

Non Human 271

Chapter 271 Berri

It felt like I'd been underground a lot lately.

But this place was... far different than any others so far.

Walking behind Berri, who walked a little slowly thanks to her limp, I lifted my little lamp a little more to study the strange bricks all around us.

We were in a rather big hallway. The stairs we had descended to get here had been... rather long. I wasn't entirely sure just how deep beneath the earth we were, but I wouldn't be surprised if I learned we were deeper than I'd ever been.

Even the mine back at the Smithy hadn't felt this deep, for some reason.

What was strangest about this place, however... was the fact that Oplar had not been joined us. She had been very adamant about not coming with me. I had not gotten an explanation for the reason as to why, yet, but... well... Berri had made it very clear. That I was to not tell anyone about this underground place.

This place was special. Though so far I was not sure why.

“This was a tomb once. For a god. We retrofitted it long ago, for the wars. After the wars it’s now more of a vault than anything else, really,” Berri explained.

The wars...

“A god?” I asked carefully.

Berri lifted her lamp a little more as the hallway ended, and opened up into a room.

Stepping out of the hallway, we came to a small stop as Berri lifted her lamp as to illuminate one of the nearby walls.

The wall was bright. Completely unlike the black stone bricks that seemed to absorb light, this wall made the whole area brighter. It reflected our lamp’s light easily, thanks to all the bright colors.

“A painting...?” I wondered as I too lifted my lamp, to take in the whole scene.

“A mural. It’s basically a painting, but done with lots of tiny pieces. In this case ceramics,” Berri explained.

Ceramic...

I stepped forward, both to light up the wall better... and to get a better look at what she spoke of.

Upon closer inspection it was obvious what she meant. The painting, the picture, was made up of countless little pieces of colorful stones. Most looked flat, and glossy, which explained why they reflected light so well. They were also no bigger than my thumbnail.

Stepping back, to get the whole picture in view, I wondered how long it'd take to make something like this. The wall itself was several times my height, and the painting was so big even with it being bright and reflected our two lamps couldn't illuminate it completely. Most of its edges were dark and hard to make out from this angle.

"This one is about the god that was entombed here. That's them in the middle, and all the surrounding motifs are supposedly their deeds," Berri said with a point.

I nodded as I studied the person in the center. It was a larger motif of a person, a human looking being, from the waist upward. They looked... relatively normal, all things considered. Their hair was a odd green color, but that might just be the artists attempt at making them look unique.

All around the center image, of this supposed god, were many little scenes. They all had circles around them, of varying plants and flowers as borders, and the scenes themselves were about the size of my head. Some looked... strange and out of place, while others were just simple illustrations of typical stuff. One was a field of wheat. While another had a strange monster, akin to maybe a Monarch.

"Uh... so... are you saying a god was here? Is the body still here?" I asked.

Berri giggled at me. "It had been. Yes."

Had been. Had she seen it...? Really?

I resisted the many questions that quickly came and went as Berri stepped away, heading deeper into the room.

I followed her, and noticed that the rest of the walls in the room were similar. They were all decorated with scenes and paintings. Though not all of them were very colorful. One even looked somewhat destroyed...

Hopefully they'll let me back down here again, so I could study them.

We left the room and entered a new hallway. One that was a little smaller than the last, and had faint smell of dampness and water.

"I'm told you're very astute. With a memory unmatched," Berri said.

"I remember things well, yes," I said.

"Haha... so humble. That's a unique trait to have, you know? I can barely remember what I ate for dinner a few days ago sometimes," Berri said.

Oh...? Was she serious, or was she much older than I thought she was?

It was hard to tell, honestly...

Berri was deformed. Half her body, her left half, had horrible scars. From burns and worse. They were so bad that even her hair on that half of her head barely grew, with only a few strands.

Those deformities made it hard to really pinpoint how old she could possibly be. Horn looked older than Vim, but I knew of course one's appearance didn't relay one's age correctly, especially for us non-humans. Plus judging her age based off Horn's wasn't viable either.

"Forgetting such things would only make them more memorable when they happened, at least," I said.

Berri slowed a bit, and she tilted her head and glanced back at me. "That's true, isn't it? If one doesn't remember the taste of food, they'll get to enjoy it as new every time they ate it. Are you saying you can remember things in such detail, that even meals can be boring for you?" she asked.

Well... "Sometimes, I suppose," I admitted. I could remember eating and the taste of, most things rather well. Yet I still enjoyed it when I ate stuff, especially the things I enjoyed... but it was true that I sometimes noticed discrepancies.

When I ate something I really enjoyed, and found it tasting off it bothered me. Because I was comparing it to something I had eaten a long time ago.

“Hm... Wonder how that affects you in other ways. Must make having conversations odd, with Vim,” she said as she thought of something.

“Odd?” I asked.

Berri returned to walking. “Yeah. That means eventually he’ll ask things he’s asked before. And you’ll have to have the same conversation again, because he doesn’t remember the things you do,” she said.

Frowning, I wondered how she had come to such a conclusion so quickly. “You’re not entirely wrong... I once lived with a human, for a long time. Nory. She used to forget things often, and I’d have to remind her,” I said. Particularly as she grew older.

“Right...? My husband is... a rather simple man, to be honest. I’m always reminding him of many things. Even the simple stuff, like his daughter’s favorite color or meal,” Berri said with a sigh.

Oh...? That was a little more than not having a good memory, I think. How did one not remember their daughter’s favorite meal?

Speaking of daughter though...

I bit my tongue as I wondered if I should ask about her or not.

She had seemed like a timid girl. A little shorter than me. Long, abundant hair. A smaller horn than her parents, and...

And eyes of pure white.

Like the Chronicler.

Like the witch I had once known.

Vim had told me that the witch I'd known had likely been a saint. Yet he's also mentioned before that the Chronicler was not one. So either some people were just... born with such eyes, or...

"And here, is the Keep proper," Berri then said as we left the hallway and entered a new room.

Upon entering, I noted the sound of running water. Nothing too strong, but there was definitely some kind of stream or something nearby.

I scanned the room, and didn't find the source of the water sounds, but I did find more murals... and also statues.

Lifting my lamp, I stepped over to the nearest statue. It was a white stone one, depicting a stout man. One full of muscles, more than any I'd ever seen on any person before. It was so detailed and emphasized on the man's muscles that I doubted it was a real likeness. How could someone even walk around with such thick legs?

The statue wasn't something put here, but built into the place. Although made of some kind of white stone, it was made into the floor and ceiling. Like a pillar that had been carved. Above the head of the man, was a section that bent off and went upward to the ceiling.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"I'm told it had been the son of the god. The one who had been buried here," Berri said as she stepped up next to me, to raise her lamp too.

The son...

Well... he looked godly, at least. Much more than the other painting had made this supposed god out to be.

The statue was several times bigger than any person would be. Even Link was small compared to it. And every inch of the man's body was carved in a way to display his profound form.

Although the very muscular form was interesting, I was far more interested in the odd thing he carried in his left hand. He held it outward, as if to display it proudly. Like some prize.

The head of an animal. Some kind of boar.

“So um... what’s the story behind this?” I asked.

“He had slain a mighty foe. Though to be honest I don’t know the true story. Some of them have tiny plaques that tell the story, but this one doesn’t... or didn’t,” Berri said.

Hm...

I stepped back a bit, to look at the other statues. All of them were similar, made of the same white stone... and formed in ways to act more like pillars than anything else. One was even a real pillar, made and formed into one, and had what looked to be some kind of serpent animal wrapped around it.

Counting a quick eleven, I realized that they were all created in a formation. A giant circle...

Stepping around the statue, I stepped over to the center of the room, and finally found the source of both the sound of flowing water... and the slight smell of dampness.

A small stream of water was flowing in the ground. In a carved out section... akin to a gutter. It ran to the center of the room, where it opened into a tiny pool, and then branched off into a dozen other paths.

“So um... why the water?” I asked.

“This way,” Berri smiled as she gestured with her lamp, to another hallway.

One that also had a gutter of water, flowing straight down its center.

I followed her, walking along one side of the water and her the other. The gutter didn't seem too deep, but it was obvious from the sound that there was more water flowing through it than appeared. I bet if I stepped into the gutter the water would reach past my ankle.

I wonder if I could touch it. Was it cold? It was kind of warm down here, really.

Keeping my questions and ideas inside to myself, I followed Berri to another room... one that was bigger than the last few.

And had lights.

I slowed to a stop as I left the room, as Berri continued walk to the room's center. She strode towards the podiums in the center of the room without hesitation.

Which meant she knew full well what was sitting on the center podium... glowing blue.

Shivering at the sight of a monarch's heart, I realized now why Oplar had not been allowed to come down with us.

I had thought she had simply hadn't wanted to... but now...

Taking a deep breath, I firmed my resolve and headed deeper into the room.

The glowing heart was about the size of Miss Beak's. Yet unlike hers that glowed a pinkish color, this one was a deep blue... just like the water that was seeping from it. It was resting on a podium, made of the same white stone of those statues earlier. Yet although on the podium, it was also on some kind of black glossy stand... one that sloped downward, allowing the water seeping from the heart to flow down the podium and then to the floor.

From the podium the water formed a small circular pool, and then branched off into those gutters. The water flowed outward from there, leaving the room.

Berri paused in front of the podium, and then bent down a little to put her lamp on the ground.

Walking up to her, I glanced around at the other podiums. Like the one with the heart on it, they too had little stands... but none of the other ones had hearts.

Had they at one time? Or...?

“See the water? It leaks pure water. Continuously. It’s an indefinite source of fresh, drinkable, water. The water pools and flows to several storage rooms, which then also flow out to the nearby lakes and rivers. It had been very useful during the wars,” Berri said as she gestured to the podium, and the heart upon it.

I gulped. “Ah... um...”

Stepping up next to her, I too lowered my lamp... but I didn’t put it down.

“You’re wondering why I’m showing you this,” Berri noted.

I nodded. “Well...”

“Vim asked me to,” she answered.

“Oh,” I nodded again.

Berri giggled. “Such an answer made perfect sense to you didn’t it?” she asked.

“Well... yes?” I said, suddenly unsure of myself. Why had she found that so odd?

“Good. It means Vim’s trust is not just something that you view as expected, but naturally so. It means he really does trust you and you him. A good trait for a mate.”

Mate again. She must be far older than me. She had called Horn husband earlier, though.

“I uh... like to think he trusts me, yes,” I said.

Berri shifted, as to lean more on her right leg than her left. Maybe she was getting tired.

Were there any chairs nearby...? Maybe somewhere to sit? It was too bad there weren’t any raised sections in the ground around us.

“This heart. It used to be one of many,” Berri pointed to the heart, confirming my earlier suspicions.

“Hm,” I nodded as I stared into the blue orb. It looked... like it was swirling. Unlike Miss Beak’s heart that gleamed from within, as if it had a tiny little fire, this one looked like a swirling whirlpool was inside it.

“Vim took the rest. But he decided this one the most important. To keep just in case,” she said.

I blinked. “I’m surprised. He seems to really... not trust them,” I said.

“Indeed. It just goes to show how important it was,” she said.

“During the wars... you mean to say fresh water was that important?” I asked.

She nodded. “There had been a few moments when this had been verily important, yes. It hadn’t been here however, but elsewhere. Farther south, where it had been used. This place had been modified for it afterward, to ensure we’d have fresh water if a day ever came again when the world itself became our enemy,” Berri said.

The world itself...

She meant that literally, didn’t she?

Did that mean she was not speaking of the wars recently, but other ones? Not of the wars between our own kind and the humans, but...

“Vim has asked me to share what history I know. I think he’s more so asking me to share my story with you than anything else... but just in case, I’ll do my best to tell you of all I know all the same,” Berri then said.

“Oh...?” I perked up at that. Her story? I’d love to hear it.

“He’s... fickle. He could share so much more, yet never does. It took years for him to properly teach Narli what she needed to know, and that had been life and death! I love the man, but wish he wasn’t so odd sometimes,” Berri said.

I quickly nodded, agreeing. “Oh yes. I know what you mean. He’s promised to teach me, yet it’s always a pain to get him to go into detail. I’ve come to accept that it will just take me years, many, many years, to learn even the smallest things,” I said.

She chuckled. “Right...? I wonder who taught him to be so secretive. I bet his parents had been strange,” she said.

Parents...

Did she know them? Or rather, had she? I was unsure if I should ask.

Also...

Narli needed to know something that affected her survival...?

I’m surprised he’d not be forthcoming with such information. Yes he kept secrets, but when it came to life and death...

I mean look at that stupid book he had sent Rapti. He had a soft spot for certain types of pursuits of knowledge, yet others...

"It's mostly his own information he guards so strongly, I think," I said as I thought about it.

"That is true. His own life. His past. His deeds... yet so much of his story is our own. So it ends up interfering and suppressing our own knowledge," Berri said with a sigh.

"Isn't that the truth," I agreed.

She shifted again, and I noticed she had returned her weight to her left leg. I tried not to stare too much as she sighed and gestured to the podium again. "Any doubt of your relationship with Vim shattered the moment he told me to show you this. As far as I'm aware, the hearts of monarchs have all but become legend within the Society. For good reason, really. I can't blame Vim for using such a method to protect them. Though it's interesting he had thought of it so long ago. It tells you just how far ahead he plans sometimes," Berri said.

It was my turn to shift as I soaked up her words.

"The Keep's original purpose was to be a stronghold. A sanctuary. A place for those of the Society to run to, in times of need. Thanks to the structure, the stores and resources, we could seal ourselves in and survive for years and years. Long enough to allow Vim to return and save any who need to be. Today though its purpose has become more of a vault, for the hearts he places here occasionally, amongst other things," Berri said.

"There are other hearts here?" I asked. The other podiums were empty.

“Not yet. They come and go, as Vim deals with them,” Berri said.

Hm...

“And ever since my daughter’s birth, other odd things show up from time to time as well. It makes me wonder what will happen once she fully matures and takes over,” Berri said with a sigh.

Oh...?

“Odd things...?” I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

She nodded. “Strange items mostly. It’s really weird. But such is fate for one such as her...” Berri said as she crossed her arms.

Wanting to ask more, I hesitated as I noticed the look on her face. It was a little hard to tell, thanks to the shadows casted upon her and her scarred face... but...

Yes. That was discomfort and worry. And not just from pain or anything from her own body. She didn’t like talking about the current topic.

She took a deep breath, and I watched as she simply... accepted her fate. Or at least, whatever fate she perceived.

“But we all have worries and tribulations. And not a one of us is strong enough for any of them, are we?” Berri said.

“We try to be, at least,” I said lightly. I wanted to say she must have been strong enough, to have survived what had obviously deformed her... but maybe she’d not have taken it well.

“That we do... that we do,” she agreed as she nodded.

As she nodded I noticed her horn again. I wonder if it was as pointy as it looked.

“And now again, a new worry. A new trial. But like always it is one we must struggle with, since he won’t be phased at all by it,” Berri said with a sigh.

I shifted, and my ear fluttered as I realized what she was talking about.

“This vote. It troubles me,” Berri then said.

“Mhm. Me too,” I agreed.

“Vim... he’s not able to defend himself. Not against us. Not in that way,” she said.

Suddenly the heart wasn’t very interesting at all.

“That’s... a very good way to say it, to say the least,” I said.

“So... will you be able to do it?” she then asked.

I shifted, and my tail coiled a little. My lamp, thanks to it hanging at my side, made my tail’s shadow dance in the corner of my eye as I stared into her single one.

Berri’s eye... gleamed a little. In an unnatural way. Not from tears.

Odds are it was a trait. Some of us non-humans had such eyes. Eyes that strangely gleamed in the dark. I’d been told mine did the same.

“I’ll do my best to, at least,” I finally told her.

Berri studied me for a moment... and then smiled and nodded. “Good.”

Feeling oddly humbled, I realized that Berri was... likely someone I could trust. Someone I could become friends with.

For her to not only worry over the vote... but to imply that I needed to do what Vim wouldn't, or couldn't, was... very telling.

Very telling indeed.

Before I could say anything, my ears forced my head to turn a little. To look down the hallway we had just come from.

Someone was heading our way.

And judging by the sounds of the footsteps, it was someone young and very light on her feet.

"Hm," Berri too noticed her daughter before she emerged from the hallway. I stepped back a little, to give Narli a direct and unbothered path to her mother.

She was a strangely timid girl, and I've grown to know that such simply little gestures such as that were what they truly treasured the most.

