

Non Human 551

Chapter 551 Vim – To Leave With A Mark

They weren't telling me something, but I knew better than to dwell on it.

Odds are it was for a good reason.

At least, that was what I was betting on. Light and the rest manipulating me...? Not a surprise at all. But would Renn...?

Glancing at my wife, who was smiling happily as she tied the large bundle together on Merit's bed, I wondered if I might have put myself in a very... precarious situation.

"We'll get wagons at the Smithy," Merit said as she justified her reason for so much luggage.

"Ah... we might need to, huh? Lellip plans to take stuff to work on armor too, that's all heavy," Renn said with a nod as she thought about it.

I shifted, unsure if I should voice an opinion or not. It wasn't as if it'd matter, anyway.

I'd not be joining them on such a venture. I'd instead head west. At full speed.

To save the same people who had abandoned us.

Again.

Taking a small breath, I tossed such thoughts away as I glanced to the nearby wall. Near the door. Merit had nearly half a dozen bags, though most were smaller there were a couple that were essentially giant packs. One of them had Renn's paintings, which somewhat justified their size but...

"What even is this...?" Renn asked as she studied an abacus.

"A tool for calculating," I said as I watched Renn slide some of the beads up and down, smiling as she did.

"Calculating...?" Renn whispered, and I could see her trying to make sense of the tool as she messed with it. It was kind of adorable how she tilted her head and her ears fluttered as she did.

Just how come I found her so utterly captivating...? I mean, she was, but typically that wasn't a good enough reason for me to fall so head over heels for someone. I could barely get my eyes off her right now, and as such was neglecting my duty. I was supposed to already be on the road, heading for the coast. To save a ship. Yet here I was... wondering if I should spend the next few years just teaching Renn everything I knew of math and its forms. Neglecting all else in the process...

"Vim."

I looked away from the only thing in this world that was adorable enough to justify my patience, and looked down at Merit... who was holding up a letter.

"Hm?" I took her letter, still enclosed, and wondered just what she expected me to do with it. I was to head to the coast, bypassing pretty much all other locations... so who was it she expected me to encounter and deliver this to before anyone else could?

"I'm told Nasba's cousin will be amongst them. One of the leaders of the expedition. You probably don't remember her, but when you see her you'll recognize her. Tressi looks, or at least had looked, just like Nasba. Down to all but the feathers," Merit said.

I frowned at that but nodded. Tressi...? I remembered her, but only barely. She had not joined Nasba who had followed Merit like a lost puppy, until the fall of her kingdom, but instead had joined the Society proper. I couldn't really remember what she had done, or where she had gone... likely because she had gotten involved in the church. "Wonder what Nasba thinks of that," I said.

Merit sighed. "She'll likely be overjoyed. The birdbrain is too simple, she'll forget all about being abandoned and just happily hug her family member," Merit said.

"If they all are coming back like this... did they really abandon us?" Renn asked as she put the abacus down.

Merit turned and nodded. "Of course they had, Renn. Just because they're coming back now doesn't negate the century we've had to survive alone without them," Merit said.

"Of course I agree, Merit, but I mean... couldn't they argue the same?" Renn asked.

Merit shifted as she glanced at me, and then looked back at Renn. "What do you mean...?" Merit worriedly asked.

I knew Merit had already realized Renn's meaning, and couldn't help but smile softly as I put her little letter into my own bag at my side. I'd deliver it, or at least will try to. Supposedly, per Renn's warning, the ship I was meant to find... could possibly sink not just before I find it, but after too.

I was trying not to read in-between the lines of such a warning. I was good at that, since it was how I used to deal with Celine's warning way back in the day.

"Well... Couldn't the rest of us have gone with them? If the whole Society had left with them, maybe it would have worked out better?" Renn suggested, easily giving the argument that Light and any of her people would likely use to justify their own actions. An argument that did in fact make sense, to a point at least.

Merit didn't answer, not right away. Instead she just lowered her head a little. "Then why would they come back all of a sudden?"

"Why indeed," I said simply.

The two glanced at me, and I could tell they were both waiting for me to expand on that. But I didn't... because I didn't know. I'd not asked. I didn't want to ask.

I mean... it was obvious, wasn't it? There was no reason to ask, or question it. At least, in my opinion.

They had saints. Light alone was powerful enough to reason the cause away. Let alone the rest of them.

Their return was without a doubt for only a singular reason. One that was likely mundane, but serious.

They'd returned to survive. Nothing more. The reason, the underlying cause, was of no importance.

I sighed, and gestured lightly at Merit. "Three of you should be able to carry all of this... but it won't be comfortable. Maybe you should get a horse or two," I suggested.

This narrative has been purloined without the author's approval. Report any appearances on Amazon.

"That was the plan? We'll take a few of the horses from the company, and then get a wagon or two at the Smithy," Merit said, sounding annoyed I'd both switched topics and called out how much junk she had.

Nodding gently, I glanced at Renn... and wished I wasn't leaving.

Why'd she have to look so... Well... Good? She had a happy smile on her face, one not of worry or stress but pure joy and glee. She looked like she was having the time of her life. Likely was. It was that same happy smirk she wore when we took baths together, or at least the smile she wore as she got into the

bath. That smirk typically morphed into one far more sensuous, with more blushing, as the bath went on.

But I knew the reason for it. Right now she was excited. Happy. Even if we were about to separate, once again, for an indifferent amount of time.

To her she was about to embark on a wonderful journey. One with her closest friends, to accomplish something she believed to be one of the most important things she's ever done. To build a home not just for herself, for us, but for many others... many people she cherished and adored.

Honestly I couldn't fault her for getting excited over it... even if it made me terribly upset to know she was going to be doing all that without me.

"Don't linger here. Leave the moment you are ready," I said to her.

Renn glanced at me, her tail twitched as she nodded. "I know, Vim. I promise. Light even wants us to go swiftly, too, oddly."

"That means there's a reason for it. Which worries me," Merit said.

"And you don't know the reason?" I asked her.

Merit shook her small head. "No. We were only told in detail about the ship."

I sighed and nodded. "Then that is on purpose too," I said, and decided to return to their side the moment I could.

"No doubt. But it's fine. If it was something really bad she would have said so, I think," Renn said as she stepped over to me.

"I'd be careful thinking that, Renn. More than a few of us have lost our lives thinking such a thing, not realizing how serious the danger is," Merit warned.

I nodded. "Yes. Celine had been the same way. Their lack of informing us of a prophecy might be for the best, since in doing so something worse might happen, but that doesn't mean the lesser of evils is any safer and..." I slowly stopped talking as Renn drew even closer. Close enough that it was kind of odd, considering the here and now and what we'd been talking about.

I stood up a little straighter as she got close, and for a tiny heartbeat I focused on her smell. It was something I'd not smell again for a time, again, so shortly after the last time.

"Will you... stop there? On your way back?" she then asked, while standing so close I could feel her body heat. She wasn't radiating it, but it was noticeable enough. Especially here in Merit's cold room.

"Stop where?" I asked carefully. Why would I linger? Anywhere? I'll be rushing back to your arms once I could, the moment I could. I'd kill that monarch and would depart before its blood even dries on my hands.

"Your little cave," she said with a smirk.

Oh. I blinked and frowned... as I slowly nodded. "I... could, yes." Was she speaking of the rings I planned to make? Or rather, the gems I'd make them from? Or did she have another reason to ask? Merit was here, in the room; listening and watching. Hopefully she didn't say anything too... important. I trusted Merit with Renn, amongst other things, but that cave was mine and mine alone. I'd not told or shown it to anyone, ever, before her.

Renn then giggled as she reached over and gently patted my chest, as if to praise me for being a good dog or something. My brain seemed to shut down for a moment as she did so... She then turned and nodded to her friend. "Let's hurry and finish packing, Merit," she said, dismissing me as if I was no longer even here.

Wanting to say, or do something, that would make her blush and yelp in embarrassment... I chose not to as I instead nodded and sighed. "Safe travels, you two. I'll tell Lilly to meet you both at the gate," I said. We'd already planned on how they'd meet up with her as to head back west together.

Odds are they'd reach the Smithy, then Telmik, and head north before I returned to them. Even though it'd not take me too long to reach the coast, I had no real idea of knowing how long I'd be there. All Renn and Merit had told me was that I needed to go there, find the inlet where others were waiting, and then save a ship of our people that is going to be attacked by a monarch. One intending to land near Vorli, which was a very small fishing town a hundred odd miles south of Kaley's Hamlet.

"Get going already," Merit simply said.

Right, right... I knew I had already lingered longer than I needed to, but still... Why couldn't I say goodbye to my wife? What was so wrong with that?

It's not like I'd even gotten a kiss or anything, either. Didn't she just recently snivel about me not kissing her when I left and returned? Why didn't she do it here and now then? That had been a great opportunity for it, hadn't it? Or was it my fault. Maybe she had been expecting me to do it...

I contemplated that, heavily, as I turned and grabbed the door's handle.

"When you get to Telmik, don't linger there. For Lilly's sake," I warned them.

"We heard you the first time," Merit said stiffly.

Renn though smiled and nodded. "You sure you don't want your spear, Vim...?" she asked, again.

"He said no the first time. You both need to learn how to listen," Merit groaned as she went back to packing a small bag.

"You keep it," I said. Renn nodded... and for a small moment we stared at each other, until I decided it was time. If I kept lingering like this, even Renn would find it odd. "Later," I said gently, feeling stupid as I did.

"Bye, Vim! I believe in you!" Renn said as she waved at me. I nodded gently as I opened the door and left Merit's room... and shut the door behind me as I did.

Standing right outside the door, with my hand still on the handle, I looked up and wanted to groan.

I should have just kissed her! Or at least said something! Even if I was in a hurry and even if she didn't seem to mind... what if we were separated for months again?

"He didn't kiss you goodbye," Merit's voice, spoken quietly, whispered through the door.

My shoulders tensed, and I realized they hadn't noticed I'd not left. Not an odd thing to do, since I sometimes walked quietly enough that not even Renn could hear me do so. "No. But it's okay," Renn said, speaking just as quietly.

No. It wasn't.

Opening the door, the two jumped a little as I stepped back into the room.

"Wha!" Merit seemed most startled, but I knew it was not because she had genuinely thought I had left. Instead it was because I nodded and stepped over to Renn.

Although Renn had been surprised upon my re-entry, she didn't fight me at all as I gave her a kiss. One that was honestly a tad too deep, and too long, for the moment. Especially with Merit watching. I had pulled her into it, but hadn't really grabbed hold of her... so after a long moment our lips separated, as she leaned back a bit and away from me, as if suddenly dizzy and unable to stand up straight. I didn't pursue her, or grab hold, since Merit's bed was right behind her.

Renn actually stepped backward, slumping down and sitting on Merit's bed as she did. She looked up at me with huge eyes; shocked to such a degree she didn't seem to even realize what had just happened. Odds are she wasn't even aware she was now sitting down, based off the look on her face.

I licked my lips and nodded, feeling suddenly content and confident that I could leave now.

"There. Now there's no chance in hell any of them will be able to woe your heart while I'm away again," I said, deciding that was enough. The sight of her flushed face, and how stiff her tail and ears were was proof enough.

Merit made an odd noise, gaping at us, but I ignored her as I nodded one last time.

Turning away, I side-glanced Merit, and was glad to see how surprised she was. Her face had even gone a little pale.

"You should leave more often, if that's the kind of stuff you're going to do!" Renn shouted as I left the room once more, this time without closing the door behind me.

Chapter 552 Renn – A New Venture, Together

"Glad that's no longer my room; because if it still was I'd be complaining it had been soiled!" Merit teased.

Lilly laughed, rather loudly. "I bet!"

My face was hot, but I had a smile on my face all the same. "It wasn't that bad..." I groaned. It had just been a kiss!

Merit shook her head as she lightly gestured at me. "I bet it wasn't. You should have seen her face, Lilly. Her ears had even stood on edge, every strand of hair was all stiff and sticking right up as if I'd just shocked her!" Merit said.

I groaned again, but said nothing in my defense since she hadn't lied. Merit's room had a mirror, one that I had glanced at not long after Vim had left after he had... well... kissed me. Even minutes after the act, I had still looked just as she described. So I could only imagine how I had looked immediately after, or during the act. I had probably looked stupidly silly. Hopefully Vim hadn't found me weird... but it had been his fault, I hadn't expected him to do such a thing at all!

"Okay, if I'm going to keep missing such things, I'm going to start breaking rules. It's not fair," Lilly said.

I smirked at that. "Well, won't have to worry about that here soon enough," I said. After Telmik, Lilly wouldn't have to live outside of the locations and keep a distance from us anymore. If anything it'd be the other way around, since we'd be building a location not far from her home. We'd be the outsiders, in that case.

Lilly nodded happily as she glanced at the horse she was guiding. She held the reins of a large, stout, horse. One that had most of Merit's stuff on its back. Another horse was following dutifully behind that one, but it only had a few small bags. One of mine and another of Vim's, and some supplies for the journey but not much else.

The idea had been to leave it enough room that one of us could ride it, if we needed to. I wasn't entirely sure why Lilly wanted such a thing, but I wasn't going to argue against it. It was likely for a good reason.

Though on one was riding it now. Lilly, Merit and I were all walking near one another, heading up the mountain pass that would lead us back west to Lellip's home. To pick her up and then head back to Telmik, where we'd then pick up Randle and Angie... and whoever else might happen along with us.

We'd left Lumen yesterday, and surprisingly I had done so with a heavy heart.

Not only had I been forced to once again say goodbye to friends, and even people I considered family such as Lamp and Roslyn, I had also been forced to watch a young girl weep. One I had been forced to forcefully push off me, since she had clung to me as if desperate to keep me from going.

Or rather, to get me to take her with me.

"So for sure he used his tongue, right?" Lilly asked Merit, likely to restart the teasing about me. Since they'd already talked about this, in full, and had been for several hours now.

I ignored them, even as I smirked and felt my face get hot again. Instead I thought of young Tundra, who had wanted to come with us.

Light and Less had not allowed it. Supposedly there was a reason Tundra couldn't go with us, not yet anyway. Light had mentioned that she could do so in time, but not today. Or well, not yesterday.

The wolf had not cared. She had cried rather fiercely, to the point even Merit had grown bothered by it. Which was saying something since Merit didn't seem to like the girl much.

It made me realize I had neither properly spent time with the girl, and also hadn't realized just how important the little time I had spent with her had been to her. To me the time I had spent with Tundra, and by extension Mono and the others, had been... short and sweet. Important, but not so important it had made me feel as if we'd gotten that close. At least, not close enough to justify such an emotional reaction.

Yet her tears and outburst had been very real. And very sad to see and hear. Somehow, without me even realizing it, I had made a bond with the wolf... and in her eyes I had just abandoned her.

It made me feel terrible, but I wasn't sure what to do or say about it. Especially since both Merit and Lilly didn't seem to care much. Or rather, seemed relieved we hadn't been forced to take her with us. As if she was some burden.

She might have been... but did that make her any less important...? It made me think of Fly. What if, like Fly, the poor girl was eventually banished? What if she had felt it, even if instinctively, and thus her reason for wanting to come with us?

Or maybe Merit was right. Maybe the girl simply was acting out, like supposedly all predators her age did. Getting emotional when they didn't get their way, just because they could.

"Renn."

I blinked, and my ears beneath my hat shifted as I turned and nodded to Merit, who I had accidentally just ignored. "Hm?"

"Was that the first time he's kissed you like that?" she asked.

"Gosh are we still talking about that?" I asked back, feeling my face grow hot again.

Lilly laughed. "That's a yes!"

"It was..." I admitted.

"Hm... wonder if he did it just to make a point, or if he's finally just paying attention to his own feelings...?" Merit wondered.

"Probably both. He seems to think there's a chance we, or someone else, can actually steal her from him. A silly notion, but he's actually scared of it," Lilly said.

I nodded, a little happy to do so. "He is! He's particularly scared of you two, and other pretty women," I said.

The two went quiet a moment as they glanced at me, then each other, and then they both smiled softly. As if I'd just given them a mighty complement, they both looked proud all of a sudden.

And I had. And I had meant it. Every word.

"So maybe getting him to act out is best done by abusing that jealousy?" Merit suggested.

"It's an idea. But I'm not sure if I want to be the one that pushes the line to such a point. Sure it'll work, but are you willing to risk your life to do so?" Lilly asked.

"Gosh you two..." I groaned at them, since they were basically saying they were planning on doing things that made Vim's worry, his jealousy over my affection towards them, get pushed to the brink as to get him to... Well, do more stuff like that kiss he'd just done. It was such a silly idea, and I knew was only being brought up as a way to tease me... but it still made me warm again to think of all the stuff they'd likely do, or try, to instigate such a reaction out of him. Not to mention the said reaction, as well. If Vim had really kissed me like that yesterday just to prove a point to Merit, what would he do if they took it that far?

"I still think she might just want to attack him herself. It's not like he'd push her off or anything, and once she's done it once or twice he'll likely never hesitate again," Merit said.

"Aye, he'd probably enjoy it. He always gets that silly smirk when he fights, he likes such roughhousing I bet," Lilly said.

I lifted my hand as to cover my face as it burnt even hotter. He did get that smirk when he fought! I knew exactly what she was talking about!

"What, Renn? Lilly and I have been talking about Vim's indifference for hundreds of years. You're not getting away from this that easily!" Merit said happily, noticing my turmoil.

"Right? I used to make bets with people back then, during the wars. If anything I'm owed a lot of money thanks to this, so it's only fair I start getting paid back!" Lilly agreed.

"Hm...? What do you mean?" I asked as I lowered my hand and glanced at her.

Lilly smirked at me and lightly pointed at herself. "I used to bet with Tosh and Feflo, and the rest. Whenever a new woman took her chance, trying her hand at wooing him, we used to bet on it. I lost. A lot," Lilly said.

Frowning at that, I glanced to Merit and found her knowingly nodding. "I'm not sure why but Lilly did in fact always bet on Vim indulging in them. Even though she knew Vim better than most, and knew he'd never do it. Never understood why," Merit said.

"Wait... you'd bet on if he'd what?" I asked, trying to understand.

"If he'd sleep with any of them," Lilly answered.

Oh. Right. "How come I'm not surprised such a thing used to happen?" I asked. And Tosh? Really? I suppose he did seem the type to do such a thing... I wonder who this Feflo had been.

This text was taken from Royal Road. Help the author by reading the original version there.

"Used to be a lot more than that, too. People used to bet on what he was, where he was from... even the names of his parents and stuff. Not much of that happening nowadays, people stopped trying, or caring, I think," Merit said.

Huh... "I've always wondered why everyone seems not too bothered over not knowing what he is," I said. So that was why. It wasn't that people weren't bothered, or didn't want to know, they had just stopped trying to figure it out. After hundreds of years I guess it was bound to happen eventually.

"The fact you don't know even now after all this tells me no one will ever know. Unless your children have traits of some kind that show it off, I guess," Lilly said.

I stopped for a moment, pausing as I realized what she'd just said.

My children! Right! "They could, huh!" I said excitedly.

Lilly and Merit both nodded. "It's a thought, at least. Most have assumed he used to have traits and just somehow removed them, after all," Merit said.

Yes! Of course...! "I wonder what the odds are..." I wondered. How many children would I have to give birth to, I wonder? To ensure at least one was born with his bloodline and not mine?

"I don't think strength matters. Look at Nasba. Ducks should have lost out to foxes, yet the ducks won," Merit noted.

I nodded, happily pondering it. "Yet a few foxes were there! That means if I have enough, at least one is bound to inherit his traits not mine!" I said happily.

"A whole litter, she's planning," Lilly said.

"Don't cats usually have multiple at once? Liina was one of four," Merit said.

"Huh...? Four?" I asked. Liina had siblings...? Never knew that.

Merit nodded. "Most pure-blooded cats typically have multiple children at once. Usually two or three, I think," Merit said.

Wait... "Really? My family wasn't like that," I said. As far as I was aware all of my siblings had been born alone. And that many at once...? I wonder how big one's belly got during such a pregnancy...

"She's a special kind of cat, Merit. Plus I'd not use that Liina as an example. Her mother had been very thick in the blood," Lilly said.

"Had she been? I never met her," Merit asked.

Lilly nodded as I frowned at that. Once again I was being forced to recognize, and accept, that I was... new. A new member of their family.

Even Lilly, someone banished by Lumen's Society, had known Liina. And had known her mother, it seemed. Well enough to know things like how many siblings she had and whatnot.

I can't wait until I knew everyone, even their whole family lines, as well as I did they and all the rest. I bet it felt... wonderful to just, know everyone. To know someone's parents, and possibly even grandparents. To see someone and think, oh that's my friend's kid or grand kid. I bet that felt wonderful...

Odds are Lilly's would be the first for me. I was her friend, her family, and had already met her youngest with Root. Which meant eventually... maybe even thanks to Lellip, I'd soon get to meet the next generation!

The idea of seeing Lellip's child, and thus Lilly's grandchild, made me grin ear to ear. What an absolutely lovely thought...!

"What are you grinning at?" Lilly asked with a huff.

"Probably that kiss. I bet she can still taste it," Merit teased.

"Merit!" I said, laughing a little. Not just because she had once again brought it up, but because she wasn't entirely wrong.

Merit chuckled and one of the horses breathed out heavily, as if sighing at us. I glanced at it, and studied its large eyes as it slowly followed Lilly. It looked bored.

"They don't like my smell, Renn," Lilly then said.

"Huh? They don't?" I asked. They didn't seem bothered, from what I could tell. I mean, Lilly was the one guiding them right now for crying out loud! They were walking behind her dutifully, as far as I could tell.

"You'd be hard pressed to find anyone who likes her smell, Renn," Merit said.

"Hey!" Lilly said, though had a smirk as she did.

"I like her smell," I said.

"You like everyone's smell, that doesn't count," Merit said.

Well... I mean... There were a few who I didn't particularly care for. In fact even Merit sometimes smelled a little, I had noticed it when sleeping with her for the first time.

She didn't stink, at all, but she had a very distinct smell. One that made me hungry.

