

Non Human 261

Chapter 261 Tim

Knocking on Sharp's bedroom door, I tried to stop my tail and ears from fidgeting too much.

I was upset. Bothered. But I wasn't sure what to be the most bothered by.

The heavy wooden door opened, creaking lowly as Sharp tilted her head at me. "Renn...? Is everything okay?" she asked.

She didn't have her robe or hood on. Nor any bandages. All she wore was a thin leather shirt, which made small noises as it clung to her skin. Her short and spiky hair shifted a little, as if swaying in the wind, as she glanced around.

At least she hadn't been asleep. "Vim's asked me to get you and Abel..." I said quietly.

Sharp tilted her head the other way, and her purple eyes narrowed in understanding. "I see. He's finally doing it then, is he?" she asked.

I nodded. "Vim and Tim are at the front. Um... I don't know where Abel's room is," I told softly.

There were other members in this hallway. Though I wasn't sure which door led to their rooms, I did know people lived here. And it was early morning. I didn't want to wake them by being too noisy.

“Oh. Right... Let me at least put on my robe,” Sharp hurried away from the door, to get dressed.

Waiting for her, I shifted as I felt uneasy again.

Banishment. I knew it. I had experienced it.

Yet...

Remembering the weird smile on Tim’s face when Vim had spoke to him not too long ago, I felt a little sick.

I had not wanted to be banished. I had not expected it, when it had happened. In truth... I wasn’t even sure if I deserved the ones I had received.

Tim was the complete opposite. He had not only expected it, he had admitted he earned it. He had even acted as if he had desired it.

It made me feel weird. I wanted to pity him... yet instead I was...

Remembering the short conversation in Tim's room, where Vim and Tim spoke to one another... I felt my tail coil and tighten as the hairs upon it stood up.

Tim had sickened me. He had spoken of the things he had done wrong, namely the threat he had given Frett, as if he had been talking about the weather.

The man had no remorse. He was not regretful for his actions. He knew it was wrong in the eyes of the Society... but didn't find it wrong in general.

He reminded me of my brothers.

"This way."

Stepping back as Sharp shut her door and hurried down the hallway, I went to follow after her.

She had her typical robe on again... but no bandages, as far as I could tell. Not too surprising... it likely took her some time to wrap herself with all those bandages. But thanks to not having any bandages, I could hear her clothes as they rubbed and got stuck on her abrasive skin. I could see her sharp hairs poke and snag on the hood she wore. I wonder if her clothes ripped and tore without those bandages.

I knew now, thanks to bathing with her, that Sharp didn't have ears. Or well, any non-human ones. She had a human appearance. I had mistaken the way her hair shifted and tugged her hood as the movement of ears. An odd thing, which under any other condition and moment would have made me smirk and enjoy thinking about.

Instead right now I was barely able to use it as a distraction as I was led downstairs and past the courtyard. We returned to the front of the church, and went to a door in the corner of one of the smaller hallways, not far from the entrance.

Sharp banged on the door and stepped back, past me even.

Taking her actions to heart, I readied myself as the door quickly opened.

“What happened?” Abel asked worriedly, his eyes wide in shock.

“Vim sent me to get you, Father Abel,” I said.

Abel looked from me to Sharp, and his face immediately contorted into worry. “What happened...? Who’s hurt?” he asked worriedly.

“No one...! Just... well...” I hesitated, and wondered why I was hesitating to say it.

It was bad, but it was reality. It happened and was happening. And Vim had asked me to do this... this was my job... so...

“Tim is being banished,” Sharp said for me, before I could find my confidence.

Abel froze, then... turned his head and flinched. "I see..." he simply said... then hurriedly stepped out of the room.

Unlike Sharp he had been dressed. His robe fluttered as he stepped past us, heading down the hallway and heading for the entrance.

He must know where they were. Maybe when one is banished they were normally supposed to be taken straight to the exit.

It made sense. Ruvindale and the Bell Church had basically wanted me to leave immediately, as soon as possible. Lumen I had been able to stick around for a few days because of a technicality.

Before I turned to join Sharp and follow Abel... I glanced into his room.

And found an empty, cold, and dark stone room. A tiny place with but a single bed. Not even a rug.

Although disturbing, I knew better than to judge or worry for him.

Father Abel was a very pious man. He lived a life of monasticism on purpose. He wasn't suffering... he was just living a life without attachments.

I wouldn't be able to live like that.

Though...

As I hurried to follow after Sharp, I realized something oddly interesting in my moment of internal discord.

Vim was the same. In his own way.

He cared not for anything materialistic. He had nothing. If he could get away with it Vim wouldn't even have the clothes on his back.

It was interesting a man so opposite of Father Abel, at least in terms of religious beliefs, was strangely so similar. You'd think Vim would be the opposite what with his difference in views of religion... yet instead was the epitome of it.

Reaching the entrance, I followed Sharp and Abel out of the church and down the few stone steps... to approach Vim, Tim, and the horse he was about to get on.

Sharp came to a stop several steps behind Abel, who also stopped a good distance from the horse and the two men. I slowed to a stop behind Sharp, since I knew I... really wasn't supposed to be here, probably.

As far as I understood, Sharp was seemingly the de-facto leader and elder here. Which was funny, since she was more like Vim than not when it came to religious beliefs. Plus she was short. Young looking. Constantly angry, and avoided by most of the residents here. Yet she had some kind of authority, all the same. Thus earning her such a position.

Abel however represented the religious members here... which was basically everyone. So it seemed he too had a position of authority.

Thus they two were the leading votes here.

It was interesting that even though everyone got a vote and a voice... each location basically had its ruler, or elder.

"Abel, Sharp," Tim greeted the two.

I glared at the taller man, and did my best to not hate him more than I did.

He looked excited to be setting out on a journey.

I'd question what Frett had seen in him, had I not heard from Vim that Frett hadn't seen anything in him. She hadn't loved him. It hadn't been a relationship of emotions, but desire. A desire for a child.

Or well, for Frett at least.

“Tim... what have you done?” Abel asked heavily.

Tim frowned and glanced at Vim. “What... no one else knows?” he asked Vim, who was standing only a few feet away from him. He had his arms crossed and looked... tired.

“They will before the day is over, Tim,” Vim said simply.

Tim sighed and nodded. “Sorry Abel. I um... well... I did screw up. I really did,” Tim admitted.

“Don’t act so sorry,” Sharp said sharply.

Tim frowned, but didn’t say anything back.

“Vim... what did he do...?” Abel asked.

“I two-timed. I’m an adulterer,” Tim answered before Vim could.

I shifted, and wanted to say something... but kept my mouth shut.

“He threatened Frett. Tim, I told you, you’re not being banished for who or how many people you slept with... but the threat of violence towards our members,” Vim reminded him.

Right! I nodded quickly.

“You... you threatened Frett...?” Abel sounded confused, and it was no surprise.

“Did you really?” Sharp asked, stepping forward.

Worried she was going to do something, I glanced at Vim. I found him staring intently at Sharp... likely staring straight into her eyes.

“Just in anger... but Vim’s right. I get it. I shouldn’t have done it. I just... got emotional... and...” Tim shuffled in his feet, making the horse he was standing next to turn a little as to stare at his feet. The horse studied Tim’s feet intently as Tim sighed. “I’m sorry. Let her know I’m sorry, would you Abel? I shouldn’t have let my emotions get so heated like that,” Tim said.

Abel groaned as he covered his eyes with a hand, and shook his head. “Gods,” he said softly.

“It’s worse than that too, Abel. This bastard got Frett pregnant, and didn’t even help her as the baby died,” Sharp told him.

Abel immediately looked up, looking straight at Tim who flinched.

The pious man stepped forward, raising a hand as if to reach out and grab something... but no words came as he stuttered and gaped. He was in shock.

“He’s admitted to it all, Abel. You and Sharp need to decide if his banishment is legitimate,” Vim said with a small gesture to the man who honestly didn’t look as ashamed as he should be.

“By the Gods you’re kidding!” Abel finally found his voice.

I flinched, and knew that he had likely shouted loud enough to be heard. At least by our non-human members.

Glancing up at the brightening sky, I looked back down as Sharp stepped forward again and pointed at Tim.

“You’re lucky Frett wouldn’t let me punish you myself,” she said angrily.

Tim stepped back, and suddenly looked worried. For the first time since Vim and I had addressed him and confronted him over his actions.

I glared at the man who was now scared. He didn't deserve to be worried and scared now. Sharp's anger was justified, in my opinion.

The fact this man was more worried about Sharp's anger than he was his banishment made me upset.

"Tim...!" Abel drew Tim's attention, and the Father of this church gestured behind him. At me.

Standing up straight, I panicked as Tim looked at me.

"What have you done...! In this holy place!" Abel asked loudly.

Ah. Okay. He wasn't pointing at me.

Calming down as Tim stared at Abel, who was shaking in his robes; I watched Tim frown and nod. A little too quickly.

"I know. I'm sorry," Tim apologized, but I didn't see or hear anything genuine from him.

"Pfa," Sharp made a noise as she turned away, and stepped back towards me. "See Renn? This is the quality of men in the Society," Sharp said with a gesture at the three men in front of us.

I didn't like how she obviously had included Abel and Vim in that statement.

"What kind of threat did you speak in this house of Gods, Tim?" Abel asked stiffly.

Tim shifted, and glanced at Vim.

"He threatened to kill Frett had she revealed to anyone that the child was his," Vim stated.

I nodded. That was what Tim himself had told us, but a few minutes ago. In his room.

Abel let out a tiny groan of sorrow... and then fell to his knees.

Startled, I stepped forward... to see if he needed help, but I didn't make it to him.

He started praying. Bowed. Prostrated... right there in front of Tim.

"Hmph." Sharp made a noise, which told me she was not impressed.

Tim looked uncomfortable in front of Abel... who had just begun to pray for Tim's soul.

"I uh..." I wasn't sure what to say.

"I accept his banishment. Since you won't give him the punishment he deserves, at least give him that," Sharp stated loudly.

Vim nodded, and then glanced to Abel... who was still praying. Deeply.

"Abel. You can pray, but I need to hear your vote," Vim said gently.

Abel continued to pray, and Tim sighed.

I flinched at the sudden desire to smack the man. He had sighed! Actually sighed!

He had no remorse at all!

"Careful Renn," Sharp whispered.

I turned to my friend, who had drawn a little closer. Maybe even to grab me. She must have noticed my anger.

“But Sharp...!” I said.

“I know. But Vim will stop you if you try. Trust me, it’s not worth the pain,” Sharp warned.

Vim would...?

Right... he would...

I groaned as I looked back at Vim and Tim, and hated how Vim was patiently waiting for Abel to finish.

He looked far too calm! Why wasn’t he more angry!?

I got it. Tim hadn’t actually hurt Frett. He hadn’t hurt anyone. Although his adultery had caused heartache and headaches, he hadn’t physically harmed anyone. And it wasn’t like it was his fault the child had died. It had been born with complications, per Frett’s own words.

But he had still threatened to kill Frett! The mother of his child! And...!

Growing very upset, I realized I was taking this far too personally.

Something I wasn't supposed to allow.

Something Vim would scorn me over.

But I couldn't help it... the bastard wasn't upset at all. He even had prepared a pack. The bag tied to the horse had been readied before Vim and I even confronted the man! He had been expecting Vim's visit! He had known long before we even got here that this would happen. He had even greeted us with a relieved smile when we knocked on his door earlier, as if he was glad to finally be done with it.

His audacity was infuriating!

And I knew why. Verily so.

Because he reminded me of my own family.

Abel then went quiet... and then looked up at Tim.

I shifted at the sight of Abel's cheeks. I was only able to make out a small section of his face from this angle, since I was somewhat behind him... but the tears marring his face, and the dirt clinging to his cheeks thanks to those tears, were obvious.

"I banish you, Tim of the Rambling Plains. I banish you from this holy land, and our house. May you never return," Abel said.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Vim nodded, and then turned to Tim.

"On your horse, Tim," he ordered.

Tim nodded. "Yeah, yeah... I'd be half way down the mountain by now if you'd have just let me go earlier, Vim. Really," Tim complained.

I shifted and glared at the man as he climbed up on his horse.

"Just get going you asshole," Sharp said, sounding just as angry as I felt.

The horse huffed a little as Tim settled into the saddle, and he sighed as he looked down at Abel. "I am sorry Abel. This could have just been avoided had I killed the stupid baby earlier. I knew I shouldn't have waited so long," Tim said.

"H...huh...?" my head went blank, as if all the anger and disgust inside me just popped like a bubble.

He then turned to Vim and nodded. "You as well Vim. Next time I won't let it become this big of a deal, promise," he said seriously, meaning every word.

I heard a sharp intake of breath next to me. Sharp. I watched Abel lean back, aghast.

Then I saw the man who had been just a moment ago tired and calm... become a man I'd never seen before.

A flash of emotion covered Vim's face. For but an instant. A scowl that I'd never seen before.

If anyone else had noticed, I had no idea... because he then took a single step forward. Up to the horse.

Then the man who had been shaking his head with a sigh... suddenly lost his head.

It had happened in the blink of an eye. Yet I had seen it all, since I had been staring wide-eyed at the man who had just said something so atrocious. So egregious.

One moment it was there. The next it was gone... as if he had never had a head at all in the first place. Then without warning a massive boom shook the air, and a burst of wind exploded outward from the area around the horse.

It hit Abel first. Knocking him over onto his back. Then it kicked up some dust right before it hit me and Sharp.

I skidded back, staying upright as I felt an actual wall of air and wind slam into me. It whooshed past, deafening, and caused the whole world to become loud as clothes and dirt fluttered and flapped. It had been so strong it had even made my left ear curl and fold backwards a little.

Off in the distance, I watched the wall of wind roll out over the dirt and grass. It was like a massive gust, flowing outwardly forever. It eventually hit the first row of trees of the surrounding forest, and the world suddenly got even noisier as the trees rustled and swayed as if in a storm.

Right as the next rows of trees began to shake violently, the horse let out a great bellow of shock and pain. It began kicking wildly, as it hurried away.

Windows then shattered behind us, startling me, as I spun. The church looked fine, but there were definitely now missing windows. Tiny fragments of shiny glass were falling to the ground, rolling along the stone church as they did. Then a moment later, the church bell began to ring... and not in the steady rhythm it did when someone else tugged its rope.

Turning back around, right as a bunch of birds flew into the sky from the forest, squawking in terror, I groaned at the sight of Vim.

He had Tim's head in his grip. And he no longer looked angry.

Vim's shoulders rose up... and then lowered as he released a deep sigh of regret as he stared at the head in his hand.

“Vim...” I groaned.

“That’s more like it!” Sharp shouted as she hurried forward.

I too hurried forward... but not to join Sharp. Instead I went to help Abel up. He was struggling to get back to his feet. He had fallen backward in such a way his right leg had gotten curled up and stuck under him. Poor man was pale in the face. It made the white lines all over his face look red in comparison. I got an arm under his, and helped him to his feet.

Abel's arms were thin. As thin as my own.

“Good job, Vim!” Sharp said happily as she stepped over to him.

“By the Gods Vim!” Abel shouted, a little loudly. Had his ears gotten hurt? He had been far closer to the cause of the noise than Sharp and I...

Thinking of ears, I fluttered my own. The movement made my ear that had been folded go back to normal, pointing upward. It felt a little ticklish as it did. It has been a long time since my ears had ever curled in such a way... it used to happen a lot when I was younger, but lately it only happened when I scrubbed my head too hard while drying off or if I’d rolled around too strongly in my sleep.

The horse stopped running nearby, a few dozen feet away. Tim’s body had fallen off it, and the horse kept kicking and scraping the grass. As if in anger.

Looking for the body, I found it not far from where the horse was fuming. It had landed in the grass, on its side.

“Aw come on,” Sharp complained.

I turned and found Vim had lifted the head. Just out of Sharp’s reach. She was trying to grab it.

“Sharp, please,” Vim said stiffly.

“What? Come on he’s already dead he won’t notice,” Sharp groaned as she tried to stretch and grab at it.

Abel stepped forward, and almost fell back down. His robe had gotten a little tangled somehow beneath his feet. I held on to him, as to steady him, as he got his robe under control and then he hurried forward.

Letting him go, I watched as Abel stepped right up next to Sharp. Close enough that I worried for him. She was jumping and trying to grab at the head, and didn’t notice his approach.

Abel reached over and Vim let him take the head without resistance, before Sharp could get it.

“Aw...!” Sharp immediately stopped trying to grab at the head as Abel stepped away, and tucked the head closely as he wrapped it with a part of his robe.

“Have some respect for the dead, Sharp!” Abel shouted at her.

“Respect? For that piece of shit? You heard him, didn’t you? He had killed the baby!” Sharp shouted back.

I groaned and flinched.

Yes. He had.

But had we misunderstood? Had he actually done it? Did we have proof?

No. We didn’t.

Even if he had been an ass, and didn’t seem to be regretting his actions at all...

“Sharp, please,” Vim said again, a little gentler this time.

Sharp groaned as she crossed her arms and glared at Abel and Vim. “Fine, whatever,” she mumbled.

Abel sighed, and stepped away as he unfolded the head from under his robe... and went to staring at it.

“Oh, my son... what brought you to this end?” Abel asked.

“Son...?” I asked worriedly.

“He means religiously, Renn,” Sharp told me.

Ah. Right. Right...

Thank goodness...

Sighing in relief I watched as Vim stepped away. At first I thought he was going to head over to Tim’s body... but instead he went for the horse. It was still stomping around, angrily.

I gulped as I watched Vim walk over to the horse. He grabbed its reins, and went to speaking gently to it. To calm it down.

He looked hurt. Vim did. The horse did too, kind of... but...

"I can't believe he actually said that. In front of Vim of all people. After being banished," Sharp said, and started to snicker as she went to laughing.

"Don't defame the dead, Sharp! Have some decency," Abel said with a dry voice.

"Decency? Like him? A two-timing child killer. Sure," Sharp said.

"What the heck's going on!"

I flinched, and turned... to see several faces. Prasta and some of the human members were at the entrance, staring out at us. Even Elisabeth was amongst them.

Great.

My tail was in a fury. Twitching and darting around all over. But I didn't even try to contain it or calm it down. My heart was beating quickly, and my mind was racing.

"Go tell them what happened, Abel. If I do it, it won't end well," Sharp said softly.

"Ah... right. Quite right," Abel quickly nodded, and turned... but right as he did, the head he held in his hands became visible to those behind us.

One of the women screamed at the sight of it, and Abel jolted. He nearly dropped the head in shock, and Sharp groaned as she waved at me.

Oh no.

Letting out a weird whine, even for me, I stepped forward and over to Abel... who promptly held the head out to me.

“Please Renn,” Abel asked seriously.

Right. Sharp couldn’t take it. She didn’t have her bandages on. If she did it’d cut Tim’s head up and...

Right. Sure. Okay...

Carefully taking the head, I felt a strange shiver at the feeling of warmth. He was still warm!

I did my best to angle the head away from me, so I’d not see Tim’s eyes. But somehow that was just as bad. It made my hands and fingers slide into his hair and over his ears...

“You can just drop it if you want, Renn,” Sharp offered.

"I uh..." I kind of wanted to, but I feared if I did I'd be the next one to be banished.

"Go take it to Vim then," Sharp suggested.

Ah. Right. Yes.

Hurrying away, I ran over to Vim.

He turned on my approach, and I noticed the way he quickly made sense of what was going on. He looked at me, blinked at the sight of me with the head... then looked behind me, and over at the crowd near the church quickly becoming noisy.

Vim readily accepted the head from me, and I sighed in great relief once it was out of my hands.

"Sorry Renn," Vim said gently.

"Huh? It's okay... I uh... it's not the blood or anything, it's just... I mean... he's still warm, and..." I tried to reason it to him.

Vim though smiled at me, and nodded. "I meant I'm sorry you had to witness it," he said.

Oh... "Well... it had been very shocking," I admitted.

Especially the... strange boom and wind. How had he even done that anyway? Vim tearing a head off made perfect sense. He was strong enough to do so... but... That had been something else entirely.

The horse, which Vim had calmed down, reached its head over to nuzzle at me. I lifted an arm, to pet the thing on the nose and snout. "Is it okay?" I asked.

"No. I popped its eardrums. It won't be able to run for a while," Vim said.

Glancing at the horses ears... I startled at the flowing blood. They were practically oozing. "Vim..." I groaned.

"Yeah... It should survive. We'll see," Vim said.

Poor thing. I scratched its head, and noted the teary eyes. It was in pain.

"I can't believe he said that. Do you... did you believe him?" I asked as I glanced at the head in Vim's hand.

“What do you think?” Vim asked as he lifted the head.

“Ah... I mean...” I hesitated, but knew what he meant.

It was a stupid question. Vim had killed him over it. He’d not have done so had he not have believed it entirely.

He had likely known Tim better than I had; of course... maybe Tim was the kind of man that anyone would have believed such a thing upon hearing it.

Abel and Sharp had also reacted in shock too... so they had believed him too, although likely startled in disbelief at first.

“Why...? Why though? Why kill the baby?” I asked as I stared at Tim’s head. His eyes were still open. They were facing away from me, but it was a little unsettling.

“For the same reason he had threatened Frett. He feared being killed or banished, so he wanted to keep it quiet. Chances are the only reason he didn’t kill Frett was because her going missing was far more obvious than the baby would be. No one else had known about the child, after all,” Vim said.

“Still...” Why kill a baby for that reason? It made no sense.

After all... as Vim had said, Tim was being banished not for his affairs with multiple women... he was being banished for his threats.

Had he not harmed the baby, or threatened Frett... none of this would have happened. Jeez, he could have even kept the fact he harmed the baby a secret. Vim would have allowed him to just... ride off into the sunrise had he simply kept his mouth shut.

Vim sighed, and I turned to follow his eyes.

I found Frett. Standing away from the group on the stairs. It looked like nearly everyone was here, listening to Abel describe the situation.

Frett was paying them no heed. Instead she was just... staring out at us.

Oh boy.

"Would... would you go talk to her? Let me handle the horse, then the body, then I'll talk to her," Vim asked of me.

I nodded. "That's a lot easier than handling that head," I said.

"To you maybe," Vim said as I stepped away.

Hesitating, I paused and glanced back at him.

The Societies Protector had grabbed the reins, and paused too as he noticed me.

“Stand tall, Vim,” I told him.

He blinked, and his eyes narrowed at me.

“Not this time, Renn,” he said softly.

Then he turned away.

Chapter 262 Abel’s Prayer

So much for a simple visit.

Usually my stops here at the Crypt were... quiet. Even when there was a funeral. After all... the dead didn’t cause problems. Not the kind that usually ever bothered me at least.

Staring at the burning pyre which was becoming more of a smoldering pile than anything else, I sighed.

I hadn't really known the man. I'd brought Tim here after his location had become compromised. It had actually been a place with several dozen people... and not a single person had died. I, and those involved, had been able to secure and help everyone escape. We had got them all out before the church which had sniffed them out had been able to do anything drastic.

Tim had been the only one from that location to come here. The rest had scattered elsewhere. The reason he had chosen this place was simple... he had wanted to find religion. He chose here instead of the other locations in the Society nearby and well...

After bringing him here... I really hadn't paid much attention to him. He was a simple man. A typical male of the non-human variety. More emotional than not, and more coward than that.

So it was surprising he became so... strange all of a sudden. I had remembered him as a timid man. One who cowed and hid. I couldn't remember a lot of details about those days of saving him and his fellows from the church, but I could remember him hiding with the rest when those knights had marched into the village.

Tim had been the kind of coward that such threats and violence should have been beyond him. Let alone killing a little baby... If he had actually done it, that is.

"So um... Vim..."

I turned to my companion whose tail was still flickering back and forth, as if agitated.

Renn pointed at the smoldering fires. "You really like burning bodies... is there a reason?" she asked.

Was that what she was annoyed over right now? Maybe it was the smell. He had smelled a little... off while his carcass had burnt. Likely something to do with his bloodline.

"Well, here it's more of a symbolic thing than not. I can't bury him in the cemetery, at the Crypt. He... well... not only had I killed him, he had been banished right before it had happened. So burning him allows me to dispose of his body without breaking any rules," I said.

"So... you'd have buried him normally had we been elsewhere?" she asked.

"Well... likely not. I do prefer cremation," I said.

"Cremation?" she asked.

"The burning of bodies. To fragments and dust. It breaks the body down without causing issues. It also eliminates possible diseases and pathogens... and well... it's easier than digging a deep hole too," I told her.

"So... we're just being lazy, mostly," Renn decoded my true meaning.

I nodded and smiled. "Basically."

She sighed at me.

Looking around at the forest all around us, I wondered how long it had been since this region had a forest fire. Some of the underbrush was a little... thick.

When preparing this pyre for Tim's body, I had to make a large berth around it as to keep the fire from spreading. I had dug what seemed like an almost foot deep trench in a large circle around the burning fire. It had helped start the fire and let it burn hot, since I had put all that debris into the stacks of wood and used it as kindling... but...

Most forests in this region had thicker detritus, but this area was definitely bad.

It was time this forest had a fire.

But what did I do about it? I could do a controlled burn, I guess, but...

The idea of burning this whole area, as a preventive measure, was a pain and a half. It'd cause a lot of issues... Rather I just trust those here to be aware and not get caught in it when it happens, eventually.

A small wind blew past, ruffling the leaves and branches around us... and causing the fire that had been about to die to reignite for a moment. It burned a little hotter thanks to the fresh air, restarting some embers that had gone out some time ago.

“Frett wasn’t as bothered as I had thought she would have been,” Renn then said gently.

“Mhm. She hadn’t loved him Renn, she had used him,” I said.

“Yeah... she made that clear. Such an odd thing... To me at least,” Renn said.

Was it...?

Glancing at her, I kept a few questions from leaking from my mouth. I knew that although Renn would likely answer them, she’d also either grow upset or sad over them.

I wanted to tease her a little, but I didn’t want her to be sad. Especially since she was having... issues already, as it was.

“I should have talked to him more. I feel shocked about this, but everyone else isn’t. That tells me he had likely been... problematic. But since I hadn’t known him, I feel like we made a mistake somehow,” Renn said.

Oh...? “Well, I did kind of just... kill him without giving him a chance to defend himself,” I told her.

“You did,” she stated.

I nodded. I did. I had.

Which was odd...

I got angry all the time. My people, those in the Society, frustrated me constantly.

They always gave me headaches. They always troubled me, and made my life harder than it had to be.

Yet...

Glancing again at my companion, who was obviously the reason I had been so emotional lately, I wondered what to say or do.

Me growing so frustrated that I'd actually act on it, without any hesitation, was rare. Very rare. Especially so for me.

It had been out of character. No one else here had really seemed to notice or realize it... but...

Looking away from Renn, I sighed and accepted that it was her fault.

After all she was the only thing new in my life. Any emotional or personality changes were... undoubtedly because of her. For better or worse.

Did she realize it? How could she...? There was no way for her to have known how I was before we had met. I had started getting affected by her presence from nearly the moment we had met, too, so it wasn't like she could even compare the me of now to the one she had met. She'd never known the man I had been, before her. Likely wouldn't ever.

I'd blame my exhaustion... but I've been tired before. I've been exhausted during such moments such as this, and hadn't acted out so hastily. During the wars I'd been not only exhausted but frustrated. To my limits. And even back then I hadn't just... outright killed people without a thought.

So it had to be her... right...?

Though whether it was or not didn't matter. I wasn't too apologetic or worried. I had no plans to separate myself from her. Or at least, I didn't wish to.

Though I did admit I was worried about how bad I'd get. If it was already this bad now...

"So um... what happens now, Vim?" Renn asked as the fire started to die off again. I could tell this time no winds would be able to help it. The fuel, the wood and foliage, had all been burnt and used up.

“Well... nothing really. He had been banished. If they wanted to, they could raise a vote of complaint against me for what I had done... but from what I’ve heard so far from everyone, the odds of that happening is rather minuscule,” I said.

Although many of them had been startled, and worried, they hadn’t been worried for Tim. Or me. They had been worried over what he had done to deserve death and banishment.

Upon being told of what he had done and what had happened, not a one had seemed bothered at all.

There was supposedly a human woman he had been sleeping with, but I wasn’t sure which one. I had asked Abel to keep an eye on her, and find out more. He hadn’t come to let me know yet, but I wasn’t too worried over it.

Knowing humans, she’ll likely not throw a fuss or even mention it. Especially since she was supposedly married already. She’ll likely go the rest of her life without ever again mentioning Tim. She’ll take their secret to her grave.

Or she’ll go crazy over it, and cause issues.

Humans were usually one or the other. One extreme or the next. Rarely anything in-between.

“What would happen if they did cast a vote? If they filed a complaint against you?” Renn asked, interested.

“It usually results in an outsider coming in. Someone well respected. It’d probably be Nann, since she’s close. They’ll then decide my punishment. Usually it involves a lot of manual labor or something,” I said.

When had been the last one...?

“Manual labor...?”

I nodded. “Last time had been in Telmik. No idea how long ago it had been. Decades at least. I had broke something special. Something important. Some kind of holy artifact, or something. Half the community there at the time, which had been several times more than there are now, were very upset with me. They nearly banished me from the Cathedral over it. Instead they decided to make me build them a new church. Or well, several churches. Throughout the western section of the Nation of the Blind. They figured it was fitting punishment for me,” I said as I remembered it. Those debates and votes had been interesting to sit through.

“Huh. It actually was fitting. You broke a religious artifact... so building a bunch of places of worship is a fitting penance. Especially since you probably had to endure and deal with the religious the entire time. Who thought of that? They knew you well,” Renn asked, and I heard the happy amusement in her voice.

“The Chronicler at the time had a few sisters. Real ones. They all got together and suggested it. Took me half a year to build those damn churches I think,” I said as I remembered them.

Renn giggled at me. “That’s funny.”

No. It hadn’t been at the time... but now, today...?