Narli's glowing eyes became visible first. The two small glowing orbs looked... odd in the dark. Once she entered the room however, thanks to the lamps and the heart, the glow of her eyes dimmed enough to not be as unsettling.

She smiled at the sight of her mother, and picked up her pace.

"Why, Narli, really?" Berri said gently as Narli went to standing behind her mother, to peer at me from behind her arm.

I smiled at the girl. "I'm actually very gentle you know," I told her.

Surprisingly the girl nodded, her glowing orbs for eyes becoming smaller as she seemed to glare at me. "I do know. You'd die before you'd hurt me," she said.

I frowned, since Narli had not only said something interesting... but had done so with the utmost confidence.

She had just declared something with such surety that I doubted anyone who had heard her wouldn't believe her. As if it had been proven already.

Berri reached around, to gently pat her daughter's arm. "Then why cower, dear?" Berri asked her daughter.

The girl frowned, and glanced up at her mother. Thanks to her looking straight at her, I noticed something odd.

She had pupils... but they were hidden when looked at straight on. They glowed too, in a similar way her eyes did, but they were just off-colored to be noticed. "She'd never hurt me... but she's also dangerous," Narli told her mother.

"Dangerous...?" both Berri and I said at the same time.

The girl nodded, and returned her attention to me. Her pupils disappeared, and I tried to find them in the glow. Why did they disappear when we looked at each other? So interesting. "Your existence. It's dangerous," she told me.

My... "My existence..." I said softly, and tried to comprehend what she meant.

If she knew I'd never harm her... how then was I a dangerous person? Or was she saying my existence was not a threat to her, but other things? Maybe her family? Her home? The world...?

For some reason I found that very unsettling. Why was such a timid young girl saying such a thing? With sure surety?

Berri sighed. "Honey, I've always happily supported your right to speak your mind... but what have I told you of prophecies?" Berri then said.

Huh...?

"It's not really a prophecy, mother... it's just... well..." Narli went to mumbling, typical of a scolded child, but... I couldn't comprehend the previous comment.

"Wait...!" I stepped forward, to raise a hand... and both of them went quiet as they looked at me.

I gulped, afraid of what I was both going to ask... and what kind of answer I'd get.

"Oh... oh my. Has no one told you yet...?" Berri asked, realizing.

I groaned, realizing the truth even before being told.

Berri nodded, and then so too did her daughter.

Her eyes grew a little brighter, and I shivered.

"I'm a saint," Narli said.

Chapter 272 Narli

“She’s something, Horn. She’s really gentle, yet there’s definitely a side to her that I wouldn’t want to piss off that’s for sure,” Oplar said happily.

“You wouldn’t get on the bad side of a fly, Oplar. That’s not much of a statement,” Horn said with a sigh.

Oplar broke into laughter as she nodded, agreeing with him.

Sitting back a little, I watched the two happily share gossip. Horn usually never cared much for such things, but he was fully interested in learning about Renn. And Oplar was more than happy to share what she knew.

I had to correct a few little things Oplar shared, since she was sharing second-hand knowledge, but I was surprised to learn that most of Renn’s adventure throughout the Society has been rather... well documented, oddly.

She of course didn’t know the more peculiar or private stuff, but anything about Renn that had happened in the presence of another member seemed to be pretty much written in history. History that was being happily shared amongst everyone, as gossip.

Odds are it was on purpose. By the Chronicler and other members, who were trying to deter her from being used as a scapegoat. They likely hoped to showcase Renn’s desire, and actions, to help and protect the Society as proof that she was not a threat nor would become one.

It’s not a surprise either way, though. New members were always a hot topic within the Society... and she wasn’t just new, she was someone who had been traveling around. Getting involved in many facets of the Society, sometimes even integrally.

I wonder if Renn knew she was such a vibrant topic amongst the Society. And if she did, or when, I wonder what she would think of it.

“So after leaving Lumen she ends up recruiting a whole pirate band! A female pirate band to boot!” Oplar said, amused beyond reckoning.

“Pirates...?” Horn frowned as he scratched his jaw, contemplating.

“She’s very... protective of the downtrodden,” I said carefully.

“Heh, most particularly women, it seems. In Lumen she also saved a bunch of eastern slaves too,” Oplar said.

“Was she at one time a sufferer as well?” Horn asked, trying to understand.

Oplar frowned and glanced at me for an answer.

“She’s had her own tragedies, yes. Though I know not to what degree,” I said. That was all I was willing to share.

“Hm. Would make sense. I’m surprised such a strong predator could get in such a position... but I suppose it has happened before,” Horn said.

Oplar nodded as she leaned forward, putting her elbows on her knees as she clasped her hands. “The oddest part is she seems very interested in religion, yet at the same time doesn’t subscribe to it,” she added.

“That could be reasoned by Vim, though,” Horn argued.

“Although true I’m not sure if Renn’s the type to allow others to control or affect her beliefs and choices. She’s gone against Vim before,” Oplar argued back.

I wanted to sigh, and wondered if I should leave. The conversation was starting to stray into areas I was neither comfortable with, nor wanted to be a part of.

People’s personal beliefs were not my concern.

“I can attest to love being strong enough to make one overlook, or even outright change, ones beliefs,” Horn told her.

Oplar frowned but nodded, having no choice but to accept that Horn was speaking the truth. It was his truth too, after all.

He had never forgiven religion for mutilating his wife. And honestly I couldn't blame him.

Even if she was now a believer in that same religion.

I focused a little on the hallway nearby. The one that led deeper into the house. I could hear Berri beyond it, in the kitchen. It wasn't time for dinner, but she was still rummaging around in it. Maybe making snacks, or something.

"What's the worst she's done, Vim?" Horn then asked.

"Worst what?" I asked.

"Going against you," he clarified.

Well... "She's not outright gone against me, in that form, Horn. But she does indeed have her own will, and is not afraid to pursue it. Like those pirates Oplar mentioned... I'd not have invited them, but I've been known to be callous. My choice was not because they weren't suited, or capable, but simply because I saw humans struggling like they always do," I said.

"Hm... I'd not call that going against you Vim. I was expecting to hear something similar to Lilly's actions, or something," Horn said.

Oplar nodded quickly. "It'll eventually happen, I bet. She's not afraid to stand against him, so it's inevitable I think," Oplar said.

My eye twitched and I wondered what they expected her to do.

Lilly had started a war. One that had changed not just entire maps, but the typography of the lands itself. It had changed the Society, even.

They thought Renn would do something on that level? Really?

As I pondered it, I had no choice but to accept there was likely a small chance they were right.

Renn might not be a warmonger, or have a lot of hate in her heart like Lilly, but...

The scary reality is I could see it happening too, to a certain degree.

"Though maybe it's a good thing. Vim's a little too passive on certain occasions. Maybe having someone right next to him who can get emotional when and where he cannot, might be for the better," Horn then decided.

"I'm surprised to hear that from you, Horn," Oplar said.

I nodded. I was as well. Horn hated those who acted on emotion over reason.

“There are extremes, Vim. You’re one of them,” he said simply.

Oplar hummed as she crossed her arms, to ponder his perspective, and I did my best to not roll my eyes.

Even if he was right, it still felt ridiculous to say it in such a way.

Before more could be said on the subject, a door opened... and then closed, nearby.

We turned to watch the two girls walk down the hallway, and then step into the room.

Renn smiled at the sight of us, her left ear fluttering a little as she came to a stop in the doorway.

Unsurprisingly, Narli was not only with her... but also clinging to her.

She hid behind Renn, grabbing her shirt and arm, as she peered around Renn at the three of us.

Like always she was a timid girl. Scared of the sights she saw before her.

Or well, odds are her true worry was directed at Oplar, likely.

She feared not her parents... and honestly when it was just me she was likewise calm, usually.

“That didn’t take long,” Oplar said.

I smiled, a little proud of her. Did Renn realize what that young girl’s friendship, and trust, meant?

“You lied to me,” Renn then said to me.

My smile grew as I tilted my head. “I did...?”

When? About what? How so?

She nodded at me and huffed as she pointed with a thumb at the girl hiding behind her.

Oh.

“You had told me there weren’t any saints left! Within the Society at least,” Renn said.

Right. “I suppose I had...” I admitted.

“You had! Why lie like that? I’m very disturbed you’d do such a thing. I’d understand if it had been a long time ago, back in the beginning... but I had asked you not too long ago! Just recently!” Renn said, raising her voice a little. Her tail coiled around Narli’s waist as it twitched and fidgeted. The young narwhal glanced at it and smiled.

It was as if Renn was trying to protect her from me.

“Right...” I nodded as I remembered that very conversation. “I uh... must have been slightly distracted. I think I just gave you the automatic answer I give to anyone who asks about such a thing. I’d not have kept it a secret to you, otherwise,” I said honestly.

Plus if I remembered correctly, that conversation had been more about a saint’s power. Particularly the ones able to heal and cure diseases and wounds, since it had been about the plague.

Narli was indeed a saint, but she was not the kind that could perform such miracles. Her abilities were more... intuitive than direct.

“Well...!” Renn didn’t seem to like my answer as she huffed and crossed her arms.

Oplar snickered, but I ignored her as I nodded gently at my annoyed companion.

"I'm sorry," I apologized.

Renn blinked, and Narli glanced up at her new friend. Renn held my gaze for a moment, her tail twitching around Narli's waist... and then she finally sighed and nodded.

Narli smiled, and then turned to look at me. When she did though her small horn brushed against Renn's shoulder, snagging her loose shirt a little. Neither of the girls seemed to notice, or bother with it, as Narli gestured lightly at me.

"Hm?"

"She was hoping you'd not give in so easily," Narli said softly.

Renn's ears fluttered as she frowned, but said nothing.

"Of course she was," I said.

"Vim's not a liar, not unless he has good reason to be one," Horn said simply.

“Rather than lie, Vim’s more likely to simply not tell you the whole truth. You should see the differences in reports from him and those who were there to witness it. I’ve gone through them over the years. Trust me when I say Vim will shorten entire books to one or two sentences if he can get away with it,” Oplar said.

“It’s rude,” Renn added, agreeing.

“There’s a reason fate avoids him,” Narli said, adding her own opinion to the mix.

I sighed and wondered why this suddenly became an ass chewing session.

“I’d argue against that. Fate seems to coil around him all the time. Unless you mean to say he’s the one who interferes instead,” Oplar said.

“I think all of your perceptions of faith are misguided as is,” Horn gave his own opinion.

“Of course you’d think that, dear,” Berri said as she entered the room.

Narli immediately left Renn’s protection, going to help her mother. Berri was carrying a platter of cups and what looked to be cookies.

Watching Narli take the platter from her mother, then step over to offer a cup to Oplar, I noted the way she extended the platter with stiff arms.

If Oplar noticed Narli's hesitation, she didn't show it. She took a cup, and a few cookies with a smile.

Narli then went around offering the rest of the room, which I turned down as I stood from my seat.

My original plan was to step away, to let Berri and the rest sit and return to talking... but as I stepped away from the small sitting area, I found Renn following after me.

"If fate existed Vim would have slain it already. You simply see things you wish to, not as they are," Horn said, continuing the topic.

"I may not have a horn, but even I can see the point you're avoiding, Horn..." Oplar happily obliged him, stepping full on into the debate without worry.

I glanced at Berri, who smiled gently at me as I headed for the hallway. She went to sit in the chair I had vacated, to either join or listen to Oplar and her husband get into one of their many debates over religion and whatnot.

It was funny because Oplar herself was not religious. In fact she hated religion even more than Horn did. She simply liked to debate. She'd play devil's advocate with anyone, when she could.

Leaving the room, I headed for the main door. The same one that Renn and Narli had just come from... and I did so with Renn in tow.

Glancing back at her, I was about to say something... to tell her she should instead join them, and not me, but it turned out we weren't alone.

Narli was hurrying to follow us down the hall, leaving her family behind.

Although surprising, it also wasn't. Renn had that affect on people. Particularly it seemed the unique.

Leaving the building, I held the door open for the two girls as they left. Upon shutting it, I turned and found Narli holding Renn's hand... but no longer hiding behind her.

"Oh...? Wait... were you afraid of Oplar then? Not Vim?" Renn asked, noticing the same.

"Hm...? She likes to hug. Way too much," Narli answered.

"Well..." Renn's tail twitched and I noticed she had likely just thought about hugging the girl.

"Why would she be scared of me, Renn?" I asked her, amused by her assumption she would be.

"Well..." Renn repeated herself, even with the same tail twitch.

I smiled at her as Narli giggled. "I'd like to show her the storage, Vim," Narli said.

"Hm," I nodded, and wondered if she had just asked me to leave them be... or to join them.

Before I could decide her meaning, Narli pulled Renn away... who reached out to grab my hand.

Taking Renn's hand, I sighed as I too got pulled towards the storage building.

The Keep was three large buildings. The Keep itself, hidden underground, was situated behind the middle and biggest building. The entrance was underneath the main building, hidden behind a door in the wall.

The other two buildings, the storage and the bath and extra boarding area, were built opposing to each other. There was a small pond to the south, fed by the heart within the keep, some farmlands to the west, and a massive forest surrounding all of it.

A typical little home... surrounded by deep forests and mountains, like the Crypt had been.

A place as far from other people as possible, on purpose.

Funnily enough at one time this place had been a huge capital. With more buildings than Lumen and Telmik combined.

Not even a single brick of those buildings remained.

Reaching the storage building, I watched Narli open the door and step through it. She had a slight skip to her step as she entered.

She was happy.

It told me a lot. About Renn. For Narli to so enjoy her presence was... rather telling.

“The original point of the storage was for moments of disaster. For when the Society needed a safe haven,” Narli explained as I was dragged into the building by Renn, who was pulled in by Narli.

I shut the door behind us, and because of it Renn’s hand slipped out of my own. I had paused, and Narli kept on dragging her along. Renn had not been willing to cling to me strongly enough to disrupt Narli’s flow. She did however glance back at me because of it.

“Now though we’re just... collecting stuff, sometimes. You’d be really surprised what finds its way here!” Narli said happily as she led Renn to the large stairwell door.

“You say that as if things show up without warning,” Renn noted as she and Narli opened the large door.

“Well... they do?” Narli said, as if unsure why Renn doubted it.

Renn’s ears danced a little as she tried to understand her meaning, and then the two disappeared as they stepped into the stairwell. They descended slowly, almost as slow as I followed.

I sighed softly as I watched the two descend.

Although I was glad that both Narli and Renn could be, and seemed to be, friends... I was also not really looking forward to the awkward conversations that would soon be born because of their friendship.

Narli wasn’t necessarily an annoyance, but...

I’d never liked saints.

Slowly heading down into the basement, I listened to the sound of a lamp being lit. The bottom of the stairs grew brighter thanks to it, causing shadows to begin to dance.

“Oh this is a bright one,” Renn noted.

“Isn’t it? It’s the flame. It is kept small, yet burns hot,” Narli happily displayed the lantern to Renn, showing off its intricate design.

“It really is... why does this one burn brighter than others? Is it the design of the glass?” Renn asked as she studied it.

“It’s the air flow. Particularly the intake. That one’s designed to work even in harsh winds and storms,” I explained.

Narli nodded. “You can even flip this thing upside down, watch,” she said as she went to display it.

Although she was partially right, the only reason it worked was because she returned it upright before the flame extinguished completely. But I let it be as Renn happily watched Narli show it off.

Glancing around the storage room, and all the rows of racks and shelves... I wondered if the two would be bothered if I chose to go sit instead of accompany them in their rummaging.

There were a few chairs lining the nearby wall, mostly just being stored... but there were a few in front of desks or tables, for working or keeping stock.

“This here is the most recent visitor. They showed up a few months ago,” Narli then took Renn down one of the aisles, stopping a few dozen feet down and kneeling in front of a box on the right.

I frowned as I peered around the edge of the shelves, and watched as Narli opened the box and pulled out what looked to be a small doll. It had crazy hair of yarn, and looked a little... worn down really, at least from here.

“Um... what do you mean by showed up? And why is it a visitor?” Renn asked as she accepted the doll from Narli.

“Because it won’t stay here. These items, like most lately, show up without warning. Father and I found a broken carriage near the pass several months ago. This stuff was left behind by those who abandoned it,” Narli explained.

“Oh... So you mean it literally. This is all stuff that you find,” Renn said as she understood.

