

Non Human 521

Chapter 521 Renn – A Tingly Test

Finding Vim and Merit alone in my bedroom was... kind of weird, but at the same time I was really happy that I had done so.

The two seemed to be getting along again. Even if Vim was... being weird.

"So... if it's not filled with divine power, is it still a heart at all?" I asked as I rolled the green orb in my hand. It felt warm, but only because I'd been holding it for a few minutes now. And supposedly Vim and Merit had been messing with it for some time before I'd joined them. Its heat wasn't the normal kind that hearts gave off.

"No. But it's still a conduit. It can connect to the source of divine power. I don't want to break this one, even though I feel as if I can and should, because I want to see if it reactivates eventually," Vim said with a weird smile.

I studied that smile, and dedicated it deep to memory.

I'd never seen that smile before. It was a new one. Very similar to the one he wore when he was working on something with his hands, but also similar to the one he had when he was staring at my naked body. It made me feel kind of... angry, to think he was as happy about this little heart being weird as he would be to see me naked.

Well... I mean, I got it. A heart being weird is important. Maybe more than my own naked body. But still!

"You don't feel anything at all, Renn?" Merit asked.

I shook my head. "I felt tingly when I held a heart last time. But now? Now it just feels like a real smooth rock or something," I said. While I studied the green heart Vim went to rummaging into one of his little pouches. I glanced at him, before he even pulled out the other heart, and noticed a slight... shift in the air. As if it had suddenly gotten a tad colder. "I felt that. Or well, feel it?" I said as I nodded to the heart he held out to me.

Taking what I assumed was Tor's ancestor's heart, I shivered a little as my fingers tingled and felt warmer all of a sudden upon touching it.

"You feel it," Vim noted.

"Yep. It uh... feels weird. It's warm like usual, but it also makes my hand feel all tingly," I said, describing how it felt to hold.

"Tingly...?" Merit asked.

"She likely feels a slight tingle like you would when you shock someone," Vim explained.

Merit nodded knowingly. So she felt like this when she shocked someone...? Interesting.

"Here, before you hurt yourself," Vim then said as he reached out to take Tor's Ancestor's heart from me.

I frowned at him as he took it, and wondered what he meant. Yet before I could ask, he then grinned at me as he put the heart back into his little monarch pouch at his waist.

"Want to take a small trip outside, Renn?" Vim then asked, still wearing that smile.

"Huh? Where to?" I asked. I didn't mind, in fact I was going to ask him if he'd take me to that restaurant we'd eaten at last time we'd been here. That blue one near the piers and docks. I knew that any day now he'd say he wanted to leave, so had been planning to ask him just now thus my original search for him... at least, before I found him and Merit in my room scheming and whispering amongst themselves over this little heart.

"There are other saints here right? A Glass or something?" Vim asked.

The corner of my mouth twitched a little. "You... want to go see a saint," I said, almost not able to believe it.

He nodded happily. "I'd be very interested in knowing if they can sense it or not. Light didn't mention its lack of presence, but that might just be because I had been there. She might have assumed I had taken it from Merit or something," he said, explaining with arms crossed.

Smiling gently at him, I wondered if he even realized how... odd he was being. Though maybe he wasn't being odd at all. Maybe this was what he normally got like when he encountered something beyond his own knowledge? Now that I think about it, this might be one of the first times that I'd ever seen him

encounter something like this. Something he genuinely didn't understand at all. I wonder if he had acted like this with Narli, during her episode. Though he might not have, since that had concerned her life.

His mother had raised him to be a thinker. A teacher. Maybe this was... well... Vim. The real one.

"Sure... I'd like to see Mono again anyway," I said as I nodded gently.

Vim's smile then disappeared. "What?" he asked quickly, with a strange tone.

Merit glanced up at him. "Wrong Mono. It's her daughter."

Vim visibly relaxed a little. "What...? She actually had children? That crazy woman?" he asked.

Once again I felt left out as I watched Merit nod knowingly and sigh. "Right? She's just like her too, by the way. She actually hugged me knowing I'd shock her, and then got all happy once I did."

My husband sighed and shook his head. "Great. Now maybe I don't want to go," he said.

I smirked at that. "Who was she to be so bad? What'd she do? Her mother?" I asked.

"Mono hadn't been... bad. She had just been weird. She was someone who enjoyed pain. Really enjoyed it," Vim told me.

Oh... "Wait... is that why Mono had found your shock so fun?" I asked, suddenly feeling a tad weird about it.

Merit just nodded.

Not really liking that, I wondered what to think about it. So... she liked pain...? A part of me felt weirded out by it, but at the same time did that actually make her someone I should be disgusted by? After all... "So... does she like inflicting pain... or just..." I asked.

"Experiencing it. As I said, Mono herself had not been a bad person. I actually found her to be kind-hearted when it counted, if you could see past her... oddness," Vim said.

Huh... I nodded at that, and decided to not judge the girl then. I'll just need to be... aware of her odd trait, I guess.

"Glasses is there too, by the way. Though I've yet to meet her," I told him.

Vim frowned and shook his head. "Don't know her."

"Me either. She's supposedly older though, not a child like Mono," Merit said.

Oh...? I wonder if that meant she wasn't childish, or if that meant she was old enough to have known Vim and the others back in the day and simply hadn't ever met them or something.

"Well... that all being said, I'd like to test it. If you're up for it, Renn, since I need you to do it," he said with a nod to me.

"Me? I don't mind helping, but why do you need me?" I asked.

"So he can push all the talking and stuff onto you, obviously. He wants to test it, but not actually have to deal with them. He's being selfish," Merit said.

Vim smiled and nodded, as if proud.

I sighed at him, but smiled back. "Then sure. Let me get dressed. You can take me out to eat after," I said, deciding this was a perfect excuse. After all it was only fair he did something for me in return!

"What...?" Merit was the one who whispered in shock as I stepped away, handing Vim the heart back as I went to get dressed to leave.

"Hm?" I turned to look at her, and was a little stunned to see her shocked face. What had I said that was so shocking, I wonder?

"You can come, Merit. It's not like she actually wants a dinner date," Vim said simply.

Oh! I blinked and looked away, to face my bag on my bed as I went to get my outerwear ready. I made sure not to speak, or turn around, since I knew I had a slight blush on my face and a small frown.

I had in fact meant it as a date, actually. I had been hoping to spend time alone with him. To flirt and stuff... but now I couldn't say it aloud. Especially since I'd not be bothered at all by Merit joining us, and in fact... "We can get Lilly too then, as well!" I said, deciding to just make it a nice big family dinner date instead.

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"She won't eat at human places," Merit said.

"She doesn't have to. She can just... sit and talk with us as we eat," I said happily as I dug out my hat and stuff.

Vim sighed. "I'll go get money..." he said as he left.

Hesitating at that, I glanced at him as I watched him leave the room. He didn't shut the door behind him, which made me wonder if he had been annoyed over my inclusion of Lilly or something else.

"Sorry Renn," Merit then said.

"Hm? For what?"

"Interrupting your date," she said simply.

I blinked, and then gently smiled at her. Before she could do or say anything else I quickly stepped over to her and wrapped her in a hug. She groaned at me, but didn't shock or push me off her as I gave her a very gentle squeeze. Now that I knew I was stronger than I used to be, I was being careful. Or rather, even more careful. Even if Merit was strong, like me, I didn't want to hurt her.

"I'd never trade a moment with you for a moment with him, Merit," I said happily.

Merit groaned. "Yes you should! Geez, Renn, you're supposed to be husband and wife!" Merit complained.

"Oh we'll get our moments! Especially since you like your alone time! Don't think I didn't notice you sneak away earlier this morning!" I said happily as I put her back down.

Merit sighed at me as she went to fixing her clothes, in a drastic way, as if I'd really ruffled her with my hug. I hadn't, she was just trying to hide her smile with her movements. "No one else tended the garden while we were gone... so..." she mumbled.

Ah... I nodded at that. Odds are Merit had just used that as an excuse, but I knew a part of it had been true. Merit actually did really love gardening, and it wasn't too farfetched to think the gardens up on the roof had been slightly neglected in her absence.

Giggling happily at her, and myself, I returned to getting ready to leave. It wasn't storming outside, but it was raining a bit so I made sure to ready the cloak I typically wore while traveling.

"Also, you really should be more... pushy with him, Renn. I would, if I was in your shoes," Merit mumbled as she watched me get ready.

Pausing a moment, I glanced at her and found her looking at me with a slight flush. She had been honest, but it had still embarrassed her. "Do you think I really should?" I asked.

She nodded. "He's... well... you know how he is, Renn. He's ancient. To him, going months if not years between moments of affection is probably not even a weird idea to him. Don't let him do that to you, you deserve better," she said with a nod.

Although I now had on extra layers, I knew better than to blame my sudden hotness over them. I felt like hugging her again as I nodded at her. "I'll take that to heart, Merit. I promise," I vowed.

"Please do. And then tell me how it goes, okay?" Merit said.

Gosh she was still on that! I mean, I got it... people usually did talk about such things with their close friends, but it felt so weird for me to do so or even think about doing so. Especially when the one who wanted to talk about that stuff was someone who genuinely felt desire for the one in question!

"Um... Merit," I glanced at the door, and fluttered my ears to make sure I didn't hear anyone.

"Hm?"

Stepping over to her, I bent down a bit so I could whisper on her level. "Did he say anything...? About me not sleeping with him last night?" I asked.

"Yes. He thinks I'm trying to steal you. Or at least punish him, since he knows I'm upset with him," Merit said with a whisper back.

I grinned at that. "Good."

She nodded. "Good."

Honestly that had not been at all the reason I had spent the night with Merit. It instead had been because when I had gone to find him, to lure him into bed, I'd been unable to do so. He had snuck off somewhere. And I had gotten fed up looking for him, and so had chosen the next best thing. And I now was happy it had gone that way, since I knew we'd soon be leaving. I wanted to spend as much time with Merit and the rest as I could. Even if it meant kind of ignoring Vim, who I desperately wanted to talk to and spend time with as well.

Although a hard choice, I was utterly blessed to have so many of them. Most didn't even get one choice, let alone multiple! It almost made me want to cry in joy, at the mere thought of it. My world, my life, today was so very blessed compared to the life I'd lived before joining the Society...

"Come on. Let me go get a coat too, I just got my hair dry," Merit said as she then decided to leave the room.

"Mhm," I agreed and followed her. We made a quick stop at her room, and then headed for the exit of the building. Thanks to it already being later in the day, we didn't have to fight the crowds as we left. The bank had already shut down, and the depot was in the process of doing so. Vim was waiting for us, and then led us out of the building and out into the drizzling rain of Lumen.

He walked a bit ahead of us, like always giving me a chance to walk side-by-side with my friend and have a moment to talk alone. While we walked, I wondered what his plan was concerning the heart. Was he going to just hand it to one of the saints and see what they said about it? Or did he plan to just leave it in a random pocket, not his monarch pouches, and see if they noticed it without being told of it?

We left the area of the Animalia Guild building and headed for the noble's district. Like usual the rain kept the streets quieter, but not empty. Plus a lot of people carried umbrellas or wore thick and heavy coats and cloaks, as we did, so it gave the world an odd feeling. As if the world wanted to be quiet, and for no one to really interact with one another.

I defied that and turned to gently reach over and nudge Merit's arm. "What'd you do with the broken heart?" I asked with a small whisper.

"In my room. I gathered up as much of it as I could and put it in one of my jewelry boxes," she said.

Huh? "Jewelry box?" I asked.

She gave me an odd look. "What? Are you going to say I look way too young to wear jewelry?" she asked.

I smirked at her, since I could hear in her tone that she wasn't actually insulted. She was teasing me. "Rather I'm upset you've not shown me any of them!"

Her odd look turned into a wry smile. "Figured. Speaking of jewelry, why don't you wear any, Renn? Particularly the kind on the neck or finger," she asked.

"Hm...? You say that as if it's really weird that I don't," I said, noting her tone.

"Because it is...? You're married aren't you?" she asked.

Oh. She meant that kind of jewelry. "Ring I've seen and heard, but necklace?" I asked.

She nodded as we came to a stop behind Vim. We had to wait a moment to cross the street since there were several wagons in the way. I didn't recognize the color of their banners and emblems, but honestly I wasn't very interested in them. I focused on Merit instead. "Most cultures back in the day used necklaces, or earrings, instead of rings. Honestly I'm not sure which I'd prefer... necklaces get in the way, and earrings would be annoying cause they'd get stuck in my hair, but I think a ring would be annoying too. I think I'd get it stuck on stuff all the time," Merit said as she thought about it.

It hurt my heart a little to hear that she's obviously thought long and hard about this. "Vim would just lose his, I think."

She smirked at that. "Right? He comes back naked more often than not. Makes you wonder if it's some weird fetish of his."

My tail squirmed a bit. "Fetish?" I asked.

She flinched and glanced at me, and then glanced ahead at Vim... who stepped forward as it was now safe for us to cross the street. The wagons had finally passed.

Merit and I crossed the street alongside Vim. Before I could ask again what she meant, Vim turned to glance at us. "Backed yourself in an odd corner there, didn't you?" Vim asked with a smirk.

"Says you? If anything it just proves how useless you are!" Merit shouted at him.

Although I could tell that I was the one being teased here, I still smiled happily as I watched the two glare at one another as we rounded a corner.

Vim sighed as he turned back around. "The word means; something that someone gets gratification from. The way Merit just used it was in a sexual way, but it can be used in a normal way too. Basically she just claimed I find it pleasing to be naked or at least to let my clothes get all destroyed," Vim explained for me.

"Ah... Vim doesn't even notice when he's naked, let alone enough so to enjoy it. I think he enjoys it when I'm naked though," I told Merit.

Merit flinched again. "Gah! Who wouldn't!" she said with a stiff shake of her head.

Giggling at her I reached over to grab her hand. Before I could though she stepped forward and away from me.

Frowning at her, I wondered why she'd not let me take her hand, but before I could ask why she turned to point at me. "If we hold hands I'll look like your guys' daughter!" she said.

"Who cares what people think!?" I said, doing my best to not smirk like mad over what she'd just said. She was small enough to look like a kid. The idea of us looking like a happy little family made me almost want to squirm and giggle, but I knew better than to do so in front of Merit. Let alone here and now.

"I do! Vim, hold your wife's hand so she'll stop trying to grab mine!" Merit said as she pointed at me and glared up at him.

"Stop teasing Merit, Renn," Vim said lightly.

"I wasn't teasing her!" I said as I picked up my speed for a moment, so I could go to walking beside Vim since Merit was now walking on his right.

"It's the fact you weren't that makes it so upsetting! Stop being so adorable!" Merit said from behind Vim.

Laughing at her, I went ahead and slid my hand into Vim's. He didn't even glance at me as I did, but he did return the hold without hesitation at least.

His hand was a little wet, thanks to the rain. He wore a jacket, but not one so big it covered him completely unlike what I and Merit wore. Yet I didn't mind, and in fact...

Studying the side of his face as I walked beside him, I wondered why I didn't feel any... tingling from him, as I had the heart or monarch.

Was it because of where I was touching him...? Maybe while he slept I should touch him all over, to see if any singular spot made me feel that same tingling sensation I felt when that monarch had showed up.

It would prove if Vim had a heart, at least. Maybe.

"What's she doing...?" Merit then whispered.

I blinked and realized they were staring at me. I felt my face go hot as I looked at Vim's smirk, and then had to look away. I tried to unhand him, but he held my hand and kept me from doing so. He didn't squeeze my hand so strongly I couldn't pry it free if I wanted to, but I pretended not to notice that as I groaned and looked away from the two of them in shame.

"Think she was seeing if touching me would let her feel divine power. As she had with the heart," Vim told Merit.

"Oh...? Well? You said it made you tingle right? As if you had gone numb or something? Well?" Merit asked.

"No... I don't feel anything but shame right now," I admitted.

Merit giggled at that. "Shame she says."

"Wonder what people think when they hear you two talk about tingling while touching me," Vim wondered.

My face got hotter as I squeezed his hand, as to let him know what I thought about such a thing.

"Oh shut it! Gross!" Merit shouted and stepped ahead of us, as if to distance herself from us so she'd not be included in such talk.

"Even without holding hands you'd still look like our daughter, Merit, especially if you're going to shout and run around like a kid," Vim then said.

"Gah!"

Chapter 522 Vim – Meeting The New Faces

This was Mono's daughter...?

The small girl was nearly as tiny as Merit. And not just in height either. She was skin and bones, at best... Were they not feeding her enough? Or was she sickly? Her lack of weight was more than just her age or not being much of an eater. Something was likely wrong with her.

Though it might just be her way of enduring her abilities. Some saints did get ill, physically, when they used them. To the point they got like this, all malnourished and stuff.

"So... how much leeway do I get?" Mono asked me.

"For...?" I asked carefully.

"When telling you a prophecy. You get angry, don't you? When we do? How far can I take it before you actually kill me?" she asked with a small smirk tugging at her lips.

My eyes narrowed. "Your mother tried that too. I only needed to threaten a single thing to keep her from ever trying again," I said, warning her.

Mono's smirk disappeared as she tilted her head. "Really...? What was it?"

I lifted a hand and placed a single finger on her brow. Right in the middle of her forehead, nearly where her eyebrows met as she frowned up at me.

"If you test me, I will destroy your nerves. So that never again in your long life will you feel anything. No pain. No pleasure. Nothing. Living as if in another's body, unable to even feel the wind upon your skin."

Her shoulders slumped as her eyes went wide... and then she simply nodded.

Lowering my hand, I smiled gently at her and extended it as to offer a handshake in greeting.

She took it and sighed. "Mother should have warned me about you," she mumbled.

"She hadn't?" I asked.

"She died not long after I was born. By the way, have you ever met a snake? A man with white eyes and a long forked tongue?" she asked.

Hm...? I searched my memories as I released her tiny, mostly bones, hand. "No... I don't think so. Why?"

"Supposedly he's my father. I'm looking for him so I can kill him," she said.

I didn't need to read between the lines. The look on her face, and the tone she had used, told me all I needed to know. So I simply nodded. "Then when, or if, I ever meet the man... I'll make sure to capture him for you," I promised.

She blinked at me, and then frowned in shock. "You'd... not just kill him yourself?" she asked.

"If you want me to, yes. But you hadn't told me to kill him," I pointed out.

Little Mono then smiled and nodded. "Right. I hadn't. Thank you! Light and the rest refuse to help me, saying I shouldn't do it, but he hurt my mom! And not in a good way either!" she said as she raised both hands, forming fists, and shook them as if excited.

Right... she had enjoyed pain, but not that kind. Mono was likely the same. Thus her asking if I'd hurt her to keep her from saying prophecies. It was why my threat of ruining their nerves worked. It was akin to threatening Renn to take her sense of taste away, and thus not allow her to enjoy her smoothies anymore. It was a potent threat. "Got any more information about him...? His name? Where she encountered him?" I asked.

"Actually I do! I've had two dreams about him!" she said excitedly.

Uh oh... well... I raised a hand before she could ramble off whatever she knew, or had seen, and gently waved her down. "Hold on. I'll more than happily help you, but in return please tell Renn this stuff instead. So that I don't have to know such things," I said quickly.