Yes. I saw the humor in it.

Plus it had worked. I've not broken anything in the Cathedral since. At least, nothing that important.

"Here though who knows. That's one of the problems Celine had with me. She had to give the Society a way to... as you say, punish me. But what could they actually do? The only real tool they have is either to order me to do something or to simply banish me from their location," I said.

"So... have you been banished? Really?"

I nodded. "From several places. There's actually one to the north, near the Keep. We've talked of it before. It's called the Summit. That place is basically the largest congregation of our Society. Last I knew there were almost two hundred members there. I've not been allowed near it since its creation, and can only go to it when summoned," I told her.

"Wait... wait, what? I don't remember a place with that many on the map," Renn stepped towards me, startled.

Map...? Oh right. The one in the Cathedral. Damn her memory.

"Well, yeah? They're a part of the Society but not. They don't want anyone to know about them, or their location," I said.

“Ah... how did uh... how’d you get banished from there?” she asked.

“I killed the wrong people. Or rather... I killed the wrong people too brutally. At least from their perspective,” I said.

Renn sighed. “Of course you did...”

“What?” I glanced at the woman who was shaking her head at me.

“Nothing Vim... so... could I go there? I know you’re banished, but what about me?” she asked.

“You could. In fact if you’d like to we can stop there on the way north, if you’d like. Actually that might be smart to do... it’d let you check on them, and relay to me if they’ve had any issues or anything,” I said as I thought about it.

Why hadn’t I thought of that before?

“Oh? Then yes. Let’s do it.”

I nodded. We shall.

Her tail swayed close to me, likely with intent to bump me, but she had been just a tad too far away. She smirked at me, happily swaying a little in expectation of the moment she could see the place I was talking about.

“Don’t be too excited Renn, they’ll likely banish you once you tell them you’re my wife,” I said to her.

Her happy swaying stopped, and then she glared at me. “Right...” she said softly.

Smirking at her, I nodded. “So just don’t tell them, maybe?”

She groaned and her ears fluttered in annoyance. “Maybe...” she mumbled.

Huh... she was actually upset over it. To the point it’d not surprise me if she still told them, even if it did indeed get her banished.

Interesting. She’d rather tell people she was my wife than enjoy the presence and company of hundreds of potential friends.

Interesting indeed...

“How long have you been telling people you’re my wife anyway?” I asked her.

“Huh...!” Renn stood up straighter, her tail going still... then it started swaying again as she regained composure. “Well... since Landi, Vim,” Renn said.

Landi? “Not before?” I asked.

“No. I’ve wanted to, yes, but... though I suppose I did tell Roslyn and her people that you were my husband. Do they count?” she asked.

“Only if they made it to Lumen and were accepted,” I said as I thought of those damned pirates.

“Hmph,” Renn huffed at me.

Smiling at her, I stepped forward as to stomp out the last few embering charcoals.

Stepping onto the few glowing remnants of the fire, I made sure to put it out completely. Then I went to grab the shovel.

“You just stepped all over his ashes, Vim...” Renn said gently as I grabbed the shovel.

"I did," I said, then went to digging a hole near the remnants of the fire.

The ground here was easy to dig into. And not just because I was strong, or the shovel sharp. The grass and soil was healthy and somewhat damp, thanks to the recent storm.

It didn't take long at all for me to dig several feet down. It helped I didn't need to dig a normal sized grave.

Renn watched me as I then went to filling the hole with the ashes and remnants of the fire. There were a few bone pieces left, notably of the larger bones, but nothing that didn't easily get buried.

A couple small wisps of white smoke filtered through the dirt as I buried the hot ashes. Then the smoke disappeared as I finished refilling the hole, and finished burying Tim's remains.

Once done I stomped the spot flat, both to pack it and to firmly put out any possible chance of a fire.

"So uh... should we say anything...?" Renn asked as I stepped back and admired my work.

"Say what?" I asked.

"He was religious right...? Shouldn't you say a prayer or something?" Renn asked worriedly.

Should I? “We could just pretend I did,” I said to her.

Renn shifted, and for a tiny moment I thought she was actually going to make me say something... or maybe she was going to say something herself. Instead she just frowned and nodded. “I suppose you’re right,” she then said.

A little pleased to hear it, I wondered if maybe I was starting to corrupt her a little. Or well...

“He did kill the baby, Renn,” I said gently.

She nodded. “So he admitted, yes.”

“I’d think that’d bother you a lot,” I said as I studied her tail. It was fidgety again.

“It does. More than you can imagine. But what bothered me the most was... his weird attitude. He wasn’t a predator was he? Aren’t such men normally meek? Why had he acted so...” Renn gestured with her hands at the pile of dirt, since she couldn’t figure out the proper word to use to describe how he had acted.

“Just because a man’s meek doesn’t mean he can’t be an asshole, Renn,” I said. But she was right. I’d thought the same myself. He had been odd. But... The reality was Tim’s oddness was more of a thing of today than yesterday.

“Well... yeah... but,” Renn didn’t seem to think that was good enough.

I sighed as I stabbed the shovel into the grass, as to make it firm enough for me to lean against. “The underlying issue is he didn’t see anything wrong with what he did, or how he acted. Regretfully... most of our people are just like that, Renn. There used to be a lot of those types. They’ve mostly been banished, or removed from the Society. Or simply not invited in the first place... but they used to be very common,” I told her.

“So... most of our kind were just like my family? Really?” she asked.

The shovel I was using as a support pole creaked, and I immediately stopped using it. I had almost snapped it. “All I know of your family Renn, is what you’ve told me. But if they were similar enough to Tim that you’d make a statement such as that...” I stopped myself from telling her I’d pity her for it.

She’d not like that if I did, even if true.

Renn shifted, her tail coiling a little as she gave me an odd smile. “They were worse,” she told me.

“Ah... well... To be honest I had assumed. You’ve said you killed them yourself, after all,” I said.

“Speaking of that Vim... should I be banished too?” she asked.

“Hm...? What for...?” I asked. Where was this coming from?

“I heard from Frett that Yangli is banished because he killed his father. Well... I did too,” she said as she grabbed her arm, worriedly.

I smiled. “First Renn... your family had not been members of the Society. Secondly, I have little to no doubt you did what you did for good reason. I doubt anyone would find fault in your actions, if you told them the full story... And well...” I went quiet for a moment, as some leaves blew past us.

Renn’s ears fluttered in the wind, and then she frowned at me. She hadn’t wanted me to go quiet.

Nodding gently, I smiled to the woman who proudly proclaimed herself as my wife. “Yangli’s banishment, and those like him, were more than just simple murderers. They couldn’t be trusted. At all. You’re not a danger, Renn... other than to me, at least,” I told her.

Plus... here soon Renn would never get banished. By anyone.

Who’d banish the Protector’s wife, after all?

“So it’s just a matter of opinion,” she said softly.

“Isn’t everything?” I said.

She blinked a few times at me, and I knew she had just relived those moments.

She had just watched them die again.

Then she nodded softly.

I sighed as I pulled the shovel out and stepped forward, and up to her.

Looking down at the woman who before had looked angry and unsettled... yet now looked hurt and depressed, I wondered what I was going to do with myself.

"I should not have killed him. I should have questioned him. Collaborated with the others, and allowed them to make the decision. It wasn't my place. There are times and places where I can be judge and executioner, but that hadn't been one of them," I told Renn, not so much to get her away from the topic of her family but to make my mistake clear.

She gulped, and her depression was quickly swallowed away by gentle concern. "I was shocked you had done it, Vim... but at the same time I'm glad you did," she said.

"I killed a man without knowing if his words had been truth or just mere bluster," I said.

She shook her head. "You killed a man who showed no remorse for breaking a cardinal rule of the Society. Even if he had not killed the child, or if the child would have died anyway without his actions, he had still threatened Frett. With death. A man such as that does not belong in our society," she said.

"From your mouth to my parent's ears," I said.

Renn hesitated, and I blinked as I realized what I had just said to her.

"I'm saying them to your ears, Vim. No one else's," she said warmly.

I shook my head and gripped the shovel, and felt it crack in two.

Renn flinched, and ducked away a bit. She hadn't needed to though, the moment I had felt it crack I had turned it away and put my body in-between her and the shovel.

The thing had snapped in two. Pieces had flown out, but they had been larger ones. They bounced off my arm and shoulder, and the two larger pieces of the shovel and its handle went to the ground. One landed on top of the grave hole I had just dug, the other near the remnants of the burnt pyre.

"Jeez Vim," Renn complained.

“Sorry. You okay?” I asked.

“I think so...”

I rubbed my hands, and felt a few splinters. I went to picking them out with a fingernail as I studied the broken shovel.

It could be fixed. The shovel head was fine. I had just snapped the handle, the bar.

A pain to replace since it needed to be sturdy wood and most of the trees around here were the malleable type. The type that bent a lot even when cured.

Renn grumbled as she watched me bend down to pick up the piece that was connected to the shovel head still. “That had been rather loud,” she said.

Had it been? Probably. Especially so to her ears.

“Sorry,” I apologized again.

“Hmph... my point still stands Vim. And I bet no one would disagree with me, either. Frett hadn’t especially,” Renn said.

Tapping the shovel against my thigh, I met Renn's eyes. "I don't care of their opinions, Renn," I said to her.

"What about mine?" she asked.

I blinked and hesitated.

She smiled gently at me. "Your expression just now told me how deeply you do care. Did you know when I startle you; you sometimes flinch and narrow your left eye but not your right?" Renn said as she pointed at her own left eye.

"I... I do?" I asked as I tried to remember if I had done such a thing or not.

"Vim... I know you often doubt yourself... but surely you realized what happened?" Renn asked.

I gripped the handle of the broken shovel, and heard it crack some more. It didn't snap again though, as I waited for Renn to get to the point.

She smiled at me. "You're... growing tired. Of them. Of their failures. Their..." Renn started to say the truth, and I quickly raised a hand to hush her. I had moved it so quickly, she nearly bit her tongue in surprise. Her ears pointed upward, startled and annoyed by my hand that had appeared in front of her face.

“Please... Renn... don’t say it. Not aloud,” I begged her.

Renn’s pupils narrowed, becoming more cat-like than I’ve seen in a long time. “Vim...” she complained.

I shook my head at her. “Please. Not now. Not yet,” I asked of her.

“If not now... when, Vim...? It’s a conversation we need to have,” she said.

“It is. But the moment we do...” I hesitated, as I realized she was about to get me to say it myself.

Looking away, I shook my head as I glanced to the hole and the dark stained section of earth where the fire had been. To verify that no fire would come back to life later.

It was common, after all. Even sometimes days later, a fire could restart. Even after a hard rain. I’d seen it happen before, many times.

It was a poor distraction.

Renn sighed at me, but I heard the gentle understanding in it. “I love you Vim... but sometimes you’re more timid than you should be,” she said softly.

“Some things shouldn’t be said aloud, Rennalee. Especially so by me,” I said to her.

The stained and bothered dirt lost its importance, and my eyes drifted back to my companion.

She had gone to grabbing her arm again. She was also now tilted a little, as if unsteady on her feet. Her ears drooped. Her tail low, and barely moving.

Renn looked fragile all of a sudden. Hurt.

It made me want to hold her.

“I promise. We’ll talk about it. Someday. But not now,” I promised her.

“Okay, Vim.”

I nodded, and glanced past her. Over her shoulder...

Frowning at Abel, I stepped forward. Renn turned, her ears fluttering as she searched for the cause of my actions.

Picking up my pace, I hurried over to Abel. The scarred man was huffing a little in exhaustion, and smiled as I approached.

His smile told me all was well. I slowed a little, and came to a stop in front of him.

“Abel?” I asked worriedly as I glanced past him. The forest behind him, which he had come from, looked fine... but it was too dense to see the Crypt. It wasn’t a surprise; we were actually quite a distance away.

He must have been searching for awhile, and had either smelled the fire or heard Renn and I talking. Or maybe had simply heard the shovel snapping in two.

“All’s well, Vim. All is well...” Abel coughed, and I gestured to his right. To a tree that had fallen.

Abel nodded as he stepped over to it, and promptly sat down to rest.

Renn hurried over as Abel sighed and took a few deep breaths. “I was lucky. I smelled the smoke on the wind, and headed this way first. Then I heard that loud noise. I’m glad now I didn’t mistake the source, else who knows how exhausted I’d be,” Abel said with a wheezy voice.

“We were about to return, Abel,” I said with a sigh.

He nodded. "I figured it'd be soon... but I wanted to talk to you before..." Abel coughed, and Renn stepped forward, but Abel waved her concern away.

Renn glanced at me, but I ignored her worried glare.

She wanted to help him. But she didn't know that there was no helping him.

His body was simply... too broken.

"Easy Abel," I warned him.

He nodded as he took some more breaths, and then relaxed a little. "I wanted to talk to you, before you returned," he finally got out.

"Hm," I nodded.

As Abel breathed, or did his best to at least, he glanced between Renn and I... likely to the mound of ash and dirt not too far away, where we had just been.

"Such a shame," he said.

Renn's ear fluttered.

"How is everyone, Abel?" I asked.

"Surprisingly calm. There's a few who are stricken, but simply over seeing the gore. You know how they are, Vim... even I was shocked, and look at all the carnage I've born witness over the years!" Abel said with a small smirk.

I smiled back at him and nodded. "Right? Got the blood pumping at least, right?" I asked.

"Please, Vim," Abel waved my comment aside, finding it in bad taste.

Funny. I had recently said the same to Nann. She had responded much the same. They were more similar than they'd like to admit.

"Most here have seen such violence. Though likely not in a long time... I apologize for that," I said.

He nodded, accepting my apology. "I must say Vim I'll never get used to your quick decision making. I don't think any mortal can decide a soul's fate with such swift surety as you did. I hadn't even begun to comprehend what he had meant by his words, and his head was already in your hands!" Abel said.

I shifted, and tapped my knee with the broken shovel. "Well... you had been distracted a little," I told him. I tried not to notice that he had basically just called me a god, or at least not a mortal.

“How so, indeed! But still...” Abel sighed as he rubbed his thigh, near his right knee. It was the same spot I had thumped the shovel against on my own leg. Had my actions made him feel his own internal pain more acutely? “Everyone has already voted. Your actions had been justified. As well as our decision to banish him... But there is a rather small issue, I’m afraid,” Abel then revealed, finally, what he had come searching me out for.

“What is it?” Renn asked quickly, before I could say anything.

Abel sat up a little straighter, and blinked at Renn... as if he had not realized she had been here the whole time.

“Well... it’s Frett,” Abel said.

“Oh?” I perked up a little. Maybe she had loved him after all?

He nodded and then took a deep breath... and then released it as a sigh, instead of telling me what was wrong.

“What’d she do?” Renn asked.

“Well...” Abel coughed again, but I could tell it had been one to prolong his discomfort. He flinched and nodded, deciding to get it over with. “She’s taken a vow of silence,” he told us.

Renn leaned back a little, and then frowned... and looked over at me in worry.

“A religious thing. She’ll not talk or speak aloud, for however long she’s decided on. A type of meditation. It’s a way to either pray to their god, to show respect and reverence, or used as a method of self discipline or punishment,” I explained to Renn.

“Huh...? Why would she do that?” Renn asked.

“To pay for her sins, Renn. Frett allowed herself to get involved in something that brought the end of not one soul, but two. And much more suffering and disruption, on top of those souls,” Abel told her.

Renn scowled, but luckily didn’t voice her thoughts on the matter.

“How long, Abel?” I asked.

“She didn’t say. She simply asked me to be the witness, and took the vow before our Gods,” Abel said, and then he made the quick gesture of a prayer before his chest.

I sighed. “You should have made her give a time limit,” I said.

“I’d do no such thing. Her vows are between her and her lords,” Abel defended Frett’s decision.

Rubbing my eyes, I felt tired all of a sudden.

“Wait so... she won’t talk again? Ever?” Renn asked us.

“Likely not forever. And technically in our faith, the hours of the waxen are moments she’s aloud to speak if she so wishes, or needs to,” Abel told her.

“Waxen...?” Renn looked to me again.

“Once a month, when the moon is a sliver in size. Basically she gets a few hours a month where she’s aloud to talk, but usually only for necessities. Like to ask for help, or food or something,” I told her.

Renn groaned.

“It’s a high honor, to receive such silence. It speaks highly of her devotion, and her intentions to pay for her misdeeds,” Abel added.

Renn shifted, and her tail spasmed in annoyance. She had not liked the way Abel had described it, at all.

“She could have at least waited until I spoke with her,” I said softly. I hadn’t gotten to speak with her yet. I had allowed Renn to, as I handled the body and that horse.

A mistake. Maybe if I had talked to her, I'd have been able to stop her from taking such a vow.

Frett, like Abel and many here, saw me as some type of holy deity. A divinity, if not one myself but at least a representative of them. She'd have taken my words to heart.

I might still be able to save her from such a vow. Though... Who knows how far I was going to be able to push in the attempt. I didn't want her to suffer for who knows for how long without talking, to anyone... but if she firmly wished to do it, and believed it was what she needed to do...

Who was I to tell her not to? Who was I to play god? If I played the thing they all claimed me to be, while at the same time despising their misconceptions... I'd be nothing but a hypocrite.

Even if I was one, that didn’t mean I enjoyed proving it to myself.

Either way it was my fault.

I may have sentenced that poor woman to decades of loneliness and silence. All because I'd allowed my emotions to control me.

Damn me.

“Such vows come when they do without warning. You know how the Gods work, Vim,” Abel said with a frown, as if upset I’d forgotten.

I bit back a response that would have shattered the poor man’s foundation of understanding, and instead glanced back at the mound of ash and dirt.

Glaring at it, and wishing I had killed him out of sight and out of mind without anyone knowing, I decided I’d piss on his grave before I left.

I’d do it now if Renn and Abel weren’t here.

“Did you offer him prayers, Vim?” Abel then asked.

“He didn’t,” Renn said for me.

Abel sighed. “I figured. I’ll do so. Although banished and a sinner, his soul has been judged and his sins taxed by your hand Vim. You are the sword of the Gods, yet sometimes I wish you were also the voice,” Abel said as he stood from the tree.

I rolled my eyes as he stepped between me and Renn, and headed for the spot where I had buried Tim’s ashes.

Abel walked slowly, likely because he was still tired from his earlier exertion, but he reached the spot quickly enough. He immediately coughed, and went to praying. He spoke lowly, but strongly. No hint of his earlier wheezing or exhaustion could be heard as he offered a prayer of lament.

My companion stepped over to me, quietly, and her ear fluttered at me. "I don't like this, Vim," Renn whispered.

"He's just giving a small prayer," I said gently.

"Not that!" Renn hissed, and then flinched as she looked to Abel. He had likely heard her, but showed no signs of it as he continued praying.

She sighed, and grabbed my sleeve. "Poor Frett, Vim. Why must she suffer because of him? Because of what happened?" she asked.

"I know Renn. I know. But what do I do?" I asked her.

"Tell her it's fine...? Convince her not to do this... vow thing?" she suggested.

"And force my will?" I asked.

She flinched and groaned, and released my sleeve as she stepped away. Disgusted with me.

“Maybe I should take a vow too,” she mumbled in annoyance.

I smiled softly at her. “You’re too wise for that.”

Thank goodness, too.

“Hmph...” she crossed her arms as she watched Abel.

Turning, I went to join her in watching Abel... as he prayed for a man who had not only betrayed the trust of the Society... but had caused issues even in his death, and after.

Hopefully when I died, I’d not be such a stain on this world that I’ll leave behind.

I was already a problem enough as it was.

Chapter 263 To Stumble Together

“Their relationship is weird Ursula, stop trying to comprehend it,” Sharp said with a sigh.

“But! He’s an angel, Sharp. The scriptures say that if they lay with our kind then demons will be born from the union and...!” Ursula spoke quickly and with a whisper, as if afraid I could hear her, and then went quiet as if afraid to say more. She glanced at me and flinched, then looked back down at the game-board.

Her hesitation was funny since the three of us were sitting so close, and had been talking to each other for hours. And several topics had been just as sensitive, and she’d not seemed to hesitant or ashamed of talking until now.

“If he’s an angel then we’re doomed anyway, so there’s no need to worry about that,” Sharp said as she went to move one of the pieces on the board.

Her bandaged hands had to grab the tiny wooden pieces carefully. Not because they’d break or shatter upon touching her skin, but because they were so smooth that they kept slipping from her tiny fingertips thanks to her bandages. She carefully lifted the small piece, and took one of Ursula’s horses.

Ursula sighed, but not because she had just been placed in check. “Just be careful Renn. Vim’s bound by his rules, and so too our realm, but he’s still a piece of divinity. Don’t allow yourself to be led astray,” Ursula warned me.

“I uh... I’ll do my best,” I said, unsure of what else to say to her.

For some reason she was genuinely worried for me.

You’d think her belief that Vim was a servant of her religious divine figures would make him trustworthy and worthy of affection. Yet it seemed it was the opposite.

Ursula nodded gravely at me, and then went to move one of her pieces. Sharp clicked her tongue in annoyance as Ursula not only protected her Queen, but returned the favor and put Sharp in check.

Smiling, I watched as Sharp crossed her arms and went to glaring at the board. Her robes made odd sounds as it got pushed and squished by her arms. It wanted to slide along the smooth bandages, yet her bandages on her arms weren't fully encompassing. Tiny patches of her skin snuck through, which caught on the robe.

When no one was talking, the sounds of her bandages and robes were rather loud. At least to me. And it wasn't helped much by the fact that the room we were in was a little... strangely sound-proof. I couldn't hear much at all outside of the room, so everything in the room sounded louder.

We were in Ursula's little library. Her board and its pieces were many times bigger than my own, but it made sense. Mine was one made for carrying. For traveling. Hers was a large board, able to be opened not too unlike a book as to put the pieces away into specially made holes for every piece.

It was honestly very beautiful. It was made out of a reddish wood, and the way it had been sanded and crafted made the game board and its pieces glossy and detailed. Which was one of the reasons Sharp struggled to keep hold of the little things.

I wasn't sure if Vim had made it for her or not, but I'd not be shocked to hear it had been. It had his... strangely too perfect appearance to it. It looked like it was without flaw at all and yet somewhat simple all the same. A boring perfection, basically.

"I can't say I don't understand why you and so many others think he's some kind of god... especially after seeing what he had done yesterday... But Vim? A god? He's failed too many times. Made too many mistakes. And he lets those failures weigh him down. A god would not be so bothered by their own failures as he," Sharp said as she studied the board.

I nodded, agreeing with her.

"That's because you're looking at it from the wrong perspective. I'm not saying Vim's a god, I'm saying he's a piece of one. A servant. A child. A tool. He was put on this planet to guide us, to fulfill his creator's desire. He can only operate within those boundaries set upon him," Ursula said as she went to take a drink of tea.

As she grabbed her cup, I pondered her words and viewpoint... while also studying the way she was about to win the game.

When had she set on this path to victory? I had genuinely thought her defeated a few moves ago... yet here she was, certain to win. Unless she made a mistake. Sharp had allowed Ursula to box in her Queen, while all of Sharp's more potent pieces were on the wrong side of the board, in another corner. She had no way to get them back into position in time. She had a few moves she could do to prolong her fate, but none that I could see that would save her from it.

"I get how you see it. I'm saying even with that excuse it still doesn't work. Even if he's bound by some strange rules and laws... how do you explain his failures? What god allows failure?" Sharp asked as she reached over and grabbed a piece finally.

She didn't lift or move it though. She instead held it as she frowned and studied the board closer.

“His failures are only such in our eyes and perspectives. From the eyes of a higher power, they’re not failures but simple steps to an end. Destiny and fate leading the world where it should go,” Ursula said, then took a drink from her small cup.

Sharp sighed and moved her piece. “I’m defeated. I don’t see a way out of this,” she complained as she put the piece into the only spot that prolonged her defeat.

“Funny. There is a way out, but it’s fitting you don’t see it since you can’t see the obvious in life either,” Ursula teased her as she went to move her own piece.

I raised an eyebrow as I heavily studied the board again.

There had been a way out of it? Really?

Sharp sighed in defeat, and pushed over the tall skinny piece. Her Queen fell with a light tap against the wooden board, and rolled a bit.

“Hmph,” Ursula smiled in victory as she went to take another drink from her cup. Or well, for her it was barely more than a sip.

I was glad I had brought my own cup. The one that matched Vim's, that we carried while we traveled. Although it still wasn’t that big, it was at least big enough to hold a few real gulps and not just a few sips.

“So Renn?” Sharp then asked me.

“No... I don’t see how you would have won. I’m assuming it’s something to do with these castle pieces, but...” I said as I pointed at the one I thought possibly led to the solution, but I still couldn’t make heads or tails of how to accomplish it. It was likely a pattern of moves, a dozen moves deep. If I had time to ponder it, I’d probably eventually see it, but... no one would willingly wait hours for me to ponder something as simple as a singular move of a silly little game.

No one other than Vim at least.

“Huh...? No... I meant...” Sharp went quiet as she studied the board. “Oh.”

“Did you figure it out?” I asked as I noticed the bandages wrapped around her head shift thanks to her hair moving in excitement.

She nodded. “I could have taken her horses after a few moves, and then fought back. Oh well,” Sharp said with a sigh.

Oh...? Oh...! I nodded as I saw what she had pointed out.

“We can resume if you’d like,” Ursula offered.

"I lost. Defeat is defeat," Sharp said.

Was it...? I kind of wanted to watch the rest. Ursula seemed to have a plan to counter it, so it would have been interesting.

Though maybe Sharp knew that, and decided it was pointless anyway.

"And no. I do agree that Vim is special... that he's likely not what we think he is, but I don't believe Vim is a god or related to them," I said as I went to helping them putting the pieces back into their proper starting positions.

"Special? How are you thinking?" Sharp asked, interested.

"I'm not sure. But he's definitely got secrets. Plus although he's strong and seems to heal from practically any injury... I've known others who were unique like that too. I knew a witch once able to heal someone from even death. So although he's strange, it's not in a way that is as unique as we think it is. But even that witch, with all her power, hadn't lived as long as him or knows the things he does. So... there's definitely something strange about him, beyond his mere bloodline or abilities," I told the two women.

"You knew a saint Renn? A witch on top of it?" Ursula asked, her hands pausing above the board. She held one of the queen pieces, and thanks to the angle of her arm and hand I wasn't able to put back the piece currently in my hand. Not without bumping into her.

Ursula didn't seem to mind the touch, or presence, of women... but I wasn't going to risk it. For all I knew she'd get panicky over my touch too, and all that would do is ruin the moment.

“Vim’s said she had likely been a saint, yes. She hadn’t called herself one though. She had simply intruded herself as a witch. She had hunted me, but we became friends... for a short while, until I killed her,” I told her.

“Good for you,” Sharp praised me.

Ursula though frowned at me, and clenched the Queen piece in her hand tighter. “You killed her...?” she asked worriedly.

I nodded. “I had to. Yes.”

“I see...” Ursula looked away from me, and I noted the depressed resignation in her gaze.

A little worried at how sad she suddenly seemed to be, I glanced at Sharp... who only shook her head at me.

Thanks to her bandages, I couldn’t really tell what Sharp meant by the shake of her head... but I figured it wasn’t her saying she didn’t know why Ursula hadn’t enjoyed hearing about my friend... but rather that I shouldn’t press on it.

Thanks to Ursula growing bothered, I was able to easily put the piece I had been holding back into its proper spot. I didn’t need to grab another, the board had been reset. Only one piece was waiting to be put into place, and it was the one in Ursula’s hand... which was now on her lap.

“Shall we end it here today? It’s almost dinner time,” Sharp then said.

Oh...? I glanced at Sharp, and noticed the soft smile hidden under her bandages.

She really could be gentle and kind when she wished to be.

I nodded. “Sounds okay to me. I’d like to find Elisabeth before it gets too late anyway,” I said.

“Elis... Ah, that human you brought,” Sharp said as she remembered her.

“You spoke to her this morning, Sharp...” I said gently, to remind her. We had all ran into each other as Vim and I returned to the church, after putting the tombstone we had made for my family next to his parent’s one in the mountain nearby. We had finished making it last night, and went early in the morning to place it next to his parent's. He had offered to let me put it here, in the cemetery of the Crypt... but I kind of liked the idea of us having a secretive little grave site to share, just for us.

“Yeah... but I hadn’t heard her name then,” Sharp defended herself as she crossed her arms again.

I smiled at her and nodded. “That is true,” I said.

Sharp nodded, glad to hear I understood.

“That’s right... you plan to leave soon, don’t you?” Ursula finally snapped out of her strange depression.

I nodded, and smiled gently at her. “In a few days, so Vim says. Yes.”

She sighed and reached over to put the Queen in its proper place. She placed it down, and then gently turned it a little... spinning it until it was in perfect placement. Facing boldly the enemy army on the other side.

“Typical Vim. Shows up, makes a ruckus, then tootles along,” Sharp said.

Ursula giggled. “The privilege of the divine,” she said.

“Of the mighty, maybe,” Sharp corrected.

“Thank you two for inviting me to your little game,” I said to the two, not caring for either of their perspectives. They did have a ground to stand on, I admitted... but I believed they were both too far down the branch of truth. Or well, more so Ursula's opinion. Sharp didn't seem to think Vim was a god, or anything like it, but she also didn't seem to think he was a normal man either.

“Hm. It was fun. You’re still newer at it, and it shows, but you play in a unique way. I look forward to playing you again next time you visit,” Ursula said happily.

“Next time we’ll play for keeps. It’ll be fun,” Sharp added.

“Keeps...?” I asked.

Ursula gestured lightly at me, with a tiny point. “Favors. Just little things, like cooking meals or doing each other’s laundry. It helps add a little spice to our little games,” she told me.

“Oh...?” I sat up a little straighter, and found myself very interested.

“So in this case I owe Ursula two favors,” Sharp said. She had won once but lost three times to Ursula.

“Then I’d owe both of you several favors,” I said.

