Not Too Late For Second Chances

by ruthlesslistener

Summary

The Shade Lord sinks its claws into Her fading form, and She thinks that it is over. She is dying, Diminished, and this time there is no one left to remember Her. She has no dreams that She can escape into, no realms to flee to. There is nothing that She can do when the Darkness comes and swallows Her whole.

When she wakes, it is to the crunch of old chitin and the chilling darkness of the abyss. She is a caterpillar again, weak and helpless, and the newborn Lord of Shades holds no interest in killing her, or reclaiming the lands that their sire once took from her. All they care about is reuniting with their siblings and living a life that they were never meant to have- and if that includes hauling her around to help make peace, then so be it. She can either come to terms with her ancient enemy, or die alone in the shadows...again.

When put that way, there's really no choice at all.

Notes

This originally started as a crack au idea tossed about on discord with some friends (you know who you are) about the Radiance getting reborn into a mortal form like the Pale King and realizing that oops, she really had no need to infect people and start an apocalypse whatsoever, all she had to do was collapse a civilization and then help clean it up when the
old god died of guilt. And then, with me being me, it kinda just snowballed from there. Aw fuck.

Just a fair warning, I have no idea where this is going or ending. I started writing it expecting it to be like 1,000 words at most and now it's 5,000 so it's really just gonna keep on going on without me controlling it much. I mean, it's a crackfic, but if you're expecting serious retribution for miss mothbitch's crimes then it's really not going to come any farther than her being forced to relive her baby years (the most horrifying punishment of all imo)
Prologue: The End of Light

It is dark, and there is no one around to hear Her scream.

She tries anyways. The wound the Void tore in Her throat drips and glows with loosed essence, clogging the memory of a voicebox, but She is a God and the form She took in the dreamworld was only ever a comfort to Her wounded pride anyways. She screams, and screams, howling with all the burning anger holding the scattered bits of Her soul together, but it does not matter. The living darkness coils and chokes, and Her voice dies out before it so much as manifests as a memory of what She used to sound like when Her cry could be heard for miles among the desolate wastelands from which They all rose.

Choked out. Extinguished. Stolen. She has been rendered as mute as the children of the Wyrm have been, when that hapless bastard drowned them in the dark sea. All of them, born to kill Her, born to be mute so that none of the creatures that raised them could hear them cry out their suffering, so that She would never be able to twist their voices to Her benefit. Powerless, useless, unimportant in Her eyes until one of them trapped Her in their mind and their clutchmate returned to finish Her off. Their claws are sunk deep into Her fur, and still She is astounded that they slipped Her grasp and ascended.

She is dying. Her beloved moths had stopped listening to Her ages ago, the only one that survived to remember Her passed to the beyond just before the hatchling came to kill the vessel. She had been dying for centuries, but only now does She feel fear, instead of the all-consuming burning anger that suffused her fading form when the Pale King took her subjects and gave them minds of their own.

Somewhere above Her, beyond the burning, broken white eyes of Her captor’s shade, eight glowing eyes open in the darkness. The claws in Her side tighten, tearing through fluff and carapace. There is a new god in Hallownest, blooded and ascended, and She, twice-forgotten god of light, can do nothing about it.

She tries to heal, to focus. To try to scream again, to try to come to barter with the darkness in a way that She never tried to do with the Pale King, thief of light. But the claws shred through Her body with a violence that drains Her faster than She can think, and before She can try to muster the energy to fight against it, the darkness rises, and swallows Her whole.
Waking up comes as a surprise.

Tentatively, she opens her first pair of eyelids, trapping her glowing eyes under a thin film lest her shine allow the Shade Lord to pinpoint her location. There is still darkness all around her, but it is not living, it does not wriggle and writhe and scorch her with the weight of its anger and possessiveness. Puffs of darker mist, nearly sentient, coil around her body, but it is lazy and drifting with the purposeless misdirection of primordial energy pools, and so she ignores it, even as it mists in her fur and chills her so deeply that her shivers threaten to wrack her apart.

...She has not felt cold in millennia. There was no such thing as temperature in the dream realm, and any memory of it that she toyed with never brought discomfort on her end. She should not be vulnerable to the elements.

With an indignant squeak (and when had her shrieks turned to squeaks?), she struggles to rise, to look around and her surroundings and seek out and destroy the source of her irritation. She never let herself feel the elements when she was delving into the minds of bugs and beasts- nor the pain that inevitably occurred when her attempts to resurrect a body inevitably tore theirs apart- and she wasn’t about to start now. Metamorphosis was never supposed to be a painful thing, no matter the strain it put on the body, and the bugs that the Pale King had gifted will to were not her subjects anyways. Would never be her subjects, as long as their gratitude turned to him, usurper, rival. She had forced their minds open with her songs and her light to feed her fading body, had liquified the guts of the resistant to form her new cocoon. Only the shackles of the vessel had kept her from forming a physical body, the Void of their carapace trapping her within, but she had slowly eaten them from the inside out, too, ignoring the cold burn of the darkness against her spirit, the thrashing panic of their mind. If their sibling hadn’t come to kill her, she was sure that she could have reformed and retaken her territory before long.

She can’t get up.

Her anger vanishes in an instinct. A cold chill thrums through her, one that has nothing to do with the darkness enveloping her. She had died, hadn’t she? She had died in the dream realm- she must be some sort of scattered scrap of a memory floating about in the realm between dreams, like she had when the remains of her tribe had turned their worship to the Wyrm. She had been able to pull herself into a passable form then, there should be no reason why-

She can’t feel her wings; the brittle, shifting floor under her pokes directly into the fur of her back.
instead of soft feathers. When she reaches forward, into the darkness, two chubby little forelegs are all that wave out at her, barely peeking out of her fuzz. When she slides back the film covering her eyes, staring in astonishment, the light barely casts farther than her body- her fat, little body- illuminating the shards of broken vessel masks that she lay on. One of them, nearly fully intact, was almost as big as she was.

By the stars, she was a *caterpillar* again.

The indignity of her rebirth hit her before the gratitude did, and she let out a shriek of anger that echoed in the oppressive, thrumming air. Again, she tried to struggle upright, but only succeeded in curling and uncurling her clumsy, tubby body- and what a useless form it was too, so soft and fragile and ungainly- the clatter of the shifting carapace fragments uncomfortably loud in the pulsating quiet of the Abyss. All she managed to do was wriggle herself deeper into the pile, the sharp edges of broken masks poking painfully into her soft side. Her struggles warmed her, at the very least, shivers subsiding as her wrath rekindled her natural glow, but that was a small comfort when she was still on her back, unbalanced and painfully vulnerable.

She never wanted this. Wyrm chose his death and rebirth deliberately, so that he could be free of the tearing violence of his kind, so that he could play dollhouse with the little bugs that he loved so dearly; all she wanted was to share in the joy of her chosen, feeling their awe and delight in her light shiver through their dreams. When she attempted to regain her physical body through the infection, it was with the intention of being reborn as her ascended self, not as a *larva*. Not like *this*. Had she had a choice in her rebirth, she never would have picked this form again. It was simply undignified.

Across the sea of darkness, something shifts, something awakens from its slumber, drawn by her glow and her desolate squeaking. She feels the pull of its mind the second it flickers into consciousness, moments before those damnable white eyes open and fix unerringly on her wriggling form. The Shade Lord has awakened.

And there’s *nothing* she can do about it.

For the second time in millennium, the Radiance feels afraid. She tries to wriggle around again, to flip herself over so her vulnerable underside isn’t left uncovered, but once she rolls onto her side, she can’t reach over to pull herself up, stubby baby legs waving uselessly in the air. Silently, the Shade lord uncurls itself from its perch; she can see it coming, can sense the cold twisting of its thoughts, and the fear that grips her paralyses her movements. Quietly, it comes to her from across the abyssal ocean, many arms clumsily propelling its long, serpentine body through the waters, until it towers above her, the soft huffs of its breaths freezing gales that blow her fur wildly back and forth. Where the sloshing of the waters around it should be, there is only silence; distantly, she can hear the quiet echo of the waves, the thrum of not-life permeating this damnable place, the quiet scritch-scratch of the shadow creepers above. But where the God of Shadows lies, no sound escapes; for they are the antithesis to voice, all thought, all of what made her powerful and strong in the days before queens and kings, when the cries of her kin and the beasts below was the only sound permeating the endless wastelands that made up their territories.

She finds, in her instinctive desire to *get them away*, that she still does have some of her power left, after all. With all the strength and soul her tiny little body can muster, she summons a trio of Swords of Radiant Light, blinding in the clouded darkness, and shoots them right at the Shade Lord. They hone in on it without much prompting from her, drawn in by its inherent gravitas, and sink deep into its snout(?) before it has enough time to do much more than blink one set of eerily-glowing eyes.
The reaction is instantaneous. The Shade Lord reels back, a vibration of not-sound blanketing out all the other ambient sounds of the abyss, and slaps at her with one of its tendrils, lashing out blindly. The flat side of its claw slams into her body with enough force to send her flying through the air, knocking all the breath out of her, and for a good long moment she just lies there, startled and throbbing. They hadn’t torn her open—though they were more than capable of it, the claw that hit her had been bigger than her entire body twice over—but they had bruised her, badly enough that breathing hurt. Distantly, she heard hiccuping, soft and squeaking and desperate, like a newly-hatched larvae struggling to breathe. It took her a second to realize that it was her.

With a not-rumble, the Shade Lord creeps closer again, sliding slowly over the sea of old husks to her. There is something almost...hesitant about it, something shivering on the edge of its aura that feels familiar. Like it was being submissive, asking for forgiveness. Tentatively, she reaches out to touch minds to it, her anger and instinctual defensiveness at the presence of another god frozen under her shock at being thrown around.

The regret she feels is less of a quantified understanding of the emotion, and more like a feeling gone physical, a sensation that washes over her like the tide and clutches her self into a tight, defensive little ball. The creatures of Void do not think in words; she knows well enough from ages spent clawing at the mind of her captor, sifting through memories and emotions that churned and slipped through their grasp like slithering black oil. But that vessel was weak, and raised in the Light of its father, watching and learning from other bugs and gods until it was something she could very nearly understand herself, even though touching its Shade hurt her. This new god—Void given mind and form—had possession of their greater form barely longer than she had her new caterpillar body, and its mind cascades through hers in a slippery waterfall of sensation that she can barely begin to parse, let alone begin to attach labels to.

