, I ducked a bit and angled my sword. It was already situated and ready, thanks to how I had cut the tail earlier. I only needed to angle it just a bit higher, up to the sky, and I tilted my whole body and shifted as to dodge the huge paws and claws.

It had leapt at me as a cat would, with open arms as if to hug me. Unluckily for it... I knew exactly how it attacked.

My uncle had done the same thing. Though he had been far bigger, it was the same method. The same technique.

The attack was lethal, because it usually allowed the attacker to bite down and wrap its sharp claws all over you. It then would be able to kick and claw at you with its rear legs, but it had a flaw. One that allowed me to step in and under it, and delve my sword straight into the thing's open mouth.

The cat was too big. Its leaps, although fast, were massive. It jumped several feet of distance in the blink of an eye. Too much too fast. It was the same reason that Merit was able to so easily dodge its attacks. The thing's movements were simply too large, too obvious.

So I stabbed it right in the mouth as I dodged and ducked its leap.

I didn't have the opportunity to push it in too deeply, because I had to roll on a heel as to dodge the rest of the thing's attack. I was hit by the monarch's giant chest, but it didn't hurt too bad as I was pushed aside. Likely thanks to the thick mane. I skidded around a bit from the blow as I hurriedly stepped away, since I knew there was a chance the monarch would spin around to continue its pursuit. But I slipped a bit on wet grass, and tumbled. I rolled backward, falling over myself as I tried to hurriedly get back to my feet.

Although only a few seconds had passed as I rolled, I still expected to receive a terrible blow as I jumped to my feet. I had given the monarch too much time. I had wasted too long rolling around. Yet instead of being attacked... I found myself being defended.

Lilly and Merit were in front of me. Lilly had the spear again, lifted and poised as the monarch jumped straight at us. It had leapt high into the sky, probably higher than it had done so far, and in its open maw I saw the gleam of metal.

It had broken my sword. But not completely. A part of the blade was still stuck in its jaw. It must have broken it by biting down on it... which showed just how strong a bite it had.

Stolen story; please report.

The thing seemed to float a moment in the air, but then my heart beat again and it fell. It landed upon us in a flurry of movement and chaos, and in the blink of an eye that it happened I panicked.

It had landed right on top of Lilly!

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Merit. She had jumped out of the way right as it landed, to safety, but then had ran straight back into it. Without hesitation Merit ran right into the wild blur of movement as the monarch rolled and hissed, swiping and attacking at... at...

With wide eyes I watched as Lilly rolled and dodged with the monarch. Right in its grasp, yet not getting hit, she ducked and danced as easily as Merit had done earlier... even though it was attacking with far more vigor than before. The monarch wasn't just attacking with its teeth and front paws, but its rear

ones too. It was rolling around on the ground, the same way a cat would fight another cat in some back alley. Over a scrap of food.

Through the hisses and roars, I heard flesh being stabbed. I heard thick leather and fur being cut. I heard and saw blood spurt and fly into the air. In the midst of the blur of red, a flash of white like a ghost came and went. I wasn't sure what Merit was doing, but every so often she left the fray only to run back into it.

Grass and dirt flew up as I reeled back. The monarch drew closer to me, and I wasn't sure what to do. I no longer had a sword. No weapon. Could I help? What the monarch even notice if I punched it? It looked like Merit was shocking the thing. She occasionally grabbed onto it, grabbing on with both arms, and then released it a moment later. I didn't see or hear her using her ability, but there was no doubt that was what she was doing.

And Lilly kept stabbing the spear into the thing. Never too deeply. Not deep enough for it to get stuck, which would result in her being unable to dodge a swipe of a claw or a dangerous bite from huge teeth. But every heartbeat that went by she stabbed it again. Usually in its chest area, or sides.

"Run!"

I took a deep breath at the voice. It hadn't been from Merit, or elsewhere. It had been shouted by Lilly, while in the thick of battle.

And that told me how serious the warning had been.

Turning, I ran back while watching the scene. Merit too had jumped away, and once she glanced around and saw me she ran towards me in my direction. Half a moment later, Lilly darted out from under the monarch and ran the other way... Vim's spear gleaming wildly in the sun as she ran.

The monarch rolled a bit, hurrying to its feet... but as it did I noticed it slump. The giant cat had its mouth gaping open, trying to hiss and roar, but only deep heaves and huffs came from it. It stood up, glancing around as if suddenly lazy and tired... like a typical cat would do, and then let out a low moan.

"Lilly!?" I shouted my friend's name. She was on the other side of the monarch, and from here she did look fine... but I had such a hard time believing she was. She had been in the thick of that monarch's attack for more than just a few seconds. And a lot of that had been with her on the monarch, or beneath it. There was little chance she had gone through that completely unscathed.

"I'm fine! Get ready, they always have one last fight in them before the end!" she shouted at us.

Merit hurried over to my side, and as she did I flinched. She had a huge gash on the side of her left shoulder, one that was soaking half her shirt.

"Merit..." I groaned.

"I'm fine. Stay back Renn, let Lilly finish it."

Right... Merit didn't have her little sword anymore either. Where'd it gone, I wonder?

The monarch roared a bit, and then it shook itself wildly. As it did a bunch of blood and flocks of fur splattered all around it, so much so it made me wonder how it was still alive. Its front legs were so drenched in blood it was akin to a fountain pouring.

It looked over at me and Merit... and then turned and looked to our right. I followed its gaze, and found it had looked at the wagons. To where Light and the rest were.

Why were they so far away...? They were so far I doubted they'd hear us if we shouted. I couldn't believe how far they were, since they themselves hadn't moved from their original spots. It was us who had traveled such a distance. And we had done it in the blink of an eye, it felt.

Then the monarch turned again, and it finally found Lilly. She was walking around it, the spear raised once more. I saw dark lines on the spear from here, which were likely the thing's blood running down its shaft.

"What's she waiting for, Merit?" I whispered as we watched the monarch turn to face Lilly. She kept rounding it, keeping a distance as she did.

"Probably trying to catch her breath, Renn. Give her a moment."

Right...

Breathing heavily, I stayed on guard with Merit as we watched Lilly continued to walk around the monarch. The monarch itself stayed relatively still... only moving to meek Lilly in its line of sight. It looked like it tried to hiss at Lilly every so often, its mouth and lips raising and moving to do so, but no

sound came. My sword, or at least a piece of it, was still stuck in its mouth so I figured that was the reason.

The thing looked... pitiful now. It was covered in blood and wounds. What had been thick and poofy fur and hair was now all matted and soaked. The thing no longer had a tail. Its mane wasn't just soaked with blood but littered with grass and dirt. What had been huge white teeth were now stained, and some were even broken. Its left paw looked mangled somehow, or maybe it was missing half of it. It was hard to tell with how it was standing, and how tall the grass was.

What had been a mighty, proud monarch, now looked like any typical animal about to be hunted and put down. The red beast had seemed kingly before, but now looked like a mangy back-alley cat.

Lilly then slowed a bit, coming to a stop in front of us. My own tail squirmed like mad as I realized she had done it on purpose. She had once again put herself between us and the danger.

How could anyone hate this woman...? She was so...

Then she charged forward. I blinked and she was right on the monarch, who flailed upward in defense. It looked like it tried to leap forward at her, but didn't have the strength. It instead just jumped up a bit and then fell back down onto its side. It tried to swipe at Lilly, but she completely circumvented its efforts by jumping around it to its side, and with a quick and single move... she stabbed it right in the back of the head.

The huge cat had a massive spasm, and then all four of its legs went taught and straight. Lilly stepped into the blow, pushing the spear deeper, and the thing went completely still... and completely collapsed onto its side.

Breathing a sigh of relief at the sight, out of the corner of my eye I saw Merit relax as well. The two of us didn't move yet as we watched Lilly adjust the spear, and then pull it out. She wasted no time in stabbing the spear into the monarch again. This time right into its side, not far above its left leg. Likely to get to its heart.

The monarch didn't even twitch at the new wound... even as Lilly twisted and dug the spear ever deeper into the thing's chest.

It was dead. Completely.

"Gosh..." I felt my shoulders slump as Merit walked forward. She took a few steps and then broke out into a run as she hurried over to Lilly and the monarch.

I followed her, but not as quickly. By the time I reached them Lilly had already pulled the spear free and stepped back a bit from the monarch's body.

"That was a lot harder than it had to be," Merit said as she stared at the red creature.

Upon getting close, I grimaced at the sight. The thing was bleeding so badly there was already a huge pool of blood beneath it. The grassy ground wasn't able to absorb it at all, the blood was so thick and red it was starting to pour elsewhere as it formed little streams.

"Are you okay Lilly?" I asked as I stared at the dead creature. Now that I wasn't worried for my life, or anyone else's, I now noticed it stunk. Terribly. Was that just its blood, or something else...?

"No. But I'll live," Lilly said.

Turning to look at her, I flinched as I saw what I'd just heard.

Lilly's left arm was twisted in an odd shape. Her left hand was likewise broken, with mangled fingers. And worst of all, across her chest and stomach were large gashes. She didn't even have a shirt on the front of her body anymore, thanks to it having been cut into rags and torn apart.

"Gosh Lilly...!" I groaned as I wondered what to do. Those looked terrible! There was a cut along her left breast that looked so deep that... that...!

"Don't panic. We have Light here," Merit said simply.

Huh...?

Oh...!

I hurriedly turned, realizing she was right! Light was a saint! That meant, like Witch, she'd be able to help heal Lilly!

And sure enough Light was hurrying over. Her robe fluttered as she ran towards us.

"Great... uh... don't tell Vim... okay?" Lilly mumbled... and then promptly fell backward.

I rushed forward, grabbing her before she fell to the ground. She crumpled in my arms, letting out a wheeze of pain as she did.

The spear she'd used to kill the monarch fell nearby and rolled into the grass, but I ignored it as I helped pull her away from the monarch's dead body and its blood. Just in case it was poisonous or something.

"Hold on! I'm coming!" Light shouted.

"She's old and slow," Merit said with a huff.

Lilly grinned up at me as I helped her lay down in the grass. As she did, I noticed the blood seeping from some of the huge gashes. And the way her mangled left arm rested lifelessly at her side.

Those wounds were bad. Really bad...

"Lilly..." I moaned at the sight of them.

"I'll be fine. I'd... survive even without her, but... yeah. Please let her help," Lilly said with a strained voice. She didn't just sound hurt, she looked it. Her face was pale.

Merit stepped over and shook her head down at Lilly.

Lilly scoffed up at her. "Shut it fish brain. Should have let it eat you."

"See Renn? I told you she becomes a baby when hurt," Merit said.

I smirked at that, since Merit has in fact never said such a thing to me before. She was just trying to tease Lilly.

Lilly's pained face contorted into a small smirk, then she flinched. As if the smile made her feel worse somehow.

"By the gods...! You actually did it! Hold on, Lilly, I'm coming!" Light shouted as she got closer. She was huffing like mad, as if terribly exhausted.

I wonder if she'd already used her powers to heal Martin. Witch had gotten weak like that too when she did...

"You're not a panda why are you so out of shape?" Merit asked as the saint hurried over.

"Oh shut it! You're..." Light flinched at the sight of Lilly. She stepped around Merit, nearly knocking her over, as she hurriedly knelt down on the other side of Lilly across from me. "Hold on. Take a deep breath Lilly, this is going to hurt," Light said, speaking seriously as she reached out and placed her hands palms open on Lilly's stomach and chest.

Lilly flinched, and with her right hand she grabbed my wrist. I grabbed her wrist in return, and held on with her as Light's eyes started to grow brighter... and I felt a tingle run up my tail.

She was using her abilities...! I could feel it!

Fascinated, I watched in awe as Lilly's wounds started to mend... even as she winced and whined in pain.

I only had Witch to compare to, but it seemed as if Lilly's wounds were healing far quicker than they should be. If I needed any proof that Light was stronger, or her abilities more potent than Witch's... here it was. In a matter of moments Lilly's dreadful wounds stitched back up, forming together without even a scab to show for it.

"Now your arm," Light said with a strained voice as she leaned forward, as to grab Lilly's mangled arm.

This time it took far longer... and about half way through the process Lilly's grip on my wrist lessened, until she completely let me go... and she passed out.

"Lilly...?" I asked worriedly as Light leaned back, huffing in exhaustion.

"She'll be fine. I uh... I might pass out too in a moment..." she said wearily.

Right...! "Okay," I said as I started to stand up. Lilly was at least lying down, Light though was kneeling on her knees. And Vim's spear wasn't far from her... if she collapsed unnaturally, she might hurt herself.

Merit sighed as I heard other people hurrying over. Worried shouts and robes flapping as they did.

"Can we go home now?" Merit asked as she picked at the gash on her shoulder.

Chapter 514 Vim – Stance

Some kind of lion, maybe.

Was it just coincidence, or...

I reached out with my left foot, pushing the already half decomposed head up a bit. Much of its fur and flesh were already decayed. If it was a normal creature, one within the realm of reason, it would be safe to assume it'd been weeks since its death.

But it wasn't a normal creature. It was a monarch. Or at least, it had been.

Even the bones were mushy. The only things that seemed still mostly in tact were the thing's teeth... and judging by its shape, size, the jaw and teeth... Yes. It had definitely been a lion or something close to it. Though why did the few remnants of flesh and fur look like it had been red...?

Probably because it had been.

Taking a deep breath I sighed as I glanced around. I had found the carcass of the monarch in a small field of knee-high grass, and nearby was a larger dirt road. One that looked like it was only a few years from being forgotten since it was being retaken by the natural elements. There were large patches of grass all throughout the road, and even a few small trees scattered here and there. Odds are this road was only used by our own people, typically by Brandy or the others when taking stuff to the Bell Church.

There was a half destroyed wagon not far from me, which looked like had been broken up by axes on purpose. Likely Light's idea. If they couldn't use it, no one should be able to, was likely her reasoning.

It was hard to tell if there had been any deaths, since there was a light storm raining down upon me. And it had been for a good portion of the day. I could smell blood, not just the monarch's, but I couldn't really smell gore. Though that might just be because Light and the rest had taken the bodies with them, as to respectfully bury them elsewhere. Though a part of me hoped that this lion had been weak like Pinchie and that lizard, I knew not to believe it. Something told me this thing had not died easily.

There were too many wounds on it. Even through its decomposition, I could see the effort it had taken to kill it. It had dozens of little nicks and punctures on its softening bones, enough to tell me it had likely taken a bunch of attacks to bring it down. Plus there were arrow shafts scattered around, enough on cursory glance to tell me they had likely fired many dozens at the thing.

I could smell Lilly and Merit, though oddly not Renn or anyone else. Their scents were faint though, but that was no surprise... It was hard to tell, since the monarch was already half-decomposed, but the battle had likely happened within a day. Maybe last night or the day before.

Maybe even this morning, actually... the monarch no longer had its heart within it, likely taken by Light, so I wasn't able to outright tell how strong it had been... but maybe I was lucky and it really had been the same as that lizard and Pinchie. A newly born monarch, without much strength. It might not have had any abilities at all, or ones that were so weak they may as well have not existed in the first place. Kind of like Pinchie, or that lizard. Neither had seemed capable of anything more than they were.

Monarchs were weak when first born... but not for long. And not always. Had Renn and the rest just been... lucky?

It was so odd. It was one thing for a god to make a mistake, or create something on a whim... but to do so three times? That I knew of...? Why make monarchs that were so weak? Without any abilities...? Without any obvious purpose?

There was so little reason to it... not even a manic god, or an insane one, would do it. It wasn't like gods could just pop out monarchs without thought or effort. It was something they spent resources to accomplish. It took effort and planning. Sometimes it took months of planning for the bigger and stronger ones... so...

Sighing as I tried to make sense of it, I wondered if I should be relieved or not.

The monarch was dead. If there had been any casualties, I couldn't tell yet, but I had a hard time believing a smaller monarch such as this could have defeated Lilly, Merit, Light and Martin's son... and Renn. Especially if...

Tilting my head at the skull, or what was left of it, I noticed the way a piece of it was missing. I knelt down to inspect it closer, and reached out to turn the mushy skull a bit. Yes, there was a rather familiar looking hole in the top of its skull. Not broken off, or eroded... but outright missing. Even with it getting all soft and mushy it was still rather obvious that it had been cut and removed by something very sharp, as if cut at a molecular level.

Yes. They had used the spear. Likely the killing blow.

I wonder who had wielded it? Renn? Lilly?

No matter.

The thing had done its job. Fulfilled its purpose. It had not only ended the life of a creature without purpose it had protected ones that did. Mother would be proud... and...

"Oh my."

The world went still as my heart thumped into my throat.

Slowly turning my head... I looked upward, and my stomach twisted as I stared up at a man.

One in the sky. Floating dozens of feet above me. Standing up there, as if the laws of gravity had no meaning. One who was already drenched by the rain, and looked as if he'd just gone through a severe windstorm. His clothes were a mess, and... wait...

A god being hit by the rain and wind...?

"I'm... surprised! But I shouldn't be. I had thought you were dead! Actually... how are you still alive? Hasn't it been thousands of years...?" the man asked me with a frown.

My jaw popped as I stood and shifted, and the wet ground beneath me did too. A far off tree cracked and fell, as if getting hit by a lightning bolt. It hadn't though. It was storming, but not that kind of storm.

The man reached up to wipe the rain out of his face, pushing back streaks of long hair. Hair of red and blue. He huffed at the rain, obviously annoyed by it, and then crossed his arms as he started to descend to the ground.

"I don't remember your face... but I remember your hair. France?" I asked carefully. His hair was multi-colored and had stripes in it. A few gods had such character traits, but not many. It was why I remembered him, he was one of those eccentric ones who had modified his own body outside the norm. Most hadn't done that, hadn't dared to risk it.

"France...? Did you seriously just call me..." the man sighed and shook his head. "It's Stance! Stance! As in..." he then struck a pose, extending his arms out and tilting back a bit... as if about to participate in some grand play. "Stance!" he said, shouting up at the rain.

Right.

Stance.

I remembered him now.