“Sometimes. Some stuff really does just show up sometimes. About a year ago a horse just... walked onto our land, carrying packs and bags. Sometimes stuff like that just happens,” Narli said.

Renn’s ears fluttered and her tail increased its swaying as Narli rummaged deeper into the box, to pull something else out.

As Narli hummed and looked for whatever else she was searching for, Renn glanced over at me.

The look on her face told me exactly what she was thinking, and worrying about.

Deciding to just... accept that I'd have to fill in the gaps, I stepped around the edge of the shelf and entered the aisle as well.

"Saints all affect the world in different ways. An effect of their divinity. Narli's regrettably is the type of divinity that makes the world very... conscious of her," I said.

Renn tilted her head at me, and then returned her attention to Narli as she pulled out some kind of book.

"See this? This is a story written by some nobleman to the east. The weird part is the story has to be fiction, yet it speaks of Vim," Narli said.

"Wait what?" Renn perked up, and I frowned as I stepped forward.

"Yeah... what?" I asked as well.

Narli giggled. "It's the story of a god. How they fell in love with a human. At the end the evil enemy who destroys them is he who god's fear," Narli said.

Oh. A typical fairy-tale. Narli was just trying to tease me in her own way.

"Can I read it?" Renn asked as Narli handed it to her.

“Sure? It’s rather short... and boring. The eastern folk have a very... hm...” Narli pondered her thoughts a moment, and then nodded. “Their gods. They look at them like legends more than religious authorities. So they like to make fancy stories of them. It’s amusing, but a strange perspective of divine authority,” Narli said.

“She doesn’t like that they look at higher powers more akin to actual creatures than aspects of thoughts or rules,” I explained.

Renn tilted her head as she opened the book, and then she sighed. “It’s in a language I don’t know,” she said.

“Oh... I could read it to you if you’d like,” Narli offered.

“Hm,” Renn nodded excitedly.

Stepping closer, I bent down to pick up the lantern that Renn had put on the ground next to them. I lifted it above the two who were kneeling in front of the box, to better illuminate the focus of their attentions.

As I did I noticed Narli’s horn. It glimmered a little in the lamplight.

Although her parent’s horns did reflect light a little too... they didn’t shine like hers. Theirs glimmered just barely, mostly thanks to their reflective white surface, but hers...

Hers glowed with a tiny faint light. Made only more apparently obvious when reflecting firelight.

Her eyes also glowed... but only faintly. They weren't as bright as Celine's or other eyes of saints I'd seen. Yet they were still far brighter than the Chroniclers.

"Mother thinks these things come here to wait for someone else. Father thinks we're crazy," Narli said.

"Hm... what do you think?" Renn asked.

Narli tilted her head at Renn, and I noticed the way her pupils focused. They became a tad bit brighter as they stared at Renn, who was still looking at the book.

"Well... I think we're unable to comprehend the thoughts of things beyond us. I believe it's simply our job to do what is expected of us... If something is sent to us, we should do all we can to take care of it until it's ready for its purpose," Narli said.

Renn hummed as she handed Narli the little doll back, to be returned to the box.

"So... are these things coming here with their own purpose, or are you saying something else is sending them here?" Renn asked.

Narli nodded. "I believe what we call fate is guiding them. Giving them purpose, though we may never understand the how or the why," Narli said.

Renn's tail curled a little, and bumped into my right foot. It immediately went to coiling around my ankle, though it didn't wrap around too tightly.

"This is normally when Vim would make an off-handed comment about how he could set this whole place aflame, and nothing would be able to stop him from doing so... thus invalidating all I'm saying," Narli said calmly.

I smirked as Renn's tail tightened its grip, and her ear fluttered as she glanced up at me. Her look told me she not only knew exactly what Narli meant, but was as upset as she was over it.

"She makes me sound mean, but the time I had mentioned such a thing was when she had asked me to debate with her. She had wanted me to dissuade her beliefs," I said gently.

Narli sighed and nodded. "It's true... Vim's never outright tried to sway either my opinion or my families, as far as I'm aware," she admitted.

"Doesn't change the fact you're completely right. That's exactly what he'd say, or was likely thinking," Renn said.

Well...

The two returned the box to the shelf, except for the book, and they stood. As Renn stood her tail slid along my leg, running up my leg until it was somewhat wrapped around my thigh and not my ankle.

It'd be interesting to know if she did such things without any awareness or not. She had to at least realize what her tail did, if even subconsciously... right?

Narli turned and pointed down the aisle to another side. "A crate floated into a nearby lake, from the rivers... it had a bunch of molds in it," Narli said.

"Molds?" Renn asked.

"Blocks to shape clay and stuff. They were mostly for hooks and chain links," Narli said.

"Must have slipped off a merchant ship," I reasoned.

"Usually most the stuff that shows up is stuff like that. Either common goods, or weird specific stuff like those molds. There's never any reason to them... you'd think if fate was sending us stuff, they'd at least have some kind of pattern or relation to each piece," Narli wondered.

"Maybe you just don't have enough of the pieces yet," Renn said.

I frowned at the way she had said such a thing so quickly, and so surely.

“You’d believe they’re being sent here for a reason too?” I asked her.

“Well... yeah...? I’d understand something odd like a horse showing up, or crates full of supplies washing ashore, happening every so often. Especially for us who live so long... but the way Narli’s explaining it, this happens all the time? We’re rather far away from other people, as far as I can tell... The Crypt surely doesn’t have random stuff just showing up without warning. Nor did Secca. Why would it not happen elsewhere too, if it was just happenstance?” Renn reasoned.

Narli nodded quickly as she turned to face Renn. “Right...! My father seems to think it just happens everywhere! But surely not!” she said.

I kept my mouth shut as I thought of all the boxes and barrels, even entire ships, which had floated onto the beaches of those islands I had secluded myself on.

Those islands had been farther out, and more secluded, than here... and even there it happened often enough too.

Humans were messy. Their stuff got everywhere, all the time.

But...

I sighed as I thought of the violin.

That wasn't just a random piece of debris.

That was something I myself had made and...

Scanning the shelves, I wondered if maybe I should spend a few hours just... looking around. To see if any of the other stuff I've made over the years has found its way here too.

Although it'd be interesting to find out... I kept myself from committing to it.

The idea of most the stuff finding its way here being things I've touched, or even crafted, was nauseating to say the least. Particularly because I wasn't sure how to interpret it.

Had I made molds lately...? For hooks and chains...? Surely not... right? If I had, would it not have been at the Smithy? So...?

Tossing the thoughts away before they became terrifying, I watched Renn hum and turn.

"Hm..." Renn stepped away, her tail uncoiled from my thigh as she did, and she stepped over to the other side of the aisle. She peered at some of the stuff on the shelves, as if in search of something.

“Beneath the house, near the entrance to the Keep, is another storage room like this. But that one’s full of food. There’s food here too, though,” Narli said.

“Your farms aren’t that big... do members bring food occasionally too, or are there larger farms elsewhere?” Renn asked as she peered into a box.

Narli shifted a little. “The food here won’t spoil,” she simply said.

Renn’s ears went still for a moment... only for the left to flutter a little. She turned to look at Narli, studied her face for a moment, then Renn turned to look at me.

I smiled at her. “Narli’s being humble. She’s the reason,” I said.

“Uh... is that because of your bloodline, or because you’re a saint?” Renn asked.

“My father says it’s because of my heritage. My mother believes it’s my blessings,” Narli answered.

Renn shifted a little, her tail coiling at the tip for a tiny moment as she studied Narli.

“I see,” Renn then nodded, as if that made perfect sense to her.

And it probably did.

Narli, although a saint... wanted to very badly believe her father had some ground to stand on. Even if she herself didn't agree.

"The odd part though is it's only food and stuff that's stored beneath the ground. Any food we store in the house, above ground, spoils and rots just as fast as normal," Narli said as she glanced at me.

Renn glanced at me too, and I knew they were both waiting for me to give them either an answer or at least a basic explanation for such a conundrum.

"Try sleeping in the attic, with dirt under your bed," I suggest.

Narli gaped a little at me, and then squinted her eyes at me. "Would that actually work?" she asked.

"No... sorry. I was just making a joke," I said, feeling bad that she had almost believed me.

Renn was the one who glared at me. "Let me guess, Vim's been a jerk who hasn't answered or helped you understand your... uniqueness," Renn said stiffly.

“Hm? Oh no... Vim’s actually been very forthcoming with me. There’s a few things he doesn’t tell me, but I believe it’s because I’m either better off not knowing, or it’s information I’m supposed to figure out on my own. For instance he’s the one who told us that any food we store near where I sleep would keep it from spoiling,” Narli said calmly.

Renn calmed down a little and hummed at us.

“I don’t think the witch had such an ability... but maybe she did and I simply never noticed,” Renn said.

“You did mention you knew a saint... is she still alive?” Narli asked.

Renn frowned and shook her head. “Sadly, no. She perished a long time ago,” she said.

I noted she kept the fact she had killed her saintly witch friend to herself.

Honestly she hadn’t needed to.

Narli would understand if Renn explained it. Particularly if Renn simply told her the truth, about why she had needed to do it.

Narli couldn’t read minds, like some of her brethren, but she was able to sense lies. It was why she struggled so hard to believe anything I said, sometimes.

Like my little joke earlier. Had I been a normal being, she would have sensed it had been a lie before I had even finished saying it.

“Still it’s a surprise... You’re not the first to speak of other saints... but like most others, they’re people from centuries ago. It’s almost like something happened to stop our births in the last couple hundred years,” Narli said.

“The wars brought forth an increase in births of saints, Narli. I’ve explained that to you before,” I said.

“I know... but it’s just strange. Are there not wars now? Plagues? Chaos? And in a way, aren’t there always such conflicts and chaos?” Narli asked.

“There are... but...” I hesitated, since Renn’s eyes were boring into me.

Usually when Narli and I spoke about such things, we were alone. It was a little strange to have someone not just listening, but a part of the conversation too.

“But?” Renn asked, urging me to continue.

“But... Saints are more commonly born amongst the bloodline of those who already had a saint in their ancestry. The odds of a saint being born to a virgin bloodline is... exceedingly small and rare. And that’s the issue. Most of the bloodlines have been lost. There used to be hundreds of them, now I bet I could scour the whole world and only find a handful at best,” I said.

“Hm, Vim has mentioned before about the bloodline thing,” Renn said, nodding.

“He has. But I have a hard time believing it’s the main reason. We’re conduits to the divine... why would a god’s power care for one’s blood?” Narli asked.

Renn tilted her head as she went to pondering Narli’s perspective.

Great. I expected Renn to pick up a few... odd perspectives while here, but I had hoped they had leaned more to the more personal ones. The beliefs of religion maybe... not this stuff.

Yet it was inevitable I guess...

“Not going to comment on that, Vim?” Renn finally asked, as the two of them stared at me.

“No,” I said simply.

Narli sighed in defeat, and Renn noticed.

Before Renn could glare at me and say anything, I raised a hand to gently protect myself. “There are many possible reasons. All of which are likely beyond our understanding. To be quite frank... saints are

existences outside the realm of normalcy. They are like monarchs. Beings that do not belong in the normal world. They should be rare. Back when there had been many saints, there had been a lot of problems. More than a few used their abilities for the wrong reasons," I said.

Renn shifted and glanced at Narli, waiting for her response.

"I'd agree with you Vim, if you didn't so fiercely protect those like myself," Narli said.

"I protect the individual, not the powers they possess," I said.

Renn nodded, finding that fact to be very clear and obvious... and even Narli nodded. "That is true, I suppose."

"You suppose?" I asked.

Narli shifted, and her glowing eyes glared at me. "You have never asked me to use my abilities. Not directly, at least," she admitted.

"Glad you realize it," I said with a smile.

"How about indirectly?" Renn asked, uncaring for my point.

I sighed as Narli smirked and gestured at me. "He's never asked me to do anything, honestly... but he has asked my opinion before. From my perspective not as an individual, but as a saint," Narli said.

Renn frowned at her. "There's a difference?"

Narli hesitated, and her eyebrows shifted into an odd squirm as she tried to comprehend Renn's accusation. "I... I suppose there is, isn't there?" she asked herself more than not.

"Don't give her an identity crises, please," I gently begged.

Renn blinked at me, and then looked at Narli with a worried expression. "Um... sorry, Narli. I hadn't meant my question to be that serious," she said quickly.

"No... you're very right... I am a saint, yet I'm also myself. Yet who am I but what I am?" Narli asked herself.

I sighed, and realized that Renn had legitimately just made Narli question herself. She'd likely be debating it for months.

A byproduct of Narli's ability to not only sense lies... but hear the purity of one's words. She had not just heard Renn's question, but had also heard Renn's meaning.

Had I asked for the opinion of Narli, or the saint powers she possessed?

“Everyone has multiple sides to them. You need not allow such a thought confound you so deeply, Narli,” I said gently.

“But it’s true, Vim. The times you had asked for my opinion... had not entirely been because of my abilities, had they? Who then had you been asking?” she asked me as she looked to me.

“You yourself, obviously. I asked you, Narli, for insight. Insight which you perceived by using your abilities... yes... but those abilities had been useless without your own ways to view and comprehend them,” I said.

Renn nodded, telling me she understood my meaning clearly.

Yet Narli only frowned further.

“We can solve this right now,” I said as I reached around to pull out the heart.

Narli stood up straighter, and Renn’s ears perked as the pink glowing orb was held before them.

“Oh my,” Narli whispered in awe as she stared at it.

"I'll be leaving this here. For a short while," I said.

Renn's ears fluttered as she hurriedly looked at me, as if shocked. Yet she kept her thoughts to herself as I turned the heart a little, rolling it in my palm.

"Why... it's as old as the Heart of the Pond... Who had this been, Vim?" Narli asked with wonder.

"A friend," I said simply.

Narli startled, as did Renn, and the saint quickly looked up at me... her eyes growing brightly as she studied me with all her might. "Truly?" she asked.

I nodded.

"I had not known you had any left," Narli whispered.

"There's two more in the room right now, Narli," I said gently.

Renn blushed, and then even Narli did... as she then went to giggling. "Oh how sweet of you!" she said.

Hmph.

“So... before I leave... I’d like you to do me a favor, Narli,” I said, to stop her from asking more about Miss Beak.

“Hm...?” she tilted her head at me, and seemed to no longer be bothered by her earlier mental conundrum that Renn had brought to her attention.

Reaching out, I held the heart out to Renn.

She frowned at me, but reached out to accept the heart without question or hesitation.

Dropping it into her hand, I studied my companion... who was smiling warmly at the little orb. As if greeting a long lost friend.

“I want to know if Renn’s compatible with it or not.”

Maybe she’d come to a different conclusion than me.

Chapter 273 Narli’s Hobby

The little boat was floating quietly upon the lake, with the only sound coming from it or us being the sound of my tail brushing against the bottom of the boat.

Holding the fishing rod, I smiled as my eyes scanned the calm lake's surface. Not a ripple was in sight, not even from bugs.

I could of course remember the last time I had fished. It hadn't been too long ago, actually. While Vim and I had traveled to the Crypt, after Miss Beak's death at the beach. We had fished in a small river. But I had not done so with a fishing pole, let alone properly. Instead Vim and I had simply just... caught the fish in the river with our hands.

It had surprisingly been very effective at the time.

This wasn't as quick, or efficient... but...

There was a very strange peace to it. One that made me remember my years with Nory. We had often fished in the lakes around our cabin, particularly during the winter. We had sat for most the day, without saying a word sometimes.

I used to miss those days.

"Vim usually fishes with me," Narli said softly.

Glancing at her, my smile grew a little. "Is that what you usually ask of him?" I asked, just as quietly.

We were talking softly, for obvious reasons, but... I've come to learn that Narli herself was in general just a quiet person. She never raised her voice. Never moved fast, or with great force. She was gentle. Dutifully so.

She nodded, and her little horn gleamed a little as she did. The sun had reflected off it and blinded me for a tiny moment when she had lowered her head far enough. "I'm glad you're here. He's not... necessarily boring, but..." she smiled a little as she spoke, telling me she thought the same I did sometimes.

"He can be... but he can also be still and quiet for a long time too, so he is useful when fishing," I said.

Narli giggled softly as she nodded again. Thanks to her laughter, and her movement, the boat rocked ever so softly. A tiny little ripple flowed outward through the lake because of it, but it didn't live long enough to touch either of our lines.