*Tight-in-thorax bile-in-throat hurt echo hurt. Hurt not thought of not planned. Hurt in mask electricity crackle-through-skin arm lash out not thought hurt small soft that was enemy-not-enemy. Not want. Enemy-not-enemy anymore hurt not-needed. Ache in thorax ache everywhere not place to sleep nothing-here siblings safe siblings with Shade siblings with web lost above hurt cracked distant. Fight done territory safe sibling safe no more hurt did hurt now cramping bad not supposed to be here put-back hurt fix. She hurt? They fix?*

“Stu.” Her mandibles are not formed to make physical words, not yet, and she lets out a huff of exasperation and shoves her frustration out for the Shade Lord to take, where she’s sure even a void being like them can understand it. Rising onto her back legs to wave at them is a wobbly process, and an achy one, but feeling like she had some semblance of control over her new body was more than worth it. *Stop it, I am well. Stuck in this dismal form, but I will live. Why on earth do you care?*
They shouldn’t, and it bothers her. She hasn’t had a cordial meeting with one of her kind since before their sire hatched; gods were not social creatures on principal. The last of her species that she remembers being anything close to friendly with had been her brother, the wandering Nightmare, and that was before he had split himself into three forms, to prevent himself from fading as easily as the rest of them. She had thought it a stupid decision, and her last memory was of the diminished dream manifestation of him running away from her light beams, hissing and
spitting at her territoriality. She was sure he was laughing at her now, wherever he was.

The Shade Lord huffs again, and presses their snout closer to her. Their skin— if it could even be called that— ripples and shifts like oil, radiating a deadly chill that her fur and aura just barely protect her against. It’s closer to touching dry ice than being assaulted by a chilled breeze, and burns her just the same when she tentatively rests her forelimbs on their shifting carapace. War fought battle done Infection gone stopped. No need.

It was an unsettlingly simple answer to a not-so-simple problem. She curls her forelimbs under her fur, away from the stinging cold of the Shade Lord, and tries her best to glare at them. No need? Lord of Void, even with your father assuming a lesser form, that did nothing to reduce his power once he achieved his full growth. I will be just as much of a threat to your territory when I undergo metamorphosis as I was before I gained a physical body—nay, moreso. For I will have no need to drag myself back from being forgotten through dreams of my radiant light, nor will I have to twist the bodies of your children to do my bidding as your father the Pale Wyrm forced me to.

She expects anger at her words. She expects violence, and for the jaws that she knows hide under the mask to split wide open and swallow her whole. But when she extends her burning mind out to the cold abyss of her enemy’s, all she gets is...reluctance?

No. Exhaustion.

I am not a king, they say, and it is the first coherent sentence that she has heard them say, even when listening to the churning whispers swimming on the edges of their mind. They push a litany of sights and sensations into her mind; Hallownest as they had seen it when they were still called Little Ghost, a tumult of pictures and feelings that she parses through with the expertise of shifting through hundreds of scattered dreams. The curiosity and longing that stains each memory surprises her a little, but not so much as the clarity and ease with which the thoughts are conveyed to her. The Pure Vessel had been easier to understand than the Shade Lord, soul-void halfling that they were, but whenever their thoughts had manifested into spoken word it was always accompanied by such an arsenal of regrets and anxieties that she hadn’t the will to do much more than poke at them to watch the way their shade hissed and writhed. It had hurt her to try to interact with directly, like catching an antennae in a patch of thorns. But while this interaction still stung at the edges of her consciousness, it was not unbearable, and the tangled knot of emotions she had gotten so used to evoking in her vessel was not present here. It was just the Void, pouting like a little grub over something that she had murdered for. Just Ghost.

Just Ghost? She asks— scoffs, really, for that is no name for a god. The Wyrm did not name his creations.

Not Wyyrm. They think, very rapidly, a series of images of their father’s corpse— as it was rotting on Kingdom’s Edge, as a diminished husk reclining on their throne, as an unattainable light glowing bright against the Abyss— and just as quickly throw them away again. They had never known their sire as anything more than an unattainable figurehead, and they did not care about him. Instead, they fill her mind with images of greenery, the cold gleam of a needle pointed at them by a bug that looked so much like their siblings that it hurt. She felt, secondhand, the electric shiver of shock that had vibrated through them, the buzz of revelation as she called them ‘Little Ghost’. The pain of her needle striking home had not diminished her in their mind; they had been hatched in a world where they had to crawl out from under the broken husks of their clutchmates, such a minor inconvenience bothered them none. Sisssssterrrrrr.

Still not an acceptable name for a god, she grumbles, but it has no heart to it. She is shivering now, despite her fur, and the ends of her legs have grown numb with cold. She tucks them closer under
her coat and tries not to let her exhaustion through their mental link. Darkness take her, she had not remembered how burdensome physical bodies could be. *You cannot expect me to call you by that when you are in this form.*

*No,* they think, and warmth bubbles up from their mind even as they think of the colours and light of Hallownest, of a broken mask left behind. *But I not stay.*

Chapter End Notes

The Radiance looks like one of those super-hairy fluffball caterpillars but with glowing eyes and three antennae. It's cute as fuck. She, queen of light and ruler of moths, righteously hates it.
This next section wasn't supposed to be this long but then more and more people started showing their asses up so I had to write more bc I'm literally unstoppable when it comes to meticulously detailing everything. Someone pls help I'm dying

Just a fair warning, I'm still pretty new to the game and I don't really talk about it much other than with a few friends, so I'm pretty heavy on the headcanons here. I don't know what the 'normal' or 'accepted' lore theories are so I'm just kind of going apeshit off of my own interpretation of the game

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes them a little longer to leave the Abyss. The Shade Lord cannot touch her for long without freezing her to death, and she does not need to touch their mind again to know that the dry warmth of her aura burns them. Instead, they set about creating her a sort of sling to ride in, crafted from the detritus around them with the help of their sibling’s shades. Before she knows it, they are pushing the sling towards her with one ropy tendril, their eerie white eyes surrounded by a ring of smaller, more cautious lights. It’s like a little, ragged cocoon made off of a broken mask and a material that she recognizes as the little vessel’s cloak when it fought her. She hadn’t realized that it crafted itself a cover from the bodies of its own siblings. She hadn’t realized they had true bodies at all, at least not until she wriggles herself close enough to see what her new transport system was made from.

Some of the Pale King’s children had wings. She scoots her fat, clumsy little body into their dusty grey embrace, and tries not to shiver when she feels it rustle against her back. Even when piloting the husks of Hallownest’s inhabitants, she had not had a personal relationship with them. She thinks back to her tribe’s ways of honouring her dead, and comforts herself with knowing that she, at least, raised a civilization that knew respect.

(At least, before they forgot about her and left her to die, alone and unwanted and the anger of her betrayal had burned away the ashes of her corpse into essence on the wind.)

The Shade Lord has no such qualms about using their hatchmate’s discarded bodies as a tool. She’s hardly wriggled herself around in her little carrier before they hook a claw around a pair of handles attached to the eyeholes of the mask, and begin to climb, their long forearms dragging their long, wormlike body out of the Abyss. Her carrier swings wildly in their claws, dizzying her despite her vivid memories of free flight, and she squeaks to herself and tucks her head under her forelegs to try to wait out the ride, nausea churning through her as they slither through the tunnels under the kingdom.

Only once the Shade Lord has stopped does she dare to peek her head out from her cocoon- and the aura of Void she pokes her antenna into nearly suffocates her immediately. The entrance to the Black Egg Temple looms ahead, darkness billowing out of it in clouds, Void dripping freely from the broken stone forming it. The Shade Lord, stops, already half-squeezed in, then lets out a soft breath and turns around to place her on the steps outside, abyssal sludge curling away from her as she settles.
They wuffle at her again, almost as if telling her to stay put— as if she could go anywhere!— and slither their long body back into the temple, shifting until their tail has enough room to squeeze inside. She tucks her legs under herself and wonders, not for the first time, if they have any idea of what they’re doing— if the form they took was voluntary, or if it was a direct result of them being a child of the Wyrm, to look so like the Pale King did before he shifted into something more suitable for ruling.

She gets her answer when the Shade Lord returns from the temple, a broken mask clutched in one vast hand, a nail wrapped in a familiar cloak in another. They look at the ruins of their belongings with such dismay that she could practically feel their father’s consciousness churning beyond the vast bounds of the world, and set their nail gently down next to her, lifting the shards of their mask up to their face with their newly-freed talons.

*Useless.* She tries to beam her mental voice to them, but she is very small and very tired and they do not feel particularly inclined to listen, so her tiny cry goes unheeded. *You are not a creature of creation. Do not try to waste your energy—*

With a sickening *shlorp,* Void lines up the mask and squelches the fragments back together, creating a unified, seamless white front. Triumphant, the Shade Lord humms, the vibration of their body rattling her around like a ragdoll, before they curl up their body into a tight, concentrated orb of pure Void and stream back into their own mask, reforming their old body with a soft ‘*pop!*’ of energy and the clumsy *thud* of someone hitting stone.

The Radiance clicks her mandibles back together and sighs.

The little vessel that killed her gingerly rises from the cobblestones, examining themselves carefully. From what she can see, there is no difference between the old body and the new (beyond maybe the sheen of a soft carapace, but she was hardly paying attention to what they looked like when she was fighting them in Godhome), but they still take a little bit of time to pat themselves over and make sure they’re all together before they pick up their nail again and sling on their cloak.

Exactly a heartbeat after their cloak settled, an excited black-and-red form burst into being with a hiss of red flame, flying circles around Little Ghost’s horns while shrieking like the massive, bug-eating monsters that hunted bugs at the edges of the world. The Radiance, who had not heard such screams since the very beginning of the world, could only watch in stunned horror as the spawn of her brother’s mortal form settled into Ghost’s waiting arms with a croon of delight, enveloping them in his dark, leathery wings.

