

Chapter 22: **The calm.**

"Requiem! Requiem!"

"I can't."

"Come on! It's been forever since last time!"

"I'm saving it for the right moment. The situation needs to call for it, all conditions need to be set so by the time I release it the impact is bigger and--"

"They're surrounding you! You need to do it!"

"Listen to him, do it!"

"It's not ready yet!"

"DO IT!"

Giving up to his audience's pressure, Lincoln activated his magic immunity item to prevent enemies from stop his channeling and pressed the hotkey to his hero's ultimate skill. A few seconds later, having gathered the spirits of the fallen warriors, Shadow Fiend finally channeled his *Requiem of Souls* technique, creating an explosion that covered most of the computer screen and instantly annihilated three out of the five enemy heroes, severely hurting the rest. Clyde and Ronnie Anne jumped and cheered up, excited about the turn of events, and their joy only increased when the rest of Lincoln's team hunted down the fleeing enemies, killing them all and paving down the path to victory, which was achieved quite promptly after that.

As the computer announced "**TRIPLE KILL!**" and both his best friend and his girlfriend rejoiced in congratulations for themselves, telling him that it was only thanks to their advices that he had practically won the game, Lincoln smiled. If he had waited for the right time, the impact would've probably been greater. He would've gotten better reactions from his audience and a bigger satisfaction for his own work, but maybe, just maybe, he shouldn't wait for the very best moment, but instead do things while he could.

Time, after all, was something he couldn't allow himself to waste.

The last couple of hours had been absolutely incredible. His sisters, his girlfriend and himself had played several board games over and over again. Lynn won almost every single one of them, as usual, but she formed a powerful alliance with Lincoln and Lana when Lisa brought *The Settlers of Cat-Land*, and the three of them celebrated an overwhelming victory in that opportunity. Being able to sit down and enjoy some quality time with his loved ones was a little pleasure that every day became more and more important for the once white-haired boy. They had all laughed throughout the games, joking and playfully teasing each other, and it was only in very few occasions that one of his sisters had to excuse herself to disappear into the bathroom for ten minutes, only to return with red, puffy eyes.

After a couple of hours, when school had ended, Lincoln texted Clyde, inviting him to join them in their fun. Five minutes later, the McBride's red SUV was parking on the driveway and his best friend was knocking on his door, ready to play with them. Clyde was so excited for being there that he didn't even pass out when Lori accidentally touched his hand during a card game; he just remained petrified, staring at the Void for five minutes without reacting to external stimuli.

It was three in the afternoon when Leni suggested to her sisters that Lincoln would probably wanted to spend some alone time with Ronnie Anne.

"T-That's not true!" He had complained, his cheeks the same shade of pink of Lola's dress.

"Let's stay for a little longer!" Lana pleaded, clinging to her big brother's arm.

"B-But...", Leni stammered, arching her eyebrows and biting her lower lip. "It's just... He... I..."

Lincoln gave him a curious look. Leni looked odd. Now that he began to think about it, she had been acting strange for a couple of hours. She always took things lightly, getting easily distracted and acting clumsily. It wasn't unusual for her to not be totally invested in a board game, to miss that it was her turn to toss the dice, or that she would forget the rules of whatever they were playing for the fifth time in twenty minutes. There was nothing unusual in that. What caught Lincoln's attention, though, was his sister's lost look, sitting with her knees against her chest, looking through the window. What had she been thinking about?

She obviously wanted something but she didn't want to share what it was, or maybe she couldn't find the best way to explain herself. Her adorable dubitation to finish her sentence was a clear signal that Lincoln, always observant and insightful, immediately recognized. Lori also seemed to notice it, of course. If there was someone in that house that knew his sisters better than him, that was undoubtedly Lori. The eldest sister looked at Leni, and the talented modiste gave her a knowing look that Lincoln couldn't decipher.

"I think Leni's right", Lori said after a few seconds, earning a relieved sigh and a warm smile from her roommate, "why don't we let Lincoln and his friends have some fun on their own?"