Lilly smelled like home to me, or well the forests where I'd been born. It was interesting because her daughters, Root and Sap, both had the same smell too. Windle however didn't. His smell was similar, but different. He smelled more like a wheat field than a forest, though I wasn't sure why.

"Think she can smell him, Merit?" Lilly then asked.

My tail twitched beneath my pant leg, and I tried to not let my thoughts reach my face as Merit hummed in thought. "It's possible. She does seem to notice him before she should. I figured at first it was her hearing doing it, but she had yelped in shock alongside me when he had stepped back into the room yesterday. She had thought he had left too," Merit said.

Great! If they try to prod and ask me about it there was no way I'd be able to keep the truth hidden...!

"I've always wondered what he might smell like," Lilly said, a little absentmindedly.

"Probably stinks, so it's for the best," Merit said simply.

I smirked at that. "I've been meaning to ask... do you two find him attractive?" I asked.

Lilly and Merit both tilted their heads as they considered my question. "Vim?" Merit asked, as if to confirm who we were talking about.

I nodded.

Lilly chuckled. "Not at all. He's too human for my taste," Lilly said.

Oh...! I nodded at that, since I kind of agreed. The fact he had absolutely no trait at all was strangely upsetting, even to me, so I understood that perspective.

"I'd not outright say he's ugly, but I'd also never call him handsome either. But I mean... I grew up in a world where men were all my size; I think all of the normal men are weird looking. Never have been able to get over that," Merit said.

My smirk faded a little as I understood Merit's meaning. She meant her own kind, her fellow knife fish people. So... the men of her bloodline had been small like her, then? Almost looking like kids? Yet they had abused her, hadn't they...? And she still found them more preferable than others?

"But the reason we like him isn't his appearance, is it?" Lilly then said.

Merit nodded and sighed. "Yes. What matters is what counts, and it's he himself. Even if he's insufferable, he's still Vim," Merit said.

My smile returned as I nodded. "I've actually grown to like how he looks, but I remember thinking how boring and simple he looked when I had first met him," I said. Honestly I had been kind of disappointed. Lughes, Amber and Crane at the Sleepy Artist had all described him as some mystical protector. A defender of our Society, and people. So I had been expecting... well...

Honestly I'm not really sure what I had been expecting. But it hadn't been Vim, that's for sure.

"Not to change subjects but is it left or right? I've not been this way in decades," Merit asked as we neared a fork in the road.

"Left," I said, right as Lilly did.

Merit nodded and headed down the path, and then I and Lilly followed. The horses followed us, diligently, still not showing any signs of discomfort. Maybe Lilly had just been joking earlier about them not liking her smell.

"Still, decades? Really?" Lilly asked.

Merit nodded. "I went to Telmik a few times... visited Nasba and the Crypt a couple times... but otherwise I've not left Lumen at all since moving there," Merit said.

I wanted to ask how long ago that had been, but knew better. Because she had done so right after the fall of her kingdom, and Merit got sullen whenever that topic came up.

"And ever since Nebl's family had their accident, they've not been shipping anything off to Lumen in excess anymore. In fact does anyone really even use the Smithy much anymore?" Lilly asked.

My heart tinged with light pain as Lilly effortlessly brought up something sad, and did so in a way as if we were talking about the weather. "Just a few odds and ends occasionally, at least as far as I'm aware. Lumen mostly uses the forges in town nowadays. But they've not really needed anything special or fancy," Merit said.

"Why doesn't the new cathedral need such things?" I asked.

The two slowed for a moment and glanced at me. "That's... a good question," Merit said.

Lilly nodded. "A very good one. What was it like? Are they building something like what's at Telmik? Or just a typical church styled building?" Lilly asked.

Right. She hadn't gotten to see it, since she had been forced to hide the whole time we had been there.

"It's just like the Cathedral. Even has the same floor plan and everything," Merit said.

I nodded. "Pretty much," I said. As far as I was aware it had a few differences, particularly in the lower floors, but in general was a replica of the Cathedral in Telmik.

"Then... they should need steel and stuff, right...?" Lilly wondered.

Merit quickly nodded with a frown. "Had Vim said anything, Renn? Concerning it?"

"Not really. He checked it for them, since Light had asked him to. He said it should only take them four or five years to finish it at the rate they were going, but that's about it." In fact Vim had seemed slightly impressed by their progress, and skill, though he had also obviously not wanted to get involved.

"Maybe they had a stockpile...? Leftovers from Telmik or something? Or maybe Nebl's been supplying them this whole time and we just didn't realize it?" Lilly suggested.

"Won't we find out shortly...? No point fretting over it now is there?" Merit suggested.

"I'm not going to let you come live with us if you're going to be such a bore, Merit. Leave your boring parts in Lumen, that was the deal," Lilly said with a smirk.

"Bore!?" Merit turned to face Lilly, yet didn't stop walking. She kept walking backwards as she pointed at Lilly and scowled. "Rich talk coming from the one who once talked Vim to sleep!" she shouted.

Lilly's smirk disappeared with a flinch, as if she'd just had a feather plucked violently from her wing. "Wha!" she couldn't even say anything in response as Merit proudly smiled and nodded, crossing her arms while still walking backwards.

"Listen to this Renn! She's the only one I know whose put Vim to sleep with nothing but a story! It was so bad even I nearly fell asleep!" Merit said, as if about to tell me the story itself just to prove it to me.

"That's not what happened...!" Lilly defended herself, but rather poorly. She had a slightly red face as she did so, and had turned to look at me so harshly the reins of the horse she held had gone taught and made the horse huff in annoyance over it.

Smiling happily at the two as they started bickering, over something so silly, I found myself looking forward once again to this trip.

This was going to be a venture I'd remember the rest of my life, and not just because I would do so anyway. I could just tell, this was going to be... special.

In ways I'd likely not understand until it was too late.

Chapter 553 Vim – A Circle of Worry

Bending down, I ran my hand along the edge of the flawless circle.

The forest which had just gone through a massive fire was still burnt and decrepit, with only a few hints of it re-growing just yet. Yet amidst a world of charred black, was a circle of healthy green. One that wasn't just growing flawlessly, but seemingly only doing so within its own little world.

I felt the way the grass just... ended abruptly. Not a single blade of grass was beyond the circle, and the reason wasn't very obvious.

Although the forest had been terribly damaged, it wasn't as if the soil had been destroyed or tainted. A few feet in any direction around the circle were tiny little hints of the forest returning. Either in the shape of tiny blades of grass, flowers or weeds, or in little twigs of freshly sprouted trees and bushes.

So it wasn't as if the ground was ruined. It had been hurt, thanks to the fire, but like all fires did... it left behind an abundance of resources and nutrients. More than enough to give birth to the next forest that would soon grow with haste, likely once this winter came and went and the soil had a chance to be really watered.

Yet still the circle of grass didn't seem to be growing outward at all. It was now past my ankle, a few inches up my shins, and the way the healthy blades of grass looked so thick and firm told me that it was likely one of the healthiest patches of grass I'd seen in forever. As if someone had been nurturing it, even. Typically one did not see such healthy grass in the wild, and even more so never saw it in a place like this.

"Yet no divinity..." I whispered as I stopped messing with the edge of the grass circle. I glanced around again, at the nearby remnants of trees. Most were just charred remains, but a few had already started to sprout new branches and leaves.

Taking a deep breath, to see if I could smell anything at all that stood out, I wondered if I should just let it be.

I had ran a little out of my way to come here, on the way from Lumen and heading to the western coast, but I had felt as if I had a good reason to do so. I had wanted to verify, if able, that this... fire, this monarch that Renn's saintly friend Elaine had a prophecy about, had been Stance's doing.

The timeline didn't outright make sense, but it could be reasoned away with Stance's insane ramblings. He had been... weird, even way back in the day. So his addled mind mistaking how long he'd been doing stuff made sense to me, or at least could be explainable.

Yet... he had not said chicken, had he? He had said bird. Although chickens were birds, I had a rather heavy assumption Stance had not had a chicken in mind when he had spoken of it. If his intent for the monarchs he had been creating was to have them search out fellow gods for him, since he couldn't reach them himself, why choose a bird so unsuited for the task...? Especially if he knew his powers had been weakened, and thus so too would be those he summoned? Though he had also made a crab for crying out loud... Maybe I was just reading too much into it. Because I feared the worst, and that fear wasn't allowing common sense its rightful place.

My only hope was that Elaine had been the one mistaken. And that had made sense to me. A saint, a human one no less, making a mistake? Not really knowing what she was seeing in her dreams...? Yes. Very believable.

But...

"She had said giant," I whispered. Elaine had made that very clear. That the chicken she had witnessed being born had been huge. As tall as the trees, if not taller.

And Stance had said the bird he had created had been tiny and weak. Insignificant. Like the rest of his creations.

"Either way the answer is bad, isn't it...?" I groaned as I stood and looked around.

If Stance had been the one to summon this supposed chicken monarch... it would relieve me, because that meant I didn't need to worry about it anymore. Since he had destroyed all his monarchs. But, that meant Stance had been around far longer than he had claimed. Not months, but years. Which meant I couldn't trust or believe any of his other ramblings. So who knew what else he had done in that time period. Who knew the severity of his influence upon the world. Even a god that was crippled, as he had seemed, could have done a lot of damage to the natural order. Enough to warrant my time and efforts

to track down such anomalies and deal with them. Even though the better of the options, it was still a terrible one.

And even worse... if Stance had not been the one to have summoned this chicken monarch, which had burnt such a huge swath of forests and also killing many... like Angie's family...

"Then another god is in play," I whispered.

I had hoped to come check on this area where I assumed the god had summoned the monarch based off the circle of untouched ground, near Angie's home, to find something to relieve my worries. To convince myself that no other gods were here, and especially not doing things as wild as summoning new monarchs.

But nothing here calmed those fears. I had hoped to find the circle dead, or at least growing wildly in all directions in the way a normal patch of grass would do so. Either of those options would have confirmed that even if made by divine power, or influenced by it, it was no longer doing so.

Now though...? Now I had no choice but to accept the fact that the circle of grass was an anomaly. Not natural. After all these months, it should either be dying out or growing outside its circle. Yet it wasn't.

Which meant if Stance had done the deed, as I hoped, his power still lingered. Unlike the hearts of the monarchs he had summoned with his own power. Which were conflicting facts.

Was it just coincidental...? Were the hearts the oddity or had his condition affected all of his powers similarly...? If so you'd expect the circle to have returned to the natural order, at least within reason, with his death. Right...?

I couldn't sense any divine power here, but it had been a long time since the act had been done. But I had not felt divinity even last time, had I? I hadn't. Not even as remnants of the fire had lingered around me, I had not sensed any divine power. But that was sometimes normal, especially for the very small abilities and powers they used. An odd quirk of their abilities was sometimes divine power just... didn't linger after being used.

Still, there was no denying the circle, now. Back when I had first found it, I hadn't dismissed it either, but I had still withheld a tiny bit of hope that it had just been... circumstantial. A fluke.

Well...

Glancing down at the flawless circle of bright green, I shifted and sighed.

No denying it now.

Glancing at a nearby clearing, where once a home had been, I studied the layer of rubble. It had collapsed ever more into itself, but it was still obvious what had once been there. A home.

He could have done it.

Stance had hated non-humans. Despised them. Saw them as flaws to be fixed.

If he had happened upon Angie and her family... he might have summoned a monarch as to take care of them. Many of the gods had done such a thing, instead of doing the deeds themselves. They had the cruelty to slaughter even women and children, but did it by hiding behind their creations. Had Stance been the kind to shy away from killing with his own hands...? I couldn't remember. All I remembered of him was that he had liked to perform plays, and had chosen the side of the humans.

Him doing this was possible. It could have happened, even if I couldn't reason the actual steps that had transpired for it to do so. It made sense. At least to me.

Stance, in his supposed search for fellow gods, had happened upon a family of non-humans. Disgusted, he summoned what at the time had been his attempt to bring forth a powerful monarch. One that sequentially used its powers, its fire, to burn them all alive... and inadvertently burnt down hundreds of miles of forest in the process.

Yes. Very plausible.

"Then... how did Angie had survived it?"

Even a newborn monarch, when empowered by its creator to accomplish such a specific task, would have been powerful. Far greater than Pinchie, or that lizard. Or even that lion that Renn and her friends had dealt with. Just how had that small girl survived its wrath?

Sighing again, I wondered if I was just spinning my wheels.

I'd already asked Angie what she had seen and experienced. She had been thrown into the nearby river by her mother. To escape the blazing inferno. She had not mentioned a man, or even a giant chicken.

Stolen content warning: this tale belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences elsewhere.

Which was weird too... maybe. Angie was just a child, but she was level-headed. Not stupid at all. I found it unlikely that such a girl, even during such duress that the fires had likely brought upon her, would not have noticed a giant chicken raging around and spewing flames as it did...

I'll need to talk to the girl again later. After I dealt with this ship that was supposedly going to be sunk...

By a monarch no less.

Reaching up behind my head, I scratched at the back of my neck.

Another oddity. Though one I doubted Light or Renn had noticed.

A monarch? In the sea...?

That should be impossible.

I had it on good authority, from my turtle-friend, that none were left. At least, none that were of any worth noticing. None greater than the basic fish they swam and co-existed within the sea, at least.

Part of my agreement with allowing that giant island of a turtle to exist was that she was to alert me to any monarchs in the sea. If not able to kill and destroy them herself, she was to let me know of them and their location. She was also supposed to let me know the moment the underground volcano...

"Wait..." I groaned as I realized something important.

That volcano! "That's the reason, isn't it...!?" I went from scratching the back of my head to slapping my hand on my face and groaning.

Of course that was the reason for Light and the rest coming back...! Why hadn't I noticed!

Because I've been neglecting the world around me lately. Terribly so. That's why.

"Idiot..." I took a deep breath and let it out as I wiped my face and shook my head. I really was!

That had to be the reason! The real one! That volcano had been foretold by Celine. That it'd erupt, not just destroying half the southern islands but sending the world into a harsh few years of strong winters. She hadn't outright known when it would happen, just that I'd be there to see it. Which was why she had warned me about it. She had hoped I'd protect the Society when it happened, since she would be gone by the time it did.

"Thus their five year plan to prepare. And why they're focusing so much on religion and the church," I said as I crossed my arms and nodded.

Yes. That made so much darn sense. They planned to prepare for the aftereffects of the volcano, and then use the years of discord and struggle to renew their influence via their faith. It made so much sense it made me sick.

I could verify this very easily. I could just make a trip to the turtle, after I dealt with the boat.

"She'll just say this is my fault, for not performing my duties properly..." I groaned as I stepped out of the circle of green and headed away from it. There was nothing more I could learn from it, or the area. All I'd done by coming here was waste time, in a way. I'd confirmed nothing, and learnt nothing. At least, to a point.

Still... it was somewhat relieving to now know the real reason Light and the rest had returned.

Although the volcano exploding was going to be a pain, since it'd cause a lot of damage... and likely uproot many of our members, as well as the turmoil it'd cause within the human societies, it was not that big of a deal.

It was just another part of life. There were floods. Fires. Plagues and wars... and occasionally? Yes, even a volcano's eruption.

"So Renn had just been an afterthought...!" I said happily as I left the bison's old home, heading back west.

How relieving! How utterly wonderful! I'd been trying to ignore it, since it was so silly and terrifying at the same time, but I admitted I had thought of it. That they had returned solely because of Renn. Or well, her children, at least. But now? Now I was confident that wasn't a factor at all!

They had fled the devastation. Or well, the soon to come devastation. Light had likely foreseen the volcano in full. Most undoubtedly even knew the day it'd happen. Probably even knew the extent of the damage, too...

"Wonder if that was why they had chosen Lumen...?" I wondered. It had been kind of odd that they'd abandon Telmik so readily. Here I had thought it was their way of expanding their influence, but maybe not? Maybe Telmik was going to suffer badly during the event...? If not from the volcano's eruption itself, maybe the fallout...? It wasn't too far from the ocean, after all...

Picking up my pace as I began to run through the remnants of the forest, I wondered if maybe I should interfere in Renn's plans for her northern settlement.

That far north would suffer terribly under a volcanic winter. It'd be hard to grow food, and thus even the wildlife will be affected. It might even get to the point that a famine breaks out in that whole region.

Though there were ways to prevent that, at least for our own little community. But why go through such lengths when you could just move southward or eastward a thousand miles and avoid most of those troubles entirely? Though I suppose I shouldn't plan on that. During such events, even the regions not under permafrost ended up dry and desolate. Droughts were common in the regions warm and dry during such a freezing, weren't they?

But I also didn't know the full extent on how bad it was going to get, did I? Celine had simply said it would cause a multi-year winter. That I'd need to be extra cautious during the aftermath, since our members will mistake their own capability and their own supplies. There would be people who would think they're safe, with a few years worth of stored food and resources, only to find they didn't have enough for one reason or another.

Like usual Celine's warnings, her prophecies, which she told to me when concerning serious life and death matters, were still not enough. She had told me just enough to prepare, and know of it, but not the full story...

Granted with Light back though, I'd be able to hear of it in more detail. To prepare better for it, even, with not just the better knowledge but their help. Or well, Renn could, by acting as my buffer.

"That's years from now," I said as I rounded a huge fallen log. One that was severely burnt, but already had moss growing on it again.

I'd say at least five. Since Light seemed to think it'd take that long for the rest of her people to get here from the other continent. I doubted they'd try to sail across the open sea during a volcanic winter, or at least I'd hope they knew better than to do that. Especially in this region. If it got that cold, a lot of ice would form even out there in the open sea.

It was always something though, wasn't it? Such was the world, I suppose. To always be active... even if not in a kind way.

Eventually I found a path. One that was a bit muddy, likely from a recent storm. I ran along it, heading for the distant flush green I saw far ahead of me. Where the burnt forest ended.

I planned to round southward, bypassing Telmik entirely, as I passed through the Nation of the Blind. I'd head for Vorli through one of the forests in the south, one of the last real ones before the desert took over. Doing it this way allowed me to avoid the major roads and all the settlements. It'd allow me run at my more normal pace, since I didn't need to worry over being seen by anyone.

It should only take me a few days to get there at my pace, as long as nothing distracted me.

Plus it gave me a little time to ponder. To think. To remember.

Also, even if I didn't like it, a little bit of time away from Renn was probably a good thing. Not only was her presence obviously disrupting my own focus, I had been treading dangerously close to fulfilling that prophecy. Renn had been... very adorable lately. The kind that made me forget some of my own rules, and even a few of her own.

The worst part was I didn't even really see anything wrong with it. Have children with Renn...? Sure, why not. They'd likely be as adorable as her. With her as a mother, they'd probably turn out half decent too. I'd not have the same troubles so many others did, like Lilly and Nebl, thanks to the type of person Renn was. At least, in theory.

Still... as much as I'd be okay with doing so... I still feared it. In ways I couldn't understand.

Because something very serious hasn't been brought up about it yet, though mostly thanks to my own doing. No one else's.

Something that needed to be addressed. Something that needed to be taken into account, and questioned.

Something that should outright invalidate the prophecy concerning Renn and her children, at least to a point.

It was something I needed to bring up. It was my duty, and responsibility, to do so. But I feared doing it, in the off chance of speaking of it actually made it real. As if by ignoring it, I could somehow negate it. As if to make it not exist, simply by pretending it didn't.

I almost had brought it up. A few days ago, at that little fishing village. When Lilly and Renn had been asking about the hearts, and gods. After I had verified Pinchie was gone, and his heart empty and devoid of divinity like the other hearts from the monarch's Stance had made.

My answer about the god's infertility had been rather dangerous. I almost hadn't believed I had said it. But by doing so, by answering and talking about it, I had remembered an important detail. One that now was eating me up inside.

As far as I was aware, I could not have children with Renn. Or any non-human, or human, for that matter.

It was something that was likely impossible. Something I didn't have definite proof of, but I did have several thousand years of data to back it up.

I wasn't like Renn. I've had relationships. I've had more than my fair share. And not once, ever, has a child ever resulted from any of them. A statistical impossibility. One that was even further backed up by... well...

Everything I was and am.

So in theory, there was no way Renn and I could have a child.

Yet they were all so bloody confident the child would be mine... Renn doing so was one thing, for obvious reasons, but why would Light have the same confidence? There would be no reason for them to lie about it. They could just reason it as us adopting someone, or something, if that was the case. Even Celine had been confident the child would be mine, supposedly.

Sighing as I ran, I allowed my mind and heart to writhe and worry.

Gods returning. Impossibilities happening. A potential world-threatening event looming on the horizon... My wife becoming too adorable to ignore, too.

To me these fears and worries were far more important than a ship of hundreds of souls. Or the Society, and my desire to step away from it. But who could blame me? The reason I wanted to step away, now, was because I simply wanted to spend my time on Renn. The woman who I not only loved, but might just be able to have children with? What idiot wouldn't focus his whole attention on someone like her and not the fools who made my heart and head hurt all the time?

But that was exactly what I shouldn't do. Since going that far, indulging in her to that level of degree would just make her mad at me. I'd lose her that way, without doubt.

Which made me realize something absolutely hilarious.

"I'm becoming my father..." I groaned as I picked up my pace, as rain started to fall as if to cool off my head. It didn't.

Chapter 554 Renn – To Plant a Seed

Sweeping up the last of the soot, I wondered how the monkey family would fare without Lellip here soon.

Nebl was back on his feet, seemingly fine as far as I could tell, but neither Pram or Drandle helped much if it all in the smithy. That meant Nebl would be on his own in here, and it was honestly too much for a single person. Even one as stout and strong as him.

But none of them seemed too worried about it. In fact, we'd already be on our way back north if not for the wagon being unfinished still.

Our original plan had been to go buy a wagon or two once we got here, since not only did Merit have a bunch of stuff so did Lellip... but Nebl had obviously thought ahead and was already handling it. A large wagon, one that would need at least two horses to pull, was being built in the workshop across from the furnaces. It was nearly done; Nebl was just finishing up the covering wrap. It was kind of weird to see an unfinished wagon cover, since it was just a bunch of hoops and bows of wood that were getting wrapped with linen. Nebl for some reason was adding leather to it, which was why it wasn't done just yet.