And then his great red eyes turned on her, and he saw her, and stiffened, and she was on her feet and readying herself before he could even think to hiss, readying a shield before her to spare herself the worst of his flames. They did not burn her last they met, for though they claimed their separate kingdoms dream and nightmare could never truly be as divided as they wished to be, but they still stung like a vengefly and she was much more diminished than she was—

The fireball never came. Quick as a whisper, Ghost’s little hand clapped down on Grimmchild’s mouth, turning them away from Radiance so that their mouth was pressed to the spot where their mask met their shoulder, patting gently and with the ease of long practice. Grimmchild gurgled plaintively, giving his friend a betrayed look, but kept his mouth shut when Ghost eventually let him go, swarming up their side to rest between their horns and glare at her balefully like a creature born of, well… a nightmare.

*You have to be kidding me. You cannot possibly expect me to be able to handle these conditions!*

She tried to scold Ghost verbally, sure that the Lord of Shades would prefer it in their newly-physical form, but all she was able to produce was mangled words and squeaking. Come to think of
it, she wasn’t even sure if they’d be able to understand her even if she could- for all she knew, the
dialect she was accustomed to using could be ancient. The idea discomfited her nearly as much as
seeing her twin brother did. The Nightmare Heart is not to be dallied with- are you seriously going
to tell me that you expect me to get along with this...this...facimale of family? That you think my
sibling is a friend worthy of your trust? Answer me, Shade Lord!

Little Ghost looked up from their charm set, gave Grimmchild a long, considering look, then
shrugged and went back to sorting their things. Radiance was almost certain that the last time her
brother had looked that smug was when he had stolen some of her worshipers and gotten them into
wearing red eyeliner, a horrible decision that had ended with the last respectable portions of his ruff
shorn into shreds by her swords. Not that he seemed to care much. She was pretty sure that it had
just aided him in his decision to style it like a hideous cape.

Ghost tucked the last of their belongings under their cloak, took out their map, and traced a path on
it with one stubby arm, lingering on some destination that she couldn’t see. Grimmchild let out a
raspy ‘mrrr’ of delight, and, with a decisive nod, they buckled on their nail, tossed Grimmchild
into the air, and scooped up her carrier to sling onto their back like some sort of pack.

Where are we going? She demanded, squirming around to try to look over their shoulder. It was
difficult- her legs were just barely long enough to peek out from her fur, hindering her movement-
but when she rested her forelimbs on Ghost’s shoulder, the god’s aura no longer burned her. I may
be diminished in this form but I am still a goddess. Wherever we are headed, I demand it had
adequate protection for three higher beings. I refuse to die for the second time this millennium just
because your standards are lower than they should be.

Grimmchild hissed at her, but Ghost just looked at her, pulled out their map, and pointed to a
destination marked with a red pin. The written words swam before her eyes, familiar but
indecipherable; she had picked up scattered fragments of the language from the dreams of the bugs
she had possessed, but she hadn’t learned it.

I don’t know what that means, she protested, and Ghost shrugged, hefted their nail, and started
trotting along. Their movement jostled her, forcing her to cling tightly to her cloak, but it did not...
upset her like being swung through the air did. Her very little brother shot off ahead with a
rustle of leathery wings, spouting gouts of flame at the withered nodes of infection still lingering
about the Crossroads. Some fireballs hit bubbles that hid bodies under their radius, and the smell
that wafted up from the burning carapaces was truly hideous.

(She does not feel regret. She will not feel regret. She did what she had to do, and these bugs
abandoned her for the usurper. They deserved the burning, the upheaval, the deaths.)

(She tries not to think about how easy it would be for the two godlings she traveled with to kill her.
The Void was the reaper of regret, the Nightmare Heart the scavenger of dying kingdoms, and she
their fallen harbinger. How easy would it be for them to turn on her, to devour her whole? Her little
sibling wouldn’t even remember it was her until after his current host died, and the Ghost...she had
no idea what plans lingered in their consciousness, and she was too wary of their cold, tangled
thoughts to try to decipher them.)

Ghost forged ahead as if they couldn’t smell the stench at all- and maybe they can’t, though she
does remember faintly smelling the ripe sweetness of rot and dying bug when the Hollow Knight
was too tired to keep her out of the forefront of their mind- and leaps up onto a chain leading up a
well, scrambling surprisingly quickly for a bug with a burden. It jostled her, and she muffled a
squeak of surprise in their cloak, pushing her face down as her abdomen clenched and roiled.

She forgot what having a stomach felt like. She hated it already.
The faint noise of someone mumbling grew louder as they ascended the chain, and, as soon as the vessel’s feet touched solid ground, she poked her head out again, hoping that seeing her surroundings would help ground her. It didn’t clear the spinning fog from her head, but it did distract her when she saw the source of the noise.

Ah. *That* one. She had never successfully managed to infiltrate that bug’s head—though she also never really wanted to. Just skimming the surface of their mind felt like sinking into a mire of repetitive dullness and self-important clamor. One curious touch had been enough to send her fleeing, never to bother with them again.

Oh, and it saw them. Great.

“You!” barked the bug, scowling fiercely at them. “Come to bother me again, eh? I thought you’d died in the caverns, and good riddance. You and your pet demon are no match for the beasts below. Not like I, Zote the Mighty, who has slain many a mighty beast with my great nail, Life Ender. Leave the glory to the adults, grub! If you die to monsters then it will be all your fault, and I would not mourn you. Hmph!” Behind them, a beetle girl gasped in awe, and the annoying bug-Zote- seemed to swell to twice his size, preening under the attention.

Had the Radiance still been in power, she would have blasted this bug into ash for daring to talk to her like that, or at the very least break open their mind to see what had gone so horribly wrong in their head for them to dare to talk as such to a goddess. But the Lord of Shades did no such thing; instead, they merely tipped their head at Zote curiously, as if they didn’t understand his words, and continued on walking by. Grimmchild dove at Zote’s horns as they passed, knocking him over with an indignant shout, and the Radiance watched, disgusted, as he failed to right himself, his horns caught in the broken flagstones.

His little admirer didn’t seem to notice. Her attention had turned entirely to Ghost—*to her*, the Radiance realized, with a jolt of surprise—and she let out a soft squeal of delight that made Grimmchild squawk in dismay and Ghost to pause and look back, fathomless dark eyes seeking out the new disruption.

“Oh! You found a grub in the ruins! Did you save her too, fierce knight?” The beetle girl flushed hard enough at her own words to bring a glow to her shell, but her eyes remained trained on the Radiance, forelimbs pressed to her cheeks to restrain a squeal. “Oh, she’s so cute! May I hold her? I-I mean, if you don’t mind.” Her delighted smile dropped, and she rubbed her foreclaws over each other, a nervous habit. “I’m not...not many bugs would let me.”

*Absolutely not,* the Radiance nearly said, by reflex. She was a goddess of light, *the* goddess of light. She was not a caterpillar to be cooed over by bugs barely out of their third molt. She was to be looked up to by these lesser beings as someone to be feared and respected, not passed around like a loaf of bread.

But...she was a caterpillar now, a goddess dethroned. And she was vaguely breadloaf-shaped. And no one had looked at her like that in a long, long time, even after she had woken up again and realized that she was so, so alone.

Grimmchild gave Radiance an assessing look, then carefully slipped the sling off their back and picked her up. Their hands were cold, eliciting an involuntary squeak from her, but she barely had any time to feel mad at herself about it before warm claws sunk into her fur and held her close.

“Ohoo,” the beetle breathed, and awkwardly shuffled her around so that she could hold her and pet her at the same time. “Ohh, you’re so pretty! How could anyone leave you behind? You’re not like me at all, you—” she glanced over at the Shade Lord again, colour rushing back to her cheeks, and
cut herself off, claw stilling. The Radiance squeaked grumpily, rising out of the warm haze the petting put her into, and she hurried to resume her stroking, carefully preening her fur back into place. “You’re so soft and cute, I don’t know how anyone would abandon you. Unless...they didn’t mean to do it at all.” She deflated a bit, then gently patted her head and handed her back to Ghost, turning positively scarlet when their fingers brushed her claws. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you...are you trying to find someone to look after her?” She fiddled with her claws again, averting her eyes. “I...I don’t mean to insult your skills, valiant knight, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a grub that’s looked like her before. And I don’t think Elderbug does, either.”

Ghost looked down at the Radiance, tilting her two and fro (she grumbled at them, but they paid her about as much mind as they did Grimmchild, who was now attempting to terrorize the lumeflies in the lantern), then nodded. They looked around, peering between the dwellings as if looking for someone, then pointed meaningfully at a bench nearby, draping the Radiance over their shoulders like a scarf (she considered biting them for the insult, felt the cold seep in under her feet, and decided against it).

“A-are you looking for Elderbug?” The beetle girl’s voice seemed to be failing her, her confidence dwindling without a cute caterpillar to coo over, though Ghost took no notice of it. The Radiance snorted quietly at her and curled her forelimbs in their cloak, anchoring herself. She couldn’t see very well like this, but the pose made the strange clenching in her abdomen calm down, at least. “He’s...he’s sleeping. There was a commotion down below...I don’t know anything else, sorry. He told me not to go down and he seemed so frightened that I didn’t want to ask.”

She mumbled another apology at their blank stare, then fled, darting past Zote to a little dwelling not far from the entrance to the Crossroads. Ghost looked towards the well, then down at their hands, as if they could still see the blood of the Hollow Knight smearing them, void tainted with sunbursts of orange. It was...strange, to feel guilt radiate so strongly off of an aura that didn’t belong to her old jailer, and the Radiance unhooked her grip from the vessel’s cloak and wriggled her way back to her carrier to escape it, trying to quell a new squirming in her guts that had nothing to do with her reborn physicality.

A red glow ahead caught her eye before she was able to make much progress, stopping her in her tracks. There, perched precariously on a lumafly lantern, was Grimmchild- and his gaze was fixed longingly on a set of circus tents set up outside of Dirtmouth, distant singing and laughter that she had originally attributed to celebrating survivors carrying over on the breeze.

There was no question who those tents belonged to. Even without the distinctive red flair of the fabric, even if her memories had been wiped upon her death, the Radiance would recognize her brother’s aura anywhere. The hum of his power thrummed distantly under her skin, like a second heartbeat, and as she focused intently on the rhythm the beat pulsed, she could feel how thickly his magic wove through the air, songs of protection guarding his subjects from the hostile lands around them. No longer did it call to her, their worlds and her power sundered, but that did not change the fact that he was here, and that they seemed to be headed straight for him.

The red pin on the map made a lot more sense now. She wished it didn’t. If Grimm was to see her in this state, he would never be able to let her forget it.

