

“SO, IT TAKES the death of your husband for you to come back,” I stated, my gaze locked on my desk. I didn’t need to look up; I knew it was her.

“Why?” Life asked, her voice shaking with rage as she stalked to my desk. “We vowed to work together and not hurt each other. So why did you let him die?”

“Why?” I scoffed, glancing up at her. Did she not understand what she’d done? It seemed that was the case when her only response was crossing her arms and giving me a sharp look. I bit out a chuckle as I stood, rebuttoning my suit jacket, glaring at Life.

“You want to know why?”

“Yes,” she answered, stepping around my desk, her heels clicking against the cold stone floor. “This place used to be so beautiful. The ivy and flowers, the light mist, and the clear skies and sunshine. Now the halls are dark, the mist is a thick fog, the clouds block the sunshine, and almost all the vegetation is shriveled up and dead.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have left,” I retorted through gritted teeth, looming over the woman whom I used to consider a friend. She sighed, her pain evident, but I didn’t show her any kindness. She didn’t deserve it.

“I still did my job,” Life said, her face falling, stepping back. “We used to get along.”

“And you know very well why we don’t anymore,” I replied, keeping a stony expression on my face.

“You could have let me be happy,” she whispered, her voice catching. I didn’t say anything. Instead, I listened to the footsteps that began echoing through the halls. When they stopped, Time stood in the arched stone doorway, twirling his glasses between his fingers before pocketing them.

“You couldn’t let us be happy,” he said, fatigued. An unfamiliar frown found its way onto his face. Life noticed, and I could see it hurt her. It should; she hurt us.

I stepped back behind my desk, letting Time take the lead. “Did you even think about us once?” He walked further into the room, keeping his distance from Life. I watched her fumble for a response; she opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

“You broke the rules,” I stated, saving her from trying to find an answer that wasn’t there. Her eyes pleaded for mercy. But I didn’t speak, letting the pitter-patter of the mice in the walls fill the room. My mind began replaying the day when we made those rules. The day 25 years ago, when the castle was brighter, the walls less cracked, and music from the birds drifted in through the open windows. The day when we all worked together in this castle.

Time braced himself against the hologram table, irritated. "Why are they so stupid? At this rate, we'll have to keep them alive for 500 years so they can fulfill their purpose!" he groaned. "Unless their purpose is to be idiotic."

"You're being overdramatic," I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose as I struggled to focus on the hologram city. Although this was normal, my friend's antics made it hard to work. I'm surprised his hair wasn't gray and falling out.

Time slumped in his seat, watching the little hologram people hurry through the city, cars driving haphazardly. It was nearing the holidays; it was bound to be hectic. If only he understood that. It does happen every year. "So stupid," Time muttered.

"They're human," Life replied, looking away from the table. Did I hear right? Did she just... side with me? Against Time? That was a first.

"What?" Life asked, wary as she spotted the slight smirk on my face.

"Nothing," I shrugged, my smirk only growing. "Just noting that you agreed with me."

"Don't get used to it," she deadpanned.

"She's right," Time agreed, a mischievous smile on his lips. Maybe I celebrated too soon. "You should never agree with adopted siblings."

I sighed, glancing down at my tan skin. Despite not being related whatsoever - each of us having been created to monitor and control the cycle of life on Earth - the pair of them looked almost identical with their fair skin and brown hair, making my tan skin and black hair stick out like a sore thumb. Time always liked to tease me about it, which never bothered me because I never minded the difference. What did bother me was how Time always had impeccable timing. He always got his punchline. "For the last time, we are not siblings. And even if we were, just because I look different wouldn't mean I'm adopted."

Time shrugged. I clenched my ballpoint pen, hating that we were bickering like children. We had jobs to do right now. I willed myself to glance down at the table, a red hologram catching my attention. I frowned; it was unfortunate that someone would be dying so close to the holidays. Unsurprising in that hectic city, but still unfortunate.

"Don't worry about those people living for 500 years. Worry about yourself dying in the next 5 minutes," Life snickered, glancing over at Time. He only rolled his eyes, sliding over to me, helping out with my "project." I spotted Life watching two green holograms rush into the hospital, but I quickly refocused on the slowly dimming light of the red hologram.

We worked peacefully and quietly while a cold draft filled the room, the wind whistling slightly as it blew through the windows.

"We should have kids," Time said.

My head snapped up to face him. What did he just say?

*Life shook her head after recovering from the shock, busying herself with work again. "I'm not going through 9 months of carrying a child and that painful birthing process."*

*I was still reeling from the proposition when Time sighed, tearing his gaze away from the hospital room where the happy couple - still green - held their newborn child. He stood up and began to pace. "Come on, think about it. We-"*

*"No, no. You won't go through giving birth like women do," Life argued, cutting him off. "You're crazy if you think I'd subject myself to that." He was already certifiably crazy before that. One time he suggested we move our castle into the middle of the ocean floor because he thought he heard a knock on the castle's doors. Like we could survive underwater in total darkness. I'm sure any minute now he'd blurt out, "Just kidding!" and get back to work.*

*However, Time continued on as if he didn't just get cut off. "If we go through with this plan, we can have a little taste of what people do. It'll be a break from just staring at this table and worrying about the world. And then, we have a child to pass our jobs onto when they're ready to take on our role. And then we never have to stare at this table again."*