Mono blinked, and then nodded. "Right...! I'll go find her right now!" Mono said quickly and then turned and darted off, before I could say anything.

Watching the young saint run out of the room, I sighed as I realized I'd just signed up for something rather serious.

But well... how could I not? That tiny thing was in no condition to do any kind of fighting, let alone getting revenge for her mother. Especially if it was a male non-human who had such strong traits such as a huge forked tongue.

If she's had prophecies of him, he was likely alive. Hopefully he was nearby so I'd be able to handle it swiftly...

"Is she gone?"

I turned and watched a new face enter. Another small girl, though not as scrawny. Which was weird to think, since she was still scrawny herself. Was Light and the rest not taking proper care of them or something? "Hello," I greeted the girl who was undoubtedly a wolf.

She had white ears. Ones not too different than Renn's. But they were unmistakably that of a wolf, and not a cat or anything else. She had shoulder length hair which started out white, like the fur on her ears, and ended up some kind of blonde color. "My name is Tundra!" she happily said as she hurried into the room and up to me.

Tundra the wolf. Obviously.

"Tundra. I'm Vim, the Protector," I introduced myself and held out my hand. The young girl gave me a toothy grin as she hurriedly took my hand and shook it, with far more vigor than she should have. Within three shakes I realized what she was doing, and likely why she was doing it, so I simply sighed and allowed her to try and squeeze me hard enough to hurt me.

It only took a few moments before she gave up, but she didn't let go of my hand... even as our hands came to a stop, hanging between us as if lifeless. Only connected because neither would let go first.

"You... you're more than strong, huh...?" Tundra whispered as she stared up at me.

I nodded.

"How...? This... this isn't just strength, is it? It's..." she began to mumble as she glanced down at our hands, and I watched her once again try to squeeze with all her might. Thanks to her sharp nails, kind of like what Renn had, they dug into the back of my hand a bit but not enough to make me stop her. I allowed her to squeeze again, and watched as she actually grimaced in effort.

"I hope you don't do this to everyone you meet," I said gently.

She immediately stopped, and then looked up at me with a weird look of annoyance. As if I'd just insulted her. "Of course not! Pretty much everyone else is weak!"

Oh boy. One of those.

I kept another sigh from escaping as I gently smiled at her. "So? Can I squeeze you back then, since you're obviously not one of the weak ones yourself?" I asked.

Tundra's ears shot straight up, and her already pale face went even whiter.

My smile softened as I released her hand, and slipped free of her half closed grip. "I don't recognize you or your smell, but I've known other white wolves. Are you related to Snowbell?" I asked.

Her look of utter terror disappeared as she blinked and tilted her head. "Snowbell...? No! Who's that? Can I meet them? Where are they!?" she asked excitedly.

Whoops. "Sorry... they're gone now. I was just wondering if you were related to them or not, or at least their bloodline," I said gently. Obviously she wasn't, if she didn't know. Snowbell had been from a very proud family. The kind that knew each and every member of their pack, able to trace their lineage to their monarch and god. If this young girl didn't recognize the name, then she wasn't a member of their pack at all.

"Oh... No, I don't think so. My father was the wolf. Mother was a fish. Father never told me much about his family, said they didn't join the Society so weren't worth talking about," she said.

"I see," I said, unsure of where to take the conversation from here. So... was she a purist or not? A part of me wanted to say she was, based off her attitude, but yet he hadn't mentioned her mother with any scorn or distaste.

Tundra's ears fluttered, but not like Renn's. They looked like they could only move a bit in either direction, where Renn's had a lot of mobility. To the point Renn could turn both ears completely different directions. Tundra's though looked in sync, and unable to such a thing. "Why are you here and not with Renn and the rest?" she asked me with a gesture to the empty room we were in.

"I'd been talking to Less. She just left a bit ago," I said. Then I'd gotten trapped by that scrawny saint.

"Ah... she's a bore. I hear her sister is fun though," Tundra said.

"Landi would eat you. I'd suggest not testing her as you had me," I said, warning her.

Tundra shifted a bit and frowned up at me. "Are... you speaking from experience? Are you able to tell that I'd lose from our handshake just now?" she asked.

I nodded.

Her frown deepened. "Really...? Am I that weak then?"

I suddenly felt a little bad. This young wolf looked utterly hurt. As if I'd just told her of her parent's deaths or something. She looked moments from breaking out into tears. "Rather than weak, you're just young. Landi is a full grown predator." And she had hearts within her, but I'd not say that here and now.

"So... I'll be stronger once I get older too?"

"If you can live long enough, yes. You're a wolf. A rather thick-blooded one..." I glanced down at my hand, and considered the strength she'd just displayed again, this time with a bit more sincerity... and I nodded. "If you trained, I'd say you'd become rather strong once full-grown, yes," I decided to say. Maybe not Lilly's or Renn's strength, but not far off from them.

"Really!?" Tundra stepped forward, grabbing my shirt as she did. I shifted a bit, as I realized she was either a simpleton or much younger than I had first assumed her to be. She was now looking up at me as if I'd just given her a wonderful prophecy.

From a wild saint to a wild wolf. What was next? At least with Mono though I had been able to confirm, to a point, that the heart I carried was not carrying any divine power. It was in my left pocket, not a monarch pouch, and she'd not even glanced at it.

"Really."

She beamed me a huge grin, her ears fluttering a bit as she made tiny happy noises. As she did so, I noted a lack of movement or sound coming from beneath her gray robe. She had no tail, it seemed. It'd be swaying something fierce if she had one, right now, I'd think.

"Think I can become the strongest!?" she asked excitedly.

No. "If you tried hard enough. Why do you want to be the strongest?" I asked.

"Because then I'd be the best, of course!" she said happily.

"Lot of responsibilities being the best you know," I warned.

Her happy smile shifted, but not in worry or annoyance. "Huh? What do you mean?"

I nodded at her and gestured lightly at myself. "Look at me. I've been working nonstop for nearly four hundred years, without a single break. Even now I'm in a hurry, I should be heaving south right now and not here. If you become too strong, you'll end up having to always be doing stuff like me," I warned her.

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Tundra frowned and considered what I'd just said for a bit, and then she gently nodded. "Right... but that's okay too! That means I'd just be needed then, right? It'd just make me even cooler!"

Cooler. Not a common word amongst this era. I wonder who had raised her. I didn't recognize her smell at all, so I likely didn't know either of her parents. "Do you want to become a knight or something?" I asked her, wondering what her goal was.

"No way! Mono is weird, Glasses stinks and Light won't let me fight she said, so no!" Tundra said with a huff.

My eyes narrowed at that, and I read between the lines. Mono being weird was obvious. She was weird, in her own way. Glasses I'd not met yet, so had nothing to say there... but Light saying she'd not let this girl fight? Even though she was an actual predator, and was actually half-strong?

That meant there was a reason for it. One that Light had foreseen.

"Well... there are many uses for those who are strong. You can be like Merit who protects a location, if you'd like," I suggested gently.

"Yeah! I'd be okay with that! A wolf should be a proud territorial protector, right?" she agreed.

"Mhm. The white wolves I knew, the one I mentioned, protected not just a location but a whole area. They guarded roads, bridges, and whatnot too. They did it so well there were many locations that tried to get them to be included in their territory," I said.

Tundra's eyes got huge as she became fascinated. "Bridges too!?" she asked with such a rush her voice cracked and squeaked.

I nodded. "They were a large family, a pack. About... twenty odd or so, yet they protected and claimed several hundred square miles of area. Several of them were very strong, to the point they even killed a few monarchs," I said.

The young wolf stepped forward, and grabbed me by the arms and shirt. "I gotta know more!" she shouted excitedly.

"There's actually someone who would know way more about them than me, if you'd rather hear about them from someone who used to live with them," I suggested.

"Who!?"

"A man named Lawrence. He's currently at the Animalia Guild, working as one of their auditors," I said.

Her eyes glowed in glee as she quickly nodded. "Okay! I'm going to go pack!" she then said, letting me go and turned around.

"Pack...?" I asked before she could run off.

"You're talking about the place that Light and Less moved to, right? I'll move there too!" she said happily.

"Hold on... you have to get permission first, Tundra," I said quickly before she could get ahead of herself.

She hesitated and glanced at me. "Permission...? From who?"

"Those who live there. Light had to get it too, so it's normal," I said.

Her ears fluttered a bit as she turned to face me. She had been just a few steps from the door, and looked as if she still wanted to run out it as to go pack. "Can't you give me permission?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I'm the protector. I have no authority in deciding such things."

"Right... who do I ask then?" she asked.

A little glad she didn't seem too bothered by the idea; I went ahead and offered her a promise. "I'll speak to Brandy and Gerald when I go back there tonight. That you'd like to move to the Animalia Guild. You don't need to live there though, you know, Lawrence would likely be happy to sit and talk with you every so often if you simply visited and asked. He likes to reminisce about his old friends," I said.

She quickly shook her head. "I'd rather go anyway! You're there, and so is Renn and Merit, right? I bet it's so much funner there!"

Funner, huh? "Well... you might also need to talk to whoever is the elder here too, with Light gone for now," I said. I assumed it was Less, but honestly I didn't know.

Tundra hummed as she nodded. "I'll go talk to Blasco then. Are you going back there soon?" she asked.

"No. We have a few things to take care of before we go back..." I hesitated a moment, as I realized something. She was speaking as if she couldn't go outside by herself. Now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure if any of them left this building much if it all... "Once you have permission, from both locations, I'd be happy to help you move. I'm sure Renn would help too," I said gently.

"Really!? Okay! I'll go ask Blasco now!" Tundra happily nodded, excited again as she turned once more and hurried out of the room. This time though I didn't stop her.

Sighing a little, I wondered who this Blasco was. I didn't recognize that name either.

Really, what was I going to do about them all...? In theory if I followed through with stepping down, as I wanted to, it wouldn't matter who they were or what they were doing... but...

Crossing my arms, I closed my eyes and wondered if I should keep getting involved or not. Less had wanted me to do something too, which was why we had stepped away from Renn and the rest as to speak privately. Now I had three requests to deal with, and I'd not even met everyone yet...

"Well, I must say it's rather nice to see our protector so worried."

Opening my eyes I turned to greet a new face, once more. This time it wasn't a young girl, at least... though it was one with glowing eyes.

"Glasses," I said, upon seeing the large spectacles on her face.

"Kind of give me away," she said with a smile as she stepped into the room and held out a hand in greeting.

I took her hand, and was glad to see she was neither malnourished like Mono nor one to try and test her strength on me like Tundra. We shook hands normally, and I as we did I noticed she was standing with a very faint crookedness. A limp in her left leg, it seemed. I couldn't tell if she was missing the leg, and walking on a prosthetic or something, but now that I noticed it, her slight unnatural stance was rather obvious. She looked like she couldn't put much weight on her right leg.

Possibly an old injury.

"My name is Vim. I don't believe we've ever met," I said in greeting as our hands separated.

"No. I joined not long before we left to the other lands, before I had a chance to properly meet you," she said.

Funny. I had been on those ships that had sailed there, all four of them. I had not felt a single saint upon them, as far as I could remember, yet here again was proof there had been. I wonder how Light had accomplished it.

"Well, welcome back, I suppose," I said lightly, deciding to not spend much more thought on it. It was a long time ago, after all, and it wasn't as if it really mattered.

The bespectacled woman smiled and nodded. As she did I couldn't help but acknowledge that she was actually kind of cute. Not in the way Renn was, and not in a way I'd ever have pursued her for it since she was a saint... but if she'd not been a member, not a saint, and I didn't have Renn... then in another time, another life, I would have likely asked her to dinner.

For a tiny moment I was a little shocked at thinking such a thing. After all, she was a saint... and honestly lately I'd not thought such things about anyone else ever since Renn had come into the picture. When was the last time I'd actually even noticed a woman's appearance...?

"Not going to ask what I meant by seeing you worry?" Glasses then asked, snapping me from my thoughts.

I smirked at that. Was that why I'd found her cute, I wonder? "I understood your meaning. You're glad to see that the one who is supposed to protect you and your people can find himself worrying, even over simple matters," I said.

She smiled again at me, and I noted her sharp canines. Not as sharp as Renn's, but far more than a human's. "Indeed! Tundra... she's a promiscuous girl, but can be sweet if you know how to handle her," she said.

Sweet. Sure. "Right... Too sweet for me, I think I'll let my wife handle her request if I can," I said.

Glasses giggled at that. "How sweet indeed!" she said, obviously speaking of me this time.

Gosh she was cute. And she did indeed have a limp leg. I wonder why she didn't have a cane or something; it looked almost as if she needed it. "I'm glad you found me, by the way. I had a small

request of you, if you'd be willing to oblige me," I said, doing my best to stop noticing that I found this saint attractive.

"Hm...?" she tilted her head at me, and for the first time I noticed she was wearing one of those headdresses. It was kind of shocking, since it was obvious. I couldn't even tell what her hair color was, thanks to the style of the head-wrap around her head.

Really. What was wrong with me? "I'd like you to look at something," I said as I dug the heart out of my pocket.

The saint frowned a bit as I held out the small heart. I offered it to her, and she gave me an odd smile as she picked up the green orb. "A... stone? It's pretty, I suppose? I'm sorry, Vim, I don't know anything about rocks or precious gems... What is it you'd ask of me?" she asked.

Studying the way she studied the heart, I felt a little... giddy, as I realized she wasn't pretending at all. She genuinely thought it was just a pretty stone. She was peering at the thing through her thick glasses, trying her best to find the probable cause for me to have asked for her help.

"Was hoping someone could tell me what it is. You don't have any clue at all? Never seen one like it before?" I asked.

"No...? There is someone here though, an older woman named Hervish. She's rather knowledgeable about such gems and rocks. She might know what it is," Glasses said as she then went to hand it back to me. She gave up rather quickly, likely because she genuinely had no clue about it either way.

I accepted the heart back and shifted a bit as I wondered if I could test it in another way.

Mono hadn't noticed it, while in my pocket.

This saint seemed to not realize it was a heart. Usually a saint's eyes would light up at the mere sight of them, and then they'd try to find a way to take them from me. But maybe this woman wasn't a very strong saint...

"It's fine... Maybe another time," I decided.

Glasses gave me a slightly worried frown. "Is it important...? I feel bad now, since I'd come to ask you for a request and yet here I am... not really presenting myself well before I do," she said gently.

Oh. Woops. I quickly shook my head as I put the heart back into my pocket. "It's fine, really. I'll be honest I was just making small talk, I uh..." I took a bit too long to find a proper excuse, as Glasses giggled at me and nodded.

"Don't like saints, yes. I know. I've heard all about it," she said calmly, covering her mouth as she chuckled at me.

Nodding gently, I accepted the easy out she'd given me and went ahead and gestured at her. "So? A request?" I asked.

"She perked up a bit and nodded. "Yes. I've been told, on good authority, you are a man of great knowledge. Beyond what any of us possess, at least," she said.

Hm...? "I'd not go that far... but I do know certain things, I suppose. What would you like to know?"

"Rather, it's what I'd ask you to do. Um..." Glasses then glanced at the nearby door, and I followed her gaze. There was no one there, thankfully, but she still acted as if there was. "Can I close the door, Vim? Or would that seem improper?" she then asked with a whisper.

"Improper...?" I asked gently as I stepped around her as to close the door for her. Since she had a small limp, I didn't want to make her overexert herself if she didn't have to.

"Thank you," Glasses thanked me as the door shut, and I turned around and found her pulling up her robe. I didn't flinch at the sight of bare legs, since her showing me her right leg made a lot of sense in this context... especially upon seeing the deformed limb as it came into view.

"I see," I said as I stepped forward and knelt down a bit, as to get a better look.

"An accident. One I wasn't able to properly heal from," she told me as I studied the scars.

It looked as if she'd not just gotten burnt, but crushed. Half her thigh was missing, and her lower leg had a good bit of deformed flesh too. Odds are it had gotten stuck under something, and she'd been sitting down or something when it happened. It almost looked like something took a bite of her leg when it was curled underneath her, since the deformity was in the middle of both her thigh and her lower calf. It easily explained the limp I had noticed earlier. In fact, it was a bit surprising she was even able to stand and walk with this leg. It was missing at least half its mass, muscles and tendons especially. Odds are the only reason she even still had it, let alone was able to use it, was thanks to her being both a non-human and a saint.

"I'm to assume you want me to make you something that can help you walk?" I asked as I stood back up, and nodded to her so she could lower her robe back down. It was the only thing that made sense to me. The wound was far too old for me to be able to do anything else for her, such as surgery or anything. And even if I tried, I wasn't sure how I'd be able to help her much if it all. She'd need muscle grafts and transplants, and such things just didn't work for non-humans.

She put her robe back down, quickly, brushing herself a bit as she did. "Yes. Several others have told me that you've made such things before. Wheelchairs, or braces for those with similar ailments," she said with a nod. She had a very faint blush on her face, which I assumed was from her showing me her bare legs.

I nodded at her. "I'm sure we can figure something out. You seem to be able to stand and walk at least, so..." I said with a tiny gesture to her.

"Yes. It doesn't actually hurt, Vim, it just... I can't put much weight on it at all, really," she said as she glanced down at her own self.

She reached out, and I took her arm as she went ahead and showed me. I watched her slowly put more and more weight on her right leg, until I had to firmly hold and prop her up since it gave out on her. She quickly went back to standing on her other leg, and sighed at me as she nodded. "See?"

I nodded back at her. "Yes. Did that hurt?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not really."

"And neither your, nor Light's healing, helps it much?" I asked.

"It was worse, actually. Light's the one that helped me to this point," she told me.

Huh. Quite a feat. "Well... why don't I come back tomorrow then, to measure you and diagnose it. Figure out what we can think up together," I suggested.

Glasses gave me a flush of a smile as she nodded. "Oh yes, that would be just lovely," she said.

The door then opened, and I turned to smile gently at Renn who glared at me... and then relaxed a bit as she realized what was going on.

"See? Told you that you should have knocked," Merit said with a smirk as she glanced into the room from behind Renn.

Before I could say anything, Glasses immediately released my arm with a small yelp of a shock. Then, I had to step forward quickly as to catch her because she had fallen backward in surprise, thanks to her leg not working properly.

Catching the saint, who had gone deep red in the face in embarrassment, I sighed as Renn hurried in to help the woman back to her feet.

"Careful!" Renn said worriedly as she took over helping the saint to her feet and to collect herself. I stepped back, since I was the one who was obviously making her feel awkward and bashful.

"I'm so sorry...!" Glasses whispered with a strained hush, but not from pain of her fall... instead from utter shame.

She was saint. And judging by the robe and headdress, not one just in name. Thus why she had asked if it was improper to close the door earlier. She was like Light, probably. And she'd just gotten caught with a man in a closed room, and not just by anyone but his wife.

Sighing softly, I glanced at Merit who was smirking happily at me, enjoying the show.

She wasn't cute anymore. Now she was just another headache.

One of many.