“No!” she squealed, loud enough that the Grimmchild hissed at her and Zote paused in dusting himself off to stare. “No, I refuse! I refuse to see Grimm again! Shade Lord Ghost, surely you must understand how heinous sibling rivalry can be! I have not seen my brother in an age and a half and I do not wish for that to change. His mockery and contempt is not worth whatever you seek.”

Ghost considered her, considered the Grimmchild above, looked to the tents, to the well leading
down to Hallownest below, to the grumbling false knight polishing his useless shellwood nail then back again. Nothing happened, nothing new presented itself. They looked at her, and a tendril of their thoughts reached out to her with a whisper of confusion, but it faded against the brightness of her mind before it manifested fully, leaving her just as confused as to their intent as they must have felt with her reluctance.

Then they shrugged and started walking towards the tents.

Grimmchild bolted off towards their home with a shriek of delight, but Radiance let out an equally-loud squeak of anger and dug her limbs into their cloak, trying to jab uselessly at them with her nubby little feet. “No! Stop! I demand it!” Screeching got her nowhere and earned her nothing but strange looks, so she reached down and grabbed onto the end of their cloak with her mandibles, tugging uselessly. “No, I don’t want to go! Cease! Desist with this useless behavior at once! Stop it!”

All Ghost did was adjust the lay of their cape and carry on. The jolt of movement finally knocked her from her perch into her carrier, and her futile wails were muffled momentarily as she sought to right herself, angrily-squeaked, mangled curses fading to an upset mutter until she could hook her front legs over the side and stick her head out to scream again.

She was too late; they had already passed into the hallway of the main tent, eerie scarlet flames guttering The melancholy sound of an accordian ceased, the heavyset bug playing it eyeing her warily. The Grimmchild let out a raspy ‘mrrah!’ of happiness and dove straight for their ruff, but the musician caught and pinned him before he could land, idly stroking a thumb over one diminutive horn when the godling tried to wiggle free.

“Mrmm. So you return.” the bug held the Grimmchild out with the ease of long practice. Ghost opened their arms and let them drop back into their grip, a raspy ‘nyah!’ of indignation sounding out as hot, leathery wings smacked against cold, soft Void. The Radiance nearly got a wingtip caught between her mandibles, and snapped her mouth shut before her baby brother’s new vessel got the idea to try to do it deliberately. “Master’s in his tent. He’ll want to see this.”

Ghost nodded at him and began to patter off towards a doorway, before pausing midstep, retreating from it slowly. The Radiance eyed them curiously, before her waving antennae caught on a thread of power, woven tight around the entrance to protect against intruding higher beings. She wasn’t particularly surprised by it- though her brother held no territory of his own in the physical realm, even he had his limits- but she was surprised that Ghost seemed to be. Surely they had felt the push of his protecting spells even before they ascended?

Apparently not. Ghost planted their feet on the far edge of the invisible line and craned their head forward, peering almost anxiously into the tent. Grimmchild circled above their head and chirped a question, but still the newfledged god did nothing, teetering on the brink of the enchantment as if they had suddenly gotten cold (heh) feet.

The Radiance, who had never wanted to go anywhere near the circus in the first place, squeaked: “Are you going to go are you going to just stand here and waste our time like a fool? I see you inherited your father’s spine, Wyrmblood!”

Ghost startled, tipping their head to the side to look at her. It was not a dramatic movement- the Radiance was sure if she hadn’t been bundled against them, she would have missed it- but it was enough. One of their horns clipped a nearby dream sigil, and for the span of a heartbeat the small, masked entity that the Lord of Shades cloaked themselves as dissolved, blurring into a gnashing dark mess of thorns and tendrils and glowing white eyes. It was terrifying, and right there, and the Radiance’s anger melted away into a familiar pang of terror, a loud squeak leaving her as she
scrambled to get away from the lashing dark shape.

The moment ended. The visage of her ancient enemy faded back into the familiar outline of Little Ghost, who stared back at her with hollow, empty eyes that betrayed nothing of the power that dwelt under their shell. Grimmchild ‘mrrr-ed’ disapprovingly, and the echo of her squeal was left to echo around the tent, the sound leaping from flame to crackling flame instead of dying out like it should have.

“Brumm? Brumm, my friend, what is with all this commotion?” A familiar rasping voice sounded out from doorway, and, with a rustle of fabric, her brother’s current shell lifted the tent flap, peering out with a distinctly harried look that the Radiance knew, for a fact, was 100% on purpose. His aura flickered and danced with living fire, and the Radiance froze, hardly daring to breathe as the familiar feeling beat down on her fur. The Grimmchild let out a happy cackle and dove straight for his chest, and the Troupe Master blinked and opened up the span of his wings further, so that his progeny might cling to his chest and nuzzle up under his father’s ruff. “I could have sworn I felt- oh, hello my child.” Grimm stroked under the Grimmchild’s chin with one claw, the rusty rumble of their purrs filling the tent. He looked from them down to Ghost, and blinked again, slowly, a wry smile quirking his lips. “So the little shade ascends. My congratulations, child of Wyrm and Root. Long have the dreams of this land been drenched in light; a little shade might be all that it takes for it to finally heal and lie fallow again. Though I will never know if we don’t complete the ritual, hmm?”

He bared his fangs in an easy smile, the friendliest gesture he could manage with a set of teeth literally catered to elicit nightmares. Ghost certainly had no problem with it; they bounced slightly in place and tilted their head to the side again, jostling her deeper into her carrier. Grimm purred softly at their antics, a low, subvocal rumble that vibrated along her antennae and left her head buzzing unpleasantly. “Even so...I could have sworn I heard a different child in here. A caterpillar, to be specific, though my sister’s tribe has been dead for quite some time now. Where on Earth…?”

She doesn’t even have the chance to try to teleport away (though she’s not attempted it yet in this form, and probably shouldn’t for the health of everyone around her). Ghost makes a quick, complicated little sign with one hand, then reaches around and slides her carrier off their back with a flourish, lifting her as high in the air as they could.

Aw, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanons I think deviate from the norm: the void sibling’s cloaks. Honestly these are probably supposed to be part of their wings or something, but whatever, it looks like clothes so I treat it like clothes, and since they seemingly crawled out of the abyss then I can only assume it came from the corpses of other dead siblings. I mean, it fits in theme with the story, so why the hell not?

Grimm’s entire situation is kinda weird and not so clear-cut as Ghost’s is so I’m just going off of my own interpretation that the Nightmare Heart, Grimm, and Nightmare King were all one main god at first, but they split themselves into three weaker forms to try to keep themselves from suffering a dangerous killing blow like what happened to the Radiance (bc if the Pale King can die a fuckoff-huge dragon-adjacent creature and return as a godbug then idk why one god can’t separate themselves into their main
components). The Nightmare Heart is the primal source of his power in its purest, most raw form, existing in all realms, the Nightmare King is his dream manifestation of himself, and Troupe Master Grimm is the physical body that the rest of them use to get places. Since he's weaker in power than other gods, being split three ways kinda made his physical body suffer from the elements and literal burnout, and so the cycle of dying and being reborn in a younger self came about so that the godly procession could continue. Unfortunately, this also fostered individuality in each new reincarnation, which is why physical Grimm is like a weird halfway between a god and a vessel; he and the Nightmare Heart are one, but he himself only remembers that through his own hand-me down memories. Shit's weird for him.
Glowing gold eyes meet red. She squirms, but Ghost’s cold little hands grip her with strength remarkable for their size, keeping her in the spotlight. She could do nothing but wriggle in their grasp, skin crawling as she awaited her brother’s judgement.

Grimm stares. His uncomfortably-large eyes widen, the fires of the Nightmare Heart glowing bright in his gaze, and for a brief moment, the Radiance wonders if she’s finally managed to render her sibling speechless.

And then he laughs.

It’s not a pleasant sound. Her sibling has always had a raucous, unpleasant voice, and now with the authority over the nightmare realm and the slow death of his current physical form, his rasping voice has gained a new harsh edge. Grimmkin and performers both poked their heads into their tent with a rustle of cloth, openly staring at their master, and then at her when her glow captured their attention. All she could do was curl her antennae away from her brother’s cackling and curl herself into a tight of a ball as possible, trying to hide her face in her fluff so that no one could see how embarrassed she was.

Ghost lowered her down and patted her head with one soft hand. All they managed to do was set her brother off into another set of hysterics at the sight of her being soothed by her ancient enemy, which didn’t exactly help matters.

“Oh,” gasped Grimm, wiping his eyes with a claw. “Oh, my friend, you’ve outdone yourself this time. In all my time sharing the gift of the Nightmare Heart’s sight, I had never thought that this specter could possibly be real. Out of all the things that could possibly happen, you bring me not my sister’s head as a trophy, nor my child consumed by flames, but a caterpillar.” He reaches a claw out towards the Radiance, carapace crackling with heat that was at once familiar and wrong, and the Radiance curled herself up tighter and hissed, summoning a weak little dagger of light that she tossed directly at his face. A couple of the newer troupe members gasped, but Grimm just casually caught it between two claws and grinned, mouth stretching impossibly wide with mirth. Several others tipped their heads back like they were rolling their eyes, then wandered off back to practice, apparently used to the sight of Grimm dealing with small, angry children. “A very fussy little caterpillar. Oh, my poor little powderfluff, are you hungry?” He clicked his throat in mock-dismay at her shriek of anger, then turned to the remaining watchers. “One of you, go fetch me some dried maggot. She’ll need it to keep her strength up- and to perhaps soothe that horrendous temper.”

Oh, that self-absorbed, overdramatic, classless little shithead. She would not stand for this slander! She had torn her territory from the grips of that primordial abyss and had raised a peaceful, civilized tribe before the Pale Wyrm had stolen them from her! She had not crawled around...
scavenging on the detritus of lost kingdoms like some witless crawlid! She had been civilized! She had been kind! She had let her brother rule the Nightmare Realm in tandem with her instead of ripping his divinity from him like so many other gods out of the goodness of her heart, and she would not let him forget that!

Invigorated by her indignity, she let out another great squeal of anger and wriggled hard in Ghost’s arms, dropping out of their newly-loosened grip. She hit the ground on her good side, rolled onto her feet with barely enough grace to save her wounded pride, and then inched her way forward with the intent to sink her mandibles into Grimm’s ankle.