Sharp sighed and Ursula giggled at me. “You sounded far too excited over that,” Ursula teased me.

Well... I shifted, and my tail bumped a nearby bookshelf.

“You’re fine, Renn. You’re leaving soon. We can play for favors next time,” Sharp said as she got off her chair.

“You sure...? I’d not mind,” I said.

“Definitely. Even if you’d enjoy it. It’s rude to force one to such rules without first telling them of it. Rather sacrilegious really,” Ursula said.

Sharp sighed, but nodded. “To a point, yes,” she said.

Although a little disappointed, I decided to let it be. “Okay. Next time then,” I said.

Sharp headed for the door as she nodded, and I hesitated as I stood. Were we just... going to leave? Without helping Ursula clean up? We had cups, and we had pulled chairs over to the table and...

“It’s fine Renn. I plan to read anyway, before dinner,” Ursula said to me, likely noticing my concern over us leaving her alone.

“You sure?” I asked.

She nodded gently at me. “Yes. Thank you for playing with us.”

“Hm...” I hesitated all the same as Sharp opened the door.

“Coming Renn?” Sharp asked, and I begrudgingly obliged. Leaving Ursula and her quiet library, I shut the door behind me and followed Sharp down the hall.

“We should have at least helped clean up, Sharp,” I said to her.

“Hm...? It’s fine Renn. Really... you’re strangely upright. Must be because of Vim. He’s weird like that too, always tidying up and never leaving a mess or anything,” she said to me.

Well... although glad to be compared to Vim in such a way, I hadn’t meant it that way.

Deciding to just let it be, I changed focus. “Has Ursula read the fourth installment yet?” I asked.

“Yes. There’s only one person left who wants to read it. I’ll give it to her after I read it one more time,” Sharp said.

Oh...? So everyone’s read it already? So quickly?

I guess we’d been here for a few weeks now but...

“Ursula was right though. You play like someone who just recently learned how. Who’ve you been playing with?” Sharp asked, changing topics again.

“Vim,” I said.

Sharp sighed. “That’s tough,” she said.

It was. But he let me win sometimes, so it was okay.

“He doesn’t like it much... so I don’t bug him to play too often,” I said.

Sharp nodded with a frown as we rounded a corner. “Some people just don’t like playing. Ursula and Prasta are the only ones who play with me... I used to play with Rapti a lot. Rapti loved it. Or... loves it, I guess,” Sharp said softly.

I frowned and slowed. “She does. She’s the one who originally taught me how to play it,” I said. So Sharp knows Rapti?

Really...?

Rapti was... very religious. Sharp and her were friends? Such an odd pair.

Sharp slowed to a stop as well, and glanced up at me. “You met Rapti...?” she asked.

I nodded. “In Nevi. Not long after I joined. We had only stayed there a few days... Vim had been in a hurry to get back to the Cathedral. I enjoyed spending time with her,” I said.

“Hm... she is fun to be with, yes,” Sharp agreed.

Oh...? That had been an odd tone. Had she been smirking in a playful manner, or had that been a sad smile? It was so hard to tell thanks to her bandages...

It really was too bad she seemed to always wear them. Especially since she really didn't need to.

She only did it as to make sure no one accidentally hurt themselves by bumping into her on mistake. She herself didn't really need to wear the bandages to protect herself.

Sharp was far kinder than people thought.

“I'm... likely to see her again. Rather soon, maybe. Vim told me we'll be heading back north that way. Would you like to write her a letter?” I asked Sharp.

The small woman tilted her head, and I felt her hard gaze from behind the bandages. I tried to hold it, though wasn't sure if I was actually looking at her eyes or not. She had wrapped herself in several layers this time, so it was harder than usual to tell.

"No... not this time, I think," she then said.

I blinked at the very sad voice, and did my best not to worry... as I nodded gently. "Okay... maybe next time," I said.

"Mhm..." Sharp nodded back and I heard the tiny cry in the noise she had made.

Feeling horrible, I realized I had likely just... hurt her somehow. Or put her in an awkward position.

"I'm going to go to my room. To read the book one last time before you two leave," Sharp then said, and I did my best to not let her see that I could hear her heartbreak in her voice.

"Okay... I'll see you later, Sharp," I said gently.

"Mhm," she made the same sound again, but this time a little more surely. She turned, and stepped away... walking slowly.

She didn't look like she was walking stiffly... but I could tell I had just bothered her. I knew she likely... hadn't taken offense or anything but...

Feeling horrible, I turned around and stepped away as well. So that just in case Sharp started to cry, I'd not be around to hear it. The poor woman deserved that much at least.

Now I didn't want to find Elisabeth. Now I wanted to find Vim. To ask him what I had just done.

Would he tell me? Sometimes he just... told me everything, without hesitation... other times he held firm, and kept every ounce of secret he held from me without fail.

Although I didn't want to pry into Sharp's life or struggles... I now felt horrible. Plus...

Well...

I had intended to just make a nice offer. A nice gesture.

Vim had given me permission to handle the letters of our Society... so I had simply tried to get one myself. I had a new job, and I had wanted to do my best at it.

And the first person I asked a letter from got hurt because of it.

Vim is going to have to tell me who I should ask and who I shouldn't from now on... or else something tells me I'll be experiencing that awkward pain a lot in the coming days and years.

Rounding a corner, I picked up the pace... and ran into Frett.

Slowing, she slowed as well... and smiled at me.

Inwardly groaning at a new kind of awkwardness, I smiled back at her. "Hey Frett...!" I greeted her, and flinched at how silly I had sounded.

Come on, Renn! Don't be so obvious about your unsure self!

Frett though only smiled more and nodded, and I could tell by the look in her eyes that she had genuinely found me amusing.

"I uh... know. I know. Silence. Sorry I'm not very good at it. I uh..." I rambled as I smiled at the woman who was patiently, and silently, watching me.

Taking a small breath, I sighed... and relaxed a little thanks to it.

"Sorry. I uh... Vim and I, we plan on leaving in a few days. I know you can't... really communicate right now, but if you need anything... just let us know okay?" I told her.

She nodded.

“Right... okay...” I shifted a little and nodded back. Then hesitated. “Wait... did that nod mean you do have something you need?” I asked, worried I had misunderstood.

Frett’s smile softened, but she didn’t nod or shake her head again.

Right... she can’t answer.

So weird. Why could she sometimes nod or acknowledge a question, but other times not? Was it the phrasing? Or was it something personal? Plus she had somewhat giggled just now, although lightly... wasn’t that a sound? Didn’t that break silence?

“I’m... not good at this... So... I’ll just have Vim make sure later, okay?” I suggested.

Frett’s smile evened and she blinked at me... then gave me a tiny bow of the head and stepped away.

Oh...? Was that a way of acknowledging me, and what I had said... or had she just dismissed me because I had brought Vim up?

Watching Frett walk away, I sighed at myself.

I wasn't doing very well, was I?

Making members feel awkward, or upset. Not properly doing my job and fulfilling my duties. Needing Vim to cover for my lacking self...

It all made me feel useless.

Returning to walking, as to search for Elisabeth, I wondered if Frett now hated Vim. She had told me very clearly, and had acted in my perspective, that she was completely unbothered or angry over Tim's death... but...

That didn't mean it hadn't affected her... or that she had not simply been hiding her true feelings of the matter.

Groaning as I picked up the pace, I rounded another corner and ran into another robed woman.

"Hello Lena," I greeted her as we passed one another.

"Heya Renn! Did you run into Frett earlier?" Lena asked as we both slowed, to speak with one another.

She had a basket in her arms. One that looked full of clothes and towels. Likely laundry.

"I did. Just now," I said with a point down the hall I had just come from.

"Hm... what'd you think?" she asked.

"Of...?" I asked back.

"Her vow?"

Oh. "Well... I mean... not sure, really. But she seems serious about it," I said.

Lena sighed and nodded. "Right...? It's so weird. Our faith does have such vows, but they're more for punishments than anything else. Which means she's seeing it as such. A punishment. A curse. Penance. I don't know what to say to her, but I wish I did... She should be grieving, and spending time with everyone to make her feel better... not just go all quiet and sulk," Lena said.

I shifted and wondered if I agreed or not. A part of me definitely did... but... well...

Maybe Frett did have something to ask forgiveness for. Maybe she did deserve punishment. Who was I to say? Or know?

Though I did agree her method was a little... odd. "At least she's not hurting herself," I said, and decided.

"That's true! Abel flagellates himself, the poor man. That too is something in our scripture... but sheesh," Lena shivered a little, which told me that her word had been something bad. Worse than even Frett's vow of silence.

I nodded, but said nothing. I knew if I opened my mouth I'd ask what she meant by that word. And although I knew she'd likely tell me, and not make fun of me for it... for some reason at the same time I didn't wish to.

"Oh well. Maybe she'll get over it in a few months or something," Lena then said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Yes. Hopefully," I nodded and agreed, willing to risk my voice now.

"Hm... oh well. Back to laundry," Lena said with a small shift of her basket.

"A form of punishment too, some think," I said lightly as I stepped away.

Lena's face scrunched up as she went to laughing. "So true!" she agreed as we both went our separate ways.

As I listened and enjoyed Lena's giggling as I left her behind, I continued to try and decode the word she had used.

Flagellate. A punishment. That Abel did.

And it made him a poor man, or at least it made him seem so to Lena.

She had flinched and shook her head too... so...

Likely something painful, maybe.

Rounding a corner, I walked past the kitchens. Pausing a moment to peak my head into them, I sighed at the sight of two human members, but not Elisabeth.

Seriously, I had seen her so often before the whole Tim thing... I had run into her all the time while walking around, yet now I couldn't find her at all.

I'd think she was avoiding me if not for the fact I knew she was likely just in some room somewhere, hanging out with her new friends.

Elisabeth was trying to convert. As to join this convent. Properly.

They seemed to be letting her, and believed her desire... but I couldn't help but feel that it was still a little wrong.

She was obviously just doing it as to... fit in. To be accepted. She wanted to do it because otherwise she'd be ostracized.

That wasn't faith, was it?

Though... I guess it didn't matter, much.

In Vim's perspective it was fine. In the view of those here, even those like Abel or Frett who were doubly so invested in their faiths... they too saw nothing wrong with it.

Those were both ends of the spectrum... and they both agreed. Though maybe for differing reasons... so...

What right did I have to find it at fault?

"It's not that cold, I think."

My ears perked up and turned, and I smiled as I hurried down the hallway I had just heard Elisabeth's voice come from.

Although now very comfortable, and not afraid in the slightest... Elisabeth still had a slight tremor in her voice. A tiny crack, as if from worry. A unique trait that made it very easy to notice and recognize her voice in an instant, even amongst a choir.

Hurrying down the hallway, I slowed as I neared an open door. One half ajar.

Peering into it, I found Elisabeth and three other women. Two humans and a non-human. The lizard girl, Prasta was standing across from Elisabeth with her focus on the table before her.

They were standing around a table, and arranging what looked to be utensils. They were getting ready to have dinner together.

Although I wanted to talk to her, and would have enjoyed having dinner with them... I instead stepped away. Staying quiet, I headed away from the door and back down the hall where I'd come.

She needed to settle. To solidify her place here. If I kept intruding... it'd just slow that process down. Even if I was welcomed, and even if I'd enjoy it...

I'd rather they all got along and became closer friends far more than me enjoying a single dinner.

I was actually very glad that Elisabeth was doing fine. Even if I didn't entirely... understand or agree with her whole conversion thing, I was very happy she had not only found a place to call home... but seemed to be enjoying it too.

Especially since she had essentially been, and technically still was, a prisoner.

Considering how badly fate went for us sometimes... Elisabeth dying, running off, or Vim deciding to end her life out of necessity... all had been very possible and maybe even the more likely outcomes of all that happened. So for it to have ended with her here, happy, and being accepted...

Yes. Very good. Very good indeed...!

"Why so happy?"

I jumped, and bumped into the small bench against the wall as I turned to glare at Vim.

"Vim!" I shouted at him as my heart thumped heavily in my chest.

He tilted his head at me in a way that made me want to pick up the bench I had hit my knee on and thunk him over the head with it.

Looking around, I groaned as I did my best to calm myself.

I had rounded a corner... and hadn't noticed Vim leaning against the wall near an extrusion in the stones. Where a door was. It hadn't completely hidden him from view... especially not as I walked past him, but it had obviously done more than enough to hide his presence from me all the same.

"Sorry, Renn," Vim apologized, and I could both hear and see that he had meant it... but...

"Now that I know you do that intentionally, I'm not going to accept your apologies anymore," I told him, and then I glanced behind me... at the bench I had hurt my knee on.

Sighing, I sat down on it. I didn't feel like sitting, really, since my heart was now thumping wildly... but...

"Well... I don't do it intentionally either, Renn. In fact I hadn't even known you were going to round that corner. I knew you were nearby, I had heard your voice and smelled you, but I had thought you were a few hallways down," Vim said as he crossed his arms and watched me relax and calm down.

"Then... why were you leaning there? Half hidden?" I asked, accusing him.

"I had been waiting for Abel. He's in there," Vim pointed at the door he had been leaning next to.

"Doing what...? That's not a bathroom," I said.

“No. It’s a prayer room. He’s uh... well... likely hurting himself,” Vim said as he frowned.

“Hurting...” I blinked as I realized what he meant, and also why Lena had spoken of it. So she must have known, or this was just... the time Abel did this. Like a daily thing. “Flagellates?” I asked him.

“Flag... well... yes. But it’s flagellation, when saying it that way. Abel uses a tiny whip with little spikes on it. It punctures and cuts the skin, but not so badly that it can kill or get infected,” Vim explained.

“But... why?” I asked as I glanced at the door. I didn’t hear anything happening behind it. Either the door led to a hallway, which then led to another room... or that door was far thicker and more soundproof than it looked.

“It’s just a thing some religious folks do. Or well... it’s also a sexual thing too, sometimes,” Vim said as he thought about it.

“Sexual...?” I asked, and leered at Vim.

“Hm...” he nodded as he frowned, likely thinking about whatever he had meant.

“I’ll not be doing that with you, sorry,” I told him.

Vim blinked, and then smirked at me. "Funny," he said. Then he stepped forward.

I shifted away, thanks to his strange comment, as he sat down on the bench next to me.

He sighed as he sat back, and made the small bench both become crowded... and creak loudly, as if about to snap.

"If this breaks while I'm sitting on it, I'll bury you in one of those graves outside," I warned him.

Vim chuckled at me. "Duly noted."

I nodded, glad he understood.

For a moment we sat in silence, and as I realized I was calm once more and my heart wasn't beating wildly in shock... I realized we were actually sitting rather close to one another. Vim had even leaned his arm back and over the bench's top, behind my head.

Although I knew Vim hadn't done such a thing with any weird intention or meaning... it still made me smile a little. Not because he was doing it, or doing it to me, but rather that he was doing it here. In this church.

In a Society location.

Vim really was willing to let people know he was letting me grow close to him.

Sometimes I felt he was just... playing along, like when I called myself his wife or made comments about it. Not because he saw our relationship as a joke, but rather as a way to tepidly hide the truth from them.

He played along, lightly, to make them think he wasn't being serious about it. Sometimes. And usually it worked.

Yet lately...

"Oh." I remembered something important, and then reached over to grab his thigh. "Vim," I said quickly.

"Hm?"

"Do Sharp and Rapti not get along?" I asked.

Vim frowned at me. "Well... no. There's a reason for it, though. They used to be very close friends. Inseparable. Something... kind of like what you and Nory had been like," he said.

“Oh...” I felt my heart thump weirdly again, for a different reason.

“Why...? What happened?” Vim asked.

“We had been playing that board game. Ursula had one, and I guess her and Sharp play often together. We all played each other, and I got to spend time with them... I told Sharp I had learned from Rapti and she got kind of weird... so I then offered to take a letter from her. To Rapti. I had misunderstood. I had thought they were friends,” I said, explaining it.

“Ah... don’t feel bad Renn. Sharp... actually does still see Rapti as a friend. Rapti’s the one who right now is... being difficult. But she has a good reason for it. Just let it be, it’s fine,” Vim said.

“Easy for you to say, Vim. I feel bad all the same.”

“Hm...” Vim nodded, and then went to patting my head.

I blinked as his hand brushed between my ears, sometimes hard enough to make my whole head turn and move because of it.

Although a little annoyed, I couldn’t help but smile and giggle at him. “Is this what you always do to all the women and kids in the Society? No wonder they’re always running away and grumbling at you,” I said.

“Eh... a bad habit,” Vim said, but he didn’t stop.

“It’s not that bad really...” I admitted. Although he wasn’t as gentle as he could be, it wasn’t like it hurt or really bothered me. I even had ears on the top of my head too. So for those who didn’t, like Sharp or Merit... well...

Though...

They might not like it not because of how it felt, but rather the meaning behind it. Vim was basically teasing us when he did it. Most in the Society had known Vim since their birth, or not long after it... So it was more playful than anything else... However... some of them were kind of small. Almost like children... I could see why those like Merit took offense to it. But he did it to others too, who didn’t outright look like children either. I’d seen him do it to not only Merit and Sharp. But to Lomi... and even to Landi, Riz, and Herra. He didn’t do it just to the young... though that was likely not the right way to look at it. After all, to Vim, we were all young.

My ears fluttered as Vim brushed my hair and patted my head... and I frowned at the feeling of him doing his best to not touch my ears.

“My ears aren’t so fragile Vim, you can touch them,” I said as I glanced at him, and had to look away as his hand pushed my head a different direction.

He hadn’t done it roughly, but I did shift as to keep my neck from feeling strained.

Vim's hand had come to a stop. His hand and his fingers felt like solid bricks above me, but they weren't squeezing or pushing me. I lowered my head a tad, and felt his hand in my hair and against my ears. It was not moving, and was still stiff but it didn't stop me from turning my head to look at him.

"Honestly... I do want to touch them," he then whispered.

I paused, and then smiled at him. "Go ahead," I offered. That was the first time he's actually said aloud such a desire before!

Grinning happily, I did my best to not leap at him and wrap him in a hug. I did not want to spoil the moment. I would remember this moment my whole life and...

Vim stared at me for a moment as I tilted my head just enough to slide an ear under his palm... which immediately fluttered thanks to it tickling me.

"Yeah... no..." Vim said as he raised his hand a little.

I tilted my head again, as to glare at him once more.

"You really are a coward, sometimes," I said with a sigh.

"Mhm..." Vim grumbled as he pulled his hand back, and the door opened... revealing a tired looking Abel.

As Vim stood to greet Abel and talk to him, I glared at the man who should have just indulged in my ears.

A day would come he'd not be so hesitant... but I worried he'd take too long. Or worse... one day he might learn to ignore or control those desires, and thus never act on them even when willing and able.

I mean... Vim was making progress. Quite so. I wasn't upset with his lack of it, really. He's made great progress in letting me into his heart... but...

For every moment he gave in and let me closer... there were a dozen more moments like this. Where he not only kept his defenses up, but seemingly enforced them as well.

One step forward... two backward.

Standing as to join their conversation, and go with them to help make dinner, I decided to start being a little more pushy. At least, just a little bit more.

I mean really. Vim could kill someone without hesitation. He could make that decision, and then act on it, in the blink of an eye... so why then did something as silly and simple as touching my ears make him so cowardly?

Although it made him adorable, it also meant it was a form of a roadblock. For me. It was a trait of his that I would need to overcome, eventually.

If Vim wouldn't, or couldn't... then it was up to me. I would do what he couldn't.

Hopefully I could do it though, since sometimes I faltered as well...

But maybe if we both faltered and stumbled together...

Maybe we'd eventually meet together and accomplish it all the same.

Chapter 264 A Man's Dreams

Being exhausted was a strange thing.

My eyes were heavy. They felt so strongly closed, that if something happened and needed my attention... I worried I'd be able to open them quickly enough, let alone even be able to keep them open.

Yet as tired as I felt, I wasn't sleeping.

Which was even stranger, since the world was perfect at the moment. Perfect for sleep and slumber.

A light storm had arrived. It was making music on the tiles on the roof, and against the windowpane. There was a fresh smell in the air, thanks to the storm, and although it was a little chilly... that same coldness made lying in a bed feel all the more comfortable.

And still, although the world was perfectly creating the best possible atmosphere for me to get some good sleep... I wasn't able to.

I'd been lying here in this bed since Renn left, and even though I knew it had been hours I had still not yet drifted off into sleep.

At this rate I'd not get any. Renn would return. She'd crawl back into bed, under the covers, and giggle as she wrapped her arms around me. It would be my fault, since I'd not move or say anything... letting her think I really was asleep... but...

The moment she did that I would get distracted. And it would become even harder to sleep...

I sighed gently, and wondered why Renn liked to touch me while I slept. It was nothing too weird, really, she just liked to touch my arms or face, but it was still strange enough to make me question her motives.

Her doing it at first, the first few times, made sense. I never let her really touch me normally, not like that, so she had simply indulged in the opportunity.

Yet she still did it. Even after doing it dozens of times. You'd think by now she'd be used to the feel of my skin, or my hair.

I sighed again, but not at Renn. Rather I sighed at myself.

Sleep, Vim. Stop thinking about foolish things.

We'd be leaving soon. Two days, maybe three. Storm or no. So I needed to sleep. I had to.

I was tired... so...

"She really isn't talking anymore..." a girly voice filtered through the sound of the storm, from below. Someone was walking through the hallway right under my head, beneath this room.

I didn't recognize the voice, or the one who whispered a response back... but it was clear it was likely one of the sisters. Talking about Frett's vow of silence.

It'd likely be a hot topic for a while amongst them all.

But that was fine. Frett had made it clear to me she was doing it as a punishment. To herself. She had made a vow of five years of silence, to pay for allowing greed and desires to alter the world around her.

I didn't agree with such an outlook, but I'd never deny her right to self improvement. If spending five years without talking was all it took to relieve Frett of the heavy burden of responsibility... then by all

means. Let her live in silence. Those years would pass in the blink of an eye. For not just her, but those around her too.

It was just too bad the rest of those here didn't understand or agree with it. Why did people have to always impose their own beliefs and rules on others?

Frett believed it was right, and it made her feel better. What else mattered...?

A low rumble shook the air and world, and I felt like nodding. Yes. Right.

Stop thinking of others and the issues of the Society. Stop thinking of anything and sleep.

Even the world was telling me to do so.

Sighing, I rolled over onto my side. Maybe it was my angle, or lying on my back.

Going still again, I tried to empty my mind. To drift off into the void of pure exhaustion that was looming, and had been for a long time now, just beyond my thoughts.

Yet although it called me, it didn't let me in.

Doing my best to not get annoyed at myself, I peeked open an eye... at the dark world around me.

It was night. Not the dead of it, but late enough that sleeping should be something normal. The room was dark as well, thanks to the storm blocking any and all moonlight... but there was a faint glow in the room.

Buzzing not too unlike a hive of bees, in the dresser across the room from the bed I laid in... was a very faint glow of pink. It was so dim of a glow, that I knew that even Renn likely couldn't see it. It was so faint even I almost thought it was a simple play of my tired eyes.

Miss Beak's heart hummed quietly. It sounded distant, yet although a soft hum... it didn't sound annoying. Nor was it the reason I wasn't able to fall asleep. If anything its hum, mixed with the rain and idle chatter that sometimes filtered through the walls and floor, was perfect background noise for me. It was when the world was truly silent that I usually struggled with sleeping.

Yet still no sleep came.

Taking a deep breath, I noted Renn's smell. At first such a smell would have made it impossible for me to sleep. It would have made me itchy, or rather it had in the beginning. Because it wasn't normal. Such a wonderful scent shouldn't exist in my bed. Yet now I found it comforting. I knew it'd not be long until when I tried to lay down to sleep, and be unable to... because I couldn't smell Renn.

So my lack of being able to fall asleep wasn't her fault. At least, not at the moment.

Closing my eye once more, I let my mind wander.

If trying not to think wasn't working, then I'd think so much it'd knock me out.

I thought of the recent days. Frett. Sharp. Ursula ruffling my hair, similar to how Renn did while I slept. Abel and his weeping of a prayer in front of Tim's grave.

Tim's stupid smile as I killed him. He hadn't noticed his own death. That smile had lingered on his head for hours, until I had burnt it.

The cocky bastard had pissed me off even as he burned.

The journey here. Those stupid human mercenaries, the ones I killed and the one I hadn't. The ducks, Nann and her family. That little girl's gleeful squeal as I gave her that little stuffed duck plushy.

Renn's happy smile as she glared at that crocodile in that river.

Miss Beak's death.

Landi and her Monarch. The look of pure graciousness as she took that heart from Renn. The look of utter defeat and pain as she held that sword at Renn's neck, threatening me.

That boy. The son of bowls.

Secca. Riz crying on the floor. Fival as we tattooed that pig. Renn smirking at me as she watched me sit quietly with Mordo, sitting in silence without talking. That flee ridden dog.

The cities of plague and disaster we had passed through on our way south. The pirates, which by now should be in Lumen. Hopefully they had passed Lawrence's and the rest's tests. If Renn found out they had failed and been killed because of it, she'd likely never forgive me... or herself.

Herra. The gems in those crates in the Armadillo's house...

Lumen.

That stupid proclamation by Thraxton. Brandy's schemes.

Those human slaves Renn had befriended. The ship I had watched sink. That beautiful craftsmanship destroyed for no reason...

Little Merit.

Those creatures.

Fly and her feathers.

Brom.

I gulped as the world lit up behind my eyelids, and then roared with thunder.

The storm had intensified. Likely to mimic the chaos in my mind.

“Can’t sleep, yet tired. Can’t face my memories, yet need to as to not make the same mistakes twice. Can’t run into Renn’s arms... yet wish to, so badly...” I whispered.

A life full of contradictions. That was me.

I felt lost. And not just because I was tired... though I did feel strangely like I needed to find a bed. Even though I was currently in one. I was even under the covers!

Where does one go, when they had no where else? Not even their own mind?

“Well, you could always go home, Son,” father said gently.

Looking up at the broad shouldered man, I hesitated. "Home?" I asked.

He nodded as he frowned, and pointed to our right... though I didn't follow his finger. I knew he wasn't actually pointing anywhere, let alone where I should go. "A man always has a home. Even if he's lost it. Even if he doesn't own it anymore. If you need somewhere to go, and have no where or no one... then simply go home," he said.

Like always my father's wisdom sounded like a riddle, but at the same time sounded simple and without thought. "What if... I'm already home though? And yet still lost?" I asked.

Father chuckled at me and lowered his hand. "Then, Vim, you're not lost at all. You're simply waiting," he said.

"Waiting...?"

He was about to answer me, but a heavy rumble shook me out of the dream.

"Hmm..." Renn grumbled in annoyance as she crept closer to the bed. I listened to her bare feet against the smooth stone as she tried to walk as quietly as possible. I heard her ears as they trembled and shook, thanks to the heavy thunder. She's never liked thunder when it was loud.

Although I kind of wanted to wake, and see her smile, the tug of sleep was still there. Still strong. I knew if I just waited, and stayed still... the dreams would come again.

As I slipped back, I felt Renn gently brush my hair.

“Swimming in mud, were you?” Mother asked as she tugged mud out of my hair.

“Father threw me into it,” I stated.

Mother smiled at me as she flicked a chunk of mud away. “Of course he did. While you were laughing all the while, I’m sure,” she teased me.

I knew better than to argue. Not only did mother see everything, she knew me far better than I wanted to admit.

She sighed as she brushed the top of my head. “You need a bath,” she said.

“Sorry mother,” I apologized.

“Hm. Do you want a real bath, or shall I simply just...?” Mother offered to just snap her fingers, but had that smile hidden behind her calm face that told me not to indulge in her strange abilities.

“I’ll bathe mother,” I said quickly.

She nodded, and the smile that had been hidden showed itself. Though it quickly morphed into one of happy praise. "Good. Go on then."

Turning around, to hurry to the building with the bath they had made for me... I hesitated as I found an open plain.

One that went on forever. Yet the grass was burnt and brown. Not healthy at all and...

"I do hope you know what you're doing, Lord."

I frowned as I turned to look at my vassal. "You always doubt me aloud, yet are the first to follow me into the fray," I told her.

She grinned at me, showing sharp teeth. "Well duh? You're always right. Doesn't mean I can't worry all the same," she said.

I nodded as I looked back out at the plains. Over them. To our enemy in the distance. The one standing on the hill. Or well, the mountain. It was actually the tallest peak on this continent.

Our enemy just made the mountain look like a hill, being so big.

The giant creature was awash in fire. From its knees up, the giant wolf looking thing didn't have fur; it had flames. The weirdest part was it looked almost like its skin itself was the flames. It not only had no fur, it had no flesh either. Other than its feet and mouth, it was a creature of fire. Not flesh and bone.

Typical of a God's creation. They were always so uselessly flamboyant and rule breaking.

"Plus... even I can see how we'll do this. I'm glad now that we've carried all this water here," my second-in-command said. Her armor clanked as she turned, to look at all the massive canisters and tanks of water we had brought. Nearly a thousand miles we'd hauled them.

We had drained nearly every lake and river along the way here as to fill them.

I knew when they broke open, until they fizzled and evaporated thanks to the creature's flames, they'd sound very similar to the rain pitter-pattering on the roof tiles above me.

Those raindrops reminded me I was in bed. But I hadn't remembered it being so warm.

The bed suddenly felt warm. Too warm. Almost as warm as that fire-wolf had as I dug out its heart.

This warmth though didn't boil blood. It simply warmed it. Gave it a reason to flow.

I moved a single finger, and felt one of Renn's ribs. She was clinging to me. Her arms were wrapped around my waist, and she was snuggling into my back. A consequence of sleeping on my side. I should have expected it.

"I love you, Vim," she whispered ever so quietly. Likely noticing my finger's twitch.

Ah... so she hadn't fallen asleep yet. Strange. Those dreams had felt far longer than that. I could have sworn she had returned and snuggled into bed hours ago...