An eccentric god who thought himself a grand playwright. Particularly ones full of jokes and grandiose themes. He was an entertainer to those who had everything and anything, and took great pride in his skills of doing so. I remembered many praising his plays, and finding amusement in just being around him.

But I wasn't amused.

A few heartbeats passed, and Stance returned to standing normally as he looked back at me. "Right... you were like this. A bore. How is it you have no appreciation for the arts? Your father would be ashamed, you know!" Stance said with a light wave at me, as if disappointed in me.

Rolling my left shoulder, I kept my cool. "Your last few art pieces haven't been very... you. Maybe you've lost your sense for it too?" I said with a tiny gesture to the carcass behind me.

Stance flinched, as if I'd just slapped him. "Still as sharp tongued as ever... Tell me, why are you killing my babies? I've ordered them not to harm humans, so why?" he asked with a gesture to the corpse behind me.

Glad to confirm they were his, I gently shook my head. "Not to harm them...?" I asked.

"Yes...? I've made sure of it. I need them doing more important things... plus why would I kill humans?"  
Stance asked.

I shifted as little as I possibly could. "I found your lizard eating them," I stated.

Stance frowned and shook his head. "Not possible. The only killing I've allowed is of lesser creatures for sustenance. Nothing more."

"Then it saw humans as lesser," I said. I wasn't going to make a comment on how the monarch behind me had attacked non-humans. That would just make him act even odder. This man, this god, had indeed been one of the few to not harm humans. He had been on the side for their survival. Everything else though, had no place in his world of art. They had not even been good enough to be extras or props, in his opinion. It was one of his many hypocritical traits. All gods had them, but his were rather basic. He found non-humans and similar creations to be impure, yet found his own to be special. Just because he made them a weird color, or gave them odd personalities. A typical god.

At least, that was what I remembered about him. I was trying my best to remember all I could of him, his abilities and what he had done and how he had done it... but I honestly felt a little shocked. I was stunned. It was taking me a moment to calm down. A long moment. Right now I wasn't very confident in what I knew of this god. It's been so long... who knows what I did and didn't remember. And who knows if what I thought I remembered was even correct or not. I didn't have Renn's memory. But I was confident in him not being an enemy of humans. Surely. He had been with that group, hadn't he...? Yes... Surely...

So... was he lying, or was I misremembering?

Stance again crossed his arms, doing so in a slightly dramatic way per usual. "Again, not possible. I don't remember you doubting us so vividly, Vim. Have you grown cynical in your old age?" he asked.

I shifted again. This time a small section of earth nearby slid, rising up a bit... forming a brand new hill.

Stance turned to look at it... stared at it for a moment, and then slowly looked back at me. "Right... Okay. Before you go and do anything stupid, I'm not lying. I'm serious. I'd show you if I could. All my recent creations are passive. They will only attack under great duress, or if I order them to. And I've neither ordered them to nor have I felt them getting damaged enough to warrant any kind of self defense... well, until now," Stance said as he gestured behind me.

Wait... until now?

"What of your lizard...?" I asked. Hadn't he just admitted that was his too? Was he saying he had not noticed when it died?

"Hm? The ugly komodo dragon? Yes, that one too. Really Vim, who do you take me for...? Why would I hunt humans, and why in that way?" Stance asked, shaking his head at me as if I was the crazy one. He then lifted an arm, and swiped lazily in the air in front of him. He frowned as he stared not at me, but to his left.

"It's dead," I said, confirming what he had just done himself.

"Wait... what? Why wasn't I alerted...? Did you kill that one too? It was ugly Vim, and stupid, but it was still one of mine you know!" Stance asked as he looked back at me.

"As I said, I found it eating humans."

Stance was about to shout at me, likely to tell me how that was impossible... but he hesitated. He looked again to his left, blinked a few times as he studied whatever he saw... and then shook his head at me again. "I... I don't understand..." he whispered.

My fingers twitched a bit, so I half closed my hands. I didn't make fists, not yet, but I didn't want him to notice my own panic.

My panic over his own.

He was being serious... wasn't he...?

Was this another case of a god going insane...? Like the one who had been living near Merit's Kingdom?

Although a terrifying aspect, it was also somewhat relieving. What if all of this had just been a flailing god's final moments as his mind shattered?

Though... unlike the last one, this one had not been waiting for me to end his life out of mercy.

"Where have you been...? You're not the type to have hid all these years. To hide. Where and what have you been doing for two thousand years?" I asked the man who looked like he was about to freak out.

He looked at me, his lips twitching a bit... and then right before he said something, he reached up and hurriedly slapped at his face. I nearly jumped at the sudden movement, but kept still as I watched him angrily wipe his face off and push wet hair once again out of his face.

"Blasted rain!" Stance shouted as he went to tying his long hair behind his head.

"Why not just... stop it?" I asked carefully.

"I can't! That's the bloody problem!" Stance shouted as he seemingly gave up trying to tie his hair back. It seemed he had only gotten half of it secured; the rest fell to the side and onto his shoulder. He gestured at the world around us, rather briskly and angrily. "Probably why my own servants are acting against me too! And why they're all so worthless!" he shouted.

My jaw clenched as I watched the god fume in his anger. He swiped his hand in the air again, did it a few more times and then gestured in front of him to his left.

"See!?" he shouted at me.

"You know I can't see, Stance," I said softly.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Stance shifted, and then flinched and shook his head... as if his head hurt. The action made his loose strands of hair cling to his face again, but this time he ignored them as he nodded at me. "Right... I'm sorry Vim... I'm... I'm having..." he started to speak lower, and I gulped at the sight.

I'd seen many gods go crazy. Or act it. Over rage, or pain and sorrow... But this was the second time I've actually believed one to be insane. Truly insane. Not from my actions, or pain, but just... time? Maybe?

It made him scarier somehow.

"Wait... your parents! Right!" Stance then perked up, smiling at me as he stepped closer. Firming my footing as he stepped towards me, I quickly chose how I'd end him. I prepared myself, as he happily pointed at me. "Why'd I not think of this before!?" he asked me happily.

"Think of what...?" I asked carefully.

"I screwed up! I tried to perform a new spell, a huge one...! One that would have changed the world! Beyond the system! But... but I failed. It failed. I was sent to a dark place, where I've been asleep. I just woke up a little bit ago, a few months I think, and... well..." Stance frowned as he glanced upward, not to his left, and seemed to suddenly get lost in thought.

Asleep...? For almost two millennia...? I mean... it was possible. He was a god. But it seemed outrageous all the same.

"You've... been asleep," I said gently, as I realized he wasn't going to continue on his own. He had gone quiet and was staring off into the sky, looking too high to be doing anything of importance.

Stance blinked and then looked back down at me, and quickly nodded. "Yes. It's the only way to describe it... I had been sealed! By my own design!" he said, laughing a little at himself. As if at the absurdity of it.

My eyes narrowed at him as he pushed back his wet hair again. He did so with a scowl, which made me... believe him.

He didn't need to suffer the wet rain. He could snap his fingers and stop it. If not the rain itself, but his being affected by it. He had well over a hundred different things, a hundred different spells and abilities, which could help keep him dry.

Yet he wasn't using any of them.

As if he couldn't. As if he was unable to.

Yet he had just been flying. And he has been making monarchs...? Though, there was no denying the monarchs had been lackluster. Even I had thought them oddly weak and stupid, even before now. How was a god having such difficulties? Was it even possible? Or was it not that he didn't have full control over his abilities, but that his mind was so far gone it was impairing him to the degree it limited him that much?

"Why not just make... an umbrella or something?" I asked softly, as if to confirm it.

"Because my blasted energy isn't recovering! I think that's why my communications aren't working either, Vim. And why all the babies have been stupid and... well..." Stance then frowned and lowered his hands, his shoulders slumping. "I'm so sorry... I don't want to believe it, but it's possible. If so I... I don't know what to say," he then said.

"Believe what...?"

"That they're killing humans! I think... I think they're defective, Vim. I can't explain it! I made them all to help me find everyone else, since I can't seem to communicate with anyone. I was going to make a bunch and send them every which way, like a bunch of carrier pigeons or something, but they've all been so... stupid. Maybe my orders hadn't properly registered...? Maybe thanks to my lack of energy, something went wrong...? Or maybe I'm still being affected by the spell I failed?" Stance rambled off reasons for his strangeness, ones that sounded to me like him grasping at straws.

But... It made sense. In its own way.

A god who had screwed up. And now his own abilities and powers either were failing him, or didn't work at all. Honestly he wasn't the only one I knew and heard had succumbed to such a thing. Many had died by their own hands. Their own spells failing, or destroying themselves as they attempted to do something beyond the realm of even fantasy. So what he was saying, and what I was understanding from it, made sense.

If I was to believe him, that is.

"Wait... you're not able to talk to anyone else?" I asked, realizing what he'd just said.

"No! Which is why I'm glad I found you!" Stance stepped even closer, and suddenly he was in range. Not close enough I could touch him yet, but close enough that I now felt confident.

I could get him before he could get me at this range.

"Found me..." I whispered as muscles started to twitch and spasm. My body wanted to act... but my mind wanted to hesitate.

I needed to learn more. To find out more. But could I risk it...? Should I...?

Renn was nearby. Maybe not within a few miles, but close enough to be in danger. I shouldn't be risking it. He'd be able to sense her and Light with ease, and in fact already likely knew about them. I wasn't entirely sure to what degree his abilities were limited, after all. He could create monarchs and had known of this monarch being killed, and had been able to fly here, so he wasn't entirely disabled.

Letting him live just to understand his circumstances was not worth the risk. But what if this was some ploy...? What if there were other gods nearby?

The list of potential dangers grew and grew, even when I already decided to wait a moment.

"Your parents! Your mother will be able to help me, I'm sure of it! Plus I'd love to see your father, I'll be honest I'd been asleep all this time so to me it feels like only just a few days ago I'd seen everyone, but I can't help but feel like I've been alone for an eternity! I even spent some time just talking to the humans

nearby the other day; you should have seen me... I even put on a little show to pay them for the food and drink and..." Stance then walked right up to me, next to me, and then stopped. He sighed as he stared past me, and down at the decaying monarch.

I turned a bit, both to keep an eye on him... and to see what had his attention. Sure enough, it was just the monarch's corpse he was looking at.

"You owe me, Vim. I know they were ugly and worthless, but they were still my babies. Plus they took a lot of my mana! What precious little I even had!" Stance said with a gesture at the thing.

"You don't have enough to resurrect it?" I asked.

He shook his head and sighed. "No. And even if I did I wouldn't do it. Now that I know they're attacking people... gosh! Should I kill the others...?" he then panicked as he swiped his hand in the air to his left.

My heart thumped as I thought of that colorful tiny crab. "How many have you made...?" I asked quickly.

"Four. This one, the lizard, a crab that wasn't even big enough to eat and a bird," he said.

Four...? Bird...? Oh. Maybe the chicken, as Elaine had called it. Wait...

"Were they all like this? Or like that crab?" I asked. Hadn't the chicken supposedly been big? And strong? It had started those fires for crying out loud!

"Huh...? Yes. The stupid bird hadn't even been able to fly. There. Done. Feels horrible wasting energy like this, but better safe than to be sorry," Stance said with a nod as he swiped his hand again.

My heart fell as I realized what just happened.

Pinchie was dead. As was the bird, if it had still been alive.

Gritting my teeth, I kept myself calm and collected as Stance sighed again and reached up to wipe the rain out of his face once more. "Oh well... So? Where are you parents at Vim? I hope they're close, I honestly don't think I can even fly very far at the moment. Now that I look at it, I bet I'd not even be able to cast a spell of flight on you either," he said as he thought about it.

He was being serious wasn't he...? Not just about his lack of ability, but what he wanted.

Does... did he not remember? Does he not know...?

"I... can take you to them. Without flight though it'll take a while," I said, deciding for now to just play along.

He nodded and frowned. "Nothing we can do about it, I guess... oh well. On foot it is. In a few days I'll have enough to at least cast a few spells, so we just need to wait until then," he said as he turned back around, and stepped away from the monarch's corpse.

"Right..." I mumbled as I stepped after him.

How long should I play along...? How far could I take this?

And should I even do it...? Even if I played along, it wasn't like it'd last. After all... it wasn't as if I could actually take him to my parents. Which meant it'd only last a few days. Once he was able to give us flight, or just outright teleport us elsewhere, my lie would be revealed.

What was I hoping for? If he was being completely honest, and honestly I was willing to bet he was, there was nothing I could learn from him. Nothing of worth, at least.

He wasn't able to communicate with the other gods. He wasn't able to use any of his abilities, at least not to their full potential... he was claiming he couldn't even fly for very long for crying out loud! So...

What did I expect from this...?

Stance sighed as he looked around the area. "Where are we anyway...? Which territory are we in, Vim?" he asked.

It took me a moment to remember. "This is the eastern quadrant. The one that Rue used to rule," I said.

"Rue! Gosh I forgot all about her... hm..." Stance smirked happily at whatever memory that came to his mind upon hearing her name... and then he blinked.

Then he slowed.

Then froze.

And I saw it.

One moment he was happily remembering some distant memory, the next he understood something.

Stance went still. His eyelids opened farther. His pupils shrunk... and utter understanding dawned upon him.

He then narrowed his eyes, as utter shock encompassed his face.

I could not read minds. Let alone a god's. But anyone could read his thoughts right now. It was that obvious. That clear.

Stance the god had just remembered who I was. Who I actually was.

Who he was speaking to. Who he was talking to, as if they were a long time friend.

Who he was standing next to.

And such a realization made Stance the God utterly terrified.

No more playing along.

Stance spun. He turned with as much speed he could muster as I rushed towards him. He raised both hands in attempt to snap his fingers and wave at the same time, but he wasn't fast enough.

My body had been waiting for this since I had turned around and saw him floating in the air. No. Since before that. Since I'd realized someone had created a monarch several months ago. I'd been waiting for this moment, for this opportunity. So my speed was nothing but exceptional. My reaction time flawless. I slapped his hands away and had my own hands around his throat before I could even think my actions through. I ran forward and into him, lifting him off the ground and pushing him over. He fell backward, and I fell forward onto him, pinning him down into the ground.

He landed in the soaked grass and dirt with not as much force as you would expect from me tackling someone. Yet out of the corner of my eye I saw the ground around us shift and budge. We'd just sunk several feet.

I pushed my right knee onto his chest, and my left on his right arm that I had crushed and bent in the fall. His red and blue hair covered half his face, having come undone from the force of my impact. Utter panic covered his now pale face as I took a deep breath... and squeezed.

"Wait!" Stance wheezed with the last bit of air I'd ever let him have as he tried to push me off him. His left arm and hand thumped against my chest, with enough force that had likely broken half my ribs... but I didn't even flinch. I paid no heed to any of the damage I endured as I pushed down harder, with all my weight, as to both keep him pinned and to keep him from breathing. I felt not just his bones and body crunch and break beneath me, but the very earth too. I felt water pool and heard splashes as we sunk into the moist ground, pushing aside dirt and grass as he tried to escape from my grip and strength. His very head dug into the dirt and ground as I pushed, digging my thumbs into his throat.

I didn't wait. I didn't stop. I found myself exerting more force and using more strength than I had in centuries. My very clothes started to rip and tear. I felt the skin on my knuckles split open from the force of my grip. I felt my bones ache as my whole body grew hot... and then...

"Vim..."

I barely understood him as he gurgled and choked. His eyes had begun to bulge. His pale face was now a shade of purple and blue. His effort to push me off lessened... his squirming turned into small wiggles. His eyes started to roll upward, and in other directions...

And then, something snapped. Something small. Something wet.

His whole head jolted a bit to the left, and I felt the tension in his whole body snap alongside his neck. He instantly went rigid, and then still.

Yet I still held his throat. I still applied pressure.

I kept squeezing. Even as minutes passed. Even as my hot body grew cold, and the rain falling upon my back fell with more weight and in greater numbers. The storm had worsened.

The god's neck started to twist and crumple within my grip. Before I knew it my fingers which had been touching only at the tips were now pushing each other aside. Blood spurted from not just his mouth and other orifices, but from his very throat as it began to rip apart.

Then, without any fanfare... I separated his head from his body.

I stopped squeezing his neck and immediately grabbed the head. I stood up, lifting the head up as to put distance between it and the body. As I stood, I felt my own injuries. My left leg felt weak, as if it couldn't support my own weight. My chest and stomach had a weird tingling sensation, as if swollen. I knew if I glanced down I'd find parts of my body bruised and broken, though how much of the damage had been from Stance and not from my own rapid actions was up to debate.

"Not going to regenerate?" I asked through clenched teeth as I stared at the lifeless head.

They had such abilities. Some could regrow their bodies, similar to what I could do. Others faded to mist and reformed at a distance. A few melted into goop, only to form back into shape hours later. Although there were many ways they could do it... there was one single constant. One step that all methods had, no matter the form.

It had to happen quickly. Within minutes. Or it'd never happen.

And it seemed...

"You really had been out of energy, hadn't you...?" I whispered as I started to relax.

It had been long enough. Stance was still dead. His eyes dull. His body unmoving...

Glancing around, I was a little surprised to find I was in something of a hole. One nearly big enough that it almost blocked my sight from my surroundings. We were probably six or so feet down, if not more. Water was even starting to pool at my feet, enough to nearly cover half of Stance's dead body. It was rather clear and clean, considering we were in a muddy hole.

Stepping away from the body, I quickly climbed back to normal ground and looked around. I held on to Stance's head, holding him by his colorful hair as I took a moment to study the world around me.

I felt no monarchs nearby. No gods. No divine abilities...

Usually when one killed a god, the world noticed. Or well, the world connected to them. The parts and pieces they had placed into existence. Their monarchs were summoned. The parts of the world they had manipulated, like the weather or ground, shifted back to normal. Sometimes even the time of day changed. More than not fellow gods showed up, to find out what was going on and what happened...

But it seemed nothing of the sort was happening here and now.

Breathing deeply, I ignored the feeling of my body healing. Bones were being reset and mended. Flesh that had torn or swollen tingled as it reconnected and expelled whatever blood or gunk had leaked or formed from the wounds within. My left kneecap popped, telling me it had snapped out of place without me knowing, and I felt several fingers do the same as joints reset within them.