The twins and Luan argued against it as Lincoln scrutinized his two eldest sisters. What were they trying to do?

"Come on, girls, Linky has a girlfriend now. Let's not make it ever more awkward for them."

"But if we go they'll start smooching and I want to see it!" Lola complained, stomping the floor.

"Lola!" Both Lincoln and Ronnie Anne exclaimed, their faces beyond the pinkish tone of a soft blush, tinted now with a glowing scarlet that put Lynn's jersey to shame.

Lori stood up and started to put away the last board game with a lukewarm smile.

"Lincoln, it's been, uh... a long time since you've just hanged out with your friends", she said in the calmest, most tender tone she could, while also avoiding to look at him in the eye. "You can just go with them and be you for a while. But only a while, ok?"

"Yeah, bro", Luna intervened, flashing him a smile that could be seen in her lips, but that didn't spread to the rest of her face. "Don't think you'll get away from us so easy."

Lincoln looked around the room. Ronnie Anne and Clyde looked fairly excited at the idea of being able to spend time with their friend in a more private, intimate environment. Lori was staring at Leni, who was suddenly very interested in her bedroom carpet. Luna was still looking at him with a warm smile and sad eyes. Luan was pressing her knees against her chest, unamused at the prospect of Lincoln leaving, but without making a fuss about it. Lynn didn't

object either, but her arms crossed over her chest and her squeezed lips were all he needed to see to know how she felt. Leaned against her shoulder was, oddly enough, Lucy. She had barely spoken a single word in the whole afternoon, and now she didn't even seem to be worried about sharing warmth with another mortal. Lola and Lana were the only ones that didn't mind showing and being vocal about their disagreement.

Both girls turned around to look at their big brother with puppy eyes. The twins had always been one of Lincoln's few weaknesses/soft points, along with Viper in Dota 2 and warm waffles with caramel on top. It was like Lana and Lola's eyes were just too expressive, perhaps because of how big they looked on their small faces. His heart ached when he saw them begging him with their eyes for him to stay with them.

Honestly, he didn't have any reason to go. He was having fun with his siblings! He wanted to stay there, to keep it that way. He wasn't fond of the idea of his two eldest sisters suggesting that they should end the family moment, but he assumed there had to be a reason for that. He looked back at Luna and her dropped shoulders. He looked at Luan, who still had swollen eyes from her last visit to the bathroom. Could it be that they all needed a rest... from him? He knew that it was hard for them to be around him, to enjoy his presence without thinking about how little time he had left, but it was the same for him, and Lincoln still managed to be strong enough to actively avoid thinking that all the fun he had wouldn't change the fact that he was dying. Couldn't they do the same? Couldn't they hold their sadness for just a couple of hours? Couldn't they do it for him?

He didn't realize how hard he was clenching his fists until a hand softly landed on top of his, gently stroking his wrist. He turned his head and he found Ronnie Anne's eyes staring at him. She looked worried, doing her best to give him a tiny, shy smile. He remembered his outbursts towards her girlfriend earlier that morning. He didn't want to blow up on his sisters. They didn't deserve that.

He turned once again, this time looking at the twins, and he gave them the brightest smile the circumstances allowed him to have.

"Hey, I'll go to play with Ronnie Anne and Clyde for a little while", he told them, resting a hand on each of their shoulders, "but I'll be back soon, alright? I promise."

The two of them dropped their heads and stared at the floor. They didn't look happy. The man with the plan had to come up with something.

"And if you guys let me, maybe later today we three can play something. Just you guys and me. What do you say?"

It was impossible for them to conceal the smile that appeared on their faces. They looked up -their heads still looking down, though- and bobbed their heads in agreement. Once again, Lincoln was proud of himself. He might not be the smartest kid in school, and he wasn't cool or fashionable, but he knew his sisters. If the ability to make them smile when they needed it the most was the only thing he would take to his grave, that was more than enough.

"Alright, let's go, guys", he said to his two best friends.