Soaking in her affection, I nearly drowned out the rain and storm as I listened to her heartbeat. It was steady. Strong. Healthy. It thumped against my back, sounding louder and feeling stronger than even my own. It was steady. Strong.

Warm.

Just like blood.

Celine's blood.

"Please...!" Celine shouted with all her heart.

Huffing as I stepped up towards her, I glared at the man standing before her. The one who had sent her to her knees. To plead. To beg.

To bleed.

“You’ve forced our hand, Celine. You have no one to blame but yourself,” the King said, his eyes never leaving her. Even as I approached, he stared at nothing but her.

Foolish of him. She may have been the cause of his kingdoms collapse, but I was here now. I was here.

“Don’t hurt her. Don’t do it...!” Celine shouted up at him.

Stopping right behind her, I glared at the man clad in black armor.

And the army behind him.

Some were on horses. Some lined alongside their shields in formations. Some were on all fours, like the horses they stood next to, yet were not horses themselves.

They held spears mostly. Their black metal gleamed in the high sun, and they created a sea of darkness. There had to be thousands of them.

A king and his massive army... all for a single woman. All to lay a single woman low.

Such a sight disgusted me.

“And you. The Saint’s Sword. You’re as much to blame as her,” the man before Celine finally addressed me, with pure hatred. He sounded more upset with me than her.

“I’ll be blamed for much more if you don’t listen to her,” I warned him.

The man scoffed, and some of the soldiers behind him began to laugh.

Yes. I was hilarious. A single man in front of an army. An army of not just men but non-humans and Monarchs alike.

I knew I looked ridiculous. Especially when I was alone... and my only companion a frail woman. A non-human, yes, but broken and beaten. Already on the ground, exhausted and half dead.

We were a poor foe for such mighty warriors. At least, by appearance.

But I’ve beaten such odds before.

I always did.

“Vim...!” Celine cried out my name, but didn’t turn to look at me. Instead she kept on glaring at the man.

“I’m here,” I told her.

Waiting for your order. Waiting for permission to...

“Vim...!”

A new cry rang out into the air, and the man and his army shifted... as if unsettled.

They had been bothered more by this new voice than the Saint’s.

Turning, I wondered just who had arrived. Who was left? Who else but me and Celine were here? I hadn’t remembered anyone else standing with us against this army. This was personal for Celine. It hadn’t been something the Society had...

Upon turning, I frowned... Instead of finding another member of the Society... I found another woman.

She too was kneeling. She too was sobbing. Weeping... and looked just as broken as Celine had, if not worse.

And although she too was kneeling in front of a man... this one was not a mighty king leading an enemy army... but instead a young boy. A lad.

A dead one. Crushed by a boulder.

“Brom...!” Renn sobbed, and the whole world heard her fragile heart shatter and break into countless pieces.

Her wail was very similar. Very telling.

That was the wail of someone who had just witnessed true tragedy... and blamed themselves for every piece of it.

Stepping towards the woman, I left behind Celine and the army that had tried to kidnap the girl she had claimed to be her daughter.

Walking over to Renn, I spared no glance to Brom. He was dead. Mangled. Lost forever. I could do nothing for him. I was not my parents.

So instead I placed my hand on the weeping woman’s shoulder. I squeezed her bloody shoulder, and felt the tremble of weak exhaustion. She was barely able to turn and look at me... Barely strong enough to even lift her head.

Yet when she did, instead of a face full of sorrow... I found one of adoration and awe.

Stunned, I hesitated at the look she was giving me. Renn was suddenly looking at me like many in the Society did.

As if I was one of the gods they so desperately worshiped.

Which wasn't right... that wasn't how she had looked at this moment.

"Renn...?" I barely comprehended that look. From her it made no sense. Renn gave me looks sometimes that made me stumble, and shook me to my core... but this one didn't make sense at all.

Renn knew I was no god. She knew I was but a man. She loved me not as a being of divinity but as a companion.

So...?

A tiny cry alerted me that I was holding something, and I glanced down to the bundle of cloth. To the baby boy wrapped within them as he tried to reach out and grab at me.

Ah. The boy. The human. The one given to me thanks to his mother fearing the plague. The one before Renn met Landi.

This was why Renn had that look. She had been so happy I had accepted the boy... so glad I'd allowed it and...

Turning to Renn, to smile at her and hand her the boy... I found her gone.

A large creature shifted behind me, and I moved the boy a little. To cover him with my arms and shoulders. As to shield and protect him from any unsuspecting attack from behind or...

"Really, Vim. You slaughtered them. Killed them all," Miss Beak said.

Turning around, I smiled up at my friend. She shuffled herself as she sat down, her feathers fluttering in the light winds that were common in her salt-flat home. "I did," I said proudly.

Beak nodded, and blinked slowly. "You had. To save them. To free them," she added.

"Yes."

"So don't be surprised when those you saved eventually return the favor, Vim. Fate likes to repeat the same story often and..." Miss Beak's words faded as I opened my eyes.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly. The cold morning air was sharp. It chilled my lungs a little, and I could hear the chirping of the birds outside. They were complaining too, trying to tell the sun to hurry and rise faster as to warm them.

At least the storm had passed...

"Mhm..." Renn squeezed me tighter, and I frowned at her sleeping face.

Hadn't I been sleeping on my side...?

I was lying on my back again. I must have rolled over in my sleep. Hopefully I hadn't squished Renn upon doing so. She had been clinging to my back, hadn't she?

She was drooling a little, which wasn't too surprising. I've come to realize she did such a thing when really happy. As if her dreams were full of food and joy when she was without worry or stress, and thus it made her hungry.

The single ear I could see, since the other one was tucked under her head and in the pillow, fluttered against my shoulder. It tapped me in a way that told me it had been the reason I had awoken. It kind of felt like when someone poked and patted me, as to wake me gently.

Funny.

Oh well. I actually felt better. I could still feel the slight pull of sleep, but it was not anywhere near as bad as it had been last night.

Though it was starting to become clear that I was starting to need sleep on a more constant basis. Maybe I should start sleeping every night, if even only for a few hours.

Renn at least would like that. Plus it'd do her good. Thanks to the fact she always tried to keep up with me, she usually strained herself past her limits. When I went days without sleep, Renn tried to do the same. Not every time, of course, but it was often enough that it had affected her. It was why when traveling she sometimes crashed upon reaching our next location.

She wanted so badly to be like me. To keep up with me. It made me feel like a jerk to make her suffer and struggle.

Her tail tightened around my right leg, reminding me it had again coiled around me.

I didn't mind... it wasn't like her tail made me itch or anything... but it worried me.

I was not normal. I was too strong for my good. What if one day I leapt out of bed for some reason, not aware her tail was coiled around my leg, and I tore it off her in the process?

I'd never be able to forgive myself. Especially since I doubted Renn would be able to grow another.

But how was I to tell her of such a fear? How could I properly explain it?

Renn would understand; I had no doubt... but...

I kind of liked how she let it wrap around me. She did it when asleep. Which meant it was some kind of instinctual desire to touch me. Even if it was something she did to anyone she slept with, it still made me feel all the more special and important.

So I wanted her to stop, as to make sure I'd never accidentally hurt her... yet I also wished her to continue doing so all the same.

When'd I become so selfish?

Slowly reaching up with the hand she wasn't clinging to, I rubbed my face.

Both to wipe away any sleep that remained, and to try and clear my head.

I could remember the dreams I had just lived through, again.

They bothered me. And not because some had been moments in my life that had hurt. Rather...

Renn was starting to really become a constant. I'd begun to notice half of my dreams had her in them, in one shape or another.

In hindsight that might be normal... since she and I were constantly together nowadays... but I was not normal. I was not a normal man.

As far as I could remember... I hadn't dreamt of Celine until after she died. And I had known her for hundreds of years.

Which meant that my dreaming of Renn already, after only a few years of knowing her... well...

It meant Renn was far more precious to me, especially deep down, than I'd likely ever admit.

And it meant that Celine hadn't been at all. Even though I had tried to make her so.

Somehow that made me feel like an asshole.

Renn shifted, burying her face deeper into my arm and shoulder. I felt the slimy drool get wiped all over me in the process. It must have started tickling her.

She didn't wake however, even as she released a nice little sigh as she finished and relaxed.

I kept my eyes off her, and at the ceiling above me. It was hard.

This really was hard. In more ways than one. Why'd she have to be so adorable? Why'd she have to be so...

Well...

Then I heard something odd. Something that shouldn't exist. Not here, at least. Not in this forest, far from any other soul.

Noises from outside.

I turned my head, and did my best to ignore both Renn's snoring and Miss Beak's buzzing heart. I did my best to ignore the bird's chirping, or the light wind that was following after the storm that had just passed through. I ignored the faint dripping of rainwater, and the sound of Renn's tail beneath the blanket.

Instead of the world around me, I focused... and heard the heavy and quick footsteps.

Slowly sitting up, I leaned upward as I stared at the window... doubting my own ears.

Then I heard the huff. The heavy breath.

Yes. Someone was outside. And not for good reason.

Reaching over, I patted Renn on her side. I pushed the blanket off, and regretted it.

She was naked again.

“Renn,” I gently said her name, and shook her a little as I tried to tug my arm from her hold.

She groaned as she pulled herself out of slumber. She glared at me with tired eyes as her tail tightened around my leg. “What...?” she asked weakly.

“Let me up. Someone’s here,” I said.

“Huh...?” she blinked, and I saw she was trying to fight off the sleep still pulling her back into her happy dreams.

“Someone’s outside. Running to us,” I told her. Their footsteps were getting louder, thanks to splashing in the puddles left from the rain.

“Outside...?” Renn finally realized I was being serious, and sat up. Her tail quickly uncoiled around my leg, going flat against the bed beneath us.

Once free from her grip and tail, I rolled off the bed and stood.

“I’ll handle it,” I told her as I hurried to the door.

There was no point checking the window. Our room overlooked the inner courtyard. We’d not be able to see anyone outside the building itself, we were blocked by the walls and spires.

“Vim...!” Renn called out to me as I left the room. I shut the door behind me, a little too harshly, and then hurried down the hallway.

It didn’t take me too long at all to descend to the first floor and head for the entrance. Yet although it had only taken me a minute and a half or so, it had been long enough to let the dim morning light become a little brighter. A little stronger.

Approaching the front door, I heard the individual clearly now. They were heading straight for the door.

The oddest thing was they were not only alone... but on foot. Not horseback.

Grabbing the door handle, I pulled it open and readied myself for an attack. A spear or something like it.

Instead I found Oplar.

She skidded to a stop. "Vim!" she shouted in alarm, shocked.

Relaxing, I sighed at the bear and shook my head.

I could have stayed in Renn's embrace.

"Don't sigh at me! I've been looking for you!" Oplar hurried up the few stone steps to the door.

"Have you?" I asked as I stepped back to let the bulky woman in. She was made bulky by her thick clothes and packs she carried.

She huffed at me, and I noted the mud and gunk she tracked in. She not only had run through nearly every puddle along the path... but had likely run through the storm itself. She was soaked.

Good thing she was wearing such thick bear leather. I knew beneath her cloak she was dry as could be.

Before shutting the door behind her, I glanced down the path and into the dense forest... which was still dark. The morning sunlight had gotten brighter, but hadn't gotten strong enough just yet to break their through their dense crowns.

She was alone. No one was behind her... or if they were, they were far behind.

"I'm alone," Oplar told me as I shut the door.

I nodded at her and glanced her up and down again. To make sure she was fine. It was hard to tell, since she wore a thick cloak of bear fur, but I didn't see or smell any wounds upon her.

"I've got news, Vim. It's bad," Oplar said quickly, stepping up to me.

Frowning at her, I glanced to our left. To the one hurrying down the hall towards us.

Renn. Hastily dressed.

Oplar didn't even glance away from me as to look at the approaching woman, who she would usually be very interested in meeting. Oplar loved stories. And I knew by now she had heard much of Renn. Who knows what kind of crazy stories she's heard from everyone about her. Usually Oplar would ignore me completely as to focus on the source of such wonder and gossip...

The fact she ignored Renn completely, to focus on me... made me realize how serious it was.

“What is it...?” I asked carefully as Renn slowed as she neared us. I heard her footsteps in the stone building echo. She had put on shoes, but I didn’t hear any socks.

Oplar shifted, causing the wet mud on her boots to squish and make odd noises. She frowned at me, and hesitated.

Oplar. The story chaser. The woman in search of mysteries and legends...

Scared to share one.

“Oplar...?” I asked, now worried.

What had happened? What bad news was she about to share, and thus break both my and Renn’s heart?

The bear gulped, and then sighed. “A vote. One’s been called. A summons,” she said.

Calming down a little, I nodded. A vote? That was all?

Don't scare me like that. I had thought she was about to tell me something terrible had happened... not a vote of all things.

What was the Society complaining about now? My bet was on Lumen. Someone was probably upset with the way it was going, or something.

About to smirk, and tell her how worried I had just been... Oplar then sighed and shook her head at me. "I'm sorry Vim. I don't know how to say it..." she then said.

"Hm?"

Oplar glanced to Renn, who stood up straighter. Her ears fluttered, and she was about to smile and introduce herself... but Oplar looked back at me... with a sad look. One that had made even Renn's happy demeanor fizzle and die.

It was clear that Oplar didn't want to say it.

She flinched... and nodded, and took a deep breath. Then she stared me in the eyes, with a look of pure defeat.

"Out with it already," I ordered.

"The Society is going to vote, Vim. On if you're allowed to keep your position as protector or not."

Of course.

After all...

A monarch never truly rests until they're dead.

Chapter 265 Oplar

Shadows began to dance in the smaller room as Vim's little fire grew in strength.

Oplar huffed as she hung her heavy cloak on the wall, then turned to smile at the two of us.

She wasn't as big and burly of a woman as she had first appeared, thanks to that heavy cloak and the bags she had carried, but she was still twice my size. Not just in height, either. Her arms were nearly as wide as my waist.

Vim had once said she was a bear. I could see it, and not just because she was twice my size. She walked and looked around with a strange confidence. A firm gaze that seemed to dare the world to look back at her.

It wasn't often anyone had such confidence, let alone a woman, in this world. Even so amongst our kind. Maybe she was like Landi?

“Tea’s in the left bag, Vim,” Oplar gestured. I turned, and found Vim had opened one of her little side-bags she had piled next to the nearby wall. He paused and went to the other.

The fact he so blatantly went to scrounging in her bags told me a few things. First, they knew each other well. Better than most. Second... she must have a peculiar taste in tea, if she wanted her own leaves and not any that were available here.

Though it wasn’t too shocking. A lot of the food and drinks here were rather... well...

Bland.

While Vim went to preparing the tea, I stood up straighter as Oplar turned to look at me. She stepped a few feet over to me, and I did my best to not let my tail twitch and move too much.

She was taller than Vim... though by only a little.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Renn,” Oplar said.

“I’ve heard of you as well. It seems we’ve been missing each other by a few days sometimes,” I said.

Oplar smirked and nodded. "Aye we have. Such a strange thing fate is, right? To round each other so many times, so nearly."

I nodded back. It was.

Oplar crossed her arms, and I noticed that although a bigger woman... she really wasn't massive in frame. Vim's arms and shoulders were bigger than hers. She was bigger than me, and taller than Vim, yet he was still bigger in frame. "I'm a bear. The two of us should be friends. We're both creatures of the forests," she said.

"Depends on the news you bring, I think," I said honestly.

Oplar's smirk went still, and then she blinked and laughed at me. "I see!" she laughed, taking no offense.

Though I had said it lightly, there was a part of me that had meant it.

She had news. And not any kind of simple news either.

The bear sighed as she gestured to the chairs near us, and I nodded as I went to join her in sitting upon them.

We were not far from the entrance of the Crypt. In one of the relatively unused front rooms that had been converted into something of a sitting area. There was a small window near the fireplace, which

Vim was kneeling in front of as he made tea. The world outside was slowly becoming brighter as the sun rose higher.

Oplar sat in a similarly sized and made chair as the one I did... but only hers made noise as she did so. Telling me she wasn't just bigger than me, she was far heavier.

"Votes on this scale haven't happened in a while. My job right now is to deliver the news to as many members as possible. I have the twins doing the same, heading west along the coast," Oplar said.

The twins... "So... you're gathering votes?" I asked.

"Hm? No. The vote is to be held in two years, in Telmik, on the night of the founder's festival," Oplar said.

I perked up, and tried to remember the name of the festival Vim and I had been in when we were there last. That hadn't been the name of it... had it?

"That's the date the Society was created. It's the same date as their religious day of feasting. It's during the winter," Vim said, his back to me as he continued messing with the tea and fire.

Oplar glanced at him, then back at me and smirked.

"What?" I asked her. What was that smile on her face supposed to mean?

“He had known you were about to ask about it,” she said.

Well...

Vim sighed, but said nothing more.

“Why is it being held so long from now? Won’t it take that long just to let everyone know about it?” I asked, deciding to not delve into a conversation... once again... about how Vim’s very obviously fully attuned to me. Now was not the time to enjoy such lovely topics.

“There’s more to the vote than just a simple yes and no. Without allowing discourse and debates, we’ll not reach a true census. Not for something like this. In two years we’ll have gathered enough of the Society, or at least their representatives, to hold a proper vote. If we have to we’ll then let the voting take a year or two after the initial meeting, if we must,” Oplar explained.

Ah... so they’ll likely let as many gather as possible, as to argue and debate, and then send out summaries or simply have those like her and the others travel around to tell everyone else who couldn’t, or wouldn’t, show up. To then hear and count the votes of all the rest who hadn’t, or couldn’t, gone to Telmik.

It was... an interesting way of doing it, at least.

“Who is even stupid enough to try and banish Vim from the Society anyway?” I asked.

Oplar blinked at me, and her smile softened... but didn't die completely. "Well..."

Frowning at her, I wondered if it was someone I knew. Or she herself. Why was she suddenly acting as if afraid to say something? Or speak it aloud?

I glanced at Vim, who had lifted the pot he had been using to brew tea off the fire. He stood and stepped over to a nearby table where cups and other stuff rested, as to pour the tea out.

"Must you make tea right now Vim?" I asked him angrily.

As he poured tea into cups, he nodded. "Oplar has likely just traveled days without rest. So yes. It is time to make refreshments," Vim said.

I wanted to grumble, but couldn't.

He was right after all.

She did look exhausted... Or rather, now she didn't look too bad... but earlier, a few minutes ago, in the doorway...

She had been heaving a little. Drenched in sweat and rain.

“Vim’s a kind man. He never cares for rest himself, but he’s always worried we don’t get enough,” Oplar said as Vim stepped over to her and handed her a wooden cup.

Oplar raised it a little, as if to thank and toast Vim, then went to take a drink as he turned and then held one out to me.

I glared at it, and then him, but took it anyway.

Watching him as he stepped back over to the table, as to refill the pot and prepare another batch of the tea, I wondered what to think.

He was acting very calm. Very normal...

Yet I had seen it. I had seen the moment of complete shock and confusion on his face, when Oplar had told him about the vote.

I hadn’t seen him that shocked since I had kissed him. There in those salt flats.

Oplar sighed after she drank what was likely most of her cup’s contents. “To be honest Renn... the fault is likely Vim’s,” she then said.

“His?” I asked as I held the cup firmly. It was a thick wooden one, but it was still warm thanks to the hot tea.

She nodded.

“It always is,” Vim said as he went to putting the pot back over the fire.

I stood to argue... but stuttered and had to collect myself. I had stood so quickly that I had splashed a tiny bit of the tea out of the cup, and lightly splattered some of it on my hand. It had burnt a little, but nothing too bad to worry over it. Grumbling I rubbed the hand that had gotten slightly scalded on my side as I glared at Vim.

“My. She’s glaring daggers at you Vim,” Oplar noted.

“As I said,” Vim said, once again laying the blame at his own feet.

“Vim!” I said, a little too loudly.

Vim sighed and glanced at me, but his expression was not one of annoyance or pain... instead it was one of the looks he had when we were usually alone.

That look was usually on his face when we were in bed together. Why was it on his face right now?

“She’s adorable Vim... It’s too bad we’ve been missing each other all this time, I’d have enjoyed seeing her in action,” Oplar said.

My glare had a new target, and she smirked at me as I locked eyes with her.

She didn’t seem bothered or worried at all as I bit back some choice words.

“Renn’s adorable, but you’ll want to be careful. Cats are quick to change temperaments,” Vim said.

“Can you two stop teasing me and being so calm? This is serious,” I said.

“We’re not teasing you... and to be honest, I’m not calm either. I’m worried, probably more than you are,” Oplar then said.

I gulped and shifted.

Vim sighed as he stood, and turned to face us. “Also, please keep your voices down. I’d rather not have anyone else a part of this conversation just yet,” Vim warned.

Ah. Right...

I slowly sat back down.

He nodded thankfully at me, and Oplar drank whatever was left in her cup. I didn't hear any sloshing, so it had likely not been much at all.

"Plus, Renn... It's not as desperate as you're making it out to be either. We have two years before the vote is even held. It's not something to panic over just yet," Vim then said.

"It's not the vote itself, Vim, it's the fact it's being held at all," I said softly.

"Actually... she's right, Vim. I need you to really take this seriously, for once, if you would," Oplar added.

I didn't like to hear her agree with me, since it meant my worries and fears were right.

Vim glanced at her, and she nodded. "You never fear anything, for good reason, Vim. But this is something you need to worry over. Especially so since it's your own fault it's happening," she said to him.

Squirming in my chair, I watched Vim's eyes soften as he stared into Oplar's. "What'd I do this time, Oplar?" he asked softly.

"You gave the wrong person the wrong book," she said.

"Book...?" I asked.

The two stared at each other for a moment... then Vim turned and frowned at me, and then shook his head as he shrugged.

"Do you mean the Queen's Lament...?" I asked. Surely not, right? I mean... I had just given the fourth one to Sharp! And she was sharing it with everyone here. If that was the cause, then... I was as much as fault as him!

"What...? No... I'm talking about the book you gave Rapti, Vim. The one you supposedly wrote yourself," Oplar then said.

I blinked, and felt a strange tingle run down my tail.

Rapti.

"Rapti wouldn't do this...!" I said as my tail began to really twist and move. I was upset.

“Rapti would,” Vim said softly.

Oplar nodded. “I don’t know why you gave her that book, Vim. But it’s very ironic if it ends up being your own undoing. To be brought low by your own hands, basically,” Oplar shrugged with a smile.

“What’s she mean Vim?” I asked worriedly.

Vim sighed and was about to answer, but the pot on the fire began to hiss.

I startled a little at the sudden sound, and had to reach over and grab my tail. It had started to whack against things in its annoyed swaying. I held it firmly, as to calm it... or at least try to.

“Vim gave Rapti a book. One that made her... question. She sent letters to others, who then sent letters to the rest. It didn’t take long for certain ideas to sprout and doubts to form from them,” Oplar said.

Closing my eyes, I groaned as I tried to wrap my head around what was happening. For a moment the room was noisy with the hissing of the pot and Vim stepping over to Oplar... as to refill her cup.

“Is this vote Rapti’s idea or those she spoke to about it?” Vim asked her.

“A little of both. She wants answers. To be perfectly honest... I think she’s just scared. And trying to face her fears in the only way she knows how, through her faith,” Oplar said.

Rapti...!

Next time I see her I’m going to make her eat Vim’s cooking. A whole years worth.

“Renn.”

I looked up, and glared at Vim who gestured with the pot.

Shaking my head, I instead held my cup out to him.

I was in no mood for tea.

He took it, gently, and then stepped away to put the pot and cup onto the table.

“Basically Vim... those like Rapti. Those she’s been in correspondence with... have all come to a very peculiar conclusion,” Oplar said.

“Which is?” Vim asked.

“That you’re a god. One of the last. And by chaining you to our service, we are committing a crime of high sin... to put it plainly,” Oplar said, then took a drink.

Pausing, I released my tail that slid out of my hand and to the ground. “What...?” I asked.

Vim sighed. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Oplar shook her head as she finished gulping her drink. “No. Not at all. However... their coalition is mighty. And it’s given the others, those with actual grievances, apt opportunity to capitalize off your ill fortune,” she said.

“They’re using Rapti’s perspective and faith for their own benefit,” I whispered as I understood.

Oplar nodded at me. “Yes. There are many in the Society who are... upset. So it’s a perfect excuse. By the way, Crane is amongst them.”

“Huh?” I sat up straighter.

She nodded again. “Crane. From the Sleepy Artist. She’s alive. She’s with Rapti right now. I’m told she’s the only survivor. Lughes died from his wounds, not long after they escaped Ruvindale. Shelldon she’s not sure if he’s dead or not, but she assumes he is.”

The room, although warmed by the fire and rising sun, suddenly got very cold.

"I'm glad to hear she's alive," Vim said.

Blinking, I felt strangely weary. "Yes," I agreed softly.

She's alive.

"Don't be. She's likely the one who planted these ideas in Rapti's head. She's the one rallying the Society against you Vim. Using Rapti's findings, and religious side as a tool. She and the others who feel slighted or let down by you are the ones calling for your removal," Oplar said as she leaned back in her chair.

"Crane... hadn't been very religious, had she?" I asked as I tried to remember her. She had seemed to have hated the humans in her own way... and all the customs and religions they had too, because of it.

"No. She isn't," Vim stated.

"Nonetheless... Crane has a grievance. And she's not the only one. As far as I'm aware there are already over twenty members who have sent Rapti their marks. Their votes," Oplar said.

“Wait... wait...!” I stood.

The two looked at me, and I forcefully calmed myself. I knew they didn’t want me to be too loud. To wake anyone. Not yet.

But...

“What happened... there... at the Sleepy Artist... It wasn’t Vim’s fault,” I said softly.

“From our perspectives, Renn,” Vim said.

I shook my head, but had to bite my tongue again. To keep myself from raising my voice.

“No, Renn. He has a point. Crane’s grievances are emotional, mostly. Though...” Oplar hesitated, and I noticed her look away from me, to Vim.

“What...?” I whispered. What was that look?

Oplar sighed. “Should I say it here Vim? It might cause issues.”

Blinking, I looked to Vim, who frowned at Oplar.

An odd silence followed, and I stepped forward. "What is it?" I asked.

Oplar ignored me, and held Vim's gaze... who then sighed and nodded. "Let's hear it," he said.

The bear frowned, but nodded... and then looked to me. "Crane's not blaming you, Renn. She's blaming Vim. Through you. She's claiming his allowance of not vetting you properly is why the Sleepy Artist is lost. She's basically blaming what happened on the fact that Vim didn't stick around long enough to make sure you were able to properly join the Society. That his lack of foresight brought about the tragedy."

My sight blurred a little, and I had to step back. Vim stepped forward, but he didn't need to catch me. I sat back down in my chair, lightheaded.

"She's just being emotional, Renn. You have many in the Society who have voiced their own opinions on Crane's claims, denouncing them. Rapti is amongst them, by the way," Oplar said quickly.

Blinking, I glanced over at Vim... who was staring at me with a sad expression.

"Did you know?" I asked him softly.

"No. But..."

“But what?” I whispered.

“They can’t fault him, Renn. Not directly. So they use such methods to their benefit. You’re being used as a tool, because they don’t have a proper outlet for their accusations or anger. You’re a means to an end,” Oplar said.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head and looked down... away from the two of them.

I didn’t want to see their looks of worry. Their looks of pity.

It only made me hate myself more.

The crackling of the fire was a good chorus to the way my heart was currently in turmoil. It felt like it was breaking, yet swelling all the same. In anger, yet anguish.

My eyes welled with tears as I tried to comprehend what was happening.

I was being used. To hurt Vim. To hurt the Society.

Me.

“Some spear she is, Vim. Look at her... she’s about to cry,” Oplar whispered.

“Hm,” Vim must have nodded.

I sniffed, and although didn’t want to cry... I did feel it begin. I was about to weep.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered before the sobs made it impossible to do so.

A heavy hand planted itself firmly on my shoulder, squeezing it. “It’s not your fault Renn,” Vim said.

“Aye. Though... if what I see is true, then them using you as the poisoned cup will only be their own undoing. This must be what Nebl and the Chronicler meant,” Oplar said lightly.

Glancing up, I wanted to ask what Oplar meant... but Vim’s expression made me hesitate and keep silent.

He looked...

“Why are you smiling?” I asked him.

“Hm... right. Rude to be so happy as your heart breaks, I suppose,” he admitted.

“It is...!” I complained. I was a hairsbreadth away from breaking! And he had such a happy grin on his face! He looked like he’d accept a kiss if I offered it, that was how happy he seemed!

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Oplar lean forward... likely to see Vim’s expression. He was angled at just the distance she likely couldn’t see it from where she sat.

“This has happened before, Renn. And will happen again. If anything you should be proud to be used by them. It means you’ve become important to me, even if they don’t realize it yet,” Vim said.

“Who’d it happen to last time? Celine?” I asked accusingly.

He tilted his head down at me, and then his smirk died into a sad smile. “No. A friend. A man you’ve painted, in fact,” he said.

Painted...?

“Rungle...?” I whispered.

He nodded. "It was why he had left the Society. Hopefully... we can avoid a similar outcome this time," he said gently.

Sniffing, I frowned as I looked down at Oplar. She noticed my questioning gaze and quickly shook her head. "Before my time, I'm afraid," she said softly.

Looking back up at Vim, he sighed as he patted my shoulder one last time... then stepped over to the table. He picked up the cup I had given him earlier, and then returned to offer it to me once more.

This time I took it, and glared at him as I took a long drink.

"Hm... I've really screwed up not catching up to you two earlier, haven't I?" Oplar grumbled a complaint.

"You have no idea," Vim said as he stepped away, to return his attention to the fire.

After taking a drink, I sighed and relaxed. I wiped my face a little, since although I had not broken into a weeping fit... I had still leaked some tears.

"They really tried something similar before, Vim?" I asked.