The rain was falling rather hard now. The sky darkening. As if to try and cool me off, or maybe to weep the passing of one of the divine figures that used to rule it.

Used to, being the key word.

"You hadn't lied, had you Stance?" I asked as I lifted the head once more. It remained unchanged... though now there was some black blood dripping from it, and it seemed the left eye had popped out of the socket.

There was no way he hadn't been. He had raised his hands in defense when I attacked. When he had realized the mistake he was making by standing so close to me, by acting so friendly with me.

He had tried to attack me, but nothing had happened. No spells. No abilities. The damage he had done to me had been purely physical. From blows from his fist, and his struggling and flailing as I broke his neck.

Stepping a few feet away from the scene of the battle, I walked over to a section of earth that had popped upward and formed a weirdly shaped mound. I sat on it, since it was just the right height to do

so comfortably. It felt soft, but didn't give way or shift as I relaxed a bit; telling me it had likely been formed from my earlier shifting and not from the act of killing the god.

Dropping Stance's head in front of me, I watched it roll a bit before coming to a stop. It did so facing away from me, but I didn't care.

The deed was done. I had killed him.

I should be happy. Ecstatic. I had just removed a plague. A tumor. A calamity. He had been creating monarchs, ones that had terrorized the world and its inhabitants. He had been one of the flamboyant ones, wild and uncontrollable. Although he had not been an enemy of humans, he had been an enemy of all other life on this planet.

Stance had undoubtedly been the cause, if not the main one, for all my recent fears and stress. The prophecies, the troubles... Maybe even Narli's strange problems too. All caused by his oddness. So removing him was just and proper.

Not to say the least of what he'd do if I left him alive. He would have hunted Renn as I hunted them. Because to him, and those like him, she would have been an abomination. All of the non-humans would have been targeted by him once he saw through enough of his insanity to do so. After all, there had been a very real chance his insanity would have cured itself in time. Or even worsened.

I'd done well. My parents would be proud. I would do it again without hesitation...

Yet...

Why did I feel like I'd just made a huge mistake...?

Chapter 515 Renn – Light's Friendship

Listening to the storm outside, I tried to not worry over the lack of tiredness I was feeling.

It was the middle of the night. The dead of night. We were at the Bell Church, in the home that Fly had once been living in, and instead of sleeping in one of the comfy beds upstairs with Merit I was downstairs sitting on a couch and stressing.

I didn't feel tired at all. My eyes weren't heavy or blurry. My body didn't feel weak... I didn't even feel hungry! Usually I'd not be upset over such a thing, but this was the third day now that I've gone without a moment of sleep.

Three days. Soon to be four.

It was one thing to go so long without sleep under normal conditions... but these last few days hadn't been normal. We've traveled miles. I've been running around and being far more active than usual... and now to top it off, I even fought a monarch!

I should be exhausted. Or at least tired enough to take a nap. Especially right now, when no one else was awake and nothing was happening... yet instead of curling up in a comfy bed with Merit I was down here counting the moments as they passed.

This wasn't the first time I'd gone this long without sleep, of course. Not even recently, either. I blamed Vim's lack of presence for such a thing, at least lately... but usually when this happened during Vim's absence I still got tired. My eyes grew heavy. My mind slowed a tad. My body ached. My mind drifted, absentmindedly pondering things of silly worth such as what Vim had possibly eaten lately, or if his clothes were still intact or not.

Yet right now my mind was clear. My tail squirming. Without a lick of exhaustion to be felt.

"Is it the heart, maybe...?" I whispered as I touched my stomach.

Since we were somewhere safe, and it was late, I only wore a single layer. The thin layer I sometimes wore to bed. The shirt was so thin it had a few holes in it but I still lifted it a bit as to touch my bare stomach. I messed with it a bit, half expecting to somehow feel the heart within me.

I didn't feel anything of course... and it was starting to worry me. I really didn't know a lot about what I'd done, and what was happening to me, but I had genuinely thought that the hearts were still inside us, those who absorbed them. Landi's had been in her womb. Sap's had been in her chest, between her breasts. And as far as I was aware, Vim and saints could sense them. To the point they could pinpoint their location sometimes.

Plus, those who had hearts could seemingly sense others who did too. Which I now thought I understood, thanks to the fight with that monarch. I had sensed it before it had arrived... and now, when near Light or Martin, I felt that same weird tingly sensation at the tip of my tail or fingers.

I could indeed sense those who had divine power, as Vim called it. Though to what degree or accuracy, I still didn't know... but didn't that mean I should sense my own too, then? You'd think that would mean I'd know where mine was. How come I couldn't feel it...? Hopefully it wasn't somewhere weird. What

would happen if it grew too big...? Vim said they grew as you absorbed more, right? Would it cause an issue then if I kept absorbing them...?

My plan was to eventually take in Miss Beak's too. And Vim had said it had been one of the strongest hearts he's seen. And it had been rather large... I wonder what it'd feel like to have something like that inside me? What if it formed in my head or something? Would it hurt?

While contemplating such odd things, something banged above me. I jumped in my seat, the hairs on my tail and ears going stiff as I stood and watched a bundle of gray and white fall down the nearby stairs.

I barely comprehended what I was seeing as someone fell down the stairs, banging loudly and yelping in pain as she did... and then once at the bottom, she came to a stop and let out a groan of a sigh as she just laid there.

"Um... Light...?" I hurried over to the saint, who was lying on the ground right in front of the stairs she'd just fallen down.

"Did... did I just fall down the stairs...?" she asked with a stiff voice as she looked up at me.

"You did! Are you okay?" I asked worriedly as I bent down to help her up.

Light groaned as I helped her to her feet. The robe she wore was thicker than it looked; it felt soft but was so thick I knew I'd never wear it to bed. It would make me too hot and uncomfortable. "Yes... or no. Maybe," she said as I helped her over to the couch I'd just been sitting at.

I couldn't help but smile at her. Was she maybe a terrible sleeper? Had she been sleep walking? Or was she just really bad at waking up? This was the first time I'd seen her like this. She didn't seem really hurt, by the time she sat down she breathed a sigh of relief and nodded at me in a way that told me she was already fine. Her legs and arms didn't look broken, her face and head looked fine... and...

I blinked at her as I realized she wasn't wearing an eye patch. Her left eye, the one usually covered and hidden, didn't look as bad as I had expected it to. There were blotchy scars all around her eye socket, and up into her hair, but nothing so bad that I felt needed to be covered and hidden as she did.

"You sure you're okay?" I asked worriedly. If she got hurt while under my care...

"Mhm... I just had a terrible dream, so..." she shivered a little as she shook her head.

"A prophecy...?" I asked worriedly. Another bad one already!? Really!

"No. Just a dream. A nightmare. I woke up crying and... wanted something to drink," she said as she reached down to rub her right knee underneath her robe.

"Wait here. I'll get you something," I said.

"Just water please."

I smirked at that as I headed for the kitchen. Seemed Light already knew of my penchant to grab tastier drinks, such as my smoothies or teas.

Returning quickly with her drink, I handed it off to the saint who looked not only relaxed but fully awake now. She smiled in thanks as she took the cup from me and drank the whole thing in a single drink.

Maybe I should have brought the whole bucket...?

"Another...?" I asked as I held my hand out for the cup. She breathed a sigh of relief and shook her head, keeping hold of the cup instead of handing it back to me.

"Thank you. I'm sorry for startling you... did I wake you too?" she asked as she glanced at the couch she sat at. I noted the way she looked at the pillows not just on the couch, but the floor around it.

I had been resting on them. they were fluffy and comfortable. And when she had fallen down I had jumped up to help, dropping them in the process. I went to picking them up, smiling a little sheepishly as I did. "I wasn't sleeping. Just sitting."

"In the dark, alone," Light said.

Oh. Right. It was dark. Should I light the fireplace? Or a candle...? This building didn't have those lights that lit up by themselves, or stayed on all the time. It was more normal, like the ones I was used to. Just a typical house. It did have plumbing though. Not of warm water, but it did have flowing water with the turn of a handle. That I suppose did make it a lot better than normal, I guess.

"It's not that dark," I said as I went to grab the little fire-stick thing Vim had given me a long time ago. I had left it on the table near the front door, since I had used it earlier to warm water for tea. I procured it and lit a few of the candles scattered around the room, but not the large one hanging from the ceiling near the stairs. It had oil in it, and glowed brightly, but I knew from seeing it earlier that its light reached upstairs and into the hallway up there. Merit and Lilly should still be asleep, and I didn't want to wake them. Lilly particularly was very... touchy about noises and light. Knowing her she had already woken thanks to Light's fall down the stairs.

I wanted both of them to rest as long as possible. Light had healed Lilly, but not Merit. And even though healed, Lilly was still hurting and tired. They needed rest, to recover from their wounds and exhaustion.

"You know my eyes glow, but strangely my eyesight isn't that good," Light said quietly as I returned to the couch, done lighting candles.

"Hm... maybe the brightness works against you in the dark?" I wondered. I don't remember Witch ever complaining about having bad eyesight... so I wasn't sure if she had had the same troubles or not.

She smirked at me. "Most assume the brightness would help, not hurt," she said.

I shrugged softly. "Just a thought."

"An amusing one. Your mind works oddly, doesn't it?" she asked.

My tail twitched a little. What'd that mean...? Was she saying I thought weirdly? Unnaturally...? Vim always mentioned my mind worked oddly, in his perspective, but he did so as if saying I was cute. Light though had just sounded tired... as if disappointed in how I had been thinking.

She sighed softly and tapped her cup... and then stood. I shifted back a bit as she lifted her cup. "My turn to get us drinks," she said as she walked past me, and towards the kitchen. Before she entered it she picked up one of the candles I'd just lit... telling me her comment had been the truth. The kitchen had these big windows, and although there was a storm going on outside... the moon's light was still strong enough to illuminate the whole kitchen in my perspective.

Though...

I tilted my head as I pondered myself until Light returned. She brought back a small platter, with a couple cups and a pitcher. I smelled the water within it as she put it down on a table nearby and went to pouring us some of it.

A part of me wanted to ask her about my condition. Since I knew she'd know. She'd be able to answer my many questions about the hearts I'd absorbed... but I knew I couldn't ask them. I was still supposed to be pretending that I was pregnant, at least in front of her.

"So... you're not sleepy?" she then asked as she handed me a cup of water.

"Not yet," I said simply.

Light frowned but nodded, as if that made sense to her. "Good. Then you can hear me talk about my nightmare," she said as she picked up her cup and sat back down on the couch.

For a small moment I stood there, a little bothered... but decided it was fine. I too went to sit down, on the couch with her, but I made sure to put a few of the pillows and cushions between us.

Light noticed, but didn't say anything as she took a drink. Then she gestured lightly at herself. "I dreamt I died. That I fell into a big monster's mouth. Some kind of sea animal," she said.

"And... we're sure it's just a dream?" I asked.

"Oh yes. We can tell the difference. I can tell the difference," she clarified.

I nodded softly. Witch had said the same.

"I know. I'm a mighty saint, yet I panic and cry over a simple nightmare. Very disappointing," Light said with a smirk.

"Hm...? I hadn't been thinking that. I was just remembering the times Witch had said similar, that you saints can tell right away if a dream is a prophecy or not," I said.

Her smirk softened. "I was teasing you, Renn. I could tell you weren't thinking such a thing. You're too kind to do that."

"Mhm..." I felt my tail coil around my left ankle. I suddenly felt a little tired.

Light sighed. "Don't tell anyone, but I'm actually rather scared of violent situations, you know? I'm not like my mother. The mere sight of blood makes me want to throw up and run away," she told me.

"Really...? You seemed fine yesterday," I said. She hadn't outright fought the monarch, but she had stood alongside those who had. She had rushed to heal Martin and Lilly without hesitation. She hadn't screamed in terror or anything either, as a few others had done.

"Bravado, nothing more. It actually took everything I had to get on that wagon, knowing what was going to happen."

"So... you knew it'd attack early? Before you said it would?" I asked. If so that kind of irked me. We had planned to face it more properly, with the arrows and spear. Since she had foreseen where and when it would have actually attacked. Us being attacked earlier than that had made it more difficult for us than it had needed to be.

"No. I just meant in general. I knew people would get hurt, maybe even die... and that terrified me. Always does. Always will," she said.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

"Ah..." I nodded gently. I guess I was the same. I didn't like the idea of people getting hurt either.

Light leaned back a bit and sighed. "I'm glad it all went well, considering. Martin won't ever be the same without his arm, but he should be able to adapt. He can still be a knight, even with only one arm. He's strong enough," she said.

Right... He had seemed fine, relatively. He had even helped unload the wagon once we got here, the only wagon we had since we had to abandon the other. The monarch had broken the axle of the first one; the one Martin had been riding. "Is he your knight, Light?"

I had asked him once and his answer had been kind of... odd, so I wanted to hear the truth from the source.

"No. Less is mine."

Wait, Less...? I thought Martin, or his father, was...? Though I might simply be misunderstanding. Maybe a saint could have multiple knights.

"So he's Mono's?"

"He's Glasses' knight."

Ah. The one I'd not met yet, for whatever reason. I wonder why he was here with us then and not with her, back in Lumen?

"Why'd Less not come with us?" I asked.

"Less can't leave Lumen until she meets someone. A particular someone. I'd have liked to have brought her, but if I took her from that fate... it'd make me feel terrible. How can I want and desire love and then turn around and take the opportunity for another to experience it from them?" Light shook her head. "Would make me a cruel hypocrite."

"She meets her fated person in Lumen...!? Is it someone I know?" I asked happily, grabbing a cushion without even thinking so that I could squeeze it in glee.

"I... I don't know if you know them, Renn. I don't even know their name yet. It's a sailor. One who is associated with the Society, but I think he's human."

A sailor...!? One of the people Roslyn works with maybe? Or Kevin? Gosh it could be one of hundreds of people!

"A human huh..." I whispered as I squished the cushion into my lap, realizing what she'd just said.

Light gently smiled and nodded. "Yes. A human."

Taking a deep breath, I wondered what to say about that. A part of me was saddened, since it meant the obvious... but another part of me was happy. Less was as old as Landi. And if she's gone this long without love, then... I should be happy, overjoyed, she finally was going to get her opportunity to experience it. Yet... here I was, wishing there was another option all of a sudden.

"What do you think of that, Renn?" Light then asked.

I perked up a little, my ears fluttering as I nodded gently at her. "It's... sad? It means her love will be short lived. It means any children from the encounter will be few in number, and mixed in the blood. So there's a chance she will outlive not just him but them too. That... breaks my heart. However... having loved humans myself, having watched them grow from children, I know it's not as simple as that. I had only known Ginny for a handful of years... but I'll remember her forever. I'd not trade those years for anything. I'm sure Less will say the same once it's all said and done. So although saddened, I'm happy for her too. Greatly so," I said.

Light seemed to relax a little as her eye dimmed a bit. "Beautifully said, Renn."

I shrugged. It was how I genuinely felt. I knew Vim, and many others, found the idea of as they called it, lessening the bloodlines, as something to be disgusted at or disappointed in... but honestly I would rather someone got to experience love and know what it was like to have a family even if for a short time over not having such a feeling at all, ever.

Light then glanced around a bit... and then smiled and leaned forward towards me. I squeezed my cushion as she got rather close, and she lowered her voice to a whisper. "Can I tell you a secret, Renn? One only Vim knows?"

My heart thumped as I nodded.

"I'm a half breed."

I blinked, and cold realization dawned on me. "You!?"

Light nodded quickly, and raised a dainty hand to gently point at herself. "My mother had been human. My father had been a brutal man, he wanted saints you see? His grandmother had been one. So he knew if he had enough daughters, eventually, one would be born a saint too. So he cruelly kidnapped women, of all types, and well... here I am," she said.

My mind whirled at the knowledge, and things suddenly made sense.

Vim had saved her. He had been sent to find her, by Celine. She had been adopted.

Like so many of our kind, her past was one of sorrow. Did... did that mean her life before the Society had been terrible? She had only said a few sentences about the man, her father, but I could tell without any doubt she was being gentle in her speech on purpose. She had flinched when speaking of him.

I gulped as I realized something else too.

Her mother had been human. Kidnapped and abused by her father, just so he could give birth to her. And... "What of your siblings...?" I asked carefully with a whisper.

Light blinked at me, and then smiled. "You really are gentle, Rennalee. Of all the things for you to think of first, it's that?"

"Was... was that wrong to ask...?" I asked, suddenly feeling very self-conscious.

"Not at all! It was very sweet. Yes. I had... many siblings. Probably hundreds. As far as I'm aware none are alive. He slaughtered all sons, on their birth, and the only daughters he kept were ones thick in the blood of his line. And there had only been a few of us born so," she said.

He kept them...? Hopefully not for the reason I was assuming...

Light sighed gently as she leaned back a bit. "I feel really calm now that I've told you," she then said.

"Mhm...! I um... thank you. I think...? I promise not to tell anyone else," I said quickly. I wasn't sure what to say, honestly.

I could see, and understand, why she'd keep it a secret. Many in the Society didn't like humans, and thus those who had a human parent... but it was also sad. Something you didn't really want to share with anyone, just because of the implications behind it.

She had not been born out of love, but of schemes and sorrow. And well... I mean...

Giving Light a soft smile I gently gestured at myself. "I had been born for the same reason, you know? My family had... well... My father believed in purity. My older sisters had been abused by him, much for the same reason as yours used," I said.

Light's eye dimmed some more, and then grew brighter as she gently nodded. "A sad history that many of us share, huh?" she said gently.

I nodded back at her. Many of us did, didn't we? The first to come to mind was Ursula, at the Crypt, but I knew many others had similar stories and pasts. Merit, my little friend sleeping upstairs, even had such a sad back-story.

For a long moment the two of us just... sat in silence. Or well, not true silence. The storm outside had grown a little louder, and every so often the house creaked from the wind and damp. The world was noisy, even if we weren't.

It felt a little... awkward all of a sudden, but I felt a little good all the same. I knew deep down that Light was just likely trying to... form a close bond with me, since she planned to become close to my daughter. But... at the same time...