Chapter 523 Renn – A Muffin's Downpour

Slowly closing the door to Merit's room, I had to bite the inside of my cheek since I wanted to giggle at her. She was still asleep, and was snoring rather loudly. I think it was the first time I'd ever heard her snore at all, let alone to such a degree.

The door shut easily, and quietly, thanks to how well it was made. I turned and glanced around, to make sure no one was nearby... and headed for my room.

I couldn't smell Vim around anywhere, and I doubted he was in my room or anything, but because I didn't smell him at all I was assuming he was somewhere else. Outside on the roof or out in the public spaces of the guild building, possibly. So I wanted to grab better clothes, and my hat, just in case I had to leave the housing area as to find him.

The air in the hallway was a tad chilly, and I knew it was because of the storm outside. I couldn't hear the howl of the wind but I heard the downpour of rain beyond the well built walls and building, though I hadn't heard any thunder so far.

Rounding a corner, I paused upon hearing a voice down the hall. I focused on it for a moment, noting it was Wynn and Jasna speaking. Although I wouldn't have minded talking to them, I had a slight purpose in mind right now so I simply hurried to my room instead.

Putting on clothes and a jacket in case I needed to go outside into the storm, I glanced around my room and noted the lack of Vim's smell. It was here, but not strongly. He'd not been in here since yesterday, likely, by the lack of his scent.

Which meant he was once again going days without sleep. Maybe even far more, since I had no idea if he'd rested at all during his trip to Narli's home. Knowing Vim he hadn't at all, which meant he's gone weeks without sleep.

Securing my hat as I left my room, I smiled happily at the thought that he was just waiting for the opportunity to sleep with me. It was a silly thought, but the fact there was indeed a chance that was the reason made me happy.

Walking through the hallway, I listened close to the world around me and paid attention to the smells as I searched for Vim. I went downstairs, checking the kitchens and mingling areas, and then had to go back upstairs to the roof after confirming he wasn't downstairs.

I opened the door to the roof, but only a little bit since it was raining so hard. I frowned as I stared out at the rooftop that was being drenched by the storm. It was raining hard enough that, after not seeing Vim or smelling him, I decided he wasn't out there.

Shutting the door, and locking it back up, I headed back down to the floor my room was on and headed for the doors that led beyond the housing area. My tail squirmed a bit beneath my clothes as I left the housing area, and I wondered if Vim had already gone to the cathedral. He had promised Glasses he'd help make her something to make it easier for her to walk, amongst other promises with some of those there, so it'd not be too surprising... But would he have gone without me? He not only liked it when I did stuff with him, he also liked me being there with him when dealing with saints and other such people. Vim liked to use me as a buffer, a shield, in a way.

It should be not long after sunrise, and I don't think even Vim would rush that much. Odds are those at the cathedral were still asleep, or just waking.

"Yet not here..." I mumbled as I turned down the hallway that led to Gerald's office. As I approached the door, finding it closed, I didn't knock or even attempt to stop and listen in. I could hear Gerald's soft writing, the scratching of pen on paper, but I couldn't smell or hear Vim. So I kept walking and headed for the entrance to the guild proper nearby.

Ending up overlooking the main entrance, the one where Reatti usually sat and worked at all day, I stepped up to the railing on the balcony and spent a few moments just... looking around. It was darker than usual, since even though the sun was rising the storm outside kept its brightness at bay. And although occasionally I heard voices or footsteps echo, I didn't see anyone.

Lifting my nose, I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths.

Yes. I could smell Vim. Like usual his scent wasn't strong, but...

Tapping the handrail as I pondered where he could be, I decided he was likely near the bank. I went down the spiral stairwell and headed for the hallway that led to the banking area, and as I entered the hall I picked up my pace.

His smell was getting stronger.

"Today will be slow."

"Thank goodness, my wrist still hurts from counting all those receipts yesterday..."

I passed a small break room, which had a couple humans in it. I recognized both of them, they both worked as tellers at the bank, but I didn't linger. I kept walking in search for the man who really by now should know I was looking for him.

Why hadn't he shown up yet? Can't he sense me now? Like he did monarchs and saints...? Shouldn't he be able to sense that I was walking around looking for him?

The thought made me frown as I rounded a corner, and then entered the main banking area. The hallway led me to behind the counters, but not to the actual vault area. I didn't head there but instead went down another hallway, one that would eventually lead me to Brandy's office.

A part of me had expected that I was going to have to go all the way to Brandy's office, but instead Vim found me. I rounded a corner, and while glancing down both directions of the new hallway I found him waving at me. Not in the direction of Brandy's office, but instead...

Hurrying over to him, I smirked as I glanced down the stairwell he'd likely just walked up from. "Are you going down into the sewers again?" I asked. That was the stairwell that led to that one hallway, the one with that weird room with that hole. The one that led to the room that had no air, or toxic air, that had made him cough a lot.

"Already did. Why are you up already? You just fell asleep a few hours ago," he asked with a small smile.

My smirk grew a bit, warming as I once again confirmed how much attention he gave me. After our dinner with Merit and Lilly we had returned here, and I had spent most of the rest of the night with Merit and Lamp. Vim had gone off to talk to with Brandy and deal with some other things, so I'd not gotten to even say goodnight to him before Merit and I had laid down to sleep.

Yet he had known. It made me feel rather... special to know he was always so aware of what I was doing, and where I was. "What were you checking?" I asked.

He shifted a bit and gestured to the stairs. "I wanted to see if I sensed or smelled anything odd. I didn't. The sub layer is definitely... different. A part of the underground section looked collapsed, but not so badly that I think we need to worry much," he said.

Collapsed... "What of the cathedral they're building? Will that be okay?"

"Regrettably," he said with a small nod.

"Sheesh, Vim..." I said with a smile.

He shrugged. "So? Why are you up already? Did Merit kick you in the face or something? She moves a lot when sleeping," he said.

I laughed at that. "She does huh! But no. I was hoping to talk to you actually," I said.

"Hm... alone, you mean," he noted.

I nodded.

Vim nodded back and turned to look down the hall we were standing in. I followed his gaze, but didn't see or smell anyone.

"Do you have a moment?" I asked, after spending a few moments staring down the hall... expecting someone to show up. No one did though.

"I do. Even if I hadn't, I would always make at least a moment for you Renn," Vim then said.

I turned to look back at him, and found myself grinning at him. "Funny, since I always put aside moments with you for everyone else," I said.

He shrugged again. "A man's life, I suppose."

Was it...? Something told me that a man would usually get upset over such a thing. Vim didn't seem to mind though. "You plan to go back to the cathedral today right? To help Glasses and the rest?" I asked.

He nodded. "I've already spoken with Brandy and Gerald about Tundra. And I've told Lawrence about her too. I... fear they'll not let her come stay here. Thanks to her personality, but that's their decision. They said they'd let her, and us, know once they all got a chance to meet her. I have a few other things I need to handle too, that Blasco requested a few hours with me to ask some questions about this city, and its people. So I'll probably handle that after I deal with Glasses," he said.

"Busy," I said.

"Right? Considering I felt like I had nothing to do before going over there, I don't know if I should be happy or annoyed," he said.

"And Mono's request?" I asked.

Vim's soft smile that he'd been wearing during our conversation died and turned into a sad frown. He sighed and nodded, and then glanced around again. "It's storming bad?" he asked.

"Don't change subjects like that, she's important," I said, upset with him.

"Hm... why not go get your heavier cloak? And grab mine too. We'll go sit up on the roof and talk, if you'd like," he offered.

Oh...? Oh. He wanted to not say anything here, where we could be overheard. Right. "Okay! I'll be right back!" I said as I turned to go.

"I'll meet you at the door to the gardens exit. The one outside the houses," he said as I stepped away.

Nodding happily I waved goodbye to him as I hurried away. I wasted no time, I went back to the housing area... to my bedroom, put on my heavier traveling cloak, and then grabbed his as well. Luckily no one sidetracked me as I hurried back, and found Vim waiting for me at the stairwell that led to the roof... and he had a small basket.

"What's that?" I asked as I hurried up next to him, noticing the smell of something tasty.

"A morning snack," he said.

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I took the basket from him as I handed him his cloak, so he could put it on. I grinned happily as I peeked into its contents and saw a bunch of bread. The gleaming kind that told me they were soaked in honey.

"You know the gazebo behind the door? Near the section of trees? We'll go sit there," he said as he finished putting his cloak on.

I nodded and slipped the basket beneath my own cloak. The rain was falling downward rather heavily, but it wasn't very windy. As long as I kept the basket under my cloak it and its contents would be fine.

We stepped out onto the roof, and I felt as if I was now wearing an extra layer of clothes as the heavy rain fell upon me. He shut the door behind us, and I followed him to the larger sitting area that was covered behind the door and stairwell.

A quick glance around as I stepped out of the puddles and into the covered area told me we were not only alone, but would be able to hold our private conversation safely. The rain was loud enough to drown out our voices, even if one of our own people were listening in.

In fact... "Good thing it's not windy, huh?" I said to Vim as I went to put the basket of goodies onto one of the two tables under the canopy.

"It likely will eventually get so," Vim responded. I smiled a bit at his voice.

I didn't need to take my hat off to hear him, but it was still slightly muffled to my ears thanks to how loud the rain was.

Which meant there was little chance anyone, even Lilly, could hear us talking right now.

Reaching up to take my hat off, I went ahead and placed it near the basket as I went to dig out one of the treats. Vim sat down at the table as I counted almost a dozen little muffin looking things, each glazed and honeyed.

"Who'd you steal these from?" I asked excitedly.

"Steal...? I'll have you know I made those myself."

My hand paused, as did my open mouth... I'd been about to take a bite. I lowered the muffin that had a heartbeat ago looked utterly delectable... now it looked like it could bite me back. "You made these...?" I asked worriedly.

He chuckled at me. "I made them normally, Renn. I promise."

I breathed a sigh of relief and giggled back at him, and then took a bite.

The thing was so tasty I barely gave myself time to enjoy it as I scarfed the rest down. "You should have made more!" I said with a mouthful as I went to grab another.

"Can later. There's a wine-skin in there for when you start to cough," he said gently.

"I won't do that," I mumbled as I took a bite of the second one and grabbed one of the chairs. I dragged it over to Vim's side of the table, putting it next to him. After moving the basket, to put it where I'd be able to access it, I sat down next to him.

Taking a few more bites, I nodded happily as I enjoyed the lovely things. "These are great," I said happily.

"Hm. I was bored. I got stuff to do for Light's people, but nothing to do here... oddly enough. And the one who normally occupies my time to keep me not bored has been ignoring me. I hear that you've done some things though, while I was gone," he said as he watched me eat. Like always Vim didn't indulge in snacks, not even ones of his own making. And I knew better than to think that was because he had eaten his fill already while he cooked them. Vim did not like to eat. But he did like to watch me do so. Part of his love language, as Kaley would call it.

"You mean Reatti's spears?" I asked as I swallowed a mouthful, and ignored his little comment about me ignoring him. Or at least, I did so for now. I'd get back to that later.

He nodded. "I don't fault you, Renn... but I wish you would have waited till I got back to do that. That could have gone... awry," he said gently.

I nodded. "I know. But she was so serious about it... and we really did spend the time to make sure it went well! We scouted the place, and made sure to not do it until a heavy storm like this one and when no one was around!" I said as I grabbed another muffin.

"I've no doubt you did it well and properly, Renn. Reatti's one of the best thieves in the Society, so I have no doubt. I just... worry, is all," he said.

"Reatti's a thief...?" I asked, pausing before I took another bite.

Vim smirked at me. "Never told you their story, did I? I found them half dead and starved. She had been stealing to keep her and her brother fed, and they got beaten and broken for it. They had resorted to such a thing to survive after Reatti killed the rest of her family," he said.

Oh... "Again, another sad past," I said softly.

Vim shrugged. "Still... as I said, I don't fault you. I'd have helped her without hesitation too. Even if they hadn't been special, those spears had been special to her. That's all that matters," he said.

I nodded. "Right? She offered me one, but..." I shrugged as I thought of his spear in my room, resting against the bed.

"Let her keep them. Though she said we'll be burying one of them?" he asked.

"With her brother, I guess. She asked if I'd do it with her," I said with a nod.

"Hm..."

Vim didn't seem to mind such a thing, but it was obvious he found it unpleasant.

"Do you not like funerals, Vim?" I asked gently.

"Do you?"

"Of course not. I've only... well... Witch had a few when I was with her. And then of course Ginny, and Nory... but no, I hate them. I weep like crazy," I said.

He nodded with a small smirk, as if to say he had already known my answer. Probably had.

"Back to your earlier question, about that young saint... I plan to deal with it as soon as I can, within reason," he said.

"How so?" I asked. I wasn't too happy he had changed topics, but I knew he had done it on purpose. He was either worried we'd soon be unable to talk in private, since the wind could pick up and the storm could worsen, or he just didn't want to talk about death and funerals anymore. Vim was a gentle soul, deep down, so I knew he too likely didn't like funerals either. Hard not to be, I'd think. No matter how many thousands he's likely had to partake in, that was a pain no one could become used to.

"I know where he is. But what I don't know yet, is if Mono's rage is justified or not."

"So... how will you figure that out? He tormented her mother, Vim... I'd be angry too," I said. Mono had told me the story, and the prophecies concerning the man. The mere thought of them made my blood boil, so I didn't think of them.

"Would you have?" he asked with a tilt of his head.

"Well... no. Not in my case. But... what if it was your mother? I'd be upset then," I said with a point at him with a muffin.

He smirked at that. "Nothing on this planet could have harmed my mother like that, so I don't need to worry about such a thing. But I hear what you're saying Renn... and I'm not saying I won't do something about it. I just need to confirm it first. I'd like to talk to Light about it before I actually go and grab this snake and drag him back here to his death," he said.

"You think she'd actually kill him?" I asked. She wanted to be the one to do it, if possible. She wanted to meet out justice, and not anyone else.

"Of course she can, and would."

"Seems like such a sweet girl though," I said as I took a bite.

"That thing...?" he asked with a look of disgust.

"Be nice, Vim. She's a little odd... but we all are, in our own way," I said between bites.

"I am nice. Especially because I know her oddness is because of her corruption. I don't fault them for such a thing, Renn, but it does irk me. It's a reminder, is all," he said as he watched me eat the last bit of another muffin.

I swallowed before saying my thoughts. "Corruption... You speak of divinity, don't you? I've been wanting to ask, you've said many times that taking in heart causes problems. Have I had any yet? Am I being changed too? Like Landi?" I asked.

"Not that I can tell. And it's an inevitability, but we'll deal with it later. In your case though, the corruption might be a good thing," he said with a smile.

"Good thing...?" I asked. What'd he mean by that?

"You not being so gentle would be a boon, in my eyes," he said.

Oh. He was teasing me. "Rude," I said with a sigh as I reached in to the basket and grab another muffin.

Vim leaned back a bit in his chair, making it creak. Which meant it had likely almost broken, since the rain was loud enough to drown out such typical noises. It had likely been loud, under normal conditions. It almost breaking told me that Vim was not as calm as he appeared. But it was not surprising to know so, considering the topic of our conversation. "As far as I can tell, Renn, you're doing fine. You've not absorbed the little heart yet, but I didn't expect you to do so. It takes even a full-blooded monarch months if not years to absorb a heart, no matter how small," he said.

"Really...?" I asked as I cupped the muffin, holding it instead of eating it.

He nodded. "Miss Beak would have taken months for even that one... though she would have been able to absorb another already. She was able to eat several at once without any concern," he said.

Wow. "What would happen if I did try?" I asked.

"You'd blow up."

I squished the muffin as I leaned back in shock. "Really!?"

Vim laughed at me and shook his head. "No. But you would die, or go through terrible pain like you wouldn't believe. See what happens is when two hearts are taken in, the stronger one eats the other. An imbalance, but one that is only one way and doesn't cause conflict within one's body. But if you add too many at once, the conduits start feeding off each other. If you ate another too quickly you'd get sick, and even hurt, as the divine energy within you goes wild. By the way your heart is forming near your tail, in case you didn't know," he said with a point to my muffin.

I glanced down, and realized the muffin in my hands which hovered over my lap was at just the right angle to be in-between his finger pointing at me and my butt. "My tail...? Really?" I asked as I reached around to touch it.

I had to dig my fingers under my clothes and pants, and I frowned as I tried to feel for anything weird. I just felt my skin, the base of my tail...

"Really. Next time you're kind enough to show me your naked body I'll go ahead and show you exactly where," he said.

Glancing at him, I huffed at him as I stopped feeling around my tail. I couldn't feel anything, not even a slight bump or tingle. If it really was there I couldn't tell. "Why would holding another heart make me tingle, but not my own?" I asked. If it was already forming in me, why didn't I feel it? Shouldn't the spot be tingling all the time?

"Because the tingling sensation you feel is your own divinity interact with another source. If you ever happened upon the same conduit, another source that is yours, you won't tingle at all because it won't affect you," he said.

"So... why don't I tingle when I touch a saint?" I asked. I felt as if I could somewhat sense them, such as when I was near Light, but I didn't actually feel that tingly sensation as I had when touching that heart.

"You should, when they use their powers. When they're not using them though, you probably either won't be able to sense them or will only be able to do so to a certain point," he said.

I nodded gently, since that made sense. I had been tingling a bit when Light had healed Lilly.

Huh...? "Wait... explain that thing about a different source better," I said.

"How so?"

"All of it! Are you saying if I met another monarch related to me, like... as if I met my uncle again, I'd not be able to sense him?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. That's basically what I'm saying."

"That... is that good or bad...?" I asked worriedly.

"Honestly both. It's bad because you won't be able to sense them, and thus could accidentally walk right into them... but the same can be said for them. It means that your lineage, and the god who made you, won't be able to sense you," he said.

God who made me... "Is that why no one can sense you, Vim?" I asked.

Vim's eyes narrowed a bit, and for the first time in a very long time... I realized I'd asked something I shouldn't have.

Yet, before I could correct that mistake and change topics... Vim leaned forward a bit. Towards me, and not the table. I went still, my ears becoming itchy since they wanted to twitch but I didn't let them, as he leaned close enough that if I leaned forward too, we'd be able to kiss.

"Is that something you came up with yourself or did someone else say that?" he then asked me.

I slowly shook my head. "No one's talked to me about this stuff, Vim... Lilly and Merit know, but we've only talked about my own self. They worry I'm not sleeping enough, because of it. We've not talked about you in this way, at all," I said, doing my best to not just... lean forward and peck him. Did he even realize how easily I could just kiss him right now? I'd almost think he was doing it on purpose, if not for that serious smirk on his face. He was trying to whisper as he tried to force himself to answer my question.

"Hm... well, stop being so smart."

I couldn't help it; I leaned forward and gave him a kiss. It was his fault. That stupid smirk on his face. The treats. The snide little compliments that made my heart flutter, what did he think was going to happen?

He accepted it, and was kind enough to not lean away from me after a few moments. After longer than I probably even realized, I finally leaned back and sat up while licking my lips. It seemed during the kiss I had squished the muffin in my hand a bit; there were now crumbs all over my lap.

Vim nodded with a sigh as he too sat back. "I did do well on those muffins, didn't I?" he said.