She didn’t manage it. Grimm just teleported a few feet away, laughing like a rusty chainsaw trying to gutter back to life, and Ghost snatched her back up before she could follow, cold little hands resuming their death grip upon her midriff. She squeaked and squealed out as many insults as she could manage, not caring that her physical screaming was nigh-incomprehensible to any listeners, and then subsided in a panting, trembling fit when she ran out of air, her exhaustion, stomachache, and the pain from her bruised side bringing frustrated tears to her eyes.

A deep sigh sounded out from behind them, and the musician with the accordion stepped forward, setting his instrument aside. Ghost looked up to him, pleading, and, with an air of resignation, he took her up into his arms, the shock of heat from his fire-fed body soothing her. She curled her front feet into his ruff and let herself sink in against him, too tired to fight it. Even though his soul burned with her brother’s flame, tainted with his essence, it was still a much more welcoming aura than the Void’s icy gravitas. “Master. Caterpillars are vegetarian. You know this.”

“Mm? Oh drat, I genuinely forgot. It has been so long since we have encountered any moths willing to watch our performances, and longer still since I wore that guise myself.” Grimm snapped his fingers and studied her thoughtfully, though his shit-eating grin twitched a little wider everytime she cuddled a closer to his musician. Ghost looked between the two of them, then settled down and watched them as if they thought they could learn something about childcare from it. The Radiance sure hoped that they wouldn’t try to run her hideous cold claws through her fur like the troupe member was doing right now- it would be anything but soothing. “Do you know if we have any vegetarian stores left over? Fresh and sugary would be preferable, though I myself have not indulged in physical food since my darling hatched.”

Oh, parental affection, disgusting. She never understood her brother’s wish to breed. With a disgusted chirp, she buried her face deeper into the musician’s ruff, holding on a little tighter when he rumbled in thought. “We have some crystallized nectar and honeysuckle tea left still. Divine doesn’t much care for it.” The Nightmare Heart’s devotee gently smoothed out a clump of awry fluff on her right side, and the Radiance melted. Oh, that felt nice. Oh, that sounded nice too, better than she’d expect with a bellyache. She was having a hard time remembering why she was angry. “Some fresh tempura leaves, too. The mantis twins were using them for meat curing but there are many yet left clean. Few vegetarians walk among us.”

“Excellent!” Grimm clapped his hands together, startling a passing Grimmkin. “Brumm, you are a blessing to our troupe, that sounds perfect. We can dine in my tent, then, if you so wish to join us.” He ignored Brumm’s grunt of surprise and quiet decline and turned to Ghost, gaze softening from one of elation to something gentler. “That invitation applies to you as well, friend. You have visitors here that will want to see you, but now is not the time to make amends. Things are in a delicate state enough as is- were you to barge in now, you would make it worse, however delightful or sought-after your company may be. No, best to stay with us, at least for the moment.” He nodded gravely at Ghost’s questioning head tilt, then grasped one of their arms and lifted them easily to their feet. “Now! To deal with the little powderfluff, and her delightful divine tantrums. What a conundrum you have put me in, my love! Heavy lies the dreamer’s crown, and you have
vacated it for a coat of down! Verily have I seen my kin laid low, for you to have taken this form instead of died with the rest of your kingdom. It seems not only Wyrm are capable of shedding their skins to become something new, hmm?"

Warm claws circled her belly and lifted her from Brumm’s arms, away from the comforting warmth of the fireplace directly into the raging heat of the flames. Once again her brother’s gaze bored into her, though not for very long before he turned away and ducked under the tentflap, barking out a revised order for food and tea at another passing Grimmkin. She wriggled uncomfortably in the crook of his arm, trying to touch his mind so that she might question his motives in full- but she was no longer ruler of the dreamer’s realm, and his thoughts yielded naught but fire and heartbeats and a strange, hissing voice before he pushed her out again with the ease of long practice. He wasn’t in the mood for mindmelding- not now, not for a good long while. He would listen, but she wasn’t allowed in.

*Why?* She thought irritably at him, feeling oddly betrayed. *Why close your thoughts to me? What purpose does this serve?*

The fires of his mind enveloped hers for a brief moment, flashing a quick series of images that didn’t leave her reeling like the Shade Lord did. Orange acid, eyes full of daylight, corpses and the howling detritus of despair that plagued the bones of every dying kingdom. The Nightmare Heart kept the dreams of the Troupe safe from the Old Light—*her* light— but he would rather not risk it, lest they suffer it. Lest they suffer her.

Something inside of her went cold. Grimm was still amused with her— and he was *never* going to let her live this down— but there was a distinctly distrustful bite to his tone that she did not like in the least. She snapped her mandibles at his wrist and hissed, low so that the Shade Lord could not hear her live this down— but there was a distinctly distrustful bite to his tone that she did not like in the least. She snapped her mandibles at his wrist and hissed, low so that the Shade Lord could not hear them. *I would never do that again and you know it, least not to your worshippers. I have no need and your bugs hardly provide a good host, with their dreams so full of flame."

*Lest of all,* he continued aloud, *“To a caterpillar who cannot even tell the difference between a simple stomachache and hunger. You poor cranky little thing.”* He made that infuriating clucking noise with his throatplates again and shook his head, setting her down on a cushion in front of a low table with a condensing head pat. She squawked with anger and lunged forward to try to bite him again, but severely underestimated her balance, tipping forward onto the table. The frustration she felt at Grimm’s resulting chuckle was insurmountable, moreso when she tried to scratch at his nice shiny table to spite him and found it childproofed. *“Oh, have some patience, my darling. We are performers, not cooks. I’m sure my servants are wondering why I’ve called for a vegetarian meal, when I myself have not touched a vegetable since our hatching, and our little friend here hardly ever eats.”*

He turned then to Ghost (who had sat down on a cushion right next to her with their legs carefully tucked under them) and inclined his head, pointing towards another cloth barrier on the other side of the tent. *“If you so wish, feel free to sleep here. Ascending is exhausting work, as I recall, and I’ve hardly had to use my bed since my child learned how to sleep properly. It’s all yours if you need the rest, and it’s the least that I can do for our summoner.”*

The Shade Lord looked over to the curtain, then back to the Radiance, and then finally to Grimm. They held his gaze for a long, unflinching moment, studying him, then opened their cape and spread it out, patting a charm clipped to it with their soft little paw. Curious despite herself, the Radiance leaned forward a little and saw that it had been fashioned in an imitation of the
Grimmchild’s face, radiating the now-obnoxious heat of her brother’s fire.

Grimm smiled softly, and spread open his own cape, tattered wings gently curling away to bare his chest plates. Against them, the Grimmchild slumbered peacefully upside-down with his wings wrapped around himself, tail coiled tight around his father’s neck so that he would not fall. It was, the Radiance grudgingly admitted, a pretty cute sight to see. “Not right now, my friend. It’s hard enough to fall asleep, when you are so young and full of energy. Maybe you can nap together later, before the ritual is completed. This new complication throws a wrench in things, I’m afraid, though the show cannot be delayed for much longer.”

Ghost considered his words, then got to their feet and pulled back the barrier, revealing a small room littered with papers, fabric, and the various other detritus the troupe master collected during his travels. They left the curtain ajar, hopped up onto Grimm’s plush bed (hardly more than a nest piled with pillows, the Radiance noted with disdain, as if he really needed that much cushion were he to somehow miraculously fall from his perch), and soon fell asleep with their head tipped forward, empty eye sockets staring down into their lap as they leaned forward, like a creepy little doll awaiting activation.

Grimm chuckled at their antics and rewrapped his wings, resting his head on his hands. “Someday, I will teach them how to sleep properly, whether it be in this current form or when my child next takes up my mantle. For once, I doubt that I will outlast my parents...ah, but that’s enough of that for now. Our food is here.” A lesser Grimmkin with a platter zoomed into the tent, chittering nervously. Grimm took their tray from them before they could upset it with their hovering, sliding a mug and a platter of leaves over to the Radiance before taking up a glass of something that looked like wine but probably wasn’t. “You should eat. Don’t think I didn’t notice the way you kept curling up as if you had a bellyache! This mortal form requires sustenance beyond soul and essence, my dear sister, I hope you remember that.”

I haven’t forgotten, she grumbled, but her mind was whirling, distracted by her scattered memories and the scent of the food before her. I’m just not used to being so vulnerable to it, that’s all.

So she was hungry? It had been so long since she had last physically eaten that she could not remember the specifications of what it felt like as a physical sensation, not just a metaphorical one. But oh, that tea smelled delicious, warm and flowery-sweet, and the leaves before her were still crisp and fresh despite the Grimm Troupe’s tendency to torch nearly every food item they handled. She inched herself a little closer and pressed her forelimbs to the warm mug, trying to dip her mandibles in without wetting her fluff.

She was right. The tea was delicious, and she drank deeply of it before moving onto the leaves, crunching through them with a voracity that surprised even herself. Grimm’s eyes crinkled up in amusement, watching her as she ate, and he allowed her a few moments of silence to gorge herself, sipping his ‘wine’.

She didn’t slow down until she consumed more than half of her plate, and even then she only pushed it away so that she could drink more of her sweet tea. She had forgotten the simple pleasures of life alongside the discomforts, and it was with a great reluctance that she projected her thoughts outwards, where she knew that Grimm could hear her.

Alright, let’s get this over with. What do you wish to talk to me about?

“Such enthusiasm. Is it simply too much for you to fathom that I am happy to see you, dear sister?” Grimm leaned back on his cushion and crossed one leg over the other, twirling the stem of his wineglass between two claws. “I have not seen you in millenia, after all. It has been so long -”

Cut the bullshit. You did not treat me like a sister, you treated me like a threat. Either tell it to me
straight or banish me like I did you the last time you made a stupid decision. Her front legs curled around the mug, taking solace in its warmth and the energy its contents had granted her. She was certainly feeling a lot calmer now, though her wounded pride was still throbbing.

“Language,” hissed Grimm, smile dropping to something more guarded. The fires of his eyes flared bright, and he cast a long, meaningful glance to the sleeping figure of Ghost, the edges of his fangs glinting in the torchlight. “Or did you forget that the little one usurped your kingdom? They need no tool to access minds now, and I’d rather not foul them so quickly. Allow them what little innocence they still retain, for me if not for them. No one would believe me if I told them it was you who taught them to swear, and I’d rather not be the one blamed for it, especially with their siblings so near.”