The three of them stood up and, after some brief goodbyes and see ya later's, they left the room and walked into the hallway. They barely made it past the stairs when they heard a door opening up and some footsteps getting closer.

"Hey, Ronnie Anne."

They turned around, not without certain anxiety, at the sound of Lynn's voice. There she was, standing with her hands behind her back, her head turned slightly in another direction,

her lips pursed as she balanced her body from her heels to the tip of her toes. The Santiago girl looked at her boyfriend, who raised his hands and took a step back, taking the clever and coward decision of staying the hell out of whatever was about to happen. She buffed and glared at him before stepping forward to face Lynn.

She just hoped that things wouldn't escalate again. It had taken her several days to fully recover from the beatdown she had received, and now Lynn wasn't handicapped with a wrist band, so she'd have both hands to punch her this time.

"Yeah?" She asked, hiding her hands inside her hoodie's pockets.

The athlete Loud looked up to the ceiling, still not looking at her brother's girlfriend in the eye.

"Listen, I..." She began, scratching her head. "I-I'm sorry, alright?"

Ronnie Anne and the two boys behind her opened their eyes in surprise. Lynn was biting her lower lip, and even though Ronnie Anne's first impression was that the girl didn't want to apologize and she was just being forced to, she soon realized it was something else that made her act that way. Shame.

"I shouldn't have treated you like that", she continued, "I was... it's just..."

"Lynn, I, uh, I get it", she interrupted her, beginning to smile. "Don't worry, I forgive you. You were trying to protect Lincoln, and I hadn't been treating him nice. I deserved being pummeled."

Lynn finally looked up to see her face, and they both smiled at each other at the same time.

"You really know how to fight", Ronnie Anne continued.

"You're not bad yourself", Lynn told her, touching her chin, "you have a sick right hook."

"But you shrugged it off and finished me with two punches, that was pretty rad."

They both begin to laugh, and every trail of tension that remained soon dissipated.

"So, we're cool?" Ronnie Anne asked, drawing a hand out of her hoodie and offering it to Lynn.

"Welcome to the family", Lynn answered, shaking hands with her brand new sister in law, and they both smiled at each other until a new voice distracted them.

"You should seal your new friendship with a hug", Lincoln suggested with an impish smile a few steps behind his girlfriend.

"Shut up, lame-o", both girls said at the same time. Clyde chuckled and Lincoln dramatically raised a hand to his face.

"Oh, God, what have I done? Now I have the two toughest, coolest girls I know teamed up against me."

Everyone in the hall laughed, but Lincoln didn't know how spot-on his words were until his girlfriend and sister shared a quick look, mischievously smiled, and a second later each one of them had grabbed Lincoln from a shoulder before pulling him into a triple hug. He couldn't help but smile, and he allowed himself to get lost for a while in all the love two of the most important girls in his life were drowning him on. He had always imagined that Lynn and Ronnie

Anne would get along well. They shared interests and passions, and he really hoped this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship between them.

The embrace eventually ended. Lincoln was bold enough to leave his arm around Ronnie Anne's waist, and his girlfriend didn't complain. Lynn wished them to have fun –"But not too much fun! We have paper thin walls here!"– and she then walked back into Lori's room, allowing Clyde, Lincoln and Ronnie Anne to finally go to the once linen closet at the end of the hall, where they would play for a while.

After the game that Lincoln won, it was Clyde's turn to play. He sat in front of the desk and started to search for a local host to join, chatting with some members of his party in the meantime. Lincoln walked to his bed and sat next to Ronnie Anne. His instinct made him leave a space between them, like he had always done, but she buffed and moved closer until their shoulders touched. He smiled and let his body lean against hers.