Chapter 524 Vim – A Dangerous Church

Walking down the hallway, I wondered why my head didn't hurt yet.

Glasses had been fine. She had been rather shy as I measured her and whatnot. It helped with Renn being with me, which had made her feel at ease enough to not make it awkward. I'd be able to make her brace pretty easily, with likely only a few modifications once it was done. Dealing with Mono and Tundra had also been relatively easy, if loud, since they had bombarded me with questions at the same time.

But Blasco had been annoying. The man reminded me of Randle, but without the actual knowledge or centuries of experience to back it up. The worst part was I couldn't even fault the man; he just wanted to know all he could as to better help and guide everyone they'd brought back with them from the other continent. But after two hours of just talking to him... I found myself not just expecting a headache but wanting a drink.

This place, this cathedral being built and the many new faces... most of whom were younger than a hundred years old, reminded me of the beginning of the Society. It felt like there was a buzz of expectations and hopefulness, yet beneath it all was a rather serious underlying worry. One that no amount of knowledge, soothing, or strength could pacify.

I wasn't really sure yet what most the people here actually were fearful of, but a part of me knew better than to ask.

It also didn't help that most of them didn't seem willing, or able, to venture out of the safety of this cathedral on their own. There were only a few, like Less, who even did so on a daily basis it seemed. Most just... stayed in this little complex, focusing on the building and upkeep of the new cathedral.

As the protector, I felt as if I should be doing all I could to help them along. To help them build. To secure any and all supplies or needs they wished to fulfill. To ask each one who they were, to meet and introduce myself to them... to ask them all for any requests they had or didn't, and so forth.

Yet the rest of me didn't want to get involved at all. And not just because I wanted to step down, but because I knew better than to get too involved in these people.

They were Light's people. There was no denying that. Nearly all of them, bar a small handful, wore the religious garb of their faith and doctrine. And even the ones who didn't subscribe to their faith, still fully subscribed to the idea of being Light's people. Many of them even outright considered themselves servants of her, in a way, which reminded me of the fervent loyalty Celine had built amongst her flock. Randle had been like that too back then.

These people were members of the Society... but first and foremost, before that, they were their own little group. Light's group. And it was rather obvious, too.

Slowing my steps, I walked quietly as I rounded a corner and neared a doorway. I knew within the room was one of the larger working groups at the moment. They were building the foundation for a spire. A stairwell and tower that would rise upward and connect to other nearby buildings. There were nearly fifty people working on it at almost any time, and they weren't quiet as they did so.

Hammers banged. People huffed as they lifted heavy things, or climbed ladders and scaffolding. Others stacked bricks, and others painted already built sections. There was, at least from a few moments of listening, at least a dozen different conversations going on at once and not a one of them were similar.

"Tundra wants to join them. Can't say I'm shocked," a man said.

"I keep smelling it through my window at night! It makes me so hungry...!" another woman complained elsewhere.

"Maybe this way...?" someone else wondered.

Standing near the doorway, I listened for a long moment to them all chitchat as they worked. It was... comforting, to hear most of their conversations were simple things. A few spoke of me, or Renn or the rest of us, but not in a way that was too concerning. Not to me, at least.

Sighing gently as I heard a wheelbarrow get dropped, rather roughly, I wondered if I should just... help them out or not.

They seemed to know what they were doing. I'd already checked the lower floors, which were already mostly built, and was pleasantly surprised at their handiwork. They weren't the best at what they were doing, but they were also far from the worst. If no one else got involved this cathedral they were building here would likely end up being one of the fanciest buildings in the whole city, maybe even including the one I'd helped build for Brandy and the rest.

But that didn't mean they couldn't use the help. And I knew how sometimes my assistance, even if only for a short time, could make a huge difference. Just a few days of labor from me was the equivalent of months for them, depending on what I was doing at least.

That was of course, under the assumption they'd even let me do anything. Light and Less had asked me to check the lower floors, near the hole that I'd made fighting those beasts, but they hadn't outright asked me for any help to build this place...

Though maybe that was the five years she spoke of...? Light did seem to want me and Renn to stay here while we had our supposed vocation...

And Light, like her mother, knew me well enough. She'd know that my doing nothing for so long wouldn't work. I'd have to do something, and without any immediate requests... my hands would find hammers and nails, if nothing else, as to help them.

Still...

"Vim...!"

I shifted and turned to watch Merit hurry down the hallway towards me. She was alone, and didn't seem too bothered. I stepped away from the doorway, just in case though.

The small woman came to a stop in front of me and pointed behind her. "Brandy's here to meet Tundra. Do you want to be involved in that at all?"

"You know I don't get involved in such things, Merit," I said with a frown. She should know better.

Merit nodded. "I know. I didn't mean it that way. I meant... well..." she shifted and glanced past me, so I turned my head to see what had caused her to get distracted. A pair of faces startled and then quickly hid behind the door frame, and I heard the people who owned those faces hurry off and whisper worriedly to each other.

They had been eavesdropping. Funny.

Ignoring them I looked back at Merit and found her upset. "I don't care much for the people here," she told me.

I shrugged at her. "So? Is Renn acting weird about it or something?" I asked. That was the only reason I could think of for Merit to want me involved.

"Yes. I fear she's taking a liking to the wolf. If you're not careful she'll be coming with us up north," Merit said.

"Us?" I asked with a smirk.

Merit's eyes went wide and she snarled at me as she turned away. "Shut it!" she shouted, then ran off back whence she came, while I heard tiny cracks and pops from her static as she did.

Watching her go, I couldn't help but smile at her.

So she had already made the decision had she? A part of me was upset, since it meant I'd have more troubles later, but at the same time... well...

It'd make Renn happy to have her join us. And that was all that mattered anymore, wasn't it?

"Still... can't blame her either," I mumbled as I went to follow after the sparky fish.

Less wasn't staying at the Animalia Guild at the moment; since we were all back, but I knew it'd not be long until many people were there. Tundra wasn't the only one who wanted to live there too, from what I'd been hearing. And she also wasn't the only strong one here, either, even though she acted it. A lot of

the members here were thick in the blood, if not outright full-blooded non-humans. Although plenty, if not a majority, were just as much cowards as the rest of the Society.

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While answering a lot of questions for Blasco, I'd been able to learn more about these people. Turns out there were quite a few predators here... though many were like Less. Strong, but didn't act or show it. Not unless it was needed.

There were also quite a few here that wanted a more simpler life. The kind of life that working at the Animalia Company would give them. So there was no doubt the guild's numbers would soon double, if not triple.

When that happened... not only would Merit not be as needed, for safety reasons, there would then also be too many incompatibles too.

Merit could live with nearly anyone. But not everyone could live with her.

She was like Renn in that aspect... which was likely why the two got along so bloody well.

Rounding a corner, I found Merit waiting for me. She was already at the other end of the hall, but waited until I headed her way before running off again.

She's been moody lately. I wonder if it was my fault, or if Renn's just... brought back a bit of spunk into Merit's life. Maybe her calmness these last few decades, before Renn showed up, was not that Merit had calmed down but had instead been unhappy, or gloomy.

Shifting a shoulder, I felt bad all of a sudden as I realized that was likely the most probably answer. Merit had not calmed down all this time; during her stay here in Lumen... she had simply been depressed.

"Depression..." I mumbled the word as I rounded another corner, and found the new hallway led me to an exit. I headed for it, since Merit was there waiting for me with the door open. The outside world wasn't being flooded anymore, but now it was cold. The kind of cold that likely hurt those with old bones.

The door led to a courtyard, one unfinished. It was a messy grass field, with more weeds than anything else. Merit guided me across the courtyard to a building opposite of the one we'd just been in. One that looked smaller than the rest around here, almost as if it was a makeshift barn or something.

Entering the building, I was glad to find it didn't smell like old hay or horses. Instead it just smelled like wood. It was some kind of storeroom.

I'd make a joke about Merit leading me to some abandoned storehouse, if not for the fact I knew she'd blush and become furious over it. It'd be an insult no matter how funny I'd find it, to her at least.

"Oh..." Merit grumbled as we headed deeper into the building, and found Renn walking our way. She smiled at the sight of us and hurried her pace a bit as she did.

She was alone.

"They leave already?" Merit asked.

Renn nodded as she stopped in front of us. "Yep. Brandy's going to take Tundra back to meet everyone else," she said.

"You didn't go with them?" I asked. Hadn't Merit said she had been acting oddly over this?

Renn slowly shook her head and smiled at me. "I... realized I shouldn't. Otherwise I'd affect her choice, I think," she said.

"Huh. Wisdom," Merit noted.

I reached over and lightly tapped Merit's shoulder, to let her know that had been snarky even for her. "I'm glad you're keeping your distance, Renn... but you don't need to. As we've talked about, you need not live my life," I told her.

Renn nodded as Merit groaned, either from my tap or my words. "I know. Thank you Vim, but... for now this is best, I think," Renn said.

I nodded back, and then glanced around. The place sounded... "Is there no one here?" I asked.

"Nope? Down this hallway are just two warehouses. Where they store barrels," Renn said with a point down the hall.

"Why were you all here...?" I asked.

"Brandy wanted to count the barrels," Renn said.

Of course she did.

"Brandy thinks they're stealing. I'm not really sure I agree with her, and even if they were... who cares?" Merit said.

"She has no proof, other than the stuff they took from Telmik, I guess. I think she's just hoping to find something she can use to validate her own opinions," Renn said.

"Foolish opinions," Merit corrected. "She's more concerned with where the coins are than what they are being used for. I don't care much for the people here, but they're still members. Still free to build their new home and whatnot, who cares how much money it takes?" she added.

I nodded; glad the snarky fish was so wise. "Indeed. Especially since there are hundreds, if not thousands, more coming. They'll all need not just homes, but a purpose. If a few wagons of gold are all it takes to secure such a thing, then a small price to give for it," I said.

Renn sighed at us. "Stop making so much sense. I'm trying to not judge her too harshly for her attitude, and you're not helping," she said.

"What's this now?" I asked.

My lovely wife's ears twitched as she crossed her arms and gave me an odd look. "See, Merit? Shows you how little time he's been spending on me, since we've not spoken about it yet," Renn said.

Merit nodded happily. "Let him waste his life foolishly, we can just enjoy ourselves on our own," she said.

Great. What's going on now? Yes Renn and I have only had a few moments alone together since I've been back, but it wasn't as if I'd actually been neglecting her. If anything I've been the one getting ignored...

Renn gave me a smile, the one she wore when she knew her teasing had been effective on me. "I'm just a tad disappointed in Brandy, Vim. She's angry at Light and the rest, feeling slighted, and I don't like how she's acting about it. I agree with her on many points, but her reasons for being upset are... well... not something I want to agree with, basically," she explained to me.

I smirked at her. "Ah. The woes of a capitalist," I said. She tilted her head at me in a way that told me she hadn't understood me, but I didn't feel like explaining it here and now. So instead I lightly gestured at her. "Not the first time you've had such reservations, Renn, and won't be the last. Just navigate your feelings as you deem fit," I said simply.

"Feh," Merit scoffed at me.

"What?" I asked her. Why was she looking at me as if I was a soured fruit?

Merit shook her head at me. "You're her husband, Vim. I don't think anyone would fault you for giving her such freedom and support, but sometimes you really should just tell her either what to do, or at least what to think," Merit said.

"What...?" I asked again, not really surprised to hear this from Merit... but I was so to see Renn nod in agreement with her.

"Sometimes I'd like you to just... voice your own opinion, you know? Even if it's a wrong one," Renn said to me.

Oh. So it wasn't that they wanted me to actually force Renn to have a certain stance or view on something, but instead they just didn't like that I didn't ever do it at all.

I sighed at them. "Okay... sure. Explain the problem, and I'll tell you my genuine opinion then," I said, offering to do my best.

Renn perked up at that, and even Merit seemed to grow excited at the idea. "Brandy's only upset because Light and the rest are taking over what she's built. She feels entitled to her position, for doing all she's done, and is actively planning on how to keep control over the stuff she oversees. To the point it might even interrupt or hurt the Society's income streams," Renn explained.

Oh boy. Renn's involved a tad too deeply for my taste, based off the words she just used. Those hadn't been ones she herself thought of, but what others had said or told her... maybe even Brandy herself.

"So... this upsets you, because she's not prioritizing the good of the Society over her own personal goals," I said, understanding. Or well, I understood Brandy well enough to understand where Renn was going with this, at least.

Renn nodded as she smirked. "Yeah!"

I nodded slowly and glanced down to Merit, who nodded back up at me. "Brandy isn't outright wrong, Vim. Light and the rest are planning to take control of certain things... but honestly, it needs to happen. Brandy and Gerald are stretched thin as it is. It's time more people got involved again in the companies we run," she said.

"And you both think, or know, that Brandy is going to sabotage this transition? Out of spite?" I asked, a tad surprised to learn so. Brandy was very... greedy, but to the point she'd do something detrimental?

Renn's smirk immediately disappeared. "No! I just... well... she's not going to just roll over and let it happen, is all. I don't think she'd actually go that far, but..." Renn quickly went to Brandy's defense, which told me it likely wasn't as big a deal as they were making it out to be. Odds are Renn just found it upsetting that someone was so greedy, and was trying her best to be friendly with that person all the same.

"Well... if this isn't that big a deal, and is just Brandy being over-dramatic at the moment, then personally I'd not interfere at all. It's not my place to do so unless it actually threatens the Society as you know..." I started to say, but quickly switched gears when I noticed both of their eyes harden a bit. They didn't want to hear such a thing here and now. "But... I too would find it bothersome, insulting even, if

Brandy would actually impede or fuss over such a thing as other members helping or adding their skills to her purview. Money is powerful, and important, but it is in the end just metal and paper. Not worth the lives or comfort of our people. Though... I will also say, it is like Light and her people to take the spoils of another's efforts. And that too is something I'd not approve of," I said, throwing my own opinions into the world.

Renn and Merit both relaxed a little... and then glanced at each other. "Rather basic for him, but at least he did it," Merit said first.

"Better than nothing," Renn nodded, agreeing.

Sighing at them, I shook my head. "Want more?" I asked.

They both nodded quickly.

"I'd like to leave. Before I get a headache. This place is full of potential traps and I need to get out of here before I fall into them," I said.

Merit smirked at that, but Renn frowned. "Traps?" she asked.

"He means dangers. There are a lot of people who have never met him before, like that Blasco guy. They all probably have countless questions, and maybe even requests, and he's scared of lingering here long enough to get wrapped up in them all," Merit explained.

Renn's frown turned into a happy smile. "I see. Honestly I'd not mind that, some of them are pretty nice people you know? Glasses is adorable, and so is Tundra."

"You have weird tastes, Renn," I said.

"You have no right to say that!" Merit groaned.

Chapter 525 Renn – A Date With Fears

Watching the two as they talked, I realized something a little neat.

Lilly and Vim were calm with one another.

Vim looked, and acted, calm with everyone. That was kind of his thing, really, but I knew the truth. Deep down, Vim wasn't comfortable with many people. If not most, or all. Rather I shouldn't say he wasn't comfortable... he just simply didn't get too relaxed with certain people. As if he was always on guard, or something.

With Lilly though, Vim was more like he was with me than anyone else. He might not ever lie in her lap and vent as he did with me, but he was also not annoyed by her either like he was when with so many others. Even Merit was someone he didn't feel completely comfortable with... though that might be more because of her feelings for him than anything else.

And even more importantly, Lilly was likely as comfortable with Vim as she was with her own family, if not more so in certain ways.

"I don't mind Vim. You two can take as long as you want," Lilly said lightly as she blinked lazily at him. She was sitting at the table, like we were, but was resting upon it. She had her head on her crossed arms, and looked as if at any moment she was going to drift off into sleep. It made her look really young. Childish. And it was something I'd never seen her do before. A part of me wondered if the reason she was so relaxed like this was because Merit wasn't here with us, but I didn't remember her acting so like this when she and I had traveled alone back near her home up north.

The cause of her relaxed front was rather obvious, and he didn't seem to notice it at all. Vim's focus was more so on the strips of flesh that Lilly had gotten for him at the nearby plateau. They looked like little flaps of leather, tanned leather, like from a deer or something. But Vim said they were actually the flesh of a god. He had let me touch them earlier, so I had expected to feel something... special about them, but instead they had just felt like dried leather. I hadn't tingled or felt anything odd by touching or being near them.

"I'd rather not, for my own sake. The longer I linger here the more I'll get wrapped up in Light and her schemes, or Renn will. Neither are things I want," Vim said gently as he folded another piece. He was packing them together as to put in one of his monarch pouches.

"Light believes she'll be back before we leave. So odds are we won't be able to leave in the next few days at least," I said.

Lilly sighed, her eyes half-closed as she watched Vim. "Usually that would make Vim just leave right away," she said.

Vim nodded. "Usually. But well... circumstances..." he mumbled a little dejectedly.

"Me or the god you met?" I asked, both to tease him and for specifics.

He glanced at me, his eyes narrowing. He didn't answer though.

Leaning forward a bit, as to rest on the table, I glanced at Lilly and wondered if she was as tired as she looked. Was she about to fall asleep? For real? "I know you want to step down Vim, but you haven't yet. That means you're still the protector. And doesn't that mean you're supposed to be helping them all as much as you can?" I asked, not so much to poke and prod at him but rather to confirm he still believed himself to be the protector. A part of me was worried he no longer did, even though he hadn't officially stepped down yet.

"I know, Renn. Why do you think I've been spending these last few days doing so much for them?" Vim asked back.

"Because you're trying your best to not accept the fact that she'd rather spend time with others than you?" Lilly asked, teasing him.

I smirked at that as Vim glanced at her with a huff. "She kissed me the other day you know," he said in defense.

"Oh wow. Congratulations. A kiss from your wife, quite a feat," Lilly continued her teasing. Vim's eyes narrowed some more, obviously the teasing was working.

I though felt as if the teasing was being directed at me now. I felt a slight blush hit my face as I squirmed in my seat. This was the second time now that Vim had brought up my kiss; the first had been with Merit. As if he was actually proud of the fact that I'd kissed him or something. Maybe he was?

Should I tell her I planned to sleep with him tonight, and not Merit? I kind of wanted to, just to see and hear her reaction, but I knew that I'd just get teased more than I already was over it so decided not to. After all, Lilly would interpret my statement as something other than what I actually meant.

I only wanted to lay in bed with him, and talk through the night. Something we'd not done in a long time. Not since Telmik.

It wasn't his fault, honestly. Lilly was right. It was mine. I could have spent more time with him, but I was instead focused on others. If I wasn't with her or Merit, I was with Brandy or Reatti. Or I spent all day at the new cathedral being built.

Honestly it made me feel a little bad, because Lilly wasn't the only one teasing him over my lack of... paying attention of him. Merit and others had brought it up too.

But... I mean... I had my reasons. And it wasn't just the fact that I worried about leaving, and not seeing my friends again for a long period of time.

The bed we had at the Animalia Guild was nice, and comfortable, and actually smelled perfectly fine. But there was another issue with the room, one that now existed thanks to how well I could hear things. I had noticed it lately while sleeping in Merit's room, since she was only a couple doors from Tosh's. He snored a bit, and I was now able to readily hear it if I focused. Which meant others with good hearing, or better hearing than I once had, would be able to hear into my room too if I wasn't careful.