"Well... Yes. To a degree. I've told you before Renn, I've failed and caused issues before. I'll not say this is as simple, or easily handled as those times had been, but..." Vim went quiet as he stared at the fire.

Before I could ask more, I heard why he had decided to go silent.

Footsteps. Headed our way.

I took a deep breath, to calm myself, and made sure to wipe my face again. So that whoever entered the room wouldn't notice we had just been having an emotional conversation.

Oplar glanced around, frowning in a way that told me she hadn't heard the footsteps yet. It was interesting she hadn't been able to, being a predator, but...

Watching her, I noticed right when she heard the steps too. It was when the tiny feet rounded the corner, and began walking on stone and not the carpets.

The steps approached the door, paused a moment... likely to listen in, and then pushed open the door. Sharp entered the room, glancing around.

She didn't have her bandages on, but she was wearing her hooded robe.

"Oh. It's just the smelly bear," Sharp said as she realized what was going on.

“What!” Oplar shot to her feet, with such gusto I actually startled. Oplar hurried over to the door, and Sharp, and extended her arms greatly. “Long time no see, my pointy little friend!” Oplar said loudly.

Smiling at the sight, I watched as Sharp startled too... and ducked away as Oplar actually tried to wrap her in a hug.

“You massive idiot!” Sharp complained as she had to duck away again, as Oplar turned to grab her once more. Or at least, try to.

Although it was clear that Oplar wasn't trying her hardest to grab Sharp... it was also obvious Oplar was not hesitating. If Sharp hadn't ducked and avoided her, Oplar would have actually wrapped her in a hug.

“Oh, I know you love me!” Oplar said as she stepped towards Sharp again.

Sharp let out a weird noise as she hurried towards me. “Renn! Vim!” she shouted for help as she hurried over.

I slowly stood, unable to contain my smile as Sharp hurried around me and my chair, as to put me and the chair between her and Oplar.

Although I knew this was likely... just a silly joke the two did each time they saw each other, I wasn't sure how far to take it. Did Sharp actually expect me to protect her? Did Oplar? What if I didn't try and Oplar actually got a hold of Sharp? Wouldn't she get hurt if she did?

As I debated how I'd stop Oplar, I decided to just stand in the way. If anything to just slow her down a little. After all it'd not bother me if she wrapped me in a hug.

Oplar approached all the same, uncaring.

"You bumbling brute! One day I'm going to just let you catch me!" Sharp shouted a threat from behind me.

"Aye, good excuses! You're just getting slow in your old age, aren't you!" Oplar though wasn't deterred, and I had to actually duck and step aside a little as Oplar walked past. Her extended arms nearly bumped into my head as she walked around me, to get to Sharp.

"Gah!" Sharp had to hurry away, nearly tripping in the process. She bumped into Vim, rounded him and grabbed his shirt as she leered at Oplar and me from behind him.

Vim sighed, and turned. Oplar went still, pausing with her arms extended a few feet from me.

Oh...?

"A vote's been called, Sharp," Vim then said to her.

What little happiness that had just blossomed within me over the moment was quickly doused.

“Hopefully on how to properly skin a bear,” Sharp said as she gripped Vim’s shirt tighter.

Oplar chuckled as she lowered her arms and shifted, smirking at Sharp who was glaring at her.

“No. It’s to decide if I’m to remain the protector or not,” Vim said.

I clenched my teeth as I glared at the man who was, as always, far too honest for his own good.

Sharp blinked, then her glare and frown at Oplar turned into a look of utter uncertainty as she glanced up at him. “Truly?” she asked.

He nodded to her.

A long moment passed as Sharp studied Vim’s face, and then she scoffed.

“Hmph... if they vote you away, let me know where you go next. No point staying with a sinking ship,” Sharp said with a sigh.

“Right!” I agreed heartily.

Maybe I wouldn't have to worry over it, if there were enough people who realized the obvious like Sharp and I!

Chapter 266 Letters

Turning the paper around, I read the rest of the Chronicler's letter.

"Next time you put pen to paper, do so with fiction," she finished.

I smirked at that and folded her letter up. The four page thing, eight since she always wrote on both sides, had mostly been an ass chewing.

One well deserved, but sometimes I felt like she enjoyed the whole, I told you so, more than someone of the cloth should.

Sitting back, I sighed as I tapped the folded letters against my knee.

A vote.

Against me.

Against my protection. My service. My loyalties.

It'd be insulting if they didn't have ground to stand upon.

Glancing at the fireplace, I stared at the stack of logs and kindling waiting to be lit.

I had gathered it up and prepared it already. In anticipation of burning the letters... but I wasn't done yet.

I wanted to burn them already. To stop thinking about them, or their contents. But I still had...

My eyes left the unlit fireplace, and went to the table next to me. The three unopened letters, sitting amidst the four others already opened and read, made me itch.

Their contents were all the same, roughly. Like the Chronicler's.

Telling me that I shouldn't worry. That they'd help me. That they'd be the voices of reason, amongst the choir of dissent.

I'd be humbled by their generous support and readiness to come to my side... if not for the fact they were all being just as snarky about it as the Chronicler.

Yes. I was a hypocrite. I caused most of my own problems. My failures were usually my own fault, in one way or another.

But what did they want from me? What did they expect me to do?

Or well...

Lifting the Chronicler's letter, I stared at some of the words written upon it. They told me exactly what she expected. What they all did.

"To be a tyrant," I whispered.

They expected me to force people to obey me. They expected me to lead. To stop allowing our weakest and feeblest members to give me orders.

To break free from Celine's contract.

I scoffed and tossed her letter onto the table.

Ridiculous.

They all forgot I wrote most of that contract. I forced most of those rules myself.

Why would I try to free myself from shackles I willingly locked upon my own soul?

Though maybe it would be for the best.

Maybe this would bring forth a needed change. Something that needed to happen. Something... something like...

I paused to remember Renn's look. When she had heard of the vote, and who had called for it. When she had heard she was one of the many excuses they were using, to strike against me.

She had been as angry over it as she was hurt by it.

It had been a lovely sight on her face. She had been furious, yet welling with tears.

They were going to try to use her as an example. As proof of my inept handling of the Societies well being.

How little they knew.

They were in for a surprise beyond imagination if they thought it'd work.

A light knock made me sigh.

"Come in Oplar," I said.

She opened the door slowly, smirking at me as she glanced around the room.

Watching her as she entered the room, and slowly shut the door behind her... she finally nodded with a knowing smile.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm just... enjoying this, Vim. I've seen you mingle before, but never anything like this..." Oplar paused a moment, then smirked as she stepped over to the bed.

I watched as she reached down and picked something up. Something tiny, yet long.

A strand of hair.

“You know I think she’s the first member you’ve slept with that I know of?” Oplar teased me as she showed me a strand of Renn’s hair.

Looking away from the bear, I strained my ears as I listened beyond the room. To the world outside, not just the hallway and floors below and above.

I didn’t hear Renn. She wasn’t near the courtyard, based on the fact I couldn’t hear her at all.

“Though I’ve always thought Landi got to you too, though she’s never admitted it,” Oplar said as she tossed Renn’s hair back onto the bed and stepped away from it.

Rolling my eyes at the idea, I watched as Oplar pulled over the only other chair in the room. It was a much smaller, less comfortable, one compared to the one I was sitting in... but I wasn’t in the mood to offer her my own.

In fact I wasn’t really even the mood for her teasing or any jokes right now either, but I knew I needed to talk to her.

This was the first time we’ve had a moment alone since she’s arrived after all.

“Renn’s right now happily debating the rest. Though I use the term happily a little loosely... she can get rather fired up, it seems,” Oplar said as she took a seat across from me.

“She shouldn’t do that,” I said.

“What woman wouldn’t try to defend her man?” Oplar asked me.

“One who should know better,” I said.

Oplar tilted her head at me. “You expect her to... stand on the fringe? Like you do? Really?”

My left eye twitched, and I had to stop myself from giving her the first answer that came to mind.

After a tiny moment of calming down, I shook my head. “Of course not... but her fervor can be...” I gestured lightly instead of saying it aloud.

“Very forceful, especially to our lesser members. Yes. Luckily most here don’t seem too bothered by her. Though most here are used to those like Sharp, so it’s to be expected,” Oplar said.

I nodded.

“Yet still Vim... I’m a little surprised. You actually did for a moment there think she should be like you. I’m surprised you’d think so. It makes me wonder if your rules are more than just agreements, or if it’s simply a tell of how deeply you care for her,” Oplar then said as she thought about it.

My eye twitched again. Damn. She had noticed.

Why were the most perceptive members always so annoying?

Though... Renn was too. Yet she didn't annoy me at all.

Or did she, just in different ways?

Oplar sighed as she glanced next to me, at the table. The letters upon it, specifically.

"You know... I've never really considered it before. But you have as many friends as you do foes, Vim,"
Oplar said gently.

"I have no enemies within the Society," I said.

"Right. Sure you don't," she said with a small nod of the head.

"I destroy my enemies. Whom are you expecting me to destroy?" I asked her further.

Oplar held my gaze for a small moment... only to frown and nod. "Fine... you don't have enemies... you simply have many members with grudges and criticisms," she corrected.

I nodded, glad to hear it.

She chuckled. "The Clothed Woman of course had no letter for you... but she did have a message, if you'd like to hear it."

Closing my eyes, I felt a pain that didn't exist for a moment. "What is it?"

"She warned you, she says. Devour them, then they'll devour you," Oplar told me of her warning.

I scoffed. "And do you know whom she speaks of, Oplar?"

"Well... no. But I'm enjoying seeing you react to it all the same," Oplar admitted.

Right. Sure.

"How's Lumen?" I asked.

“Hm? Fine. They were busy with Thraxton and all those merchants and lords. There were royalty and bishops from neighboring nations involved too. Brandy is having the time of her life,” Oplar said.

Good. Although it meant down the road I’d have pain and headache, at least right now all was well.

“Oh. Those pirates showed up too.” Oplar remembered.

Frowning, I gestured for her to continue.

She nodded. “They’re fine, last I heard. Merit took them under her wing, though I’m not sure what they’re doing,” she told me.

Huh... I should be surprised, but honestly I wasn’t. Renn would be very happy to hear the news, though. Even if it seemed Oplar either didn’t know their full story, or simply didn’t care.

“Telmik is fine. Everyone I know of is fine. I have a letter for Renn, from Twin Hills. Several in fact. I also have one for her from Crane, amongst others,” Oplar then said.

I frowned. “You speak as if you haven’t given them to her yet,” I said.

That wasn’t... shouldn’t be possible. She’d only been here a day, but...

“Because I haven’t,” Oplar said as she dug underneath her right arm, and pulled out a small bag. One she had hidden in her pants.

She stared at it for a moment, and then reached out to hand it to me.

I only stared at it.

“Why are you giving me her letters, Oplar...?” I asked softly.

“She’s yours Vim,” Oplar said simply.

My eye twitched again, and not because she was teasing me.

This was Oplar being very serious.

“Those are hers, Oplar,” I said.

Oplar blinked, but the small bag didn’t move. “They are?” she said, as if my statement made no sense to her.

I sighed, and decided to just let it be. I leaned forward and grabbed the bag.

It felt thick enough to be more than just a few letters. Or someone had written far more than a few pages.

Oplar smiled and nodded, glad to have delivered her task successfully.

Sitting back, I put the bag on my lap and stared at the bear that was... a little more animal than human, sometimes.

Really. You'd think someone without any actual traits wouldn't be so... instinctual.

Sure. I had claimed Renn was my own... but was she not doing the same with me?

If anything I'd think she had more reins upon me than I her. If anyone should be given letters first it should be her.

Maybe in time Oplar would see the truth... if not... well...

"So um... Vim."

“Hm?” I left my thoughts as Oplar shifted in her chair, and I noted the way her clear eyes glanced around. She was glancing around, as if in search of something to occupy her mind... but I knew the truth.

Oplar loved stories. She dedicated her life to the unnatural and unique. She was likely looking for something no one else had known, or noticed.

Like Renn’s hair in my bed. Others may not have even noticed such a thing, yet it was the first thing in this room she had seen.

“Rapti. She’s rather adamant in her claims,” Oplar said.

“I’m not a god, Oplar. If I was, I’d be a damned poor one,” I said to her.

“Right... but...” Oplar flinched and shook her head. “They don’t believe that.”

“They’re free to believe as they wish. But I’m not a god. I’ve always firmly said so,” I said.

Oplar sighed and nodded. “It’d make a poor story, true,” she admitted.

“Right?” I agreed.

Oplar glanced around again, and I noticed her eyes linger on the dresser near the fireplace. The main door of it was half ajar, thanks to Renn, but it was at an angle that I doubted Oplar could make much out. There was no way she could notice the heart. But she might still instinctively sense it, being a full blooded predator.

“Can... can I ask something personal, Vim?” she then asked.

“You just asked if I was a god, Oplar. How much more personal can you get?” I asked her back.

Oplar paused, and then she chuckled and nodded. “That’s true...!” she realized. She laughed a moment, then coughed and gestured at me. “Renn... and you. A pair,” she stated a fact.

“You could call it that, yes,” I said. I knew that’s how she, and those like her, would see it. A pair. Mates, or whatever.

“So um... Well...” Oplar hesitated, which wasn’t usually like her. Especially when she was pursuing some story.

Though...

I blinked as I realized this might not be a story to her.

Maybe Renn and my relationship with her wasn't a story. Maybe it was something too personal to be such a thing to her.

It made sense, actually... Oplar loved delivering mail, since it let her exchange gossip and witness it firsthand herself half the time... but...

She never shared anything personal. Not like that.

Seeing her in a different light, I patiently waited for Oplar to find the words to her question.

"You... love her, right?" Oplar then asked, finally.

Although a little bothered that she had struggled so hard for such a simple question, I nodded calmly and didn't smirk or shrug off her question.

To others it might have been something of a joke, or a way to tease me... but to Oplar, right now, it had been something serious.

Oplar studied me for a long moment... so I nodded again. "I do, Oplar. I really do," I told her, to make sure she understood.

The bear gulped as if in awe... and then nodded back. "Okay..." she whispered.

Okay...? Was that all?

Before I could try and ask my way through her strangeness, Oplar coughed and slowly stood up. "Then I better not intrude much longer..." she said.

"Oplar," I stopped her before she could step away.

She slowed to a stop before the door, and glanced back at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

Our Societies messenger hesitated, and shifted a little. Then she gave me a tiny smile. "I hadn't believed it, Vim. And... to be honest I don't think anyone else does either. Not yet," she said.

"Is it really that strange?" I asked.

"No. That's just it... It shouldn't be. You're still a man. Everyone, anyone, finds love and stuff... I guess... but..." Oplar shrugged, obviously unable to really explain it.

I nodded slowly, since I somehow understood what she was trying to get at.

"If you think I'm the odd one, you're in for a shock," I warned her.

Oplar smirked and nodded. "I'm looking forward to it. I plan to stick with you until Telmik, I think. Unless you have other plans," she said.

"Hm. Look forward to it," I said.

Oplar grinned and opened the door. She nodded at me one last time, then left.

Sighing as I listened to her heavy footsteps as she walked down the hallway, I glanced down at the pouch of letters on my lap.

"If anything it proves I'm no god. They couldn't love anything, after all," I said softly.

Though... that wasn't true. I just didn't want to admit it was.

"Did none of them, really?"

My breath caught as I looked up from the pouch and found Renn. She was smiling gently at me, her tail swaying behind her.

I see. So that was what Oplar meant by intruding.

She must have been waiting outside. Which meant I had not noticed her approach with Oplar. Or her slipping in after Oplar left.

Fascinating.

“Some had, yes,” I admitted to her.

Renn’s shoulders lowered a little, as if relieved to hear the truth.

I gestured to the chair across from me, which Oplar had just vacated. Renn happily went to sitting in it.

“Everyone here is rather vocal about supporting you, Vim. Frett even broke her vow as to speak her opinion of it.”

“That’s foolish of her,” I said.

Renn furrowed a brow at me. “She had spoken lovingly. Very well. Even Sharp seemed to be moved by her words. They had brought tears to the eye,” she said.

I'm sure it had. To your eyes at least.

Glancing at the door, to make sure it was both shut... but also to make sure no one, like a certain bear, was listening behind it...

Once I was sure we really were alone... I sighed softly as I lifted the pouch Oplar had given me.

"If I give you this... will you promise to behave?" I asked my companion.

"Behave...?" Renn asked.

"No riling up the Society, Renn. I appreciate your devotion... and will always be very proud of you for standing up for what you believe in... But they have the right to their own wills and beliefs. Influencing them is..." I started to explain what I meant, but Renn's soft smile made me go silent.

Staring at the woman who was suddenly staring at me the way my mother used to, I felt a strange tingle in the back of my neck.

What was with that look? And how was she able to have it?

"I... admit I am angry. And that I'm upset... and have lots of words planned to be said to certain people... but... I promise you Vim, I'll not try to change anyone's opinion. I promise," she said seriously.

I had to drop the pouch, lest I crumple it and destroy it in my grip. The pouch fell to my lap, and luckily remained there and didn't fall to the floor.

Renn nodded. "Really Vim... I know you well enough by now to know how you'd feel if I tried something like that. I'm surprised you'd even think I would," she said.

"Hm... seems I'd not thought deep enough about it, had I?" I admitted.

She nodded, and her smile turned into a grin. "Obviously! But... it's okay. I know you've got a lot on your mind right now."

Honestly I didn't. Right now all that was on it was her. Her. Her smell. Her body. That smile.

The way her tail was coiling around the chair's leg. Did she do that consciously? It was coiling in the same way it did when she slept. The way it went around my leg. It wrapped around stuff sometimes, but usually not in that way. Not so slowly or so tightly. Was it because she was happy, insulted, or... was it simply because she was staring at me?

"What's in the bag?" Renn asked, dragging me out of my thoughts.

I sighed. "Letters," I said as I picked it back up and held it out to her.

Renn at first didn't move. She stared at me with shocked eyes, her tail quickly uncoiled the chair... and her ears perked up. "Letters...?" she whispered.

I nodded, and leaned forward some more.

She slowly reached out, and with both hands she took the pouch from me.

"I have letters...?" she whispered.

Watching as Renn carefully sat back and clung to the pouch... I realized something... rather shocking.

Were those her first letters?

Ever?

Surely not... right...?

“The only letters I’ve ever gotten before had been... painful,” Renn then whispered as she ran her thumb along the pouch.

Frowning, I chose my next words carefully. “Sometimes bad news hurts... but in my experience bad news is better than no news,” I said.

Renn smiled gently as she finally tore her eyes from the pouch. Her left ear twitched as she smirked at me. “Remember the letters from the Sleepy Artist? The... ones that banished me?” she reminded me.

Oh.

I slowly nodded, and felt bad that I had forgotten. Yes. Lughes and the rest had indeed written letters as proof of her banishment. Lughes had even wrote a letter to her, personally, to tell her his thoughts on it. I’d forgotten all about them.

If those were Renn’s only experience with letters, then... well...

I should have written her love notes, or something. Maybe I’ll start doing that from now on.

Renn gulped and sniffed as she turned the pouch over and found the little strap that secured it closed. She slowly undid it, and the pouch unfolded to reveal a rather large stack of different colored letters.

I quickly noticed the few familiar colors and papers of certain people. One was the same white as another letter, the one I had just tossed onto the desk earlier. Another was a gray that was similar to one of my own. Though the one I had gotten from the smithy was from Nebl, hers likely was from Lellip.

There had to be at least a dozen of them, and a few looked thick. Several pages of happy little letters for her to indulge in.

She sniffed again... and suddenly she was crying.

Although used to her tears, I still found myself a little unsettled. I shifted in my chair, and was thankful I didn't accidentally break it while doing so.

Watching as she smiled and slowly moved the letters, as to read the few that had stuff written on the outer envelopes, I watched as she paused on one of the smaller ones.

Renn's smile grew warmer, and her crying turned into sniffs as she lifted it a little... as to show it off to me.

"Lomi's," she told me.

I nodded slowly.

Her tail that had uncoiled from the leg of the chair, and had until now been resting on the floor, began to sway gently. "Almost a year later," she said softly.

"Such time is what makes them all the more valuable," I said.

She nodded. As she read the name on the letter again, and smiled. "Her handwriting is bad," she said.

I said nothing as she went to slowly opening it. Renn did her best to not tear the envelope too roughly, likely because she planned to keep it, yet the sound of the paper as it tore told me it was of poor quality. The type of stuff that would rip and fade no matter how well kept.

Once opened she unfolded two pages of words... and something slipped out and onto her lap, on to the rest of the letters.

Renn tilted her head as she carefully picked up a few stalks of wheat.

Watching a small tear leak from her eyes as she closed them, and went to smelling the wheat, I noticed the way her tail hung motionless in the air as she took in its scent. Or at least, what little scent was likely even left of it.

After smelling it, Renn sighed. "How is it such things can have their own scent, even though they all smell the same?" she wondered.

“You’re likely smelling Lomi amongst it,” I said. Certain strands of wheat did of course have their own smell. It depended on their soils, and whatnot... but odds are the memory she smelled wasn’t the wheat, but those amongst it.

Renn smirked as she then turned the papers around and went to reading it.

I patiently waited as Renn slowly read both pages, and then read them again... and again.

Then on the fourth pass, she told me of their contents.

“She’s made herself at home. She talks of the rest as sisters and brothers. Porka as a mother... Even calls Trixalla a grandmother,” Renn said softly.

“That’s good,” I said.

She nodded, and sniffed again. “It really is...”

Expecting her to start sobbing again, I was a little surprised she didn’t as she lowered the letters a little... and then glanced at me.

“Hm...?” I tilted my head at her strange gaze. She had a smile but...

“The letter I sent her, Vim... I’d asked her a question. One in particular, amongst... well... the other stuff I’d sent,” she said.

I nodded slowly.

“I’d wanted to know if she was upset that you hadn’t hunted down those who had burnt her village,” she told me.

I blinked.

“She tells me that you had someone named Meriah handle it for you,” Renn said.

“Rather I asked her to find out who had done it, so that I could handle it later,” I corrected. Had Meriah taken matters into her own hands? She was far from the hapless nun she appeared to be, but...

Usually she never did such a thing. She gathered information. That was it. For her to have done something... Either opportunity had shown itself, or she had been forced into a corner.

“I... I don’t think Lomi knows. She was simply told by Meriah that she and you have handled it. That her family, her village, can rest peacefully now,” Renn said as she lifted the letter.

“Hm...” I nodded, and wondered if any of my other letters had been from her, or about it. Meriah never told anyone, other than those who had been victims like Lomi, about what she did or found out. No one other than me at least. She never even told the Chronicler, and she saw her akin to a mother.

Yet when it came to the victims...

That was one of the small problems of utilizing Meriah. Her strange views of faith and ethics made it impossible to keep the stuff she found out truly a secret, since she shared it with those who were related to them.

Yet the Chronicler hadn't mentioned anything about it... which meant Lomi likely hadn't told anyone else yet.

“You... you were doing stuff, behind the scenes, Vim?” Renn asked me.

“I've not done anything yet. I simply asked Meriah to look into it for me,” I said.

“Who is Meriah?”

“A traveling nun. And that's not just her persona. She's genuinely a nun,” I said.

“So... you asked her to find out who had burnt Lomi's village,” Renn said, understanding.

I nodded. "Thanks to us having to check on the surrounding members for safety reasons... and also because I had chosen to then head to Telmik. I had decided at the time, for now at least, the rest of the Society locations were safe. And that by the time I returned to the north Meriah or someone else would have found out the perpetrators... who I'd then handle once back there," I explained.

Renn glanced at Lomi's letter, read something upon it, and then looked back at me. "When'd you ask her to do this for you?"

"In Telmik. I left letters for her... just like I'd done for other things, such as that's where I put the book I sent Rapti. Into Oplar's office, for her to deliver it for me," I explained.

"Why did you give Rapti a book that caused this vote to come to be?" she asked, changing topics a little.

I sighed. "I hadn't meant for it to do that. Rapti had simply... wanted to know about a certain subject. One she'd never asked about before, not directly... And well..."

"You who so dearly cherishes ones freedom, especially in pursuit of knowledge, happily obliged her," Renn finished for me.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"What was the book about?"

“The Monarchs.”

She frowned at me. “You barely tell me anything about them, yet you’ll give Rapti a whole book about them?” she asked.

“Firstly, Renn... you know more about Monarchs than anyone else right now. Other than maybe one or two others, at best, who are Monarchs themselves. Also, calling it a book is honestly rather overstating its importance. It’s rather a small journal, only a few dozen pages thick. Most of it is simple depictions of those I’ve encountered over the last few years. I had written it as something of a... report, for Celine, once. She had asked for it,” I said.

“What’s in it that would make Rapti believe you to be a god?” Renn asked.

I shrugged and shook my head.

“Vim...” Renn sighed at me.

“No. Really. It was basically just a... report. One I’d wrote half-assed for Celine. I explain how I tracked down, hunted, and killed half a dozen Monarchs... The only thing I can think of is she interpreted my snide remarks on a few of them wrongly, or something,” I said.

“What kind of snide remarks?”

Taking a small breath, I shifted again. This time though the chair complained. It didn't break, but it did creak loudly.

"I think one of them... well... The creator. Of one of the Monarchs. It had been a god that I knew. I may have... made a small remark about it. But I don't remember saying anything too revealing. If anything she likely just put what little knowledge she has together with the knowledge of others and... well..." I shrugged, not sure what else to say.

Renn sighed. "You admitted you recognized a god's particular creation, because you knew that god. And yet still claim you aren't one. No wonder, Vim," Renn said.

"All the people here claim they know their god, yet are they gods?" I asked.

"They know their gods through their faith, Vim," Renn said softly.

I wanted to scoff, but knew better than to do so.

Not because Renn would get angry at me... but because she was right.

"I was trying to be nice..." I whispered.

“Why does it seem so many tragedies happen because of your kindness, Vim?” Renn asked softly.

“Because it’s true. I shouldn’t have sent her the book. What more do you want me to say Renn?” I asked her and myself.

“I don’t want you to regret your decisions, Vim,” she told me.

“That’ll be the day,” I said.

Renn folded up Lomi’s letter, shuffling the papers a bit as she put them back into the thin envelope she had drawn them from.

Once she finished, she sighed softly as she lightly rubbed another. The blue one.

The one likely from Merit.

“Do you regret choosing me, Vim?” Renn asked me.

“I didn’t choose you Renn,” I said.

“Are you saying I forced you to love me?” she asked.

“No. I’m saying you weren’t there... then I blinked, and you were. And from that moment on you had my heart in your hands. I didn’t get to chose you, but I would choose you if able to again,” I said.

Renn’s ears fluttered. “If you wrote that journal with such beautiful words, I can see why Rapti would have such misguided thoughts,” Renn said softly.

I flinched. “Please Renn. Not you too,” I said.

Renn smiled at me. “You’re not a god, Vim. I know that. You’re too fragile. Too easily teased. Too easily abused... but...” she hesitated as she glanced at the letters.

“But...?”

She nodded. “But I can see why others would think so, Vim. I really can. You’re a mystery. Your lack of telling the truth... your hiding of your bloodline, your secrets... they’re the source of all this. Surely you realize it...?”

I blinked, and hesitated.

Was it...?

Well...

“Why not... tell everyone Vim? Maybe it would stop the vote if you did?” she asked.

I gulped.

“Yes it may cost you some support... or some trust... but Vim... you’re about to lose that anyway. You’ve lost it, already, from what I’ve heard. And from what I’ve seen, too, by the way. There are several who accept you as their Protector, but dislike you or what you have done... why can’t they do the same knowing what you are? You’d give their hate something to be directed at, while they still rely upon you all the same,” Renn said.

Staring at the woman who was very obviously saying something... logical... I did my best to not break the chair I was sitting on.

Doing my best to not move a muscle, lest I destroy the chair... and maybe even the floor beneath me... I held the gaze of the beautiful golden eyes that were digging into my soul. Or at least, whatever was left of it.

“Let me guess... it was brought up just now,” I said softly.

She nodded.

I wonder who it had been. Abel? Ursula? One of the others?

Did it matter...?

“Is it really so important Vim?” Renn asked.

“It’s not. But Renn...” I stopped myself from telling her the truth, and realized there was really no way to address it without doing so.

Honestly... Renn knowing didn’t bother me. Not anymore.

But...

“Normally Vim... I’d change topics. Since I know eventually, even if many years down the road, you’d tell me. But this isn’t about me. It’s not about us. It’s about something more. Something bigger,” she said gently.

“If I tell them, Renn... it won’t do what you think it will,” I said.

“Why not?”

Because it'd just make the rumors worse, of course.

Holding her gaze, I gestured at her letters. “Who else sent you letters?” I asked.

Renn blinked, and suddenly looked hurt.

Before she could say anything I raised a hand to stop her.

Taking a small breath, I nodded. “I'll think about it. Give me... a little time. We'll talk about it later. I promise.”

“Fine. If you break that promise I'll stuff my tail in your mouth while you sleep,” she said, then went to grabbing another letter.

I shifted in my seat as I wondered what that would feel like.

“This one's from Merit... and this one's from Lellip,” Renn said as she went through her stack.

Nodding softly, I watched as she paused on one... and turned it around. It didn't look like a real letter, but instead a simple card or...

"This one's from Crane," she said softly.

"Oh...?" I perked up at that. Crane? Really?

Renn sniffed and gulped, and then smiled gently at me. "Here," she stood, and stepped over as to hand it to me.

I took it carefully, and noticed she was waiting for me to read it. Apprehensively.

Looking down at the card, I read Crane's name. She had signed it... but nothing else.

Turning it over, I found a single sentence.

"I do not blame you for what happened, Renn. May we see each other again soon," she had written.

Renn sniffed again, and giggled a little as I went to hand her back the note.

Instead of taking it though, Renn stepped forward... then bent forward to wrap me in a hug.