The morning hadn't started all that well. Seeing Lisa's eyebags during his morning check, his mother almost breaking down as they wrote a new chapter in their book –it had been too much for her to listen to him talking about his role as a big brother in a chapter that he had decided to title "Baby Steps"–, and all the drama his delicate emotional state had caused at Ronnie Anne's house... Yeah, that was definitely not what one would call a good start. Little by little, though, things had started to improve. He now had a girlfriend. They had kissed a lot. Big time. He spent some amazing hours with his family and friends. Lynn and Ronnie Anne had worked out their differences. Everything seemed to be working out just fine.

Of course, that could only mean that the Universe was conspiring to make sure that his life would be miserable once again. Soon. And it all started with the most trivial and simple of questions.

"Hey, Lincoln, why don't you bring some juice?" Ronnie Anne asked.

"Make it orange juice, please!" Clyde asked, just before yelling at the microphone. "The Tower! Forget the creeps, hit the Tower!"

Lincoln, of course, wouldn't deny a glass of juice to his guests. His coin collection and his host skills had always been something he had been proud of. Clyde had his coin collection now, but the manners were still there. He excused himself out of his room –he was tempted to give Ronnie Anne a goodbye kiss on her cheek, but he wasn't so corny– and was ready to head for the kitchen, but he stopped when he noticed something.

The calmness. The silence.

During the last nine days, the Loud house had stopped being so loud. The familiar chaos he had grown up with and that he had complained so many times about was no more, and Lincoln found himself missing it. This time, however, it seemed to him that it was... different. Even though the news about his sickness had clearly affected all his sisters, and their depressed states were evident with the lack of motivation they did their activities, they never found themselves being in an absolute silence like the one the whole house was right then. Not the television, not the echo of conversations down the hall, not the sound of the creaky and loose floorboards, nothing was heard outside of his room.

Forgetting the juice for a second, Lincoln walked to the other end of the hall, knocking his fist against the door of his eldest sister's room.

"Lori?"

After getting no answer, he considered his options. He would never try to go into Lori's room without her written consent, but unfortunately for everyone, circumstances had changed.

So without worrying that something horrible might happen to him, he opened the door and peeked his head inside. The floor was a mess, with the board games all over the place and the blankets and cushions they'd used before still there, along with some clothes. Still, no traces of Lori or Leni.

With a big dose of curiosity and a pinch of worry, Lincoln checked the rest of his sister's rooms, but only Lisa's seemed to have someone inside. Judging by the electric and mechanical sounds that slipped through the closed door, he imagined that the little genius was probably too busy in her research to act as a proper host for her sibling units. He walked downstairs, hoping to find them all in the living room, or perhaps the kitchen, but they weren't there either.

Where did they go? Why would they even go without letting him know? It didn't make any sense, and for some reason, he began getting anxious. He didn't like the idea of being left alone. Not when his calendar –hidden behind his bed so no one else would find it now that he didn't lock his door anymore– was running short. He, more than anyone else, was aware of the fact that every minute could very well be his last. Did they really think it was a good idea to go without telling him? Without...?

Without saying goodbye? Could they really live with that weight of their shoulders if...?

The sound of a voice brought the colors back to his face. He jumped to the window in the living room, pushing aside the curtains to take a look at whoever was outside. The relieved smile he had begun to form faded away when he realized it wasn't any of his sisters, but her mother, carrying Lily on her arms and speaking on her cellphone. He was still ignorant to the whereabouts of his sisters, but if someone in the house could help him understand why they had all left without saying a word, that was his mother.

He went through the front door and walked into the stoop. The cold air caressed his face, and for a second he looked up in the sky, only to find that the Sun was nowhere to be found behind all the clouds. He looked down once again, resting his gaze on his mother.

"...I don't know, at least an hour and a half", she said, and Lincoln quickly noticed that she sounded afflicted. Whatever it was that she was talking about, it didn't seem to be a good thing. "It's not up to me, it depends on how long he... Yes, I know. Alright. I'll take him and–"

"Wincon!" Yelled Lily as soon as she saw her big brother a few feet away from her. She began laughing with no reason at all, stretching her arms towards him.