It was such a silly worry, but I feared being heard. By those nearby. My room wasn't too close to anyone else's, but there were still a few that were close enough that it was possible. And there were people who lived above and below it, on different floors. Last thing I needed, or wanted, was for weird rumors and stories about me and Vim to spread thanks to someone hearing a weird sound or noise, or even worse hearing an important conversation.

Glancing at Vim and his slight indifference to the moment as he finished packing away the god's skin into his pouches... I wanted to sigh at him. Even if he didn't actually deserve me blaming him, as if it was all his fault that I was now able to hear better and thus was scared others could too.

But so many had been telling me lately it was the wife's privilege to be a little selfish... so, well...

So I did.

He glanced at me. "Tired?" he asked.

"Why are you asking me? Lilly's been about to fall asleep for well over an hour!" I said.

"Am not," Lilly mumbled, sounding asleep already.

"Hm... it might be time to return. Unless you'd like to have dinner together, that is," Vim noted as he glanced to the nearby window. It was getting darker.

"I'm fine, unless Renn wants to," Lilly said with her tired voice.

Gosh she actually did seem tired. I wondered if she didn't sleep at all, normally? Maybe she didn't like sleeping here, in this city, alone. Should I offer to stay here for the night...?

"Is she actually tired Vim? I know she won't answer me if I ask, so I'll ask you," I asked.

He smiled and nodded. "Yes. Lilly is one of those types who waits until she's utterly exhausted before resting. Odds are it's because of her injuries and healing after you fought the monarch. She likely had been on edge the whole time while at the Bell Church," he said.

Oh! That made a lot of sense. It had seemed as if she hadn't actually slept, even though she had been in a bed for nearly a whole day after the event.

"Don't look so happy to hear I'm such a weakling, Renn. Sheesh," Lilly grumbled at me.

"I wasn't thinking that! I was actually wondering if you wanted us to stay the night so you can get a good night's sleep," I said happily.

Lilly sat up a bit and blanched at me. "And listen to you two flirt all night long? Who knows what kind of ghoulish nightmares I'd have then. No thank you," she said.

"Ghoulish...?"

"Then we'll go and let you sleep. I have to spend the morning with Brandy and Blasco, but after that I'll be at the company building the rest of the day," Vim said as he went to stand from the table.

Lilly nodded lazily as she stretched a bit and yawned. "I'll be here," she said, speaking a bit before her yawn ended so she sounded cute as she did.

"Are you sure you don't want to just go home, Lilly...?" I asked softly.

"I do. But remember we have to take Lellip up north, and I'd rather travel with you two doing that," she said.

Oh. Right... I sighed as I glanced at Vim. "And we need to help Randle and the rest leave up north too, Vim," I reminded him. Winter was basically almost over...

"I've not forgotten Renn. At all. I plan to use those things as my excuse to leave here in a few days, once I finish the important stuff," he said.

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"Mhm..." I wanted to grumble and complain over that, but knew better than to do so. Lellip, Randle... we had promises with them. To help them. And as much as I liked spending time with Merit and the others here, we had already been here for a few months already...

Usually Vim and I didn't spend so long in one place. The last time I'd been here we had stayed for so long thanks to the ruckus. Fly and those monsters. Now... well...

"Get going already. I'm going to wipe down and sleep," Lilly said, and then yawned again.

"Okay. Goodnight Lilly," I said as I hurried to stand. She really was tired!

"Mhm," she made a similar noise, akin to the one I had just made to Vim. I smirked at that as I stepped away from the table and towards the door, following Vim. I put my hat on and tucked my tail back into my pants as I waved goodbye to the sleepy owl.

We left Lilly's temporary home, and I was glad to hear her lock the latch on the door as we headed down the stairs to the street.

"Is she still hurt, Vim?" I asked worriedly.

"No. She's just tired, Renn. She's likely not slept much since we got here, and then she endured the injuries and healing of Light. Odds are she won't get any real rest until she gets home, she's just like that," Vim said as we headed back towards the Animalia Guild.

"I feel as if I've slept less than she has, yet I don't feel too tired," I said.

"You've absorbed a heart, Renn. A slightly strong one, too. You'll from now on start noticing your new limits, and in some cases will find they're quite drastic," he said.

"Like hearing through solid walls and doors," I said.

He glanced at me and nodded. "More than you already did, yes. Oddly hearts usually just amplify one's innate abilities. You just so happen to have already been... well... you, even before you took one in. So it'll do more for you than most, like Sap for instance. She had been born weak, so the heart had simply made her normal. You had already been strong, so..." he shrugged a bit as he gestured at me, as if my very being was already answer enough and thus he didn't need to specify what he actually meant.

"To this big of a degree though, Vim? It's so bad it startles me sometimes. The other night I had heard Brandy and Gerald talking through his office door, several feet from the room. I had heard them as clear as if the door had been opened," I said.

"We've spoken of this. You'll slowly adapt to it, and be fine. Worry not," he said.

"I'm... not really worried, as much as I am disturbed. Is your hearing this good?" I asked.

"In some ways. I try not to focus too much during such moments. I respect privacy," he said.

"I do too! I just... heard it, is all..." I mumbled as we had to pause a moment. A small cart was in the way, slowly being pulled by what was obviously an old horse. Why'd they make such an old and tired animal work so hard? It sounded like it was struggling, and the cart wasn't even that big or that full.

Vim and I watched the cart for a moment, and then before we crossed the street he grabbed my hand. I smiled at him, almost forgetting all about the tired horse, and we crossed the street hand in hand.

For a bit we walked in silence, making me thankful that it wasn't storming or raining. Although I enjoyed such weather... I wearing heavier duty clothing and rain-gear made it so Vim usually didn't hold my hand as we walked. Since it was either cumbersome, or because he worried about me getting wet.

"I'd invite you out again Renn, but I actually have to go find out what they all thought of Tundra," Vim then said as we rounded a corner.

"Hm... it's fine. Are you busy tonight though?" I asked.

"Tonight?"

I nodded as we passed a shop. One that was just now closing. There were a pair of men talking lightly about their lack of customers as they closed up shop. "Can we sleep together tonight? Or are you busy and I get to bother Merit some more?" I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Vim smirk, but I didn't turn to look at him. Instead I kept staring into the window of the shops we were walking past. None of them were too interesting, thanks to my having seen them all already, but I pretended as if they were all of a sudden. "I only have a few things to do. I can hurry and finish them up if you'd like to bathe together, yes," he said.

"Bathe too...?" I asked and looked at him, a little shocked to hear it.

He nodded. "I've felt dirty lately, so I should I think," he said.

"Dirty...?" I asked. Him? I mean, Vim did get dirty often... but lately he hadn't seemed so.

"I've been spending too much time in that church, you see," he said with a smirk.

Oh. He was being rude. "It's not even a church yet," I said.

"Funny. Some would say a church can be anywhere and anything, while others would agree with you. That only certain places, blessed and ordained, can be churches."

"Although I find that very interesting, I'd rather talk about our little bath date right now," I said, doing my best to not focus too much on his attempt to switch topics.

He smirked and nodded, accepting defeat. "I'll handle what I need to... do you want to have dinner together too? Or?"

Hm... "I'll eat with Reatti and Tosh, I think, and then we can bathe together," I decided.

"How is Tosh anyway?"

"Wondering why you've not talked to him lately. He's fine though, otherwise. He's not as... chipper? As Merit and the others say. He's a little depressed compared to how he had been last time I was here, or well... after he got back to normal from his weirdness," I said.

"Hm... So he's remembered everything, has he?" Vim wondered.

"Merit says he has."

"Sometimes forgetting is the best thing that can happen. Hopefully this time he can endure it," he said.

I wanted to ask for the details, since I'd only gotten a brief explanation from Vim once, but decided against it. Vim didn't like talking about such pasts and secrets concerning anyone, himself or otherwise.

"Also, I don't know if you know, but Magdalena is going to get married soon. To one of the men, Harrold, who came back with Light," I told him.

"I'd be shocked if not for the fact such a thing is common. Used to be people settled down and mated within days of meeting each other back in the day," Vim said with a frown.

"Doesn't explain us at all," I mumbled.

"As I said, back in the day."

I huffed at him.

"Still I'm glad for her. Even more so that she's settling for one of our own," Vim said.

"Congratulate her, would you? A lot of the people here aren't being very nice about it... you know, since he's part of that group who left so long ago and whatnot," I said.

Vim nodded knowingly. "That'll be a problem, Renn. Maybe one that will never go away. Many of our people, thanks to how long we live, have longer memories. Berri's one of the nicest people I know and even she had some choice words for them," he said.

Speaking of the narwhals. "Are you going to take them up north with us, Vim?" I asked. He had told me that Berri was worried for her daughter, and wanted Narli close to Vim for the foreseeable future... since it was dangerous for her now.

He sighed gently as he nodded. "It's what Berri wants. And although I'd like to think that I solved Narli's possible situation... well..." he didn't finish his sentence as we rounded another corner and the Animalia Guild building came into sight.

It was still slightly busy, even though it should be time for the doors to be getting shut.

"Is there not anyway for you to prove it, Vim? Can't you... sense them? Like you do us and monarchs?" I asked softly. There wasn't anyone else around us, but I wasn't going to speak too loudly concerning such matters.

"Only to a degree. I've begun to ask everyone to keep eyes and ears out for... discrepancies, but I'm not sure how well that will work. Plus that could take years, if not decades, for word of something to reach me," he said.

"Discrepancies?" I asked.

"Gods are noticeable if you know what to look for. They change the weather, create monsters, and perform miracles... fly in the air without wings, and so on and so forth. So listening for rumors of such things is usually a good indicator if there's a god anywhere in the world causing chaos. But, like I said, that's a reactive warning system. Not a preemptive one to say the least," he said.

"So... you have those like Brandy keep an ear out for so called miracles, oddities that can't be explained, and then you go find out if they're real or not...? What do you do about the ones that are always circulating amongst the humans? The restaurant we were in the other night had people talking about some sea monster they saw the other day on the horizon," I said. People had been laughing at it, arguing if it had been a giant duck or a snake. No one had been able to get the story right.

"There are ways. I've been using such a method for thousands of years Renn, after so long anyone would get a certain sense for it," he said.

Ah... right...

Thousands of years...

Slowing a little, since we were about to cross the street as to walk into the Animalia building, I squeezed Vim's hand to get him to stop for a moment too. He did, and turned to smile at me with his patience of eternity, waiting for me to speak my mind.

I tried to choose my words carefully as I gently shrugged at him. "Will... Will I live that long too now, Vim?" I asked softly.

He blinked at me and then frowned. "Honestly Renn, you might. Hearts are conduits to divine power. Real power. What you would consider magic. And... well... whether I like it or not, that power manipulates reality and alters even the physical. It breaks the rules."

I noted he didn't actually give me a genuine answer. Not an actual year amount.

"Rough estimate?" I asked.

"You'll likely outlive your first few children, Renn," he whispered.

Oh...

I blinked suddenly teary eyes as I nodded at his answer. "Why'd you answer like that...? That hurt," I whispered.

"Because it was the truest answer I could give you," he said, whispering just as softly.

Squeezing his hand, he squeezed it back.

Nodding at him, I returned to walking... and although was proud of myself for not crying as we entered the building... I wasn't proud over the sad fact that I now knew one of Vim's fears. Or rather, just confirmed one of them.

Outliving my children would indeed break my heart. Beyond what I could possibly imagine. But... for him to have answered in such a way so readily...

It was clear such a fear has been long in his heart too. Eating away at the back of his mind.

Was... was that one of the reasons he was so hesitant to have children with me? Was it not just because of his disdain for prophecies...?

If so it made so much sense. It was, in a way, a continuation of his fear of his love for me. He had fought it originally, putting up walls and barriers around his heart against me, because he had feared loving me. Because he had feared what time would do to that love; either destroy it completely, or make it hallow and dull.

It had taken me longer than I wanted to admit to break those barriers down. And honestly I still felt as if I was doing so, even today.

Was that my next barrier? If so that was quite a terrible one. Daunting, to say the least. How did one confront such a horrible fear?

Sadly I could think of many in the Society who could probably answer such a question for me, having either experienced it themselves... or were currently doing so.

Glancing at Vim as we entered the building, and were greeted by Reatti and Lawrence, I did my best to not bury such a realization too deeply.

I would need to ponder such a thing. To weigh it, and process it. To better understand it... so that I could not only understand the man I loved, but find a way to help him face that fear. And hopefully do it in a way that allowed me to face it and overcome it myself too.

Chapter 526 Vim – A Small Fish’s Request

Uh-oh.

"And then!?" Tundra shouted happily as her ears wiggled a little. She looked as if she was half a moment from pouncing out of her seat at Lawrence. He was sitting across from her, relaxing a bit on a couch with a glass of one of his favorite spirits. He looked far too calm compared to Tundra's utter thrill.

"Then we feasted. And did other things," Lawrence said, and I noted his left eye twitch a bit. He had been about to say something else, and had just barely stopped himself from doing so. The poor man kept forgetting the girl in front of him was young. Too young, really.

"And the pack leader? Was she able to eat a lot!?" Tundra asked, not letting Lawrence move on from the story just yet.

I stepped away, wanting to smirk and chuckle at them as I did. I didn't though, since I was now a little bit worried.

Tundra liked Lawrence a tad too much. It was a good thing he was old enough to know better.

"Well..." Lawrence's voice faded as I stopped listening and headed down the hallway, looking for another headache to occupy my time.

It wasn't that the young wolf was necessarily annoying. She was just... full of energy. Typical for a predator like her. She needed something to do. Something to actually do, and not just sweeping floors or sorting books or something. She needed something to do that expended all that energy she had been born with. Sadly though, I wasn't sure what to really have her do. The depot, or the ships, would do best for her... they'd let her work her muscles hard, but we couldn't really just let her do such a thing.

A little girl, who looked so scrawny a breeze could snap her in half, should not be seen lifting full barrels and crates with ease. The humans, especially the ones here who now fully believed in monsters thanks to Fly's Masters, should not be seeing such a thing.

But maybe it was a mute point. Although Tundra seemed to like Lawrence, a man who had known a pack of wolves like herself, she also seemed intent to follow Renn north. I wasn't sure how that was going to work out, but... well...

"Not like I can stop her," I mumbled as I rounded a corner.

Although I had no real destination in mind, I found myself heading out of the housing area of the Animalia Company building and heading for the main entrance. I didn't have any plans to leave, since I had to escort Tundra back to the cathedral before nightfall, but I also felt like I needed to busy myself.

Renn was off doing something with Reatti, again, and honestly I didn't even want to know what they were up to. They had snuck away sometime this morning, giggling as they did like children up to no good.

Which was fine, honestly. I was actually very... happy that Renn had friends. Especially since last time we'd left here they all had been half a step from banishing her outright from this place, and not just on contingency.

Actually it was kind of... odd how much everyone seemed to have forgotten such a thing. As if it had never even happened in the first place...

Coming to a stop in the middle of a hallway, I frowned as I realized something was off about it. The kind of off that made me question it entirely, and...

"Vim!"

I blinked out of my thoughts and turned to find Tosh. He hurried up to me, smirking at me as he held up a leather pouch. "Guess what I just got!"

"Smells like oiled leather," I said.

"Close, it's a bag of whale intestines!"

"What...?" I now expected a joke, since there was no way the bag was made from such a thing.

"Look!" Tosh then opened the bag to show me, and I flinched at the smell.

I see. I had misheard, or well, misunderstood. He hadn't meant a bag made of whale intestines, but instead a bag of them. He had a bag full of ambergris, the stuff that was made in their intestines.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked.

"Ronaldo just docked this morning. He and his crew found a dead whale and harvested it. You should have seen Brandy's face when she heard, I was lucky to get this much," Tosh said.

Great. Maybe that was what Reatti and Renn had run off for then, to join Brandy in seeing the spoils of such a catch.

Wonder how Renn fared with such a stink.

"Well... congratulations, I guess. Going to make candles with them or something?" I asked.

"Was thinking that and drinks. Though if I'll be able to do so without getting kicked out is another question," Tosh said with a smirk.

I nodded. Using the stuff to make spirits or rum was indeed something you could do... though if it was tasty or not was another question.

"Want some?" Tosh then asked.

I shook my head and smiled. "Thank you but no."

"Hm. Renn hadn't wanted any either. The smell you think?" Tosh asked, confirming my suspicions.

"Very likely."

He chuckled at that and tied up the bag, though it barely hid the bad smell coming from it. "I'm going to go properly store the stuff then! Later!"

I waved him goodbye and watched him run off back the way I'd just came. To the housing area.

"I'm glad he's doing well," I whispered. Renn and the others had mentioned he had seemed a bit... depressed. But honestly he seemed to be doing fine. I had spent a few hours with him yesterday, just talking and stuff, and was glad to find that he now remembered everything. And although he was sad, and unsure of what to do, he was at least active and able to enjoy the simpler things in life.

Simpler things...

Heading for the entrance once again, I found myself being stopped not far from it. Magdalena walked over, carrying a clipboard and grinning happily.

"Hey Vim!" she greeted me, and once again I noticed the kiss marks on her neck.

I'd congratulated her already, for finding love and a mate, and honestly I was glad for it. She used to be one of the ones who tried to flirt and sneak into my room when I visited here, before Renn. "Magda. If Brandy catches you sneaking off you're going to get a headache from her nagging," I warned.

Magdalena blushed and laughed, and waved me off a bit. "I didn't sneak off! I spent the night with him! I just got back, I'm not late for work, I promise!"

Oh. Right. That made a lot of sense actually... "Right... sorry, I was just teasing a little," I said. It wasn't as if Brandy, or anyone actually, would fault Magda even if she did sneak off occasionally. There was a reason we had hundreds of human employees here, after all.

"I know...! Gosh, you and everyone else! I'm glad everyone's happy for me, but I swear! I almost miss talking about the weather!" she said with a stupid grin. She didn't seem to actually mind talking about her new love life at all, based off her happy tone.

"Watch, most of them will end up doing the same as you Magda, so just return the favor when you can," I said.

She tilted her head at that. "Oh... right? You're actually very right, aren't you? I wonder who will find a mate next? My money's on Tosh," she said.

"Tosh?" I asked. Really? The man may be returning to normal, but in his perspective his wife, the love of his life, had just been ruthlessly taken from him. Even though it had been almost a hundred years ago.

She nodded. "I saw him talking, or well... flirting, you know how he is, with some of them the other day when they came over to visit."

Ah. She was interpreting his flirting as something more than it was. She had not known him before his... mental crisis, had she? "Personally I hope it's Brandy. She could for once learn to focus on something other than money," I said.

Magdalena laughed at that and shook her head. "No chance!"

Right?

"Ah! I got to go, Vim, or else I really will be late! See you later!" she then startled and hurried off, because she'd seen someone else down the hall. I studied the person, not recognizing them, but the human had the back office attire on. Likely someone she was supposed to have a meeting with, or give orders to, and was late in doing so.