No matter. We still had several weeks before the official end of winter, so Randle wasn't in danger just yet. Plus I kind of liked staying here, since it gave me time to both spend time with little Copper and do stuff like this.

Tapping the broom against the ground, and causing a small cloud of ash and dirt to form, I smiled softly as I stood up straight and looked around at my work.

The floor was clean again. For now.

It was something Vim would have done. Or well, Vim likely would have helped Nebl finish the wagon, but I couldn't do that. Not just because I didn't really know how to do it, but also because Lellip was the one helping him. No one had said it, not outright, but I knew what it was.

It was, potentially, one of the last times they would work together. So to them it was special. And likely why they were taking longer than they needed to.

How could I fault them for that? And even more so, how could I possibly think about intruding in such a special moment...?

"Turning into Vim, are you?"

I blinked and turned, and watched Merit enter the smithy as she glanced around.

"Hm?" I wondered what she meant. Did she mean my little attempt to help out? I had just thought it was what Vim would have done too, I guess.

"Getting so dirty all the time," Merit said with a gesture at me.

Oh. I glanced down and smirked, and couldn't do anything but sheepishly nod. Yes, I now had a bunch of soot and ash all over me. The fact she was comparing me to Vim, not because I was doing little odd things around the place but instead because I was getting dirty made me kind of happy for some reason.

"I can only spend so much time with Copper, else I'll want to take her with me when we leave," I said.

"Hm... I myself have never cared much for children," Merit said as I went to put the broom away.

"Why's that?" I asked. I had noticed she had been prickly with Mono and Tundra, but I had just assumed it was because she had not liked their personalities. Not because they had been children.

"I mean... look at me, Renn," Merit mumbled.

"Hm...?" I turned and did so, wondering what she was saying. Was the answer in her expression...? Her clothes or...? Oh... "Wait..." I frowned as I realized, what I assumed, was the meaning of her statement.

She nodded, a little stiffly. "They can't see past my appearance. It's one thing to be mistaken for a kid on first impressions, but to do it again and again? Children can't comprehend it," she said.

I crossed my arms as I thought of the way Tundra and Mono had treated her after first meeting her. I had been there for most of their interactions, and...

"Is that true though?" I asked. Tundra and Mono had indeed treated Merit kind of oddly, but I had felt that had simply been because of their personalities. Mono liked pain and annoying people, and Merit was a perfect target for such a thing. And Tundra just simply liked, and was friendly, with anyone who she saw as strong and with a backbone. Merit, although tiny, was mighty. So that too made sense.

"You think I'd not be bothered by it if it wasn't...?" Merit asked, sounding a little annoyed I didn't believe her.

I nodded. "I suppose... but surely Copper doesn't have such a problem with you, does she? She's too young to even notice such a thing!" I said.

"You obviously haven't spent much time with children, have you Renn? Babies can tell, yes. Enough about this, I have a question for you," Merit said, reminding me of Vim in the way he changed topics forcefully.

Allowing it, I nodded gently and waited for her question. Should we go sit down somewhere? There were some chairs near the other side of the room, by the cold furnaces and forges.

Merit didn't seem to mind us both just stand here, near the soot pile, as she gestured at me. "This home we're to build up north. Is it going to be in the forest? With Lilly and her family?" she asked.

Oh? "No...? Randle and Angie plan to build an orphanage. One for humans. Vim suggested the town that Lilly's son, Branches, has been living in. It's a newer town, growing wealthy thanks to a gold mine or something. It is near the Owl's Nest though," I said.

Merit nodded, as if knowingly. "And who will be the leader of this location? Randle? You?"

I smirked at that. "Does it matter...?"

For a tiny moment she didn't say anything, and then she sighed. "Yes, Renn. It does. For now we'll shelve that topic, but know if it ends up being Randle I'll be annoyed," she said.

"Okay...? But technically I'll not be amongst the orphanage, you know?" I said, wondering if I'd even talked to her about this yet or not.

"Huh? You won't be?" Merit frowned as she looked up at me, as if now more focused on our conversation than she had been moments before.

I nodded. "I plan to make something of an inn. For our people. Members only, not for random people, if I can get away with it. It might be with the orphanage, in the same place or even building, but I plan for it to be its own thing," I said. I felt a little giddy talking about it, since I hadn't even told Lilly or anyone else this idea yet. Only Vim knew.

Merit's tiny mouth frowned deeply for a moment, and then she smiled at me. "You mean for your little cupid station."

"Cupid station?" I asked. What'd that mean?

"Your love-nest. For people to meet and become mates. Like Lellip and Branches are doing," she explained.

I smirked and nodded. "Yeah!"

Merit sighed at me and shook her head. "And Vim's okay with this?"

"Vim would be okay with anything I do, you know that," I said.

She groaned at me.

"What! You know it's true!" I said, a little worried over her reaction. She looked as if she was regretting coming with us!

"It is. Fine. So you'll be the same location, but with a different focus. Honestly I'm glad to hear it; I was a little worried about the whole orphanage thing. I was worried I was going to have to pretend to be a student, or an orphan, from now on," she said with a sad smile.

Oh! That was why she was asking! "Please, Merit. I'd never make you do something you don't want to. And I'd sic Vim on anyone who tried to, as well," I said.

Her sad smile turned into a real one as she nodded. "Thanks, Renn. But still, the way you're talking about it is as if you really don't know what we're doing or how we're going to do it... I'm to assume you've only talked about this a few times with Vim?" she asked.

"Well... yeah? You know he doesn't like talking about stuff like this," I said.

Merit sighed at me. "Actually when it comes to building a new location, he's one of the best to have at your disposal. Not just the whole building aspect, but the examining and planning. I highly suggest we let Vim pick the spot, and not Randle or anyone else, and let him deal with whatever authority that owns the town," she said.

Ah... I nodded at my friend's wise words, and realized I was now speaking to Queen Merit. The one who knew full well the costs and headache that came with such things. "Are you saying we should wait for Vim to return and join us up north, before we even begin? What about Randle's banishment?" I asked.

"He can do what we will. Just sit and wait. From what I understand it's not like the kids are going to be homeless, right? He just wants to open a new orphanage and church? So what if it's a few months late? He can snivel but he'll get over it," Merit said.

And there was typical Merit. Or well, maybe that was also Queen Merit too. Supposedly she had been rather feisty. "To be honest I'm not really sure how it's going to go. I assume we're not taking any children with us, but..." I said with a shrug. No one had told me if we'd be taking any of the kids in Telmik with us or not.

"Hopefully not. This means we'll need humans too, you know? I'm used to living amongst them, but what of the rest? What of Lellip?" Merit asked.

"Well... I had assumed Lellip would be living with Lilly, what with Branches and all," I said.

Merit frowned and shook her head. "Lilly believes in children going out on their own after a point. She'll let them be near, and visit any time they wish, but she doesn't like her children sticking around once older," Merit said.

"Wait really...?" I asked. That was news to me. So she didn't just have her children leave her nest as to grow and see the world, but because she actually didn't want them there in the first place? Really?

Unlawfully taken from Royal Road, this story should be reported if seen on Amazon.

She nodded and sighed. "There's a chance Lilly has changed, of course, after all these years... but yes. Back then she had been rather obstinate about it. Not really sure why, but that's just how she is I guess," Merit said.

Hm... "Well, I'm sure Lellip would be fine, right? Not only is Branches living amongst humans, and has for years, Lellip's dealt with them too. She's mingled with the residents of the nearby town, the one that works the mine," I said. I didn't bring up the fact that she had fallen for one of the men, since I wasn't sure if that was something Lellip wanted others to know about or not.

And even if she wasn't capable, I'd figure it out. Somehow.

Merit hummed a bit in thought as she tilted her head, closing her eyes as she did. I smirked as I watched her ponder deeply, and I wondered why she was suddenly worrying over such things. With the wagon we'd be traveling with, and likely more wagons once we picked up Randle and Angie, it was likely going to take us weeks to get back up north. We had plenty time to talk and plan for this, I figured.

Odds are Vim would be back before we even got to the town up north, I'd bet.

"By the way, I overheard you and Vim say that Berri and her family would be joining us too, is that right?" Merit then asked as she re-opened her eyes.

My tail squirmed a bit as I nodded. "Yes. In fact I plan to send Vim to go get them as soon as possible, once able," I said. I trusted Merit, a lot, but I didn't want to bring up the reason for the narwhal family needing to be rushed in their relocation just yet. Though, I do wonder when Merit had overheard us talking about them...

Merit nodded as she then scratched at her chin, a little absentmindedly. "And Nebl plans to join us too, once they're sure the kids work out. Is there anyone else? How many others are we thinking might join us?" Merit asked.

Smiling softly my ear shifted a little, since I heard someone walking our way. Judging by the sounds of the footsteps it was Lilly. She wore thick and heavy boots. "Well, I expect a few others to show up. Oplar plans to make an office with us, though I don't think she means to live their full-time. Tundra of course wanted to join us, but who knows what she'll do once the time comes to decide..." I spoke as I thought of those who I knew for sure had already voiced such things, and then my smile grew a little as I remembered even more. "Mapple, too. She asked me and Vim if she could join us too, after she retired," I added.

Merit shifted as her eyes narrowed, yet before she could walk in Lilly entered the smithy. "What are you two scheming now?" Lilly asked loudly as she headed our way.

My small friend turned around and pointed at me. "She's going to get us killed, Lilly," Merit said.

"What?" I and Lilly both said, shocked.

"She plans to bring idiots. The whole lot of them, with us up north," Merit said with an exasperated huff.

Ah. She was just annoyed over the names I'd listed.

Lilly relaxed too, laughing as she stepped up next to us. "You have no idea, Merit. But I mean... we're taking you too, so what do you expect?"

"I expect at least a modicum of intelligence! Did you know Mapple plans to join us?" Merit asked, sounding a little angry as she did.

Wonder what modicum means.

The owl shifted, looking slightly startled. "Mapple...? The heretic?" Lilly asked, glancing at me as if for confirmation.

I nodded with a frown. "She asked if she could come, after she retires," I said. And heretic? Really? Funny coming from her, even if true.

"Well... I mean, Randle will be there too. Whether we like it or not those like him will come, Merit," Lilly said with a shake of her head, as if she had already resigned herself to her fate.

"Easy for you to say. You'll be nearby, but in the safety of your tree. I'll be stuck dead center of it all," Merit said.

"I'll let you have a stack of hay in the barn, if you'd like to visit occasionally, so don't mope!" Lilly said with a smirk.

Merit's eyes narrowed. "Vim already offered me an aquarium, so I need not your magnanimous charity," Merit said.

"Wha...? Had he really?" Lilly flinched, and looked at me again as if she wanted me to deny it and say it wasn't true.

But I couldn't, since I both had no idea if he had said such a thing or what it even was. "Aquarium?" I asked.

The two had been about to tease each other more, but they hesitated and then looked to me. Merit smiled gently at me and pointed at herself. "A large tank to house fish and other aquatic life. Usually made in a way to allow people to see and watch said life swim and stuff," she explained.

"Think of a giant window made into a huge bowl, that lets you see into it with ease. Imagine putting a pond into a bowl of glass," Lilly said further.

My ears twitched as my eyes widened and I nodded. "Fish can survive like that?" I asked, shocked to hear it so. Didn't they always die in barrels not long after being put into them? I'd seen more than my fair share of such instances!

"They can, if properly set up and managed. Though this one just needs mud and gunk," Lilly said with a smirk as she gestured at Merit with a thumb.

"And she only needs a few branches. Doesn't even need to be on them, just sitting under them is enough for her," Merit countered.

I smirked at the two. "I like lying in snow. Just a small pile is more than enough," I said, to join the fun.

The two seemed to hesitate again, and I felt a little conscious because of it. Why were they suddenly looking at me as if I'd just said something weird...?

Maybe it was too early for me to join in their teasing. I'll make sure to not try to force it, then... maybe I needed a few more years and...

"The scary part is Vim would be okay with it too. We might want to keep an eye on them, less they drift too far from humanity," Merit said with a sigh.

I blinked as Lilly nodded gravely, as if we were suddenly talking about something deeply serious. "Especially once she gives birth. Odds are the kit will be strong, but nothing like them if my children are anything to go by. Vim especially won't pay enough attention," she added.

Smirking wildly at them, I realized they had just included me in their teasing! "I'm not so bad as that!" I said happily. Really! I'd not let my baby freeze to death, no matter how much like me or Vim she'll be!

"That's what they always say. I'll have you know half my siblings were eaten by fish because my parents never paid attention to them," Merit said.

Lilly snickered as I tried to tell if she was kidding or not. It didn't seem she was. "You probably only survived because of how nasty you taste," Lilly said.

"And you only survived thanks to a fat panda. Who's worse?" Merit asked back.

My ears perked up, a little shocked to have heard Merit say such a thing. Lilly had indeed been saved when young, by Celine and Vim, but how did she take such a thing...?

Apprehensively waiting to see Lilly's reaction, I almost didn't hear my name being called. I turned, as did Merit and Lilly as they both noticed my attention get focused elsewhere.

My ears fluttered as they moved, and I frowned as I wondered if I had misheard... but then I heard it again. "Renn!" Lellip shouted.

"Lellip's calling for me," I said. She didn't sound stressed or worried, but it did sound like she was searching for me. Her voice sounded like it was coming from near the house.

"Go see what she wants then," Lilly said.

I nodded and stepped past the two, heading for the door. As I did Merit sighed.

"Did you hear her before that shout just now?" Merit asked quietly.

"Not at all," Lilly answered as I reached the exit, and paused before it.

Glancing back at the two, I frowned at them as they went to whispering about... what they considered at least, my extreme sense of hearing.

I mean, it was. Even I admitted it was a little too good now. But was it really that shocking? My hearing had been good in the first place, supposedly, so it wasn't as if it was a wild difference between before I'd taken the heart and after...

Leaving the smithy, I sighed at myself and found Lellip in the distance. She noticed me after a few moments and we headed for one another.

"You okay, Lellip?" I asked as I neared her. She of course looked fine, she even had a huge smile on her face, but I wanted to make sure.

"Huh? Yeah? My mother wanted to know if you'd like some of those sunflower seeds. She just made the last batch, the way Vim had taught her to," Lellip asked with a point to the house.

I frowned at her. "Huh...? There was some left?" I asked. Hadn't we made all that had been left? Before leaving last time?

She nodded. "The flowers we had tried to plant didn't make it. They wilted not long after you left. We gathered up the seeds from them, figured may as well not let them go to waste. We also planted some too, but we doubt they'll sprout and all... so," Lellip said with a shrug.

Ah... I see. So the sunflowers we had tried to plant hadn't survived. That was too bad... "I'd love to have some, yes. Is there enough for Merit and Lilly too?" I asked.

"Of course there is? Just wanted to offer some to you first, you're the one who brought them after all," Lellip said as she smiled.

Well... Vim had, really... "It's too bad they didn't survive. I'm sorry," I apologized as we headed for the smithy, to let Merit and Lilly know. They hadn't left it yet, likely either still whispering about my changes or were now bickering back and forth again.

"The trees are dying too. Probably the soil or something," Lellip said.

Although I nodded, I wasn't sure if that was the case. Vim had said they'd likely not grow, even though we'd taken them from a nearby mountain. Odds are it had been a mixture of things; Vim should have given them more information about how to properly tend to them.

I loved the man, but he was so indifferent sometimes. Too indifferent. As if he didn't even realize what he was doing half the time. Others would say it was because he was so old, but I knew it was because he was simply tired. Tired of it all.

It was why he still wanted to step down as protector, even though he no longer had a justified reason to do so. I wasn't sure yet how I was going to handle that, but... well... I'd have to. One way or another.

Because even if Vim wanted to step down and leave the Society, I didn't. I'd not abandon them. No matter how bad of a headache they became, no matter how annoying or ungrateful... they were still my people. And I owed them a great debt.

Their existence gave me friends and family. I needed to repay that. And I planned to do so over my, now longer, life.

And it will start with a small home up north... and a little bit of a wife's manipulation. To keep her husband in check, and keep him from drifting too far off the correct path. To keep the protector, the protector.

Hopefully my daughter arrived soon, because I expected her to be the main factor in that plan.

Vim probably hasn't realized it, but he seemed very excited over her. It had been him who had thought of her name, long before I had even considered such a thing. For him to have already thought long and hard about such a thing proved just how much he liked the idea. Even if he'd not admit it aloud.

I was confident I could sway Vim a little, here and there... but there were limits. Very real ones. His love for me only bent his rules so far. And sadly it wasn't as far as I'd like to admit.

But a daughter...?

I had proof all around me how powerful such a thing was.

Nebl had been willing to sacrifice himself for his granddaughter's love. Through a human, of all things.

Lilly was willing to let others, notably those like Randle who she didn't get along with at all, to set up a home near her nest. In hopes of rebuilding her relationship with her children.

Berri was willing to leave their adorable little home, and all its safety and importance, just in the off-chance her daughter needed help.

Landi had built a whole nation, and risked so much more, just for the chance to have a child. The mere idea of one pushed her to such lengths.

Frett had gotten herself involved with a terrible man, for much the same reasons as Landi.

Roslyn and her people had done terrible things, and gone through terrible things, just to feed their children.

And that was just of those I personally knew. Nearly everyone in the Society had such a story. Either of great sacrifice, or in choosing their entire lives and lifestyles, to either support their children or grant them life. So, so many, had structured their whole worlds around their children. And for good reason.

Even I had done similar back then, for the kids. Lujic and Ginny. I had dedicated decades to them, and they hadn't even been my own.

Maybe, just maybe... Vim would be the same. Odds are he would be, since deep down he was a good man. One willing to protect something like this Society for hundreds of years, and only now just finally growing annoyed over it.

That man will not be like my siblings, or my father. Vim will be the father I've never known could exist. It was impossible to expect anything less of him, based off his personality and his ethos as he called it.

She'll be what I, and the Society, needs. To keep him with us. With them.

Come soon, Nory. It might take both of us to keep this whole thing together. And even together we'll likely still struggle and need help.

But we'll do it.

We'll stand tall

Together. As a family.

Chapter 555 Vim – Vorli's Beacon

Well, this had to be it.

I was not far from Vorli, a town that surprisingly had diminished in population since I'd last seen it. The town had never been too popular or busy, but it still had a port. One big enough that many of the larger sea-faring vessels stopped here to exchange cargo with the smaller ones heading north. It even had a large river that went rather deep inland, so had all the makings of a trade-hub. Yet it seemed even with all its natural riches, the town was steadily losing its importance and its people.

It looked half-empty when I had traveled through it, with several empty buildings even upon the docks itself. Which meant business was bad, though I wasn't entirely sure how or why it had happened. Though for all I knew it was just because of something simple as rising taxes.

But I wasn't here to check on the port, or its people.

Walking up to the large pyre, I studied the way the stacked logs were situated. They looked... settled. Wet. And the chopped parts looked less rugged than typical.

Yes. This was likely it. It had been many years since I'd seen a beacon like this being used, but there was no doubt its intended purpose.

Someone had made this, likely a few months ago. I knew that they'd light it once they believed it was ready to do so. To use as a beacon for the ship out at sea, to let them know where to dock.

This wasn't the highest hill overlooking the ocean, but it was both high enough and secluded enough that they wouldn't need to worry over it being found. The few footprints that were barely visible in the grass and dirt around the stack of wood made it clear only a few people had been here recently. And those very people were who I wanted to find.

I had gone into Vorli first, expecting to find them there, but I had not seen or smelled any hint of them. Here though, near this pyre, I could smell them. The light scent of a non-human, though it was not strong enough or fresh enough to tell me if they were actually nearby.

"Probably should have asked for a bit more detail," I whispered as I looked around. Not far from the edge of the cliff, which overlooked a small beach and lots of rocks, was a forest. Not as thick as the ones up north, but still thick enough that I couldn't see very far into it. Oddly though, with just a cursory glance at it, I noticed several deer. A large herd of them was nearby, grazing and sitting just beyond the forest's edge.

Not too strange, of course, but it told me that Light's people weren't nearby. Non-humans stunk a tad bit more than humans, and that stink usually kept such large groups of animals at a distance. And if these people here, waiting for the ship, were anything like those Light had taken with her to Lumen... they'd likely be rather thick in the blood. Just like Renn and Lilly.

But they couldn't be too far. I wonder if I can do something as simple as follow their footprints...?

Glancing around, I deduced they led north. So I went to following them.

They faded rather quickly, but I found something of a path. One that obviously was used by animals, by game, but figured it was what they had used too. It didn't take me long to verify I had assumed correctly, as a man appeared in the distance. One with a large walking stick.

Approaching the man, who went still upon noticing me, I wondered if every last one of them were going to wear that stupid robe. This man too was wearing the gray robes of the church.

I mean, I got it. Their entire shtick to survive and blend in with the human world was their church and faith. But sometimes too much was too much, in my opinion.

"Vim...!" the old man shouted my name, in shock, as I got closer. He actually dropped his walking stick, he was that surprised. I frowned, but not because it was a surprise he recognized me.

Instead I did so because of his shock. The man looked utterly flabbergasted that I was in front of him. Which meant he had not expected me at all, not now, not ever.

Maybe that meant Light had not planned at all, originally, for me to be involved in this ship or any of them. That was kind of worrying. That meant the reason I was here, the prophecy of the monarch attack, had been recent. Fresh.

Unforeseen until the last moment.

Not good at all...

Approaching the old man who had seemingly gone still, as if still unable to comprehend who and what he was seeing, I bent down and picked up the stick he had just dropped. I found it was just a light piece of driftwood, one that had been cut and sanded into shape. "My name is Vim, I was sent by Light," I said as I handed the old man the stick.

He took it, but upon hearing Light's name he froze once more. The moment passed and he gripped the stick, and with a small jerk quickly shook his head. "Oh... Oh no!" he said, realizing the meaning behind my words.

I frowned as I studied the old man, and wondered who he was. I didn't recognize him, at all. He looked human, outwardly, but his pupils were elongated sideways, implying he was some kind of prey creature. He was clean shaven, but nearly bald... and it looked like he had a slight indent in the back of his head, from an old injury.