Even if a good portion of her kindness, and her friendship, was because of the future... did that really negate it? Did it make her trust and friendship any less pure...? Maybe it did. But...

About to ask something, I stopped myself as she then spoke up. "How do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Love a man who might be something more?" she whispered.

I couldn't help it, I smirked at her. How did we go from such a sad topic to this one? "Well... to me he's not, if that makes sense. I know he's special. Even if he won't admit it, and denies it profusely. But even with him being special... he's still just Vim. He has flaws. More than we do, even. He has problems, like everyone. He has wants and needs... even desires. He just doesn't let himself indulge in them. If he's really something above us, something beyond me or you... it's not so great a step that I need to worry about it."

Light smiled at me, and I noticed the way her eye lit up a little more. "Love, you speak. Mother would say you just spoke beautifully... I want to squirm and call you stupid," she said.

I nodded and giggled for a moment. "I felt kind of silly saying it too."

"I want to know what that feels like. What love feels like," she then said.

"Find someone? Try?"

"I can't. I've tried. A lot."

Frowning at her, I wondered what she meant. Was she saying her love never works out or something more specific? "Why... not?" I asked carefully.

"Because anytime I try to get close to someone, they die."

I shifted a bit, squeezing the cushion in my lap as I did.

She had said that very coldly. Too coldly. That hadn't been some joke or self-deprecating humor... but...

Light then giggled at me. "You just thought, oh no we're getting close I better stop! Didn't you?"

Woops. "I kind of did," I admitted with a smile.

Light smiled back at me and nodded. "I meant more in the sense of love, Renn. Real love. Like what you have with Vim, for Vim. Us being friends, or even family, won't cause any issues."

"I hope not. Vim would be very upset if I died because we became close," I said.

"Gods don't even put that out there. He's... well..." Light shifted a bit herself, and then curled a leg under her as she turned to face me directly. She then smiled and gestured at me. "He tried too you know? The other day when you two first got to Lumen? He asked me if I'd found anyone yet. I think he had just been... trying to be nice, in his own way. but it meant a lot to me for him to ask like that. The old Vim I knew wouldn't have ever even thought of such a thing, you know?" she said.

That was sad to hear. Because in my eyes, Vim was a very gentle man. The kind of gentle and kind that such a question from him wouldn't be surprising at all.

But... I knew the truth. Vim could indeed be distant. Especially with those he disliked. Such as... well...

Saints.

"What'd you tell him?" I asked.

"Not the truth. I just told him I hadn't found anyone yet. That I keep trying, and keep my eye out but no one's really... worked out yet," she said with a shrug.

Right. She can't, or rather doesn't lie, so she speaks around such truths in that kind of way. "So... you say this very confidently... is this because you've tested it, or because you've foreseen it?" I asked.

"Both. Every time I think I'm getting close to someone, I have a prophecy of their death. And it's the kind that well..." she pointed at the nearby stairs. "Does stuff like that to me."

"You're not lying about who died in your dream just now, are you?" I asked.

Light made a noise with her nose. "No. I really died in my own dream, not you or anyone else. I promise."

Good.

"You said tested too...?" I asked softly.

She nodded, but didn't clarify. Which told me all I needed to know.

"Is it a saint thing...?" I asked.

She frowned at me. "Why would you ask that?"

Well... "Witch. She had foreseen her husband. He hadn't died, not until after she did... but she had foreseen his death a few times. We had to stop it from happening. Another saint I knew also lost her husband, too. In fact she had foreseen several children, but only had one with him," I said. I made sure not to say Elaine's name, just in case she didn't know of her. I knew her mother had met Elaine, but had no idea if she had or knew of that meeting.

Light frowned a bit. "I see... no, I'm not aware of it being a saint-related curse. Many saints have children, or get married and whatnot. Many even have multiple partners, because of the... well... implication," she said with a shrug.

"Implication?"

"We want to have as many kids as possible. To continue the bloodline. The saintly one."

Ah. Right.

Funny. Wasn't that not just what her father had done? I wonder where the line was drawn where it went from being something cruel and diabolical to something normal and respected.

Was it just the feelings behind it? The brutality of it?

Still... I couldn't help but be interested in such topics. After all, there was a chance that... well...

I'd soon be a part of such a group, if the prophecies were true.

It made me wonder if I should start asking questions. About... a lot of things. Not just the basic questions, but the important ones. Like... if I really did have a saint as a daughter, was there something important I should know about the process...? I'd known plenty of saints, but hadn't known any from when they were young. Other than Mono, I guess, since supposedly she wasn't even twenty years old yet.

I knew Vim could likely answer many, if not all, such questions... but he was such a pain to speak to when it concerned these things. Even if he answered the questions about this stuff, he did so with a stiff face and a flat tone. I knew it made him uncomfortable to even think of such things, let alone speak of them.

Yet... Light wouldn't have that problem at all, would she?

She was... actually someone I could probably learn a lot from.

She knew so much that I didn't. And not just because she was a saint. She had learned under Celine. She knew of things that those like her had gathered and archived over who knows how many years, concerning not just the more secretive things in the world such as monarchs and Vim but just... things in general.

Light knew of hearts. She knew of divinity. She knew more about Vim than most... and had a wealth of knowledge from her prophecies, and the prophecies her mother and others had told her.

I was sitting in front of likely one of maybe half a dozen people in the world that could answer my questions... and might just do so honestly.

Yet I couldn't ask a single one.

If I asked what it was like to absorb hearts or what it all meant, she'd confirm I had done so already. If I asked what it was like to give birth to a saint, or anything concerning such a thing, she might focus a little on me and ask questions in return that would reveal the truth I was hiding from her about my lack of being actually pregnant.

If I asked about gods or monarchs... or prophecies and the past, concerning Celine and the rest... I might tread into topics that got me in trouble. Either with her, or Vim.

Such a conundrum, as Vim would call it. Though it was all his fault! If he'd just... if I could just talk to him about these things and not have to feel like I was walking on thin ice while doing so... well...

"You okay Renn?" Light asked after a moment, likely noting my thoughts. Like always I was easily read, in certain ways.

I nodded. "Yes. I just... I feel a little lost, I guess. But I can't ask you to guide me. Not yet," I said.

"Why's that?"

"It's not time yet. I need to wait for Vim first," I said honestly.

Light smiled at me. "I see. Is that a wife speaking, not willing to anger her husband, or is that a proud cat speaking; one who is on the prowl and knows better than to risk their hunt?" she asked.

I smirked at that. "Both, maybe? I actually don't mind angering Vim. He doesn't get really angry with me. I do mind disappointing him, though, or hurting him. And if I ask you certain things, or talk about certain things... before talking about them with him first, I know it'd upset him. Even if he'd not get angry over it, it'd still bother him. And I don't want to do that. He's mine. I'm his. A part of that agreement is to place each other first, at least in this way. At least to try," I said.

"Ah... see? I'm jealous again."

Giggling at that, I squeezed my pillow... and then realized the world outside had gotten a little brighter.

Peering out the window, I noticed the familiar morning haze. The sun was rising, slowly.

Another night come and gone. Without a hint of sleep.

Oh well. At least I enjoyed this night, thanks to my new...

Frowning gently at Light who was smiling softly at me, as if waiting for me to ask a question... I decided to just accept it.

"I think you're right, Light. I think we're going to be good friends," I said.

"We already are, Renn. We were since our births. Connected by fate," she said.

My tail twitched as I squeezed the cushion on my lap. "Don't let Vim ever hear that, please."

Light laughed.

Chapter 516 Vim – The Greeting They Expected, Surpassed

The world just beyond the trees was shrouded in rain and mist. Tiny puddles were all over the village, and a fog was rolling in from the nearby lake and mountain. It gave the Bell Church a rather somber appearance, but at the same time made it feel cozy. It made even me want to find a nice chair, light up a warm fireplace, and read a good book.

Instead I was hiding here beyond the rim. In the forest surrounding the village, not far from the new wall that was still only half built.

It was midday, and thanks to the weather no one was out and about. No one other than Lilly, at least. I ignored her approach as I stared into the foggy window in the distance, at Renn. Or well, her silhouette. My eyes could see her from here, when she was in my line of sight, but I sensed her more than saw her.

Her heart was forming. And it was no minor thing. Another heart was near her, likely the one from the monarch they had just slain, but it was almost not noticeable when compared to Renn's.

I sighed a bit, as a hooded Lilly clambered over the half built wall between me and the village. I watched the way she did so, and noted the way she had not used her left arm at all as she did.

Shifting a little as she walked up to me, I studied the owl. She didn't seem to be limping, nor did I see pain or fatigue on her face... but yes, her left arm was definitely being favored. Maybe it was broken?

"Hurt, Lilly?" I asked as she got near enough.

She paused, and then glared at me. She had been about to say something first, and I had interrupted her. She put it aside though as she pushed back her cloak, as to show me her left arm as she stepped up to me. "Was shredded rather bad. Got stuck in that cat's teeth during the battle. Light healed it, but it still aches," she explained.

Ah... I nodded. I did in fact feel the faint remnants of divine power upon her. "How's the rest of you? Everyone else?" I asked.

"The only one who really got hurt was Martin. He lost his arm."

My eyes narrowed a bit. "Martin lost his arm...?" To that monarch? One as weak as that?

I honestly hadn't planned to ask for the full details, since as long as everyone was alive and the monarch dead that was really all that mattered... but now? Now I felt like I needed to know.

"Not that one. It's his son. He's... not as strong as his father, luckily," Lilly said with a small smirk.

Ah. That made a lot more sense. Almost too much. "I see."

Lilly sighed as she glanced me up and down. "Um... are you okay?" she asked.

"Hm?" I looked down, but hadn't needed to. I knew why she was asking. My clothes were utterly destroyed. I didn't even have a shirt anymore, since I'd torn off the few pieces that had remained while coming here. And my pants weren't much better. They were hanging on with threads.

"I'm fine. How long ago did you get here?" I asked. I felt as if I'd just missed their battle with that monarch.

"Last night. A bit after sundown. We were able to travel quicker with only one wagon," she said.

I nodded. That made sense. "Can I ask why Renn's in Fly's old home?" I asked.

"Because she had asked for it. When told there were only a few empty houses, she had overheard that it was still not cleaned out so she had nabbed it up. You should have seen the way her tail had twitched when she had heard Plumb imply that no one had wanted to live there since it stunk like Fly," Lilly said.

I nodded gently at that. Renn would not have taken that well at all, no.

"And the banishments?" I asked. Not only was Renn here, so was Lilly. And Merit. Something that shouldn't be possible.

"Like any of that matters when Light says they don't. Plumb and the rest just bent the knee the moment Light stepped off the cart and started giving orders," Lilly said with a gesture at the village.

Wanting to sigh at that, I simply nodded instead. "Like her mother."

"Worse, actually."

"How so?"

"She's absolutely ensorcelled by Renn. To the point it makes me sick. By the way Merit's here," she said with a point to the building.

I scanned the building and the area around it... half expecting to see the tiny white fish as she hurried over too. I didn't see her though. "I know. I stopped at Lumen on the way here. Heard all about how shocked everyone was Merit agreed to join you."

"Hm..." Lilly frowned at me as she nodded.

For a few moments we stood in silence, and I realized I probably owed her a thank you. "Thank you, Lilly... for keeping her safe," I said gently.

Lilly stood up a little straighter, and I heard her arms shift under her cloak. "It's okay, Vim. I like her. I... don't like her friends, but I've come to realize that's just who she is. And it gives me hope, to be honest, so I'm okay with it," she said.

"Hope?"

Lilly nodded softly as she looked into the village, to the building in the distance. I knew her eyesight was nearly as good as mine, so I wondered if she could see Renn right now as I could. She was helping Light cook dinner, it looked like. "My children, Vim. I fear losing them. I'm... hoping she, who can be friends even with those like them, can help me rebuild those bridges. To help and teach me. To regain what I've lost, through her," she said softly.

Oh my... "Have you spoke to Renn about this?" I asked.

She nodded.

"And Renn of course didn't hesitate to help," I said, knowing my wife.

She nodded again.

"Then there's no need for hope, Lilly. It'll happen," I said simply.

She smiled at that. "So I believe too," she agreed.

Hm... "So...? Anything I should know before I go get myself involved?" I asked.

"Your wife's got Light wrapped around her finger. They spent half the night, and all morning, talking in private. I don't think Light realized Merit and I were awake, but Renn did after a bit. They were talking about stuff that honestly I wish I hadn't heard," she said with an odd tone.

"Um... do I even want to ask?"

"No. But I need to tell you anyway. Merit thinks Light's just trying to worm her way into Renn's heart, by abusing Renn's kind gentleness. It seems when Renn gets told a secret, one that no one else has ever been told before, she falls in love with the one who told her it. I... don't disagree with Merit, but after listening to the two all morning, I've come to the conclusion that Light's been waiting for her all this time. I think Light's convinced herself, from her prophecies or what have you, that Renn's her sister. As if in blood, in fact," Lilly said.

I frowned at that. "Are you saying it's Renn she's after and not her daughter?"

"No. That's the weird thing. Renn and Merit both think it's your daughter they want, that she wants, but I don't think so Vim. I mean... yes, it's important, she's going to be important, but I think Light's fascination with Renn is more than that. By the way why did you never tell me she was a half-breed?" Lilly suddenly asked.

"What...? She told you?" I asked, absolutely shocked over hearing so. More than I was Lilly's assessment.

She shook her head. "That was the big secret she told Renn. I never knew... but now it makes sense. Renn's said she smells like Witch, that human saint friend of hers. I can't see it, since I don't think she smells like Elaine, but I don't doubt Renn's memory," Lilly said.

I shook my head. "No. Don't doubt her memory, ever. She told me that too. You... wait..." I felt my head start to hurt as I realized what Lilly was implying. Or well, what Light was.

Lilly nodded. "I don't think Renn's noticed yet, but I think Light's saying she's related to them. Elaine's bloodline or whatever. Light sees them as flesh and blood sisters, Vim. She keeps saying it, offhandedly," she said.

Great. "It's... possible..." I admitted. After all Celine had known where Elaine, the human witch that was a descendant of Renn's friend, was. At the time we, or rather I, had simply assumed that Celine had seen a prophecy concerning her and the heart she had taken from Elaine, but...

"You're the one who found her. Did you happen to meet her parents?" Lilly asked.

"No. Her mother had been dead already. And I had killed her father rather quickly. He had been a disgusting man," I said. Just thinking of that moment made me smell that building. That cesspool. It made me want to spit, as if I could taste the disgustingness just from my memory.

"So can't confirm it," Lilly said.

"No. But it doesn't matter. If Light sees it that way, whether it's the truth or not is of no concern. Especially since Renn will happily believe it, since she supposedly smells just like her old friend," I said.

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"Exactly. I know you don't like imposing your will Vim, but... please. She's your wife. Don't let her get corrupted by her, for all our sakes," Lilly asked carefully.

I nodded and sighed. "Right..."

Lilly crossed her arms under her cloak, and oddly her doing so reminded me of her wings. When she had ruffled them as if upset. The sounds had been similar.

Taking a small breath, I glanced at the owl. She looked... annoyed, but maybe not too badly. She was looking down at a nearby root, one coming from the tree we stood under.

Probably was thinking of her own Root.

How long had she been away from her newborn now...? Months? Not just her newborn daughter either, but the rest of her family. All because I'd asked for her help. I had taken her from a happy home, a true purpose, to fight monsters and mingle with people who hated her and made her uncomfortable.

By my parents I was a terrible protector. And an even worse friend.

Looking away from Lilly, I reached up to scratch at the back of my head. My hair was soaked. As soaked as my soul.

"Are you saying... I don't need to kill her then?" I asked carefully, trying to stop myself from going too far off topic.

"Hm... I think if you do now it'd just cause more issues than it'd solve. Miraculously," she said with a nod.

Great. "Was kind of hoping to come back and find her throat in Renn's mouth, or something similar. Jokes on me, I guess," I said with a huff.

Lilly laughed. "You don't need to feel so defeated, Vim. She's met quite a few people she's unsure of what to think of these last so many days. Though I fear they'll all end up latching onto her like the rest of us," Lilly said with a huff.

"Hm...? More of them?" I asked.

Lilly nodded. "Regrettably."

Just great! Let me guess most were women, too!

Lilly chuckled at me, likely seeing my distress as I rubbed my temple.

"You'd not laugh if you were in my shoes, Lilly," I said stiffly.

"Oh, I'd be worse off than you. Luckily for me Windle is too much of a coward to even consider cheating on me. Though unlike you, I'd kill my partner if they even thought of it. You though are too nice. You give her too much freedom, Vim, be a man," she said.

"You say that, but if I kept her from being your friend you'd not be happy, would you?" I asked.

"Huh...? Oh... right..." Lilly mumbled as she realized what I meant, and then she nodded. "I guess... yes..." she admitted after a moment.

Hmph.

"So...? I'm used to you showing up looking like this, but how'd this happen here and now Vim? We're the ones who fought a monarch, not you," Lilly then asked with a gesture at me.

I gently shrugged. I honestly wasn't in the mood to talk about it. At all. "I ran into the god who made the monarch you killed," I said.

While studying the house, I noticed one of the windows get opened. It was one on the second floor, the one over the front door. I at first couldn't see who had opened it, but then the white hair made it clear. Merit had opened the window, for whatever reason.

"Uh... Vim?"

I blinked and glanced at Lilly, and found her staring at me with an odd look. For a tiny moment I wondered what was wrong, but then I remembered what I'd just told her. I nodded gently at her, to confirm I had been speaking the truth.

She shifted and glanced around, and then looked back at me. "Should... should I worry?" she asked with an odd tone.

"No. He's dead."

"I... A god is dead... you killed a god. Just now," she said, confirming what I was saying.

"Mhm. The one who had made that monarch. By the way had it been a lion? It had looked like one," I asked.

Lilly didn't answer. She simply stared at me, as if I was speaking in riddles.

For a small moment I held her gaze, and then I looked away from her and sighed. "Really Lilly. You should know better than to be so shocked," I said as I stepped forward.

"How could I not be! Don't just drop such a huge thing on me like that, I don't know what to think or do about it!" she said as she hurried to join me.