She snorted at him and shook her head, antenna waving, though his plural use of ‘siblings’ unnerved her. Surely, her vessel was not still alive…? She had nearly chewed clean through them with her cleansing light, there should have been no chance of their survival. It was a child of the Wyrm, however, and she of all people knew that gods didn’t die easily. Oh, please. As if they wouldn’t know. I spent near the entirety of my confinement screaming every insult at the Vessel that I could think of, and the Void is not a singular thing. It must have already learned every curse that I taught its clutchmate, if that idealistic creature hadn’t the sense to seal its mind from the others as it sealed its mind to me.

“And that is the exact reason why I no longer trust you, Radiance.” Grimm rose, claws curling tight against his glass, before he set it aside and unfurled his wings. His words were cold, but his tone was weary; carefully, he uncoiled his son from his neck and strode over to place him next to the Shade Lord’s slumbering form, smiling briefly as the child let out a sleepy squeak of protest. When he turned back to her though, he pulled his wings tight against his body and stared her down as if he expected her to somehow remorph into her adult form and rain fire and desolation down upon them. “I have seen the extent of the Vessel’s wounds. She whom I called my sister in the ages past was a frightful thing, but the wars she wages were upon gods equal in power, and when her battles were won she was peaceful, and preached tranquility and pacifism to the bugs who she held in her thrall. Now, however, I gaze upon someone who has killed thousands of innocents in order to further her goals, someone who has tortured and has delighted in it, someone whose fire no longer warms, but burns.”

The Radiance felt as though someone had thrown her into cold water and then flung her into a fire, so intense was the shock and the fury that struck her. Foolish nightshrieker! Have you not forgotten what the Pale Wyrm did to me? Have you not forgotten that I was betrayed, my physical form destroyed and my moths stolen from me? Angrily, she wriggled her way up onto the table, taking care not to upset her mug. You accuse me of crimes that you yourself profited on! Do not think I do not know what your new form grows on, wastelands scavenger! Do you take the traitorous Wyrm’s side, now that its spawn feed your own? How weak you have become! How pitiful! I am not only betrayed by my children, but by my own family as well! How low you have sunk, brother!

He dipped his head down to her level, staring at her like a predator before prey, and for a brief moment she felt her ancient bravado flee her as the Nightmare Heart gazed deep into her being, pulling all the unnamed terrors and worries she hid away to the forefront of her mind. And then the moment passed, Grimm’s great eyes flickering shut, and she was just a silly little caterpillar again, fussy and being chastised by her unusually-tired sibling. “No, Radiance. Do not mistake my distrust in you as support of the Pale King. He despised me, and what my coming would bring, and you of all people should know that the life of the bugs under other god’s care often mean little to me. But that does not mean that they are any less deserving of pity- a lesson that you taught me yourself, I might add, and pity I have learned aplenty since your dear archenemy took form and
focus. The Pale King’s plan was desperately foolish and cost the lives of many of his own hatchlings, and as a father and vessel- vessel user?- myself, I would find it very hard to take his side. Very hard indeed.”

He leaned in closer, hot steam hissing out from between his teeth. “But see here, we are faced again with this dilemma, for though my eyes tell me that my reborn sibling sits before me, my memories scream out of the devastation that you wrought upon this kingdom, and the strange new hatred that burns within you. Do not forget, Radiance, that though the Pale King destroyed thousands of his brood in the abyss, it was you who slaughtered thousands more of his children in your desperation- thousands that you claimed to love. Take it from this lowly scavenger- before this rebirth, the two of you were equal in crimes, neither more justified than the other. You have been given a second chance that many others haven’t, a chance to atone from your crimes and lay to rest old wrongs with forgiveness- forgiveness, not fire. Will you return to the stern, yet caring sister that I once knew? Or will you remain a devastating, ravaging force of nature, haplessly striking down all who you thought spurned you, until someone else comes to consume you? I do not know, for I am not a Wyrm, and the gift of foresight is lost to me.” He leaned back, waving a claw idly about, before pausing to flash her a cheeky grin. “As you have so blithely reminded me, little one.”

This was a talk much too heavy for tea, and her brother’s cautious attitude was much too difficult to parse through for someone whose thoughts still churned with hunger. The Radiance glared down into the sweet amber liquid before her, and tried not to think about the bitter tide of shame welling up within her. I understand now. Though you seem awfully hung up about that damnable Vessel, for one who had never met it before. She paused her drinking for a moment, thinking back to her earlier misgivings about her warden’s supposed demise, and her blood turned to ice. Wait. No…

Grimm arched a brow at her, seemingly oblivious to her discomfort, and finished off the last of his ‘wine’ with an elegant twirl of his glass. “So you tell me that you cannot sense them? What a conundrum you have landed yourself in, then. And one so very unfortunate for my poor Troupe’s peace.”

He rose, and teleported over to her side of the table with an elegant sweep of his cloak. As he reformed, red flames flickered into life in the air around him; flames that shifted and blinked like eyes, flames that showed a mass of void and bandages and those accursed, familiar, damnable white horns in the places where their pupils should be. Two familiar dark eyes stared back at her through the scrying flames, sightless and empty, but alive. Indisputably still alive.

Grimm’s smug asshole smile made its sneaky return. Oh, how she hated him.

“No, dear sister. The Hollow Knight still lives, and I know this because they are here in this very circus as we speak.”

Chapter End Notes

all angst aside radiance spent at least half her time w/hollow just teaching them to swear (accidentally and on purpose) and the other half singing bored meme songs when singing so if they every got a voice it would just be like this:

Hornet: we freed you and you’ve got the chance to speak now that everyone knows you’re not a Pure Vessel. What say you?
Hollow: fffffff...FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK shit FuuuuCk beer on walls hey now you're an all star BITCH
Hornet: what the fuck.
I am physically fucking incapable of writing short chapters, gods help me. Again, this was originally way longer, but then I started including more and more shit as I got into the groove of writing, Grimm refused to shut the fuck up, and I eventually had to just stop and be like 'alright dumbfuck this is an entire chapter already spare the readers the pain of long updates and just POST it already'

Note: 'nightshriekers' means bat. I figured since bats are essentially terrifying demons to bugs that they wouldn't have a silly little name like 'bat', so I decided to nickname them something that wouldn't be out of place in a dramatically scary DND campaign (according to what I've heard of dnd. i've never actually played it myself. that would involve actually having the free time to have irl friends ahahaha *sobs in bio major*)

NOTE: Grimm goes all eldritch text again in this chapter, so if you have trouble reading it I put it all in the end notes in normal characters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ice cold dread chilled her, all the way down to the very tips of her claws. Beyond the now-familiar sting of betrayal, beyond the fear of facing her old warden, a new fear of the schism she had drawn between them arose. Grimm knew of what the Hollow Knight had done, knew what it was capable of- and yet he had still let it into his territory, had given it care and shelter like it was some sort of guest of honour rather than a monstrosity bred to kill her. Surely, he had sensed her demise? Surely he had known what it had done? There was sympathy, and then there was allowing the blasted thing to interact with him and the ranks of his followers. Had he no fear of what it could do? Had he no anger for what it had done to her, distant though their paths had become? Had she really upset him that much? He had no reason to try to save it, apart from hubris and...empathy.

...She had torn it apart from the inside out, rotted its arm off and reshaped its mind and form to fit to her desires with little thought to pay heed to its agony, both mental and physical. Grimm was both a vessel and a user of a vessel. He had said as much. And though he was trying his best to not let his weakness show, it was clear that his current mortal form was tiring him, the fires sustaining him burning too hot for his current husk to bear for much longer. Even the most cruel gods would be hard-pressed not to empathize.

Still, she was not feeling particularly kind, and in the absence of fear the anger that she felt at seeing the damned thing still breathing made it hard to think of empathy.

Why? She near-growled, turning to glare at him as hard as she could without letting her terror show. Why, why are you showing me this? Is it not clear that I want it dead? Is it not enough that it trapped me in a place without light for centuries, a place where I could feel myself slowly burning out, dying, forgotten? Why help it? What benefit are you getting from this, other than an excuse to torment me?

Grimm tilted his head at her, giving her an aloof stare. “Why? Why not? Is it not enough, dear sister, to hear a bug crying for help and aid them out of a genuine desire to minimize what little suffering I can? Must I justify myself any further?” He paused, looking down at her, and a strange
shadow crossed his face before he smirked and said, quite coolly, “I am the stranger to these lands, summoned by a pale shade of its king, and when the princess and protector calls for help, then it would be simply inconceivable for me to not come running. I am intruding on her territory, after all, and were our families not mutually benefiting off of each other then she would have no reason not to banish me. And besides, powerful, chained-up godlings bleeding to death practically on your doorstep is quite bad for business. So if you want a list of reasons, dear sister, then you will see that I have plenty past the simple capacity to have a heart.”

The force of his words cowed her, resentment and something else bitterly unwanted crawling up the back of her throat. She clutched her mug tight for warmth, but the tea had gone lukewarm, and she found little comfort in chewing the handle when she clamped her mandibles around it.

She would not regret her actions. She would not be remorseful. She would not-

Gentle claws smoothed down her back, comfortingly warm, like being submersed in a hot spring or sunning her wings on the side of the massive wastewalker beasts that she used to drive away from the kingdom. She glanced back up at her brother, cautious of his anger, but the only thing that greeted her was his tired smile. He was angry at her. He would probably always be angry at her for this. The wrongs she had enacted- the lows she had sunk to, she reluctantly admitted- had bothered him more than he cared to admit.

But despite everything, he still loved her.

“We cannot change the past, no matter how powerful or omnipotent or farsighted we are,” he told her quietly, his talons still brushing lightly through her ruff. “The only thing we can do is leave the ashes of our failures behind us, and burn our way towards a better future. Do not forget that, Radiance.”

She sighed, and let a little bit of the tension melt out of her body, stroked away by Grimm’s gentle claws. The bitter little ball of regrets was still wedged somewhere in her chest, but she could think past it, at the very least, and not do something that would probably drain her, like manifesting said ball of regrets into an orb of vengeful light to explode in his face.