"So he's quiet with you too? Even when you're alone?" Narli asked.

"Most of the time. He'll respond if I talk to him, though," I said.

Narli hummed at that, and was about to say something but her fishing pole moved.

I watched as she smoothly went to pulling the fish out of the water. It didn't take her long at all to lead the fish near the boat, and then tug one last time to bring it half out of the water. She grabbed the line, and brought the brown fish into the boat.

It was decent sized. The type of plump that had Vim and I caught it on our travels, I'd have been excited. It would only take that fish and maybe one or two more smaller ones to feed us.

Yet as Narli took the little hook out of the fish's mouth, I realized something I should have noticed before.

We didn't have a bucket. Unless she was just going to put the fish on the bottom of the boat... but there wasn't much room near our feet...

Narli answered my worry, but in a different way. She studied the fish for a tiny moment and then nodded as she went to throw it back into the lake.

"We're not going to keep them?" I asked. That was the first fish we'd caught so far! We'd been at this for an hour already almost.

"Not today. Today they're not to be eaten," Narli said simply, as if it was very obvious as to why.

Watching her lift the fish, and then let it slip out of her hand over the edge of the boat, it plopped into the water without resistance. I heard the fish swim off quickly, and then the lake went quiet again.

"Hm..." I'd wonder if it was a religious thing, but I'd already seen her eat meat and fish in our dinner last night.

“Does it bother you?” she asked as she went to check on the hook she had just removed from the fish.

“Fishing for fun? Not at all... but you said it in a way that tells me it’s more than that. Are... are you saying if we ate the fish we caught today, it’d end up being a bad thing?” I asked.

Narli smiled as she finished checking the hook, and then turned as to toss the line back into the water.

“Mother’s preparing a pig for dinner. Amongst other things. It’d be a shame to ruin her efforts, and eventually my own when I go to help her, by filling our bellies with something else,” she said.

Ah! So that was what I had heard this morning. Narli and I had left rather early, and I could have sworn I had heard a squeal of an animal. It must have been the pig.

“That makes a lot of sense,” I agreed.

Narli giggled a little as she nodded. “If you were looking forward to fish we can keep a few if you’d like,” Narli offered.

“No, no. To be honest I’d rather have the pig,” I said.

Vim was always very proactive about feeding me. Particularly well, too. Yet lately not only have our last few stops been... well... lackluster, but so have our travels. The Crypt had simple and boring meals, on purpose. Thanks to their religious edicts. The Weaver's Hut had been more fruits and fish, not much meat. And our travels recently have been through arid and dry places, lacking real opportunities to hunt or fish... so...

"Does Vim neglect you? He can go so long without food, but I've always thought him kinder than to make others suffer alongside him," Narli asked, likely misunderstanding the thoughts on my face.

"Not at all! Vim likes to watch me eat new and tasty food... it's just recently we've not been able to eat anything nice like a pig, is all," I said.

"Hm... ah, because you were recently at the Crypt. Yes. They're a little... pious over there," Narli said as she understood.

I was going to comment that she and her mother seemed equally so, but decided against it. Especially if she saw them as more extreme followers of their religion than herself.

"Have you... met them?" I asked carefully.

"No. I've only met a few members of the Society... but I've heard lots about them, particularly from mother," she said.

"Your mother?" I asked.

She nodded. "Mother used to be very involved in the Society. Before I was born. She used to live in Telmik," she said.

A little stunned, I at first was going to wonder how she had lived there... what with her horn, but realized the religious headdress those sisters wore would have easily hid it.

Yet... what really bothered me was something a little more personal and serious.

Her mother had been involved in the Society. And now wasn't. Because of Narli's birth.

"I'm sorry you need to be so careful, Narli. You'd think at least within the Society you'd be in less danger," I said softly.

Narli blinked and sat up a little straighter. Our little boat shifted a tad, and then she gently smiled at me.

"You really are a gentle one... It's okay, Renn. I actually am very happy here, living like this. Plus, I've been told that during the vote I'll get to visit Telmik. Vim's already offered to escort us," Narli said.

Oh...! "Really? That's good! We'll keep you safe, I promise," I said.

Narli's smile warmed a little as she nodded.

So they were already making plans...? I mean, it made sense... but...

Wonder why I hadn't heard them talking about it. Narli and I had been next to each other nearly this whole time since we got here.

"Can I ask... why you saints are so targeted? The religious should want to protect you, yet I've heard they're even more dangerous to you sometimes. While I'd think the non-religious wouldn't even care about you, too," I asked.

"It's an instinctual thing. We unnerve people... either because of our eyes, our presence, or our abilities," Narli said as she pointed at her eyes.

Unnerve... "Well..." I was about to say I've never felt the desire to kill a saint just by being near them, but then had to bite my tongue.

"Plus... there is actually an affect we have on the world, and the world us. Like how strange items always find their way here, without explanation. We, and many do, could argue the reason for it... whether it's divine intervention, magical powers, or something we can't understand... but the fact of the matter is, we saints are both unique and the world sees us as unique as well. A saint can hide herself completely, far away from any people, and yet still get found. Without reason or proof. A very powerful saint, Mantopli, is the perfect example of that," Narli added.

"Mantopli...?"

“A saint back in the beginning of the Society. They had been living underneath an active volcano, and had been for what was likely centuries. A whole army, formed and commanded by a man following prophetic dreams, marched half a world away to the mountain. They laid siege to it, not even knowing she was there. When his soldiers carried her out of the mountain to him, half dead, he was so furious he had been led all that way over a single woman,” Narli told me.

“Wait... so he hadn’t known she was there?” I asked.

“As far as the story goes, no. He had simply been led there by dreams,” Narli said as she shook her head.

Huh...

“You’re basically saying that... the world, or fate or however you wish to see it, suddenly decides randomly that certain individuals need to die... and thus sends random people to fulfill that task,” I said.

Narli shrugged. “It makes no sense to me either. If we really are conduits of a god’s power... and it’s the gods that command fate... That means we’re being hunted by the things that create us. I’ve long pondered it, I have no answer for it,” Narli said.

“Wonder what Vim would say about it,” I said.

“He’s given me two different answers,” she said.

I tilted my head as Narli nodded. "First time I asked, he told me it's because I am misunderstanding a fundamental truth," she said.

"That's it...?" I asked, upset for her.

She nodded again. "Isn't it rude? The second time I asked, not too many years ago, he told me if fate is real and wants me dead... it's because I interfere with it. He said I shouldn't question fate or the world wanting me dead, because I break the natural order. That my birth, my power and its source, were irrelevant."

I blinked, and strangely found that to not only be a very Vim-like answer... but...

"That makes sense to you, doesn't it?" Narli asked, watching me.

I nodded slowly. "It... does. I don't like it, and I don't want to agree with it... but it does make sense. Let's say a god created a saint... how are we to know it isn't for a singular purpose? And then once that purpose is fulfilled..." I gestured lightly, because I didn't want to say out loud the rest.

"Hm. Is that how you justified it?" Narli asked.

The boat rocked a tad as I gripped the fishing pole tighter.

Slowly looking at her, I found her smiling gently at me.

“You’ve killed a saint before, haven’t you Renn?” Narli then asked.

My fishing pole shook for a tiny moment, and my mouth went dry.

Her small smile on her face was very odd. A sad one, but a smile nonetheless.

Although very disturbed... I found myself relaxing a little upon seeing her look so calm and happy... and then I nodded to her.

“It’s okay... I can’t tell a lot... but I can tell it was something that troubles you. That you regret it. That it had hurt. And not because she had cursed you, either,” Narli said.

“You can see all that...?” I asked softly.

Narli tilted her head a little. “It’s more like... I can sense it. A lot of people think we saints are all the same, with the same abilities and sources, but we’re not. We can be as different as anyone else. But one constant, is the touch of the divine. No matter which divinity it is, or to what level,” she said.

The divine... “You can tell I’ve... touched the divine?” I asked.

She nodded. "Verily. I'm sure all saints could, to be honest. We can tell when someone has both been touched by a divine power, and also when they have touched it themselves. In this case... I can tell you've both received divine power, and also were what snuffed it out," she said.

Snuffed it out... "Are you saying any saint could tell?" I asked.

"As far as I'm aware. It's very obvious, and to... be completely honest Renn, my abilities aren't the best nor the strongest. It's part of the reason Vim never really considers me to be like the others he's known. To him I'm not a full-fledged saint. I don't have the same reach as they do," she said.

I didn't really want to hear that, since it meant a real saint was even stronger and weirder than her... but... well...

Witch had been rather strong, hadn't she...?

"She wanted to die," I whispered.

Narli blinked, her bright eyes going dark for but a moment.

"She had been sad. Very sad. And tired. She begged me to help her," I said.

"I see," Narli said softly.

"At the time I... felt obligated. I owed her so much. So when she so seriously begged it of me, pleading, I... well..." I gulped as I realized I was not just telling her... This was the first time I'd told anyone since it happened.

I'd told Vim I had killed her... but I hadn't ever told him why, or how.

"So... you'd not have done it? Had she asked you today?" Narli asked me.

I blinked and was about to shake my head... to tell her no. To tell her how I'd never again allow such a thing to happen again.

How I'd try with all my might to always avoid such a result... to struggle and cry and...

But...

"I'd like to think I wouldn't... but... at the same time..." I whispered as I admitted it.

"Hm... you really are a gentle soul, Renn," Narli said.

“No... I’m not. It means I’m too cowardly to face those I love. I should be willing to incur their wrath and anger, if that is what it took to keep them alive,” I said.

Narli said nothing as I took a deep breath. At least I wasn’t crying, even if I felt like I wanted to.

“So to hear you say that the world just... forces it to happen? Does that mean I didn’t have a choice? That she sensed it? I don’t want to hear that. I don’t want to let what I did be nothing more than the whims of something I don’t even know exists,” I said.

“We saints can’t kill ourselves, Renn.”

Blinking, I frowned as I focused on her. “Huh?”

“We can’t. And... because of what we are, it’s surprisingly difficult for us to die too. The world is cruel to us, yet not in the way that results in death. There’s a reason I live here, Renn. Even though my heart yearns for me to go out into the world, and help people,” she said.

“You want to leave?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’m happy here. I don’t mind it... but... at the same time... I do. Verily. I dream of those I should, and could, be helping. Those who are sick. Those who are in pain. Those who are lost. Particularly them... for some reason my ability is very... entwined with the idea of finding one’s purpose. So I always dream of lost little children in horrible places, who I need to save,” she said.

Lost children...? "Sounds... annoying," I said.

Narli giggled and nodded. "It is sometimes, it is."

Shifting a little, I moved the fishing rod a bit. I wasn't too concerned with catching fish anymore. "I still regret it. But... I understand. I know, based off the happy smile on her face as I did it, that what I did had been the right thing. Influenced or no," I said.

"Yes. As I said... she had not cursed you. She left this world with no hate directed at you," Narli said.

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"I just do. But only because it's another saint we're talking about. For instance I can see others within you... those you've slain. Those you are glad for ending, and those that torment you even now. But I can't tell who, why, or anything special about them. They're as... blank to me as your mind," she said.

"My mind is blank?" I asked.

Narli giggled again. "You're very focused on the odd things. I meant, I can't read your mind. Not like other saints. So... basically I'm saying I can't tell anything about that stuff," she explained.

Ah. Right...

"I wonder what people's minds sound like," I wondered.

"I'm told it's chaotic. And not a good ability to have, at all," Narli said.

"Oh?"

She nodded. "Vim's told me before. That he's known many saints with such abilities. He says they never die easy, or well," she said.

I sighed. "Wonder how many he's ended himself," I said.

For a long moment the world was silent... and I felt a little awkward as I glanced at her.

She was staring softly at me, with a strange look. It was hard to tell if it was shock, or something else, thanks to her eyes though.

"Sorry," I whispered, apologizing for being crass.

Narli then smiled, and shook her head. "You're fine, Renn. I was just... surprised you could say such a thing with so much love in your heart. You hadn't said it with disgust or anger, but simple fact. You know

exactly what kind of man you love, and have accepted him for it all the same. It makes me jealous," she said.

My tail coiled around my left elbow as I studied the saint. She had tiny blush on her face now. "Can you... see into Vim too?" I asked her.

"Hm...?"

My ear twitched as I shrugged. "Like... how you just did with me. Can you see that stuff about Vim too?" I asked.

Narli was quiet for a moment... then she looked away from me. Out over the lake. But not towards her fishing line. "I cannot see within him... but I can see around him," she said.

Around him...? Before I could ask what that meant, Narli lifted a hand.

She made a fist, and I was a little amused to see how tiny it was. She really wasn't much smaller than me; she just had really tiny hands. "Vim is like a dense ball. Something only this big, yet within that tiny space is... what I'd consider an infinite amount of room. So I can see inside him, yes... but because of how vast he is, I can't make anything out. Everything is so tiny, they're basically invisible. No matter how hard I focus, or how long I concentrate," she explained.

I gulped as I listened, and couldn't help but think of the monarch hearts in the Keep.

“Is it... similar to what the hearts look like?” I dared to ask.

Narli smiled at me and narrowed her eyes. “You really are wise. Yes and no. The hearts... look like what I’m explaining, but they’re not. The hearts are just giant balls of energy. Divine power condensed into a small orb. They’re not actually minds or souls, even though so many believe they are. Vim is... different. I can see why you’d make the connection, though,” she said.

So... he’s different... but not outright enough to the point that she could just say so.

Which meant he really was something different. Something... similar to them, but not...

A monarch yet not...

That’s what he had told me before. That he was one, but without a heart.

Yet it was a heart that made a monarch what it was in the first place.

So contradicting...

“I don’t know what Vim is... I...” Narli hesitated, and she turned a little. The boat rocked, and she put her fishing rod down a moment.

I sat up straighter, worried something was wrong... but she instead leaned forward... as if to whisper with me.

Joining her, I put my rod down as well and leaned forward a bit too.

“Don’t get... bothered by this... okay?” she asked.

I nodded quickly.

Narli took a small breath and glanced around, to make sure we were alone. Well... of course we were. We were in the middle of a lake.

Once sure we were alone she looked back at me. “No one has divinity. Not anymore,” she whispered.

I blinked as I quickly tried to understand what she was saying.

She nodded quickly, before I could even wrap my head around it. “In all my years... I’ve only seen divinity in those touched. Saints. Monarchs... or well, their hearts. But I’ve never seen it in anything else,” she said.

Cold understanding washed over me, and I was half tempted to jump into the lake because of it.

She was saying that no one... no normal people at least... had pieces of gods in them anymore.

"I... but..." I hesitated as I thought of all the scriptures.

"I know. It's mind boggling. Yet, I've been told by those I have no reason to doubt, that people all used to have divinity within them. Just like I do. Just like a monarch. Not as much, nor as potent of course, but they had it," Narli whispered.

"Who told you this?" I asked. Vim, maybe?

"The Chronicler's sister. Before she passed. She had been a saint as well," Narli said.

Oh...? Wow... That meant Narli was a little older than I had assumed.

"So you're saying that other saints, those who lived before us, saw everyone with parts of... divinity within them," I said, trying to understand.

She nodded. "And now no one has it. No one born today."

I was going to ask how Narli knew this if she was always here, not seeing anyone else... but I knew such a comment wasn't proper. Especially since she had recently helped save a couple women a few years ago. It meant she did see people, if only occasionally.

"Have you asked Vim about this?" I asked.

"No. I'm scared to," she admitted.

Scared...? "Of his answer, you mean," I understood.

She nodded. "Yes... he keeps his secrets of course... but sometimes he still reveals them. And his nonchalant answers terrify me more than the darker secrets he keeps," she said.

Nodding quickly, I agreed. "Because it means the true secrets he's keeping are even worse, or scarier," I said, agreeing completely.

"Right...!" Narli nodded too, and our boat rocked a little because of it.

Tapping my fishing pole, I hummed as I thought about this new information.

No one had their god's blessings, or powers, in them anymore. That was basically what Narli meant by divinity.

Such a weird thing... especially if it was true we all used to.

I'll need to talk to Vim about it later... maybe after we leave, so that just in case Narli didn't accidentally hear.

Though I might also need to wait until after that too, since Oplar was with us.

As I pondered it, a fish jumped out of the lake some distance away. I watched it land back into the water, barely making a splash.

"You're... surprisingly open about this stuff," I said.

"You've been spending too much time with Vim. People aren't usually so secretive," she said.