We walked up to the stone wall and I half-jumped and half-climbed over it. I made sure not to break it as I did, and I stepped deeper into the village as Lilly too clambered over it.

"Keep it to yourself for now. I'll tell Renn when I get chance alone with her, but make sure you don't let Light know," I said as we headed for the house. The one Renn was in.

Usually I'd go see Plumb, the elder of the village, upon first getting here. But I was in the mood to hear Renn's voice. Plus Light was in there too, and if Plumb and the rest were going to kneel and bow to her then in essence that meant she was the elder of this village, for now at least.

"Keep it to myself? More like try and forget about it! What even happens when you kill a god...? Do you get cursed or anything? Should I not touch you for a bit...?" she asked worriedly.

I smirked at that. "Superstition."

"Don't smirk at me! This is serious..." she groaned.

It was. But not for those kind of reasons.

As we headed for the house, I noticed Merit peer out at us. She gave me a weird look as I glanced up at her, and then she huffed and shook her head... and then shut the window. As if to not have to hear us.

"Is Merit upset with me?" I asked.

"Hm? No? She's being her typical self, of course, but she's actually been in a good mood lately. You should have seen her a couple days ago, Vim, we all made dinner together and she even hummed a tune as she stirred the stew. It made me pause," Lilly said.

Oh...? That was interesting. I wonder where they'd done such a thing... had they taken Lilly into the Animalia building? If it was a few days ago it would have been when they were back in Lumen...

"Wait Merit can cook?" I asked, a little shocked over that.

Lilly snickered at me. "Not just cook, but do it well, too. I don't think I've eaten anything that good in a hundred years," she said.

You were kidding! Well... it's not like I'd know, I guess. I'd always tried not to get too personal with our members, especially the ones who were... well... wanting to jump into my bed, or whatever. I honestly had thought Merit had always relied on others to cook, such as Nasba or Sofia. But maybe that was my fault for assuming. After all everyone had to know how to take care of themselves, at least to a point...

"Renn's a good cook too by the way," Lilly then whispered. Likely because we were nearing the home, and she didn't want to be heard.

"I know. I try not to admit it, though."

"Yes. Terrible for a husband to compliment his wife. Especially over her cooking," Lilly teased.

"It is," I agreed.

Reaching the front door, I sighed softly as I heard the silence behind it.

Lilly stayed back a bit, and I knew it was because she could tell too. Just beyond this door... waiting apprehensively, was Renn.

I reached out and grabbed the door's handle. As I did, I thought of Fly. The last time I had tried to open this door, it had been locked. Because Fly had left the house, via the window, without unlocking it first.

Typically I would knock, but there was no need. Renn already knew I was here. And Lilly was behind me... yet...

Opening the door, I stood up a little straighter as I greeted Renn. She looked about ready to pounce on me, but hesitated once she took in the sight of me.

"What the! Vim!" Renn scowled at me, but laughed all the same.

In the corner of my eye I saw Merit walking down the stairs, holding the rail as she did. She had her typical upset frown on her face. Not far from those stairs was Light, who also had an odd look on her face. She had a towel in her hands, and she was in the middle of using it to wipe them off. Likely because she and Renn had been cooking just now, I could smell the food.

"Hopefully you brought me some extra clothes," I said as I entered the house.

"I didn't!" Renn groaned at me as Light giggled at us.

Stepping up to her as she sighed and studied me, I wondered what she had planned to do before noticing the state of my attire. She had looked about to jump on me, not just hug me but actually jump onto me. Had she planned to kiss me or something?

I wanted to kiss her. To hold her. But I didn't want to do so in front of so many viewers. Particularly these ones.

"Lesson learned, then. You should always have an extra set on you, just in case," I said.

"I will from now on! Sheesh! What'd you do...? And you're soaked..." she groaned as she hesitated. She had been about to step up to me, to touch me, but had then noticed how wet I was.

Reaching out, I gently tapped her outstretched hand. She flinched at my touch, her ears fluttering as if I'd just shocked her with static. I hadn't though.

"Glad to see you're all okay," I said gently.

Renn huffed at me. "Of course we are."

"Considering how close it had come to being worse, I'd like to voice a bit of reason if I can," Light said.

I ignored the saint as I studied the way Renn stared into my eyes. Her golden pupils looked... tired all of a sudden, even though she hadn't been a few moments ago. Had Light's comment done that to her, or something else?

Still... she did look fine. I could feel her heart, it had finally manifested into a real one. It was forming near her ass, it seemed... "Hm..." I reached out, grabbing her by the shoulder. She went stiff as I gently turned her, and I stared down at her rear.

Yep. Right above her tail. Interesting... I wonder if that was just coincidence, or because of the nature of the heart she had originally absorbed?

"Vim...?" Lilly said my name, with an odd tone as she entered the house and shut the door behind her.

"Not only are you not going to hug or kiss her, you're going to act all weird? Maybe I should be glad I never found a way to grab your heart..." Merit said from the stairs, sounding annoyed.

Renn's ears fluttered as she made a tiny noise, something akin to a whine. She must have not liked what Merit had said much, though I knew the real reason for her to react in such a way.

She didn't like it when Merit was self-deprecating like that. At all.

Releasing Renn's shoulder, I patted her gently before I did. "What's for dinner?" I asked.

"Wha!?" Renn made a noise as I turned away, as to head towards the kitchen. I paused to glance back at her, and found her staring at me with wide eyes of shock... as if I'd just accidentally stepped on her tail.

"Hm?"

"By the gods he's worse than I heard..." Light said with a sigh.

Frowning at that, I glanced at Light and found her walking away. She was shaking her head, as if not able to watch the scene before her anymore.

Merit too sighed as she continued down the stairs, no longer seemingly willing to watch either. Lilly didn't wait to join them, as she went to putting her soaked coat onto a rack. "I don't know why anyone's surprised. Vim's still Vim, no matter how much she changes him," Lilly said.

"Because it's disappointing. It makes me feel sad for her," Merit said as she walked over to stand next to Renn... who was glaring at me.

Shifting a little, I frowned at them all. "Wait... I'm not forgetting anything, guys..." I said, hoping to defend myself.

"Obviously you are!" Renn shouted at me. She was now angry, and it showed.

"I'm not! I just don't want to do it in front of them!" I said back.

The house went quiet, and I realized I'd shouted a tad too loud. I coughed a bit, and made sure to keep myself in check for any further outbursts... hopefully no one else came over to find out what was going on, there were a few houses close enough to have heard me just now... I already had an audience, I didn't need to make it worse for myself.

"Now I'm jealous again!" Light shouted behind me, sounding defeated.

Lilly and Merit also both shook their heads, with Merit actually reaching up to cover her face as if embarrassed... And Renn gave me a beautiful smile, as if forgiving me for everything I've ever done in my life. All my mistakes and faults, until now and forevermore.

Which only made me regret not just kissing her in greeting as they had all expected me to.

Chapter 517 Renn – A Library's Quiet Smell

Closing the heavy door behind me, I smiled at the smell of paper as I entered the library.

The smell made my tail twitch, but I actually liked it. It made me hope that the place we'd make up north, the orphanage, would have a library like this. Or at least an office with lots of books and scrolls too, so I could bask in such a smell often. It was strangely calming, somehow.

Stepping deeper into the library, I glanced around the rather dark place... and wondered why it was so. The roof had windows, the big type, and although the storm was still here it wasn't as bad as it had been earlier. Though... it did seem as if none of the lamps or lanterns were lit, which only allowed the darkness to settle even easier, I guess.

Sniffing gently, I smirked at the smell I was following. It was... almost impossible to detect, amidst the smell of books and the smell of Braid, the one who was usually always here, but his scent was there. Faint. Hidden away. Trying to not be noticed.

But I'd recognize it anywhere. Always would.

Rounding a large bookshelf, my smirk turned into a huge smile as I found the man who had yet to kiss me even though it's been about half a day since he'd returned.

Vim sat at a small wooden table, and had a book in his hand. Although he was sitting at the table, he was not using it. He had turned his chair away from the table, as to rest against it as he held the book up to read from it. It made him look as if he didn't even know what table was supposed to be used for... but honestly I found myself kind of liking the way his leg rested up on his knee, and the way he was leaning back a bit.

Vim always looked relaxed. Even when he wasn't supposed to be. But right now he looked... not really relaxed, but instead comfortable. Though it was odd to think such a thing, his appearance here and now made me think so. Vim was not relaxed. He was comfortable. Which was funny, because not only did those two things go together... Vim also was the very definition of such things, so it shouldn't be too shocking to see him so in the first place.

Seeing him sit like he was, as if he had absolutely zero worries made me feel comfortable myself. As if I was now safe and nothing bad would ever happen again.

Though maybe I was just entranced by him because I loved him, and it's been some time since I'd seen him...

"Where's Braid?" I asked as I stepped up to him.

"Elsewhere," he answered, not taking his eyes off the book he was reading.

I was a tad upset to see him not even glance at me. Sure it's been a handful of hours since he's returned, and we'd been together almost every moment since... but surely he hadn't had his fill of me already, had he? Usually he couldn't keep his eyes off me!

"Did you... scare her away? Or is it just time for the library to close and her to go to sleep?" I asked. It was nightfall, but it had only recently become so.

"Both."

My left ear twitched at his simple answer. More a statement than an answer, really.

Glancing at him, I glared for a moment at his eyes. They didn't even blink as he kept on reading... whatever it was that had his attention so.

Was that book really that important...? More than me? This was the first moment we were alone, wasn't it...? Shouldn't he at least glance at me, to check if I was well? Or if I was naked or not?

Hadn't he himself said he was going to properly greet me when we were alone? It had caused quite a stir back when he had said so. Enough to make me... well... expect something, I guess...

Maybe I shouldn't have.

I blinked at the weird feeling in my chest, and then realized I was being selfish. I pushed the feeling aside, and gently coughed and cleared my throat as I went to sit down across from him. I pulled a chair back a bit, and took a seat. "How was Narli, Vim?" I asked. This had been the first opportunity I had to ask, since I didn't want to bring her up in front of Light. Or anyone else, really, since although Merit and Lilly knew of her I didn't know to what extent they knew of Narli. Or what Vim was willing to speak of in front of them.

"She's alive... but I'm not sure if she's actually okay yet. Something is wrong with her, I don't know how to help her... or if she even can be helped, but she is at least alive for now," he said, still reading the book.

My hands clenched, grabbing my shorts. "That's not what I wanted to hear, Vim," I whispered.

He nodded. "It's not what I want to say, either. But it's the truth. She... got stuck in a prophecy. I'm not really sure how, or why, but it was bad. She had been stuck in the same prophecy for a little over two months. Unconscious the whole time. It nearly killed her," he said.

My eyes narrowed. "I didn't realize that was even a thing that could happen...!"

"It isn't. Wasn't. Until now," he said simply.

Oh no... "So...?"

"So she's awake now. Slowly healing and getting back to normal. I... as I said I don't know how to help her. I plan to talk to Light about it when I get a chance," he said.

I nodded at that. "She does know a lot," I said.

"Hm," he nodded too.

Still... that explained why it had taken him so many weeks to return, then. He had likely stayed there at the Keep for a while to ensure she'd be okay.

Sniffing gently, I shifted a little in my seat as I held back some tears. I now felt horrible.

Here I'd spent the last several hours laughing and smiling, having dinner with Vim and the rest without a worry... I should have asked of Narli's condition sooner. What kind of friend was I?

"Why the frown, Renn?"

Blinking as I looked up, I found Vim finally looking at me. I felt my heart twist a bit, hating myself even more as I tried to push aside my own thoughts for a moment.

I'd been wanting him to glance at me this whole time! And now that he had, he did so as I was about to cry!

"I'm just... I..." I hesitated, since I almost didn't want to say it. But I needed to. If anything for myself. I took a small breath, gulped, and then nodded. "I should have asked sooner. Instead of just laughing and eating without worry, as I just had," I told him.

"Hm... but you know not to mention Narli in front of others. That's not your fault," he said.

"Yes it is. I could have asked without actually mentioning her name, or what she is. I could have just asked if all went well, or something..." I said as my tail squirmed up and on my lap. I grabbed it, squeezing it as if to hurt myself. To punish myself for being so terrible.

"Hmph." Vim huffed at me as he shut the book, rather loudly, and then tossed it onto the table. I glared at it as it bounced, nearly falling off the table thanks to how rashly he had tossed it down.

"Careful," I warned him.

"I think not. It disgusts me," he said.

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Disgusts him...? I reached out to grab the book, and was glad Vim didn't stop me as I did so. I picked it up, found it had nothing on its cover or back and so opened it to a random page.

I didn't recognize the language. "What is it about?" I asked.

"Saints."

Oh... "You're looking for something that relates to Narli's condition," I whispered as I understood.

He nodded as I put the book back down onto the table, gently and with care.

Smiling gently at him, I wondered if he even realized how dedicated he was. He had arrived, gotten new clothes and freshened up... had dinner with us, and spent an hour or so talking to everyone and then had left the house. He had said he had gone to say hello to Plumb, and then had come straight here so Lilly had said.

She had not joined him, but had simply watched him from afar. I wasn't sure if Lilly did it on purpose or not, but she seemed to often stare and study Vim from a distance. I liked to do so too, but I usually couldn't do so for long. I always wanted to run over and talk to him when I did.

Vim had gone straight here once he had a chance... to start searching for a way to help Narli.

He really was a good man. Beyond what we deserved. Beyond what the Society deserved, at least.

"Do you think the answer is here?" I asked as I glanced around us. We were surrounded by shelves of books.

"No. If the answer does exist, it's with someone like Light... or maybe within Celine's writings. These are all basic, and half of them are lies anyway," he said.

Lies? Yet he had tried anyway, all the same. "And your clothes Vim? You said you stopped in Lumen on your way here... had you gone through the town looking half naked like that?" I asked. I'd not believe the guards in that city would have let him be had he entered the city in that condition. They had become... very on guard ever since they had founded their new city-state. Not that Vim cared or would be affected by such things when he was focused.

"No. That uh..." Vim paused a moment, and then he started to stand. I was about to stand too, to join him wherever he wanted to go, but he instead just moved his chair. He re-situated it so he could sit properly and face me, and not at an angle. I sat up a bit straighter as I realized Vim had just decided to have a serious conversation.

I glanced around real quick, trying to listen and smell to make sure we were alone, but knew it was not needed. Vim would not have brought up Narli otherwise.

"I encountered a god, Renn."

Quickly looking back at Vim, I hesitated as I opened my mouth to speak. "Huh...?" was all I was able to get out.

He nodded. "I found the monarch's corpse. The one you killed. Your battle. I had been studying it, making sure it was dead and whatnot, and its creator had showed up. A god named Stance," he said.

My tail spasmed as I quickly tried to comprehend the conversation we were now having. I wasn't sure what to think, so simply just... nodded. "Okay..." I said.

Vim sighed as he leaned forward, resting an elbow on the table. "I was... shocked? To the point I was stunned. I mean... I'd been expecting a god to pop up, ever since your friend's prophecy. But well, not like that, that's for sure. And definitely not one I knew, of all people!" he said with a small shake of his head.

I gulped as I slowly nodded, and remained quiet as he continued.

"He spoke of some kind of curse. That he had failed in some spell he had tried to cast, a long time ago. And thus had been asleep all this time. A part of me didn't believe it, but the rest of me did. He had been acting odd and... I'd encountered other monarchs on the way back here. A crab and a lizard. Like the one you guys faced, they were all weak. Small. Stupid. He had not been able to summon his full power, as if in a weakened state," he explained.

Weakened...!? That monarch had been weak?

Vim gestured at me. "I'm glad he didn't notice you, at least. Or Light. I had planned to get information out of him, so I was going to play along but... well... After a moment he got all weird, and then I think he remembered who I was. So he turned to attack me, to flee from me... and so I killed him."

The room suddenly got very cold. "You killed a god," I said, and I felt as if I hadn't been the one to speak. As if my voice had sounded distant.

He nodded. "I had to. He was making monarchs. Ones attacking people. The lizard I ran into had eaten a whole family, or well, almost a whole family," he said.

"Wait..." I lifted a hand, and blinked a few times as I tried to make sense of what he was saying.

This was more shocking than hearing of Narli's fate! Or the way he had acted so odd when I first saw him! I had been planning to jump on him, as if a child, to tease him... but he had acted so weird, and then had looked at my butt all oddly and then he had even admitted he was too embarrassed to hug or kiss me in front of everyone...!

"Hm... Sorry. Probably should have explained that better, but yeah," Vim said gently.

"You should have warned me! Don't act as if it's something so simple and normal!" I said, my tail squirming like mad. It kept hitting the nearby chair's legs, and was doing so hard enough to make the

chair jolt upon impact. It didn't hurt, but I knew it would if I kept letting it do so. I reached over to push the chair back a bit, out of my tail's reach.

"You okay?" he asked.

"My tail was hitting it," I told him as I looked back at him. "You said his name was Stance?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Odd name for a god..." I said. I couldn't remember any of the gods I knew having such a name. Most of them had names of elements, or were related to something momentous. Like the god of fate, or blood or death.

"This is a real god, not your fake ones," he said with a smirk.

"Vim..." I groaned. I was in no mood for his little jokes!

His smirk softened, and then he nodded. "Sorry. Yes. Stance. A kind of thin man, about my height, with red and blue hair. He was a flamboyant man, thus why his creations were always colorful and weird," he said.

"Like a red cat..." I whispered.

He nodded. "That was actually rather tame for him, honestly... further proof of his abilities failing him, I suppose," he said with a shrug.

"Why... why were they failing him? A curse? What's a curse?" I asked. I'd heard of such things before, but had no idea what they actually were.

"Who knows? I'm glad they were though... otherwise it would have not been as easy to kill him, that's for sure, or you all slaying his creation," he said.

My jaw clenched as I studied Vim who sighed and rested a bit more against the table. He suddenly looked tired.

"Are... are you okay, Vim?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"You fought a god... right? Are you hurt?" I asked.

"Oh. I'm fine. Like I said he had been weakened for some reason, and I had caught him slightly off guard. I'm perfectly fine."