_Tell me that you at least didn’t indict it into your cult_, she muttered to him, half to get him to stop telling her painfully mushy things and half to watch the horror bloom on his face at the thought of trying to wrest his will onto a godling. _The last thing you need is a broken killing machine with a death wish wandering through your troupe._

“Oh, stars no. I am too weak to try to coax a bit of my flame into their shade, even for healing. Their void would eat me alive, whether they wished for it or not.” He removed his claws from her fur, grasping his wrist with his other hand and curling it tight towards his chest as if he could shield the flames within. The mild horror within his voice faded, however, as he tipped his head back to look at the sleeping bodies of the Shade Lord and his child, turning into something more contemplative. “Perhaps, if there were any other new-hatched children, little ones with no territory or element to call their own...perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. I cannot see any out there still living, and it is useless to yearn for things that can never be.”

He shook his head mournfully and took his seat again, picking up his wine glass to fiddle with it. “Fear not, sister, the Hollow Knight’s stay with my troupe is temporary. Besides, I doubt they’d wish to join my clan, even if I offered. With their father gone and their purpose void-” he stopped to chuckle at his own joke, his laughter the dry rasp of sandpaper over chitin- “they have dedicated themselves entirely to clinging to the last remnants of family they have left. Or, at least, I assume that was the case; they haven’t exactly had the chance to tell me otherwise.”
It is incapable of doing so. You reason with something that has no concept of self. Not entirely true, but the gleams of personality that she had witnessed in her containment had been frustratingly alike to that of the Pale Wyrm, and so she made no comment on it. Stubbornness, anxiety, and an odd fear of expressing emotions did not, in her mind, count as a concept of self. And even that could have been a mirror of their father, for all she knew; the void was unfathomable to creatures born of light.

Not, apparently, to creatures born of fire; either that, or Grimm had grown closer to the dark in his travels through nightmares, for he merely shook his head and pointed towards the slumbering godlings in his nest. “Not at all. The children of the king might have a terrifying tendency to not care for their well-being, but they are very much capable of having an idea as to what they wish to pursue. Even tasked by the king to destroy you, this little one still took their sweet time meandering about the kingdom collecting flames for my child. Entirely on their own time, despite it not counting towards their ultimate goal, and more than once they have walked away from our dance to chase some other task that caught their attention. You would do well to remember that, Radiance.”

The Radiance glowered at him, then continued to sip at her tea in silence. Grimm waited patiently for her to finish, then propped his chin up in his fist and frowned as she forsook her usual urge to continue the conversation in favor of drinking the rest of her beverage before it went completely cold.

“Are you really going to drink all of that yourself?” He asked, bemused, then raised his hands defensively when she looked up at him and let out a warning hum, her eyes glowing bright as she charged up a light bean. “Oh, don’t mind me! But the bathrooms are in the side tent to the right if you need them later.”

I didn’t ask, she hissed, reaching the end of her mug. The honey that had been used to sweeten the beverage formed a thick, flowery syrup at the bottom, and she inched up a bit to grab the rim with her middle legs so she could shove her whole face into the mug. May her own pride damn her later, it was delicious, and she wasn’t about to let that shit go to waste if it killed her…again.

“Of course you didn’t,” Grimm said, in that patronizing tone of voice that was quickly becoming her least favorite voice of his, “But you are also not the god who has successfully toilet trained your own reincarnations for millennia. Trust me, my dear, I know the limits of a grub your size very well by now, and unless you’re storing all that moisture in your fur somehow, you’re going to want to heed my warning one way or the other.”

Oh, fuck you, she spat, merely to see the way his lamplike red eyes narrowed in disapproval. Honey dripped from her ruff, gluing long strands of fluff together, then smearing all over her forelegs when she tried to groom it off. I don’t want to hear about your centuries of experience with grubcare. Literally no one asked, brother.

“Really now? Because I think that you would benefit from the experience. It’s quite humbling, seeing yourself so small, so vulnerable.” He paid no heed to her shrill squeak of anger, striding over to pick her up from the ruins of her meal. He was much more capable at holding her steady than the Shade Lord, and her wriggling did nothing but tire her out as he wedged her tight to his side and cleaned her fur with a burst of flame that did not burn her. It was terrifyingly similar to the tactics that she used to employ when they first hatched and he kept getting the blood of the nightshriekers he preyed upon all over his ruff, but she couldn’t twist about to see if he was exacting his revenge on her with her face smushed against scaly chest plates. “Of course, this might be a wonderful opportunity for you to learn to do so, with you severed from the dream realm. What say you, sister? Care to join me in my temporary mortality?”
I’d rather be drowned in the Void Sea than be stuck in this body with you! Her wails were muffled, but her mental voice was still piercing, screeching out into the ether with all the might she had left. Grimm just chuckled at her, desensitized to her cries, but she felt something stir itself out of the liquid darkness that comprised her old element, a shifting under the veil that separated the dream realm from the waking world.

“They didn’t stir, not even when Grimm gently laid them down next to her, but she felt the tendrils of their thoughts pull at her mind nonetheless.

‘…?’

‘Rest now, both of you.’ Grimm patted her on the head, distracting her from the tug of the Shade Lord’s inquiry, then ran a hand between their horns. Their mind settled, soothed by the heat of his touch, not stirring even when he gently tipped them back so that they lay in a position that would presumably not strain their (nearly nonexistent) neck. Grimmchild chirped sleepily and flipped over onto his side, trapping them both under his developing wings. “We can deal with a family reunion later. For now, though, gather your strength. You need it.”

You can’t just tell me that before I’m supposedly about to fall asleep, I’d get nightmares. She complains only for the show of it; she knows full well that her dreams will not be gentle to her, even as she tries to settle into a more comfortable position. With her mastery over the dream realm gone, there will be no light to soothe her as she rests; only the shadows of the Void, or the flames of her brother’s ever-beating heart. Still, the familiar tug of exhaustion pulls heavy on her limbs—she is mortal now, and far too weak to resist it. Keep your claws out of my mind, sibling.

His chuckle rasped on the edges of her hearing, both a comfort and an irritant. “I’ll try, sister. But I make no promises.”

Gods did not dream like normal bugs.

Even with her rule over the dream realm ousted, she was still a god, and no mere nightmares plagued her sleep. Neither did the void try to touch her; when she opened her eyes into the comfortable embrace of her old realm, the shadows writhed thicker, but even they lay sleeping. The Shade Lord apparently had not yet learned how to exert their influence over the spirit realm yet.

But gods did not dream like normal bugs did, and when they did not fill their minds with sleeping visions of what their future kingdoms may be, they delved deep within their memories, reminisced on the past; made their nests within it, even, when the physical realm abandoned them. So when the Radiance awoke within her dream and flipped herself onto her feet to find herself in the throne room of the Pale King (a place that she herself had never seen), she knew that she was not part of a dream, nor a nightmare, but a memory.

She turned her head to gaze upon the face of her enemy, but the doors of the throne room slammed open, and Grimm strode inside; Grimm, as furious and unhinged as she’d ever seen him, with the flames of his anger licking across the tips of his flickering cape. Palace retainers quavered and fell before his fury, their frames trembling as they bowed low to the intruding god, but his vengeful red eyes were affixed only to the monarch on the throne.

He roared—howled, really, his eerie, crackling voice echoing off the walls until it sounded like the very palace itself screamed its misery through a thousand broken throats. Fire roared around him, boiling the crisp, cold air, wreaking him so that he looked more like his dream...
Slowly, the Pale Wyrm rose from his throne, the impenetrable glare of soul wreathing his form diminishing as the heat of her brother’s flames burned the air around them. Though his gaze was proud and his head lifted haughtily, he looked like utter shit; there was a tired slump to his shoulders, his normally-pristine robes dirty and frayed around the edges. He had been in mourning—was still mourning, the Radiance realized, her stomach giving a funny little flip. Her first reaction was to gloat over her enemy’s suffering (and she was, she was!) but years alone with the Vessel’s thoughts had seemingly conditioned her to think of the blasted king as someone to look up to, someone to impress. She could almost feel their pain echoing through her mind, a hollow, twisting ache that underscored the gleaming glow of her success. “Nightmare King, I urge you to watch yourself. Your presence is already unwelcome here— no need to make the situation worse.”

“You claim that my arrival is unwelcome and yet you take no responsibility for the sins that your weakness unleashed upon your kingdom.” Grimm’s hiss was the sound of air rushing from punctured lungs, the sound of flesh sizzling in a fire, his teeth a mess of needles protruding from his jaws as he snarled. He was a bug’s worst nightmare walking, and the Radiance saw many of the watching servants quiver and faint dead away as his wings fanned out to their full extent, casting the silhouette of a nightshrieker upon the pristine marble floor. The shadow flickered and danced like a demon in the light of his flames, a terrible display that made him seem much, much bigger than he already was when he swept close to the throne, glowering down at the god resting upon it. “Had you the courage to kill her outright, your kingdom would have lasted far longer than it already has. But instead you played the pandering game, and now you have damned yourself and every one of your works for nothing. And you know it.”

She blinked. Grimm’s memory didn’t fade. The ringing of his voice in her ears didn’t stop.

He had been angry for her. He had cared. He did.

And that made all the things that she had said to him in the tent hurt like a bitch.

The Pale King stiffened, already-unfathomable expression growing colder, harder. “I did what I had to, I did what should be expected as King and God and defender of my people. My Pure Vessel has locked the Old Light away forever, and the infection has been stopped. Your kin is dead, Nightmare King, choked out by my vessel’s purity, and nothing you can do will change that.”

“Not pure enough, for even now my sister stirs.” Grimm leaned closer, exhaling a steady stream of smoke int the Pale King’s masklike face. He did not look away from Grimm for one second, but he betrayed his emotions with a flick of his tail, a short, violent twitch of anger or shock. “I can sense her, on the edges of my thoughts. I can hear her screaming in her cage, can smell her burning on the back of my tongue. No, Pale King, my sister is not dead, and even now her voice still whispers into the minds of the bugs you hold sway over. She is alive, and you have dealt your full hand. The instrument of your kingdom’s demise was of your own making, all along.”

“Impossible,” the Wyrm spat, and oh, now he was mad, now he was in denial, his small frame shaking as he swarmed back up his throne, a corona of spirit daggers circling his head as he stared down Grimm. She’d almost feel pity for him, if it weren’t for the arrogance that he still wore in the cock of his head and the flare of his wings. “My Vessel was pure. The Dreamers are sleeping, the Black Egg has been sealed. The infection stopped. It has been contained, she has been contained, and I will not let a fearmongering fool who juggles fireballs for a living tell me otherwise!”