Making sure I didn't break the chair on accident, or bend the card from Crane, I accepted her hug as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

Renn let out a tiny sob, but it was a happy one. I returned her hug, patting her gently on the back.

"See, Renn? Good news travels slowly. Always," I said.

"Just like your love, Vim," she agreed.

Well...

She chuckled, her tail happily dancing as I nodded and admitted it.

Yes. That was true too.

It really was.

Chapter 267 A Silent Voice

Oplar thumped the tombstone lightly. "This here's my ma'," she said. Then she stepped to the left, and patted the next stone. "And my pa'."

I nodded as I studied the two graves. We were near one of the other buildings, the one that Sharp had her little insect cages in. The tombstones were about waist high to Oplar, and both were in the shape of stacks of books.

"So you inherited your passion of stories from them?" I asked.

"Aye. Though it was my idea to start delivering letters. They had been more interested in cataloguing family histories and stuff," Oplar said as she stepped around her mother's tombstone, and brushed some fallen leaves off the top of it. Thanks to their flat tops it seemed easy for stuff to accumulate on them. Especially out here, surrounded by the dense forest and winds.

"Family histories..." I said softly as I watched her pick each leaf off the stone one by one, carefully.

"Used to be important. Lotta' folk don't care much about it anymore though. Back in Telmik I have massive tomes, which go back hundreds if not thousands of years for some. It's always very interesting to read about'em," she said.

"Should put them with the paintings," I said as I imagined a great room, full of paintings... with those very tomes lying underneath them, as to tell their story.

Oplar tilted her head, and then stood up. "Why... that's a good idea," she said seriously.

I nodded. I'd have enjoyed going through such a place. Just as I had spent days and days staring at all those paintings back at Ruvindale.

"I've heard you can paint well, actually," Oplar said as she turned to look at me.

"I try. Though I've not had the opportunity to do so lately," I said.

"Mhm... must be hard being tugged along by Vim all the time. Maybe we should get you an office at Telmik, so you can spend time there as he wanders around. Give you time to do such things," Oplar said as she pondered it.

I smiled at the idea. "I might consider that one day," I said honestly.

"Hm... you'll probably need to do such a thing eventually anyway," she seemed to conclude from her thoughts.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Well once you start having children. I doubt Vim would ever let anything happen to you, or them, but traveling around with him without rest might not be the best way to raise'em in the beginning, eh?" Oplar said as she smiled at the idea.

I frowned as I pondered her point.

She was right... wasn't she? It took our kind a long time to mature. Any child I'd give birth to would take far longer than a human to grow large enough to tend to themselves. Which meant many years of needing full attention... The type of full attention that living on the road would make it difficult, if not even impossible.

Children...

"In Telmik you'll have many to help you out too. Plus it's safe. Beneath the Cathedral are many floors that humans don't even know exist, safe to live in," Oplar said.

Although still fascinated over the idea, I blinked and changed focus. "There were floors beneath the church?" I asked.

She nodded. "Aye. Celine had Vim and many others, like Hands' father, make them. Originally they were meant to be a place for us to hide if we were attacked or something, now though they're mostly just houses and rooms... though honestly most have been empty for some time now," Oplar said.

"I do remember Vim mentioning tunnels... but he hadn't said there were actual places to live or anything..." I said. I should have known though.

"Vim's weird," Oplar stated, as if that summarized Vim's entire existence and strangeness up perfectly.

“He is...” I admitted and agreed softly.

Oplar stepped away from her parent’s graves and back onto the little stone path I was standing on.

“Can I ask something, Oplar?” I asked her.

She nodded.

“Are you the author? Of those books. The Queen’s Lament,” I asked.

Oplar grinned at me. “Me? No!” she laughed a bit, and then reached over to wrap her arm around my shoulder. Thanks to her being taller than me, she easily turned me as to make me join her in walking along the path, away from her parent’s graves. “I can see why you’d think so. But no. The stories I crave are not such made up drivel... No... What I’m fascinated by are the ones made by real people, in the real world. Which, surprisingly, ends up being more unbelievable sometimes than even the wildest of fiction!” Oplar added.

“Which is why you enjoy joining Vim on his travels,” I said as I understood.

Oplar tightened her grip around my neck and shoulder, as if hugging me. “Ha! No! Not at all! I’ll admit Vim is... a good source of stories and such, but he has a fatal flaw. One that ends up ruining the story more than not,” she said.

“He does...?”

She nodded and pointed at the church we were heading back towards. Though no one was in sight, so she was likely just pointing at nothing. “He’s too perfect. Basically Vim does encounter the strange and unusual often, but he... ends those stories too quickly. Too swiftly. If he had it his way, even the craziest moment would only last a few heartbeats, and no one would die, nothing drastic would happen, and he’d then simply go on about his day... as if nothing happened at all,” she said, as if it was something terrible.

“You’d... prefer he wasn’t so good at doing his job...?” I asked.

“Aye. I know. That’s horrible of me. I know. But it’s the truth. Take those Monarchs, or monsters, he sometimes fights. They should be natural disasters! Calamities! Stuff of fiction and legends...! Yet...” Oplar raised her hand, and made a fist... yet opened it and revealed her open palm, as if to display the thought in her head upon it.

“He defeats them before they can cause such chaos,” I said, understanding.

“Yeah... same with men, or armies, or genuine natural disasters even! He fixes them too easily, and does it all while being all calm and collected to boot. It’s no fun. Real stories have grief, heartache, disappointment... Vim doesn’t always end it happily, of course, but you see when he fails it’s not because he actually does so, but because it was impossible. An inevitability. So it’s not fun,” Oplar complained.

I wasn’t really sure I liked her viewpoint at all; especially since it didn’t sound like she was joking or teasing at all... but I did understand where she was coming from.

Sometimes Vim did treat even the serious stuff a little...

"He is sometimes a little nonplus about stuff," I agreed.

"Aye? Right! Now don't get me wrong... I'll run to Vim the fastest the moment I, or anyone, needs him... but... well..." Oplar shrugged, bumping me as she did since we were walking so closely together.

She felt rather warm, oddly. As if she was sick. But she didn't sound or feel sick. Maybe it was just her trait. She was a bear... so...

"I see where you're coming from Oplar, but I've felt most of Vim's stories have ended rather sadly in my experience..." I said softly.

"Aye. As I said, it happens... it just, even when it does, it doesn't feel normal. As if he's..." Oplar hesitated, and I realized she was about to say something very similar to what many were, and had. Particularly akin to the more recent vote. She instead shook her head, and squeezed me a little tighter. "But enough about me...! I want to talk about you," she decided.

"I'm taken," I warned her.

Oplar nearly tripped. I had to stand firm as the heavier woman leaned on me and guffawed, then burst out laughing as she stood back up. "Indeed you are!" she shouted happily.

I let her cling to me, as if her laughter was about to send her to her knees, and I wondered how heavy she actually were. I had actually needed to firm my footing, and strain a little, as to keep her upright just now.

She continued to laugh, until they turned into heavy giggles, which then turned into deep wheezes and huffs. "Ah... that was great. I'm going to enjoy you, Renn, I really am," she said.

"Vim doesn't like to share, but he begrudgingly allows it sometimes," I said.

Oplar made a noise, then went right back to laughing. "Does he now! That's good to know!"

Smiling at her, I enjoyed not just her boisterous attitude... but how touchy-feely she was. Brandy had been like her, but had only on a few times actually wrapped me in a hug or done what Oplar was doing. Landi had been similar, a little, but it had seemed she had always been scheming something... though half the time it felt like it was something silly, and of no consequence... but Oplar on the other hand...

Well...

She seemed to be just enjoying the moment. Which somehow made her personality all the more lovely.

Plus I kind of liked the way she thought... not so much about Vim's supposed interference with her search for stories, but rather... well...

Stuff like her comment about children. Her being able to think in such a way told me she and I were going to be good friends.

“What would you like to know about me?” I asked her as she calmed down a little.

“Ah! Everything! But... for now I’d like to know something a little silly, that you might find weird,” Oplar said.

“Hm...?” We slowed a bit, and eventually came to a stop near another path. One that led to more graves.

Although we had stopped, Oplar kept her arm around me... and she coughed and nodded. “Well... uh... you wouldn’t happen to have a brother, or anything would you? One who needs a wife?” she then asked.

I blinked, and couldn’t help but smile... but kept myself from laughing, even though I kind of wanted to.

She had asked so seriously, after all. Just as seriously as Elisabeth had asked, not too long ago. “My brothers are all dead. I’m sorry,” I said.

Well I wasn’t sorry, but she didn’t need to know that. For as much as I’d like to help Oplar, I’d never insult her by trying to set her up with one of my family members. She didn’t deserve such a thing... and they wouldn’t have deserved her, either.

“Ah... I see. The others had mentioned you had told them your kin were all gone, but...” she shrugged, smiling a little.

“So you’re looking for a mate too?” I asked, thinking of Landi.

“Aye. Have been for awhile now. As you know, I’m a bear... and well... lotta’ the men in the Society are either just not my type, or simply won’t entertain the idea of having me... so,” she shrugged again as we returned to walking.

Hm... “Are there no other bears?” I asked.

“None I know of,” she said.

“My father had a friend. He’d been a bear... but I’m not sure whatever happened to him,” I said.

“Oh...? Remember his name?” Oplar asked.

I shook my head. “I never got to learn it. I never met him, personally,” I said. I didn’t mention that such a thing had not only been intentional on my part, but a blessing. If that man had been a friend of such a bastard then... well...

He was likely not worth knowing.

“Huh... You came from the north, right? Just how far north?” Oplar asked.

“Well... from Ruvindale it'd take me several months to get there. You head north, but then west a bit,” I said.

“Oh. Wow. That's farther than I thought,” she said as she thought of it.

I nodded. That had been the point. I had run as far from that place as I could.

Oplar grabbed my shoulder, gave it a squeeze... then released me. For the first time in a moment we weren't touching as she stepped away, and crossed her arms before me.

I studied the bear, and noticed for the first time that she had a few scars beneath her right eye. Scattered around her cheekbone. They were tiny little marks, but thanks to the angle of the sun they were now readily visible.

“I'll be honest, Renn... This vote worries me,” she then said.

Although a little surprised by such a massive leap in topics, I nodded... and was glad to hear it. I had wanted to know her opinion on it but hadn't known how to ask.

“It worries me too. Particularly so because Vim doesn’t seem to be, at all,” I said.

“Vim’s like that. He’s the kind of man that even if they did vote to banish him completely... he’d likely not even blink. He might even still keep protecting most of us, at least those who ask him to. But it’s not really his outcome that worries me,” she said.

I frowned, and wondered if she was right. Sharp had also mentioned offhandedly that if Vim got removed as protector, or outright banished, she’d follow him... so maybe Oplar was on to something. Especially since Vim would likely keep protecting people all the same.

What did, or would happen, if they actually voted to remove him as protector...? Would that mean he'd no longer be a part of the Society at all? Or would he just lose his status?

“If not the outcome of the vote... what worries you?” I asked, trying not to let my mind wander too much.

“The discontent that birthed it. Whether Vim, or anyone else, wants to admit it or not... the fact is that there are many in the Society who are not happy. There are those who feel slighted, abandoned... those who are afraid, those who desire more... There are those like Lilly, and then there are those like Rapti. Basically... our Society is fractured. Divided,” she said.

“Hasn’t it always been?” I asked.

She nodded. "Aye, it has... but that was when there were enough of us to not matter. You could be anywhere on the board of desires, wants, or beliefs... and you weren't alone. You had many who would and did stand alongside you. Now though...? We're so few that there are many who are quite literally alone. Those who have no such allies or friends to share in their grievances, and as such feel even more as if the Society isn't catering to their needs," Oplar said.

My left ear fluttered as I thought of the many that I could see being used as such examples of such people. Like Landi, the Clothed Woman, or even someone like Sharp. Although she lived here, amongst many, she was practically alone. Her only real friend was Ursula and even they had their differences.

Oplar was right. Verily so.

"You know what I mean," she said, likely noticing my thoughts.

I slowly nodded. "I do... I've thought of the same thing myself, especially lately," I said.

"You feel alone?" she asked.

"Oh. No... not that. I have Vim, even if I was alone. I just meant I've also noticed there are many who are, although members of the Society... to a point also not," I explained.

"You do have Vim," Oplar said with a smirk.

I shifted, but didn't argue or let her tiny little teasing comment bother me. It was the truth after all.

Even if the whole of the Society abandoned me... as long as I had him, I wasn't too worried.

Plus it wasn't as if I was some outcast myself. Even those who had banished me, like Crane and those in Lumen, I was on relatively good terms with. Herra had voted to not let me live amongst her, yet we had grown closer before separating back at her family.

"I personally think it's not something any of us can fix, though, Oplar. The only method that would possibly work is to either find a bunch more members, or to force everyone to live together. As to form families, and bonds between them. One is obviously... impossible... while the other would likely just make it worse," I said.

Oplar nodded and sighed. "That's true. And the few locations with enough members to have such integration anymore have all but shut themselves off from the rest of us," she said.

"Who do you mean?" I asked.

"There are those like Tor's village, or the Summit. They have the most members of any location... some of them mixed very well, too, with lots of bloodlines and even with humans. Yet one won't let anyone with a drop of predator blood in their veins in, and the others are either stuck in their religions or cultures to such a degree no one would want to go to them even if they could," Oplar said.

I frowned. "The Summit?"

“It’s a village up north a little. We’ll be heading to it after we leave here, unless Vim plans to go to the Keep first. The Summit has banished Vim, but they actually have a request for him so he can go there,” Oplar said.

Oh! That village. Vim had mentioned it before... in fact he had planned to let me visit it while he stayed at a distance, as to check on them and...

“They have a request for him?” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s why I don’t care for them much. They won’t let him in, yet are always crying out for help whenever they get the chance,” she said.

My tail shifted as I nodded. I agreed with that, completely. “And Vim simply accepting it, as if it was normal,” I said.

“Hm...? Well that’s his job isn’t it?” Oplar asked.

I nodded, but didn’t tell her my true thoughts of the matter. I’d decided to not let anyone know, not yet, my personal feelings concerning their... abuse of his kindness.

“Oh! Let’s continue this later, Renn, I see Abel. He’s been avoiding me, and I want to hear his thoughts on the vote,” Oplar turned and hurried for one of the doors that led back into the Crypt.

Watching her hurry off, I felt slightly abandoned. She sure did change focus real fast. It felt like she was always in a hurry.

Although left behind, I wasn't insulted. I knew Vim planned on us leaving at any moment. We had been planning to leave the day before, but he had wanted to let Oplar spend a few days resting and catching up with everyone... since she had letters for them, they also wanted to give everyone chances to write responses too and...

As Oplar entered the building, I noticed a new target of interest for myself. I stepped forward, and went to a different door. One that led to the eastern side of the building, where the church laid.

Tapping on one of the windows, I got Frett's attention before heading to the door. Entering the Crypt, I shut the door behind me and stepped over to Frett... who smiled quietly at me.

Right. Although she had spoken the other day, in favor of Vim's continued responsibilities... she'd returned to being mute.

"I know you're getting ready to go pray, so I'll not keep you long. I just wanted to ask if I could write you letters after I leave, Frett," I asked her.

Frett blinked, and although she didn't frown... she didn't smile either.

Was that a no...?

“I know that you... won’t be able to respond. But that’s okay. I’m willing to wait until your moment of silence has passed for a response. Or would I just be a bother?” I asked.

Frett finally smiled, and did so in a way that told me it was okay.

Relaxing, I smiled and nodded back.

So it hadn’t been a bother that I’d send her letters, but rather she had simply not wanted to respond and break her vow.

The written word was as loud as the spoken one, after all.

“Okay. Thank you Frett,” I said as I nodded again.

She gave me the tiniest of nods ever, one that told me she had done so without meaning to, and then stepped away as to return to walking down the hallway. She headed for the church, quietly.

Watching her go, I sighed and wondered what it would be like to take such a vow.

I mean... it wasn't too unrealistic of a thought for me. I'd gone years and years alone. Especially before Nory and after the siblings. Yet although I had been alone, I had still spoken. Especially when traveling through human towns... And even when completely alone, I was rarely that silent.

I hummed. I talked to myself. I even sang sometimes.

Yet back then... could I have done it? Stayed silent? For years? Without a sound...?

Yes.

Likely.

Maybe.

Today though...?

The mere idea of not talking right now was almost an impossibility to me. And not just because I had so many things I wanted to ask, and say, to those around me.

How hard would it be to not say anything to Vim...? For extended periods?

Sometimes I couldn't contain myself. There were times I blurted out something the moment he came into view. As if I was some child or lost puppy, unable to contain my excitement when I saw him.

Crossing my arms, similar to the way Oplar did earlier, I tried to imagine it... as the man in question rounded the corner in front of me.

He noticed me, and tilted his head as he smiled at me. He must have just passed Frett, considering where he had come from. I wonder if he had heard me talking to her earlier, and thus why he was here now. He might have been in the church then.

As he approached... I wondered if this was the world's way of giving me a chance to find out if I could do it or not.

Vim approached me... and came to a stop a few feet away.

Keeping my arms crossed, I stared up into his eyes... and knew my tail and ears were giving my thoughts away. My tail especially was wiggling around rather fiercely right now.

In a certain perspective... my tail alone had made me fail in my attempt. It may not be able to speak, or make much sound even when it swooshed and moved quickly... but...

It spoke all the same. It was my voice... especially to Vim's eyes.

Still I kept my silence... and oddly, so did he.

Neither of us said anything for a long moment, and then Vim smirked at me... and simply nodded as he stepped away.

Without a word, Vim stepped around me and headed down the hall... leaving me be.

For a tiny moment I had to bite the inside of my cheek, as to stop myself from saying anything. After a few moments I turned, to look over my shoulder at him. Vim reached the end of the hall, and then promptly turned a corner... disappearing from view.

Releasing a tiny pent up breath, I sighed and felt ridiculous.

"That was hard," I admitted.

Chapter 268 To Make a Bandage

The smell of the freshly made bandages was strong. It made Sharp's room smell of medicine.

Better than the incense burning throughout the rest of the church, at least.

"Renn helped me a lot. She not only helped me gather them all, she spent half the day with me yesterday too. Surprisingly... she seemed to kind of know the process already, without being told. Poor thing has had to make bandages before," Sharp said as she slowly spun the spool of bandages. She was winding it up, and it was several feet thick.

It was one of half a dozen similar spools. Each likely lasted her months if not a year or more. Especially since she only used the bandages as covering, not to actually tend wounds. Plus I knew she didn't put them on every day. The only reason she was putting them on so often lately was because we were here. It made the place lively. Under normal circumstances, Sharp likely went many days without ever talking to anyone else here. Maybe even rarely leaving her room or that house full of insects.

Still I was glad to see that her supply wasn't just suitable, but stocked to a degree that told me the plants and the process I had taught her had been worth it. Though... I knew from experience that it took many days of hard work, collecting those herbs and carefully tearing and peeling them in a way to make the plant fibers suitable for use. She and Renn had likely only made a few dozen feet of bandages at best, even with two days of work. A day to gather the plants. A week for them to properly dry and flatten, a day to work them into shape.

Hard work just so Sharp could feel comfortable enough to walk around without worry.

Stepping over to one of the spools, I reached out and tapped it lightly. It creaked, but didn't spin much.

The bandages felt dry, but even with a slight tap I could feel the herb's ointment that they left on my skin. It made my fingertip tingle a little... but not because the ointment was that potent.

It was that very ointment those plants released when prepared properly that allowed Sharp to utilize the bandages in the way she did. Other cloth, felt, or leather just tore and ripped. Certain quality silks lasted a little longer brushing against her skin... but...

Rubbing my fingers together, I felt the slight burning sensation of skin healing as if from a burn.

Like always my body resisted even that which was supposed to help.

“She’s a good person. Even if she’s started to consider touching me,” Sharp said with a mumble.

“Has she?” I asked. I’ll need to make another comment again to her, to have her not do so.

Renn would likely survive such wounds... but not only did I not wish to see her in such pain, I also didn’t want to see Sharp weep. The abrasive woman had a very fragile heart when it came to hurting friends.

She nodded. “Likely thanks to Oplar always trying to when she sees me. She’s not tried yet... but you can see the idea tugging at her sometimes,” Sharp said.

I smiled and nodded. “Yes. Her tail gives such things away.”

“It does,” Sharp agreed.

Stepping away from the spool, I sighed as I looked around her room. It was honestly... a little...

Well...

Girly.

Sharp had lots of pillows, stuffed animals, and other things scattered all over. Not on her bed, of course, since she couldn't touch such things easily... but she had many shelves and tables. And they were all proudly displaying her hidden heart, which she never showed anyone else... at least not willingly.

Although it was funny that such a sharp tongued woman had such a childish and gentle side... it was also very sad, in its own way.

So many in the Society thought Sharp was a cruel and heartless woman. It has always bothered me that so many misunderstood her... but it wasn't my place to correct such a thing. Especially since she herself was the reason for it.

Sharp didn't like people knowing.

Like me, she pretended to be something else... as to keep the peace.

"Did you enjoy the book?" I asked her.

"I did. I copied several chapters and passages that I enjoyed the most, as to read them again until another copy makes its way here," Sharp said with a point to one of the desks. I couldn't make out any papers or books upon it, thanks to all the crafting supplies.

Sharp finished with the spool, and then turned to glare at me. I smiled back at her, and she scoffed. She shook her head as she went to sit in a chair.

Although another chair was nearby, I remained standing.

It was far too thin for me to risk sitting down upon.

"I hear you're not worried about the vote at all," Sharp said as she got comfortable.

"Should I be?" I asked.

"Feh. If they're stupid enough to vote against you then good riddance," Sharp said.

I didn't want to agree with that so I didn't nod or even blink.

"You might want to have a conversation with Renn about it, however," Sharp then warned.

"Hm? Yes... she might vote against me just so she could keep me for herself," I said with a smile.

“It’s scary that I could see her actually doing that, yes. But no... Renn seems to be rather upset with it. Her tail twitched mightily when she sat with all of us the other night, talking about it,” she said.

“She sees it as a betrayal. She’ll get over it,” I said.

“Do you honestly believe so?” Sharp asked.

Shifting, I shrugged. Honestly... I didn’t mind either way.

The fact she got so protective of me was rather humbling. I kind of enjoyed seeing her get so upset over it...

But Sharp was right.

It wasn’t good. We’ve lost many to such anger. To such disappointment. Though not over me, usually it happened when it concerned other members.

Plus I needed her to care for them. Or well...

I wanted her to, at least.

I needed her to... in case I ever stopped.

“You leave tomorrow,” Sharp then said, letting me drop the conversation.

“Tonight actually,” I said. It was why I was here talking to her, in her room. To say goodbye and give my last report to the de facto leader here.

Or well... that and also because she had asked for me. She had sent Renn to get me. So she definitely had something else to bring up... though I wasn't sure if she had said it yet or not.

“Tonight...?” she then asked.

I pointed upward, to the ceiling.

“Ah. Right... the full moon,” Sharp nodded, understanding.

Yes. Enough light for us to traverse even these wooded forests.

“So all requests fulfilled. Ursula feels a little better, though I'm not sure any progress was actually made... Tim's been dealt with, Frett's vow of silence won't last long considering she still talks every so often... what else did you do?” Sharp asked me.

"I fixed the roof and some statues," I pointed out.

She grinned and nodded. "Ah. You did..."

Plus I had helped teach her how to make proper insect cages, and glass. But I didn't remind her of it. She had omitted them on purpose. She'd already thanked me and Renn... there was nothing else to say concerning them.

Sharp shifted, and glanced to one of the spools. One connected to the wall near her bed.

"Anything I can do for you, Sharp?" I asked the suddenly unsure woman.

"I don't know... I feel like I'm supposed to say or do something, but I'm not sure what it is," she said softly.

I frowned at her confession... and wondered what it was she felt.

Unease? Anxiety? Such a rarity for her... especially so for her to admit to it in front of me.

For a small moment I tried to think of all that has happened, and been said, since we had arrived. Had I missed something? Was there another issue? Had I made mistake?

Had Renn...? As far as I could remember all Renn had said concerning Sharp to me was that she enjoyed her friendship. That she was a mix of Merit and the Clothed Woman, in her eyes.

An apt description really. More than Renn likely realized.

And the few times I'd been there when they had been together, like when we had made the glass cages, there hadn't been anything too odd said between them. The two had just been... happy. Friends.

"Don't look so worried Vim... It's probably nothing," she said.

"You sure?" I asked her.

"No... but I'm not sure what to say about it. Maybe I just don't want you to take Renn away so quickly?" Sharp wondered as she crossed her arms.

I sighed. "You'd have my full support if you could find a way to keep her here for awhile," I said.

Sharp snickered at me. "I believe it! Though... I bet you'd come running back as fast as possible, once you got lonely... I wonder how long it'd take you," Sharp said.

Probably not long at all.

She then sighed and shook her head. "I don't know what Rapti's thinking, Vim. Her fascination with her gods, I understood that. It made sense, considering her life and upbringing. But this...? Claiming you're one too?" Sharp brought forth the reason she had asked me to her room, finally.

"Everyone is entitled to their opinions," I said simply.

Sharp scoffed at me. "Please Vim. Should we take in the opinions of the beasts and bugs too while we're at it?" she asked.

Well...

Shaking her head at me, and likely the thoughts she had read on my face, she gestured lightly with a point. "They're going to try and use Renn against you, Vim. Don't let them," she warned me.

Ah... I nodded. "I know, Sharp. But she won't be the only one. It won't take long for Yangli to be brought up and focused on instead," I said.

"Yangli... speaking of him, is he dead?" she asked.

“Do you really want to know?” I asked her back.

Sharp held my gaze for a moment, then sighed and shook her head. “No. I guess not.”

I smiled and nodded and stepped away from the wall, and the spools of bandages hung upon it.

“This isn’t the first time the Society has voted against me, Sharp. Nor will it be the last. I’m not worried. I might have to... adjust a little, or perform some deed or action, or maybe change my rules a little... but that’ll be all,” I said.

“That confidence is what bugs people, Vim. It’s why they’re voting against you. You speak as if you can see the future,” she told me.

“History repeats itself... whether I want it to or not,” I said.

“Hmph,” she didn’t agree, of course, but kept her reservations to herself.

“Anything I’ve forgotten Sharp? Before I leave?” I asked again.

“No. We’ll be fine until you return... or until I see you again in Telmik, during the vote,” she said.

Tilting my head at her, and the sudden smirk she wore, I realized she may very well vote against me.

Interesting.

“By then Renn might be too much for me to handle, so I’ll probably ask for help,” I said.

Sharp’s smirk turned into a wry smile. “I bet! I look forward to it, honestly... Though if you two do separate, and you break her poor heart, just send her my way. I’ll accept her here,” sharp gently said.

Although humbled and glad to hear that Renn had once again made a very good friend... I had no choice but to realize, and admit, once again that no one else was taking my relationship with Renn seriously.

Sharp had just been completely honest. She expected me to lose interest in Renn.

I wonder why so many thought so. I’d understand it if I made a habit of mingling with members often, but...

I never did. The only member anyone would ever be able to honestly say I had ever mingled with was Celine... and she had been the one to shun me.

If anything I should be the one they all worried about, considering Renn’s personality.

Stepping over to the door, I tapped the heavy thing with a finger. The wood was as thick as my arm. Something that would have been cumbersome for a human. "Goodbye Sharp," I said.

"Hmph. Ignoring my statement isn't very manly, Vim."

"On the contrary. I took your comment to heart. I'll remember it for when she breaks my heart instead, and when I come to weep in your arms," I said.

Sharp tilted her head at me as I opened the door and smirked at her.

She sighed and shook her head as I stepped out of the room. I shut the door behind me, and glanced both ways in the hallway.

The hallway was oddly quiet. It wasn't the early morning anymore; people should be out and about... but...

It was also not a day of prayer. So maybe people were sleeping in and being lazy. There was likely many who were still exhausted from all the commotion lately. Between the fiasco with Tim to the meetings concerning my fate, they've been busy talking even late into the night. Sometimes all together in the same room, other times in small groups of two or three scattered throughout the Crypt.

Plus Oplar was here now. She was a loud woman. The type to always draw people into conversations and gossip. She'd talk to you until the morning sun if you weren't careful.

This place would do well for us to leave. If anything just to let them return to their peace and quiet.

I went to walk around for a moment, with no real goal or reason. I've already talked to everyone. I had even talked to that human we had brought, Elisabeth. She was happy here, and was already acting as if she'd been here her whole life.

There were no more requests. No more concerns. No more drama.

Nothing more needed to be said. At least, nothing I wanted to say or hear. I knew many here wanted to talk to me about the vote, but...

Well...

I didn't want to talk about it.

Let them come to their own conclusions. I'll deal with it later.

It took about half an hour to walk around the whole Crypt. In that time I passed, or simply saw at a distance, most of the inhabitants here. Some spoke to me, others didn't even notice me as I walked past them in their rooms or sitting at tables.

The Crypt was fine. It would be.

Hopefully we would be too.

Once I rounded the same corner for the second time since I started walking around, I realized something important.

I'd not seen, or heard, Renn.

It'd make sense if I'd not seen anyone else... but I had seen even Ursula and Oplar earlier. The two had been walking through the courtyard together.

Yet no Renn...

I knew that Renn had been spending some time alone outside. In front of all the graves... but I hadn't seen her out there either. I'd walked past several windows that looked out to most of those cemeteries and flower patches. Though she might have been hidden behind one of the many larger monuments or statues...

I paused a moment, and then headed for the nearest stairwell.

Heading to our room, I slowed a little as I approached the door.

She was in the room... but not asleep. She was doing something. I heard the sound of something moving and...

Packing maybe...? I had thought she had already done so earlier, though.

Opening the door, I found Renn on the bed. She sat up a little more, and smiled at the sight of me.

She was combing her tail.

"Is Sharp okay?" Renn asked as I shut the door behind me.