Smirking at that, I nodded. That was very true.

"Plus... I feel comfortable with you. You're Vim's partner. Whether you like to or not, whether the world accepts it or not... doesn't matter. It makes you special. In ways no one can understand yet. It won't be long until you're the one teaching me, I bet," she said.

Somehow I doubted that, but...

"I promise not to be as difficult as Vim. If I ever get like that just... whack me in the head or poke me with your horn, I guess," I said with a point to my forehead.

Narli grinned at me. "They're actually rather sharp you know? Don't regret saying that," she said.

"I bet they are," I said as I grinned back.

As Narli and I laughed, a large bird flapped up towards us. It didn't hesitate to fly over to Narli, as to try and land on her head.

She quickly went to shooing it away, going so far as to even move her fishing pole around in effort to scare it off.

"Shoo!" Narli shouted as it flapped harder, and then it squawked and finally flew off.

Narli let out a heavy sigh as she sat back down, as the boat rocked in complaint.

"See Renn? Nothing good about being a saint at all," she complained with a huff.

Giving her a small nod, I did my best to not smirk and laugh as Narli mumbled and complained as she re-situated herself.

The two of us went back to fishing, and luckily the rest of our conversations didn't stray into the strange or uncanny.

In fact it ended up being very enjoyable... even if as the day went on and each fish we caught and released made it worse... since each time just made me hungrier.

Chapter 274 Trophies

Stepping down the hallway, I walked slowly... quietly.

Reaching the end of the hall, I peered into the half-open door. The large bedroom was dark, even though it was midday.

Although the bedroom of a saint, it looked more like Sharp's room than any of the other nuns back at the Crypt. It was packed full of items, on shelves and not. She even had stuff littering the floor, like a tiny child unable to properly sort and clean her room.

But it wasn't her messy room that I found interesting. What I found amusing, instead, was what was on the bed.

Curled up together, under thin blankets, were Renn and Narli. It was both interesting, and a little worrisome, that Renn's head was so close to Narli's horn. I couldn't see it from here, but odds were they were even holding hands.

Sleeping with a saint. If she knew how hard such a feat was to accomplish, I bet she'd never lack confidence again.

I sighed quietly, and blamed myself.

This was what I got for not sharing a room with her.

Stepping away, I returned to the center of the house. It was quiet, but not because no one else was here. Oplar was in her room, I had heard her talking to herself as she wrote in her journal.

Horn was also around here somewhere, but I hadn't seen him for awhile. And his wife, lovely Berri, was humming away in the nearby kitchen as she'd been doing for hours.

She enjoyed cooking for visitors. Always had.

Realizing this was likely a good moment, I decided to head for the Keep.

Stepping out of the house, I found Horn. He noticed my exit and stepped over to me. His hands and arms were recently washed, and still a little wet, which told me he had been doing something that had required washing his hands. Likely something to do with the farms considering he had been heading for the house from their direction.

“Well Vim, I’ve officially given up on the pumpkins,” Horn said with a sigh.

Ah... “It is a little cold here,” I reasoned.

“I thought by growing them in a mound between two hardier crops would better insulate them. Plus they were in a spot with as much sunshine as possible throughout the day... I’ve tried for several years now, and I think it just can’t be done,” Horn said.

“You could just make a greenhouse, Horn,” I suggested.

He huffed at me and rubbed his right hand against his thigh, as if it was dirty or something. But I knew it was instead because the idea of using such a method was... at least in his eyes, beneath him.

“Think about it. Your wife and daughter would likely enjoy squash snacks and meals,” I said gently.

He shifted and frowned. “Berri does like them roasted...” he mumbled.

I smiled at him and nodded. She did. She also really enjoyed the pies. “I’d offer to help, but we’ll not be here long enough I think. I could though find a spot for it, and help you design and plan it if you’d like,” I offered.

Horn sighed and nodded. “Maybe... maybe... let me eat and sleep on it,” he said.

“Sure,” I nodded as he nodded back and then stepped away, to head into the house.

I watched him go for a moment and couldn’t help but smile at the man who was mumbling complaints.

He’d give in. Especially once Berri or Narli heard that I had offered to help him.

He hated technology or using methods from the Society, or the religious... but he couldn’t deny his family anything.

Horn was a simple man, but he was also a good one.

Such men like him were always stuck between a rock and a hard place.

“Pumpkins,” I mumbled as I glanced to the nearby hill. Just beyond it were the farms.

Honestly during certain seasons this area should have been just barely able to grow such things. But the nights did get chilly. Even during the summer sometimes, let alone the winter. It likely meant they went bad before even sprouting... They needed not just warmer soil, but heavily hydrated stuff too. A hard mix for this mountainous region. Even with the near infinite source of water, it was just a laborious task.

But... the greenhouse would fix that completely. They would need to hand-water them often, but... well...

It wasn't like Horn had too much to do usually. They lived simple lives, all things considered.

I wish my only worries were about growing pumpkins.

Though that belittled Horn's true worries. It wasn't fair to think such things about him.

Sighing at myself I headed around the house. I entered the back of the house, behind the kitchen, and headed for the entrance of the Keep.

It was accessible from inside the house. I hadn't needed to leave it. But the door that led to it from the main hallway was rather noisy. It was big and heavy, and squeaked on the hinges.

I hadn't wanted to wake Renn or Narli by opening it. Both of them were very perceptive, and I was not in the mood for another afternoon of questions and stories. I had barely survived the one the other night.

The entrance to the Keep was its own room in the back of the house. It was a windowless room, and the only thing inside of it was the hole in the floor that was a stairwell.

The first few steps of the stairwell were wooden, but not because the dark brick of the Keep didn't begin until later. Rather it was because the first few steps into the Keep had been broken and shattered. The

stone bricks had been jagged and sharp. Not the kind of stuff you wanted to walk upon, less you accidentally slipped or fell.

After about a dozen or so steps, the wooden steps returned to the normal black stone ones. The undamaged stones were smooth, but rough enough to not be slippery. Even when wet.

They were not wet at the moment... but I remembered them being so in my memories.

It had been when they were wet that I had broken those first few steps. I had been very upset as I swam up and out of the Keep, both annoyed over having to drain the submerged tomb and the idiots who had gotten it sunk.

Reaching the end of the first stairwell, I had to open the heavy wooden door that led to a hallway. The hallway was dark, and although started out small, with low ceilings and close walls, it eventually opened up and widened. By the time I reached the end of the hallway, to another door, the hallway had opened enough to be considered a great hall more than not.

Another door led to a new stairwell. One much larger than the first. It was big enough, with a high enough ceiling, that my steps echoed as I descended it.

There were three more hallways and stairwells. All relatively similar. Dark. Made of stone. With huge doors to separate them.

A fortress. A genuine fortress built hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Thousands, possibly, even. Made originally to entomb the divine figure of a great nation.

That nation had its last stand here too. They had held out rather well, all things considered.

Reaching the end of the last stairwell, which led to a rounded hallway, I walked slowly amongst the darkness towards the center of the structure.

I knew others needed lamps down here. Particularly in these sections, where the hallways were strangely darker than elsewhere. There were small rooms, without doors, on both ends of the hallway. Each had shelves with lamps, chairs, and simple supplies. Elsewhere in the Keep were similar storerooms and whatnot, just in case a day came where Berri and her family needed to hide down here.

The purpose of it was simple.

Stay down here, safe, until I arrived.

Although the doors were wooden, they were the kind of heavy timber that would be near impossible for humans or even non-humans to easily get through. Fire wouldn't work, since there was not enough airflow to sustain the flames. Axes, or any brute force methods, would be their only real viable method and it would be very difficult and take a long time. Particularly since only one or two people could attack the doors at a single time.

Then...

Pausing in the middle of the hall, I glanced to the walls. There were smooth little gaps in the darkness. They blended in well, and likely wouldn't have been something noticed even if the hallway was lit. I simply knew where they were, out of having used them.

There were stone doors. Huge blocks, that could be slid outward. They could, and did, seal off the hallways completely. With a groove set in the ground that made it near impossible for anyone to open them from the outside. You would have to pull them somehow from the other end, which wouldn't be feasible. There was nothing and nowhere to grab them. There wasn't even enough space between the blocks and the ground and walls to slip something in to use as a joist or lever.

I had used this Keep's structure as an example for the refuge beneath Telmik. Although I had added a few... additional safety measures to that one.

Brushing the stone wall with a hand, and the gap of the hidden block, I returned to walking.

Hopefully Berri and her family would never need to use this place.

Hopefully no one would.

Our kind could last a long time under... pressure and stress. But it was never done so without consequence.

They could easily survive down here for years, thanks to the fresh water and the stores of food. But would they enjoy it? Would their hearts and minds be calm and undamaged after...?

Likely not. Particularly Narli...

Exiting the hallway, I stepped into the first larger room of the Keep. It had murals and paintings, but I paid them no heed as I left the room and went down another hall.

The next room had statues. Mostly marble ones. I glanced at a few as I passed them, and headed for the center of the Keep.

To the Heart of the Keep.

Entering the room which housed the heart, I glanced at the nearest water stream.

Flowing steady. Like always.

This room was brighter than the rest, thanks to the soft azure glow of the heart in the center of the room.

There were ten pedestals in the center of the room, but only the center pedestal was being used. It was also the only one that was made to allow water flow. It was hollow inside, unlike the others, and had little crevices and small sluices as to direct the flow of all the water that seeped from the heart.

Although I had made multiple pedestals... I'd never needed all of them at once. The most hearts that had ever been here at once was eight. And it had only been for a very short time.

It would have seemed shortsighted and foolish, but when I had made them... I had been running into monarchs rather often. There had been times when I had carried around not just a single heart but several. It was why I had turned this place into a vault. Those who had been able to absorb and deal with the hearts had been more numerous back then, but none of them could devour more than a single heart at a time. It took years to properly absorb and adjust them, even for the greater monarchs like Miss Beak. In fact it was about time she should be able to...

Pausing, I coughed as I realized I had just forgotten she was dead.

Which was very weird since the entire reason I had come down here was to put her heart here.

Reaching around, I undid the little pouch that hid the heart. The monarch leather was... strange to feel. It was a little rubbery, even though it could cut and slice if you touched the edges of the seams without care.

I had three such pouches. Or well, now I suppose I had two. I had given one to Renn. Both so she could carry the letters entrusted to her, but also so she too could have a pouch to hide anything she needed to from prying eyes.

I wasn't sure yet if Renn knew how special that pouch was, or what it was capable of... but I knew that was my fault. It's not like I had explained it to her. I had simply given it to her and told her to keep the letters in it, and to not lose it.

Sighing as I pulled out Miss Beak's heart, I lifted it a little as to stare into the swirling pink colors.

"You probably would be upset with me. Leaving you here... next to that one," I said as I glanced to the blue orb.

Stepping over to one of the pedestals, I placed Beak's heart onto the metal stand. The thing was a small half-circle. Made specifically to hold a heart. The pink orb slid into the grooves of the stand, and as it settled it spun a little.

As it settled... I reached over to gently tap it, and make it spin. Thanks to the smooth metal, and how the stand was a slight bigger than the heart itself, the orb spun. It soundlessly spun inside the stand, though the swirling colors within it didn't move or shift alongside the movement.

"Rest here a bit, my friend. You're not in good company here, at least amongst your own, but the others will make up for it. They're good people," I said softly.

Of course the heart didn't respond. And I wasn't foolish enough to expect one.

After all, although Miss Beak's heart... it was more the heart of her creator than she herself. It was the conduit. Not her.

Still... it reminded me of her.

At least I hadn't needed to end her life with my own hands.

Such a thought made me frown, since it almost made my eyes water. It was a sad thing to be so relieved over, yet it was the truth.

I hadn't needed to end another friend's life with my own hands. There was a strange... solace to it.

Hearing footsteps, I pulled my hand away from the orb. It took several minutes for the source of the sounds to appear.

Berri smiled at me as she lowered her lantern at the sight of me.

"So you really did have another. It's been a long time since you've left one here," she said as she entered the room.

She was alone, and as she approached I smelled the bread she had been making all afternoon. It was a sweet smell.

"It has been a while, hasn't it?" I agreed as Berri walked up next to me.

Berri stepped up to the pedestal and studied Miss Beak's heart. Her horn shimmered with the pink color as she smiled at it. "That's a very pretty color," she said.

“They had been a flamingo,” I told her.

Berri perked up as she stood up straighter. “Really...? That makes a lot of sense. Fascinating...” she said.

I suppose it did. There weren’t many pink animals, were there?

Though I guess in a sense flamingos weren’t always pink. It was their diet that dictated their colors, usually.

Thinking of all the animals I knew of that were, or could be considered, pink... I realized most of them were found in the water. Sea life, typically... like seahorses.

Though I suppose there were plenty of birds too.

“Your daughter could tell you more of its trait. If she’s able to call forth its ability though... Although useful, I’d suggest against it. Its ability is not something that can be controlled, and its only real use would be for destruction. It produces immense heat,” I warned her.

“Hm... I’ll let her know. Intense heat though...? How interesting. Water and fire?” Berri asked as she glanced to the azure orb nearby.

“Not really fire, to be accurate...”

Berri hummed as I glanced at her. She was focused on Miss Beak’s heart again. She stood to my right, so her scarred side was facing me.

She really was beautiful. It wasn’t the same beauty that Renn had, but it was close.

I really was a simple man. I liked confidence. I liked those who were comfortable in their own skin. Although both Berri and Renn had... sides to them that were fragile, their main personality trait was solid. Their backbones were firm. Their minds clear and strong.

Even the parts of them that hated themselves, did so not out of depression or shame... but rather out of anger. They wanted to be better. They wanted to overcome their failures. They didn’t wish to be someone, or something, else.

Crossing my arms, I sighed a little at my own simpleness.

“What is it, Vim?” Berri asked as she turned, as to see me. Her left eye didn’t work anymore.

“I’m just being sentimental,” I told her honestly.

Berri giggled, and I couldn't help but bask in the sounds. "Sentimental, sure," she said, not believing me.

Renn would have.

"Horn said you convinced him to build a greenhouse. Thanks for that," Berri said, changing topics. She hadn't believed me at all.

"He actually admitted it? I'm glad," I said.

Berri nodded. "Narli will be very happy to hear it. She's been wanting to grow certain plants and flowers that just don't do well here. I look forward to it," she said.

Hm... "Well... I'd offer to stick around and help, but Oplar's informed me that the Summit has requested my help," I said gently.

"Hm... they may not be the smartest people, always cutting off their noses to spite their faces... but they are still members of the Society. It'd not do well for you to linger. Should you leave tomorrow then?" Berri asked.

"Either tomorrow or the next day," I said.

"Why the hesitation?" she asked.

"I've asked Narli a favor. I'm not sure how long to give her for it, or if it's even possible, but I'd like to give her a chance all the same," I said.

"A... favor...? What kind?" Berri asked as she turned again, to glance at the pink heart.

Did she know already? Is that why she looked at Miss Beak's heart? Or did she just assume it was related to the heart, for good reason?

"I don't like keeping secrets from you Berri, so please don't ask again," I said carefully.

"Hm... I figured. Should I worry over it?" Berri asked, not bothered or offended.

"No. It's a more personal matter," I said.

"Ah. Concerning Renn then. That makes sense," Berri nodded, understanding completely.

I kept a sigh from escaping as Berri stepped closer to the pedestal. She put the lantern down on the ground, as to get a better look at the glowing colors of Miss Beaks' heart.

"It really is a pretty pink. Look at those swirls. Must have been a strong one," she said.

“Very strong,” I said.

Berri hummed again, and I glanced down to the lantern at her feet. The thing was one of many that had been built years ago. Hands and I had made hundreds to be distributed throughout the Society... though I wasn't sure how many were even left.

Berri studied the heart for a moment, and then tilted her head. It was the kind of movement that was obvious. Something she did often. It told me she had just remembered something.

“On that topic, though Vim...” Berri spoke gently, still staring at the heart.

Looking back up, I was rather proud of myself for not glancing at her rear. “Hm?”

“My daughter has told me that Renn is destined for something momentous,” she said as she turned to look at me.

Great. “That’s not what I wanted to hear right now, Berri,” I said.

Berri smiled at me with one of her sad grins. Made sadder by her inability to fully smile thanks to her scars. “I figured... but just in case I figured I should tell you, in case Narli didn't.”

I wasn't able to stop the sigh from escaping this time.