"Ah... this is not good. Is it concerning one of the ships? Pray say it isn't so!" the old man asked, sounding distraught as he leaned heavily on his stick.

Gently nodding, I spared a moment to glance around real quick. We were standing in the middle of the game trail, heading down a hill, but were alone. I didn't see anyone else anywhere. "Yes. I've been told a monarch will attack them, and," I started to explain but the man suddenly tumbled backward.

Rushing forward, I barely got hold of the man before he completely collapsed backward. He moaned as I held him up by his arms, and I wondered if he had just nearly passed out. From the news alone. This time he hadn't dropped his stick, and instead had clutched onto it even harder.

"You okay?" I asked quickly as he seemed to come to his senses. He wobbled his head; though I wasn't sure if that was him answering my question or if just shaking off whatever had just happened to him. He seemed to regain his strength, and I warily released him as he stood back up on his own strength.

"Thank you, Vim... I'm sorry, I sometimes pass out during bursts of great emotion..." the man mumbled as he spoke, telling me he was still slightly out of it.

Frowning in worry, I wondered if such a thing was from his bloodline, or a remnant of that indent in the back of his head. It was such a sunken dent that it no doubt had damaged his brain, so...

"Deep breaths. I promise to do all I can to not let anything happen to them, but I'll need to know all you know about what's going on. When were you meant to light the beacon?" I asked.

I definitely didn't remember this man, at all. I'd remember someone who had such issues, I'd think. Even though many members had such ailments, such older men were rare in the Society. Most didn't live to be this age anymore. Hadn't really back then either.

"Yes... I mean, no. We weren't meant to light the beacon until we see a pair of white seals on the shore," he said with a small point towards the ocean.

White seals? That was one way to tell, I guess. Such things were rare in this region, very rare. "You sure you're okay?" I asked. He looked to be far more reliant upon that walking stick than before.

"Yes, Vim. Thank you... my ailment is one I've lived with my whole life, just a thing I deal with... Come, you should speak with the others. They'll know more, and you might need to hear what they have to say," the old man said as he turned, gesturing back down the path from whence he came.

I nodded. "I'll admit it, I do not remember you," I said as I went to walk beside him.

The old man chuckled at me. "You wouldn't, protector. My name is Gavel. I used to live in Telmik, working under Randle. You and I pretty much never spoke to one another," he said.

Ah... yes. Many under Randle had treated me with the same distaste that Randle had all those years. Keeping their distance, and rather upfront about their grievances. "All the same, I'm glad to see you well Gavel. Are there many of you here?" I asked.

"Twelve of us. A few I know for a fact you'll remember, too!" Gavel said, sounding happy over such a thing.

I wasn't, though. "Is there a reason you're not using Vorli as a place to wait?" I asked.

Gavel nodded. "A couple of our members are not as capable of blending in. Instead of forcing them to live alone outside the city, we decided to share in the burden. A few of us go into town occasionally for supplies though," Gavel said.

That made sense, I guess. "The town does seem..." I wasn't sure how to phrase it, but decided to just say it. "Dying."

"Yes. The plague had not been kind to it, I'm told. Then they had a winter where no fish could be found in its rivers or inlet, further driving the humans away. You know how they get during such things, a superstitious lot," Gavel said.

Raising an eyebrow at that, I wondered if this man only wore the robes because it was expected of him. "Superstition or not, a lack of food is a big deal," I said.

"It is. As far as I know, the town is back to normal. Fish once again in the waters, no more sickness amongst its people... but still it dwindles. At the rate it's going I'll not be surprised if it ends up becoming a hamlet of some sort. See there?" Gavel then paused to point between some trees. I followed his point and saw a large stone building, one that looked very obviously like a church.

"It had been abandoned. An old monastery. We've settled in it without complaint, and are left alone. A few of us here are even considering staying, even after our duties are done," he explained as we headed for it.

"Hm," Following Gavel through the trees, I saw a few figures in the distance. The main building was the stone church, but there were a few other buildings around it. There was a small garden near the main building, where three people which currently busying themselves with. I wasn't too surprised to see them all wearing the same robes, but I was surprised to see someone I recognized so readily.

Slowing a little, I frowned at Jennifer who emerged from the church. She was carrying a large basket, and was saying something to someone still inside the building. Someone that didn't follow her out of it.

"Allow me to go find Charrson, Vim. He might be asleep, being the night-owl he is," Gavel said with a small chuckle as he nodded to me.

I nodded back, and slowed my pace a little as he left me behind. He headed straight for the main building, and in doing so made Jennifer notice us.

She nearly dropped her basket as she realized who I was, and then hurried towards me. "King-killer!" she shouted.

As she approached, those working in the nearby garden all paused in what they were doing to look at us. I ignored their looks, and Gavel who seemed to scurry into the church with renewed purpose, as I nodded in greeting... only to have to catch the basket that she promptly dropped as she hurried over to give me a hug.

I lifted the basket up above her, and myself, as she wrapped me in a hug and giggled happily. "It's been so long!" she shouted as she gave me a squeeze.

Keeping a sigh inside, I shifted the basket so I could hold it with one hand and went to patting the woman on the back. "Yes. It has," I said. Especially since I had thought she was dead.

Jennifer wiggled a bit as she laughed, and then she leaned back to smile up at me. "What'cha doing here? Not only are there no crowns to take, we're to be bored for months!" she asked.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

"Light had a prophecy, concerning one of the ships," I said as I lowered the basket, it felt like it was full of clothes.

"Oh that's not good," Jennifer said with a sudden frown.

"No. It isn't," I said. Her still holding me wasn't good either. Or well... was it?

How was I supposed to act during such moments, I wonder...? I was married now, right? Should I stop letting people get so close to me...? It honestly didn't bother me much, and as much as I'd like to think Renn would get jealous and bothered by it I knew better than to think she did. Renn actually liked it when our members acted like this with me, since she preferred this over them being distant with me or outright rude. So maybe it was fine...?

Next time I see her I'll ask. I didn't mind, myself, not really, but I didn't want to assume. Last thing I needed was to be negligent and...

"Not going to hug me back?" Jennifer then asked.

I blinked at that, and wondered if that was why she was still latched onto me. "I patted your back?" I said, wondering if that wasn't enough.

She giggled at me and finally released me. "Same as ever!"

Allowing a sigh to show itself, I went to hand the basket back to her. "I'm glad to see your well, Jennifer. I had thought you dead," I said.

A huge grin covered her face, a mischievous one that reminded me of a memory I'd legitimately forgotten. Remembering that night was kind of surprising, and suddenly I felt slightly uncomfortable. "Dead? Really? That's not nice, Vim!" she said with a happy laugh.

No, I suppose it wasn't.

"Jenn...?"

I looked away from the woman giggling happily, and watched a thin man walk over. A small crowd had gathered near the front of the church, but I noticed Gavel and his walking stick wasn't amongst them. I scanned their faces quickly, for anyone else I recognized, but didn't outright see any that I did. There indeed was likely a dozen of them here, as Gavel had said.

"Vim, meet Formpress. You may dispose of him anytime you wish, I'll not complain," Jennifer said as he stepped over to us.

The man flinched, almost as if he had just nearly tripped on his own robe, but he still stepped up and nodded. He held a hand out, and I noticed he was trying his best to smile. He wasn't doing too well at it. "Vim... the protector. It's an honor to finally meet you, I'm Formpress," he said.

I took his hand, and noticed on the back of it was the feeling of smooth scales. "Pleasure."

"No it's not! Come, ignore him. If you're here on important business you likely need to talk to Charrson," Jennifer said, and then promptly pushed the basket she carried into Formpress's arms and went to grab my hand. She didn't give him or me a chance to complain, or argue, as she tugged me away from him and towards the church.

I sighed at her, and tried to remember if she had always been like this. Now that I remembered her, better than I had upon seeing her just now, I remembered a gossip. Someone not too unlike Oplar, who had gone out of her way to live amongst humans just to indulge in their society. Particularly the noble and royal types, since she had found their gossip-fueled lifestyles absolutely fascinating.

Last I had heard of her, she had moved up north to a noble's estate where another member had been. After she had helped me kill a king, one who had been hiring mercenaries to track down and capture our people. The castle she had gone to had been ransacked and collapsed not long after Celine had died, so I and many others had thought her dead since no one had ever heard from her afterward.

Yet again, just like Martin and his family, and Mono and hers... and Light, of course, I was being proven wrong.

Which meant all this time it hadn't been a matter of me just not paying attention, but with intent. They had intentionally kept me in the dark... or well... someone had, at least.

"Is that really the protector?" someone asked as we drew near the crowd.

"Part ways! Don't just stand and gawk!" Jennifer yelled at the crowd, who hurriedly went to obey. A small path was made to allow us to walk into the church, and I sighed again as I allowed her to pull me through the crowd and into the building.

"It's not this pressing, Jennifer," I said gently as I nodded at the crowd of staring faces. As I passed, I thought I saw a few who I might remember but couldn't place any names to them. I was kind of surprised to see so many men amongst them, even if most looked old like Gavel.

Though I suppose Light's group had its fair share of men, too, hadn't it?

Entering the church, I wasn't too surprised to find it had been retrofitted. Instead of a large open area, for praying and listening to sermons, there were now sectioned off areas with half-built walls of cloth. As we walked through them, heading deeper into the building, I noticed that only a few had beds within them. Some were just little rooms with chairs, or tables.

"About half of us live in here, I and a few others live in the other building in the back," Jennifer said, likely noticing my staring.

"Hm," I nodded, not sure why I found it so odd.

She giggled at me. "We have some here who have taken vows, Vim. So they can't sleep amongst the men," she told me.

Oh. Right. "Become a nun have you?" I asked, smirking gently at that.

Jennifer paused a moment, and then turned to look at me. A mighty smirk planted itself on her face. "I have. And I've heard you got married, so we're both acting out of character, aren't we?" she asked.

"Not wrong..." I mumbled.

We rounded one of the larger makeshift rooms, and I was led into a hallway. Jennifer finally released my hand, and she slowed a bit as we headed to the end of the hall. Where a door was open.

Finding Gavel, and another older man. One I didn't recognize.

"Ah. Here he is," Gavel said as he turned to nod at me in greeting.

"You awake old man?" Jennifer asked.

"I am now. Come, sit protector. Tell me of your quest," the old man, who I assumed was Charrson, gestured for me to join him at a nearby table. One that was littered with books.

Glancing around the room as I entered, I realized it was likely his bedroom not just his office. I didn't see a bed anywhere, but there was another door in the corner. One that I didn't doubt led to what had previously been some kind of closet. Which was likely now a bedroom.

"Charsson is it? My name is Vim," I said in greeting as he went to sit down. The chairs looked a little old and rickety, so I hesitated a moment as I pulled my own chair away from the table.

"You don't have to sit Vim, if it'll break," Jennifer said.

Pausing, I smiled and nodded. "Right. It does look like it would, huh?" I said as I tilted the thing a little. The legs looked decrepit, as if termites had gotten to it or something.

"What's this now...?" Charrson asked as he glanced around.

"I'm a bit heavier than I look," I said as I pushed the chair back under the table. I wasn't going to risk it, since if I broke it I'd just feel obligated to make them a new one. And if I did that, who knew how much else I'd have to do around here.

The old man frowned at me, but didn't seem too bothered. "I see. I hope you don't mind if I sit, protector, my legs are..." he shuffled a little, as if suddenly trying to gather the strength... and the nerve, to stand up. Maybe it hurt him to do so. Joint problems, maybe?

"You're fine. I was sent here by Light, from Lumen. She had a prophecy concerning the ship. It's to be attacked by a monarch, and she claims it will happen at any moment," I said.

Charrson sat up straight and quickly looked from me to the other two. I ignored the two who, by the sounds of it, shrugged and shook their heads.

"All I need to know is when you expected the ship to arrive. I'm told you were to be on the lookout for white seals?" I asked.

Charrson fidgeted as he nodded and reached up to rub his temple. He suddenly looked older than he had before. "Yes... After winter when the days are long and hot, a pair of white seals are to be seen on the shore. When we see them, we're to light the bonfire and keep it lit until we see the sails on the horizon," Charrson said.

Made sense, at least when concerning a prophecy. "Can you think of a reason they'd have set sail this early?" I asked. Winter was ending, but they were still talking about months from now what with the hot days.

"Only two reasons for them to sail early, Vim. Either they received word to do so, which shouldn't have happened, or lives were in danger and it needed to happen," Jennifer said.

I glanced at her, and frowned at the way she had crossed her arms. Why'd she look angry all of a sudden? Worried I'd understand, but angry? "How would you send word?" I asked.

"By sending someone there, of course? That's why it's not likely. As it is right now, no one has any plans to sail back. It's too risky, especially for smaller boats," Jennifer said.

I nodded. That had been why they had requested my aid when going there the first time. And even then it hadn't been easy. It had taken months and...

"What... what do you need from us, protector? What do we do to save them?" Charrson asked, his voice heavy.

"I just need to reach them. As long as they're on course, I can find them. My goal is to reach them before the monarch does," I said. There was no point trying to hunt the monarch before it found them, the ocean just wasn't the kind of place one could do that in. Not safely at least.

The old man nodded gravely. "We don't have any ships..." he said worriedly.

"I'll just swim," I said.

"Swim...? It's a month long journey on sail!" Charsson said, shaking his head as if he wouldn't allow it to happen.

"You obviously don't realize who you're talking to," Jennifer said with a huff.

"I do, and even I can't see how that is the better option, Vim. If we send word we can have a ship in a few days. There's one in Nevi now," Gavel said as he shifted and squeezed his stick.

Shaking my head, I gestured lightly at the old man sitting in front of me. "Light wanted haste. Those few days to get a ship could make the difference here. If they're already on route, I need not swim the whole way. I'll likely find them en-route. And I can swim far faster than you think," I said.

"But..." Gavel seemed to disagree, but didn't continue voicing his opinion.

"Why didn't Light tell you what to do?" Charrson asked, frowning at me in confusion.

"Well..."

"Vim and prophecies don't go well together. He has his own way of dealing with them," Jennifer said.

I nodded with a small shrug, unsure if I should be glad she remembered.

"Still... Gavel, please go summon Plain. If you would," Charrson said with a nod.

"Sir," Gavel nodded and obeyed. Jennifer had to step out of his way as he left the room, his walking stick tapping the stone floor as he hurried to go.

"Plain?" I asked Jennifer.

"A fellow nun. I'm to assume you're to send her on a message trip?" Jennifer asked the old man.

"To Nevi, yes. Not to discount you, protector, but I have a responsibility. I'll be summoning that ship just in case," Charrson said.

I frowned at the old man who looked ready for an argument, but I had no plans to give one. "Of course. If you don't mind however, I plan to leave immediately," I said.

Charrson shifted in his seat, and I could tell by the look on his face that he was a little surprised. It was kind of annoying to have someone doubt me so readily, but knew better than to really let it bother me.

"Do you need anything Vim? Before you go?" Jennifer asked.

Shaking my head as I glanced around the room, and again noticing the books upon the table, I wondered if I could trust Jennifer with a few of my bags or not.

I had not stopped at the crystal cavern before getting here. I had wanted to, but I had worried I had been running late... So I still had stuff on me that I couldn't risk foolishly. The monarch leather ones would be fine in the ocean, being waterproof and water-tight, but I had a couple that were normal leather bags. Not suited at all for the ocean's waters.

Hearing footsteps heading down the hall, likely Gavel and this Plain he had been sent to find, I decided it was time to leave. Before I got too wrapped up in those here.

"I'll be on my way then. I suggest still keeping an eye out for those seals, just in case," I said as I stepped towards the door, and thus Jennifer.

"Oh...! Okay... um..." Charrson stood, seemingly unsure of what to say or do. I gently waved him down as I left, not wanting him to trouble himself further.

"Mind doing me a favor, Jennifer?" I asked as I left the room.

"Hm? I'll not swim with you, no," she said with a small laugh as we left the old man behind. I stepped aside, to let Gavel and a blonde haired woman pass me by and enter the room I'd just left. She stared at me with wide eyes as she passed, but didn't say anything.

"Mind if leave a few bags with you? If not I'll just find somewhere to bury them," I said as I headed down the hall.

She laughed at me. "Of course, Vim. Something like that doesn't even need to be asked for," she said.

Yes it did.

"One's a little heavy..." I said as we re-entered the common area of the church. A few people were standing around, talking lightly about me and my arrival. By the sounds of it none of them had been told yet of my real purpose here.

"Then this way," Jennifer took over, passing me by and leading me out of the building.

I followed her, likely to the building in the back that she had mentioned she and the other women slept in.

Once I re-arranged a few things and was ready I'd head back to the shore. Then I'd set off, swimming towards the other continent. I wasn't really looking forward to spending days out at sea, especially when not on a ship, but I knew this was the best option for now.

The way Renn and Merit had explained it, Light had seen me fighting the monarch. That meant I was most likely going to find them, the odds were heavily in my favor.

Though I had a lot of suspicions about this, I knew there was nothing I could really do about any of them. Not until I handled the monarch, at least.

"Ah, one second Vim... let me make sure no one's improper," Jennifer slowed and waved me back as we neared a single storied building, one that looked like it needed a new roof.

I nodded as she entered the building, and I heard multiple voices from within once she did. I sighed a little as I waited, and wondered how exactly these people planned to take care of almost six hundred people here shortly.

This place looked like it wasn't even big enough for the dozen of them.

Though, I suppose they had been under the assumption that it would be many months before they had to worry about it...

"Okay, come on in Vim!" Jennifer shouted at me from inside.

Entering the building, I quickly did what I had to and left. I was lucky to do so before Jennifer could say anything to me that could make my eye twitch.

Sometimes having such a serious task at hand was beneficial.

Chapter 556 Renn – To Wagon It

Merit sure did sleep a lot. We'd left Lellip's home three days ago and it felt as if Merit had slept through two of the three days so far.

Walking behind the wagon, I wondered if she did so because she was bored or if it was just something she's always done. I felt as if she had been sleeping more than when we had been in Lumen, but in reality I had no idea if she was or not. I had spent a lot of time with her, sure, but I had also spent a lot of time with others.

She was on the wagon, or rather in it. The cloth covering on the wagon was right now tied up and sealed, hiding its contents from view. I could hear her soft snores from within it, and judging by the sound of them... she was likely curled up between some of the larger crates near the front of the wagon. They were muffled, and not just because of the cloth cover.

Lilly was sitting at the front of the wagon, guiding the horses that pulled it. Lellip was walking next to me, smiling happily as she looked around at the world we were slowly passing.

We were still in forests, but they weren't half as thick as the ones she called home. And the road we were on wasn't just large, it was slightly busy. Every so often we passed other travelers or merchants on their own wagons and carts. To me it was something normal. Vim and I had been traveling like this for years, and although it wasn't often I traveled with a wagon it was also something I'd done before. Lellip however was obviously having the time of her life, experiencing something she's never done before.

"How far are we from the ocean, Renn? Will we pass by it?" Lellip asked.

"Hm? No. We'll pass some really big rivers though," I said. In fact one should be near us right now.

"Is Lilly's home near the ocean?" she asked further.

"Not really... but if you want to see it, I'm sure we can figure something out. It's a couple weeks to the ocean from where we're heading up north," I said. I'd not mind taking her to see it, if she wanted. We could visit Rapti as we did.

She frowned but nodded, and I wondered what it'd be like to have never seen the ocean before... She wasn't the first to have brought such a thing up before with me, but it seemed each time it happened I still found myself perplexed. "Have you never left home, Lellip?" I asked.

"No... Or well, yes, I guess. When I was young mother and the rest had taken me to Telmik, supposedly, but I don't really remember it. And of course I've visited some of the towns near home, but never for long and they were all in the same mountain," she said.

Right... "Well you'll get tired of traveling soon enough. Especially if it starts to rain," I said. Off in the distance, in the direction we were going, were very dark clouds. The thick kind that told me there was far more than just rain within them.

"Speaking of weather... is it getting warmer already? I almost want to take a layer off," Lellip asked as she shifted a shoulder.

"Hm... maybe?" I frowned as I too thought about it. It was warmer than a few days ago and even more so than it was in Lumen, but it wasn't really noticeable to me.

Or maybe it was...? Come to think of it, not too long ago I had been complaining over the cold hadn't I? It was why Vim had gotten and made that fox scarf for me. I wasn't wearing it now, it was in a bag in the wagon.

"Speaking of being hot... do you have fur? Like how your grandfather does down his back?" I asked. I had seen Nebl's bare back a few times, when he had been working in the smithy. He sometimes didn't wear a shirt, or wore one that was really loose. He had patches of thick fur that ran down the back of his neck to the middle of his back.

"A little. Think that's why I'm feeling hot?" Lellip asked worriedly.

"You're just used to living up on a mountain, is all. You'll get used to being down here," I said. Wonder if she'd show me her back if I asked?

"Right... do you have fur anywhere?" Lellip then asked.

I perked up and pointed at the top of my head. "In my hair, between my ears," I said.

"That's kind of boring, you can't even tell," she said.

"Vim said the same thing," I said with a small laugh. He had once said, or at least hinted at, that he was kind of disappointed I didn't have more on me. Particularly around my butt, for some reason.

"Does he even have anything anywhere? He looks completely human doesn't he? How can he complain about that when he has nothing himself?" Lellip asked, as if offended for me.

"Personally that's why I think he finds our traits so attractive. It's because he lacks them," I said.

"Why are you having such a fun conversation by yourselves!" Lilly shouted from in front of the wagon.

Lellip snickered happily. "Poor Merit," she said as she hurried to round the wagon, as to head up to the front of it.

I didn't follow her right away, and instead glanced around. We were alone, of course, but not far off behind us was another cart. One that looked like it was slowly gaining on us, likely because it was half the size.

There was no reason to worry about being overheard or anything, but I knew soon we'd start passing through villages and farmsteads. It'd not be long until we did have to be careful, if at least a little bit, in what we said and how loud we said it. I had already figured Lellip knew better, but a part of me knew to keep an eye on her as we traveled. As I'm sure Lilly and Merit were doing too.

Concerning Merit...

I tilted my head a little as I heard Lilly and Lellip talking. Lilly was complaining that she was being excluded from such interesting conversations, and Lellip sounded like she was doing her best to apologize. They weren't really being loud, but...