That was good to hear... but also concerning. So this god, this Stance, had been severely weakened and Vim had caught him unawares... yet the battle had still destroyed his clothes to such an extent?

"Are we in danger, Vim?" I asked.

He didn't answer right away. He held my gaze for a moment, and then lightly shrugged as he shook his head. "I don't know Renn. We could be lucky and... Stance could have been a simple fluke. A lone god left behind by an era forgotten. Or he could be an odd indicator of what is to come. I can't answer. Right now I'm... assuming the worst, just because I need to. Because I can," he said.

"What does the worst entail?" I asked softly.

Vim didn't say anything. He simply stared at me.

Which told me all I needed to know.

"What do we do then, Vim...?" I asked.

"For now? We deal with our own. To face that which even the world cannot handle, we first have to have a foundation we can trust. Before cleaning the streets outside one must first have a clean home within," he said with a nod.

"A... clean home?" I asked. Was he saying we were going to go make a home? And make sure it was clean?

He nodded. "It's time I properly addressed the Society. Or well... my position in it. And I think it's time you and I have a real conversation... about many things," he said.

My tense body suddenly relaxed. My shoulders slumped, and my eyes once again threatened to fill with tears. "Really...?" I asked, almost unable to believe it.

He nodded. "I'm sorry, Renn. For not being better. I'll... try to be better. Again. From now on."

Sniffing I nodded. "Okay. Me too."

"You've been fine Renn. You have nothing to try to better about," he said with a soft smile.

I shook my head. "You have no idea how badly I've been doing...! I've been neglecting people, and so stretched thin, Vim! I've only spent a little time with those like Lamp and Roslyn, and although I helped Reatti with something I feel like I did it poorly... And every day I feel like I'm meeting new people who need help, or I need to better understand... Not to say the least of Lilly and Merit! I owe them so much, and..." I began to ramble as I gestured at him and myself, as my heart cracked open and I felt like just... rambling about all the things I'd done, and thought about, and wanted to talk and ask about...

"One piece at a time, Renn. Together," he said.

Sniffing again, I nodded. "Okay. Yes. Please."

He smirked at me, in a way that made me want to blush. "Can I kiss you now? Merit's coming, and as much as I'd like to solidify to her I'm no longer single, I know how much you don't want me to break..." Vim started to say, but I hushed him as I stood up and clambered over the table, knocking the book off as I did. I didn't give him a chance to finish his sentence, or let Merit's fragile heart get hurt by seeing what happened next.

Chapter 518 Vim – To Enforce Rules

"I want them gone, Vim."

"And they will be. Tomorrow morning," I said simply.

"Light plans on staying here for a week more, at least," Plumb said.

"And she will? What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

The old woman gestured at me, as if I was the one she wanted to exile instead. "They're all in cahoots! Light thinks she can simply say a few words and wave a hand and grant them clemency. I shan't have it!"

I kept a sigh inside as I nodded. "I too have my own grievances with Light's personality, Plumb. You need not tell me of the saint's faults, I deal with them too. That being said, this is my wife and her friends we're talking about. I give you my word I will take them away from here on the morn," I said.

"They've been staying in the home, as they promised..." Braid whispered behind me.

Plumb ignored the librarian as she stepped forward and winced, as if just walking hurt her. Likely did, she was old enough for such a thing. "Please Vim. I know she is your wife. I know... but we have these rules for a reason. It would be one thing to overlook her, a single individual, since I'm the only one who remembers her scent... but this is also Lilly we're talking about. No mention to the fish who has drowned several of our sisters!" Plumb then shook a little, as if suddenly cold.

"I know, Plumb. I do," I said gently.

Plumb nodded. "Thank you Vim. I... I will hold you to your word. I'm going to go pray. For forgiveness," she said as she stepped past me.

"Forgiveness?" I asked. For them?

"For these lost souls. I do what I must, to keep the peace and protect my people... but that does not justify what I am doing. I go to beg my gods for mercy for my cruelty," she said simply as she left.

Braid gave me a look, one of worry, but went to quickly follow Plumb. She was the only one here, and so had taken it on herself to tend to the old woman's needs. She opened the door for the old crone, and then gave me a short bow before following her out of the building.

Sighing at them, I shook my head and looked down to the book I'd been reading.

I was only half way through it. Searching for any knowledge I didn't possess myself. It was important, in my opinion, because Narli's life might depend upon my finding answers for her. Yet now I was in no mood to read anything.

"I understand... I really do... but why do I have to?" I asked myself as I stepped over to the shelf I'd taken the book from. I put it back where I had found it, and wondered if I should just... go get Renn and the rest and leave now.

I probably should. Lilly and Merit were both healed well enough to travel, and Renn hadn't gotten hurt much at all in the first place. A few bruises at best.

But it was not her physical body I worried over...

Lilly and Merit would not be bothered by having to leave. They both knew they were banished. They understood it, and in their case... the two actually found it to be a badge of honor. They were proud over such a thing.

Renn though...?

I sighed again as I wondered how I was going to properly handle this. Would she get angry? Or would she just... get all sad, and snuffle and cry, as we left?

I didn't want her to do either. I wanted Renn to be happy. Pure joy, nothing less.

But what was I to do? Lilly and Merit were banished from here for good reason. Or well, good enough reasons. Renn's banishment I felt was unjustified, but it wasn't my place to actually say or do anything about that. And though I knew Light would happily stand up to defend Renn, and thus Lilly and Merit too by association, I didn't want that either. Last thing I needed was for Renn to fall ever more into Light's good favor. Even if Light was justified in going against Plumb.

Why was it she could do what I couldn't...? It pissed me off.

The door opened, and I turned to watch Lilly enter the library. She shut the door behind her and pulled back the hood of her cloak as she walked over. "Let me guess, we're being told to leave finally," she said.

I nodded. "Likely wasn't able to muster the courage to tell Light, but me? I'm fair game, it seems."

Lilly smirked at that. "Even though she's your wife?"

"Seems such a thing doesn't matter. If anything I applaud her ability to stand by her decisions and beliefs."

Lilly huffed at that as she stepped a little closer, but didn't actually enter the main library area. The floor went from wooden to one layered with rugs, acting something like a carpet, and she was soaked. It was still storming like mad outside.

Even in a place she didn't belong, or like, and was actively being told to leave... she still was kind enough to not ruin their floors. "You think we can leave tonight...? I asked for the night, as to leave in the morning, but now I feel annoyed," I said.

"By the dead gods, yes. Let's go, please," Lilly said with a nod.

"I meant do you think Renn will allow it, Lilly. Not if you and I, or Merit, want to or can," I said, clarifying.

"Oh... well I don't know. Depends on the fuss Light throws up, I guess."

Throws up. What a gross way to describe it.

Stepping towards her, I stopped right where the rugs ended. A few feet from her. Lilly tilted her head at me, and I wondered if she was tall enough to see down onto Renn's head. She was a tad taller than her, and me, though not by much.

"What?" Lilly asked.

"You able to see the little tuft of hair between Renn's ears? The swirl?" I asked as I reached up and lowered my head, to point where it was.

Lilly made an odd noise as she chuckled at me. "Yes. Why?"

"You think it's fur or hair?" I asked.

The smirk that had formed on her face morphed into a frown. "Huh...? Hm..." she pondered it for a moment. "Both, maybe?"

I nodded. That was my conclusion too.

"Wait... you don't know, Vim? Are you saying you've not ever touched her there?"

I hesitated. "I have. Just... not well enough or often enough." I've patted her on the head a few times, but I never did so for long or allowed my fingers to really dig into her hair. Especially near her ears.

Lilly shook her head at me. "You're such an odd man, Vim."

"Hm..." I nodded at that.

She gave me a small smile, as if amused but also disappointed that I'd so readily agree. As she likely thought rude things about me, I glanced around at the library and all its shelves and books.

I'd gone through most of the ones that related to saints, or gods, already. As I'd told Renn, most were not real. Or well, not real in the sense of being correct. Most were simply things written with half-truths that were only half understood. And more than a few were also simply repeated rumors and stories that the authors had heard elsewhere. Not to mention all the ones that were purely theological in nature, written purely as dedication to faith or some form of it.

"Did you... find what you were looking for?" Lilly asked.

"No. I figure I'll go ask Light, while Renn and you all prepare to leave. If she doesn't have an answer I'll search the archives at Telmik. Or... well..." I hesitated, as I realized that meant I'd have to likely also read Celine's tomes and journals. Which meant I'd be exposed to prophecies.

"Yeah, not going to work is it? I'd offer to help, but I don't think even Light will be able to get me into Telmik," she said.

I nodded. "And Randle has to leave it. Shortly. So I'd not be able to ask him for aid..." I said as I wondered what to do. It'd likely take months of searching properly to find the answer, if there even was one, in those endless shelves.

"Why not let Renn and Merit search for you? I know it sickens you something fierce for her to know prophecies and stuff, but she seems to be doing a good job of keeping them secret and separated from what she needs to," Lilly asked.

Wanting to groan, I nodded. "I may yet have to... let me consider other options first though, if I can."

My friend chuckled at me. "Never change Vim."

That's just it. I was. I am. I will.

And it scared me.

Reaching up, I scratched at the back of my head. "Let's go," I decided.

Lilly nodded as she turned and headed for the door. We left the library and headed for the home that we'd all been staying at, Fly's old one, and I was glad to find they were all just sitting around in it. Light, Renn, and Merit were just... relaxing in the kitchen, not doing anything. Not cooking, nor making any grand plans such as taking baths together or anything.

"Oh. That's a look that spells trouble," Light said as I entered the kitchen.

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Renn glanced at me and frowned, and Merit nodded as if she knew it too.

"Renn, we're going to have to leave. Would you please go pack your bags and get ready?" I asked gently.

Her ears fluttered, as Light nearly dropped the cup of tea she'd been drinking. "What?" Renn asked.

I nodded. "You're all rested and healed now. They overlooked your banishments out of kindness, but it is time I enforced them," I said.

"Vim!" Light shouted at me as she stood from her seat, rather briskly.

"You may hold great authority Light, but rules are rules for a reason. And whether any of you like it or not, all three of them are banished from this village. If not for the leniency given, I'd have been forced to remove them myself the minute I showed up," I said.

"Just hold on a second!" Light said, her eye glowing brightly as if about to use one of her abilities.

I shifted a little, and wondered if she'd actually throw more of a fit than Renn. Renn had been shocked at first, but was already calm it seemed. She was now looking at Light with a look of surprise, as if shocked to see and hear her act so over this news.

"Don't you dare try to force your authority on the village. You might win, but it will cost you more than you know," I warned her, since I saw her thoughts in the way her eye was shivering.

"Vim...!" Light groaned at me as Merit chuckled and patted the table, heavily amused.

"Honestly I couldn't ask for a better result. I'll go pack right now," Merit said as she hopped off her chair.

Light looked hurt as she watched the small woman leave the kitchen, and Lilly too turned around to join her. I wasn't really sure how much they had to pack, if anything at all, to be honest.

"Light... Vim is right," Renn then said.

"Not you too Renn!" Light shouted as she turned to look at her.

Renn though simply nodded, staying seated. "Vim's right. If you force the issue... all it will do is cause more grief than needed. Plus he's right. We're all healed and able to travel now. It's only proper."

Light flinched as she reached up and covered her face with her hands. "This can't be happening...!" she groaned.

I studied the saint for a moment, wondering if she was acting like this because of genuine emotion... or because of some prophecy she felt was now going to not come true. After a bit of listening to her groan, and not just outright say something or hurry out of the house to go lay down the law with Plumb and the rest... I decided it was the former.

She'd be fighting harder, or maybe even not get emotional at all, if the current events were in her opinion going the wrong way. That meant all was well, and we could leave.

"Before we leave though, I'd like to speak to you," I said to Light.

Light ignored me for a moment, and then she dropped her hands to her sides as she sighed at me. "What? Not only are you taking my sister away, you want to steal the last few moments I have with her too?" she asked.

Sister...? I tried to ignore that, and the way Renn's ear had twitched happily at hearing it too. "Have you, or anyone you know, ever gotten stuck in a prophecy?" I asked.

Light's entire demeanor changed. She frowned at me, and stood up a bit straighter... as she studied me with a serious look. "Excuse me?" she asked.

That earlier tone of emotion was gone. She had tossed all previous feelings aside, and I now had her whole attention.

"Has any saint ever gotten stuck in a prophecy. For days on end. As if stuck in a nightmare, unable to wake?" I asked again.

Light didn't answer at first. I listened to Merit and Lilly bang around upstairs, and Renn's breathing as she patiently waited for an answer alongside me. And then Light went ahead and sat back down.

I noted the way she sat, and how she grabbed her cup. She was deep in thought, and wasn't even really paying attention to what she was doing. She lifted her cup of tea, but didn't take a drink from it.

Then she turned to look at me again. "I haven't ever heard of such a thing, no," she answered finally.

Not good.

"Is it possible, you think?" I asked.

"I... didn't think it was, Vim. Not until now. As you know our prophecies only last a few minutes at most. No matter how long or how much time passes while within them. They're things of divinity. I... I don't even know why such a thing would happen in the first place. That would be the same as saying the divine power, the ability itself, fails. Which..." Light slowly shook her head.

"Can't happen in the true sense, correct," I said, agreeing with her.

"True sense...?" Renn whispered.

Light turned to look at her, and blinked in a way that told me she had nearly forgotten Renn was even here. That relieved me, honestly, it meant she had actually delved deep into her memories and knowledge to help find an answer. "A divine ability, such as a prophecy or the spell we saints use to heal someone, can't be deactivated once it is used. It cannot work, as in the ability to heal cannot heal an injury for a myriad of reasons, but the ability itself still activates. It still costs us energy, and makes us feel tired. Whether it does anything or not," she explained.

I nodded as Renn glanced at me to confirm her words. "Basically if a prophecy activates, it is seen through. So for one to get stuck in it, is the same as the prophecy not operating properly or failing. Which in theory, isn't possible," I said.

"But..." Renn mumbled, and it was obvious she wanted to ask what that meant then, for Narli.

"I'm to assume this means you actually encountered a saint who had experienced this, or recently heard of such a thing...?" Light then asked me.

"Yes."

"The one you just left to help," she clarified.

"Yes. She had been stuck in the prophecy for two months," I said.

"And... she's still alive? That didn't kill her? Or break her mind?" Light asked, frowning at me with worry.

"Miraculously yes. Alive and fine. For now. But as far as I can tell, as she can tell, there was nothing obvious to point at as for the reason. And... if she had not woken, she would have died. It utterly weakened her, physically. Even with her caretakers constantly keeping an eye on her as she slept, administering food and whatnot," I said.

Renn's eyes narrowed at me, and I knew it was because she was worried I was saying too much. But I had no choice. Light wasn't stupid. She'd have made the connection whether I told her or not. Plus... the more I said, the more she might be able to help me find an answer. Or maybe even prevent it from happening again, to not just Narli but the others.

"This... is terrifying to hear, Vim. You're basically saying saints, all of us, might be in danger," she said softly.

I nodded. "I have more to speak of too, but I don't want to yet distract you from your thought process. Tell me, how would you reason it? Getting stuck in a prophecy?" I asked.

Light sighed as she put her cup of tea down and crossed her arms. "I can't. First off, the prophecies happen so quickly...! To get stuck in one for two months...? Either that means the prophecy lasted in real time or it lasted an eternity. Or... maybe the saint lived it over and over? As if repeating the same dream without end? Or maybe she saw every prophecy she'd ever known and would see all at once...?" Light rambled off some ideas.

Ones that were very close to my own. Which kind of made me feel stupid.

"I was told it was the same prophecy. She..." I hesitated, but knew I had to say it. "She was stuck in darkness. Standing near a pool of glowing water. With whispers all around her. She was stuck there, sitting next to the water, the whole time," I said.

Light shifted as she frowned. "Why... that could be many places. The whirlpools in the south? The alcoves near the islands? Some underground place with algae or something...?" she said as she shrugged.

"That was my line of thinking too."

"The whispers. What were they saying?" she asked.

I shook my head. "She hadn't been able to make heads or tails of them."

Light's frown deepened. "At all...? Then what did she gain from it?"

I shrugged. "As far as I can tell, nothing much. She felt as if the pool of water had stuff within it, as if it was akin to a window and another world was beyond it, per her own words."

"Hm. That too could just be one trying to find meaning in odd shapes and colors," Light said with a shake of the head.

My thoughts as well. I believed Narli had been supposed to either get into the water, or head into the darkness towards the whispers... but she hadn't done so. Though now we'd never know.

For a few moments there was silence, and then Light sighed as she reached out to grab her cup again. She took a small sip, and then turned to look me in the eye. "I know you're keeping her details secret, Vim... probably out of request on her end. But I would suggest you bring her to me. As you know, many of us have the same prophecy many times until it comes to pass. If this prophecy is... some kind of failed one, or broken somehow, then her having it again could threaten her life. She should be near me, and other saints, who can possibly help her should that come to pass again," Light said.

Renn grabbed the edge of the table in front of her as she wordlessly looked at me, eyes full of worry.

"I hear what you're saying, Light. And... to a point I agree with you. But that is not my decision," I said carefully.

She nodded gently at me. "I know. Just... please tell her. Let her know. She'll be safe with me. I vow it."

Nodding back, I heard footsteps coming back down the stairs. Lilly and Merit were done.

"Renn, go pack your bag please."

"But!" Renn argued with me, likely because she wanted to be a part of the rest of the conversation.

Light giggled at us. "It's okay Renn. I know you can hear us from upstairs anyway."

Renn groaned as she glanced between us, suddenly looking as if she was a daughter being told to go to bed by her parents. She then sighed at me and stood up. Her tail squirmed in annoyance as she hurried out of the kitchen.

"Also I need a favor, Light," I said as I ignored Lilly and Merit's teasing of Renn. They had brought down her bags and clothes for her, it seemed, and had met her before the stairs.

"Hm? I don't know if I'm in the mood to fulfill it, considering you just stole her from me."

"Please," I scoffed. I stepped over to the nearby table that was against the wall, near the door that led to the pantry. I picked up a kettle, one that wasn't too warm anymore but not so cold it couldn't be drunk. I used it to fill her cup back up, to which she smirked at.