She noticed of course, and tilted her head at me. "What are you going to do, Vim?" she asked.

"About your daughter trying to steal my woman? I'm not sure yet."

Berri froze for a tiny moment... and then guffawed a laugh. "Really, now!" she shouted as she went straight to giggling. She also covered her face with a hand, as if she needed to hide such a beautiful laugh from the world.

Maybe she did. It was too precious for this world to even comprehend, after all.

"Funny... I'll enjoy telling Horn that later. But really Vim... I mean about this vote. What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

"I've decided to handle it later. There's no point stressing over it when I'm not even sure the full extent of it. For all I know Oplar is exaggerating what's happening," I said.

"Or she's doing the opposite, out of fear or innocence," Berri countered.

"Hm..." I was only able to grunt at that.

“Really Vim... what if it can’t be easily solved? What if they go through with it? What if they banish you?” Berri asked.

“Well...”

“Well nothing. I know what kind of man you are, Vim. Or at least, I think I do. If they’re actually foolish enough to vote against you... you’ll actually oblige them. You’ll honor their wishes, even if it means their deaths. If you do that, you’ll doom them all,” Berri said.

“If their will is that firm, and the majority of the Society shares that will... then what would you have me do, Berri? Force my protection on those who don’t desire it?” I asked.

She nodded.

They really were similar...

I scoffed as I shook my head. “Funny. That’s what that one said too,” I said as I pointed to the blue heart.

“That’s not the same...” Berri argued.

“Says you.”

“Says the world, Vim,” she furthered.

Holding Berri’s gaze, I watched as her sad glare slowly turned into one of defeat.

“Just... be careful, Vim. Please,” she asked me softly.

“I try to be, Berri. I always try to be,” I answered honestly.

“I had honestly thought you might have changed a little. With Renn. But maybe I’m misunderstanding something, or maybe it is still happening...” Berri said, more to herself than me.

“Can’t argue she’s changed me... but I’d not be the man I am if I could be changed so completely as that, Berri,” I said.

She nodded. “I know... but I still have hope, Vim. I always have hope.”

Neither unable to argue with that, or wanting to, I simply nodded in agreement.

Berri finally sighed and nodded. "Fine. Maybe by the time the vote happens you'll be more open to suggestions," she complained.

"Maybe," I said. Maybe Renn would indeed change me that much by then. Two years never seemed like a long time anymore, but...

She obviously wanted to say more, but she quite visibly gave up on the idea as she sighed and glanced away from me. She looked next to her, at the glowing pink heart.

"No matter what happens, I'll always protect you and your family Berri," I said gently.

Berri shifted, and I heard her fists clench. Or rather, I heard her left hand squeeze. The skin on that hand was rougher and harder, thanks to the burn scars. "I know you will, Vim. I just wish our people were better... and that you were too," she said.

I nodded, agreeing with her.

I wish I was better too.

"You really do love her then? Renn?" she asked, likely to stop talking about what was disturbing her.

"Oddly, I do. No. I can't explain it either," I said.

"Huh... you know to be honest I've never considered why you didn't have a lover. I guess I've always figured you were either beyond such simple desires, or maybe that you had one long ago and now they were gone... so you were just respecting them. Or do you take lovers occasionally throughout the years?" she asked.

I smiled at her. "I've had a few I suppose. But to be honest... I expect Renn to be something special. Or rather, she is special. I've had partners before, but I've never had any I've so happily shared my secrets with, like I do with her," I said.

"Hm... I wonder what it is. She is adorable, I'll admit... and Narli becoming so close with her means she's got a good soul... but it must be more than that, surely?" Berri wondered and asked.

Shaking my head, I wasn't sure what answer to give. "If I figure it out one day I'll let you know," I said.

"Please do."

Berri seemed happy again, and I was glad to see it. Even if I really hadn't been the one to give her that happiness. I knew she was still upset with me, at least inside.

"I suppose, if anything, I should be happy that Narli has a friend, finally," Berri said as she tilted her head in thought.

"Renn's a good friend to have," I said.

“Hm... You know... I’ve not thought of it in a long time... but I should probably start to worry over what she’ll do once we’re gone. Horn has begun to have gray hairs, not just in his beard either. And I’m... well...” Berri went quiet as she glanced down at her left hand.

“Here’s where I promise to care for her when that day comes,” I said.

Berri smiled at me. “Indeed... is Renn older? Is her blood thick enough to keep her alive long enough to be there for Narli even as the years go by?” she asked.

“She is a little younger than Narli... and likely will live just as long, if not longer,” I said.

“Good. I’m glad to hear that. That’s one thing I wish I had done before leaving society, is find a few more friends,” Berri said.

I blinked and felt my heart grow heavy. What a sad thing to hear, especially when spoken so bluntly.

Especially when said by her.

“She’d happily be your friend too, Berri,” I said softly.

Berri's horn glimmered as she tilted her head. "Oh... Hm..." she thought for a moment, and then smiled at me. "Maybe. I've been kind of... letting them be, Vim. I want Narli to enjoy her while she can," she said.

Right. Very motherly. Very beautiful.

Should I make a joke that I'd be her friend if she'd like?

Berri then sighed softly as she turned and looked one last time at the hearts nearby. "I'll go check on them. Maybe I should spend a little time with her too, before she goes," she decided.

I kept my joke to myself as I nodded. "Don't fall for her now. Both I and Horn would be very jealous," I warned.

Berri gave me a huge grin as she giggled. "That you would! I wonder who'd be more depressed!" she wondered as she laughed.

That was hard to answer. Horn would be the saddest I think, but at the same time I'd probably give him a run for his money.

"All-righty. Don't linger down here too long, Vim. Who knows what ideas you get up to when surrounded by your trophies," she said as bent down to pick up the lantern.

“Hmph.”

Watching her pick the lantern up, she gave me one last smirk and nod as she stepped away.

Berri left the room with a comfortably slow walk. The kind that told me she was in no hurry.

Renn rarely walked like that. She was always in a hurry it seemed. She moved quickly. She wanted to get to the things, places, and people, which made her happy. She wasted no time getting there.

Once Berri stepped out of the room and into the hallway, and disappeared from sight... her lantern's glow slowly diminished until it was swallowed by the darkness.

Glancing away, I took a small breath to sigh. Berri's scent lingered and I noted that the smell of bread was mostly gone now.

Staring at the hearts... I glared at both of them.

“Trophies,” I scoffed.

Chapter 275 A Promise, After a Yawn

Miss Beak's heart was warm, like always. Yet it did seem a little brighter than usual... though that might just be because of where we were.

I was sitting on the only elevated section of floor in this room full of pedestals and water. It was more of a step really than anything else. It raised up the pedestal behind me, which had been where Miss Beak's heart had been resting before I picked it up.

"You really should have slept more, Renn," Vim said as he stepped away from the blue heart's pedestal.

I shrugged as I ran my thumb along Miss Beak's heart. "I'll be okay," I said.

We were leaving soon. It was still the middle of the night. Vim wanted us to leave not long after the morning sunrise... so he was a little worried I'd not have gotten enough sleep for the venture we were about to embark on.

"Honestly I'd have thought Narli would have been boring in bed. Yet look at you, exhausted even though you've been sleeping so often," Vim teased me.

"Oh shush. You should be thanking her, really," I teased back.

Vim tilted his head at me and frowned.

I smirked and nodded. "I may have grown upset if I had to sleep alone. She was entertaining enough to forget for a moment it wasn't you in my bed," I said.

He smirked back at me. "So I should thank her, then?" he asked.

"I'd think you should, yes. Especially since our long talks through the night hadn't been that odd," I said.

"Odd...?" Vim asked.

Shifting a little, I tried not to smirk too broadly as my ear twitched. "Narli's interests are more... simple. For instance Sharp's conversations had always been... well..." I hesitated, and mentally kicked myself. Don't hesitate now! Coughing, I nodded. "About us. By the way she was very upset we've not done anything yet. While Narli is glad we're taking it slow," I said. As I got over my embarrassment.

Vim's eyes narrowed at me for a moment, and I did my best to hold his gaze. I faltered though after a moment and looked away, pretending to look at Miss Beak's heart.

He sighed. "So Narli was interested then," he said.

"Mhm..." I mumbled as I nodded. She had been. More than I made her out to be...

"I'm glad you've made a friend, Renn... but you really should have rested," he said softly, unbothered by my teasing.

"How could I, Vim...? She was so happy to have someone to talk to, and... well..."

I had been too.

Yes I was a little tired. Because Narli and I had talked even until the sun came up... but...

I'd not hesitate to do it again if given the chance.

Vim stepped closer, and I knew without looking at him that he understood what I meant. I knew if I looked up from the heart in my hands, which rested on my lap, I'd see a sad but knowing frown on his face.

He was always so worried for me. He always did his best to make sure I wasn't hungry, or tired, or sad. It was... rather comforting to have someone so mindful of me, but it was sad at the same time.

It reminded me that Nory and the others, like Lujic and Ginny, hadn't been so. They had cared for me, of course, but...

Well...

"Renn...?" Vim noticed my thoughts and worries, and I smiled sheepishly at him.

"I was just... thinking," I said.

"About?"

"How kind you are to me. I've... well..." I hesitated a moment, since I wasn't sure if I wanted to say it aloud or not. But the moment of hesitation passed rather easily. "I've remembered my time with Nory... and the kids. They were... not very worried of me like you are. They never really noticed or minded if I was hungry, or cold, or something," I said.

Vim was about to say something, but I raised a hand and waved the heavy air away.

"But!" I quickly said. "I think it's my fault... I mean... I'm not human. So I may have been seen as something... different to them. Something special. Especially so for the children. I was more an older sibling, or mother, than anything else... So it wasn't that surprising or that big a deal," I reasoned.

As I spoke, I realized how my own voice sounded. It echoed a tad in this room, here in the Keep. I sounded... a little desperate. As if I was trying to convince someone something.

Likely myself more than him.

"Basically they all saw me as someone, something, special... so... They hadn't worried for me like that, in that way," I finished.

"I know that feeling, Renn," Vim said gently.

Beak's heart thumped in my hand as I held Vim's eyes. He was looking down at me with worried eyes. He looked like he expected me to start crying all of a sudden.

"You..." I blinked a few times as I realized he was very right. Yes. He did. "You do, huh?" I said.

"It's a little sad to think I'm always reminding you of sad things," he said.

I smiled at him. "Really? Rather you make me realize how happy I am now. Would you rather you make me always remember happier times?" I asked.

He frowned as he tilted his head in thought. "Huh... I suppose that's true."

"Right? Though I do suppose a day will come where you will remind me of happier times, too," I said as I thought about it.

"How so?"

"Well... one day I'll look back on moments like this. And delight in them," I said.

“Ah... that would be a good thing too, wouldn't it?” He agreed.

I nodded as Vim stepped over to me. He huffed softly as he turned around and sat down next to me. It was an awkward attempt, since the step we were sitting on was not very high off the ground. It was almost the same as simply sitting on the ground, really.

Still, I enjoyed his presence and warmth as I leaned against him. “Why leave her here, Vim?” I asked as I tapped the heart in my hands.

“I trust the ones here, Renn. They'll not touch it, or let anyone else do so either,” he said.

I nodded. “I get that. I know. I meant... why do it at all? Don't you need to take it to someone who can eat it?” I asked.

He sighed. “Well... that was the original plan, yes. But with this vote being called, we'll be forced to return to Telmik sooner rather than later. So I'll not be able to go to the only monarch I can trust to devour it right now,” he said.

“Tor and Bray aren't that far from Telmik,” I said. A few weeks, less if we hurried.

“Neither of them are ready yet. Bray just ate one, and she's on the brink anyway... and Tor is... well...” he mulled his next words for a moment, and then sighed and nodded. “He's problematic. I don't like giving him hearts. I will if I must, and I may very well have to, but giving him one so soon after the last worries me... especially when it's that heart that we're talking about,” he said with a small point to my lap.

“Because she had been so powerful,” I said, understanding.

He nodded. “Yes. I worry if I give that to either of them right now, I’d end up with another heart I’d have to worry about. Almost defeating the purpose,” he said.

I frowned as I processed his words... and then realized he was saying that he expects either Bray or Tor to either die, or need to be killed, if given Miss Beak’s heart.

“Is... a powerful heart that effective?” I asked.

“Verily.”

“Hm...” I lifted her heart, to turn it around and study it.

It was strange something so tiny could be so influential.

“Has Narli told you if I could absorb it yet or not?” I asked softly.

We’d been here for over a week since Vim had asked Narli to find out. No one, neither Vim nor Narli, had brought it up since.

“She hasn’t. But I don’t expect her to. It might take many years before she figures it out, if ever,” Vim said.

“If... if she uh...” I gulped as I wondered if I should ask or not.

“If she figures you can, and do so safely... yes, Renn. I might consider it,” Vim said gently.

Glancing at him, I found he was looking away from me. He was staring to our right, to the pedestal in the center of the room. The blue one with water flowing out of it.

“Really...?” I asked softly.

“Well... like I said. I’d consider it. Plus it’d be up to you... and I’d not allow you to do it right away,” he said.

“Hm...” I ran my thumbs along the warm heart, and couldn’t help but smile at him.

So he really would consider it.

I wasn’t sure what to think of it yet, honestly. But that was mostly because I wasn’t entirely sure what it meant yet to absorb a Monarch’s heart.

“We can talk about it later. For now it’s a moot point,” Vim said, likely noticing my thoughts.

“Mhm,” I nodded, accepting that.

Later was fine. I was patient.

“Speaking of Narli... have you enjoyed your time with her here?” Vim asked.

I nodded. “Very much so. She’s...” I hesitated a moment, and then decided to just say it. Especially since he likely knew already. “She’s lonely,” I said.

Vim nodded in a way that told me he knew full well what I meant.

“You’re going to escort them all to Telmik for the vote right?” I asked.

He nodded again.

“How do you... hide her? Her eyes kind of give it away,” I said.

“Bandages. Kind of like what Sharp does. That or special glasses, that are dark. There are a few pairs of them already at Telmik. I’ll bring them back with us when we return to pick them up,” he said.

Oh...! I smiled at him. “I’m glad you’re so thoughtful,” I said.

“If I was truly cautious I’d never allow her to go anywhere near Telmik... but... well...” he shrugged.

“You value free-will,” I said simply.

He nodded.

Still... he was right... “Is Telmik really that dangerous for her Vim? You’ve mentioned once that they’d kidnap a saint if they could,” I asked.

“It is. It regretfully is,” he said.

“Why then... admit she exists? The census map, the one you showed me at the Cathedral, had them all listed,” I asked.

“Of course you remember that... And it's because it's easier to hide something with a tiny lie rather than a huge one. No one else knows she's a saint, Renn. Oplar knows, but she's trustworthy. She isn't

religious, and has a beef with the Chronicler and the rest of the church. Plus she's a pacifist. She couldn't harm anyone even if she tried. And... well... to be honest I don't think Oplar really comprehends what Narli is anyway," he said.

Huh... So Oplar really did have her own issues. Interesting.

I sniffed away a yawn before it could escape, and noticed again the slight dampness in the air. It wasn't too bad, but sometimes a deep breath forced you to notice it.

Really Renn... you had just told Vim you were fine and not tired. Don't go yawning in front of him after declaring such a thing! He'll make us stay another day.

I didn't mind that, at all. I liked it here. I liked Narli and Berri. But... well...

That was the issue. I liked them too much.

I wanted to stay here longer. I wanted to spend more time with them.

So I couldn't afford to linger here. Else I might long for it.

"Did you sleep at all, Vim?" I asked.

“No.”

“Are you... feeling better then?” I asked.

“No...”

That wasn't good at all.

“What do we do about it, Vim?” I asked.

“I don't know, Renn. I'm going to try and fight it, I think,” he said.

“Fight it?” What'd he mean by that?

He nodded and shifted, making me move again. I had to grab the heart since he bumped me hard enough to make it roll along my thigh.

“I want to see if the feeling of exhaustion gets worse, or stays the same. I slept quite a bit at the Crypt... it didn't seem to help much, except for about a day or so after sleeping. I'm going to see if it gets worse when I go weeks without sleep,” he said.

“Vim... why risk it?” I groaned in worry.

“Because I need to understand it. I need to know my limits, and what I can and can’t do.”

“Yeah but...” I went quiet as I noticed the look on his face.

He was serious, and there was likely nothing I could do or say to change his mind. He had already made his decision, and was already in the middle of testing it.