Yes. I heard Merit shift around in the wagon. She was no longer snoring. She had woken up, likely from Lilly's earlier outburst.

Rounding the wagon, I reached the front right as Merit popped her head out from the tightly wrapped cloth. She looked ever like a child with the way she had the rest of her body hidden, with only her face and unruly bed hair visible. "He once complimented my gills," she said proudly.

Lellip's eyes went wide as she sat down next Lilly. She had climbed up onto the front seat while I'd dawdled behind. "You have gills!?"

"What's surprising isn't that he finds such things attractive, but the range of them that he does. Wings, gills, tails and ears? I myself don't even like all kinds of wings, for crying out loud, I couldn't imagine finding even other traits attractive too," Lilly said with a frown.

"You don't like my ears, Lilly?" I asked, smiling a little as I did.

"What...? No they're cute, but that's only because you're cute. Ears on other people are stupid looking, as if they're all deformed or something," she said with a wave of a hand.

I frowned at that, since I myself felt more like Vim than not. I found many people's traits, even the odd ones, adorable. Though... we weren't really talking about adorableness, were we? We were talking about something a tad more... intimate.

"Wings stink," Merit said.

"Says the fish!" Lilly shouted.

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

My frown turned into a smirk as I pointed at my own head. "Do you think my ears are cute, Lellip?"

"Huh? Yeah? I like cats and dogs though," Lellip said.

That wasn't really what we were talking about though, was it...?

"Did your newborn have wings, Lilly?" Merit asked.

Lilly happily nodded. "Aye, she did! Beautiful and strong set too, she'll definitely be a flyer," she said proudly.

I too nodded. "They were indeed beautiful. Bigger than her, nearly twice so!" I said.

"Wings, huh..." Lellip sighed, sounding jealous.

Couldn't blame her. I too wished I could fly in the sky.

Glancing up, I found the sky was now a bit darker. The clouds I had seen earlier were starting to arrive.

"Wonder which bloodline would win out, monkey or owl," Merit then said, teasing the two as she slipped back into the wagon's covering.

Lellip tilted her head, as if she didn't really understand, but Lilly groaned. "Ignore her. She's just trying to stir up trouble," Lilly said.

"I'd prefer my kids had wings too, to be honest. I bet flying is so useful!" Lellip said.

Lilly smiled at that, in a way that told me that Lellip had likely just earned a lot of respect and trust. More than she already had, at least.

"And they say monkeys are supposed to be smart," Merit grumbled from within the wagon.

"I still don't even know what a monkey is..." I said softly as Lilly slapped the cloth of the wagon behind her.

"Anything's smarter than a fish, at least!" Lilly shouted.

"Don't hit it! If you rip it stuff will get wet, birdbrain!" Merit shouted back.

I laughed at the two as movement caught my eye in front of us. I stepped back a bit, as to see past the horses pulling the wagon, and saw a group of people heading our way down the road.

They weren't on horses, nor did they have a cart or anything, but judging from the large packs they carried they were likely just merchants or typical people traveling from one place to another.

I wasn't too worried about brigands or anything, even though we were still several days from Telmik's area, but I knew better than to not be on guard for them. Considering how many times I'd encountered such people in my life, I'd be foolish to not think the odds of it happening again weren't big enough to be concerned over.

Though with Lilly and Merit here, I wasn't as stressed over them. At least, not as I had been when I had been traveling with Oplar, Silkti and Angie. To be honest it was a little relieving to know the people I was traveling with could be so reliable.

Vim of course always made me feel safe, no matter the situation, but he wasn't a fair standard. If anything he was a rule-breaking one.

"Are you eating already!" Lilly shouted, drawing my attention back to my friends. I smiled at them as Lilly actually handed Lellip the reins to the horses and turned around, crawling into the wagon as if to punish Merit.

"Knock-it-off!" I heard Merit shout with what was undoubtedly a mouthful of food, which made me laugh. She sure did eat a lot for one so small!

"Um... Renn, I've never done this before," Lellip worriedly said as she stood up straight, holding the reins with unsure worry.

I quickly climbed up to the seat, and went to ignoring Lilly and Merit who both were arguing with one another. By the sounds of it Lilly too now had a bunch of food in her mouth. Hopefully they'd share some here in a moment.

"It's not that hard, just hold them. They surprisingly can sense what to do on their own most the time," I said as I took a seat next to Lellip.

"Like when plowing a field," Lellip said.

Oh...? They hadn't had horses had they? At her home? Maybe they had at one time, or something. "Yep. Really the only time it matters is when we need to move a certain way fast, or if one of them is unruly and likes to test whoever has the reins. These two seem very calm though," I said. They were the same ones we'd brought with us from Lumen, and although they didn't seem to like Lilly much they also didn't act out at all.

"Wonder who even thought up doing this. Throwing a lead on a horse and telling it what to do and all?" Lellip wondered.

I frowned at that and nodded. "I... don't know? I assume people just tried it with any and all animals, figuring out which ones worked and which one didn't," I said.

Lellip hummed as she pondered it, and I decided to ask Vim about it next time I saw him. He'd likely know the answer, or at least be able to explain it a little as to the how and the why.

It was honestly something I'd never thought of before. She was right, of course, someone had to have done it first... right? Maybe it was just something as simple as a wild horse having followed a person around, since that person had fed them or something, and they eventually just went ahead and put a saddle on them just for comfort if nothing else.

"Gosh, I miss your wings!" Merit shouted.

"I bet you do!" Lilly shouted back, and the wagon shifted a little as they moved around a bit. Had they just moved one of the crates...? Or knocked it over in their roughhousing?

"What do you think she meant by that...?" Lellip then whispered.

"Hm...? Ah... I assume Merit means the wagon itself. Lilly's wings had probably been too big and bulky for her. She'd have likely struggled to crawl in there with how full it is, what with the cloth covering, if she still had them. Thus allowing Merit to eat in peace," I said, reasoning as well as I could.

Lellip frowned as she nodded, seemingly finding my idea to make a little bit of sense at least.

"Renn!" Merit shouted, sounding worried.

It was my turn to frown as I leaned around, grabbed the small flap that wasn't tied up and peered into the wagon. I found Lilly standing up, and Merit opposing her. There was a bunch of stuff in the middle of the wagon, on the floor of it, which confused me since there shouldn't have been anything there...

"Why'd you break it...?" I asked with a sigh. One of the crates had been broken, and some of its contents had spilled out from it. Apples and other fruits were rolling around on the floor.

"She pushed me into it!" Lilly complained as she bent down to pick up some of the stuff. Merit instead went to messing with the broken crate, likely to see if she could fix the damage or at least make sure nothing else fell out.

"Probably bruised them all, birdbrain," Merit complained as she moved stuff inside the crate. Lilly went to putting the stuff she had picked up back into it, huffing at Merit in the process.

I shook my head and turned back around. I allowed the flap to close, since there was no point in watching them clean up their own mess.

There wasn't enough room really for me to join them. I'd just be in the way. The wagon was too full.

"What'd they break?" Lellip asked, sounding concerned.

"Just a part of one of the crates. The one with the apples in it," I said.

"Ah... Why'd they do that?" Lellip asked.

"Right!" Lilly shouted.

"Don't eat them, pick them up!" Merit complained, and I heard Lilly crunch into an apple noisily as if to defy her with as much gusto as she could muster.

Smiling happily at them, I watched as a distant section of the sky got really bright for a moment. A few heartbeats later, a very distant and soft rumble filled the air.

"Storms," Lellip said, having heard it too.

"Like I said, you'll get tired of it soon enough. I love the rain but storms like that make traveling annoying," I said with a sigh.

"Annoying? How so?" Lellip asked.

"Makes it hard to set up camp," Lilly said.

"Hard to cook too," Merit added.

Although I agreed with my friends, I gently wagged a finger at young Lellip. "Makes it hard to have lovely conversations as this, what with the rain and wind blowing every which way," I said.

She nodded quickly, seemingly agreeing with me the most.

And after all, how could she not?

I knew days like today were mundane. Simple. Without event or cause for concern... but it was days like today that made everything worth it, in my opinion.

I was enjoying this. I looked forward to picking up Randle and Angie. I looked forward to building a home up north for them all, and myself too if I could get away with it. I looked forward to seeing Lellip and Branches meet, and even more so looked forward to the day that everyone else showed up too.

I knew right now Vim was likely working hard. If not already at the coast, I was sure he wasn't far from it. I knew here soon he'd be dealing with chaos. Death. Pain and destruction. But it was precisely because he was going through such trials that I had to enjoy every moment of peace I could. It'd be insult to his struggles if I didn't.

All he did, all he was doing, were his attempts to keep everyone in the Society safe. And in that safety, they were supposed to find happiness.

So, being his wife, I needed to not just find such happiness... I needed to find a lot of it. To prove to everyone he was doing a good job. To prove to everyone, and Vim especially, that his efforts weren't wasted.

The flap behind me shifted and Lilly leaned out from it. She wrapped an arm around my shoulder and neck, resting on me as she offered me an apple and Lellip another. "Snack away, since we'll likely not be setting up camp tonight," Lilly said, likely saying so because of the storm about to meet us.

Taking the apple, I nodded and smiled. "More like eat them all now, since they're bruising," I said.

"Ha!" Merit shouted, happy I had seen through her ploy.

Chapter 557 Vim – A Shipful of Worry

I hate saints.

Swimming not far beneath the surface of the ocean, as to avoid the waves and their currents, I watched one of the white seals swim past.

There were two of them. They were both as big as me, and as white as snow. They'd been circling me for a few hours now, playfully swimming and making noises at me as they did.

What was odd though wasn't that they were swimming alongside me, but instead the way they grew annoyed when I drifted off course. As if they knew where I was going, and why I was going there, and were trying to make sure I did what I was meant to.

It could be a stretch, but considering they had been involved in a prophecy... them trying to guide me was very likely.

I'd been swimming for more than day now. Internally I felt I was still on the right path, and the position of the sun and stars when visible, validated that for me... but I still worried I had missed the ship.

After all even if I stayed on course, not deviating from it at all, there was nothing stopping them from straying off course themselves, rendering my efforts useless...

But Light's prophecy did have me finding the ship, and fighting the monarch which attacks it. And now I did find, even if not on the beach, the white seals...

One of the seals got a little close, swimming right under me and looking up at me with its huge black eyes.

I stared down into them, and wondered if there was intelligence in them. Beyond the normal, at least. Only one of them seemed inquisitive about me, while the other seemed slightly indifferent. Yet both had remained very close this whole time. Neither had tried to bite at me, or do anything to imply that they were waiting for an opportunity to take a bite out of me either.

Seals in general were actually very smart creatures. Inquisitive and sometimes even playful. But they'd been following me for so long, even without the white fur, I would have thought them acting odd.

The one currently swimming beneath me had huge whiskers, which were surprisingly black. As if its colors were inverted, they were very stark against its snow-white fur. And it, like its fellow, looked completely healthy. I saw no obvious scars on either of them, which was a little surprising considering their appearance and how big they were.

You'd think they'd be targeted often by larger predators with how white they were. Though maybe they typically spent their time far up north?

Looking away from the seal as it spun around and darted off, to go swim next to its fellow nearby, I wondered if the original prophecy had been about me finding them on the beach, and then following them from there? They had shown up only a few hours ago, barking at me since until I slowed in my swimming enough to allow them to come up to me and swim around me for a moment. And were now happily swimming along me.

I felt no hearts within them, of course, but I also didn't feel any hearts or divinity anywhere around me.

That was what I'd been waiting for, to be honest. I figured I'd eventually sense the monarch, or someone on the ship I was meant to protect.

No one had said anything, but I was assuming that there was going to be a saint or two on the ship. Or maybe someone with a heart inside them, like Renn. Something to let me easily find them and...

Speak of the devil.

Swimming to the surface, I breached and found a rather calm ocean. Staying afloat, I glanced around and... yes. I found them. Sails on the horizon.

It was faint, but I could feel the divinity. There was undoubtedly a saint on the ship, maybe even more than one.

While treading, a white head appeared a few feet to my left. The seal turned to look at me, sneezed out a spray of water at me and then barked.

"Yes. I know. I see them," I said with a sigh. If I had needed any confirmation further that they weren't just random seals, there it was.

It sniffed loudly, and blew more water out at me and made more noises. It seemed annoyed at me.

"Pets are you?" I asked as the other seal emerged too. It barked and looked around, as if questioning why we were just wading here.

"Pest more like," I grumbled, and then went to swimming. I stayed on the surface, as to keep an eye on the ship and since the surface wasn't as turbulent as it had been earlier.

The ship was large, with many brown sails. There were faded flags, and emblems, painted on the sails. Old ones, which I'd not seen in the Society in a long time. It was the old church symbol, back before Celine's religion had taken over the humans. The sight of it only further confirmed it was the right ship, not that I really needed such a thing. As I got closer and closer, it became ever more apparent that there was indeed multiple saints onboard the vessel. Maybe three or four, even.

It was infuriating but more so confusing. How come they had so many saints amongst them...? Even during Celine's height, even after hundreds of years of her trying to gather as many as she could, she had only a few dozen at most. And most had been human, not non-human. Like Amber's mother. In fact non-human saints had at one time been something I had thought impossible. Rare beyond measure. And now it felt like I was meeting a new one every time I rounded a random corner.

How had they gathered so many saints at once...? It was almost concerning. In the past saints had been more common, where you could find at least one in every major city, but that had been centuries ago. Today saints were so rare it was almost as if they were extinct.

Yet now there were... how many? Light had two others with her, Mono and Glasses. Renn's friend, Elaine... Narli... and now these ones...

The seals kept pace with me, swimming alongside me close enough that one even bumped into me a few times as we neared the ship. It was in full-sail, so I had to swim at it in an angle. I could swim quickly, but not at full speed while on the surface. And it didn't seem that any of the crew had noticed me yet, which was odd.

Not noticing me was one thing, but what about the two giant seals that stuck out like sore thumbs out here? How did they miss them? Especially when occasionally they were barking and...

Then I heard a shout. A voice. A quick glance to the deck of the ship showed commotion. People were starting to look overboard, shouting at one another.

They'd finally notice me.

I sighed as I sunk a bit, as to pick up my speed. I swam quicker, and reached the ship. Breaching the surface again, right up against the boat, I found a roped net dangling down not far from where I'd emerged.

Grabbing onto the rope, I quickly climbed upward and left the comfort of the sea for the first time in almost two days.

As I climbed, I noticed the ship only had a few gunports. Maybe half a dozen. They were all sealed shut at the moment.

Considering the size of this ship, that wasn't enough.

Reaching the ship's deck, I slowed a bit as I grabbed onto the bulwarks, as to not startle the many people who all went silent upon seeing me.

For a small moment I looked around at all the people, counting almost three dozen on the deck. I looked around not just to confirm these were my people, but for familiar faces and for glowing eyes. A pair of glowing eyes in the center of the group confirmed they were my people, and the tall man standing next to young looking saint with his hand on a sheathed sword confirmed they were both my people and those I knew.

Clambering over the bulwark railing, I landed on the deck with a small huff. I was soaked, of course, and as such got the area around me drenched.

"Martin, is that you?" I asked the familiar knight. Both to confirm what I saw, and to let everyone here know who I was.

The knight relaxed a little and sighed. "Yes, Vim. It is."

Interesting. I had met his son in Lumen, but had honestly kept my distance from him. I hadn't liked the way he had tried to be so friendly.

Looking around again, I quickly realized the other saints were below. One was almost directly beneath me, as if standing right below me, and... another was near the front of the ship. On one of the upper levels, maybe even one above the main-deck.

"It's the protector...!" someone finally shouted, and quickly the whole crowd relaxed and grew noisy. People stepped forward, greeting me happily, while others stayed back with worried expressions. Either because they weren't sure of me, or because they were smart enough to know that my presence here and now could only be a bad sign.

"Hey Vim!" a familiar voice drew my attention to the left, and I smiled and nodded to Nasba's cousin.

"Tressi. How're the feathers?" I asked. The duck laughed and waved happily at me as she made her tail feathers dance behind her, much to the annoyance of those near her. They looked fine. She had been born with twice as many feathers as her fellows, so such a thing had always been an easy topic to remember her by.

"What're you doing here?"

"Why were you swimming out here!"

"Should we pull the net up...?"

People noisily fussed around me, but no one directly came over and touched me. Likely because I was utterly soaked. Although I myself wasn't bothered by the cold of the sea, or the wind, I knew most others here were. It was cold. And out here getting wet could be rather discomforting, if not life-threatening.

"Give him room! Pull the net up," Tressi shouted over the crowd, pushing people into motion as she did.

The group around me quickly stepped back, some going to pull up the rope I'd just used and others simply stepped back to give me room.

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

As the crowd quieted a moment, I noticed that... it was actually pretty diverse. Half the crowd were men, and everyone seemed to be of different bloodlines. I saw a deer, a ram, another duck like Tressi, a man with scales on his head instead of hair, a few with wings...

"Ah, look! It's Sef and Bump!"

I turned to watch some people peer over the railing and point and wave at what I assumed were the seals below.

"Did they lead you to us, Vim?" Tressi asked.

"Kind of... Are you the leader, Tressi? I'm here for an important reason," I said.

The duck gave me an odd look as she nodded and frowned. "Kind of. Come on, let's go talk with the rest then," she said as she gestured to the front of the ship.

As she stepped away, heading for a stairwell that led to an upper deck that had what looked like some kind of captain's quarters, I glanced at Martin and the saint he still stood nearby.

They too nodded and turned, heading for the stairs as well.

"Long time no see, Vim!" I was greeted by a familiar face as I went to follow the duck, one that made me pause.

"Kapni...?" I almost couldn't believe it. The taller man grinned as he reached out to me. I took his hand, firmly, and nodded in greeting at the old fox.

"Must say I'm glad to see you, though I expect this is not for good reason. We'll talk later, go do what you have to," Kapni said as our hands separated.

"Hm... Glad to see you're well, Kapni."

Leaving the fox behind, I felt strangely confused once again.

Another person I had thought long dead. How many times was this going to happen?

Tressi hurried up the stairs and through a door on the upper deck. I waited for the saint and Martin to climb the stairs first before following them, and as I did I noticed the saint was like Mono, younger. She kept glancing over at me, and had little glittering scales around her glowing eyes. The kind that told me she was some kind of fish.

"I met your son in Lumen," I said to Martin as I followed him up the stairs.

"How's he doing?"

"He lost his arm, fighting a monarch."

Martin slowed a bit, glanced at me, and then sighed. The young-looking saint frowned in worry as the old knight nodded. "He inherited his mother's side more than mine. I trust he's well, at least?"

"Light patched him up. He seemed well enough," I said. I didn't want to audibly admit I had ignored the lad on purpose and as such hadn't spent any time with him.

"Well, least he did his job I guess..." Martin whispered as he went to hold open the wooden door for the saint. She nodded in thanks at him before hurrying in.

Martin kept hold of the door, for me, and I slowed a bit when I stood beside him.

He held my gaze as I glanced him up and down, confirming he looked well. He had more gray in his hair than I remembered, but otherwise looked... well... like himself.

"I'm fine, Vim. The lands there had been peaceful. Too peaceful," he said.

"Ah... but for warriors, peace is usually the great killer, you know?" I said.

He smirked at me and nodded. "Always with your weird views. Glad to see some things don't change."

"Wasn't weird at all..." I mumbled as I entered the noisy room.

It was indeed a type of captain's quarters. There was a large horseshoe table, littered with papers and books. A large map sat on it, and before it was another saint. The one I had sensed earlier. Tressi was here, and a...

"Hello," I greeted who was undoubtedly Tressi's daughter. She was a young girl, standing barely up to my waist, but had a large fan of feathers spread out behind her that nearly took up a quarter of the room. The size of the feathers weren't just the reason I knew it was Tressi's daughter, but the fact she was a splitting image of Nasba. Down to the little tuft of hair on her brow.

The young duck warily nodded in greeting, but said nothing, as Tressi stepped over and gently patted her on the shoulder.

Before Tressi could say anything, or I, the saint standing before the table sighed... and did so rather loudly.

She was older, but not one I recognized. She had feathers in her hair, but no other discernible traits to tell me what she was. But thanks to being near her, and near the younger one a few feet away, I could tell she was the strongest of the three saints on the ship. The other was still below, near the center of the ship. Maybe sleeping...? I hadn't felt them move at all.

"I fear what you're about to say. But hear it I must," the saint then said as she turned to directly face me.

"My name is Vim," I introduced myself first, since I didn't recognize her at all. "I was alerted by Light that this ship would be attacked by a monarch."

The saint flinched and the rest of the room grew tense. "Thus you coming here to hopefully protect us," the saint said.

I nodded.

"What is it? When's it supposed to attack...? We're only three days from shore, and..." the saint began to ask questions, but Martin quieted her by clearing his throat.

"Vim is not the kind to know such details. The fact he even knows it's a monarch that attacks us is testament enough to the direness of the situation," he said.

I nodded, glad he still remembered the kind of man I was. "I don't know the details. All I know is the monarch will attack you before you reach land, and... it will not be a gentle attack neither."

"People will die," the saint whispered.

"Not if I can help it," I said.

The saint closed her eyes and reached over to the edge of the table. She gripped it as to support herself, as if suddenly weak.

Likely was.

"Is there anything we can do, Vim? Should we sail a different route?" Tressi asked.

"I hadn't been told of such a thing, so I'm assuming it'll attack no matter what we do. I'll be honest, with so many saints on board it will be... difficult for me to sense its approach. But as long as I can notice it before it does anything too drastic, I'll be able to distract it long enough to allow you to escape and reach land before it can do any real harm," I said.

"Martin, please have those with the greatest eyesight put on watch. I want half a dozen at least on alert, at all times, from now on," Tressi said.

Martin nodded and immediately turned and left. He wasted no time, per usual.

I sighed softly as I gestured lightly at Tressi. "Have the rest of your people prepare for possible contact at any moment. I noticed you had cannons, it might be wise to ready them for use just in case," I said.

"We have no cannonballs, Vim," Tressi said.