Sighing gently at her I returned once more to head for the main entrance.

This time I actually made it to the entrance without being stopped. I spent a few moments just... watching people come and go. Humans were like always, busy people. Always in a rush, and half the time it seemed as if they themselves had no idea where it was they were rushing to.

I felt that way lately. Before encountering Stance, I had felt lost... now though? Now I felt like I was messing up terribly because I wasn't hurrying to do whatever it was I was actually meant to be doing.

But what was I to do about it...? It wasn't as if I could just run off and abandon Renn and the Society. Even if I did... where would I go and what would I do?

A part of me wanted to search for more gods, since Stance's arrival had been so... odd and sudden. But to do so would mean to not just abandon Renn and the Society but likely lose them completely. By the time I found any other gods, then dealt with them, the Society and Renn would likely long be gone... not from my absence, but simply from time.

"Would you like some help sir?"

I turned to find a younger woman. One wearing the simple teller attire here at the guild, a human girl who was likely just recently hired based off her age.

"I'm fine, thank you."

She tilted her head but nodded at me. She stepped away, and I watched her for a moment since she kept glancing at me. But not in a good way. She must think I was odd just standing here and walking around... Though it might also be my attire. I wasn't wearing anything to let anyone know I was associated with Animalia Guild in anyway. I was just wearing the basic stuff that I usually wore under my traveling gear.

I stopped paying attention to the young girl as she walked over to speak with some other workers. I instead focused on an older man, one who was reading from one of the many bulletin boards situated around the entrance. I knew on that board were many things. Job listings, date listings for certain appointments and events, prices and fees for consultations and other things the company offered to the public, and so forth. He could also just be reading things to occupy his time, waiting for an associate to finish their own work here.

As I stood there, watching the place... I had to like always accept a rather odd fact.

The world always kept turning. Going about its own business. No matter how chaotic life felt, or seemed, the general world just... didn't notice typically.

Even back when monarchs and gods had been causing utter chaos, the people who had lived under such a hostile environment hadn't known any different. To them such calamitous weather patterns, monsters lurking all around, and just a general chaotic environment was... normal. To be expected. They had not liked it, but it had been normal to them. So they had been... calm in their own way about it too.

Not that my own life had really been chaotic lately. So what if I was encountering more monarchs than usual? So what if the Society was being annoying, and there was a bunch of people doing things I didn't agree with or understand? Such things were normal. To be expected. Even a god showing up occasionally was...

"Okay maybe not," I mumbled. That wasn't normal at all. Not anymore.

"Vim?"

I turned and found a new face, again. I didn't recognize the woman who smiled at me, and then she gestured behind her. The young girl from earlier walked up, her head a little low even though she was staring at me with wide eyes.

Uh oh, what'd I do this time? Who was this? One of the human supervisors it seemed, based on...

"Your daughter is it?" I asked as I remembered who she was. Or rather, I didn't remember her name... but I remembered her story. She had a pair of daughters, Sing and Song, or something like that.

"Yes! I'm so glad you remembered! This one is Sing," she said as she gestured for the girl to step up and introduce herself.

The young woman gave me a nervous smile. "Sorry about that, Mr. Vim... I um... didn't know who you were," Sing apologized for earlier as she held out her hand.

I took the young girl's hand, and gently shook it. "Hm? It's fine. That's your job, to make sure weirdo's like me don't linger here and bother everyone."

She gave me a half-forced smile as she nodded. "Isn't she adorable, Vim?" the mother asked.

"Yes?" I wasn't sure how to answer that. Was that just a mother's doting love, or something more?

"She's being weird, Mr. Vim. One of the customers complimented us the other day and she's been like this since," Sing said with a sigh.

Ah... I blinked as I remembered her name. "So Clair, did you introduce them to Renn yet? She'd love to hear them sing," I said. Renn had once mentioned she had wanted to meet the girls with such odd names.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

Sing went red in the face as her mother sighed and shook her head. "They're horrible singers, Vim. They don't live up to their names at all! But no, I was hoping to let them meet her before you two leave again, but we've not had the chance."

I nodded at that. "I'll make sure she knows. She's been busy lately, we all have I think," I said.

"Of course! If she's too busy we can always do it another time, so no worries!"

That was the issue, though. Even if Renn and I ever came back here again, after I stepped down, it could be decades from now. And by then...

"Still, I'll let her know. We should still be here for a bit longer, so there should be plenty of time," I said.

Sing glanced at her mother, her flushed face now back to normal. She watched her mother nod happily. "I'd like that! She and I had lunch last time you two were here, I had enjoyed that," Clair said.

Oh...? I hadn't known that. Typical of Renn though. "She can be a glutton," I said.

The woman laughed as the daughter gave me an odd look, as if she couldn't believe a husband had just called his wife a glutton.

Before I could make another joke, as to tease Renn some more, I noticed Merit. She was up on the upper balcony, the one that led to the hallway that led to Gerald's office. She was glaring down at me, with eyes that told me she wanted to speak to me.

Lightly gesturing at the mother and daughter, I nodded. "Seems I'm to be busy again. It was nice meeting you Sing, I'll make sure to let Renn know to come say hello to you and your sister before we leave again," I said.

She nodded quickly as I turned to nod in goodbye to her mother. She gave me a knowing smile as she nodded back and I stepped away, heading for the stairwell which would lead me up to Merit.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I found little Merit standing at the entrance to the hallway. I walked over to her, and wondered if maybe she had been sent to get me for some reason. Had Gerald wanted something from me? Brandy maybe? She was likely still at the port though, dealing with the return of Ronaldo and his ship.

"Good day Merit," I said in greeting, since this was the first time we'd met so far today.

"Mhm... Can I have a few moments with you?" she asked with a small voice.

Hm...? Was something wrong, I wonder? "Of course Merit."

She nodded and sighed. "Could we go to the roof? It's not raining, yet," she asked.

"Even if it were would it matter?" I asked with a smirk. Did we not just a few days ago sit and talk on the roof together as it poured like crazy?

"No, I suppose not. I was born in the water, and you like getting dirty and wet so that Renn will fuss over you," she said.

Well if she was able to make little jokes like that, then whatever was bothering her couldn't be too concerning. "I'll have you know I took a bath recently," I said.

"Congratulations. I'll mark it on the calendar," she said as we headed down the hallway, passing Gerald's office and heading for the stairwell which would lead us to the roof. I noted Gerald was in his office as we passed it by, but he wasn't alone. There were two humans in there with him, and they were talking business.

"Renn's with the rest at the port, I think," I told Merit as we climbed the stairs.

"I know. I was with them a few hours ago, Vim," she said.

Oh. Right... that explained why I hadn't seen her until now too, then.

"How's Kevin doing?" I asked. I wasn't going to ask how Ronaldo was doing, since I doubted Merit cared much about him at all. Unlike the humans Renn was involved with, Ronaldo was under Lawrence's care not hers.

"Fine? He mentioned you visited him and his family recently, was very excited to talk about that. He also wouldn't leave Renn alone, but as you'd expect Renn was okay with it. Was the first time they've met," Merit said.

"Renn would meet everyone in the world if she could," I noted.

"Hmph."

Merit opened the door to the roof, and we both stepped out into the cold but dry world. I could smell a storm heading our way, but odds are it'd not hit us until late in the night. I followed Merit to the gardens, and watched as she went ahead and picked up one of the buckets from the gardening shed. She didn't ask me to help, so I didn't pick up one for myself.

I knew better than to outright step in and tender to her trees and plants. This was her thing, and although she sniveled when no one helped her... I knew it was because we all knew better than to take her little hobby away from her. She didn't like it when others helped her out, though Renn was likely one of the few who could do so and not get glared at. Sofia too, maybe. Nasba used to hate plants, and hadn't ever helped even when Merit wanted it, but I doubted Merit would have gotten offended over her helping either.

Me though? I knew better. She's shocked me more than once because I'd overstepped and in her opinion harmed her plants.

Merit took her bucket to one of the more wild bushes. Some kind of berry bearing one. Though right now there was nothing fruiting upon it. She went to kneeling in front of it, to dig around at its base and into the soaked dirt.

"I thought about it," she then said.

"Hm," I nodded, though not because I knew where she was going with this or what she was speaking of. I had simply assumed she had something serious to talk about, and so had been expecting it.

"Don't stand there acting as if you know what I'm talking about, I'm being serious," Merit said with a side-glance up at me.

"I don't, but I figured something was up. You don't ask to talk privately like this often, Merit, and when you do it's for good reason," I said gently.

She glared at me for a long moment... then she sighed and returned her attention to her berry bush. "Were you always like this? Even as a child?" she asked.

Like what exactly...? "I don't really remember," I told the truth.

"Wonder what she sees in you..." Merit mumbled as she went to pull a few weeds. They were tiny things, but so were the fingers tugging on them.

I'd ask what she had seen in me herself, but didn't really want to steer the conversation in that way. So instead I just... stood and waited for her to get through her grumbling and tell me what was actually wrong. I figured it couldn't be anything too important, since if it had been she'd have brought it up by now.

For a few minutes I just stood there, watching her pluck tiny weeds... ones that were honestly too small to even worry much about. Then finally, once she had a nice little pile of weeds by her feet she glanced up at me again. This time with not as an angry look. "She's getting close to them, Vim. Too close," she said.

"Renn and Light and her people, you mean," I clarified.

She nodded.

I nodded back... and then went ahead and knelt down next to her. It felt silly looking straight down at her, as if she was some little kid. "I know, Merit. But that is her right. And if you'll forgive a man who is utterly captivated by his wife from speaking with bias, her ability to be friends with so many different types of people is one of her good points, if not her best," I said.

Merit's eyes softened a bit, and I was surprised to see she wasn't upset with what I had said. "Of course, Vim... but it means she'll be involved. More than she needs to. More than she should."

"If you don't think I've not been stressing over it, Merit, you're wrong. But what am I to do...? I can't kill them. Not only are they proper members of the Society, they haven't actually done anything wrong. They're scheming, they use their prophecies for their own devices, but they've not outright done anything worth such punishment. And worst off, Light and the others genuinely like her. So their friendship isn't just one-sided, but something real. Me stopping Renn from associating with them would be the same as if I stopped her from associating with you, just because you're known as a troublemaker. It's based on rumors and speculation, not fact," I said.

She frowned at me. "But why doesn't she see it, Vim? Why can't she see that they only like her because of what they foresee? That they only are friendly thanks to their expectations and hopes, not because they actually love her like we do?" Merit asked.

"Can you really say that Merit...?" I asked with a whisper.

Her eyes narrowed at me and she shook a little, as if suddenly cold. "Vim..." she whispered back.

"Mhm... a hard thing to swallow isn't it? When confronted with a mirror," I said gently.

"You knew...? All along?" Merit asked, shocked to realize so.

"I don't know the prophecy, but I know you expect something. But... you're not the only one, Merit. Far from the only one. I've come to realize far more than just Celine and Light have known of Renn, and her circumstances. Renn hasn't said anything yet, but I've overheard whispers lately since my return. The only reason they had all voted to banish her last time we were here is because of Brandy. Because of a prophecy she had been told. She had been acting on Celine's orders," I said.

Merit's shoulders slumped. "Vim...!"

"I'm not angry, or upset. Just... don't ever speak of it in front of me. And if you can, Renn, too. I love the woman, more than you can know, and she tries so very hard to play by my rules but... well..." I hesitated a bit, and wondered if I should reveal a little secret about Renn.

"She talks in her sleep, yes," Merit said with a sigh.

I grinned and nodded. "Isn't it cute?"

"No. Not to me," Merit said flatly.

Hm. It was to me. Even when she spoke of things that broke my heart, such as her worries and fears.

Reaching over, I gently patted Merit on the back. I tried not to notice how... small she was as I did. Merit had always been tiny, but sometimes I forgot just how tiny she was. What was it like I wonder to be stuck in such a small body? "All we can do, Merit, is stay near her. To protect and help her when we can. But at the same time... don't try and shield her from everything. Even if she gets hurt, she needs to live. To experience all life has to offer. The ups and the downs," I said.

"I'll not interfere with her in that way, Vim. I know better. I know you'd squish me if even thought of it... I just... worry... and not just because of a prophecy! I promise! I actually hadn't even known, not until Nasba told me!" Merit said, her voice growing quicker but quieter as she started to whisper.

"Nasba?" I asked with a frown. Really...? Nasba had never been involved with Celine or any of them. After her village had fallen and she had left it she had hooked up with Merit nearly right away, and had spent most of her time far from such things.

Merit nodded. "In a recent letter... I... I actually wish I hadn't read it, to be honest. But I understand why she said it. Because I had said something foolish in my letter first," she said.

"Foolish...?" I asked carefully.

Merit took a deep breath and sighed. "I was going to keep a distance from her. Because I felt... unworthy. I didn't want to like her just because I was jealous. Just because she got what I never had, or whatever..." Merit mumbled.

Oh boy. Quite a serious conversation we were having, wasn't it...? Maybe I should have grabbed a bucket... "And her... response to that letter made you change your mind?" I asked.

Merit slowly nodded... and then shook her head. "Yes and no, Vim. She told me of a prophecy. At least, a part of one. Not the whole thing, just enough to make me reconsider. Then I realized how cruel it was, to not just Renn but me. I... I've only ever had a few friends in my whole life, Vim... and I know to Renn I'm just one of many. A single little fish in a huge ocean of people she finds interesting and fun, but I decided it was rude to not just her but myself to neglect the possible friendship between us," Merit said.

"Hm... well I'm glad you didn't. You and I may not have always seen eye to eye Merit, but I'd prefer your company over all of theirs any day," I said.

She smirked at that. "I've no doubt, Vim. But we're not talking about what you would prefer, but what is best for Renn," she said.

"Hmph. If you're trying to imply you learned of a prophecy that makes you worry for Renn's safety... then fear it no longer. I've plans my own to counteract them," I said.

Merit turned a bit, rather quickly, to face me. "She's in danger?" she asked loudly.

My eyes narrowed in understanding at Merit's outburst. She had not meant that at all, it seemed. Good thing, though that meant the prophecy she'd been told by Nasba... the one that had made her decide to embrace her friendship with Renn and not keep her distance had another purpose.

One more likely to do with Merit herself than Renn or anyone else. Which was odd... Why would Nasba tell her of it then?

"She's always in danger, Merit. Just as you and everyone else always is as well. I didn't mean it that way... I just meant if you had learned of something... not good, concerning Renn's future, you need not truly fear it. I'll figure out how to keep her safe," I said, choosing my words carefully.

Merit relaxed a little, but only to a point. "Great. So there are such prophecies concerning her too? Not just the ones Light and the rest are using to justify their schemes?"

"Who gave you yours?" I asked.

"Nasba...?" she answered, in a way that told me she was upset I'd even ask. Since she'd just told me.

"Yes, but what saint? Who told Nasba of the prophecy originally?" I clarified.

She blinked. "Oh. Right. Celine."

Hm... I wasn't sure if that was better or worse, to be honest...

"Just... just how many saints have had prophecies of her, Vim?" Merit asked.

"More than I want to admit. But before you read too deeply into it, think on it for a moment. Several of them are those who she considers family. Friends. Her witch friend, Light is seen by Renn to be a friend

too now, and so forth. Saints typically have more prophecies concerning those they hold dear to their own hearts," I said. I didn't mention Narli or Renn's human friend Elaine, the one still living.

"Is that common though...? I had saints come and go a few times during my kingdom and it always felt as if their prophecies weren't that common a thing, sporadic at best," Merit said.

I sighed at that. "Sometimes they aren't, no. It is a little troubling just how many seem to be about her, but I mean... there is one way to reason it all," I said with a shrug.

"Her connection with you," Merit answered with a stale voice.

I nodded. "Regretfully."

"Maybe it should be you who considers distancing yourself from her then," Merit said simply.

A distant roof tile cracked... as I slowly nodded. "I've long considered it, Merit," I told her honestly.

The small fish shifted a bit, though if she did so because she had heard the tile break and crack... or if she was simply unsettled by my response I couldn't tell.

"Is this why you're okay with her plan to make a home up north...? With everyone?" Merit asked.

Slowly nodding, I wondered what to even say to that. Even if I hadn't been okay with it... I'd still allow it. Because I wanted her to be happy. I wanted everyone to be happy, if able. But there was no denying the cold hard fact that I wanted to surround Renn with layers of security. Not just ones I myself provided... but others did too. Like Lilly and her family, or even Randle and his insight.

Merit's little face contorted into emotion, and then she sniffed and nodded. "Then my decision is the right one."

"Decision...?" I asked softly. Hopefully she didn't mean a reconsideration of her earlier statement. Of not getting close to Renn, of keeping a distance from her... Poor Renn's heart would break if Merit did such a thing now.

"I've decided to go with you. Up north. I've been here long enough and... with Light and her people here, they no longer really need me. Not that they really ever needed me in the first place. But now? Now I'm certain. You love her, and will do everything you can do to keep her safe... but you're not cruel enough to do what needs to be done. So I'll go. Maybe between me and Lilly we can protect her in the ways you won't allow yourself to," Merit said as she went back to weeding.

Slightly stunned... I watched Merit wipe her nose on a dirty sleeve as she continued gardening. She looked, and seemed, done with this conversation. With all of it. She had just made her decision, and now nothing anyone or anything could change it. I knew that look on her face, I'd seen it before both when she had decided to found her own kingdom... and when it had fell, and she had decided to abandon it.

Smiling at her, I felt myself relax a little. So this whole conversation had been about that. After coming back from my trip to the Keep, I had assumed Merit would, or at least wanted, to join Renn on her little venture to make a home... especially since she kept accidentally speaking as if she was included in the task when anyone spoke of it. But it was nice to both hear confirmation... and to know the reason for her decision was such a pure one.

She wanted to protect Renn. From the world that seemed so intent to disturb her. Even if Merit had a slightly selfish desire, from a prophecy or whatnot, it didn't matter to me. It was the same reason I had stayed my hand, and decided Light was not a threat. Because as it was now, here in this moment, they were things that could and would keep Renn safer than the alternative of not having them nearby or at all.

"Can... I come with you, Vim...?" she then whispered softly.

"Merit, any home of Renn's is a home you are and always will be welcomed in, you know that," I said gently.

Merit turned to look at me. She held my gaze, but she didn't smile. She didn't smirk or blush... instead her eyebrows met even tighter. "I'm not asking Renn, Vim."

Ah...

I swallowed a sigh that wanted to escape and nodded. "You're always welcomed in my home too, Merit. All that I ask is occasionally you let me have my wife for a night or two, is all," I said. It seemed with the growing cast of friends and family that was set to accompany us, such nights might become rather rare for me.

She finally smirked at me, and nodded. "That won't be too hard. She won't admit it to you but she actually cherishes your little talks in the night."

"The fact you seem to know all about them makes me annoyed, maybe even enough to put you in an aquarium. One I'll build in the dog house," I said.

She scoffed at me. "Renn wouldn't let you do that. Which is too bad, I probably would like that."

Probably would.

As Merit returned to her task before her... I stood up. "I'm glad you found a new purpose... even if like me it's one chosen wildly thanks to uncertainty," I said to her.