Grimm went still, and when he did, his voice went soft. The Radiance felt a chill creep up her spine, despite her knowing that there was no way for him to turn on her. Even after centuries,
Grimm’s true anger was a frightful thing. “Not even when that fearmongering fool is the Old Light’s sibling, in realm as well as body? Not even when the fool’s element is knowing when it is a kingdom’s time to die?”

“You give me no other reason why I should listen to you,” The Pale King snarled, but his dark eyes were full of fear, and uncertainty was starting to bleed into his voice. She didn’t need to be close to them to know what was going on; as usual, Grimm had seen all the worries that the Pale King held and dredged them up to the surface, and now he was forced to confront them. Very little escaped the eyes of the Nightmare Heart. “The statistics were sound. The Vessel was free of mind, of voice, of will and emotion. It held no weakness that would cripple it so.” The Pale King shook his head violently- less a statement of denial, closer to the jerking movement of a predator snapping the neck of its prey, as if he still thought himself a great wyrm who could handle all his problems as such. “I have seen nothing but darkness in all of the other futures. I’m telling you, Troupe Master, there was no other way.”

“Oh, you poor fool.” Grimm’s whisper was the sound of ashes kissing dead, scorched ground. He shook his head, slowly; not the sharp movement of the king before him, but a pitiful dismissal. “Your statistics lied. You know it, deep in your heart; can you not feel the pain of your child? Of all your children? Long have you shut them out, to listen to the cries of those who called you creator, but I can see how heavily your loss weighs on you. Even when repressed by the purest logic, the heart knows, and remembers. They claw at you now, the little shadows, little pieces of yourself lost to the abyss. Pieces of yourself you tried to forget. But you loved one of them dearly, didn’t you? A tiny little thing they were when they came to you, obedient and empty and perfect in your eyes. A perfect vessel, a solution to the problem that you created, that plagued you and the bugs that you were so proud of. But you didn’t expect to love them, didn’t you? No, that came later. Later, when they began to succeed where you couldn’t, when they looked you in the eyes and you saw yourself in their face, their mother in their eyes and their stature. You suspected it then, and your own weakness was like a brand of failure striking your heart. You knew it. You knew it then, and you tried to deny it. But you persisted, priming them to pure, perfect form, because by that time you had already gone so far down your damnable path that there was no turning back. Because turning back would have made all those little broken bodies in the abyss worth nothing. Because it would have made all their terror and pain and suffering meaningless. Because stopping and loving the only child you had left would have made your guilt choke you. Because turning back would have been admitting that you were wrong.”

Dead silence reigned in the court, punctuated only by the soft crackling of Grimm’s flames. The Pale King was rigid, trembling, his gossamer wings shaking like leaves, on his back, but still he did not back down. He never did. He never would.

“I gave these bugs life and I gave them my everything for that. There is no cost too great to buy them their freedom.” The Pale King’s voice was choked, a strangled hiss rather than the soft, sighing whisper he was known for. He sounded almost mad, as if he was trying to convince himself that was the case. “They still dream free. The Hollow Knight—”

“-Did not fail because they weren’t hollow. They failed because they were too much like you.” Grimm tipped his head, burning scarlet eyes narrowing. “They loved their kingdom so deeply that it destroyed them, as your love for it did to you, though for them loving their kingdom was synchronous for loving you. And oh, Pale King, how they loved you.” He leaned back and sighed heavily, his breath leaving him in a cloud of harmless steam. Weariness dragged at him now, a sorrow that stretched fathoms deep. “Born of god and abyss, soul and void, but only one of two can kill my sister true. Cursing them with dark does not erase the fact that they were your child, you shortsighted fool.”
He straightened back up, going rigid for a second before closing his eyes, looking away from the Wyrm’s stricken face. The fires around him died down to smoke and steam, right as the distant, frantic sound of tapping feat broke through the silence- the sound of a messenger running, flat-out, towards the throne room.

The King looked to the door. Everyone looked to the door. Except for Grimm, who took a step to the side and gave the Pale King a look of such tired pity that the Radiance’s chest ached. “Wyrm, please understand. Despite all of this… I am sorry.”

The doors burst open. A harried-looking bug, almost run ragged, charged into the room waving a letter over her head. A letter splattered with a familiar orange fluid. A letter that she remembered seeing through the eyes of the first bug that her consciousness had slammed into, right before her brilliance blinded them for the rest of their days.

“My king, my king! The infection has come again! No bugs are safe!” She collapsed, panting, onto the floor of the throne room. Her shaking slid the spider silk from her grasp, and the letter fluttered to the floor, jagged blocks of text smearing under the acid.

There was no mistaking what it was. Cries of terror sounded out from all around them; but nothing matched the slow spread of horror across the king’s face, sheer shock giving way to a pain so deep and profound that the Radiance had to look away, lest his agony blind her.

*Let me go,* she whispered to the ether, and let the essence of the memory disperse into the air around her. *Let me free. I cannot watch any longer.*

The memory dissolved into red dream motes. The cool silvers and porcelain of the White Palace melted away into deep, dark red, the screams of the servants warping into the pulse of the Nightmare’s dread heart. Across from her, the lesser dream form of her brother crouched over a tiny dark thing held tight in his claws, the flickering flames of the Nightmare Heart casting his form into shadow.

“Why did you show me that?” the Radiance croaked, shaken. The pulse of the Nightmare seemed too intimate somehow, too close to her brother’s secrets; a byproduct, perhaps, of direct proximity his heart. She was closest to interacting with her brother as he was in the days of their youth here, where the primal source of his power lurked, but instead of offering safety all it did was make her feel like an outsider. The second half of this realm was not hers anymore. “To show me that the Pale King had a heart somewhere in his cold chest? I did not need you to show me your memories to tell me that. It does not change the fact that he tried to kill me.”

The Nightmare King’s head slowly tipped up, his eyes trailing from the little dark thing in his claws to her. She was still a caterpillar in here, her powerful dream form torn from her from her rebirth, and his gaze upon her reminded her intimately of how very, very small she was.

Grimm hissed his words- on the breath in, on the breath out. The beat of the Nightmare Heart stuttered for one quick second, and then resumed its usual pace. Grimm slowly turned back to the thing in his hands, his claws curling tight over it. *No, did not do it to teach you a lesson.*

/ *Merely to remind you and me. To teach me again, to cover the things that I can lose before they are gone forever. To teach us again, as we so very often do when we are gods and immortals and the very world stretches on before us to mould to our heart’s content.*

Heuffed a breath, not quite a laugh. The little thing in his hands quivered, then settled again, like a fussy little hatchling that needed soothing. *To remind me that family is not forever. Not them. No one ever stays forever through my home and its embers of mental fire. Everything dies. **Even us.** All of us.*
He stroked the darkness again with one talon. It seemed familiar somehow, but she couldn’t place in what way. Grimm hunched over it like it was a dying ember he was trying to prevent from flickering out, staring at it like looking away once would let it fade away before he could save it.

Her breath hitched, and she hated it hated it hated it. This was Grimm. This was her brother. He was always the weird one out, the god with no territory, the god who embraced his fears instead of vanquishing them, the god who chose mortality over immortality even when others strove to never let theirs go. Death and life and rebirth, fear and fire instead of kind warmth and light. She should pay no heed to his dramatics, and yet...“You’re trying to scare me.”

He did not look away from his clawful of shadow, only dipped his head lower over his burden.

And then he fell silent. The fiery pulse of the Nightmare Heart overtook all other sound, bright red eyes ever-watching. Grimm did not raise his gaze from the weak little shade he clutched in his talons, much less paid any attention to her, and she sensed that her stay within the Nightmare Realm was over.

When she awoke, it was to the sensation of tears on her face, chilling despite the warm air. Ghost and Grimmchild still slumbered deeply around her, seemingly oblivious to her struggles; her brother was still absent, the perch above them abandoned. She could only guess at the silent vigil he kept tonight.

She curled up against, staring off into the deep darkness beyond the tent’s edge, and did not fall asleep again for a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

The Pale King pulled a tolkien elf move and died of grief and regret imo, which is arguably the punishment that he deserved after pulling that bullcrap with the vessels. He's one of my favorite characters due to the complexity of the situation surrounding him, but he was def. on the same level as the Radiance with the amount of nasty shit that he did, so *shrugs*

The key to defeating/properly containing the Radiance was to be a vessel of pure void and you cannot convince me otherwise. Sure, a perfectly hollow vessel might keep her locked away for ages, but if poor ol Pure Vessel was capable of keeping her trapped (if not inefficiently) for a good amount of time before she started rotting them through, then who's to say that she wouldn't be able to burn through their bodies before she was completely forgotten? I know the White Lady said they failed because of 'an idea instilled', but I think that just gave Radiance a weapon to break their mind with. The real reason why they failed was because they didn't have enough Void to choke her out with; even in their Pure Vessel boss battle, they barely use any Void tactics other than
teleportation (harmless on the offensive) and their Augur of Ebrietas attack. Everything else seemed like something the Pale King taught them; his love for them accidentally shaped them into someone that was clearly his kid, which meant that they didn't have the void control necessary to keep her fully under wraps.

But lore theory over. I hope y'all like this chapter. It's going to get lighthearted soon enough, I swear it.

EDIT: Here's all the fucked-up text from Grimm/NKG if you have a hard time reading it
Grimm: Pale King! What have you done?!
NKG: No.
NKG: No. I did not do it to teach you a lesson. Merely to remind you. And me. To teach me again, to covet the things that I can lose before they are gone forever. To teach us again, as we so very often do when we are gods and immortals and the very world stretches on before us to mould to our heart's content.
NKG: To remind me that family is not forever. Not them. Not us. Not the troupe, though my flames emptied them of mortality. Everything leaves. Everything dies. Even us. All of us.
NKG: Blood is thicker than water, flames dance faster than air. But all of it crumbles to ashes in the end.
NKG: Only if ceasing to exist scares you, sister. As for me. Shadows and fire shall dance quite prettily together, one last time. The oblivion is not to be feared, but embraced, to remind us to covet the sweetness of life again. Before we grow tired. I yearn only for the alluring rest of a dreamless sleep. At least for a little while, before I burn again.

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