"What...?" I frowned at that.

"The ship was overloaded, with all of us and supplies. We removed the cannons and cannonballs to keep it from sinking," Tressi's daughter said.

Hearing her voice for the first time made me focus on her a tad more than before. She had a scratchy voice, but not in the sense of her being sick or something. That was the sound of a damaged vocal cord. Something had happened to her.

I was used to non-humans having such deformities. Rarely, if practically never, were they born with them... but the world was not kind to them. And many were fragile beings. They got hurt often; in my opinion did so more often than their human counterparts. But why did it seem so many of these people had such ailments? Glasses back at Lumen. Light and her missing eye. This girl and her throat.

Considering so many called it a peaceful land where there hadn't even been large animals in the forests to worry about, they sure did seem to have a large disabled population. And it was rather concerning that many of them seemed to be young, and or had gotten the injury while over there like Light had.

"Then let us simply hope I can notice it and draw it away from the ship quickly," I said simply, choosing to not dwell too deeply on the girl's raspy voice or the conundrum it brought.

"Clips, would you please go wake Raccooni?" the saint then asked the younger one.

Clips stood up straight and quickly nodded. "Sure...!" she then turned and looked at me, went still as she stared up at me with wide-eyes... and then hurried out the door.

Clips...? Raccooni was obvious, but I wonder where the moniker Clips had come from. Maybe it was a name not associated with her bloodline at all.

"Though you bring dire news, and a lot of stress, I still thank you and welcome you Protector. My name is Pleck," Pleck finally introduced herself, likely thanks to having regained her composure, and stepped forward to offer me her hand.

I stared down at it for a moment, and noticed the lack of pinky upon it. Not even a stub remained, but the scarred tissue told me it hadn't been a birth defect but something rather recent. Maybe a few years ago at the latest.

Taking the saint's hand gentle, I nodded. "Peck. Clips. Raccooni... and...?" I smiled gently as I turned to greet Tressi's daughter.

The young duck stood up straighter, her feathers going stiff in the process as she even leaned back a bit against her mother. Tressi giggled at her and patted her shoulder again. "She's Fressi. My youngest," Tressi introduced the girl to me.

Taking a step over to her, I reached my hand out to properly introduce myself to the young duck... who grabbed her mother's dress for comfort. Before I could say or do anything to make her worry disappear, the girl swallowed her fear and then stepped forward and offered her little hand.

"Fressi... It's nice to meet you, Vim," she said with her unique voice.

I took her hand with far more confidence and joy than I had just taken the saint's, and nodded. "Fressi. I doubt anyone has told you, but you are the splitting image of your aunt Nasba."

A wry smile wormed its way onto the young duck's face. "I've heard, yes."

"Though, your feathers are much nicer. Twice hers in length, easily! She'll be jealous," I said.

The wry smile that had been half-unsure of herself quickly morphed into a real smile of pride as her eyes gently twinkled and nodded. "Really!?"

"Yeah. If my wife was here she would have begged you to flutter them at her like a fan or something, they're that marvelous," I said.

Fressi's huge grin of pride wobbled a little, as she tried to comprehend what I'd just said, but I didn't give her a chance to respond once she had. I turned to face the saint, and basically outright ignored the look of annoyed worry on her face. She had been offended I had focused on someone else over her, it seemed, or maybe was just bothered that I was not taking the situation as seriously as she thought I should be.

But I mean... what more did she want me to do right now? Until the monarch showed up I was dead in the water, figuratively at least.

"So Peck... By my estimate we're about two and a half days from shore. Any chance we can speed up the ship? I noticed one of the sails weren't fully unfurled," I asked. The rear mast had been half tied up.

"It's ripped and torn," Fressi told me.

I glanced at the little duck and noted the happy smirk on her face. She seemed very confident all of a sudden. She had even stepped closer to me, away from her mother's area of safety to do so.

"So that hadn't been a misspeak... Vim, it's Pleck not Peck," Tressi though ignored the topic as she sighed at me.

Huh...? Oh. "Sorry... Pleck?" I asked the saint.

The faintest hint of a blush showed itself beneath her glowing eyes as she nodded.

Woops. "Let me go try to fix the sail. Even arriving there a few hours earlier might make a difference. Do you have any suitable cloth I can use? Spare sails maybe?" I asked.

"We do, but they're buried in the hold... We'll have to get Gorb to help you find it, he'll know exactly which crate it's in," Tressi said.

"I'll go get him!" Fressi happily volunteered and then ran out of the room. As she did I noted noise, so I leaned back a bit to watch the young duck go. Not far from the door, outside near the stairwell that led here, was a small crowd. Likely trying to eavesdrop.

"Someone should alert the crew... I mean everyone else," I said. Last thing we needed was for the monarch to show up and people to panic and get themselves killed over it. Many of the folk here seemed to be prey, people who didn't do well under stress.

"I'll handle that. Come on, let's get you to Gorb as well," Tressi said as she gently patted my arm and headed for the door.

I nodded and turned to go, but before I did I glanced back to the saint. She was staring at me with an odd look. Not the annoyance from earlier, or the slight embarrassment but... What was that? Sorrow?

"Anything I should know?" I asked her carefully.

She blinked her glowing eyes and then slowly shook her head. "I'm the one who should be asking that, Protector. No. I've not had any prophecy concerning our trip, nor has anyone else. I'm... shaken over this. Not sure what to think about it."

"Well, that's prophecies for you. Worthless things they are," I said simply, and then left to get to task.

Repair sails. Ready the ship for combat... and if I was lucky, slay a monarch before it could do anything to these helpless people.

Just another day at sea.

Chapter 558 Renn – A Rainy Wagon

Nebl was a genius.

The rain was pouring down with a vengeance, and the raindrops were huge and heavy. Luckily for the last few hours they'd not been flying at us sideways, but instead coming down straight. And thanks to that, we were safe from being constantly soaked. Or well, we were safe from the rain thanks to a nifty little addition to the wagon that Nebl had added.

I sat with Merit in front of the wagon, holding the reins, and above us was now an angled canopy that extended off the roof of the wagon. It kept us pretty much dry; thanks to how much of the front seat it covered.

It was basically an umbrella attached to the wagon. One that Lellip had been able to unlatch and open by untying some strings. I had never seen such a thing before, and wondered why not every wagon had one. One could make a whole business enterprise just off it, I'd think! The few other travelers we'd passed by since unfolding it had all stared, obviously jealous over it.

We were near Telmik, probably would be there by midday or even the morning of tomorrow, but it was slow going. Thanks to the heavy rains the road was both muddy and the horses trotted slower than normal. It wasn't night yet, though it felt like it thanks to the storm and dark world around us.

Merit shivered a little and scooted a little closer to me. Pulling the blanket closer draped over our laps to her as she did.

"You can go sleep and warm up if you want, Merit," I offered.

She huffed at me, causing some small haze to escape her lips. "Shut up. There's barely enough room in there for me, let alone three of us," she complained.

Oh? So if Lilly and Lellip hadn't been sleeping, Merit would be? Considering just a few hours ago Merit had woken up from a long nap, again, that was kind of concerning. Was she sleeping more, or did she just not like traveling I wonder?

Plus that was funny. Barely enough room for her...? Merit was such a tiny little thing, I doubted she'd not fit anywhere comfortably. I've had pillows bigger than her before.

"I'm actually kind of surprised Lilly's even sleeping, to be honest," I said softly, doing my best to not smirk at the thought of comparing her to pillows.

"Even she has to rest. It's because she's reaching her limit, she's been going for months without any real rest and it shows," Merit said, not speaking softly as she did.

Maybe she figured the loud rain drowned out our voices. Lellip sleeping through us talking I'd not be surprised over, but Lilly...? I'd feel bad for waking her, especially when she rarely slept and seemed to be getting so stretched thin as Merit also claimed.

"Hm... think Vim's reached the ocean by now?" I asked, wondering if maybe a nice little conversation would warm her up.

"Likely. Depends if he got side-tracked or not."

"He does seem to do that often enough... I feel like every time we separate he comes back and I find out he got involved in something neat without me, like Mistle's situation," I said.

"I'd not really phrase that as neat, but yes. He's a danger-magnet. Says so himself."

Magnet...? "What's a magnet?"

Merit shifted a little and glanced at me. "Vim's been lacking in your education, hasn't he? Can't say I fault him... even when you two get a chance to have a moment alone anymore it's filled with your flirting and stuff... Magnetism is when magnetic fields end up attracting or pushing away things. It happens because of electricity, or well, their currents. Basically when something gets electrically charged it can interact oddly with things around it. Next time we stop near a river I'll find a suitable rock to shock and make a magnet for you so you can see what I mean," Merit explained.

"There were a lot of words there I don't really understand," I said gently.

Merit sighed, but not out of annoyance. She shivered again and tugged the blanket closer to her. "I bet. I'll teach you all about it later. Vim taught me it when we built my kingdom. He built me an electrical system for the plumbing and other things, and I was the one he taught to upkeep it," she said.

Ah... "I was hoping he'd build those for us too. I like it when I can get a hot bath with a simple tug on a faucet," I said happily.

She chuckled at that. "Don't mention hot baths right now, please."

"Sorry..."

Merit shifted a little, and then leaned against me. Likely for warmth. "Vim used to come and go over years. Decades sometimes went by without seeing him. Honestly, in a certain perspective, you didn't want to see him. Him showing up usually meant there was a reason for it. A need for him. That wasn't a good thing," Merit said, speaking gently. Was she going to fall asleep leaning up against me? I'd not mind, of course, but if she was going to do so I wanted to adjust the blanket a little...

"I personally kind of like traveling around with him. I think I'll miss it, if I do end up staying up north," I said.

"Hmph. Even if he does step down he won't stop moving. Vim can act as indifferent as he wants, but he's too soft inside. The moment he ends up hearing someone needs help he'll run off to aid them. Look at those idiots in Lumen, Vim kept having to distract himself because he wanted to help them finish their new church. I'm actually surprised he didn't get more involved in it as it was," Merit said.

I nodded understandingly. "Yes... he even avoided some of them, like Martin. I hadn't said anything to him, but I know he had done it on purpose."

"Why wouldn't he? Involving yourself with those people only ends up getting you hurt. Look what happened, you lingered too long in Lumen and now you're separated and Vim's sent off on some crazy quest again. Another monarch...? So quickly...? I don't think anyone's realized yet but something is wrong. How can we go decades without seeing any and all of a sudden they're everywhere again? It wasn't even this bad back during the beginning," Merit said.

My tail squirmed beneath the blanket as I nodded. "Vim's worried about that too. Not to mention the god..." I whispered.

"Likely all connected. Did he mention anything about it?" she asked.

"Kind of. On a few occasions he had brought it up... he's worried about it. But he has been for a while now, Merit. I have a saint friend up north, she had a prophecy concerning the monarch that had destroyed Angie's forest. He's been... stressed since hearing of it," I said.

Merit shifted a little and glanced at me. "Hearing of it...? You mean to say he actually asked to hear the full prophecy, don't you?"

I nodded.

She sighed. "That's not good. At all. What was the prophecy?"

"She saw a unique light and then witnessed the birth of a monarch. A very large chicken that set ablaze the forest, and eventually the world," I said, giving her a summarized version of it.

Merit groaned and went to rubbing her hands together beneath the blanket. "Just great. I'm assuming, and desperately hoping, the god who made that monarch is the one he killed the other day? Yes?"

"Um... Vim also hopes that the case, but I have a sinking suspicion he doesn't believe it was."

"That's terrifying. That means there's a god out there summoning new monarchs. And powerful ones to boot...? No wonder Vim was so willing to ignore so much and run away as he had. I wonder if the monarch he's to fight in the sea has anything to do with all that?"

"I hope not..." I mumbled. Vim had seemed genuinely worried over it all. And for Vim to be worried that meant we all likely should be terrified.

For a moment we sat in silence, and one of the horses shook their head a little violently. They calmed down after a moment, which told me either water had gotten into their ears or something like a bug had bothered them.

They had little sashes over them, tanned flaps of leather, where saddles would be. It covered most of their bodies, but not enough in my opinion. So they were somewhat shielded from the rain, but not completely. But no one had seemed too worried over the horses, even when the wind had been bad too.

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

Wonder if horses got upset with us. They walked and pulled calmly, not needing to be ushered, but that didn't mean they weren't upset... right? Was too bad they couldn't speak. Though I had been told once that horses actually loved to pull stuff. To work. That some would grow upset and anxious if they didn't get to move around and do stuff. Though that might just be because pulling a wagon was better than being stuck in a barn, not because they actually liked to work.

"The world's all noisy again..." Merit then mumbled.

I glanced at her, and realized she was still pondering our conversation. Deeply, too.

Not a surprise. This was the first time I'd told her of that prophecy, and Vim's thoughts on the matter. Surprisingly it seemed Merit knew a bit about gods and their methods... likely thanks to spending time with Vim over the years, I assumed.

"Explains his willingness to so readily let you risk absorbing a heart. To help protect you," she then said.

I nodded gently, though I knew Vim had not directly planned for it to have happened as it had. He in fact had planned to give me Miss Beak's heart, at a later date. He had even asked Narli to try and foresee if I'd survive it or not. He had never gotten an answer... or well, he might have while visiting her last and had simply not told me.

"So... um..."

Glancing at my friend, I wondered why she was suddenly twirling her fingers beneath the blanket.
"Hm?"

Merit didn't say anything right away, and instead she sat back up a little. We were still touching, since she had gotten so close, but was now no longer leaning fully against me. With her not doing so I now felt a little colder, more than I had before she had gotten close originally.

My friend glanced at me, and then glanced behind us. The flap that led into the wagon was sealed firmly, to keep rain out, and I could hear both Lellip and Lilly still sleeping. Though Lellip snored Lilly didn't, but her breathing was soft and even enough to tell me she hadn't woken even from our talking.

"Since we're about to be there... I should probably say it, but..." Merit mumbled.

I nodded and focused on my friend, patiently waiting for her to say whatever was obviously bothering her.

"Me and um... Randle? We don't get along... I once tried to kill him, so um..."

Oh boy... "Uh... is that going to be a problem...?" I asked, concerned.

She stiffly lifted her shoulders and shrugged. "I... don't think so? I don't have that hate in me anymore. I... won't attack him. I hadn't last time I had seen him either, I just... figured I should let you know since... I mean..."

I reached around and grabbed my friend, pulling her into a side-hug. "I'm sure we can figure it out, Merit. Randle's changed by the way, even Vim's mentioned he's become... different. If you two do become an issue I'll do my best to act as your buffer and keep the peace, I promise," I said.

Merit grumbled for a moment as she nodded. "Okay... I just... yeah..."

"It's okay, I mean... look at Lilly! And Vim! Randle rather openly said he used to hate Vim, and they act all friendly now," I said.

"Probably just because Randle pissed off Light and the rest..." Merit mumbled.

Well... "That's likely it, yes..." I admitted.

Merit sighed as she nodded. "Still... sorry it took so long to say it. I promise to leave if... if it becomes a problem, so..."

I squeezed the small fish, smiling happily as I did. "Please, Merit. Don't even worry about it. I'd just move us to another town or something if that happens. Randle's been nice to me but he's not my family like you are," I said.

"Mhm..." Merit groaned at me, but I could feel her real thoughts. She was growing warmer, significantly so, which meant she was both embarrassed and happy.

I giggled a little and nodded. "What'd you even try to kill him for?"

"He blamed my kingdom's downfall on my lack of faith. He had said it in front of me in a way I had not... liked to hear," Merit said softly.

Ah... I nodded. "I'd have gotten angry over that too, I guess..." I said. Though would I have tried to kill him over it? No, I wouldn't have. At least, I didn't think I would have.

"No you wouldn't have, Renn. You're too nice for that."

I smirked at my friend and gave her another squeeze. "Is that why you're banished from the Bell Church?" I asked.

"Huh...? No. That one's because I had killed a few of them before joining the Society. Some of their members had sold some of our people to the Epoch Cult, and I hadn't liked that. Turns out only one of the people I had killed had actually been involved... the rest had simply been defending their friend from me, or at least had attempted to, not knowing the full story," Merit said.

Oh gosh... "Vim's told me of the Epoch people... I'm glad they're all gone," I said.

"They're not, Renn. You even have a friend amongst them."

"I do...?"

"The Clothed Woman? She's a priestess of Epoch, Renn."

What...? Oh. Right. She had indeed had that weird cross in her little church, and had prayed before it, hadn't she? "The people who had sacrificed our people? And... she's a member?" I asked. That explained a lot about her, at least, but didn't explain why Vim let her be.

"She helped Vim and Lilly root out the rest leaders of the cult. She still believes in her gods, but she earned her right to be a member. Though I don't care for her much either, having seen their handiwork more than I want to admit..."

"Hm... Vim once mentioned, off-handedly, that he had killed their gods. I wonder if he had been genuine in that statement or not," I said.

"Knowing him, it's likely. By the way, I don't mind you holding me but can you not grab at my sides...? That's where my gills are and it tickles..."

Woops. "Sorry," I shifted a little; releasing Merit as I awkwardly wondered if I had been grabbing at her without paying attention or something. Probably had.

"It's... not that big a deal, it doesn't hurt, it just feels funny..." Merit said as she shifted a little.

"I get it. My tail isn't that bad, but for some reason my ears are terrible when touched. It's a weird itchy feeling that makes me want to jump in a lake," I said with a point to my head. I had my hat on so they couldn't be seen, but I shifted them enough to let Merit hear them.

"Is that why you don't let Vim touch them?" Merit asked.

"Huh...? No? I've been trying to get him to touch them for years. The stupid fool wants to, but he always hesitates and cowards out," I said.

"Cowards way out is the saying, Renn. Chickens out, is what you're likely thinking of."

Hm...? "Maybe."

Merit sighed at me. "Not to ruin the lovely topic... I should probably bring up that I have quite a few... um... issues? I've been banished from quite a few places, and there are some people like Randle that I uh... well..."

I gently nudged her with an elbow. "It's fine, Merit. I appreciate you telling me, and uh... maybe from now on let me know beforehand? Whenever we meet someone or something? That way I don't make a mistake or anything? You're not the only one, not only is Lilly like you but I've got the same problems you know," I said.

"Your banishments are likely from them trying to manipulate you and are not real. Ours are."

My lips pursed as I bit the inside of my cheek. "I mean..." I wasn't sure what to say about that since she was right.

I'd not even fully talked about it with Vim yet, that I had overheard Brandy and Gerald saying that the only reason I had been banished from Lumen originally was because of a prophecy. I wasn't sure if that was the same reason I had been banished from the Bell Church, but it was a possibility...

But there was no way my banishment from the Sleepy Artist was from such a thing, was it? They hadn't done it until after Amber's death, and the chaos, and then Crane went on to start this vote against Vim...? As far as I knew, and understood, Light and the rest were manipulating that vote and using it to their own advantage, but hadn't started it themselves. They were simply using Crane's actions to their benefit.

"Well... I've already talked to Vim about it. I promise not to cause more problems than I'm worth; I just wanted to let you know..."

"You're worth all the problems in the world, Merit."

She waved a small hand at me. "Shush."

Giggling happily, I went to grab hold of her again. I made sure to avoid her gills this time, dedicating the knowledge that touching them brought her discomfort into my heart as I did. Merit groaned as I grabbed hold, but didn't fight back as I pulled her into me.

I knew she, like Lilly and myself, had... difficulties. With not just the people, but the world. Ourselves, even.

But that was fine. More than fine. We all had issues. We all had mistakes in our past, and things we regretted. But to me none of that made a difference.

All that mattered was our loyalty. Our companionship.

For as long as I could trust her, and the rest, with not just my life but my heart... then I cared not what the rest of the world thought of them. In fact, I dared the world to try and take them from me. If I couldn't properly protect them, I'd just get Vim to do so in my stead.

Thinking of Vim... I hoped he was doing okay. As Merit and the rest have said, this monarch he was off to hunt was... concerning. Vim especially so had found it worrisome.

I knew that Vim would be fine, in general. He'd survive anything, really. But... it wasn't his physical body I worried over.

Hopefully he'd find a way to save that ship without destroying it. Or letting it be destroyed. If Vim failed, and almost six hundred people perished because of it...

He'd weep. Terribly so. Even if they were Light's people.

And I did not want Vim to return to me sullen and forlorn. As much as I'd love for him to bury his face into my lap and a vent to me through the night again, I didn't want to have to cry alongside him as he did. I'd much rather he came home to me with a smile, and... It kind of hurt me to know that I was having so much fun, with my family and friends, and he was out there fighting not just for his life but the lives of many others. It made me feel... kind of ungrateful. As if I wasn't properly sharing in the burden, not carrying my own weight in the relationship.

Especially since lately I've not done much if at all for him. Lately our private moments had just been me getting all flustered, laughing and crying over stuff he's said and done... I've not gotten a chance lately to really...

"Okay, let me go now," Merit then said.

"Hm? Why? It's getting colder so this is perfect," I said happily.

"There's someone heading this way. If they pass while I'm leaning against you like this they'll think I'm your daughter or something."

I chuckled as I gave her a squeeze, pulling her closer. "So?"

"Gosh...!"

Chapter 559 Vim – Havoc

"What is it Vim...?" Martin asked.

He stood beside me, with Tressi's daughter on my other side. We were alone up on the deck of the boat's stern, staring out at the open ocean behind us. It was the very early hours of morning, right as the sun peaked over the horizon to our east. The kind of early that, thanks to being out on the open ocean, allowed one to see a lit up world and a dark one opposing it, since the sun's light hadn't reached that section yet. Darkness.

Or at least, that was supposed to be what we saw facing west.

But the west right now was brighter than the east.

Far off in the distance, a bright pillar of light was illuminating the still dark world. It was so bright even the clouds looked see-through, and the ocean was glimmering something fierce thanks to the distortions it made. The light was not natural, in any shape or form, and was the same shade and shimmering of a saint's eyes. The same glow from within a monarch's heart.

Unmistakable.

Damn Light and all her kin. Had she known? If she had she should have said something...

My jaw was tense as I calculated the distance. Not just from the ship to the light, but the ship to the shore.