She huffed at me. "You may be acting out of panic, but I'm not. Renn would abandon you before she would me, after all."

The fact the little fish was probably right made my eye twitch.

Chapter 527 Renn – A Smaller Cat's Clutter

A loud rumble woke me up. The kind that was oh so familiar, but yet just unique enough to pull me from my deep sleep... and my dreams.

Rolling over a bit, I glared at the nearby window. It was shuttered, and the drapes were covering it, but still I pretended I could glare straight out of it and up at the sky. The one that was rumbling and being noisy. I could hear the howl of the wind outside, and the heavy rain that it carried.

Another storm. This place sure did get many of them. Maybe it was because it was technically a port city? Even though it barely felt like it sometimes, since I stayed indoors so much. Though speaking of such cold and the feeling of it... why did it feel like lately I've been more aware of the cold temperatures? Hadn't Vim said that I should be less affected by extreme heat or cold, thanks to the heart forming in me? Why then did I feel like lately I wanted to wear thicker clothes, and bundle up more often than not? Was it because my senses were adjusting, and so I was more aware of it all as it did, or was it something else maybe?

"A better thing to ponder is..." I mumbled as I pushed myself up into a seating position. I yawned as I glanced around, smelling the damp air... and figured Vim had been gone for at least an hour or so. His scent was still here, but old. Cold.

I wasn't sure yet if I was still adapting, or if Vim's scent was just... that weak sometimes, but I felt as if his smell dissipated and left a tad too quickly. I had hoped to sleep and hold his extra clothes while he had been gone, but only a couple days after he had left I had pulled them out and found they had stopped smelling. At all. Not just like him, but of anything.

It had to be something to do with his abilities. Surely. Though it made no sense...

Still, I wonder where he'd gone. And I wonder how come I hadn't woken when he had done so. Usually I did lately... maybe I hadn't been laying up against him like I usually did? I might have rolled over or something... Though it could just be that I had been far more exhausted than I wanted to believe I had been? "Might just be because we'd been up so late," I said as I stretched a bit. As I did the blankets fell completely off me, and I was forced to realize how cold it was in the room.

A tad too cold. I'll need to make sure the home Vim and I build up north isn't drafty, and to make sure the bedroom has a fireplace. This one didn't, though it honestly wasn't so cold that it actually needed one. I was likely just being... well...

"Picky," I said to myself as I got out of bed.

Although I had no idea what time it was, I figured it couldn't be too long after morning. Vim wouldn't have left before sunrise, no matter how busy he was, but he also wouldn't have waited much long after it. Plus although I'd happily eat a snack, I didn't feel hungry enough to justify wanting dinner. So midday at the latest it was.

A bright light flashed into the room for a moment as I got dressed, and then the loud rumble that followed made my ears and tail twitch like mad.

A very big storm, by the sounds of it. I could hear through the heavy wind and hard rain the sound of puddles. The kind of deep and big ones that told me huge swaths of the streets around the building were likely flooded.

Lumen wasn't able to flood as bad as some of the other cities I'd been to, since not only was it made mostly of stone it was also built on just enough of a slope to let the water run off into the ocean, but I don't think I'd ever heard or seen a storm this bad here before. I decided to make sure I peeked my head out of the building at least once before the day was over, to see what it actually looked like.

Once dressed I left my room in search of Vim. I wanted to tease him about sneaking off without waking me. I knew if I did so properly he'd give me that silly little smirk that made my tail twitch.

Before I could find him though I walked around a corner and found Liina. She was kneeling in the middle of the hallway and...

"Are you okay Liina?" I asked as I walked over to her. She was kneeling in front of a box, one that looked as if it had been dropped on accident. She was slowly picking up what looked like little wooden... what were those? Boxes? Toys? Tools? I wonder when she had dropped the box, I hadn't heard it at all even though I'd been heading this way... and there were quite a few scattered around the hallway. A few were even up against the wall.

"Oh. Morning Renn. Yes. I'm fine... I think..." Liina said, and I almost stepped backward at the mere sound of her voice... let alone the look on her face.

She sounded, and looked, terribly sick. The kind that made me want to be careful. "Geez Liina..." I said as I stepped a bit around her and knelt down to help her.

"Sorry... thanks," Liina said with a weird voice. Her nose was plugged, and she sounded like her throat hurt. And judging by the huge dark circles under her eyes, and the faint smell of sickness upon her it was clear she was not only utterly exhausted but had recently thrown up.

"I hope you were heading back to your room, to sleep," I said as I got the rest of the little wooden objects back into the box. Even as I picked them all up I wasn't sure what they were. They looked like little boxes, but felt hollow inside, but didn't seem to open or anything either. Were they some kind of decorations maybe? They were odd, but not to the point I'd find them neat on a shelf or anything.

"Mhm..." Liina only groaned an answer as she nodded. I stood up, lifting the box for her... and found myself going several moments without Liina moving.

"Liina?" I asked, worried. She was still kneeling down on the ground, and had started to lean oddly... had she just fallen asleep?

She twitched ever so slightly, took a deep breath and started to cough. As she did she slowly stood, and did so with such unsure feet I instinctively reached out to grab her by the arm.

Luckily the box full of smaller wooden boxes was light. I held Liina's arm, keeping her upright, as she slightly swayed a bit. She looked not just half asleep, but in a daze. "Ah. Thank you Renn..." Liina blinked at me, and I noted the odd tone she had just used.

Had she... had she completely forgotten I was just talking to her? Surely not, right?

"Come on. Let's get you to bed," I said gently as I tugged on her arm, to lead her to her room. It was on this floor, but around the corner I'd just come from and down another hallway. Near Jasna's room.

"Bed...? I don't want to. Vim would kill me..." Liina said lightly, and then coughed a bit. I couldn't tell if her coughing fit was because she had tried to laugh, or if her little statement had been utterly serious. Still had almost made me laugh, all the same. Probably would have if not for how seriously ill she seemed to be.

"Not if your sickness doesn't do you in first. When'd you get this bad, Liina? I just saw you yesterday at the docks with everyone else," I said as I slowly took her to her room.

"Mhm... I donno," she mumbled.

Gosh! I'd think she was drunk if not for the fact she didn't just look sick, but felt it! I was holding her arm, and she had a thin sleeve covering it, but I could feel her body heat through it and it wasn't nothing to scoff at.

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I'll need to get someone. I'll have to let the others know of her condition. This wasn't normal, I didn't think, at least.

"Door..." Liina whispered something I didn't catch as we reached her bedroom. I thought at first she was saying her door was locked or something, but I found it not so. I opened it, and was a little surprised to find... a rather cluttered room.

Hesitating a moment, I glanced at Liina and found her just... standing behind me. As if she was completely out of it, she didn't even seem to be looking at anything. She had her head hung a bit, and she was blinking very slowly... as if about to fall asleep.

"Sorry Liina," I apologized as I entered her room and tugged her in with me.

I guided her to her bed, which I found had a lot of blankets upon it. The handcrafted things looked... kind of worn and thin, with many holes, but there were at least a dozen of them layered on each other so I didn't worry for her getting cold. I put the box down on a nearby table, one I had barely been able to use thanks to how much stuff was upon it, and then went to tucking her into bed.

Liina didn't fuss or fight me as I helped her undress. I wasn't going to take all of her clothes off, but to my surprise she hadn't been wearing anything underneath her two outer layers. And also to my surprise,

although Liina the cat didn't have a tail... she sure did have plenty of fur to make up for it. It covered most of her thighs and midsection, to the point her lack of undergarments made sense. That much fur likely made wearing certain undergarments hot and uncomfortable.

Though that didn't explain anything for her top half.

"Tired..." Liina mumbled as she laid down in bed, and I helped pull some of the blankets up over her. I made sure to pull most of them up over her, since they were thin and worn.

"I bet... get some sleep. I'll let the others know, and..." I hesitated a moment as I glanced around, looking for the door to her bathroom. I couldn't find it. Her walls were lined with shelves and even tapestries, so I assumed it was just hidden behind one of them, but... "I'll bring back some water and stuff in a moment too, so," I started to finish, deciding to just go get it from the kitchens instead. Yet Liina had already slipped off into slumber, snoring away as she did.

Smiling at her, I stepped back from her bed and headed for the door. Although her room was full of stuff, stuff I wanted to examine and study since a lot of it were things that I didn't recognize and couldn't place a purpose to like those weird little wooden boxes, I also didn't want to intrude more than I needed to. Even if my scent wouldn't linger anymore, I didn't want to be so daring or rude as to stick my nose where it didn't belong.

Liina didn't mind me anymore, but she still wasn't completely comfortable with me. Even though I no longer smelled like a predator, I still made some members uncomfortable with just my presence alone. The kind of uncomfortable that my presence made her hairs stand on edge, even though it was mostly a instinctual thing for her than anything else it was still a thing that was real. I needed to respect that.

So...

"I'll be back," I said softly as I shut her bedroom door and left.

Okay. Time to find Jasna or at least Brandy and Gerald, as to let them know of her condition. And then I needed to find Vim to let him know too, since...

Glancing back at the door to Liina's room, I frowned at the odd smell that lingered around me. I knew the smell of sickness. It was a combination of sweat, puke, and just general nastiness. But this...? The smell that lingered on me kind of reminded me of the smell the people with that plague got. It wasn't the exact same, but... it also wasn't too far off from it. Hopefully it was just my mind playing tricks on me. She hadn't seemed to have any spots on her, or anything like that, but...

But there were far more diseases and ailments than just that plague.

Turning away, I hurried down the hall. I'd go get a pitcher of water, and some light snacks to leave at her bedside before I ran off to search for help. There was no telling if Liina would sit up in a few minutes and want a drink or something. I actually was kind of surprised she had even been able to go anywhere in her condition as it was... where had she gone to get that box, I wonder? Or had she had it already? What if it had been in her room, and she had wanted to take it elsewhere and I had just presumed?

Heading downstairs, I chewed at my inner-cheek as I went to the kitchens. The kitchens and eating rooms around them were cold; the kind that told me breakfast had long since come and gone. Luckily though whoever had made breakfast had left a few platters of small foodstuffs. Little crackers and cheeses. I gathered one up, and a nice cold pitcher of water, and then right when I was about to pick it up and turn to leave... I was tapped on the shoulder.

"Yip!" I yelped, and spun and backpedaled into the counter I had been working in front of. I heard things clatter and fall as I found Vim standing there, smiling apologetically at me as I felt the hairs on my tail stand up so strongly it hurt. "Vim!" I shouted at him as my quick heart calmed itself.

"Sorry... you'd been mighty focused, Renn, I even said your name. What're you doing?" he asked as he glanced at the platter I'd just been preparing. Luckily the pitcher and stuff hadn't gotten knocked over, but some of the small foodstuffs had fallen off the platter and fell to the floor. They were scattered around our feet.

I groaned at him as he bent down to pick up the fallen crackers and cheeses. "Liina is sick. Pretty badly. I was going to take her some water and snacks," I said as my ears fluttered while I watched him gather up the stuff that had fallen. He looked a little silly as he picked them up, for some reason. Was it because of how small the crackers and cheese bits were? It was like he was picking up tiny little bites for children or pets, or something.

"Liina is sick...? I'd just seen her last night, she had seemed fine," he said as he stood back up and went to toss the handful of food into a nearby trash bin. The old me would have stopped him, to tell him not to waste such delicious food so quickly, but I knew here in the Society that was just what one did. They were rather... serious about their hygiene stuff. Which was why Vim was so shocked to hear Liina was sick, of course. Because those here usually didn't suffer such things.

"I found her in the hallway kneeling on the ground; she'd been carrying some box... I think she dropped it and was slightly out of it and was just sitting there half asleep as she picked it all up," I said as I went to pick up the platter.

Vim though reached around me and grabbed the platter himself. "I'll take this to her and check on her. Why don't you go let Gerald know? He's in his office," he said.

I glanced at Vim, who was suddenly very close. He had stepped up behind me as to grab the platter from me, but had done it almost as if he had intended to wrap me in a hug instead. My shoulder and back had bumped into him upon turning, he was that close.

"Doing it that way so you can check on her and I can deliver the message, swiftly and efficiently... or are you being overprotective of me?" I asked softly.

"Both. Liina had indeed been fine last night. That means whatever is wrong with her could be something serious. Plus I'd rather you talk to Gerald right now, he pissed me off earlier and I'm not in the mood for him, at the moment," Vim said as he picked up the platter and stepped back and away from me.

I was a tad upset over him stepping away. I had kind of been enjoying the odd closeness. It wasn't often I was able to lean back against him like that. "He pissed you off?" I asked, trying to focus on that and not his lack of touch.

He nodded and sighed. "Not his fault. He just keeps pushing the whole; us staying here thing. Living here. Gets annoying after a bit," he said.

Oh. Right. "Should be happy over it Vim... not everyone gets invited you know," I said softly. In fact I had experienced the exact opposite of such a thing last time I was here.

He smirked at me. "We'll talk of that later. Go on, I'll check on the weaker, smaller, uglier cat and then meet up with you in a moment," he said.

I frowned at that. Uglier...? Liina wasn't ugly, at all! Sure she was supposedly some smaller, more normal cat, and thus of course not as strong as me... but ugly? Why was he being mean to her all of a sudden? I

felt offended for her, since I honestly found her adorable myself. "She's naked under her covers, so don't stare, you'll get proved wrong," I teased as he stepped away.

Vim paused a moment and glanced back at me. He seemed about to say something... but stopped himself and then sighed, then he turned back and left.

Smirking at him, I felt a small sense of victory. He had teased her and I had gotten revenge for her, in my perspective at least.

Still...

Glancing at the counter, and the nearby platter of the remaining little snacks... I went and quickly took a few. Both to eat right now, and for later.

With a mouthful I left the kitchens, went the opposite way that Vim had gone... and headed for Gerald's office. To give him the news, and to find out if he'd bug me about living here as he had been doing Vim.

Even if I knew he was only doing so as a way to keep this place safe, from the world and Light's reaches... it would still feel kind of nice to hear such a thing said aloud all the same.

Chapter 528 To Betray One's Oath

Side-Story – Vim – Vim's Mistake – Prologue – To Betray One's Oath

Stepping foot onto the deck of the ship, I took in a deep breath as I glanced around at the hundred-odd people who had just betrayed me.

Most were on their knees, but a few were still standing. Most looked untouched, implying they had not fought back as Kriss's detachment boarded and took them all under arrest. But a few were bloody. And a few were not standing, or kneeling, but on the ground... dead or knocked out.

The ship went dead silent as I stepped into the center of it, looking around at all the faces.

Some were familiar. Most weren't. I was only able to put names to a couple, notably the ship's commander, but each and every one of them was looking at me with eyes full of fear and... strangely, hope.

"Fleeing battle... I can understand. Death is a foe many break under," I said as I started walking towards the commander. Kriss was standing behind her, the huge bull didn't have a sword or spear at the commander's throat or back but he didn't need one. The giant man has never needed a weapon; his mighty fists had always been enough.

"Even disobeying orders, or acting out of self-interest. Tis' natural, after all. To place oneself, or family and friends, over goals and duties beyond the everyday," I continued.

Most of the sailors were sea-folk. People with scales, webbed fingers or fins. But there were a few birds amongst them. One of which, a woman with huge wings, was kneeling a few dozen feet from the commander of the ship. She had blood running down her pained face, dripping off her sharp nose to the wooden deck. She had a spear's point resting at the back of her neck, held by one of Kriss's soldiers. She looked like at any moment she was going to charge at me.

I stopped regarding the bird and instead returned my focus to the commander. A stunning woman, who even with a blacked eye and swollen lip was likely more beautiful than any other woman I knew alive today.

She was a dolphin, if I remembered correctly. I couldn't see anything obvious about her, or her traits, to tell me such a thing... but I didn't care at the moment for whom or what she was.

I only cared about what she had done. What she did. And who she had done it for.

"But... to side with them...?" I asked through clenched teeth as I stopped right before her. She was on her knees, as most others were, but unlike all the rest... she didn't have a look of utter fear, or any hint of hope. She didn't even have a hint of hate on her face, as the winged woman did a few feet away. She looked calm. Level headed.

The commander said nothing. She simply held my gaze as I glared down at her, waiting for some kind of answer.

Was she not going to try and defend herself? To convince or reason with me, or at least attempt to? Was she just going to sit there silently, until I gave the order?

Did she think she was being a martyr? Did she think this act of defiance; this... faux indifference would sway me or those watching?

"Not even going to try and beg for forgiveness?" I asked.

Her swollen eye twitched. "Why should I...? You're blinded by your hate, Vim. Always have been. Won't change now... even with your victory in grasp."

I blinked, and in the time it took to do so had grabbed her by the throat. I hefted her upward, lifting her up off her knees. She didn't resist. Her legs dangled off the ground, her arms stiff but staying at her sides. She didn't even try to grab my arm as to help support herself, as to keep herself from choking.

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"No!"

I ignored the world around me as commotion tried to interrupt me. I heard people shouting. The sound of flesh being beaten, and stabbed. I heard a pair of huge wings flap, and then land harshly with a thump onto the hard wooded deck.

People had tried to save their commander. And had died doing so.

"My hate!" I shouted as I squeezed her throat. "Fueled your lives! Gave birth to them! Without my hate, you and yours wouldn't even be able to think of betrayal let alone act it out!"

The huge warship shifted, creaking loudly as massive floorboards and the beams that supported them started to crack and shift. I heard cries as people were sent to their knees, and soldiers worriedly tried to steady themselves.

"Vim..." Kriss's deep, guttural, voice cooled my hot blood as I blinked and glanced around. The deck was a mess. People were on the ground, soldiers were clinging to each other or anything they could grab to steady themselves... all while the boat wildly rocked.

The sea was calm. The wind gentle. This huge ship rocking in such a way was because of one and only one reason.

My eyes twitched as I realized I was putting Kriss and his men in danger. I cared not, anymore, for the betrayers. They could, and would, sink to the depths. But those still loyal? I owed them. I cherished them.

Looking back up at the commander, who I was still choking to death, I felt my blood grow hot again.

"Your lack of loyalty, and the seeds of despair that it plants and waters, will not be allowed to grow. I have not come all this way, have not sacrificed so much, just for your bleeding hearts to ruin it all," I said, and then released her.

The commander fell to the deck. It was still rocking, but not nearly as strong as it had moments ago. Most people were already back on their feet and steady.

"You watched their atrocities. Helped me put an end to them. Then you all of a sudden support it? Aid it?" I shook my head at the dolphin, who was puking and heaving up blood and other gunk. I had likely crushed a part of her throat. "Disgusting traitor. Vile," I spat, and then looked up to the giant bull just behind her.

Unlike all the rest he hadn't even budged during the rocking of the ship. He, like the giant masts nearby, was just that solid. Just that firm. Kriss's eyes were huge. Black pools of deep, unyielding intelligence. He, like most the other senators and generals I've carefully raised, were a good portion of our most recent victories. Within those infinitely black pools was a man I could trust. One I could rely on.

One I knew would never break and betray.