“I’m sorry I’m not good enough to lure you into bed every night,” I whispered softly.

Vim’s face contorted into an odd frown, and then he smirked as he glanced at me. “You haven’t realized it yet?” he asked.

“Realized what...?”

“Nothing... for your information our next location will allow us to sleep together, if you’d like,” he said.

“If I’d like...? Why would I say no?” I asked, confused why he’d even say it that way.

He shrugged again, but didn't do it so roughly that it made me move. "You always make friends and stuff... I might get pushed aside and abandoned again, is all," he said.

Giggling at his strangely sad tone, I couldn't help but bump him back. He barely budged. "Please...! And this is the place that banished you, right...? Yea, no. Likely won't find any friends there, I'm sure," I said.

"We'll see."

We shall.

He sighed and reached over, tapping Miss Beak's heart. Although his flick of the finger didn't make much sound, or move the ball very much in my hands, it still affected it.

For several moments I watched in awe as the swirling colors and lights inside the heart went crazy. As if Vim had just stuck a stick into it and stirred, the colors and lights were spinning as if from a current or wind.

"Huh..." I watched intently, shocked. I'd seen the swirling colors move and dance, but nothing like this... and it hadn't done anything like this before, no matter how much I had messed with it.

"There're a few things we'll need to do, Renn. Before the vote," Vim said softly.

“Such as?” I asked as the swirls of colors inside the heart began to slow down and settle.

“Stuff like that,” Vim said as he pointed to my lap. “We’ll need to go to a few places... and grab some stuff. There’s some stuff at the Cathedral we’ll need to get too, just in case.”

“Hm... just in case we get banned from those places, and can’t get them afterward,” I said, understanding.

“Yeah. There’s not much we need to worry about... but there’s a few things I should probably take care of,” he said.

Interesting. I’d not thought about it, but that was true... if Vim did get banished from more locations... he would indeed be unable to get anything he’s left behind in those locations. Most particularly because he wasn’t willing to break any rules imposed on him. After all, it wasn’t like anyone could actually stop him from doing so if he really wanted to.

“Where will we take the stuff you’re worried about? Bring it all back here?” I asked.

Vim shifted a little, making my whole body wobble and shift with him. “Hm... maybe. I hate leaving everything in one place though,” he said.

“Do you now? Funny... especially since I’ve been under the assumption you didn’t even have anything all this time,” I said.

“Hm?” he glanced at me and I nodded as I tapped the heart. The inside of it was calm now. It no longer looked disturbed... as if the crazy swirling and movement had never happened.

My tap of course had no effect. Although my nail did make an odd noise as I tapped it. It sounded kind of like how my nails on glass did, but it was a little too dull sounding to really be glass. “I mean... you care so little for stuff, Vim. Yet now? You have a tombstone. Hearts. And stuff beneath the Cathedral and elsewhere? And here I felt bad for making my bag so heavy by collecting so much these last few months,” I said.

He chuckled at me. “Yes. So much stuff. Maybe between the two of us we can gather up enough stuff to fill a single tiny bedroom in the next few years,” he said.

I smiled at that idea. “Don’t tease me with that Vim; I won’t need years at all! Plus it’s your fault, most of the stuff I carry around now is because of you,” I said.

“Hm...” he nodded, accepting that fact.

It was true though. Most of the things I found precious enough to keep on me... were well... from him, in one form or another.

“Though... maybe you’re right. A room...? Maybe we should make a place for ourselves. Are there any places like this anywhere? That aren’t lived at? Any long forgotten places we could claim for ourselves?” I asked him.

Vim shifted again, and I patiently waited to hear what he’d say. After a long moment of thought he rolled a shoulder and nodded. “Well... I can think of a few places. Yes.”

I smirked at him. "I mean places we can stop at. Along our routes. Not some distant island," I clarified.

He smirked at me and nodded. "I know. Yes. There is. There's an overgrown castle near Lumen, near those massive bridges, that as far as I'm aware hasn't been touched by people in a thousand years. There's an underwater place near the western seas, but that'd be a pain to use... being underwater. We could also just make someplace ourselves too, if you'd like. Somewhere you want to call home, Renn? Maybe your mountains in the north?" he asked.

Gripping the heart, I hesitated at the very gentle and lovely idea.

My heart grew hotter than the heart in my lap as I smiled. "That's... a very lovely idea. Would you really be okay with that?" I asked.

"Why not? We'd never be able to stay there long... a week or so a year at best... but it'd work. Plus it'd be a good spot for you to run to and hide at if you ever need to, if we got separated or something. It could even be a place you could stay at, if you someday didn't want to go with me to certain locations," he said.

"And why would I ever want to do that, Vim?" I asked with a smirk.

"Oh I'm sure someday we'll have fights or something. Or maybe you'll end up hating certain places, or something," he said with a tiny shrug. He hadn't put much thought into it... and hadn't realized why I was smirking at him.

Although I wanted to tease him over the idea of me needing a place to stay, for extended periods, because traveling would be too difficult... I decided against it. It was likely too early to bring up such topics with him. Especially since it's taken this long just to get this far into our relationship.

He was so... strangely hesitant and fearful of being closer to me. If I suddenly suggested having children or something, he'd likely panic.

Though honestly I wasn't ready for such a thing anyway. I still had so much I wanted to see and do with him. So many people to meet, and places to see.

Plus this vote was bothering me... but...

Not as much as his obvious personal issues.

His exhaustion was starting to really scare me. Especially since he was now trying such a strange method to test its seriousness. What if by not sleeping for so long he did permanent damage or something?

Damage... like his wounds re-opening...

Glancing to his hands, which were resting in front of him thanks to his elbows on his knees... I was glad to see undamaged skin.

He had said such wounds re-opening did happen sometimes... but...

But his discomfort and shock had been rather obvious.

Vim could lie. I wasn't stupid. He lied when he needed to. To keep secrets. To protect those he felt needed it.

But would he have lied about those wounds? To me?

Maybe.

My eyes blurred, and I wasn't able to stop this yawn from escaping.

After yawning, I did my best to ignore Vim's look.

"I'll be fine. Promise," I said.

"Hm... want to stay another day?" he asked calmly.

Great. I knew he would do that...

Shaking my head, I tapped the heart again. "No... I'll just stay up late talking to Narli again if we do," I said.

"Not if I carry you to bed," he suggested.

Smiling at him, I did my best to not turn his teasing into a promise. "It's fine. You said we can sleep together at the Summit? We'll make it up there," I said.

"Hmph."

Nodding, I was proud of myself. Not only had I resisted the offer to stay here another day, and enjoy Narli and her family, but also resisted his offer to carry me to bed.

Though resisting it was a little easier since I knew his true meaning.

Reaching over, I slid my hand into his. It was cold, especially when compared to the warm heart I'd been holding all this time.

"I'll be with you Vim. No matter what happens," I promised.

He smiled as he squeezed my hand. "Want to know something scary?" he asked.

I nodded, and wondered what he would say.

"Such a thing was never a doubt in my mind," he said.

Unable to resist, I scoffed and laughed and giggled at him.

"Only you would find something like that to be so terrifying!"

Chapter 276 Oplar's Ramblings

The air was a little cold. The sky was mostly devoid of clouds, and there wasn't much wind. It was the typical weather one encountered not long after fall and on the onset of winter.

Though not up here in these mountain ranges.

We were about half way to the Summit. We were passing over the last mountain range in this region, and honestly I had expected it to be stormy up here.

Instead it was rather nice. Though I knew Oplar and Renn would likely want a campfire tonight, as to stay warm.

“I’m telling you Vim, Hands has been acting weird lately. Link thinks he’s in love, but I just can’t see it. How’d that man even have the opportunity to meet someone, let alone notice they existed when he does?” Oplar wondered.

“His father had been a romantic. It’s not that surprising,” I said as I thought of Eyes.

“Had he...?” Oplar mumbled.

He had. I had not liked that man... though at the very end he had proven his worth.

He had been far better than anyone had known. I had been wrong about him completely.

If Hands lived a life just a fraction as honorable and great as his father’s then he’d succeed in life, in my opinion.

So far he’s done a good job of it. He’s never caused issues. He’s always fast to help and offer his aid, and although I felt the same strange annoyance towards him as I had for his father... it wasn’t anywhere near as bad. I’d not felt the need to kill him on sight as I had for Eyes.

“Vim’s mentioned him. Eyes, right?” Renn asked.

“Aye. I actually met him when I was younger, but he died not long after. With my parents,” Oplar told her.

“Ah...” Renn’s tiny noise was a sad one.

“Let the man have his moment of romance. It’s about time he had children anyway,” I said.

Oplar scoffed at me. “I can’t imagine him doing that. He’d forget the child as he got focused on some toy or mechanical mechanism. Poor kid would suffer with him as a father,” Oplar said.

Hm... I had thought the same of Eyes. Yet he hadn’t been that bad of a father as far as I was aware. In fact Celine had told me he had been a wonderful one.

“How old is Hands?” Renn asked.

“Hm...? A little older than me, right?” Oplar asked me.

I shrugged, since I knew why Renn had asked such a question.

“Hmm...” she hummed at me, and I ignored it.

A light breeze blew by, and I noted the smells upon it.

Animals. Trees. The scent of mist, likely from higher up the mountain.

Nothing odd. Nothing that I needed to worry or take note of.

“Jelti’s also married now, Vim,” Oplar told me.

“Oh? She grew brave enough did she?” I asked, amused. Good for her.

“The Chronicler told her it was okay. Guess she found out about it somehow... Everyone was a little surprised, but maybe she’s grown soft in her old age?” Oplar wondered.

“Wish we could have been there,” Renn said softly.

“It was just a simple ceremony. Just us members there, and a few of the human’s friends,” Oplar said.

I frowned as I wondered what had made the Chronicler allow it. She must have seen something.

Hopefully nothing odd happened before I returned to Telmik. I’ll need to remember to check on them, and ask about it and...

Some birds flew past overhead. They cawed loudly as they did.

I watched them for a moment, but the path we were on was heavily wooded. There wasn't much sky to see, at least not clearly.

"I've never been to a wedding," Renn then said.

"Oh...? I suppose they are rare for us, huh? Not only do we rarely actually marry, most aren't religious so they don't have such ceremonies," Oplar said.

Saying nothing, I wondered if Oplar realized the truth in Renn's words.

She wasn't just saying she hadn't witnessed a ceremony amongst our kind, but any at all. Not even a human's.

It was a sad thought, really.

Made sadder by the fact that I would not be interested in doing such a thing at all. Hopefully she wouldn't ask it of me. Especially since I wouldn't know how to deny her such a simple experience or joy, since the only reason I didn't want to participate in such a thing was purely personal. Oplar had perceived it as a religious thing, but in reality marriages and ceremonies were common even amongst those without gods or deities. Humans loved festivities no matter their beliefs or culture.

"I take it that means you've never been married then, Renn? I had heard you spent a lot of time with humans before joining us, though," Oplar said.

"Hm...? I had, I guess... but not like that. Wait... what are people saying about my past to make you assume such a thing?" Renn asked, worried.

"Huh? Nothing really. Just that you lived amongst humans mostly before finding us and being happily surprised when you did. I just figured you'd be like the many others who had lived similar lives before joining the Society. Those who basically are born and raised amongst humans are usually like them," Oplar said lightly, not realizing how seriously Renn was likely being about wanting to know about the rumors concerning her.

"I wasn't born amongst humans. I was almost fully grown before I met my first one. And the humans I spent all my time with were... not like that. I basically raised two kids and then hid away with a nun," Renn said.

"A nun...? Really? Explains your fascination with the humans' religion," Oplar noted.

Of all the things to notice from what she said of course it was that. But that was what bothered Oplar the most, so it was understandable.

"I'm more surprised you call Telmik home with your aversion to it, honestly," Renn said.

“Haha! Right! But that’s the point, Renn! If I run away that means they win. My parents didn’t raise no coward,” Oplar said proudly.

Funny. She basically was one, honestly.

She ran the moment she saw blood, or expected it to be drawn.

Though that wasn’t too surprising. Those like Renn were the rarity, not the norm. But... well...

“Oh...!” Renn clapped a little, sounding very impressed. Likely was.

She likely thought Oplar really was brave, staying in a place that was essentially the capital and home base of her enemy.

It’d be true if not for the fact Oplar was a bear. And strong.

If she hadn’t been such a coward about fighting she’d have been another Lilly or Landi. She was that strong. Or rather, she could have been.

Though maybe it was for the better she was the way she were. Did we really need more like Landi or Lilly?

“Plus, I’m not really alone there. Henrietta and the rest share my sentiments, and the twins too,” Oplar told her.

“Oh...? But didn’t Henrietta and her family work in the church?” Renn asked.

“Aye, they do. But in that perspective so do I, you know?” Oplar answered.

Renn hummed in a way that told me she wanted me to explain a little better.

“The dog family are not members of the cloth... but they’re very generous people. They believe in helping those who are less fortunate. If you’ll forgive me for sharing an opinion, I’d say they’re a better representation of that faith than most of those who preach it,” I said.

“Right! See? Vim’s on my side too. Though most would argue he don’t live there, it’s a place he often visits. So I’m not as alone as you’d think,” Oplar said, glad to hear me voice an opinion for once.

It wasn’t often I did in front of her, after all.

“How are they doing, by the way? How’s little Fizz doing?” Renn asked Oplar.

“Hm? She’s doing well, I think? Everyone was doing well when I last left,” Oplar said.

Renn hummed, and I wondered what it was like to remember everyone so... vividly.

It was likely she had heard Henrietta's name and remembered everything about them. Every word spoken. Every action. Every moment.

Such vibrant memories would be strange and unsettling, I'd think. What would it be like to remember absolutely everything so deeply and accurately, within moments? It must make her memories feel fresh and recent because of such acuity. Which only made them all the more potent.

It... explained why she so often got melancholic sometimes, when talking about events in the past or the people involved in them. It also explained why she sometimes cried in her sleep when she herself didn't seem too sad or depressed recently.

Odds are her dreams were vivid as well, because of her ability. It made sense to me, since my most vivid memories were what haunted my dreams too.

Though that might be me mistaking the cause and effect. Maybe I remembered them so clearly because I dreamed them, and not the other way around.

"Vim...?"

I blinked and slowed a tad as to turn and look at Renn. She had that smile on her face that told me I had ignored her again.

“Hm?” I smiled at her as an apology.

“Oplar asked how long it’s been since you’ve been to the Summit,” Renn said with a light gesture to her.

Ah. “Well... a few trips, I think. Maybe a decade or so?” I said as I thought about it.

Last time was when they had wanted another waterwheel... I think.

“A decade...? Really? Didn’t they ask for your help a few years ago? Something about a riverwheel?”
Oplar asked.

“Waterwheel, yes. I think that was some time ago, wasn’t it? I didn’t go there last time I came this way, so it had to have been longer than that,” I said.

“Wait... so you’re banished... but you still get asked to build them stuff?” Renn asked.

“He’s requested for other reasons too, but most are like that I think, yes,” Oplar told her.

Renn hummed in a way that told me she had a very serious opinion on that, yet didn’t seem to want to voice it.

She likely would have had we been alone.

Though I'd noticed lately she's been a little more... vocal. Especially about certain things. Honestly I was kind of glad she was starting to voice her more... specific opinions. Though in my own personal perspective, most of even her extreme positions weren't that bad. But I knew to many in the Society they would be.

It meant she was growing more comfortable, and confident, in herself and her position in the Society.

I knew eventually she'd find herself solidified in certain beliefs and perspectives that would make it... difficult. For not just her, but myself. Eventually she'd be at rough ends with certain people, and maybe even groups, in the Society. Which meant eventually she'd be if not entirely unwelcomed, at least disliked by others.

It had already happened in certain perspectives, what with her banishments, but... those had been out of fear. Out of concern. Not out of personal differences in beliefs or religious subscription.

"Are you banished from anywhere, Oplar?" Renn asked.

"Hm? Not as far as I'm aware, no. Landi don't like me much, but she's not banished me from her halls yet... and I don't like some places, or people, but I don't let it bother me. Even the people who don't like me much are happy to see me when I show up, since I carry letters or items they requested. Basically I'm seen as someone who brings presents," Oplar explained.

“Mhm,” Renn was glad to hear it based off the pitch of her hum.

“Oplar’s a predator, and noisy, but she’s well liked. It helps that she’s a complete pushover,” I said.