"Yes. She simply wanted to give me a warning," I said. And to tell me that Renn could be sent here once I was done loving her, I suppose.

"Hm... Is she considered the leader here Vim?" Renn asked.

I nodded. "She is. Abel is the one they go to for guidance... especially the spiritual kind, but Sharp is the strongest and oldest here. She's the one they go to when there's real problems to be handled," I said.

“Why is it that most of our oldest and strongest members seem to be women?” she asked as I stepped over to grab one of the chairs, as to sit and talk wit her.

“There are just as many men who are as old and strong... but they’re like Tor or Lawrence. Unable, or unwilling, to step outside their comfort zones,” I said.

“Like you,” she said simply.

Was I the same...? “Possibly,” I admitted.

She smirked at me and went to brushing her tail again. The comb I had made for her sounded a little odd as she ran it along her tail.

It was a smooth sound, especially since she did it so slowly. “Plus... most non-human men were too influenced by their emotions and desires. A man without restraint is hard pressed to live long in this world, for many reasons,” I said as I sat down near the bed.

“Hm...” Renn hummed at me as she paused in her combing, as to stare at me.

I enjoyed her gaze for a moment, and then smiled and shrugged. “What is it?” I asked, waiting for her strange thoughts to be shared.

“You too suffer those outburst. Those moments. Of emotion. I don’t blame you, but it’s a good thing you don’t succumb to them often I think,” she said.

Oh...? “You mean Tim,” I said, understanding.

She nodded.

“I get emotional often, Renn,” I told her.

“I know. But that was the first time I’d ever seen you so upset,” she said.

Was it...?

I had gotten upset over Ruvindale. Over Nebl’s death, or rather the lack of motivation over his supposed death. In Lumen. Landi. Miss Beak.

Or was she not speaking of pure emotion, but instead anger and hate? If so...

Maybe... But I’d argue I had been just as angry, if not more so, over Nebl’s family failing him. Granted, I hadn’t acted on that anger. I’d not harm, or even say anything to them over it, but...

“What are you thinking, Vim?” Renn asked softly.

I hesitated, since I really didn’t want to say it aloud... and as always, my first instinct was to not say the truth. To never say aloud my true thoughts, or emotions.

Yet not only had I just asked her the same, basically, just now... this was also Renn I was talking to.

I wanted to be open with her. At least about stuff like this.

“I was angry, Renn. Over hearing, and seeing, Tim act so callous... but I’d honestly not been that upset. I had been more bothered before. Over stuff like what happened at the Smithy. I’d been furious then,” I told her.

She frowned at me and tilted her head. Her tail, which was in her lap, coiled and tapped her thigh... telling me she was pondering my words deeply.

Renn thought about my statement for a bit, and then nodded. “You mean Nebl. Him being trapped in the mine... and his family’s lack of motivation to save him,” she said.

I nodded.

Her ear fluttered, and I half expected her to sigh at me. She didn’t though, and instead smiled at me. “You had been angry. I hadn’t realized it had bothered you that deeply, however,” she said.

“It had. Deeply so.”

“I can see that now. Does... Does that mean you judge a person’s inaction greater than their actions, Vim?” she asked me.

I sat up a little straighter at the question, and felt a little worried over it.

Was she really going to be like Miss Beak then? That was the kind of question she would have asked me.

“Yes. I don’t fault those who are scared... I don’t hate those incapable of facing a dangerous terror... but Nebl had not been in danger in such a way. There was no great threat. No monster. No Monarch. No God. He had simply been buried under a little bit of dirt. They hadn’t even thought of trying to save him. Not a single handful of dirt had been moved,” I told her.

Her tail thumped her thigh again as she studied me. Her smile remained on her face, but I could tell it had grown a little softer. A little more somber. “Why then did you not kill me on sight Vim? Back when I had come to bring you news of my banishment, and Amber’s death?” she asked softly.

“Renn, you had acted. You had not just risked their ire to try and save Amber, but had suffered for it. You had been banished from a place you had planned to make a home, just in an effort to attempt at saving someone’s life. That’s genuinely the opposite of what Nebl’s family did,” I said.

Renn perked up, her ears and tail going still as her eyes widened and her pupils contracted. They became more cat-like as she fixated on me.

“What...? You thought otherwise?” I asked her.

“I... I hadn’t looked at it like that. I had simply been looking at it from the perspective that my presence had brought forth death and destruction,” she said softly.

I smirked at her. “Really...? Then why did you think I so quickly trusted you, Renn? You had already proven yourself to me by trying to save Amber, and accepting your fate. Your willingness to accept the banishment, and any punishment I’d deal to you in turn, proved to me you were someone trustworthy and suitable for the Society. Or did you just think I was affable or something?” I asked her.

“Well...” she smirked at me in a shy way, telling me she had indeed simply thought I was being kind or indifferent to it back then.

Hm... “Maybe that’s one of the reasons I fell for you, too, now that I think about it,” I said as I crossed my arms and thought of it.

“Oh...? Really?”

“Possibly. That and others. Same with Lumen, and the Bell Church. You weep when you get banished, but you accept it... even if it isn’t justified. Maybe it’s because we’re so similar in that regard,” I said.

“Although glad to hear of another reason you love me, I’m not sure if I should be happy or not about it. We should not be so happy with being doormats for others, Vim,” Renn said softly.

I smirked and nodded. That was true.

“I do enjoy talking about lovey-dovey stuff Vim... but can I ask something, since we’re on this topic?” Renn then asked.

“Hm?”

“Would you really accept it? If the Society voted to remove you as Protector... or even outright banish you?” she asked.

“Yes. If that would be their will. However, if there were others who came to me and asked for help from me still... I would still give it. My help for the Society is not a shackle of slavery, Renn. I choose to do this because it’s what I feel is both right, and my responsibility. Yes, I made a contract with Celine and thus the Society... but I had signed it. I had even written most those rules myself. No one forced me. No one can, even if they wanted to,” I said.

Renn kept my gaze, but she sighed and nodded. “Right...”

“That upsets you,” I said, not asked.

She nodded again. "Verily... but I'm not sure if I should try to change your opinion, or even if your belief is wrong. If anything... it means you're that good of a man. To be so gentle to those who so readily prove they don't deserve it. I'll... need to ponder it. A lot," she said.

Shifting a little, I smiled at the woman who now looked disturbed and worried. As if she had just been told bad news. "Take your time. You got two years until the vote," I told her.

"That's what worries me. Today I'd vote in your favor... but what if I grow so upset at them, that I vote in their favor? Just out of spite? To separate you from them?" she asked me.

"Well... I'd not be very pleased to watch you vote in such a way, but I'd respect it. I'd ask you not to condemn them over their misguided opinions, but..." I shrugged, since I wasn't sure how to properly express my current thoughts and emotions about what she had just revealed to me.

It was even harder to properly make sense of the weird feeling of joy over it too. I found myself really liking the idea of her being so possessive in such a way.

It was something my parents would have done. To vote in such a form. To use the system their supposed enemies created against them, in such a way.

Such a thought made me smile.

Renn sighed and went to comb her tail again. This time though she did it much faster, as if annoyed now. "I have a lot to think about," she said.

“Hm... want more to think about?” I asked her.

She glanced at me and nodded, accepting it happily.

“If I do get banished... what do I do with myself then? Even if a few still want me to protect and help them, it won’t be enough to take up all my time. I’ll get bored again,” I said.

Renn coughed, and then went to laughing. “What a silly worry!” she said happily between her giggles.

“It’s worse than you think, Renn. Last time I got bored I joined the Society. Think about that. Boredom for me brings forth great changes, not just for me but the world...” I shook my head as I tried to think what I’d do next.

She continued to giggle happily, her tail left her hands and lap as to sway and slap the bed alongside her jubilant joy. “Indeed...! Still... didn’t you say you spent a long time on some islands? Weren’t you alone? Why didn’t you get bored then?” she asked as she calmed down.

“I had gotten bored. That’s why I came back here. I went there originally because I failed... because I made mistakes, and wasn’t able or willing to face the consequences of my actions. Plus I ended up finding it peaceful. And I wasn’t alone, entirely. My friends visited occasionally,” I said.

“Huh...? Which friends?” she asked.

“The giant tortoise. She visited a few times. She brought a few others a couple times, too,” I said.

“What’s her name?” Renn asked.

“She doesn’t have one. She doesn’t comprehend the concept of them,” I said.

Renn frowned but nodded, as if understanding.

“Though admittedly... they had only visited a few times. A handful of days amongst centuries,” I said as I thought about it.

Renn sighed at me.

For a moment we sat in silence as Renn grumbled a little and reached out to grab her tail. It seemed to only half cooperate as she put it back on her lap, and went back to brushing it.

Interesting. She could control it, yet it still twitched and moved from emotion.

Made me want to see what it did when we kissed. I hadn’t gotten to see last time, since she had been on my shoulders. Did it go still? Did it coil and twist? Did it puff up a little like it does when she was distressed?

“Those islands... are they near the others?” she asked.

“Others?”

“The other Society members. The ones you said that left to distant lands,” she clarified.

“Oh. No. They’re past the ice. That’s a different ocean,” I said.

“Hm...” she nodded.

“I was at those islands before the Society, Renn,” I reminded her.

“Ah. Yes. I know. I was just wondering if maybe you found the place they went to while you were there, so told them about it,” she clarified.

That made sense.

Her mind sure did work in odd ways. Of all things to think of, concerning this conversation, she chose them?

“We’re leaving tonight, right?” she then asked.

“I’d like to yes.”

“So... no bed for a while,” she said softly.

I nodded. Yes. Likely. The Summit would have a place for us to sleep together, but the Keep wasn’t somewhere I wanted to...

Or... well...

I tilted my head and debated it. Should I just... accept and allow it? I mean really... was it really that bad? Was it so wrong?

“Vim...?” Renn asked for my thoughts, gently.

“Debating. The next location is a place that I instinctively chose to not have us sleep together at. Yet at the same time... I’ve come to accept it. If you’re already being accused and being used as a tool against me, what harm is there in allowing our relationship to be out in the open? There’s no point hiding what they already know,” I said.

“Right...!” Renn nodded quickly.

“Basically I need to decide if I really wish to draw any lines or not,” I said with a sigh.

“You already have lines, Vim. More than I like, to be honest. But you just said it yourself... they’re using me anyway as a means to claim you’re unfit, so why should we hide or obscure ourselves?” she asked.

“Because they can’t hurt me, Renn. But they can hurt you,” I said simply.

Renn’s left ear fluttered and she opened her mouth to say something, but stopped herself. “Wait...” she mumbled as she thought about my word’s meaning.

I nodded. “I’ve long decided to accept you, Renn. To accept my feelings for you. So I’d not be so cruel as to hide our relationship just because there would be those in the Society would voice concerns over it. It’s not their voices, or their votes, I fear. It’s the actions of those not just willing, but capable. There are many in the Society who haven’t liked me for a long time... and not a few of them are strong. Several would be able to hurt you, even kill you, if they put their mind to it,” I told her.

“And they would, because they can’t hurt you,” she said as she understood.

I nodded. “A sad reality I must address. I too have a lot to think about,” I said.

She sighed. "I figured I'd be sad and in danger by being with you, occasionally, but I never considered I'd be in danger from our own people," she said.

"Then that's my fault. I should have made it more clear there are many in the Society who I'd not consider friends or allies at all... I mean... really Renn... have you not noticed how I always linger and keep an eye on you every time we visit a new location? At least at certain ones?" I asked her.

"I have... but I hadn't realized it was that big of a concern for you. You really did worry over Landi that much then?" she asked.

"She put a blade to your throat, Renn," I said softly.

"She hadn't meant it, Vim. She'd not have hurt me," she said.

Possibly. But I was not going to be her life over such faith. Let alone one corrupted by a Monarch's Heart.

Renn took a deep breath, brushed her tail one last time, and then nodded with a smile at it... as if it was now in perfect condition, without flaw.

Honestly I did find her tail adorable, but I wasn't really sure yet if I could tell if it was ever really... out of place or not. Sometimes I noticed that the hairs on it were a little off, or ruffled, but never to the point it had stood out. Even back in Lumen, during all that chaos and commotion, her tail hadn't looked that bad. And she had broken it. Or well, she hadn't broken it but those fools in the sewers had.

“My sisters had nicer tails, you know? Better colors. Fuller,” she said as she stared at the tail swaying in the air in front of her.

“I’ve seen many tails, Renn. Yours suit you best,” I said.

She tilted her head at me and smirked. “Suits me best.”

“It does. As would any tail you had, to be honest. I’d find anything about you adorable, or sexy, or pretty, or whatever term you’d like to call it,” I said.

Renn’s face got a little redder, but not as much as I’d have expected. “Not sure if I should thank you or grow upset over that,” she said.

I smiled at her. “You need not worry if I find you attractive Renn. That’s the problem. I do. And I’m not sure how to handle it yet,” I said.

“Hmph. You surely don’t act it sometimes. What if you decide to not sleep with me at the next few locations? That means I could end up going months without sharing your bed, if not longer. And you’d not even blink or worry about it. How am I supposed to interpret that?” she asked me.

I noted that although she had a smile and a blush, and sounded happy, she was also being a little serious. This was likely something that had been in the back of her mind since we had brought up the whole sleeping together thing.

Adorable of her.

“I’d understand such a complaint if we actually did something, but all we do is sleep and talk,” I countered her.

Her smile turned into a wry frown, and her blush deepened a little. “Those little talks are very important to me,” she said quickly.

They were to me too.

I took a small breath, and regretted it. Her scent was suddenly very noticeable. “It’ll only take a few weeks to get to the Keep. I’ll see if I can... convince myself to stomach it, by then,” I said.

“Anything I can do to help convince you?” she asked, unbothered.

I smiled at her and shrugged. “Who knows.”

She made a grumbling noise, but didn’t press me on it. Her tail twitched as it slid off the edge of the bed, and I knew it was because she was focused on me. I was close enough it could touch me if she extended it, but she’d only be able to touch my right leg and only with the tails tip.

I of course didn't mind her touch at all... but that was the problem.

I wanted to touch her too.

Just like recently. I had wanted to rub her ears. As if she was some dog or cat on the side of the road.

It was usually not something I minded. Some members even liked it when I was physical with them in such ways. Yet I knew many who weren't. There were many who would not have liked it, or allowed it, at all.

Yet that was the problem.

Renn wouldn't just like it... she wanted it. She wanted me to be more affectionate. It bothered her that I wasn't.

And it bothered me too, honestly... but...

"Vim?"

I blinked and nodded at her. "Hm?"

“You okay?” she asked softly.

“Yeah...? Why?” I glanced around, to make sure all was well.

It was, of course.

“You suddenly looked worried. What had you been thinking about?” she asked.

My inability to control myself around you.

“I made us a tent, by the way,” I told her, changing the topic. Like the coward I was.

“Huh...? Really?” she asked, excited. She even leaned towards me on the bed, looking as if she was about to leap off it to wrap me in a hug.

I nodded. “At the Weavers. Thanks to us heading northward, and the summer ending, rain will be common... and eventually snow. Since you asked for one. I hadn’t planned on actually going to the Summit, so I had planned on rounding it and going another route. One that would have sent us far from any human locations, so it would have been useful. For you at least. Now though you might not get much use for it,” I said.

She frowned at me. “You’re saying we’ll not be taking it, aren’t you,” she said as she understood my meaning.

I nodded. "Oplar hates wasting time. At least between locations. She'll allow a little rest, but she's very... bearish on time," I said.

Renn smiled, but sighed. "Well... I suppose that's fine. Next time," she said.

"Mhm. Next time," I agreed.

She giggled at me, and her tail tapped me with a tiny brush along the knee. "One day we'll go see your islands, Vim. Together, next time," she said.

"Far stretch, Renn. Or are you saying the lack of a tent means you'll now demand a different, more special, gift?" I asked her with a smile.

"Hm...? Not at all. I'm just saying next time... I'll be with you. So all will be well," she said simply.

I gulped as I realized her meaning.

She wasn't just making an offer. She wasn't just teasing me about the tent, or anything else.

She was telling me that she'd make sure I'd not be bored again. That even if I lose the Society... I'd always have her.

I blinked at her, and felt a strange tingle run down my spine. As if it had just been snapped in two.

To be broken by such a soft, gentle, gesture terrified me.

"Mhm. Next time," I agreed.

"Next time," she accepted, nodding gently at me.

"Mhm. Next time," I agreed, repeating myself.

I was too scared to say anything else.

Chapter 269 A Typical Night

"I've only been to the Keep three times. So I'm kind of excited about this," Oplar told me as I poured some of the freshly brewed tea into her cup.

"Just three times?" I asked.

She nodded. "Not many letters ever go there. And they never send any, either. They give theirs to Vim when he visits, uncaring of how long it takes. So it's not a place I get to visit often," she said as I finished filling up her cup.

Hm... I studied the bear for a moment, before stepping away as to put the hot pot onto the rock near the fire.

Once I put the pot down, I glanced around the camp for Vim. The world beyond our little campfire was dark, and not just because it was the dead of night and there were thick dark clouds above us. The forest here was... strangely dark. Somewhat akin to the one Lilly and her family lived in.

Vim wasn't around. He had stepped away a little bit ago, but hadn't said as to why. He had walked far enough away I couldn't hear him, or what he was doing... but he'd been gone long enough to know he hadn't left just to relieve himself or something. There had been a reason for it.

I'd blame Oplar, and our conversations, but the two of us hadn't really been talking about anything too odd or embarrassing lately. We were mostly just exchanging stories. Mostly my own. Of my last few visits in the Society, like at Secca and with Landi. Oplar hadn't heard or known about them yet, so she had been very interested in them.

"I'm sure you know already, since Vim told you, but the Keep is a secretive place. It's on the Societies records, since it's a place of refuge, but as far as I'm aware no one's really ever gone there. Other than me, and of course Vim, I bet only a few people have ever been there," Oplar said as she finished up her first gulp of her tea.

"Oh...? Why's that?" I asked.

“Because of who is there, of course.”

“Hm...?” I tilted my head at her and wondered what she meant.

Was there another Monarch there or something?

“Wait... you don’t know...?” Oplar noticed my confusion.

I shook my head. “No...? Is it someone dangerous or something?” I asked. Maybe it was someone like Lilly.

She frowned at me, and thought for a moment. Then she sighed. “Well... I’d assume it’s fine, since he’s taking you there. But just in case he has other plans, I’ll keep mum about it,” she decided.

“That’s okay. I like surprises,” I said.

Oplar was about to take a drink, but had to stop as she laughed. “Do ya’ now?” she asked happily.

I nodded, and went to sit down on the stump I’d been using as a chair. It wasn’t very comfortable, since it wasn’t a stump from an axe or saw but a broken tree. So I had placed one of the bags on it to use as something of a pillow. I used the bag full of my clothes.

“Interesting! Though that must make Vim kind of boring for you. He’s surprising to the world, but he’s not very shocking himself,” she said.

Really...? Personally I found myself being surprised by Vim all the time. It was the little things, really. Like the comb he had made me. Or him accepting Hark, that human baby, when I had expected him not to.

“You disagree?” Oplar asked, likely noticing my thoughts.

“Yes and no. Vim is... boring. I admit. He’s never startled or anything. It takes me whole days of effort, thought and planning, to surprise him sometimes. And even then all he does is raise an eyebrow or blink... but he also often shocks me enough to make me shiver,” I said.

“Hm... does that mean he doesn’t even get all emotional even when you flirt? He smirks and laughs, I’ve seen him do that often enough,” Oplar asked.

“Oh he does. Just not to the level I’d like him to, I think,” I admitted.

She giggled at me. “Of course.”

What? It was the truth. It was too bad Vim couldn’t get drunk. It’d be interesting to see how he’d act if he was.

The fire crackled, and I followed one of the wisps of ashes that flew up. It was a bright orange for a long moment, before fading into black ash and smoke.

“So Renn... I hear you’re stronger than you look,” Oplar then said.

I shrugged. “Some have said so, I guess,” I said. Lately I’ve not felt very strong at all. Likely thanks to Vim.

“Wonder who’s stronger. Maybe we should start lifting rocks and stuff as we travel, to find out,” she said, amused.

“Rocks...?” I asked.

“Yeah. We’ll each lift rocks, slowly picking up bigger ones. Once we find one that either of us can lift but the other can’t, we’ll know who is stronger,” she said.

Ah... I nodded softly. “If it’s just that I’m okay with doing it, if you’d like,” I offered.

She grinned. “Sounds great!”

Seemed she genuinely wanted to find out. I wonder if it was just because she enjoyed such odd things, or if it was important to her for some reason.

“You met Lilly didn’t you? Did you spar with her?” Oplar then asked, and then took a drink.

I shook my head. “No...? But I’d only met her for a short time,” I said. A few hours were all, really.

“I see. How about Landi?”

I smiled at her. “No. She had been far more concerned with other things,” I said.

“Huh... but maybe that’s because Vim had been there,” she said as she pondered it.

“Yeah, she doesn’t have any intention of trying to mate with Vim,” I said as I nodded.

Oplar laughed, but quickly shook her head. “I didn’t mean that! I meant she was likely worried he’d whack her upside the head if she tried to fight you! But... that’s true isn’t it? Landi has never seemed too keen on trying to bed him, surprisingly. I originally thought it was because she had succeeded long ago, but maybe you’re right. Landi’s always said she’s never done it with him and Vim just outright sighs and shakes his head when I mention it, but maybe they really haven’t. I wonder if it’s just because Vim’s strong? Landi’s proven she doesn’t necessarily have any type or anything, that’s for sure, so that can’t be the reason,” Oplar wondered.

I frowned at her. “I actually asked her about it. Or mentioned it, at least. I don’t think she ever even considered Vim as a possible option. She said she kind of looks at him like a brother or something, so to her it’d be weird,” I said.

“Brother...” Oplar tilted her head, and then nodded. “Yeah... I could see that. That makes sense.”

“Does that mean you’ve fought with Landi before, then?” I asked, trying to change the topic a little. It didn’t necessarily upset me, but I didn’t like the idea of other women thinking of Vim in such a way. It made me jealous, since I’d yet been able to do it myself.

“Twice. I won the first time, but lost the second. I’d have died if not for Sharp,” she said.

“Sharp? Really?” I asked. I wonder when that had happened? That meant they had all been together, or something like it. I wonder when and where...

“Aye. It was my fault really. I took it too far. I said things I shouldn’t have... and well... to be honest Renn, I’m usually a coward. I hate the sight of blood, or death. It makes me woozy. After saying something I shouldn’t have, she hurt me enough to draw blood. Enough blood to make me almost faint. So I hadn’t been able to properly protect myself from her follow up attack. If Sharp hadn’t stepped in at the last moment, Landi would have likely killed me with that blow,” Oplar said, a little too happily.

“You... faint at the sight of blood...?” I asked.

“Aye. Or at least, I can. Doesn’t happen all the way, but if it happens without warning or something then yeah... it can happen,” she nodded.

I shifted, and felt the bumpy stump more acutely so I shifted again as to get comfortable. "I uh... don't understand," I said.

"I know. I'm a predator. A bear. And I'm strong as hell, at least compared to most. But it's the truth. I can't handle carnage, at all," Oplar said with a shrug.

Huh... that was...

Strangely fascinating. I mean, it made sense of course. Many of our members were like her. Skittish and feeble things... but...

Well...

I guess she wasn't any different, was she? Although a bear, a predator, that didn't mean much did it? There were many members who were very strong, yet were just as much cowards as she said she was.

Then there were those like Nann, who technically weren't predators at all. Yet fierce all the same.

"I hear you're rather bold, though. So if anything ever happens, without Vim there to handle it, I hope you'll take care of me, aye?" she raised her cup as she smirked.

"Sure... I'll do my best," I said.

She nodded, glad to hear it and then took another drink.

Interesting indeed.

“How’d you fight Landi then, Oplar?” I asked.

“Well usually it don’t go so far as blood being drawn, you know! I just uh... sadly had a small attitude in my youth. But don’t worry; it’s been thoroughly beaten out of me! Not just by Landi either!” Oplar said proudly.

I wonder who else had been the cause. Lilly maybe? Merit? Sharp?

“So Sharp is stronger than Landi?” I asked. I hadn’t realized Sharp was that dangerous. Or well, she was dangerous, but I hadn’t thought it was in that way.

“Aye. Though I’m not sure who would actually win if the two were to really go at it, I know for a fact Landi doesn’t want to fight her. Which is saying something all on its own, surely,” Oplar said.

I nodded. It was. But something told me it might just be because of Sharp’s peculiar traits.

“Though I have heard Vim’s been training you, right? Must mean you’re probably plenty dangerous yourself by now, I’m sure!” Oplar said.

“Hm... we’ve not been training as often as we should, but yes. He has been,” I said. We’d only trained twice while at the Crypt. And only for a short time in the morning, while everyone else was in the church during their time of prayer.

Vim was odd about us keeping our little sparring sessions secret. But I was okay with it. It meant it’d take many more years to truly learn what he wanted to teach me, but it also made those moments all the more precious.

“Interesting. But in a way, maybe not. Vim used to train a lot of us, supposedly, back in the day. Link once told me he had risen entire armies, though who knows how much of that is legend more than not,” Oplar said.

Oh...? Right. She was based in Telmik. That meant she and those there were very close. “I’ve heard of the armies,” I said.

“Hm. Such an odd thought, isn’t it? We used to supposedly have kingdoms. Armies. Entire cities and nations, even. Telmik used to be ours in its entirety. Now it’s a human capital, hah!” Oplar laughed at the idea, but I didn’t find it very funny.

I didn’t like the idea of humans using and claiming for their own what we had built.

“Lumen used to ours too, I’ve heard. Or at least, the town beneath it,” I said.

“Hm...? No. Not as far as I’m aware. Where’d you hear that?” Oplar asked.

Uh... uh oh. Maybe I misunderstood something Vim had said. “Not sure... I had thought Lumen had been built over another town. One our Society had been involved with, in some form,” I said.

Oplar frowned and shook her head. “Don’t think so...? There was of course a town there, before it sank, but I don’t think it had been ours. There may have been members there, though, of course. We used to be far more. Thousands more, all over the place,” Oplar said.

I nodded, and decided to not bring it up again.

Vim had surely mentioned he had been there many times. Often. Either that meant Oplar didn’t know much of the Societies history, or the history Vim had shared with me at that time hadn’t been of the Societies. He did do that sometimes, without realizing it half the time. Telling me of stuff that pre-dated the Society.

Though there was of course the simply chance that Oplar was mistaken... which was a little odd, really. She seemed to know a lot, and knew a lot of people... Hadn’t she mentioned her parents had been very enthralled by keeping the history of the Society and its members...? That there were even massive books and tomes of such information, written by them?

Odds are she knew far more than she let on. I should be careful then, revealing too much.

Vim often told me secrets. Secrets of not just his own, but of others and of those in the Society. It wasn't my place to share them.

I've always tried not to reveal too much, but with those like Oplar it was strangely hard to figure out what was a secret and what wasn't... though I guess I could blame Vim for that. It wasn't like Vim ever told me what was to be kept confidential. He's only told me a few times not to share certain things, and other times he's told me to share whatever I wanted.

As Oplar took another drink, I went ahead and tried to change the topic a little.

"So... other than Vim, are you the most well traveled in the Society, Oplar?" I asked her.

She tilted her head and smiled as she lowered her cup. "Me? Well... maybe... Meriah genuinely lives on the road. She's never in one place for more than a day or two, per her beliefs. Then there are those like the twins, or Mapple, who are restless... and of course Harold and his wife..." Oplar's voice became a little quieter as she went into thought, thinking of everyone.

It was very interesting to hear names I'd not heard before, or had only heard of recently.

"Honestly there are only a handful of us left, who travel. There's of course a few like Brandy, who travel occasionally for one reason or another, but... yeah... Not many of us anymore, are there?" Oplar then decided to conclude.

I hadn't wanted to hear sad news, so I instead tried to focus on the positive. "Do they all travel everywhere, like you and Vim?" I asked.

“Hm...? Not really... Some do occasionally, for one reason or another, but I’m probably the only one who really goes everywhere anymore. Other than Vim, of course. Most that travel have been staying in the north and west, usually along the coast. The world’s become too violent and dangerous elsewhere, so it makes sense,” Oplar said.

“What about the places that are... hidden...? Like this Summit, or the Keep we’re going to. What’s it mean to be secretive, really?” I asked.

“It’s a remnant rule from back in the day. From the wars. Basically no one is allowed to talk, or leave written proof, of their locations or numbers. So that if something happens... like a letter gets found or something, they’ll not be found and put in danger. But they took it a step farther too. They made a rule that no new members are allowed to go there without first being in the Society for a certain amount of time. That means new members can’t be told about those places until they’ve been vetted basically. The idea was to keep those locations, usually full of the weaker and frailer members, safer in the long run. The problem with it though is that it resulted in half the Society not knowing at all about them, even all these years later, and as such they don’t even know they could go there if they wanted to. It’s a sad situation, but I can’t change it,” Oplar explained.

“Wait... you’re saying there are those that could, if they wanted to, go live there? Yet they don’t simply because they don’t know about it?” I asked.

She nodded. “Basically. There’s a lot more to it though... for instance the Summit is... peculiar. They’re a strange people. Even if more members knew of them, I’m not sure if any would even be able or willing to go live there. I mean Tor’s village is the same? Most don’t know where it is, even though they might know of it... but then you need to live under a Monarch’s rule, and most of the inhabitants there are very mingled with humans too. Makes it a strange and difficult place to live for some, so they never even consider it,” Oplar said.

Oh. Right. Tor...

“Is he cruel? Does living under his rule bring hardship?” I asked.

“Hm? No? But many of us wouldn’t like the idea of living so close to a Monarch. And many more wouldn’t feel comfortable even if they tried. So,” Oplar shrugged, deciding it was obvious and no point to continue talking about it.

Still... It made sense, but...