Rita turned around. The surprised and slightly scared face that she gave him was definitely far away from the reaction Lincoln would want his mother to have upon seeing him. She stood there, thunderstruck for a few seconds, before pressing her phone tight against her ear and tilting her head away from him.

"Honey, I have to go, please take care and don't come back too late. I love you", he said, before finishing the call.

"Who was that?" He asked.

"Lincoln, what are you doing here?" She asked herself, avoiding the question.

Lily kept making gestures towards Lincoln, so the boy closed the distance between them and grabbed her by her armpits, carrying her on his arms against his shoulder. She smiled and giggled, rubbing her cheek against Lincoln's head, who couldn't help but to catch on from that blissful ignorance. He envied her, to be honest. He wished he could live ignoring everything that was going on in his life.

"I was looking for the girls", he said as he blew a raspberry on Lily's belly, making her laugh and move her arms everywhere. "Have you seen them?"

"They... they had to go. They didn't tell me where", she quickly added; too quickly for his taste. "Where are Ronnie Anne and Clyde?"

"They're playing in my room. I should be getting some juice for them. But why did they all leave together? Why didn't they invite me, or at least let me know where they were going?"

Rita showed him a bittersweet smile and gently stroked her little boy's head. Lincoln felt his mother's soft fingers getting lost within his hair, and childhood memories flashed inside his mind. Memories of simpler times, happier and warmer. He closed his eyes and let out a sigh as he felt streaks of his hair being combed by Rita, who eventually dragged her fingers gently across Lincoln's face, placing them on his freckled cheeks. Lincoln opened his eyes and looked at his mother. He found himself staring at a face that seemed to grow a decade older during the last week. The eye bags were painful to look at, and he was sure that those wrinkles on her forehead hadn't been there not too long ago. He embraced Lily tighter against him, without complaining when the baby grabbed some of his chestnut hair and pulled it.

"I'm sure they just want you to have fun with your friends without worrying about them", he quietly told him, as she distracted Lily to keep her from leaving her brother alone. "Are you having fun?"

"Yeah", he confessed with a smile, "we're playing in my computer, taking turns. We're having a blast. And Ronnie Anne.. well, she's been acting a lot sweeter since, uh, well... since we're a t-thing..."

He might never get used to speak about them in those terms. It felt incredibly bizarre, but it also felt right. Like it was just what it was meant to be. Lincoln didn't know much about love, but in his ignorance, the only thing that he knew was that being with Ronnie Anne made him happy on the inside. And the kisses weren't bad at all, to be honest. Rita's smile embarrassed him a little, but the way she bit her lips and blinked to contain some treacherous tears made him regret making that comment.

"Honey, listen", she said, clearing her throat to speak, "go upstairs and keep playing with your friends, alright? But... but we'll be leaving in an hour."

"What? Why?"

Rita closed her eyes and made a small pause to take a breath and get ready. Even before she explained it to him, Lincoln was already sensing that something bad was about to happen, something that would ruin his wonderful afternoon. Because the universe hated Lincoln Loud, and it wasn't willing to allow him to enjoy not even one nice afternoon with his family and friends.

Five minutes later, Lincoln walked upstairs with shaky feet, dragging them through the carpet once he was on the first floor. He opened the door to his room and slowly let himself fall next to Ronnie Anne.

"Hey, what took you so long? And what happened to the juice?" The young Santiago reproached him. Her mockery disappeared the moment she saw the worry in her boyfriend's eyes. "Lincoln? What's wrong?"

Clyde also turned around, forgetting about the game and allowing his rivals to kill him without resistance. They both noticed Lincoln's clenched fists, his trembling lips, but most of all, his scared eyes. Ronnie Anne saw him slowly turning his head until their eyes met, and the

panic she saw there almost broke her heart. As soon as he stretched his arms towards her, she hugged him with all her strength.

It took him almost ten minutes to calm down enough to explain to them what his mom had told him. His anxiety didn't let him fully express himself at first, but the phrased with which he started was enough to make his friends worry.

"I-I don't know if I can do it."