*I looked at Time with a blank expression. I think he was actually serious this time.*

*"I think it's a brilliant idea," Time added when no one answered.*

*"You think anything you say is brilliant," I scoffed, busying myself with the red hologram. Hopefully, he'd drop this silly topic and forget about it by tomorrow.*

*"Having a child is... actually not a bad idea," Life admitted. "Even with all that pain."*

*I turned to her, shocked again. Yet she did side with Time more often than she did with me. But after her vehement opposition, I didn't think she would change her mind so easily. "You can't be serious."*

*She only shrugged. "Do you really want to just kill people for the rest of your life?" I rolled my eyes at the question, scoffing. I did more than just kill people. She knew that.*

*"Way to be blunt," Time snorted in amusement, watching the scene unfold. Of course he would find this funny. He wasn't the one being picked on. It was me. Again.*

*At least Life was a bit kinder. "It's true, though. He is Death."*

*"He helps me kill people," I interjected, motioning towards Time.*

*"I also help people live," Time defended, albeit weakly. He frowned seeing the smirk on my face. Karma was sweet. "Do we have an agreement?" Time huffed, turning the subject away from himself. I returned my focus to the red hologram, its light much duller than before. Whoever this was wouldn't last much longer. And neither would my patience if my friends kept silently staring at me.*

*I blew out a sigh, turning to face the stained-glass window, watching the snow settle on the sill outside. "What happens if I say no?"*

*“We hate you for eternity,” Time quipped.*

*Life chucked a ballpoint pen at the idiot before turning to face me. “Then we don’t do it. It only happens if we all agree,” Life responded.*

*I nodded, burying myself in my thoughts. I could agree, and satisfy all parties here. And maybe it wasn’t as bad an idea as I initially thought. But in my defense, Time came up with the idea. This still had a very good chance of going wrong, which made me wary. We had never done something like this before, and I had two fairly unpredictable friends. But Life was right; I didn’t want to be killing people for the rest of my life. I also would rather not hear Time’s impatient complaints much longer.*

*“Fine,” I agreed, turning to face Life and Time.*

*“Fine? As in yes?” Life asked, surprised.*

*“Don’t give him a chance to change his mind. Take the yes,” Time scolded teasingly. Both Life and I shook our heads at his childishness. He ignored that, speaking up again. “So, the plan is we all have one kid to take over our roles here when it’s time. No other involvement with the human world. Speak now or forever hold your peace.” No one spoke. “Great.” It was settled.*

But it wasn’t.

“You broke the rules,” I said, emotionless. “We didn’t want a full connection to humans. But, you got married. And then, you had four kids, not one. Everything that we said we wouldn’t do, you did. You punished yourself.”

Life looked between Time and me, her eyes searching for something. Something that she had lost. Something that I wouldn’t give her.

“Of all people to lecture me about rules, it’s you two,” she mumbled, looking down at the stone floor. Taking a deep breath and squaring her shoulders, she looked back at us, all traces of grief and vulnerability gone. “Fine. If I’ve broken the rules, what’s the harm in doing a bit more? You already murdered my husband. What else can you do?”

A lot. But I didn’t grace her with an answer.

“I don’t want Dominic, my firstborn, to take on my job. I want Ashlyn to.” She waited a few moments, glancing between Time and me, but when no response came, turned on her heel and left without another word. Her footsteps echoed down the hall, the creaking of the gate the only thing filling the tense silence she left behind.

“She must be crazy!” Time exclaimed, throwing up his hands. “What does she think she’s doing, going against every rule we set? There’s already enough chaos in the world, and she’s just adding to it.”

I agreed, but I kept my composure, sitting down at my desk. After all, I should have seen this coming. Life was the most likely to stray from the plan. But I still wasn't prepared for it. For the betrayal. For the pain.

"She's acting like every other regular person in the world," I spit out. "And if she wants to act like one, we'll treat her like one." It was the only way I could fix this mess. The only way to make sure the world didn't descend into chaos. The only way Life could understand what she'd done. I picked up a pen, began to write. "We'll take up our own roles on Earth. We'll watch her and treat her as a neighbor or the like."

"But she'll know it's us," Time interjected.

"If we hide ourselves well, she won't know. But if she does recognize us, she'll be caught off guard when we show up. And then she'll know we're watching her. With us there, she should come to her senses. If she doesn't, we'll just have to take over."

"You're being terrifyingly vague," he mumbled, eyeing the paper with trepidation as I kept writing.

"We've watched her children from afar since they were born," I explained. "We agree that Dominic is the best one for the job. He's smart enough to act without regard for his emotions. All the others are reckless, just like their mother. We can't have that. That's what got us here in the first place."

"How do we even have a say in this?" Time asked, letting out a frustrated sigh. I decided to give him a moment to think. He'd get there. "She would know if we declared Dominic her successor, and she'd still have the power to change that. The only way we could choose who takes over is if she's-" He paused, his shocked gaze meeting my indifference. He shook his head, a hesitant chuckle leaving his lips, an uneasy smile on his face.

"No, you don't actually mean-"

"That's exactly what I mean." I ripped the paper from my notepad, setting it elsewhere on my cluttered desk along with my pen. "If she won't fix what she's done, we will. Even if that means killing Life."