If Tor didn’t demand any kind of price, nor was cruel... then what was so wrong with it? Or was it just the idea that someone, or something, not too far away at any moment could eat and kill you was enough to make you never consider living under such conditions?

If that was the case, how did so many live amongst humans, or near them? Humans were just as volatile and dangerous, in my perspective.

“Though here soon it’ll probably be you, Renn. You’ll be the one to know more and visit the rest most often. I know there are several locations Vim goes to that chances are not even the Chronicler knows of. So... you’ll likely know more than I will in little time at all,” Oplar said simply.

I shifted a little on my uncomfortable stump, and felt a little awkward because of it.

She was right of course. It was just like Vim had mentioned before we left the Crypt. About how I knew more about Monarchs than most, even other Monarchs.

Which was very concerning honestly, since I felt like I knew so little about them.

Same with the Society... it was obvious that Oplar wasn't just telling the truth... she was likely understating it. It'd not be long until I knew as much about the Society as Vim, and he knew more than anyone else.

It was weird. It made me feel like I was taking on a strange responsibility... which didn't bother me, since I wanted it, but...

"How often do your human messengers visit other locations?" I asked.

"I try to send them everywhere at least once every six months or so. But we send the letters we get immediately. Some routes, like the one between Telmik and Lumen, have people on them almost all the time. Going one way or another," Oplar said.

"That often?" I asked. I mean it made sense but...

She nodded. "Yeah. Then of course Vim and I take letters, and others do too if they travel. For instance not too long ago Crane visited Telmik. She brought Rapti's and other's letters with her, and then left with a bunch more. She's probably still making stops along the way," Oplar said.

Oh...? Crane was willing and able to do that? She seemed like such a skittish person...

Maybe her experience in Ruvindale had changed her.

"I was told there's an orphanage? In Telmik?" I asked.

She nodded. "Aye. The church runs it. We actually have four, which I know of. The human kids that don't find homes, or don't run off or have problems, usually find jobs within the Society. Or join the church, or something," Oplar said.

"Who runs that?" I asked.

"The Chronicler looks over it mostly. I uh... I'll be honest Renn, I'm not very involved in those matters. I'm not too fond of the church, and because of that the Chronicler doesn't let me meet most of the members of the cloth," Oplar told me.

"Wait... you don't get to meet them?" I asked, trying to understand.

She nodded. "Aye. The Chronicler is very protective of her flock."

"Yet you live in Telmik," I said flatly.

She shrugged. "I do. I've no problem outright with the church, or its people... I just... well..." Oplar sighed, and then nodded. "My parents. They were killed by the church. Burnt alive," she told me the reason.

Ah... "That would upset me too," I said.

"Would it?"

"Honestly, no. I'd have happily lit the fire for my parents alongside them. But... take Lomi's village for example. If I ever found out or met those that did the deed, I'd not be kind to them. In any fashion," I said.

"Right...? Yet the Chronicler would interpret that as outright malice. She seems to think we can't see the difference between those who did the deeds and those who didn't," Oplar said.

Was that all it was...? Wasn't the Chronicler a little odd...? She had been able to see and know things she hadn't supposed to.

Her eyes... had... well...

Maybe I shouldn't read too deeply into it. For now.

“Don’t feel bad about being ostracized. All those zealots are a pain in the ass.”

I startled, as did Oplar, as Vim stepped into the light.

He huffed as he nodded, and crossed his arms... and as he did...

Staring at the man who was dripping wet, I had no words.

“What?” he asked, noticing my stare.

Standing up, I gestured at the soaked man.

“You’re soaked!” I shouted at him. What the heck happened?

Vim took a deep breath, and then sighed and nodded. “Yeah...”

Stepping over to him, I glanced around to make sure there was no one else. Sometimes strange things happened with Vim, so someone else showing up randomly wouldn’t have shocked me...

I saw no one in the dark forest around us, so I focused my attention on him again. I drew closer, and tried to comprehend what had happened.

He really was soaked. His clothes looked all clumpy too, and his leathers gleamed in the firelight.

“What’d you do?” I asked. Did he ruin his clothes again? I couldn’t smell him, or whatever had got him soaked, but odds are it had been a large body of water or something and they weren’t always the cleanest things...

“I know. I know. I fell in a lake,” he said as he stepped over to the fire.

I stepped back just enough to not touch him, and could only gape at his dubious attitude. “How’d you fall in a lake, Vim, really!” I complained.

Yes. He wasn’t just wet, there was gunk clinging to him. Leaves. Grass. Dirt. Mud on his elbows, arms, and feet. He did indeed look like he had fallen in and had to crawl out of it.

“Hm... Sometimes life is just full of surprises,” Vim said lightly as he went to add some of the wood he had gathered earlier for the night into the fire. It quickly grew in size and intensity as he added nearly all of the wood. He’ll need to get more later, at least if we wanted to stay warm all night.

“Vim...” I groaned as I watched him then begin to undress. As to dry off and clean himself.

As he undressed I glanced over at Oplar... who was staring at us with a weird smirk.

She was enjoying the show, and by show I didn't mean Vim's body.

Ignoring her I watched Vim remove his shirt, and watched him squeeze the water out of it. Enough splattered down that even though he had done the deed several feet from the fire, some still splashed into it and made it sizzle.

Glancing around us, I tried to smell and hear any sign of what had happened. I couldn't see, or tell, that anything was off or odd but...

Vim...? Falling into a lake? On accident?

Doubtful at best. He broke things all the time, thanks to his immense strength, but... Vim being clumsy? Yeah... not a chance.

Something must have happened. I wonder what it was.

Maybe something similar to what had happened on our way to the Crypt? Had another predator hunted us? Like that mountain lion?

I hadn't heard anything but it might have happened at quite a distance away. Vim was weird like that, sometimes noticing things to such a degree.

“Are you fine at least...?” I asked as he went to holding his shirt out towards the fire, as to dry it off. It looked silly now, all crumpled. He had squeezed it too much, and too hard. It might even be ruined now, based off the way it looked. Did squeezing a shirt too hard really ruin it that much?

“I am.”

I stepped over to see his leather pieces. He’d already removed them, and put them in a small pile. They looked... fine, as far as I could tell. No marks, or visible damage.

“How far away was the lake, Vim? I hadn’t heard you splashing,” I said.

“A short distance, but it’s over a small bend and hill. Between all that and the trees, I’m not surprised you hadn’t heard anything,” Vim said.

Oplar scoffed, but I ignored her as I watched the way his shirt shifted a little and...

Wait. He had been about to fold it. Why’d he stop...? What had he...?

Stepping over to him, I ignored Vim who went still as can be as I grabbed the shirt and tugged a little.

With my tug a tiny ripping sound filled the night as Vim's shirt completely separated. It tore from where I had grabbed it and ripped upward, all the way to hole where his head would pop out of it. The shirt was now two pieces, and looked so haggard and weird that it didn't even look like a shirt anymore.

Glaring at the two pieces of cloth that Vim now held, I sighed and shook my head at him.

Of course he had ruined it! I can't believe him! We've only been on the road for a few days!

"Why'd you rip my shirt Renn?" Vim then asked me, with a rather sad tone.

"Me!?" I startled, shocked that he'd blame me for such a thing. It had already been ripped! I had just touched it, to verify what I had seen!

Vim had a small smirk on his face, unable to contain it, as he tried to nod seriously.

He was teasing me.

Grabbing one of the halves of the shirt, I tugged it free from his hold and promptly tossed it at his face. It smacked him rather quietly, telling me it was already dry as could be, and I huffed as I stepped away. I returned to my stump and its uncomfortable solitude.

I was going to offer to help dry his clothes... but now he could do it alone.

“Ha!” Oplar laughed, enjoying the show of our typical night.

Chapter 270 The Keep

Putting the bundle down, I stepped back as Horn went to sorting the clothing.

“Nann’s always a gentle soul. But it’s surprising to find Landi sending so many gifts too. What’s gotten into her? Old age, maybe?” Horn wondered with a chuckle.

I smirked as I went to step around him, and stare down one of the several isles of racks and shelves within the room.

The lane of supplies went quite a distance. There was a small pillar near the center, where the racks and shelves separated to make room for it. That pillar was important... especially since it kept a good section of earth up above from falling down and burying the whole room. It was one of many.

“Oh look at that. A bunch of hats,” Horn hummed as I listened to him shuffle around some of them. A few had fur by the sounds of how they rubbed against each other.

“Hm,” I stepped to the next aisle, and was glad to see that this one too looked stocked full. Nearly every shelf and rack in this storage building was full. Full of supplies. Clothes. Food. Tools.

Everything and anything.

Just in case.

“Well?”

I turned, and found Horn wearing an ugly hat. Something made from beaver, likely.

“Least it works with your horn,” I said.

He smirked and shrugged. The horn that extruded from his forehead was only a few inches big, but it was sharp. The hat rested on it a little, but not so much that it would be an issue.

Horn took the hat off and laid it on the table with the others... but instead of returning to the task of sorting them, he instead focused on me.

“You look tired, Vim,” Horn noted.

“I’m traveling with both Oplar and a woman who has decided to become my wife,” I answered.

Horn tilted his head, and his horn actually glimmered a little even in the dimly lit room. “Yes. I suppose you are...” he admitted.

We'd arrived a few hours ago. It was midday, but there was a storm nearby. It made the world dark and moody, and even a little cold. But down here beneath the surface... it felt warm. Dry.

Quiet.

I was enjoying it. As much as I liked hearing Renn and Oplar happily chat with one another...

There was a faint luxury in silence.

"How's the family been?" I asked.

"We're always fine, Vim."

"Always?" I asked.

"Yes. Even when hurt. Even when struggling... we are fine. We're hardy folk," Horn defended his answer.

Well...

I guess I could at least let him have that.

“Has anyone visited?” I asked.

“No. It’s been quiet. A few years ago my daughter rescued a pair of slaves. They spent a few months healing, and then we sent them on their way,” Horn said.

“Slaves?” I asked.

“From the east. Those folks with tattoos all over them,” Horn described them.

Interesting. They had likely been fleeing the wars and plague. Possibly escaped their servitude thanks to such chaos, in fact.

I’ll ask his daughter about them later. Just to confirm they weren’t a threat or would reveal anything to anyone down the road.

“We did have a small forest fire, too. About a year ago. But it was short lived. It rounded the lake to the north, two mountains are still somewhat bare thanks to it,” Horn added.

I nodded. “Some of the forests here do look due for such fires,” I said. That wasn’t a surprise to me at all.

“Other than all that... all’s well, as always. No issues. No visitors. No chaos. No strange prophecies,” he said.

That last thing was the best news of them all. “How is she, anyway?” I asked.

Horn frowned then turned to go back to the table. Although he returned to sorting the hats and clothes with increased seriousness, I knew it wasn’t because he suddenly wanted to get the job done. He simply didn’t like my question. “She’s been fine. She’s a quiet girl, you know that, Vim. Most of the time she only ever speaks to her mother anymore. But she seems happy enough. She likes to fish. Likes to sew. Likes to clean and tend the gardens. A typical, normal, daughter,” Horn said.

Watching the man as he stacked a pile of clothes, I noted the way his elbows were a little stiff.

He was hoping I’d drop the subject.

So... might as well.

“There’s been a vote called. You’ll need to either go to Telmik and cast it, or send it via a letter,” I told him.

“Hm? What kind?” he asked as he studied a hat. It looked like one for the deep snow and cold.

“If I should retain my position as Protector or not,” I said.

Horn paused... and dropped the hat he had been studying. He turned to look at me, and I was glad to see the shock on his face.

“To... remove you?” he asked.

I nodded... but then hesitated. “Well... to be honest I’m not entirely sure yet. I don’t know if it’s an outright call to banish me, or simply to change my authority and duties. I’ve not yet really... spoken with those who have called the vote, just yet,” I said the truth.

Horn took a deep breath and sighed. “Who is doing such a stupid thing?”

Shifting a little, I wondered if I should blame Rapti or not. From what I’d been able to deduce from Oplar so far... she was the source, but not the cause. There were many involved. “From what I’ve gathered so far, the religious sects of Telmik. Though to be honest I’m not sure if it’s the whole order, or just a few members,” I said.

He groaned and reached up to his face. Unlike other people who rubbed their eyes, or the bridge of their noses, he rubbed instead the horn. As if it was stiff and painful. “Those religious idiots,” he mumbled.

I smirked at him. “Wonder if your daughter will agree with them or not,” I said.

Horn let out a deeper groan, realizing exactly what I meant... yet he kept his words to himself.

He'd speak ill of others, particularly those who were religious, but never his daughter. Never.

"You can learn more from Oplar. And I'm sure you'll receive more letters explaining more eventually, too. It's to happen on the eve of foundation, two years from now," I told him.

"Hm... You know it might be a good excuse to travel. Berri has recently made a few comments of traveling. She'd likely enjoy it," Horn said.

"Oh? Then sure. Maybe we can plan it... I wouldn't mind escorting your family when the time comes. Just let me know," I said.

Horn nodded, and his frown told me he very likely would do such a thing. He seemed to like the idea.

I was glad he was receptive to my offer of escorting them.

Even if they didn't have horns on their foreheads... I'd need to.

They were too... special... to not have me with them when venturing into the lands of humans. Or anywhere beyond their safe haven, really.

As Horn decided to go back to sorting the clothes, I stepped down one of the isles. I studied the little markings and plaques beneath the boxes and shelves of stuff. Some were very easy to read and make out, others I had to pause and really study. They were that old and faded.

There was no real rhyme or reason to their sorting method. They had nails next to thread. Below the thread was cans of pickled vegetables. Behind them were what looked to be a box of...

Rounding the aisle, to the other side, I pulled back the box to make sure I wasn't mistaken.

I hadn't been. Within was a violin.

I tapped the box's edge, and wondered when it had found its way here. It was the one I had made many years ago. For that blind girl.

Reaching into the box, I pulled out the small instrument. It was oddly clean, especially since I knew it had likely been in the box for over a decade at least... yet it and even the strings all looked good.

"Hm? What is that, Vim?"

I turned, to show the instrument to Horn. "When'd this get here?" I asked him.

"I uh... don't even know what it is, to be honest," Horn said.

"It's a musical instrument. I made it a long time ago. I wonder who brought it here," I said as I wondered.

"Oh...? Huh... Well, you know how it is. A lot of strange things find their way here, Vim. They have ever since Narli was born," Horn said.

Right. Right...

Putting the thing back into the box, I hesitated.

Hadn't I once thought of giving such a thing to Renn...?

I didn't see its bow in the box, but it'd be easy to make a new one.

But...

Deciding to let it be, I pushed the box back onto the shelf. To hide it away... since it obviously seemed like it wanted to be.

I sighed as I stepped over to accept a pile of clothes from Horn. He was ready to put some away.

Following him down another aisle, we quickly reached a rack with larger boxes. Ones that slid out a little, on rails.

Horn opened them and we put away the clothes that Nann had made for them. They joined similar fashioned clothes... that Nann has sent over the many years.

“She really is such a nice person. These would be great during the cold winters,” Horn said as he patted them, and then went to shutting the boxes and securing them away.

“Then use them?” I suggested.

“Hm. Maybe one day,” he nodded and smiled.

Right. Sure.

Damn man was a hoarder, I swear.

Oh well. It was fine. After all he'd happily give anything in this room to any Society member the moment they asked for it.

And that was the original purpose of this place, too. In a way.

Once done, Horn and I headed for the exit of the storage. He walked slowly, and crossed his arms in a way that told me he had a thought he wanted to share.

I waited, and we nearly reached the door before he finally figured out how to properly say it.

“This vote, Vim... Is it serious?” he asked.

“It might be, yes,” I admitted.

“Did something happen? To cause it? I don’t understand why anyone would even think of doing such a thing,” he said.

“Well... I think, honestly, there are just a lot of people that are... upset. I do fail after all. I do make mistakes. They have a right to be upset,” I said.

“Your mistakes are never intentional, nor are they ever that bad, though. Or did you recently really screw up?” he asked.

I shrugged lightly. "I've dealt with a few Monarchs. There's been some losses... a few villages, and members, are lost to us now. Not a few of them were lost while I was nearby, as well. So in a certain sense, yes. I suppose," I said.

"Knowing you that likely means they really don't have any grounds to stand on. Oh well... Maybe Narli was right then," Horn said with a sigh as I paused, both to let him open the door that led to the stairwell... but also to process what he had just said.

"What was Narli right about?" I asked carefully.

Usually I never wanted to know, but...

"Hm...? Just that you'd lose something important before coming back here. Maybe she meant your position? Hm," Horn nodded, as if it made perfect sense as he opened the door.

My eyes narrowed, and I refused to allow the shiver that wanted to run down my back. I denied its existence.

Following Horn out of the storage room and up the stairwell, we returned to the first floor of the building. I shut the storage door behind me, and turned to watch his wife approach us.

"Still I'm surprised they're that foolish to try again. Do none remember what happened after Celine died?" Horn said with a huff, not realizing his wife was stepping up behind him. He had turned to watch me close the door.

“No. Most don’t anymore,” I told him.

“That’s a good thing, in my opinion. Let the past stay behind us. It’s cruel and depressing,” Berri said, startling her husband.

He turned, and gave her a massive smile upon realizing she was here. He stepped forward to kiss her on the cheek, which she accepted with such gentleness and surety that it made me jealous.

I couldn’t blame Horn for being so in love.

Berri was a beautiful woman. In many ways.

“How’ve you been Berri?” I greeted her. We had seen each other earlier, but Oplar and Renn had basically swarmed her and her daughter. Horn and I had snuck away rather quickly, without really getting a chance to let us say much.

“Very well. And I’m even better now that I got to meet something so adorable,” Berri said.

I frowned at first, but quickly realized what she meant. “She is, isn’t she?” I agreed.

Berri nodded and turned to her husband. "You should go meet her, dear. Your friend has finally found a mate. Don't miss this opportunity to know her," she told him.

Horn frowned, and then turned to look at me. "Wait... you were serious, then?" he asked.

I nodded. "I think so?"

His eyes went a little wide, and then he looked to Berri... who smirked happily and nodded. The left side of her face, and its scars, made the smirk look a little wobbly... but it was beautifully pure all the same.

"Then... yes. I really should. I'll go do so now!" Horn turned, not even waiting to say or hear more. He hurried to the exit of the building, where Berri had come from.

"They're at the house, dear," Berri told him as he left.

Watching him go, I sighed. "I plan to stick around for a short time. There's no need to rush," I told her.

"The world doesn't care for our patience, or our neglect," Berri said.

I shifted at that, and wished Berri hadn't grown so old. I missed her back when she was a youth. And not because she hadn't suffered her wounds and gotten those scars... but rather because she hadn't been tainted by her daughter back then. She had been easier to talk to.

“How have you been Vim?” Berri asked gently.

“Fine. There’s been a little drama and stuff... but nothing more than usual,” I said.

“Hm. I’ve heard most of it already,” Berri nodded.

Good. I didn’t like sharing such news with her. I’d rather talk to her about things that were happy, as to see her smile.

She turned a little, gesturing down the hall. Away from the entrance, where her husband had just left through.

“Hm,” I nodded. She must want to sit and talk.

Threaten me with a good time.

Berri turned and headed down the hallway. She walked slowly, with a slight limp. Her left leg, like the rest of that side of her body, was malformed. Forever ruined.

Although she now walked with a limp, I still couldn't help but gaze a little at the way she strode. She had the same kind of gait that Renn did. One of surety and confidence. One that told the whole world that she was happy, and content, and nothing would ever hamper that.

She didn't care at all how the world saw her. And that pure independent confidence was what made her so beautiful.

"I hear your daughter saved some slaves," I said lightly.

Berri nodded, and I watched the way her horn left my sight for a small moment, thanks to the angle. It wasn't as pointy as Horn's, but it was a tad bigger. "Indeed she did. They were good girls... I was okay with letting them stay here, but Narli saw something. Something that required them to move on," Berri said.

Well that wasn't something I wanted to hear. Now I really will need to ask her about them.

"Anything else happen? Horn had mentioned a fire too," I said.

"Hm. Nothing really happened this time, Vim. Even our winters have been rather mild, to be honest," she said as we rounded a corner and headed for a small sitting area.

This building didn't have rooms, or a kitchen, but it did have a small meeting area. It was honestly more of a resting place, more than anything. A place to rest when working in the storage room for extended periods.

Berri took a seat, and I noticed the way her left leg curled a little into her healthier and stronger right leg. As if for warmth.

Although crippled... Berri sat up straight and elegantly. Unbothered by her deformities, nor ashamed of them.

As I sat, I couldn't help but smile at the beautiful woman.

"She suits you," Berri said gently.

"Thanks... I guess."

"Hm... I'm glad to see you're taking the teasing so well. It means you're being serious," she said as she studied me.

"I'm trying to," I admitted.

"She's a cat, right?" she asked.

I nodded. "A jaguar. It's a large forest cat. A true predator... in fact... she's more like Lilly than not," I said.

“Huh... I wonder where she came from. I’d like to hear her story,” she said.

“She’ll share it if you ask. She keeps a few secrets, but not enough in my opinion,” I said.

Berri giggled at me. “How horrible that must be for you,” she said.

Hmph.

“Narli noticed your arrival, Vim. She grew very excited... now I’m starting to think it was her, and not you,” Berri said as she thought of it.

“Likely. I’m boring, after all,” I said.

“Wouldn’t really call your existence boring to Narli, Vim,” Berri commented.

Well... likely not. But I didn’t want to admit more than that.

“Before we get too... deep into conversation, I’d like to hear of this vote, Vim,” Berri then said, revealing the reason she had wanted to talk to me alone for a moment.

I nodded. "It's real. I'm not sure how many, or who, are actually involved... but there's enough of them to make it serious. I also don't know how far they're going to try to take it, but it wouldn't surprise me if they try to go all the way and banish me outright," I told her.

Berri sighed. "Did they not try after Celine? Are they the same people doing it this time?" she asked.

"Most of those individuals are either dead, or left, Berri. Most today aren't that old anymore," I told her.

She frowned. "Really...?"

I nodded. "Those like you, and Nann and the others... are rare now. Take Renn for example. She's about two hundred years old, and even she could be counted amongst the oldest. Though she likely hasn't realized it yet," I said.

"That is unsettling to hear. I did get the letters from Renn, and I did notice how few there were. I thought it was simply a lack of communication, but... it's because many are gone, aren't they?" Berri asked.

"Sadly, yes," I said.

"Is that why I've not heard from Yaz lately? Or Millie?" she asked.

Jeez how long has it been since I heard their names? "They're gone, Berri. They have been for at least a century," I said gently.

Berri didn't like that news, and I felt horrible. Didn't I just wish to only speak of happy things with her?

"It seems you and I will have to... catch up a little. I'd blame you Vim, for not telling me, but it's not your fault. You answer honestly, always, so it just means I've not ever asked," Berri said as she realized it.

I nodded slowly. "We can talk of those gone and still here later, if you'd like," I said. I didn't want to, but I'd not deny her the simple right of knowing if her friends were still alive or not.

"Yes. I'd like that... or well... I likely won't, but," Berri gave me a sad smile as she nodded.

Right. "It won't be long until a new census is taken. I expect the vote to result in one. Probably the most accurate one made in a long time," I said.

"Some good news, at least," she said.

I gestured lightly with a wave of the hand. I wasn't sure if the vote itself was really bad news yet, myself.

It wasn't like much would change either way the vote went. At least in my perspective.

“Well... for now let’s leave such sad words unspoken, shall we?” Berri decided.

“Sure,” I agreed, happily.

She gave me a tiny grin, and I noted the way her hair slid along her horn. It kept some of the loose strands of her bangs on one side of her face.

“My daughter tells me you carry something precious,” Berri said.

“I do.”

“At first I thought she spoke of Renn, but seems not?” Berri tilted her head as she made sense of her daughter’s strange insight.

“It’s a heart,” I told her.

“Hm. Should I open the Keep?” she asked.

“I’d be thankful if you would,” I said.

She nodded. "Want to do it now? Or?"

"It can wait. Renn knows of it, but Oplar doesn't. I'd like to keep it that way," I said.

Berri's smile became a little odd. "Oh my? Is that because she had been involved, or is she special in more ways than one?" Berri asked.

I sighed. "Both, I guess," I admitted.

Her smile became more awry, and she slowly blinked with her only eye. "Interesting. I regret leaving so soon. I had thought this vote was more important to speak of, but maybe she holds fate in her hands right now and not you," she said.

"If only," I said.

Berri giggled and then tilted her head in thought. Her strands of hair danced again, now the other side of her bangs rested against the horn. "It's been a long time, Vim. Since you've brought such entertainment. How fun," she said.

Please.

Although not very glad to hear that things really were becoming... chaotic, in a way...

I was glad to see Berri so joyful. I was glad she looked happy. I was glad she was still the same.

Though...

I glanced around, and the windowless building reminded me that we were alone.

Something that might be rare here shortly. The family of narwhals rarely separated too far from one another. Especially the mother and daughter. And now with Oplar, the gossipier, and Renn the friendly cat...

This might be the only chance I get, without making it awkward.

I gulped, as I realized I was going to actually have to ask. I was going to actually admit it, and put someone else's thoughts and mind into a place that required such thoughts.

And I was going to do it to someone who I've spent hundreds of years trying to tip-toe and be gentle with. Someone who I've always treated gently, on purpose.

Yet that was precisely why I needed it to be her.

I had a few others in mind to ask... eventually... but for now she was the one in front of me. She was the one I needed to ask.

A few long uncomfortable moments of inner turmoil kept me from saying anything, and Berri noticed. She blinked at me, telling me she saw my internal discord... yet she said nothing.

She simply waited for me to find my nerve.

Nodding, I took a tiny breath and decided to just get it over with.

"I have... a heavy ask of you, Berri," I said softly.

"Hm?" she tilted her head at me, and some of the stray strands of hair on her scarred side of her head shifted, to dangle in front of her scarred eye.

I nodded gently, and felt ridiculous... but I had to say it. I had to ask it.

There weren't many I could. And I needed to keep my options open. I needed to prepare... just in case.

"You look terribly distraught Vim... what is it?" Berri asked gently.

I'm sure I did.

"It's Renn," I whispered.

Berri's smile died, and she tilted her head again. She was now worried.

Before she could ask why, I took a small breath and nodded... and looked down for a moment. Away from her powerful gaze. Finding my nerve, I looked back up and nodded again.

"One day... maybe even soon... I might need to send Renn here. To keep her safe. If... if you'd be okay with it," I begged.

Berri blinked, and her only remaining eye went wide. She said nothing, and made not a move... didn't even breathe... then she simply smiled at me.

"So while we're here... please, you and your family, judge her. Decide if it'd work out or not. If not I completely understand, of course, but..." I felt weird as I spoke, as if I was suddenly talking about something embarrassing.

Yet it wasn't. It was serious.

Before I could say more though, Berri shifted in her seat.

She stood, and I quickly stood up too. I felt a little ridiculous because of it... since I had bumped the chair a little in the process. It thumped along the wooden floor, pushed away. She didn't even notice it however, as she stepped over to me.

Berri grabbed my right hand. I froze as she cupped it with both hands. Even the one deformed. It somehow had more strength than her other one, but that was likely because the burns had ruined her nerves. She couldn't control how much strength she was using with it, she had no feeling in it anymore.

She lowered her head, and suddenly she was making a small prayer.

"Berri...?" I asked softly. She's become more religious ever since her daughter had been born... but this was a first. For her especially. Yet...

For this to be her answer to my request... the only one I'd ever asked of her in all these years... was very concerning.

Staying still, I allowed Berri to make a tiny prayer of hope. She prayed to her daughter, in her name, that I'd be okay. That the world would be gentle to me, for once in my life.

I squeezed her hands ever so gently with my own, and felt strangely out of place. As if I was being yelled at, or something.

Letting her pray, I waited until she finished... and then she finally looked up. Her only remaining eye, in all its beautiful glory, gleamed at me as she smiled.

“No matter the future, Vim... Know that we will always be on your side,” she said.

Taking a small breath, I felt the unease grow even more.

This was not something I was comfortable with at all. And not just because of the prayer.

“I uh...” I wasn’t sure what to say. Or do.

Berri has always been... somewhat special to me. I liked her. Not in the way I liked Renn, of course... or even how I liked my supposed friends. She wasn’t a Nebl, or a Miss Beak... but...

I’d always been fond of her. She had a wonderful personality. Her soul was beautiful. She was stalwart and without fault, at least in my eyes.

It was why I’d always been so careful of her. It was why I had let her and her family take over the Keep. Both to keep them safe... but also because I trusted them. Because I trusted her, the woman who had given birth to a saint.

So...

“Berri...?” I whispered, wondering what was wrong. Had her daughter said something? Had Renn? Had something horrible happened that I didn’t know about yet? Was she about to deny me my request?

Honestly I couldn’t, wouldn’t, blame her even if she did... but it would startle the hell out of me and...

She squeezed my hand a little harder, and nodded at me.

“Of course you can bring her here Vim. Anytime. The two of you will always be welcomed here... and if it comes to that, we’ll keep her safe Vim. For you,” she finally answered me.

I gulped, and nodded. Although it felt great to have that burden off my shoulder... I somehow felt all the more tense all the same.

Berri then squeezed my hand again, and nodded. “Pray with me, Vim. Just this once. Please?” she asked.

My eye twitched, and I almost tugged my hand free from hers. Almost.

Blinking a little, I tried to fight through my thoughts and their horrible directions they wanted to go.

“Can I know what we’re praying for...?” I dared to ask.

Berri’s smile warmed and I felt my stomach coil a little. How come I found her so beautiful? She should have been born the saint, not her daughter.

“For you and her, Vim. For the both of you,” she said.

From anyone else... I would have scoffed. I would have even said something that might have resulted in discord.

Yet... From Berri...

Taking a deep breath, I glanced around... to make sure we were alone. To make sure Renn wasn’t around.

Then, against my better judgment...

I bowed my head.