I nodded up at him, telling him it was time. I didn't even need to give an order, nor explain my meaning, and the bull understood. He released a huge huff of air, and raised one of his mighty fists above him. "All hands!" he bellowed an order, and without any questions or hesitation... he and all his men disembarked the ship.

I didn't watch them leave. Nor did I join them. I stayed standing before the commander, who had gotten her own body under control. She still heaved and gasped, sounding desperate for air, but was no longer throwing up blood.

"Gods..." someone whispered nearby. I ignored them, as others worriedly whispered amongst themselves.

The crew that were still alive sounded terrified. I could hear in their whimpers, in their whispers, that they knew what was about to happen. They knew.

"Go ahead then..." Glancing down, I watched the commander lift her blooded face as to look at me. The swollen lip was now split, seeping blood. "Do it. Sink me and my ship. End our lives. That's what you're best at, after all," she said through clenched teeth.

"You're right," I said. Her eyes narrowed as I nodded. "Destroying gods, and their... wrongs, is indeed what I'm best at," I said, agreeing.

She made a wheeze of a noise, as if she wanted to take a deep breath as to say something back to me. But she didn't seem capable. It looked, and sounded, like she was about to die at any moment. I had likely crushed her windpipe.

No matter.

Lifting a foot, I held it up above her head.

"What shame you bring me. Your betrayal sickens me to my core. May the sea forgive you, because I do not."

And I stomped down, sending not just the commander to the depths... but the whole warship and its crew too.

Chapter 529 Another God Slain

Coughing up what was likely a piece of a lung, I spat it out and away from me.

The piece of black gunk landed a few feet away, staining the pure gold tile. It was one of maybe a dozen pieces of myself I had spat up in just as many minutes.

I was sitting up against a huge pillar. One that felt cold. It, like everything else in this palace, was made of pure gold. I still didn't have much strength yet, so I didn't even think about getting up or doing anything. I just... sat here.

Even as hundreds of soldiers ran into the palace.

My mouth pooled with some blood again, but I didn't spit it out. I just allowed it to overflow, leaking out between my lips and teeth. It tasted funny, which told me another organ had just regenerated. In a few moments I'd be spitting that one out too.

"Lord Vim!"

Coughing, I glanced to my right and watched one of the commander's of this battle take to the air. She flew over to me, landing a few feet away with a bit of ungracefulness as she hurried to take off her heavy helmet.

"You did it...!" she said happily as her wings flapped and folded up. She stepped over to me, kneeling down next to me as she placed a hand on my shoulder.

She looked worried, and that worried expression made her look rather cute. Though I knew better than to ever say such a thing. This bat was adorable, but she'd rip even my face off if I told her so to her face.

Taking a small breath, I went to tell Nectar that she needed to go secure the god's body before it faded away. But I wasn't able to get a single word out as I instantly had a coughing fit.

Nectar grabbed firm hold of my shoulder as I coughed up another piece of flesh. I spat it out, but this one landed on my lap instead of elsewhere.

"Steady," Nectar worriedly said, but knew better than to think I was actually in danger. She, like Kriss and the rest, had been serving under me for hundreds of years.

"God," I got a single word out, as my chest began to tingle and feel funny. Stuff was healing well, just slowly.

"Already got them harvesting it, Lord Vim," Nectar said with a nod.

Did she...? The body was behind this pillar, wasn't it...? Yet she had flown over to me, having entered from that side of the building...

Ah, no matter. It's not like we haven't done this dozens of times now. They knew what they were supposed to do.

Coughing some more, I nodded weakly. I wanted to thank her, and ask about casualties and other things, but my mouth was once again filling up with blood.

"Sheesh... You okay? Anything I can do, Lord?" Nectar asked worriedly as she watched a bunch of blood sputter out from my mouth.

I shook my head. I was fine, just healing. The damned god in her final moments had done something I should have expected, but hadn't. She had casted her ability inward, onto herself, just as I was ripping out her heart.

"Still... I can't believe she turned all this to gold. You should see the outside, Lord Vim, even the trees had turned to gold. Even the birds sitting on their branches!" Nectar said, speaking with a hint of awe. She stood a little, looking around at all the gold everywhere.

Very little of this building had been gold before I had arrived. During the battle though that had changed. And in fact, was the same reason I was now struggling so badly.

This god had only one real ability. And it had been a slightly simple one. She had called it Midas Touch, which I had scoffed at. I hated hearing of the same legends and stories from them as I had from my parents growing up. It was just a constant reminder, and I hated it.

But my hate hadn't stopped her ability. For as simple as it had been, able to turn anything she touched to gold, it had also been... very potent.

Luckily thanks to my blessings, I had resisted most of her attacks and attempts of turning me into gold. But during her last moment, as I ripped her heart from her chest... she had somehow found a way around my parent's blessings. By casting her ability on herself, on her heart, right as I took ownership of it had somehow allowed her ability to actually work on me. If even for a moment.

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My whole body had turned to gold. And of course, my own abilities wouldn't allow that. But changing something on a molecular level was not easy. Nor was it painless.

It took time. Time and...

"Look even the bugs are gold!"

Coughing, I turned my head a little to look at Nectar. She was kneeling down a little bit away, staring at the ground. Likely at ants or something. I watched the way her huge ears fluttered as she spoke. She always has had a childish side to her. It was why I found her adorable. Though of course, the bat didn't like being seen as adorable. Though I never could understand why.

Coughing again, I found I had enough strength to lift my arm. I went to wiping my mouth on my forearm, though it barely did anything. What little blood and gunk I could wipe off was just replaced by more.

"Ah... want me to clean you up, Lord?" Nectar noticed what I was doing and hurried back over to me. She didn't hesitate to rip off a piece of her shirt and go to wiping my face off for me.

She was quick about it, and gentle, but fussed in a way only a winged-creature could. She kept wiping at the corners of my mouth as more and more blood seeped from it.

"Nectar..." I groaned her name, and coughed some more as I tried to gently wave her away.

"Ah...!" she didn't seem to understand my meaning though and instead went to patting my back. As if I was some child choking on food, or something.

Blasted bat. Her father had not been so fussy!

Although a little annoyed, I let it be. It wasn't as if she was actually being rude, after all.

Leaning back against the pillar, to stop her from patting my back needlessly, I nodded at her as one of her soldiers hurried over. The fellow winged man was not a bat, but some kind of crane. His wings were lithe and long.

"Commander...! Several of the monarch carcasses are already decomposing, permission to burn them?" he asked as he saluted her.

Nectar turned to look at the man, and at an angle I saw the way she frowned. "Didn't I order you to skin them before they did?" she asked.

Yes. I had ordered I too.

"Ah... well..." the man flinched as Nectar stood. Her leathery wings fluttered in anger as she stepped forward and started chastising the soldier. She wasted no time barking more orders, ones that were heard by many of the other nearby soldiers. They all ran off in a hurry, to obey.

Watching her huff at them, I felt a small bit of relief.

She may not have inherited all of her father's traits... but at least she had inherited his good ones.

Unlike her, whose arms were detached from her wings, her father had been more non-human. He had not only had combined arms and wings, he had also been born not with human feet but claws.

Nectar was, like many children being born now, more human than her parents. They were still far from being human, of course, but it almost felt as if every few generations now a trait was being lost to evolution.

A stark warning that I needed to focus more on them than I had been.

But what could I do about it...? What could be done?

It wasn't as if I could just snap my fingers and adjust their very genes or anything... and even if I could, that'd be going against all I stood for.

Sighing as I felt the tingling and burning come to an end inside me, telling me my healing was mostly finished, I went to stand up.

I did so with a little bit of wobbliness, to which Nectar immediately noticed and hurried over to help me. She wrapped a strong arm around me, under my own, and helped me to my feet.

"Sorry, Sir, I really had given the orders properly...!" Nectar said worriedly, likely thinking I had stood because I was upset over people not doing their job.

"Fine. Tis' fine..." I waved her worries away. It wasn't fine, actually. We needed as much resources we could for our war against the other remaining gods... but it wasn't as if I'd actually punish anyone for it. This god, this gold making one, had dozens of monarchs protecting her. I had not expected us to be able to gather all of their materials in time before they decayed anyway.

No matter...

Nectar helped me step away from the pillar. Several nearby soldiers noticed and stood at attention, but I ignored them as we rounded the pillar to see the other side of it.

The building beyond the huge golden pillar was destroyed. Collapsed. The sunset sky was visible, and a half burning city of glistening gold lay just beyond the broken walls of the palace.

Some soldiers were kneeling nearby. Hovering over a corpse. A woman draped in gold cloth, which defied the natural. They were hurriedly cutting away pieces of cloth and flesh, doing all they could to gather up as much of the god's corpse before it could wilt away.

"Again, Lord Vim... congratulations. Another god dead!" Nectar said happily, praising me.

"Hm."

I accepted the praise, since it was indeed praiseworthy.

But I knew better than to get all excited.

After all... she was just one of many. And she had been an easy one.

Abandoned by her fellows. Left behind like a sacrifice as they fled. Treating me like nothing more than a savaging wolf, capable of being distracted.

And it had worked.

Chapter 530 Betrayal's Deep Poison

"Lord..."

Kriss's deep voice was loud in this train station. But it shouldn't have been.

This place was the center of this city. Of this nation. This massive city, and its million residents, relied on this station. On this depot. It was from here that all the food grown miles away entered and was distributed. It was here that all the goods and freight came. It was here that all the residents were able to conduct their business, personal or otherwise.

It should be bustling to the point of annoyance. I should be walking shoulder to shoulder with thousands of people, workers and travelers alike. I should be hearing the sound of steam and engines, not just from the trains themselves but from the machines that loaded and unloaded the cargo. I should hear the nearby warehouses. I should hear the sounds of speakers and horns, alerting people of incoming and outgoing trains. I should be hearing all the world around me, and instead...

Instead...

I only heard betrayal.

Standing at the edge of one of the platforms, for one of the trains that dealt with people more than goods, I fumed as I stared at the empty tracks.

This track. The next one over. And the fifty more thereafter all had the same thing in common.

Not a train in sight.

Closing my eyes, I felt blood vessels surge to near bursting. My right temple was thumping like mad, to the point it was making my right eye twitch.

"Lord..." Kriss said again, his deep voice wrapped in worry.

"Tell me this is all a mistake," I begged.

I took a few breaths and then opened my eyes. I turned, to face the mighty bull. His head, and thus his huge black horns, were pointed downward and sullen.

"Tell me this isn't happening!" I shouted at him.

The platform shook, and I heard nearby rails creak. I heard the nails and beams that made up the train tracks stress, and maybe even snap and break. But it didn't matter. I didn't care. Why would I?

No point having train tracks with no trains.

"I'm... sorry, Sir. But..." Kriss spoke slowly, gently, but I didn't want to hear it.

I took a few steps to the left and sent out a kick. My leg went through the bench of wood and metal, sending pieces all over the place.

"Again!?" I shouted as I began to pace.

The bull said nothing. He only lowered his horns further.

Walking back and forth near the edge of the platform, I reached up and grabbed at the side of my head. I grabbed hair. Skin. Ear. I was half tempted to rip it all off.

I couldn't believe this. It just wasn't real. I had to be having a nightmare. This was all fantasy, fake, impossible!

"How did this happen!" I shouted as I looked again out at the many platforms. Again I saw nothing. Nothing but a stark reminder of how deep this failure cut.

This wasn't just a betrayal, this was an attack.

Without those trains, without the constant supply they provided, this entire city... no, this whole nation would come to a standstill.

Business would come to a halt. People would starve. Key infrastructure, such as the water supply, would ultimately fail. The important, but brittle, electrical grid would collapse. And with it, this nation's surety.

And with the fall of this city, of this nation, so too would our armies swiftly follow suit.

No soldier would march if they knew their families back home were starving to death. No sailors would sail if their home ports were succumbing to depopulation and might not even be there when they return.

No trains meant no more progress. No trains meant failure.

No trains, no army to help me slay the gods.

And this was not something I could fix with ease. Even if I got started immediately, here and now, I'd not be able to build new ones fast enough. Even with all the help I could now muster, it would still take decades to fully replace the hundreds of trains and all their cabooses and cargo holds. Not to say the least that there was now the threat of them being destroyed or stolen without protection. Which meant entire swaths of the armies would need to be positioned to protect them, and that was no easy feat. You were talking millions of miles of track!

And what of the stores...? Some of them had been emptied? Taken? Stolen? Not just did we lose the trains, we lost the very safety net they had been providing...?

"Lord Vim..."

Turning, I glared at the bull. His head was still lowered, but he had turned a little. To point at something behind us.

"She knows. Who did it," he said stiffly.

My eye twitched again as I looked past him. Far off in the distance, near one of the large warehouses, was a big crowd of people. In my fury I couldn't really make out any of their faces.

"Who...?" I asked.

Kriss huffed, breathing out so heavily his whole body shook. "I beg you, find reason and..."

"Who, Kriss!" I shouted as I stepped towards him. Upon doing so, a nearby covered roof collapsed and fell. Neither I nor Kriss flinched as we listened to the roof fall into itself, crunching and breaking over the platform and onto the track below.

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"Please, Lord Vim... if you don't calm down you will..." Kriss began to speak, raising one of his huge hands palm open as if to calm me, but I wasn't going to hear it. I was not in any mood for any games! I was about to step forward again, to push past him and go to the crowd myself.

If he'd not point her out, I'll just grab her myself.

Before I could though, she showed herself. Wings and all.

"I need not your protection, Kriss."

Upon seeing the adorable Nectar, I calmed a little. I breathed a small sigh of relief, glad to see one of my commanders.

She must have seen what had happened, or something. "Nectar..." Kriss said her name with his deep voice, and I couldn't help but notice something odd in his tone.

Had that just been fear...?

That man, this bull, feared nothing.

Not even me.

"Freski and Vlad took the trains. Took them and fled," Nectar said as she stepped up beside Kriss and nodded. Her huge bat-ears were pointed and straight.

What...? "What...?" I asked aloud, unable to believe what I'd just heard.

"They left. To deliver aid," Nectar said firmly.

My eyes blurred a little as I shifted. If something broke nearby, I didn't hear it. "Aid...? To who?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"One you will never know of, or find. One hidden from you, as they have been for..."

Nectar was no longer adorable, and she was no longer able to speak.

"Vim...!" Kriss yelled in shock, which made me blink as I realized what I was doing.

I had Nectar. By the face. In my hand. She was squirming, her wings flapping wildly, but wasn't able to free herself. I had grabbed her by the face, above her mouth, and...

"Lord Vim! Please!" Kriss was then upon us. His huge hands, bigger and wider than even my forearms, grabbed me. I felt his mighty strength as he went to trying to free the bat.

Not even he could free her. Even as he broke my bones.

I felt Nectar scream into my palm, a scream of utter pain. But still I didn't release her.

"You can't be serious. You cannot be doing this! None of you!" I shouted as Kriss grabbed my head.

"Lord Vim forgive me!" Kriss shouted, and then he twisted.

The world went dark and quiet. Then with a feeling of numb bones resetting into place, the world came back to me as I took in a breath.

I was on the ground. A broken ground. Of tiles. Above me was one of the train platform coverings. It looked... distant.

My neck then grew hot, and I groaned as I realized Kriss had broken my neck.

"Bastard..." It took several long heartbeats of tingly twitches before I regained control over the rest of my body. I slowly sat up, my neck popping as parts finished healing. Though I was able to sit up, and was regaining full control, my sight was blurry. I felt dizzy, as if I was on a boat in the middle of a raging sea.

"Hurry!" Kriss shouted.

I blinked a fuzzy head away, and wondered if Kriss had just ran away with everyone else. Did that mean he too had been a part of it...?

Impossible...

"Lord Vim..."

Ah. No. He was still here. I felt his mighty footstep as he drew closer.

"You broke my neck," I said with a grunt.

"I'm sorry, Lord... but I had to. You would have killed her. May still have," he said.

Yes. Maybe.

Probably.

Undoubtedly...

I reached up and rubbed my dizzy eyes, and suddenly felt tired. Exhausted. And not just because I had basically died.

What was I going to do...? If Nectar had been honest, which I didn't doubt at all, then we were screwed.

Not only had we lost the trains, and a lot of our stored resources, I just lost half my army. Or at least, half of the reliable commanders who led it.

Vlad was one thing, but Freski and Nectar...? I relied on those two deeply. As much as I did Kriss. Without them...

"What is going on...?" I groaned, and hated how close my voice sounded to sobbing. Was I about to cry? I felt like it.

I'd been betrayed. Terribly so. This was not just someone choosing the gods over me, this was worse than that. They had stolen from, and crippled, this nation. Likely condemned millions to death, at bare minimum starvation or at least terrible years of struggling as we rebuilt.

This was not just an attack on my loyalty and trust, it was an attack on every citizen of this nation. Of every soldier who they had fought alongside. Their brothers in arms. Their fellows.

And the worst part was I couldn't understand it.

How could you so willingly choose slavery...? And so readily for such creatures? For beings who saw you as nothing but tools. Disposable ones!

"Lord Vim..."

Lowering my hand, I took in a huge breath as I watched mighty Kriss kneel down next to me. Even when kneeling he was too tall, too big. I had to look up at him, as if looking up at the ceiling.

In the corner of my eye I saw a nearby group. People had hurried over to help. To take Nectar away. Likely to the healers, the saints. They weren't far. They'd be able to save her.

How badly had I hurt her, anyway...?

"I know, Lord Vim. I do. But this is who we are, have been, fighting. People who would doom all else for their false gods. Please, don't abandon us now. Not when we need you most," Kriss whispered down to me.

Abandon...? Why'd he think I was going to abandon them?

"I'm just angry, Kriss. I'm not about to do that, you need not worry," I said.

"You nearly just did Vim," he countered.

Hm...? "You mean Nectar...?" I asked. I couldn't imagine what else he'd meant.

His huge horns glistened in the sun as he nodded.

Hmph. "How can one abandon a traitor?" I asked.

"Is she really, Vim...? This is our cute little Nectar we're talking about," Kriss asked.

"Don't get all soft on me, you mountain of muscle. You heard what she had been saying! The same cultish-blubber the rest do!"

"Yet she had not gone with them, Vim. She had stayed. To stand and face you. To confront you and..."

"Enough! I'll not forgive such a betrayal, and neither should you! Look at what such soft-handed..." I waved my right hand, to gesture at the empty platforms, but felt something odd as I did so.

Frowning, I turned a little to see what I had smacked. But there was nothing there. I was near the edge of the platform, and parts of it was destroyed... likely my own doing and not Kriss or Nectar's. Yet...

Yes. I had felt something odd hadn't I? What had that...

Then I realized it. Something was in my hand. Or rather, stuck on it... like...

Lifting my right hand, my eyes that had been blurry became still. Clear. Precise.

"Mhm..." Kriss grunted, as if confirming what I couldn't believe.

I held Nectar's ear in my hand. One of them. With clumps of hair and flesh attached to it.

I had torn it off. In the scuffle.

That adorable bat. Who has served me loyally, just as her father had, for centuries.

Kriss had been right. As always. She had not run off with them. With those traitors. She had remained. To face me. To tell me.

And I...

I...

"What'd I just do...?"