"If you have any other prophecies of monarchs... please inform me immediately. Also, I'd like for you to ask all your people, all of them, to start keeping track of any rumors they hear of such things too," I said.

Light shifted a little. "I'd... always tell you of monarchs, Vim. When I can. You know that. But... why the rumor thing?"

"Because I've ran into three monarchs in less than three months," I stated.

Light's eye brightened up as her mouth gaped open a bit. "You're kidding...!" she said.

I shook my head. "I wish I was. I've asked Brandy and Gerald to keep an ear out for me too. As too I'll ask others. Plus... well..." I placed the kettle back down and sighed. "Landi had a monarch near her kingdom. And although the creatures that ransacked Lumen weren't monarchs, I'm starting to question if I had somehow been mistaken," I said. I didn't want to admit it aloud, since then I'd have to admit why I thought so... but I now believed those monarchs had been some kind of failed summoning, monarchs but not. Though if they were created by Stance as well was another thing entirely. He had said he had made only four since waking up, but... well... he had also been partially insane. And maybe he'd not classify those plant-like things as monarchs, since they'd not had hearts? Just as I had?

But then I also had to wonder about a time-line issue in that case. Stance claimed he had only woken up a few months ago. Those creatures in Lumen had been down in those sewers for decades. At least. The time didn't add up.

Light sighed as she took a drink of the tea I'd just poured for her. Once she finished she nodded. "I'll do so, Vim. Though only in exchange for a favor in return."

"Hm?"

"Please. Ask that saint to come to me. I beg you," she said seriously.

Ah... I nodded. "I would have told her of your offer without such a request, Light. I'm not a fool. I may not like saints, but that does not mean I would willingly do something that would result in one's death. And by not telling her such a thing, that'd be the same as withholding a cure, or at least a possible one, so I'd not do so." Not to mention Narli was Renn's dear friend. And I pitied the poor girl myself. I'd not discount a way to help her, even if it meant bringing her to this web of trouble.

She nodded gently at me. "Thank you. And... please take care of Rennalee for me. Though we'll only be separated for a few weeks, I know when you're involved how much can happen in such a short time," she said with a sigh.

"A few weeks...? I'm sorry Light, but I plan to head back west. And you plan to head north. We're going different directions," I said with a small smirk, as if I'd just won a battle.

She smirked back at me, knowingly. "Keep telling yourself that."

Chapter 519 Renn – To Storm Back To Lumen

Now this was new.

Smiling happily, I studied the backs of the people I loved.

Vim was far ahead. Giving us space, as he kindly did during such moments. Lilly and Merit were just in front of me, bickering about a piece of dried meat that Lilly had just eaten. It had supposedly been Merit's, and she had been saving it all this time.

We were walking on a dirt road, not the one we'd traveled on a few days ago or the one Reatti and I had traveled on the last time I was here. This road was small, not for carts or horses but people. Plus it was near the ocean. I couldn't see it, but I could smell the sea. It made me feel comfortable.

Since we were on a path I wasn't familiar with, I wasn't entirely sure how far we were from Lumen but I knew it couldn't be more than a day away from us. Actually I was a little surprised I couldn't see the huge white walls from here, we weren't in a forest and instead traveling through huge fields of grass and small hills. Plus there was an odd lack of people too. Usually this close to the city the roads were busy, to the point it was annoying. Yet we'd only passed a couple people so far today.

"What! So you did have more!" Lilly shouted, and I giggled as I watched her step over to Merit as to try and grab another piece of dried meat. Merit made a noise as she stepped away, hurriedly shoving the pieces of meat into her mouth as she did. Where'd she even get them?

I laughed as I watched Lilly actually try and pry one of the pieces of meat from Merit's mouth. Merit's mouth must have been too tiny, because Lilly was able to grab at a piece that stuck out from it. Lilly pried it away, smirking as she hurriedly put it into her own mouth and chewed away.

Merit mumbled angrily at Lilly as she chewed her own stuffed mouth, and while the two glared at one another... I found the world growing blurry.

Reaching up, I quickly cleaned my eyes of tears before anyone noticed. Luckily neither Merit or Lilly did, being so focused on one another, and I bit back a sad sigh that wanted to escape.

How lovely. I couldn't explain how wonderful the moment was, or the people before me, but I wished I was capable of doing so.

These two were a far cry from those at the Bell Church. Or Lumen. Or Telmik or... well...

Mostly everywhere else. And I wasn't sure what to do about it.

I wanted to thank them somehow. Both Merit and Lilly had not only risked their lives to help me, to come with me and Light, but they were just... genuinely good people. People, who had their own troubles and worries, yet were able to put such sorrow and troubles aside all the same when needed.

I sniffed, and was a tad surprised to see only Vim glance back at me. I smiled at him, to let him know I was okay, but then I had to look away from him as Merit hurried forward a bit, all the while trying to keep Lilly from grabbing another one of her pieces of food.

Smirking at them, I watched as Lilly chased Merit as if they were children. They ran up to Vim, and around him, as Merit tried to use him as a shield against the food thief. Yet as active as they were, and as hard as Merit was trying... I couldn't help but notice that every so often Lilly was able to snatch a piece from her.

"Gosh! Vim!" Merit shouted for him to help as she dropped a piece of meat. One that Lilly promptly picked up and laughed at as she quickly went to eating it.

"Just how much do you have in that little bag? Did you bring nothing but food with you?" Vim asked with a sigh.

I picked up my pace as to join them. Since they had ran ahead, and left me behind, there was now a bit of a distance. The kind that would have made hearing their voices difficult, with my hat on, usually. Even though I heard them well enough. Which was starting to be something that bothered me, since I'd been noticing it a lot lately.

My hearing has either improved, or something else was at play. And well... the reason was probably obvious...

Shifting a little as I slowed to my normal walking pace, a few feet behind Vim, I watched as Merit ran off down the path. Lilly followed in chase, and I couldn't help but wonder if they always did such things like this. They had bickered quite a bit during our trip to the Bell Church, but it hadn't been like this.

"Are they always like this?" I asked Vim, since he'd know best.

He didn't glance back at me as he nodded. "Usually."

How lovely... I hope that I too can keep such a pure and childish relationship with them, even hundreds of years from now.

"What bothered your heart Renn...? If it's the banishment, think nothing of it. You did not inherit your ancestor's sins. They aren't yours to bear," Vim then said.

Although I should have been a tad surprised... I wasn't. My heart, which was already about to burst, swelled even more. "Actually... it was just them. I love them, Vim," I said softly as Merit yelped out as Lilly grabbed her by the waist and lifted her, as to grab at her pouch.

I laughed as I watched Merit throw her own bag, the one with the meat in it. It went flying off the path and over a nearby hill. "Ha!" she shouted at Lilly who was staring out at the distance, flummoxed.

She had just tossed it. Away. Just so Lilly couldn't get it.

Unable to contain my smirk as I watched Lilly toss Merit aside, in the other direction, and then run off in pursuit of the pouch I couldn't help but shake my head in utter awe as Merit wordlessly shouted while in the air and once landed ran off to join her.

"They're like children!" I said happily.

"More like they want to fight but know better than to actually do so," Vim said simply.

"Fight...? They're not fighting Vim. This is obviously how they show their love," I said happily.

He finally turned a bit to glance at me. And he did so in a way that made me feel a little silly. Did he not see it? Surely not, right?

Vim slowed a bit, as to walk side-by-side with me as I watched Lilly run over the hill and out of sight. Merit was but a moment behind.

"Love?" he asked.

I nodded, happily to do so. "Merit hates being touched! Yet she didn't stop Lilly from lifting her at all! Let alone take food from her own mouth! I bet there's less than a handful of people Merit is so comfortable with! To say no least of Lilly, who is the same! She won't even touch food that others have touched, yet she'll eat something that had just been in Merit's mouth?"

My wise, but sometimes slow, husband gave me a weird look as he too turned to watch them. They were now running along the hill, with Merit the one in chase this time. Lilly had found the pouch first and was rummaging around in it.

"Why aren't you playing with them?" Vim then asked, as if he no longer wanted to talk about the previous topic.

"Hm...? Because this is their moment. Plus I'm more than happy to just watch, this is wonderful," I said.

"Wonderful," he scoffed.

It was.

For a few moments we walked in silence as we watched Lilly and Merit run off a bit more. They became distant, shouting at each other as they did.

"If they're such good friends, Vim... why don't they stay near one another?" I asked softly.

"Lilly doesn't let anyone live with her and her family, Renn. It's one thing for a short time, but not forever."

"Then... why doesn't Merit just live nearby? Close enough they can visit each other more often?"

"What of her friends in Lumen?" Vim asked.

"Hm... right..." I nodded gently at that. She did seem to really like Sofia...

"Plus, Merit likes to feel like she's doing something worthwhile. Her staying in Lumen lets her feel useful. And... as far as I can tell, she doesn't like to be alone either," Vim said.

"Then... why not live with Nasba?" I asked. Weren't those two super close? Plus then she could be a protector of their little village too, so that'd also fulfill Merit's desire to be doing something with a sense of purpose.

"She doesn't like their little village. Too many humans," he said.

I knew well of Merit's distaste for humans, but I honestly didn't think it was that bad. She helped and took care of Lamp and Roslyn's people for me after all. "Yet she lives in the capital of human commerce," I said.

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"Not in her perspective. To her, she lives in the Society. The company building. In her eyes that is not full of humans, the area around it is," he explained.

I nodded slowly as I understood his meaning. "Seems an odd way to look at it. As if more an excuse than not," I said.

"It kind of is. Honestly I think she just likes being where it's busy. Nasba's village is noisy, but nothing ever interesting happens there," he said.

That too was likely a part of it... but...

Glancing at Vim, I smiled as I realized the real reason she likely had chosen Lumen to call home after her kingdom's downfall. Did he even realize? Or did he and he was simply being nice and not saying it aloud, I wonder?

"Um... since we finally got a small moment alone, Vim, can I ask something?" I asked the man who Merit based a large portion of her life around. Lumen was after all like Telmik, a place he frequented the most.

"Hm?"

"Narli. Is she really okay?" He had told me so already, but after our short conversation about it we no longer had an opportunity to be alone. So I hadn't gotten to hear more than what little he'd already said. And I hadn't liked how he had said he wasn't really sure if she was going to be okay or not.

He frowned but nodded. "For now, as I said. I'm... hoping the ailment that had bothered her is now gone, so there's no more need to worry. But we'll have to wait and see," he said.

"You... you think the god you just killed had something to do with it?" I asked, understanding his meaning.

He nodded. "I do. She had been hearing whispers. As if someone calling out for help, that they were lost. He had been searching for other gods, and his abilities were acting all weird. I think she must have somehow heard his calls for help," he explained.

I hummed at that. "Monarchs are their servants, right?" I asked.

He nodded.

"And saints are kind of like monarchs... does that mean they're supposed to be servants too?" I asked.

"In a way. Saints are those born without a heart, but connected to a conduit anyway. If you're worried your daughter will have to suffer in such a way, don't. I'd not let it happen even if it was like that," he said.

I flushed a little, since I had not realized he'd so readily realize my true worry from my questions. "She'll be your daughter too Vim, stop calling her just mine," I said, trying to make him share in this strange and sudden embarrassment I felt. That had not been the first time he spoke of her in such a way. The first few times I'd not taken much notice, but now it was starting to worry me that he spoke of her in such a way.

He smirked and nodded. "We'll see."

"There's no seeing nothing!" I said with a small jab to his arm. Why would he even say such a thing!

"How are you feeling by the way?" he then asked.

"Well now my knuckles hurt," I said as I glanced down to my left hand, the one I'd just hit him with. Had I hit his elbow or something?

He sighed at me. "What'd you do...?" he asked as he slowed his walking and grabbed my hand. He lifted it and my ears fluttered under my hat at his touch. Not just because it had hurt a little, but because this was the first time we'd held hands in a long time. How long had it been...? Weeks and weeks...

"You dislocated it. Here I'll reset it, take a small breath," he said as he pushed my hand open a bit and grabbed my middle finger.

"Wait..." I tensed up a bit as I stopped walking, and then before I could say or do anything Vim simply tugged on my finger. In a blink I felt it pop back into place, and I winced again. That had hurt more than it had hitting him!

"A good sign, actually," he said as he studied my hand. I had grabbed his with my own, and dug a few fingernails into him as I did.

"How so...?" I asked angrily. My finger hurt now.

"You hit me with a lot of strength. More than you realized, I think. You had just been playing with me, yet had hit me hard enough that it would have broken a normal man's arm... maybe even worse," he said.

"I... I did?" I asked. I had? Really?

"Hm... why not squeeze. Here, with your other hand, squeeze my wrist as hard as you can," he said as he offered me his other hand.

Studying him for a moment, I didn't need to wonder what he meant or why he was doing this. He wanted to see how strong I was.

Grabbing his wrist, I shifted a bit and wondered if I really should grab with all my strength. Vim could heal, better than anyone, but that didn't mean I wanted to hurt him. "You sure?" I asked.

He smirked at me and simply nodded.

"Okay..." I mumbled, and then with a small breath I went ahead and squeezed.

Then I squeezed harder. And harder... until I was straining myself.

Thankfully I didn't feel any of his bones shatter or break, but I stopped trying a few moments after using all my strength. Just in case, so I didn't actually harm him.

"Hm..." Vim studied me as I released his wrist, and I narrowed my eyes at the white and red hand-print upon him. You could see where parts of his skin had gotten pinched from my grip, between my fingers. It looked like it was already starting to bruise, too.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yes. You're stronger, Renn. By a noticeable amount," he said simply as he lowered his hand, uncaring of the bruise that was forming upon it.

"Think so...?" I asked as I tilted my head at him.

He nodded. "Yes. It's a good sign. It means you're quickly adapting... and in fact, might even be ready for another already," he said.

"Another...? Just how many am I going to eat?" I asked.

"Something tells me they're not talking about food."

I startled, and turned to find Lilly and Merit. They stood only a few feet away, and the both were staring at Vim and I as if we were some kind of roadside attraction.

When'd they get here!?! They had just been far down the road chasing each other! And now they both had a handful of dried meat, and were both munching on them. As if they'd suddenly decided to share evenly.

"I speak of hearts, of course," Vim said simply.

Merit's eyes widened as Lilly sighed. "Perks of being his wife, I guess," the owl complained.

"Perk? It's not a perk! Vim!" Merit stepped closer and yelled at him.

Vim didn't even blink as he looked down at her. "It's not... but it was, and is, a necessity. To keep her safe," he said.

"By making her a walking target to saints and monarchs alike?" Merit asked angrily as she gestured at me.

Oh my...! She was worried for me! I felt warm again as I watched Merit angrily squeeze the dried meat in her hand. She looked like she was about to pick a fight with Vim, and do everything in her power to win it. I quickly decided if she did I'd help her out, if I could.

"I told you that I'd done it, Merit," I said gently. We'd already talked a few times about it. Why was she suddenly acting as if she'd never heard of it until now?

"Just be quiet a moment, Renn. I'm trying to make him realize how cruel he is to you," Merit said without a glance to me.

I shut my mouth as I nodded softly.

"You'd rather I leave her undefended?" Vim asked her.

"I'd rather you not involve her in your foolish schemes at all! If she needs protection, I'll protect her!" Merit shouted.

"Not to argue your point, Merit, but you might be missing a tiny but important detail," Lilly said with a mouthful.

Merit didn't look away from Vim. She kept glaring at him even as she turned a bit, as if to glance at Lilly for further information.

Lilly swallowed what was in her mouth and nodded. "He encountered a god on the way back. The same one who made the monarch we killed," she told Merit.

Merit finally looked away from Vim. She spun to look at Lilly, confirmed her words as truth by the way Lilly held her gaze... and then she spun back around to look at me.

I nodded, but then shrugged. "I uh... yes. That's what Vim said. Though I uh... I'll be honest I'm still not entirely sure what that entails," I said quickly. That too had been a topic I had planned to talk in length with Vim about, once I had the opportunity. In fact I'd just been about to ask more about this Stance before I had hurt myself.

Merit's eyes held my own for a moment... and then they seemed to become shimmery. A huge frown formed on her face as she looked away and down to the path we all stood upon. I shifted at the sight of her, who suddenly looked as if her heart had just broken.

"Merit...?" I whispered as I stepped forward. Was that gleam I just saw a tear falling from her face? Surely not, right?

Then Merit stepped forward. With more speed than I'd ever seen her do... and she hit Vim. With both arms outstretched, she stepped right up to him and pushed him. The act had looked childish; thanks to her appearance... but in the blink of an eye it became serious as Vim was actually sent flying backward.

I yelped as I turned to watch Vim fly off a dozen or so feet and fall backward. He landed harshly on the dirt path, rolled a bit, and then came to an abrupt stop. If the ground hadn't been damp from the recent storm, there would have likely been a huge cloud of dust and dirt from the commotion.

Stunned at the sight, I couldn't even think straight as I watched Vim groan and slowly push himself to his feet.

"Blasted fool!" Merit screamed at him... and then she spun around and stomped off. Heading down the path with heavy and quick steps.

My heart thumped like mad as I tried to understand what had just happened... and I couldn't comprehend it even as Vim stood back up and sighed. "I deserved that," he said as he brushed some dirt off.

"You did," Lilly agreed.

Groaning at the two, and how calm they were being, I turned to see Merit. She was now a ways down the path, though it seemed her walking had slowed a bit in its pace.

"She's fine, Renn. She's probably just crying. She's been holding that one in since we all showed up in Lumen the other day," Lilly said gently, noticing my gaze.

"Mhm... I think she ruptured my kidney..." Vim groaned as he stepped over to us, rubbing his side.

"Is... is she angry that I absorbed a heart...? Is it actually something bad?" I asked.

Lilly shook her head. "No, Renn. It's not. It will keep you safe, healthier, and let you live longer. She's just upset because she's realized how dangerous your life is," Lilly said.

"Dangerous...?" I asked. Was it? I didn't feel as if it was any more dangerous than anyone else's, to be honest. In fact, thanks to Vim always being near me, I wasn't sure if I was ever in danger at all as it was.