We were still a day away, even with the rear sail fixed. And that didn't include the fact that it would take them several days to disembark the ship, since they'd have to port off distance without a proper docking point. They'll have to use smaller boats to shuttle everyone, and the stuff they carried, to shore.

But... in theory such a thing shouldn't matter. Since I should be killing the monarch being summoned right now before it had a chance to harm them in any way.

Yet this was no longer just a monarch was it...?

"Vim...?" Fressi grabbed my sleeve; her rough voice sounded concerned... but if it was because she understood the situation or had simply overheard Martin's worried voice and thus was now worried too, I couldn't tell.

I gently patted the young duck on the head to reassure her. "All will be well," I promised her. Then I turned to look at the stoic knight who looked as if he was seeing a ghost. "Martin, that's the monarch. I'll take one of the smaller rowboats and head out there before it has a chance to get too close," I said to the knight.

"Um... sure? I hope you're not going to ask for any help, I'm not really sure what I'd be able to do out in the ocean like this..."

"It's fine. Keep the ship on course. I suggest, unless I show up and tell you all is fine, that when you make landfall you focus on getting everyone off the ship first and to a safe distance. You can worry about material goods once it's safe to do so," I said.

Martin nodded and sighed. "Many won't like that, but I agree."

It doesn't matter what people like.

The bright light began to dim, and with it doing so I began to grow anxious. I should have leapt overboard and started swimming towards it the moment I had seen it.

If it was finishing then I needed to hurry. Gods could only cast their spells one at a time, and summoning a powerful monarch as they had obviously just done took a lot out of them. But how I'd get my hands on a god who was likely floating high in the sky over the ocean, I wasn't sure yet...

"Vim...!"

We turned to watch Pleck hurry towards us. She wasn't wearing a robe, but instead just shorts and a loose shirt. Not the kind of outfit one should be wearing in the cold morning on a ship like this, where the ocean spray occasionally doused those on deck. But I knew it was because she'd just jumped out of bed, she had been asleep.

"A prophecy?" I asked as I stepped towards her.

Her glowing eyes were bright. Far brighter than normal as she quickly shook her head. "No...! But I just felt something terrible and..." she then went silent as she finally noticed the beam of light off in the distance, and Martin had to step forward as she nearly fell to her knees in shock.

"No...!" Pleck screamed at the sight, which told me even from this distance she could feel the divinity.

"Alert everyone, prepare for the worst. I'm going," I said as I stepped away. There was no point standing around on the deck watching people shout in confusion any longer.

I hurried down the stairwell and headed for starboard side of the ship where one of the smaller boats was fastened. I first checked to make sure there were oars within it, and then undid the pulleys to let it

begin falling to the ocean. As I undid the smaller boat, lowering it to the ocean with pulleys and ropes, the main deck began to grow noisy as people started emerging from inside the ship. The pillar of light in the distance was fading, but it was doing so slowly. Methodically. It wasn't like a candle being snuffed out by a harsh gust but instead a slowly dying ember. The light alone would have drawn such interest, but since everyone on board knew full well that they had been prophesized to be sunk and killed by a monarch... well...

"Protector, what is that...!" someone shouted worriedly nearby.

"The monarch. Stay aboard. Don't panic. Stay alert, I'll handle it," I said as I finished readying the smaller boat. It had been lowered completely, but the little ropes it was connected to via the pulleys were connected to little metal bracket hooks. Which meant I'd have to clamber down there and unhook it from the boat itself. Which wouldn't be a big deal, but then someone would have to pull the ropes back up else they'll get tangled up in the other nearby mechanisms and the ropes for the sails...

"I'll do it, Vim. Get going."

I turned and nodded to Kapni, the old fox. He had a stern expression which told me he knew exactly how much danger they were all in.

Wasting no time I leapt over the railing and down to the boat below. It made a loud splash with me landing in it, but didn't sink or break since I had been careful. I quickly undid the ropes, and then pushed off against the ship's side and grabbed the oars.

They weren't as thick or wide as I had hoped, so as I went to rowing I made sure not to do so too strongly. Didn't need them snapping on me.

Although not able to use much strength, I still quickly grew the distance between me and the ship. And not just because it was sailing the other way. The little boat was not really a sea-faring one, meant only to help shuttle people and goods to the ship when it was docked, but it was still better than a simple canoe or something found in rivers and lakes. I quickly picked up speed, mostly thanks to the lack of choppy water, and headed for the pillar of light that was quickly disappearing.

A newly born monarch. Although weaker ones were feeble and small when first born, there were methods around that. It was what separated First Born monarchs from the typical ones. They were created into existence not as children needing to grow, but full-grown and fully ready for battle.

I had no misconceptions here. I highly doubted this one was going to be like Stance's creations. That light had been far too bright. Too big. Too obvious.

This was a real monarch summoning. Not some half-baked one done for amusement, or an attempt suffering from a lack of ability and strength thanks to a corrupted and broken mind and body.

I was about to fight something akin to Miss Beak. Or rather her parents. Something I'd not had to face in... well, since before the Society.

And that didn't take into account the monarch's creator.

Really. How was I going to fight a god while out at sea like this? Usually during such moments I had assistance. Either in the form of Miss Beak and her wings, or war fleets, to use as platforms for the battle, or even little islands.

"Should have brought my spear," I groaned as I rowed.

I'd left it with Renn because I had worried for them. Lilly had told me in private that without that spear they might not have been able to beat that monarch they had faced without sacrifice. And with Renn seemingly getting so involved in the fate of the world, in prophecies and whatnot, I feared leaving them defenseless.

Of course I wasn't foolish enough to think a single spear, even the one my mother had created, would be able to save them from something like a god... but it was better than nothing. Armor did not save a soldier on a battlefield from bullets or arrows, but it increased their odds of surviving by many fold when compared to having none.

Yet there was no denying that having that spear would have made this upcoming battle a lot easier...

"Should have had mother made two," I said as the sun started to rise fully. I wasn't facing the pillar of light, rowing the way I was, so I was instead facing the sunrise. I could see the ship still, though it was now a small speck on the horizon.

Had I already gone that far...?

"Hello Vim."

I stopped rowing.

Looking up, I heard and felt one of the oars snap and break in my grip... as I stared up at a man. One standing a few dozen feet above me, standing in the air.

Although I'd stopped rowing, the boat kept floating onward. It still had a lot of momentum. Yet even with me moving at a good pace, the god didn't get left behind. Although standing still, visibly, he stayed right above me. Keeping pace.

The man was broad shouldered. Wore something like a cape, though it didn't flap in the wind... and I knew who he was.

Standing up, I dropped the oar I hadn't broken into the boat. The one I'd broken was now floating somewhere on the surface of the ocean behind me.

"Havoc," I greeted a god I had once torn in half.

"Hm... Can I land on your boat, so we can talk?"

My eye twitched, but then I glanced down a little... and saw the ship still. Still within range. Still there on the horizon. Likely less than five miles away.

"You can," I decided, though I didn't move from where I stood.

Havoc slowly floated downward, and then stepped down onto the other side of the boat. It rocked a little heavily with him landing upon it, and he had to extend an arm to steady himself.

"Before you laugh at me, I've not stepped on a boat in over a thousand years," Havoc said as he slowly bent down to sit.

"What do you expect when you defy the natural order so much? You rely too much on your crutches," I said.

He chuckled at me as he nodded. "That I do. We do. Can't deny that..."

By my parents it really was him. That laugh, that chuckle, had been unmistakable. He had laughed like that before I had ripped him apart last time too.

Havoc relaxed a little now that he was properly seated... and then he looked up at me and smiled. "Thank you for not attacking me on sight, Vim. Really."

"I'd not thank me just yet..." I said.

He nodded, but still smiled. "Maybe... but still."

"Where's your new monarch?" I asked with a small glance to the sea around us. I didn't feel its presence. Either it was distant, or far... far below. With one as strong as I expected it to be, I usually could sense such monarchs from quite a distance. From miles away, sometimes.

"Coming. I uh... well, I made a mistake. I summoned it in the ocean, and displaced a lot of the water around it as I did. A giant whirlpool had formed because of it, and it got stuck in it for a moment," Havoc said.

"Tormenting your creations from the moment they're born are you?" I asked, disgusted.

"I'd not meant to do it, Vim..."

Sure. "So? What is it you wish to say?" I asked.

Havoc held my gaze, and nodded gently. "I've come to... find out if you killed Stance."

"I had."

Havoc blinked. Heavily. And then he looked down and sighed. "I see..."

"He had been creating monarchs. Ones that were harming innocents," I said.

"You need not justify your actions Vim. Your birth does that well enough..." Havoc shook his head and raised a hand, speaking gently... and then took a deep breath. "I just wish you hadn't. We had... needed him."

We...? By my parents there really were a bunch of them, weren't there?

How had they hidden all this time from me? And why now, after nearly a thousand years, were they finally showing themselves again?

"Then you should have found him before I had. He had been searching for you," I said.

"Yes. He had been. But..." Havoc hesitated, and I knew he had been about to say something he didn't want to tell me. I debated beating the information out of him, but knew if I just... waited then...

The god then looked up, at the sky. I didn't follow his gaze, and instead studied he himself.

It really was Havoc. He had a thin beard, one he obviously kept clean and tailored. His hair was shorter, and like most gods he looked utterly healthy and clean. Not a speck of dust was upon him, nor was there a single blemish upon him. He had typical clothes that a god wore, though that cape was odd. It looked like a large rain jacket, but seemed to have a purpose beyond just clothing. Was it some kind of armor, maybe? It moved oddly when he did, as if it wasn't real. As if it didn't obey the laws of physics, as if gravity didn't affect it at all.

And most importantly he was in one piece. I wasn't too surprised to see it, since when I had ripped him apart his upper half had been taken by his fellow gods... but I had back then been hoping the damage would have been enough.

Obviously it hadn't been. Which meant this time I'll need to do more than just tear him into two.

"So... I'm here to make a deal with you, if you'll hear it," the god then said as he looked back down at me.

"I've never been one for deals," I said simply.

"No. But I have a feeling you'll be interested in this one."

I felt teeth stress and crack under pressure as I clenched my jaw for a moment, and then briskly waved at him to go ahead and tell me what it was.

Havoc nodded back... and then lifted a hand and swiped it in the air. He made a few motions, and then extended his other hand forward... palm open and wide, as if to display something.

And then a haze appeared. One so familiar to me that it forced me to push aside memories of my father. He had used a similar spell to teach me since he had not the skill mother had to do it without such tricks of light. The mist-like haze emerged from his hand, flowing upward and outward... until there was a large circular area floating over his open palm. The thick haze was see-through, but only to a point. And then, like from a distant projector or light source, an image appeared within it.

The boat shifted as I saw a wagon. A covered one. On a brick road, one being pulled by two horses and by the looks of it, entering a city.

"Before you outright attack me, I'm not threatening her. Not yet, anyway," Havoc said.

Yes. That was Renn sitting on the front of the wagon. Next to Lilly. She looked happy; talking to Lilly about whatever topic had them seemingly so enthralled. Even Lilly looked like she was enjoying it, which said something since it looked like they were surrounded by people. They were either already in Telmik, or entering it from one of the gateways. It looked like they were waiting for something, maybe to be given authorization to enter the city.

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

I couldn't see Merit and Lellip, who should be with them, but the image only really showed the front half of the wagon. And only a few feet around it. They could be on the other side of the wagon, or inside or behind it.

"Hard not to see it as a threat," I said stiffly.

"I know. But, honestly... I swear on your parents, I don't mean it that way. Not myself, at least."

"Then who?" I asked. The group he represented maybe? Or was a part of?

"About two dozen of us survived your genocide, Vim," Havoc said. He hadn't stopped his spell; Renn and the wagon were still visible. She was now talking to an armored guard, verifying she was in Telmik. That was their emblem on his chest.

"That many?" I asked, a little embarrassed to hear so. How'd I let that many escape me this long?

Havoc scoffed. "Considering we arrived here with almost two thousand, I'd not sound so crushed over hearing so. Listen... the survivors have split into two groups. One still wants to go home, the others don't."

"And which side do you belong to...?" I asked carefully.

"I want to go home, just as I always have, Vim," he answered with a heavy voice.

Well... "I can respect that," I said. Having that same desire for thousands of years, and even after all I've done to him...? Yes. I could respect that level of dedication very much.

"I'm sure you can. That said, thanks to Stance waking up and broadcasting his thoughts so wildly, your little secret is out now," he said.

"What...?"

"I don't know what was wrong with him. But he woke up one day and just... started sending everyone his thoughts. What he saw. What he heard. It was annoying. So annoying we... or well, most of us at least, started to block him out. We put up barriers to save us from his incessant mind of chaos. Well, just so happens a few of us hadn't done so. Or at least, hadn't done so constantly. A few had been keeping an eye on him, I guess... and well, noticed something."

"Renn," I whispered.

He nodded. "Quite a weakness, Vim. Though I can understand it. You've thought we've been gone all this time. At least, so I assume. So you finally let your guard down. Finally relaxed," Havoc said as he shifted his hand and the image too shifted. It went from overlooking the wagon to a close up on Renn's face. The wagon had begun to move again, having been given permission to enter Telmik, and she was giggling at something Lilly had said.

Her utterly adorable smile did not ease me in the least.

"So...? Either threaten me already or let me kill you," I said through clenched teeth.

"Hardly, Vim..." Havoc scoffed and snapped his fingers. The misty image disappeared, and he waved his hand to clear the air of the mist that was now floating wildly all over. "I've come to bargain. As I said."

"Bargain then."

Havoc nodded and gestured at himself. "I want to go home. As does the group I belong to."

"Some bargain. You know I can't give you that. You ask for the impossible. That's not any kind of negotiation in good faith."

A thin smile formed as he nodded. "I know. But the other side, the other group... well..."

Well...? Well what? "Just get to the point, Havoc." My mind was half a moment from slipping into pure rage; I wasn't in the mood for this.

"If I gave you their location. The others who have been sabotaging us, I'll guarantee that none of the others ever find out about her."

The boat went still.

Utterly still.

Havoc shifted and glanced around with just his eyes, not moving his head. His eyes narrowed when he realized the sea had just gone absolutely still.

No waves. No currents.

Not even wind.

"Explain," I whispered.

He looked back at me, and then with a small gulp he nodded. "Only I and one other know about her. I'll never reveal who it is, or where they are. As you know, since we've been hiding all this time, you'll never find them. But they will let everyone know of Renn, her location and her importance, unless..."

"Unless I kill... what? Those who don't want to go home anymore?" I asked.

He nodded.

"This makes no sense. Why not just reveal their location to me in a more natural way? Lead me to them? You'd need not threaten me like this." Not to mention all the other flaws in this plan. Why would I even abide by it? Did he think my love for Renn would be enough to control me like this? Did he not think I didn't know they'd just kill her anyway, even if I obeyed? Did he not think I'd just expect more orders and commands later on and eventually be forced to disobey anyway...?

I loved Renn. Dearly. I'd die for her and more. But I would not allow that love to be used to control me in such a way. I'd sooner kill her myself than allow such a thing to happen. Even if I did allow it, and bend the knee to such a threat, all such a thing would do is corrupt that love. Invalidate it. Make it hollow. Doing such a thing would just end up ruining the relationship, inevitably.

And that was not to say the least to the fact that Renn herself would not permit it.

The moment she learned I was, or would potentially, allow someone to control me in such a way thanks to such a threat would just result in her doing something drastic to put an end to it.

Even if I was willing to sacrifice the world for her, I'd still lose her in the end. So there was no point.

This was a losing situation for me, no matter what happened.

"Because we all live together, Vim. If I revealed to you their location, I'd be revealing my own and those alongside me," Havoc then said.

Ah... well, that made sense and answered that question at least.

If I found them I'd just start slaughtering them. I'd not wait in the least or care who was who. So him doing it this way, so off-handedly, at least made a little more sense in that context.

"And... why would you want me to kill them? After all this time? Haven't you been trying to keep each other alive in hopes of finding another method to go back?" I asked.

"They're sabotaging our attempts, Vim. And the only reason I've even figured it out is thanks to the same reason I know of your wife."

Stance. "How did Stance even...?"

"Go insane? I have no clue. He had attempted a spell a few hundred years ago that sent him into a coma. He woke up and was all broken. Probably his own doing," Havoc said.

"And I take it he had been on the side that no longer wants to go home," I said. In his broken mind he must have told those like Havoc secrets he'd been keeping all that time, not realizing what he was doing.

He nodded. "Yes. That's how we figured out what they've been doing for years. Hundreds of years, even!" Havoc's voice grew louder as he clenched his fist. "You slaughtering us, stopping us from what we need to do, is at least understandable... You have a just reason for it. But them? Those two-faced fools have been poisoning us all this time! While living amongst us and...!" he went quiet as he allowed his rage to flow through him. He released a deep breath, through clenched teeth, and shook his head. "Betrayal is one thing, Vim. As I'm sure you know. But this is more than that. They've been living amongst us, some of us forming relationships and more, and all this time they've been manipulating us. Our world. Our goals and hopes. I've never wished you on any of them, but now I wish you had gotten more of them," he said.

I smirked at him, since even though I didn't believe this little negotiation or deal at all... I firmly believed in his rage. His hatred. His disgust.

It was very real. "Then why are you upset I killed him?" I asked, pointing out an inconsistency in his words.

"We could have used him for proof. Real proof," Havoc said.

Ah. That meant there were members amongst his group that didn't outright believe or agree with him. Likely because, like he said, only a few people had been paying attention to Stance's ramblings. It was hearsay, basically.

"Sounds like a personal problem to me."

"Ah... it is... I'll not deny it. And even more so I cannot deny that neither I nor the rest of us can do anything about it. Thus my coming here to you," he said with a point at me.

My eyes narrowed at that. "You speak as if this other group is... what? Powerful? So much more to the point you don't even dare to face them openly?" I asked.

He nodded.

Well that wasn't something I wanted to hear. "So... what? I kill this other group, and you vow to leave Renn alone? Is that what you're offering?" I asked.

He nodded again.

"I'm sure you can see why I can't trust you on this," I said carefully.

"Of course not. But my alternatives are extremes I can't risk. So here I am."

Feh. I shook my head and glanced away from the stupid god. I checked the distant horizon, under a rising sun, and was glad to not see the ship any longer.

"Really, Vim. I'm being serious. If you agree to this, I'll guide you to where we all live. Where we've been for over half a millennia. Only under the agreement that you only slay those I tell you to."

What a stupid scheme. For all I knew he just wanted to gain power and leadership over his group or something, and was going to use me to cull those he couldn't force to obey. Or it was just a trap to get me to go wherever they all were. A place they've been for hundreds of years...? Yeah sure, I bet that place was definitely not riddled with traps and spells. Even if they hadn't cooked up something in our thousand year war that could defeat or seal me away didn't mean they didn't finally do it another thousand years later.

"You're threatening me over a woman who will be dead of natural causes in the blink of an eye," I said stiffly.

"That doesn't work, Vim. I know damned well how precious even just a few years can be, you can't use that against me."

Probably right. "And how do I know you're not just going to betray me afterward and kill her anyway?"

"And risk your wrath? We've been hiding from you all this time Vim not out of some fancy spell or scheme, but thanks to an anomaly. Once I reveal the where and how, it will never work again on you," Havoc argued.

Possibly. "And if you so desperately still want to go home, to the point you're willing to allow me to slaughter a handful of your precious survivors... why should I not find that to be conflicting? You need every ounce of mana to open your gate, yet you'd let me cut that reserve in half?" I asked.

"I would when it's because of that half that we're not already home, yes."

Hm...?

I studied Havoc's eyes, and the seriousness in them. That had not been some scheme or ploy he had just said, but his honest truth.

"You've found a way," I whispered.

He nodded.

"Then why?"

"Why haven't we left yet? Why haven't we just done it? Because of them, Vim. They've been sabotaging us."

I didn't like the fact that I believed him.

Going home had been their whole goal. Everything all of them had wanted. To the point they had been willing to conduct terrible experiments and to even torture lesser life forms in such vile ways that even amongst their own members there had been suicides from the guilt.

For a group of such people, of survivors of my genocide against them, to actually actively sabotage a viable way for them all to finally return home... It led me to believe they likely were doing so for good reason, as hard as it was to believe it.

"Yes. If you do this for me then shortly after we'll be gone. The rest of us will leave. We'll go home. All of us. Leaving you and the rest to this world without quarrel," Havoc offered.

So... they had found a solution to the mana problem. Or at least, a method around it.

And... there was a group who was impeding it from working.

But why...?

Even if the method had been terrible. Even if it risked destruction of the whole world and all its inhabitants, I couldn't see that as being justification for them to interfere with it. They'd already been willing to go to such lengths before, after all.

So...

"I'm threatening your wife. I know. But what else could motivate you? What else could stay your hand? Can't you see? This is fate. Stance reveals the truth thanks to his insanity and in doing so revealed your weakness. At just the right moment for this to come to pass. For this agreement to happen. If you are willing to agree to this, and do what I ask of you, this will all be over. Seven deaths. That's all I ask of you. Kill seven more of us, and then let the rest of us go home. And never again will you ever have to see, hear, or think of us or us you."

Seven. Just seven...? Yet he had said a few dozen earlier. Even if Stance had been included in that, the numbers were off.

If Havoc and his group were the larger in number, even if those seven were the stronger... I couldn't comprehend how they were having so much difficulties they needed to resort to using me this way.

Unless...

"I'd not turn down an opportunity to kill one of you, let alone seven," I said simply.

Havoc smirked and scoffed. "No doubt. So...? Do we have a deal?"

No. But did I want to risk not playing along?

There was no denying the risk to Renn... and thus too everyone else around her. Around me.

But that risk was now guaranteed. Whether I agreed or not to this stupid deal, Renn's life was now on the ledge, and until I found and killed every last one of these bastards that was how it always would be.

Yet...

"How long have you been watching me?" I asked carefully.

Havoc scoffed. "Tracking you used to be near impossible. But ever since you've dedicated your time to that non-human society, it's been easy to monitor you. I've been waiting for an opportunity to speak to you since a few days after you killed Stance, but I had to wait until it was outside the sphere of observance."

I shifted a little as I understood his meaning. "You waited until no one else would notice us meeting," I said.

He nodded. "I summoned the monarch for the obvious reason. To attack you and keep you at bay if you chose not to talk to me. I'll unsummon it once you let me go."

Studying him, I wondered how much I could believe.

I knew none of it was true. But there had to be a way to find the truth by dissecting what he's saying and doing. But did I have time to do so?

I mean...

He was here.

Now.

In front of me.

Not within arm's reach, but that could be fixed rather easily. And although I knew he had a very powerful monarch, just waiting to attack me on his order, it wasn't close enough to stop me in time. I couldn't sense it, which meant it was deep beneath us. Maybe even on the ocean floor.

Renn's life would be in danger if I killed him... but at the same time letting him go wouldn't outright fix that. If anything killing him here and now would bring her closer to safety. One less god was better for everyone, not just her.

And now I knew that I was being monitored. I wasn't sure to what level, though.

He had said only he and one other knew of Renn. Which wouldn't make sense if they'd been actually monitoring me this whole time. Anyone watching the two of us, especially when we were alone, would be able to tell how close she and I were.

Which meant they were monitoring me, but not in a very direct way. Or at least, hadn't been the last few years... It was possible, I suppose, that no one had been watching closely lately. Since for the last few hundred years I'd been basically doing the same thing over and over. Going to the same places, traveling around the Society... maybe after my life had become somewhat routine they had simply ensured I was still doing what I was doing but hadn't watched any closer than necessary. And then with Stance's death and him noticing and seeing... Or well, odds are it wasn't that Stance had noticed Renn but instead with his death and I the one granting it to him, the others had started paying more attention. And while doing so had noticed Renn that way.

Stance's arrival, and my killing of him, had put these events into motion. Which meant Havoc's offer, even if a hundred percent genuine, wasn't worth the spittle speaking of it gave. It meant eventually others will notice Renn no matter what. It was an inevitability. Even if it took years, eventually the other gods who monitored me would pay a little more attention at some random time and see the truth.

Which meant there was no reason to agree, other than by doing so I'd get to possibly learn of this location where they've been hiding out this whole time...

"I don't want to harm your wife, Vim. I really don't. I just want to go home," Havoc then said.

My finger twitched, and I bit back some words.

They always said such things. Twisting their words in a way to make people believe their lies.

They had said similar back then too. When they had killed my parents.

"I kill those seven. You leave," I said.

He nodded quickly. "Without hesitation. And I vow we'll leave her alone."

"How long will it take you?" I asked.

"To open the gate...? A few years at most," he said with a frown. His shoulders had softened a little. He was no longer tense. Calming down.

He thought I was about to agree with him.

And why wouldn't he? My entire existence, everything I was and am, was dedicated to their slaughter. He wouldn't have shown up this way, getting so close, if he had not believed highly that I'd agree to it. And in truth, in the past, I likely would have. Because I wouldn't have cared about the details. I'd have focused on the seven lives I'd be able to end, and the possibility of grabbing a few more in the process as I did.

"And if I required you to let me watch? To oversee your return home? To ensure you do as you say you are?" I asked.

Havoc actually smiled. A big one. "Done," he agreed.

I did not like at all how quickly he had agreed to that.

"The rest will agree too?"

"They will. I'll ensure it."

I shifted as I felt a heart beneath me. It moved quickly, and was not close by. The monarch, his monarch, had just swam past. I focused on it for a moment, and then felt it turn to the left, and begin circling us.

Damn thing was strong. Like usual Havoc was no pushover. The man was a fool in certain ways, but when it came to his creations he was nothing but a perfectionist and it showed.

"Destroy your monarch, and we can talk further about this," I said after a moment, taking a chance to see if it'd work or not.

"Deal," Havoc instantly lifted a hand and went to do as I had asked. My heart thumped heavily for a few moments, apprehensive, as I watched him manipulate the world around us. "You know if you helped we might even be able to get the gate open faster, Vim! Might not even take a year at all if you did, and..." Havoc began to ramble happily as he swiped at things I couldn't see. Then, with a final gesture of a waved hand... I felt it.

Or rather, I stopped feeling it.

"Done. It's dead. Or gone, I mean," Havoc said with a nod.

Yes. It was. I no longer sensed it, and it had been close enough that I knew it hadn't just disappeared or something. The feeling of its heart had been strong and noticeable, and now it was nonexistent. It had happened instantly.

I nodded. "Okay... um... should we talk here or...?" I started to ask as I stepped backward, pretending to look around.

"I know it's annoying but we can't go back to land. The others have their own network of observing spells all over it, so we'll have to," Havoc started to explain as he started to stand, either to join me in standing or to do something else. He had started to lift a hand, maybe to make an island or something for us to talk on.

But I never got to know what he had planned to do, for I stepped down hard with my back foot.

Hard enough to cause the boat to flip. The side I was standing on went downward, into the sea, and the side Havoc was on went flying upward, and he with it.

With the ship going vertical, I was able to easily reach out and grab the god by the leg. Not his pants. Not his cloak.

His leg.

"Wha...!" Havoc shouted out in a startle, completely caught off guard... and I squeezed and pulled.

With all my might, as the boat dipped straight down into the ocean and sank, I pulled Havoc close to me. I tore off his leg right as I grabbed him by the throat with my other hand.

I thought of Renn as I stopped his airflow. I thought of her bubbly smile I'd just seen, as she talked to Lilly... and steeled myself.

"This time I'll tear you into many tiny pieces," I said as we both fell into the ocean, and I began to tear him limb from limb.

Chapter 560 Renn – Telmik O' Telmik

Watching Lellip and Jelti round the corner and disappear from sight, I wondered if something sad had happened recently. The bunny on my last visit had been happy, recently married and whatnot. Yet now she seemed to be missing a little bit of that pip in her step that she usually had.

Maybe she was just tired, or something...

Sitting back, I sighed softly as I continued to wait my turn. I was sitting in front of the main office of the Chronicler, the public one she used. She was right now in a meeting with some of the other church members, and so I was waiting to see her. I had felt bad for making Lellip sit with me, since she wanted to walk around and enjoy the Cathedral, and so when Jelti walked by and offered to show her around I had happily ushered Lellip to agree and go off with her.

We'd just arrived this morning, but it was already mid-day. It had taken us a bit longer than needed to find a proper inn that had a secured barn to store our wagon and horses. Lilly and Merit had stayed with the wagon at the inn, Lilly for obvious reasons but Merit said she planned to show up eventually. She wanted to see Oplar, it seemed.

Though if Oplar was here or not I couldn't tell. Other than Jelti, and the Chronicler who was busy, I'd not seen any of our other members yet.

I had thought it proper to meet the Chronicler first, and to give her the letter I had from Light. It was one of the thickest letters I'd ever delivered, as thick as a sandwich, and honestly I was tired of carrying it around. Not because it was heavy or anything, but instead the importance of it.

There were prophecies in it. Written as warnings for the Chronicler and those she oversaw. In other words, its urgent deliver was important. Lives depended on it.

I'd not told anyone else, not even Lilly or Merit, and especially not Vim that I carried such a thing... but I hadn't done so because I'd been told not to or anything. I had simply not wanted anyone to worry over me getting involved in such a thing. Lilly and Merit had... very Vim-like views on prophecies and those who had them.

I couldn't fault them, of course... I mean, I had similar views myself now. After learning that people have been treating me differently, like Brandy and Gerald had and the vote they had called last time to banish me, I'd been a little... on edge when it came to such things.

It made me wonder if Witch had done something similar. She had told me that she had prophecies concerning me, but had never told me any of their details. How was I to know she had not manipulated my life, my future, because of things she foresaw...? I'd really not talked about it in depth with anyone yet, but I was a little worried that things were... mixed up.

Elaine had claimed she had seen Vim and I show up years before we actually had. Not as in she had a prophecy concerning us years before, she had actually foreseen us showing up together far before we actually did. Back when she had still been a young woman. Decades ago.

And Light hadn't outright said it, but I had a sinking suspicion she too had similar prophecies concerning me.

I was supposed to have met Vim, to have joined the Society, years ago. Maybe even hundreds of years ago.

Why? And what is the consequence my being so late to do so? I knew, as Vim has said, that their prophecies were constantly wrong in such ways and as such shouldn't look too deeply into it... but...

What if I had made a mistake? What if Witch had done me wrong...? What if...

"Rennalee."

I blinked and looked up, and found Mapple. She was standing at the open door to the Chronicler's office, and a group of four people were walking down the hallway and talking amongst themselves. Their meeting was over.

Standing up, I left the bench and walked over to Mapple and greeted the woman with a smile. "Long time no see," I said in greeting.

"You were here a few months ago," she said simply as she went to close the door behind her after I entered the room.

"That's a long time, Mapple," I said happily.

"No it isn't..."

"Welcome back, Renn. Sorry about that, I tried to kick them out but we were discussing an internal problem. One of our nuns killed herself last night, rest her soul, and we're trying to figure out the details," the Chronicler greeted me while she sat behind a desk and was busying herself clearing it off. She stacked small books and papers on one side and then went to gather up loose leaflets to stack next to the pile of books.

"It's okay... I'm sorry for your loss," I said gently as I stepped up to her desk. I wasn't sure yet if I wanted to sit down or not.

"The priests expect foul play, but the one in charge of her is firmly against it. Pushing back against investigations and what have you in a way that is concerning, for all involved," the Chronicler said.

I frowned at that. "Wouldn't there always be foul play...?" I asked.

The Chronicler tilted her head at me as she stopped fussing over her desk. Her faintly glowing eyes grew a tad bit brighter. "What do you mean...?"

"Even if someone kills themselves on their own volition, is there not always an underlining cause? Abuse, neglect, a lack of people around them doing their job to help them, and so forth?" I asked.

She leaned back in her chair as Mapple shifted behind me. I was about to ask why she was looking at me all funny, but before I could she smiled at me. "I see Vim has not corrupted you."

My frown deepened. "I think Vim would say he agreed with my words..."

"Words he obviously taught you. Volition?" the Chronicler asked.

I blinked, and then smiled softly and nodded. "It's a Vim word, yes." He hasn't ever told me its meaning but I've heard him say it a few times and knew its meaning thanks to it.

"Used correctly too. And yes, he might agree with you. He's wise enough to know such things, yes. But he's also a champion of free-will. To the point he fully abides suicide. Thus his idea of mercy for endlings. He might know that such causes bring forth suicide, but won't ever stop it from happening. I had figured you'd have a similar mindset," the Chronicler said.

Beneath my hat my ears shifted, and I wondered why this woman always pointed out the differences between Vim and I. "Was I wrong to assume so in this case?" I asked, hoping to get the conversation back on it and not my conflicting differences with my husband.

"No. I firmly suspect she took her own life thanks to abuse. The girl had been from the far southeast, one who had been sold into slavery and found her way here upon escaping it. No matter how much our faith tells us we are all children of gods, many don't see past their skin or traditions and forget such a rule," the Chronicler said.

"She was abused for having tattoos. The pagan ones," Mapple said.

Oh... I'd seen those while far south with Vim. "So will you investigate it?" I asked.

"Of course we will. But even when we do, and punish those who did it... she'll still be dead," the Chronicler said with a small sigh.

Yes, that was true. "Is suicide a common thing amongst humans?" I asked as I went to dig out Light's letter for her.

"More than most want to admit, yes. But I'd say our kind are more susceptible to it. Though I don't know which of us actually do it more often, percentage wise per population," the Chronicler said.

Hm... "Seems like something Vim would know. Here, from Light," I said as I pulled out her thick letter and stepped forward, placing it gently before the old woman.

She blinked at it and frowned. "Thick. The kind of thick that tells me it includes prophecies. If she entrusted this to you... I assume she still lives, and all is well?" she asked carefully as she reached out to grab it.

"She's fine. We were attacked by a monarch on the trip to the Bell Church but Lilly and Merit had been there to help us deal with it. And... well..." I shifted a little and then shrugged. "We've talked it out, I guess. Yes. For now all is fine, I think."

The Chronicler smiled in a way that almost made me want to undo all the effort I'd just put into becoming friends with Light. It was that knowing smile, that snide type, that people who were haughty got sometimes. I didn't like it. "As foreseen. I'm glad to hear it. See Mapple? You were panicking over nothing," she said with a huff as she went to opening the letter.

Mapple shifted but said nothing.

"Vim still wants, and plans to step down, though. Light may not have justified his wrath, but he's still upset. I've not been able to sway those feelings or thoughts," I said.

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

"And thus why he's not in here. I'll tease him about it when he shows up finally," she said with a chuckle.

Oh. Woops. "He's not here, he was sent to the coast by Light. One of her prophecies," I said.

The Chronicler immediately stopped messing with the thick letter and looked up at me, her smirk disappearing as she squinted at me. "What...? What prophecy?"

"She foresaw one of the ships being attacked by a monarch. One from the other continent. Vim's gone to try to save them," I said.

She dropped the letter's packaging, her eyes going wide. "No!"

I nodded. "She had been... or was? Very worried about it. In fact she told me in private, after Vim had left, that she fully expects to hear it being sunk. That Vim won't be able to save it," I said. Not that he wouldn't be able to save it in time, but that he wouldn't be able to save it at all. In general.

The Chronicler leaned forward and placed her face in her hands, groaning in grief. "Gods..." she whispered through her emotions.

"When... when is this to happen, Renn?" Mapple asked behind me.

I turned to look at the woman who rarely spoke during such moments, and found her face wrought with concern. "Any moment. It may even already have happened. Vim had left in a hurry, ushered by Light. I um... don't really know much else. Light and I had grown close, and unlike Vim I don't mind hearing about prophecies, but it seems this one had been rather simple. A monarch shows up, then sinks the ship. Somewhere off the coastline near Vorli," I said.

Mapple's whole face trembled, and she looked down and nodded... as if accepting the truth she did not want to hear.

Was... was she just that good of a person to feel such emotions over hearing such a thing...? Or was someone important to her on the ship, I wonder? She looked like she was about to...

Ah, she was. She started crying. Tiny glistening tears could be seen falling from her chin, not hidden by her loose hair.

"May Vim once again perform a miracle. Why are they arriving so early? The next ship is not meant to arrive for years..." the Chronicler was faring a little better. She was now digging through the bundles of papers and small letters that had been in the thick one, likely looking for the very letter and prophecy concerning the ship.

"She doesn't know either." Or at least, hadn't told me if she had.

"Maybe the volcano is already erupting...?" she then asked softly.

Volcano...? "What's that?" I asked.

"The reason they're returning. Though it's not to erupt until..." the Chronicler then glanced up at me and frowned. "You're glowing rather spectacularly, Renn. I'm glad to see it."

Great. She had just done what I had done a few moments ago, and what Vim did all the time. It was a tad annoying, but I couldn't really blame her for it when I'd just done it. Though it was interesting how I've begun to notice easily when someone forcefully changed topics, having so much experience with Vim in doing so.

"Yet still a flat belly," I said happily as I patted my stomach.

"Likely just your thick blood. I'm not sure of a jaguar's gestation period, but you predators typically have longer one's than humans. I knew a thick-blooded cat who had a long pregnancy before, from my youth. It had taken her over a year to give birth," she said.

Oh...? I nodded, glad to be told about what might possibly be important for me one day. "It's kind of weird us being thick of blood makes that happen, when our animal ancestors have such short pregnancies," I said. I knew most animals could give birth in only a few months.

"We're thick in divinity, Renn. More perfect than those without it. Perfection takes time," she reasoned.

I wasn't really sure if that was the case or not, but I was willing to entertain it as a reason for now.

"Well... that all being said, while Vim is gone I plan to escort Randle and Angie up north. If they still plan on doing so, and or haven't left already," I said.

"They're still here. Technically his banishment begins next week, but... it is fine. Take your time. I've already offered my assistance, Randle and I have already dealt with most of what needed to be handled. You... mentioned Lilly and Merit earlier, I'm to assume Lilly will be joining you up north...?" the Chronicler asked, and I noticed the way she frowned as she did so.

She was asking for a different reason. Was she asking to see if Lilly was here, in Telmik, or for another reason though? I wasn't sure if I wanted to know. "Yes. Merit is actually with me too. If you're worried over my protection, I think I can confidently say you don't need to with them joining me," I said.

The Chronicler seemed to relax a little. "That old grouch left Lumen...?"

I shrugged lightly and nodded. "Some of Light's group plan on moving, or already have, into the guild. Those capable of acting as guards and stuff, so Merit took it as an opportunity to travel with us for a while," I said.

"I see..."

"Did you ever figure out anything concerning the monarch's death?" I asked, to get the topic off Merit and because I'd also been worried over it.

"No. In fact it's very concerning that we never did figure it out," she said.

"So weird..." I mumbled. Vim had found it very strange too, but had seemed to give up on it a little quickly even for him. But he had been so focused on Light and her schemes that I think he had not neglected it more than he should have.

"Very. But sometimes such oddities happen, Renn. They're rare, but do occur."

I nodded, I understood that. I really did. I mean... I was married to one of those weird oddities.

For a few moments no one said anything, and I realized that the Chronicler was likely waiting for me to leave so she could read Light's letters. Even if I was the one to deliver them, that didn't mean I had a right to know what was within them. Also, she was the type who found it rude to ignore someone without dire cause. I'd not mind if she read while talking to me, but she herself found it wrong.

"Um... can I ask a favor, Chronicler? Light gave her permission but I'd like to have yours too, if I can," I asked, deciding to finish my concerns and our conversation.

"Hm?"

I gestured lightly at myself. "I'd like to see the archive? Or rather, more precisely the prophecies that Celine left behind. I've decided to try and be the... interpreter? For Vim, concerning them. And I'm told there's still quite a few to be concerned over, so..." I started to explain, unsure of how else to phrase it.

The Chronicler sat up straighter, and a large smile planted itself on her face as she quickly nodded. "Of course...! Absolutely!" she said, a little loudly, and then gestured at Mapple. "You actually already know where some of them are, Renn. The small monarch had made its nest in that library, remember? Many such things are stored there. But there's another, one under the Cathedral, that is more secure. I'll have Mapple escort you there when you'd like to see them," she offered without any hesitation.

Glancing at Mapple, she quickly nodded in agreement at me. "Thank you. I um... I guess I'll go see Randle then, to let him know to prepare to leave. Unless you'd need anything from me? Or ask of me?" I asked, feeling suddenly like Vim all of a sudden.

She chuckled at me and shook her head. "Our worries and troubles are both simple and our own. In-house stuff. Just please let me know before you leave, so we can talk again," she said.

I nodded. That was fine. I wasn't sure if Randle would want to leave today or in a few days, but we all had assumed we'd be here in Telmik for a few days at least. "Then I'll go find him, then. Any idea where he is?" I asked.

"Randle is in his office. I just a bell ago took him a letter," Mapple told me. Okay. I assume she meant his upper-level one, and not the one down below... But just to be sure I gestured downward at the floor, and she nodded. "Yep."

So he was below. In the basement office. Got it.

"Okay then... um... also, I think I should also let you know that I spent a lot of time with Light," I said to the Chronicler. She tilted her head at me, so I went ahead and expanded on my meaning. "I think we became... friends. So... please don't worry anymore, I think." I wasn't going to outright say here and now that I planned on doing all I could to get Vim to put aside his desire to step down, since I wasn't sure if I had the right to do so just yet.

I wanted him to stay the protector. But I also wanted him to be happy. And if being the protector made him sad, then...

The Chronicler softly smiled at me and nodded. "I'm glad to hear that, Renn. But I had known such a thing already. Hopefully between everyone we can keep Vim in check, and hopefully more-so his trip to the sea ends well. I'm... still trying to comprehend what you've informed me of. I assume Light will have more information for me about it here, but..." she sighed as she shook her head and picked up some papers, obviously wanting to dig into them.

I nodded. "please let me know if she says something important concerning it. We had left not long after Vim, so..."

"Of course. Welcome back Renn, just let me or Mapple know when you're ready to check out the archives," the Chronicler said as she went to unfold a letter and go to read it.

Taking that as my cue to leave I nodded and turned around. Mapple was already opening the door, and didn't leave the room as she did. She was going to let me leave and then close the door behind me, likely to have a conversation with the Chronicler after I left.

"Thanks Mapple. I'm glad to see you're here," I said.

"Hm... with Light and her people back I don't have to run around as much," she said with a nod.

I see. So she had been busy all the other times because of a lack of trusted people. Or maybe now they didn't trust her with important duties, since more trustworthy people were now available...

"We'll catch up later, okay?" I said as I left.

"Sure...!" Mapple nodded quickly, seemingly excited to hear me say so.

Leaving the office, I sighed softly after the door shut behind me.

That had gone well, I guess, but I now felt tired.

Stepping away before I could overhear anything that would hurt my heart, I did my best to focus on the sounds of my own footsteps as I heard soft whispers from the room. Luckily I didn't hear anything I didn't want to before I got out of earshot of their voices.

Why was my hearing so darn good now...? I almost didn't like it being so good. I wonder if I could hurt it somehow? Make it worse, on purpose...? But if I did that I might regret it one day, since I might need such hearing to save my life or others...

Heading for Randle's office, I rolled a shoulder and wondered how long we'd be here. I had left my bags with Lilly and Merit at the inn, but at the same time didn't know if I was going to go back and stay with them during the night yet. The room we had gotten had two huge beds, big enough for four of us, but at the same time...

I loved Lilly and Merit. I even loved Lellip, and had no problems with any of them. But at the same time I kind of wanted to sleep alone tonight. Merit moved around a lot while sleeping, and although didn't do so in such a wild way that it hurt or anything it did wake me up a lot. I wasn't used to a random hand or foot just... smacking me in the side or face or something. Vim didn't move at all in his sleep, except in the rarest of cases, so it was not something I was accustomed to at all.

Maybe after taking Lellip back to the inn tonight I'd grab my bag and come back, if the mansio wasn't occupied. That'd give me a chance to spend some time with those here too, as well.

I had people to see, things to take care of... and a few things I needed to do that were personal, too. I wanted to see Vim's mother's statue again. But I knew better than to not handle the important things first.

"Busy, busy..." I whispered.

Hopefully Vim wasn't.