"Vim would have never allowed you to have a heart, had he not thought it necessary. In other words, your life is one that not even he can shield you from. She's just upset that her first friend in so long is someone who needs such a thing, is all," Lilly said.

"You speak so certainly," Vim said with a huff. He sounded a tiny bit strained, as if he was struggling to breathe. Maybe Merit had actually hurt him that badly...? She was far stronger than I thought, wasn't she?

Lilly scoffed at Vim. "Because I am certain? It's the same thought process I've had all this time, myself," Lilly said as she shook her head at him and turned around... and started heading for Merit.

I didn't hesitate to step forward, to join her. Before I did, I turned to glare at the man who suddenly looked tired.

"You better apologize to her later," I said.

Vim didn't sigh, he simply nodded.

Nodding back I picked up my pace and hurried after Lilly, who in turn was hurrying to Merit.

Leaving Vim behind, who coughed, I joined my friends... my family, as we headed back to Lumen.

Chapter 520 Vim – Merit's Rooftop

For once I had nothing to do.

Or well, nothing pressing that needed to be addressed at the location I was presently at. I myself, personally, had lots to do. More than I wanted to admit. But Vim the protector? Well...

Walking up the stairs, heading for the roof, I wondered where I should begin first.

Should I have us just leave...? Head back west? Should I head south, completing my circuit that I originally set upon when last leaving Telmik? Should I sit here and wait for Light, as she so readily implied I'd do with utter confidence?

Personally I wanted to burn it all down, but if I did that I'd never hear the end of it from Renn, so...

Opening the door to the roof, I breathed in the rather chilly air as I stepped out onto it. I shut the door behind me, and glanced around as I typically did when entering a new location. To scan for people, or issues, or enemies... or gods and monarchs... and instead, oddly enough, found Merit.

Frowning at the small creature, I glanced around the roof again.

Renn wasn't here. And I hadn't actually needed to look around to confirm that. I felt Renn. She was a few floors below. I think she was with Reatti, or at least that was who I had last seen her with.

But Merit being on the roof of the Animalia Company building was not odd. She liked to grow flowers and plants, and up here was the largest gardens. But... she wasn't at the gardens. They were on the other side of the roof. Instead she was sitting at one of the smaller tables. Under one of the canopies, near an area where one could cook with a sunken barbecue in the floor. She wasn't cooking though, and good thing since it was lightly drizzling.

Walking over to her, I wondered if she was up here pouting or something. As far as I was aware, she's not really left Renn's side since we'd arrived. Yet here she was... sitting at a table in silence up here all alone, without any seeming reason or purpose.

Though she might just be sitting alone and resting. For all I knew she'd just spent the last few hours working on the nearby garden or something and had just come over here to sit for a moment.

"What do you want?" Merit asked without looking at me as I stepped under the gazebo-like canopy.

"I should be the one asking that. Why are you here in my hidey-place?" I asked.

"Hidey place...?" Merit finally glanced up at me. Her hair was soaked, which I just now noticed, as I went to sit at the table across from her. As I sat, I sighed a bit and glanced up at the gazebo. It wasn't leaking, anywhere, which meant that Merit had likely been under the rain doing something else. Maybe my earlier assumption that she'd been working in the garden all this time had been correct.

"So? Why aren't you clinging to Renn? You know that we're going to leave soon, don't you?" I asked.

Merit huffed. "No you're not. Light said so."

"Light also says Renn's pregnant. She's as often wrong as gods are," I said, thinking of Stance.

The young looking Merit gave me a weird look. "You sure do say weird things at weird times. Do you do that unintentionally, or are you trying to get me to ask about it?" she asked.

"Actually it's because I had been thinking of the god I'd just vented some of my frustration upon. Pay it no heed," I said.

She huffed at me. "And you wonder why Renn slept with me last night and not you!"

My eye twitched. I had in fact wondered why that had happened. We had returned yesterday from the Bell Church, and so I had fully expected her and I to... well... enjoy our night together. I'd been gone all this time, and although we had spent a day at the Bell Church we had been separated. She had spent the night with Light, Lilly and Merit instead of me.

Didn't she miss me? "Maybe I hadn't been gone long enough for her to miss me," I mumbled.

"Oh shut it. She missed you so much it made her sick. Gods! You're insufferable!" Merit sounded like she wanted to spit at me as she leaned against the table and rested her head on her hands, looking like an exasperated child.

"Has she been sleeping, Merit?" I asked, ignoring her snide comment.

"Hm...? Not enough. She slept last night, actually slept, for I think the first time since you left. She even snored for once," she said.

Oh? That was good to hear. "Her snores are cute, huh?"

"They are. By the way she likes to snuggle. Does she hold you in her sleep too?"

"Of course she does?" Was she actually asking that?

Merit's nose twitched as she "Tsk'd."

Smiling at how offended she looked over the fact I was shown such affection too, I wondered what she'd think if I told her that Renn likely held anyone she slept with. Though... well...

I frowned at that thought. In my opinion, Renn did hold anyone she slept with. I'd seen her sleep with many people during our travels, but there was a flaw in that anecdotal perspective. Renn, when she did sleep with those other than me, did so with those she considered her friends. Merit. Fly. Lomi, or Angie. In fact...

"What are you thinking...? It better not be anything crude or I'm going to...!" Merit threatened me as I slowly shook my head at her.

"I just realized that Renn actually doesn't sleep with just anyone. She only sleeps with those she cherishes, like you," I said as I thought about it.

Merit sat up a bit straighter, her eyes which had been narrowed and glaring at me were now wide and open.

I nodded after a few more moments of thinking about it. Yes. Renn only slept with those she loved. Or saw as children, like Lomi or Angie. Other than the children, she's really not slept with anyone else has she? Narli? But was Narli a child in her eyes or not? She was in mine. Then there was Riz at Secca... She

had also spent a night with Sharp once while we were at the Crypt, but I wasn't sure if they had even slept that night. I think they had just stood up all night talking as they made bandages...

A small sniff made me leave my thoughts as I glanced across the table and found Merit sighed as she wiped her face. I tried to pretend that she did so because of her wet hair, for her sake.

"While I was gone... she didn't sleep with Lamp or those pirates had she?" I asked carefully.

Merit glared at me. "Huh? No. In fact she didn't spend much time with them at all. She was upset over it. Light and the others kept bothering her," Merit said, sounding angry again. Odds are she knew I had noticed her earlier tears.

"That's something, at least... though not. What is worse, you think? Her having a tryst with a human or getting involved with Light?" I asked.

"Tryst...? Are you saying that just to be funny, or are you serious? She loves those humans, but not in that way Vim," Merit said.

Says you. Renn's perception of love was a little odd. She had spent a lifetime with that one human, Nory, and although it had not been an outright physical relationship it had been nearly everything else. Plus Renn, if she even realized it or not I didn't know, actually seemed to have zero interest in men. She always seemed to gravitate towards women and children... It was why I usually worried a little whenever she met a woman she found interesting, or pretty. I couldn't see Renn ever cheating on me with another man, but a good woman? Would happen in an instant if I wasn't careful. Maybe.

I kept such thoughts to myself though as Merit leaned back in her chair a bit. "A sad thought. Renn falling for a human. Considering she had before," Merit said.

Oh? So Merit had known already. Figured. Did Renn not keep anything secret? "She hadn't realized how many of us existed. To her, before the Society, she had been alone nearly. Or may as well have been," I said.

She nodded. "And considering her family, one cannot blame her. Kind of funny, we grew up in the same cesspool even though so different," Merit mumbled.

I gently nodded at that. That was strangely on the nose, wasn't it? But it was also correct. Renn had avoided anything more than physical abuse from her family, unlike Merit, but Renn's sisters hadn't. And thus she too had known and experienced it, even if from a distance.

"Many of our people had suffered like you two, Merit. At least back then," I said gently.

"Mhm... and now instead of such cruelty, we instead suffer idiots," she said.

I noted how seriously she had said that. It made me wonder if Merit would have preferred a world where people were brutes and cruel, but not stupid, over the one we had now. Though it was likely more that she was simply including me in that group of supposed idiots, instead.

For a few moments only the rain spoke, and then Merit gestured lightly at me. "Can I ask something, Vim?"

"Considering you usually never ask for permission... I'll say yes, with a lot of wary safeguards in place," I said with a nod.

She smirked at me. "Did you know? Before meeting her?" she asked.

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My eyes narrowed at her, and I felt as if I should have been more serious with my joke just now. Now I really was on guard.

"No, Merit. I had not known about Renn at all."

She held my gaze for a moment, and then slowly nodded. "Okay," she softly said.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed and looked away from her. Her gaze hurt. I didn't like how relieved, and pained, she looked over my answer. "If I had known, I would have avoided her. Completely," I said.

"I figured. I still... wanted to ask. Because as much as I hate prophecies too, I think I'd have still clung to her all the same," Merit said.

Yeah, well I'm not you.

I didn't say such a thing though, and simply shrugged. "Honestly who is to say, Merit? I say such a thing with such confidence... but who am I to know? Maybe I would have fallen for her even harder, faster, had I known? And then maybe Light's stupid prophecy of her being pregnant already would be reality and not a fantasy," I said.

"What are you going to do about that, by the way?"

"About what? Their prophecies concerning her and her children?" I asked, fearing having to answer.

"Well... yes, both. But I more so meant what are you going to do when Light realizes she isn't? She's tricked and believes it right now, somehow, but it won't take her long to see through the veil. What then?" Merit asked.

I nodded slowly as I reached up to scratch at the side of my head. I had felt a drop of rain just now, which I wasn't sure how I'd gotten hit by it. There wasn't even much wind. Maybe the gazebo was leaking after all. "I'm hoping we're long gone before she has a chance to. And when it comes time for them to meet again in person...? Well... I'll deal with it then, I hope," I said. Honestly I wasn't really sure how to fix that dilemma at the moment.

I had no idea how Light would act once she realized... but something told me it wasn't going to be good.

"Hmph. For a man who can kill a god without batting an eye, you sure are a coward," she said.

Oh. She was asking why I didn't just fix it in a more direct, proper, way.

"Either try to keep her out of my bed, or let me drag her into it. Don't do both," I said.

Merit's mouth trembled a bit. "I'm trying my best here, damn it!" she shouted at me.

"So am I!"

She growled at me a moment, and then relaxed and sighed. "Why are we such broken failures, Vim...?" she mumbled in defeat.

"Because that's all anyone is? I dare you to name one person who actually has their shit together," I said with a light gesture around us.

"Renn?"

I scoffed at that. "Renn's as much a mess as you, Merit. She just doesn't let her fractures and cracks stop her from loving every moment of this haphazard life we live," I said.

She lowered her head a bit as she sniffed. "Just because it's true doesn't mean you have to say it so directly like that," she said.

"Sorry," I apologized.

Merit took a deep breath and sighed it out. As she did some white haze came from her, telling me she had gone a little cold inside. My words had actually hurt her, and now I felt bad. "I can't blame you, Vim... I'd have chosen her over me too," she then said.

Oh boy...

"If you try to steal her from me..." I said gently.

She laughed at me. "Luckily for you, I don't want her in that way. I don't like women, Vim, they are too much like me," she said.

Smirking at her, I nodded. "I like women too. For the same reason."

"Like you...?" she asked with an odd look, as she tried to understand me.

"I'm saying because they're not like me at all, Merit. Not that I'm like them," I said, correcting her misunderstanding.

For a moment Merit studied me, and then she smiled and snickered. "Right? You're a bumbling mess, aren't you?"

I am.

For a long moment we sat in silence, as Merit gently smiled at me... and then she sighed and nodded. "You're not going to apologize at all, are you?"

"Why should I? It'd just be insulting. Even if I genuinely meant it, you know how worthless the words will mean. I can't love you Merit, I won't. I'll be honest I'm not even sure why I love Renn, I just do. And no, don't you dare say it's because of fate... because that reality is starting to really dig into my soul and it hurts and makes me want to flood the world again," I said with a groan at the thought.

Merit's smile shifted a bit as she tilted her head. "You flooded the world once?"

"On accident. And it wasn't really me; it was the god I was fighting at the time." And it hadn't been the whole world... just most of it.

"Hm... are you a god, Vim?" Merit then asked.

I shook my head. "No. You've not asked that in a long time... why? Is Renn filling your head with odd ideas?" I asked, thinking of all the topics and conversations Renn's had lately with those like Meriah and Rapti.

Actually, where was Meriah...? She should be here by now.

"Hm? Renn doesn't even think you're a monarch or special in that way at all. She actually thinks you might be some weird human or something," Merit said as she glanced down at herself, and then went to do something beneath the table. Maybe rummage in her pocket or something.

"A human...?" I asked, a little stunned to hear so. Really?

"That or something silly. Like a snail," Merit added.

I blanched at that. Snail...? She was likely thinking of those damned stinky things at Secca, then. That was rude, but kind of hilarious all the same.

"Here." She then placed something on the table. Something round and small.

Ah. Whatever she had been rummaging for. I wonder what it...

The world grew colder as I stared at something impossible. Something that shouldn't exist.

"What...?" I whispered as I stared at what could only be a heart. A monarch's heart.

A red one. But...

"Hm...? It's the heart of that lion. Light wanted it, but I claimed it before she could. Said it goes to the one who slain it, as per your rules, and she wasn't able to say anything about it. I think it was because she was exhausted. She healed Martin and Lilly at the same time, so was barely even able to stay standing let alone argue with me," Merit said with a proud smirk.

Reaching out, I grabbed the small heart... and realized I wasn't mistaking anything.

Bringing it closer to my face, I glared at the thing... and wondered why I didn't feel it at all.

"Vim...?" Merit whispered my name as I tried to comprehend how the thing before me existed.

"This came from that monarch? You're sure?" I asked.

"Yeah...? It's the heart; even Renn mentioned she felt it was. She said it made her hand tingle when she held it," Merit said.

Right...

That had all been before I killed him.

Before Stance supposedly killed all his monarch servants. Before I'd killed him.

"Vim?" Merit asked again, as I then fully enclosed the heart in my hand... and wondered if I could do it now.

The thing wasn't glowing. It had the same familiar swirl inside it, like a tiny storm, but it wasn't glowing. It wasn't warm to the touch. It wasn't thumping as with a heartbeat.

And most importantly, I didn't sense it at all.

I'd not sensed it on Merit before sitting down. I didn't sense it, even with it in my hand... so...

Standing up, I angled the orb away from Merit. I put my own body between her and it, in case something went terribly wrong... and then, right as Merit went to ask what I was doing, I closed my hand around it and squeezed.

The thing shattered before I even put much strength in it. It cracked loudly, and I felt the thing pop into countless tiny pieces in my hand... as Merit hurriedly stood up too.

"Vim!" Merit shouted at me in shock as I turned back towards her... lowered my hand and tilted it, opening it above the middle of the table.

Merit and I both watched reddish pink dust and pieces of what looked like broken glass fall onto the table.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I nodded. "Well... that happened," I said.

"Um... uh... okay. You broke it? Why?" Merit asked as she reached out to touch the remnants of the heart. I watched the way her small finger pushed aside some of the few remaining whole pieces, and the dust they rested upon.

"I've never been able to break a heart, ever," I told her.

Merit stopped messing with the dust and glanced up at me.

I nodded at her. "Yet that heart... this one... had been lacking in something. It felt empty. Dead. So... well..." I shrugged as I gestured at it.

"So you broke it...? Why though? Wasn't it a heart? You and so many people always want them, aren't they special?"

"They are. My... well..." I shifted as I wondered I should actually tell her or not. But then decided it was fine. After all... I'd already realized what was going to happen. Even if Merit hadn't yet herself.

She'd be soon joined to Renn, by the hip nearly. I fully expected her to join us west. Or well, north, once we set up that new location.

Nebi and his family were planning on coming. And now Berri and hers too. So... well... it was only to be expected, in a way.

"Well what? Vim, you just broke a heart!" Merit shouted at me, sounding annoyed.

"The god, his name had been Stance. Before I killed him he killed all the monarchs he'd given birth to. I think that's why this heart was broken. You said Light and Renn sensed it? That it made Renn's hand tingle? That's because she had been holding it before that moment. Before the god... killed his creations," I said.

Merit frowned at me. "I uh... didn't know gods could do that," she said.

"They could do many things. They're gods, Merit," I said simply.

"You always say they hadn't been real gods though! Being able to just... kill all of the life they created sounds very god-like to me!" Merit shouted.

"I know! Wait... let me think..." I raised a hand to quiet her, since I wasn't at all in the mood to have this conversation here and now. Instead... I figured out how to prove this.

Downstairs. The heart of that lizard. It was in the bags.

"Wait! Vim!" Merit shouted angrily at me as I stepped away, to head downstairs.

"I need to verify this," I said simply.

"But...! Gosh!" Merit yelled as I heard the table make noise. I didn't need to glance back to know she was currently trying to gather up the remnants of the heart I'd just crushed.

I'll verify this.

If this was true... if a monarch's heart, its connection to the divine, could be de-activated... that meant there was possibly a way to replicate it.

I could do it too. Somehow. And if I could do that... I could do it for more than just a heart. I could disconnect a saint from their connection. A monarch from its abilities. Maybe even do it to another god outright, and save myself all the trouble.

And even if I couldn't... it'd also help me confirm other things. Such as the fact that Stance hadn't been lying.

His powers had been weakened. Inept. Dull. Cursed, as he called it.

Even if I couldn't replicate the same thing... if I could just figure out how he had been cursed... if I could figure out how to break other gods and monarchs in the same way he had been... then...

"Vim...!" Merit shouted at me as I headed downstairs, with her quickly following after me.

"Let's go run some tests, Merit!" I said excitedly. My mind was racing wildly, unable to contain all the possible ideas and hypothetical scenarios I could soon test and try out! I couldn't even remember the last time I'd been so lucky to find such a flaw! Such a weakness!

It was probably the best yet!

"Hurry up!" I shouted at her as I began to run, unable to keep myself from not doing so anymore.

"Freaking weirdo...!" Merit complained, yet followed me dutifully anyway.