Oplar laughed. “That I am!” Her laugh echoed a little in the dense forest, sounding stranger and stranger as it did so.

“Do you usually travel alone, Oplar? When delivering letters?” Renn asked, further diving into Oplar’s life.

The bear hummed a little, which was a little uncharacteristic of her. Maybe she was trying to mimic Renn. “I do. Unless I’m escorting someone, or joining another along the way. I sometimes travel with Vim too, when our paths and destinations allow. But honestly I don’t venture too far usually. Most of the more common areas, like Lumen, can usually be dealt with by our human members. I’m usually going to the more secluded places, like the Crypt. Places the human members, or the weaker ones, can’t go to or don’t like to go. For reference Vim, I passed through Lumen and took the coastal route here,” Oplar said.

Oh? “How were the Geese and the rest?” I asked.

“Fine. Keven was there when I passed through,” Oplar said.

I nodded, glad to hear it. As was I to hear Keven was fine.

“Coastal route?” Renn asked.

“Remember the sea Lumen was on? If you travel along its southern coast you eventually head this way. You need to pass through marshlands and stuff, but it’s a quick route. A few weeks from Lumen is a large port town. There’s a family of geese there, alongside a few others, who are members of the Society. They run one of our trade depots there,” Oplar explained.

“And Keven...? You mean the captain of one of the ships, right?” Renn asked.

“Aye. He recently replaced Hector. Keven’s a captain of one of the larger trade ships the Society uses. Although in theory Lumen is the home port of the ship, Keven is actually a member of the Geese’s location. He’s not a goose though,” Oplar told her.

“Huh... I’d not gotten to meet him, but I had seen the ship,” Renn said.

Right. She had been waiting on the dock for me that day.

“Mighty aint it? Though I hear Vim’s newest addition is far fiercer! I didn’t get to see it though, they’d been out at sea when I passed through,” Oplar said.

“You mean Ronalldo’s ship,” Renn said, understanding.

“Aye. A mighty ship of war... which may be needed soon, what with all the recent chaos. Maybe that was fate at play, eh?” Oplar thought aloud.

Renn let out a tiny groan, and I heard her tail shift and brush against her leather clothes. “I hope not,” she commented.

As much as I would enjoy Ronaldo getting the experience one could get from war, I wasn't in the mood to deal with it either.

War...

Studying a patch of scraggly looking bushes we were passing, I ignored Oplar and Renn for a moment. They were just talking about Oplar's journey to us... something about some chicken she had seen on the way here. It had chased her for days, supposedly.

War was common. It happened more often than people realized. But the Society itself rarely got involved in such things. The last true wars the Society involved itself in were the ones hundreds of years ago. Before Celine died.

However, there had been wars since then. Merit's kingdom had been at war. Landi's been at war many times. Telmik's nation, the Nation of the Blind, has been at war a few times too. One of them was so bad that I had even gotten involved, as to protect the Cathedral. We had lost a few members because of that war. It took me assassinating the neighboring nation's king to end it.

Yet...

Did I really see the wars back then as true wars?

Honestly?

Even the ones during the Societies peak... had I even considered them actual wars?

I may have called them such, as did everyone else... but in reality...

No. When I thought of wars I did not think of men, human or not, marching on fields wearing armor. Nor did I think of ships swaying from cannon fire, or siege engines burning.

To me war was... something far different.

Something more personal. Something forgotten today.

There weren't enough monarchs to wage war anymore.

Let alone their creators.

Not against me anyway.

“Vim.”

I blinked and turned, to look at Oplar. She had a grin on her face as she pointed with a thumb.

Turning the other way, I found Renn on my other side. She too had a grin, but it was a sadder one.

I had ignored her again.

“Yeah?”

“The Queen’s Lament. What’d you think of the new volume?” she asked after a tiny moment, unbothered that I had obviously ignored her once again.

“Hm? I told you, didn’t I? I know where the author is taking it. I see its ending, so it’s boring to me,” I said.

Oplar scoffed.

Renn noticed and frowned at her. "Why the scoff?" she asked her.

"Vim's just being old. He's saying he's seen it before so it doesn't bring him any joy to experience it again," Oplar said.

"Really Vim?" Renn asked, worried.

"No... I did enjoy a few parts. There's a part in the middle I found amusing, thanks to the way it unfolded," I said. It had been cliché, a queen of a kingdom finding corruption and dark plots of their relatives... but it had been done in a way that made me smile. She had written a punishment that I knew every reader would have found interesting and unbelievable, but I'd seen it before myself.

Torture and death by pleasure was not a new concept at all.

"Which part?" Oplar asked.

"Renn hasn't read it yet," I said quickly before Oplar could say something to spoil it.

"Oh?" Oplar sounded surprised.

"I've been waiting. To savor it," Renn told her.

Oplar hummed as she nodded in understanding.

“But overall you didn’t enjoy it much,” Renn said, returning the topic to me.

“No. But I’ve never cared for romantic stories. Plus it’s a little...” I wondered what word to use here to best describe it.

“Spicy?” Oplar suggested.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Renn giggled. “Which is why it’s mostly the women of our Society who seem to enjoy it so much,” she said.

“Not true. I’d say some of the biggest fans of it are men. Gerald for instance? He’s commissioned artwork of it. Of the characters and scenes,” Oplar pointed out.

“Wait really?” Renn asked, surprised.

“Hm. You’ve probably seen them. A few of those paintings are along the halls in the guild. In Lumen,” Oplar said.

Renn hummed as she very obviously searched her memory. “I very well likely have,” she said softly as she likely thought of the ones that made sense.

Most were just character portraits... but there were a few that displayed entire scenes, as Oplar said. One was a larger painting in the main hall, near Gerald’s office. It was the final scene of the first book. The climax moment where she becomes the queen, and defeats her despot father.

“Personally I found the books to be too serious. I don’t care much for fiction anyway, so when I do read stories I want them to be crazy and unbelievable. If I wanted real stories I’d just look around me,” Oplar said, giving her opinion on the series.

“Right... so are you saying you haven’t read, or won’t, the fourth book?” Renn asked.

“Eh maybe one day. But it’s not my thing. I’d rather watch you two flirt or something,” Oplar said.

“Flirt...!” Renn startled at the sudden teasing, but I heard her happy smile all the same.

“Now don’t you hold back on my account! I’ve heard of your endless talks through the night, and secret rendezvous! But I’ve not seen a lick of it since I’ve met you! It’s not nice at all keeping such juicy gossip from me. Mighty rude in fact!” Oplar said, her voice growing louder as she got heated.

“Rendez-what?” Renn asked with a higher pitched tone than normal. She was embarrassed.

I glanced back at her, and sure enough found her face a little flushed... but she was grinning ear to ear.

She liked Oplar it seemed. Likely had just opened her heart more to her in fact, thanks to what she had just said and declared. Renn liked it when others acknowledged, and helped, our relationship.

“Meetings, basically. She’s talking about when you and I sneak off alone to talk. Our little dates have been noticed, it seems,” I said, explaining it to her.

“Oh!” Renn glanced at me and her grin turned into a happy smirk.

“Indeed they have! But I asked around the Crypt and no one noticed any there, it seems... I’d blame my arrival, and the drama I brought, but you were there for weeks before I showed up and I know Vim doesn’t give a mite’s bite about the vote... So what’s the reason? Having relationship woes already? Surely not?” Oplar asked Renn, buffeting her with questions.

“Huh! But we did? We snuck off several times,” Renn however wasn’t ashamed at all, and happily rightened the score.

“So you did!” Oplar happily laughed at hearing so.

Shaking my head at them, I sighed and wondered how many of these so called rendezvous Oplar knew about. Or rather, what the Society knew about.

Renn and I did often enough linger away alone... but half the time it was for good reason. With tasks at hand, or for some goal... such as checking on the city we were in, or something.

Oplar had come here through Lumen... so it had to have been there that she had heard such rumors and gossip. Before Lumen Renn and I hadn't really been that... well... Flirty had we?

Maybe we had...?

As I thought of how we had acted in the beginning, I noticed something through Oplar and Renn's loud voices. Something large had just took in a deep breath nearby.

A flash of white drew my eyes, alerting me to what I had heard, and I had to blink at what I found.

Peering our way, hidden behind branches and leaves... was a massive elk.

And it was a startling white in color. With red eyes.

An albino.

Even the massive antlers were white. A few of the tips were darker, but that was likely stains. Either from blood, from fights with other elk or predators, or maybe digging in the ground.

The great creature glanced our way, but didn't focus or seem to even notice us. It turned its mighty head back the other way down the path, and then stepped forward. It must have felt the path was clear and safe.

It was neither afraid or on guard... but I couldn't blame it. It was one of the largest elks I'd ever seen, that was natural born at least. It was big enough that it likely didn't need to fear human hunters, or even typical predators. It stood taller, even not taking its antlers into account, than a large bear would even on two legs. For it to have lived long enough to grow so large while being as white as snow was... well...

The creature was a rarity. A true anomaly.

"Wow..." Oplar whispered in awe as the massive elk strode onto the path ahead of us.

I stood still as Renn and Oplar paused as well. They stood on either side of me as we watched the white furred creature slowly stride across the path, not even glancing at us.

The three of us watched the creature finish crossing the path and re-enter the dense woods. We were able to follow it for a moment, thanks to its bright white fur, but it eventually faded from view... getting lost in the foliage and dense trees.

“I’ll be... Not only is that the biggest one I’ve ever seen, I’d say it was the most beautiful to boot,” Oplar whispered humbly.

“It didn’t even care we were here,” Renn noted.

“Why would it? Its head was so high off the ground I’d have to jump to reach it... and even then I might have only hit that dangly bit,” Oplar wondered.

Dangly bit. “That’s a fold of skin. It’s how you can differentiate certain elks from the larger species,” I said.

“That was definitely large,” Oplar stated.

It had been.

Returning to walking, I searched my memories for another that size.

“Did you see its eyes? Red rubies,” Oplar said.

“Its horns were bigger than me,” Renn said.

They had been. Interesting...

Hadn't I seen a massive spider back at the Crypt? In Sharp's glass jars? That had been huge too.

Maybe something odd was occurring. I'll need to start paying attention to the animals and bugs... and also maybe start listening to rumors and bar stories. Humans always exaggerated but...

"Must have come from the snow. Wonder why it's here," Renn wondered.

"Its snow white appearance was from a body disorder. Not its environment," I said.

"Disorder...?" Renn asked.

I flinched as I realized I should have just stayed quiet. Now I'm going to have to explain to her what albinism was, and likely then who know what else as to explain that.

If it was just the two of us it'd not be that big a deal... but...

"So it was sick?" Oplar asked.

“No. It’s fine. It’s actually very resilient to have survived so long with its white appearance,” I said. Maybe this region was lacking in larger predators.

“Isn’t that the truth. If any human seen that thing they’d either worship it as some forest spirit, or hunt it for its pelt and antlers to hang on the wall,” Oplar said with disgust.

Renn hummed, and I knew it was because she knew I had just gotten out of having to answer her.

As we returned to our path... I thanked Oplar’s constant gossip as she went on to tell Renn all about the massive bird she had seen a few months ago.

The two happily went to telling each other stories of unique animals they’d seen over the years.

I was a little surprised the two had dropped their earlier conversation. But I knew it was only temporary. It’d not be long before their fascination with unique and strange animals would fade, and Oplar would re-ignite the passion of gossip within her. And Renn, being the woman she was, would not just indulge Oplar’s fascinations... she’d likely join her in doing so.

Their chatter and yapping would undoubtedly become annoying eventually... but right now...

It was far better than questions.

And not just questions about what I’d recently said, or hinted at.

Questions about my health. My abilities. The vote. The Society... So many things, and then some.

I knew Renn would not forget the questions in the back of her mind. Her memory was too perfect.

She'd inevitably ask them again when she could. Likely soon, if we'd be alone as I expected us to be once we reached our next location.

But thanks to Oplar's presence, those questions couldn't be levied. They had to remain within her mind, even as they squirmed.

So...

I happily indulged in the safety of Oplar's ramblings, while I could.

Chapter 277 The Summit

"That's a peacock Renn. That's basically what Rapti is," Vim said as I watched the bird with the huge tail walk across the road in front of us.

The thing's feathers were not just big, they were bigger than me! They reminded me of Nasba's tail feathers and her children. They were even strangely colorful, with odd designs and...

Another bird stepped out of the tall wheat. It hurried over to its fellow, bobbing its head as it did.

“Peacocks...” I whispered as I studied them. They seemed kind of like turkeys or something, but weren’t as fat. Could they fly? They looked like they had wings but their tail feathers looked so ridiculously large that it was hard to imagine them capable...

The first bird finally noticed its friend approach, squawked loudly at it, and then the two ran off into the field of grass on the other side of the path.

“So... Rapti’s feathers look like that?” I asked. And they grew from the back of her head? No wonder she plucked them. They probably were heavy.

“Yeah. Her feathers were more blue I think though,” Vim said as he thought about it.

Hm...

“How come Nasba and her children aren’t these then? I’ll be honest their feathers look more like those than duck feathers,” I said.

“Because you hadn’t seen their elders hundreds of years ago. Their oldest members had feathers all over their bodies, and it was quite clear they were ducks. Plus their feathers aren’t as pretty, and don’t have the reflective traits. They only seem similar thanks to how large and long they are is all,” Vim said.

I frowned, because I myself had found Nasba's feathers rather pretty. Honestly they hadn't seemed that less interesting than these at all, so it was interesting to hear Vim say they were noticeably less so, based on how he had said it.

"This species is a peafowl. They're pheasants. The males are called peacocks, and the females peahens. Or just hens, I guess," Vim continued to teach me about them.

"Are these the males or females?" I asked.

"Males. The hens are more normal looking. They don't have the big fancy feathers," he said.

"Isn't it weird the male birds are always prettier?" I asked as the birds hurried away, heading for an open field of flowers and tall grass.

"Every species has its odd features for the males. Fancy colors, different sizes, calls or dances. It's their way of telling who is healthy and who isn't. Diseased birds won't be as pretty, or dance as well. Sickly animals won't be as noisy or big. Humans have the same traits, people just don't put any stock into them usually... or if they do it's subconscious," Vim said.

"Wouldn't explain you, Vim. You're rather average looking," I said as I glanced at him.

He smirked a little, as if proud to hear it was so. "And you're absolutely stunning."

Although I had expected him to counter in such a way, per usual, I still blushed a little and looked away from him. I pretended to search and stare out at the birds, which were nearly out of sight thanks to the tall grass they were entering.

Really. It was so difficult to tease him! Why was he able to say such things so confidently all the while sounding so sincere? It was almost as if he wasn't teasing me at all, and had just been stating a simple fact.

"Shall we continue Renn?" Vim asked after a moment.

I nodded slowly as I glanced around at the surrounding village. "I'm surprised no one has come over to say hello yet," I said.

Oplar had ran off not long after we neared the Summit. She hadn't really said as to why, but Vim hadn't seemed bothered or surprised... so maybe it was normal. Maybe she had a friend here she wanted to hurry and see.

It was too bad for her. Vim and I had been flirting quite a bit since she had left.

"It'd be more shocking if someone actually did, Renn. Come on... I'm technically not supposed to linger outside very long here," Vim said as he stepped passed me, heading towards where there were a bunch of buildings.

"Not supposed to linger? It's not really that bad is it, Vim? They're the ones who called for you," I said as I hurried to his side.

"I'm banished from here, Renn. There's a building in the center of the village, that way, which I'm supposed to stay in unless doing something they've asked of me," he said with a point.

Frowning, I didn't like that at all. They made him stay confined to a building...?

"Wait... is that why you said we'd be able to easily sleep together here?" I asked, finding that to make a lot of sense.

He chuckled at me. "Suddenly not as upsetting, is it?" he asked.

Well...

Although I didn't want to openly admit he was absolutely correct, I couldn't help but sheepishly smile and nod. "So I guess I should thank them. What about Oplar then, Vim? Will she be staying with us too?" I asked.

"Oplar can if she wants. She has a friend here though... who is likely who she had run off to see," he said.

Right. So my assumption was correct.

Although I enjoyed Oplar's presence, a little more than I thought I would have, I kind of hoped she'd stay with her friend instead.

I had enjoyed staying in the same room, alone, with Vim at the Crypt. Even if it had only been when we slept... but if he was forced to remain indoors during his stay, outside of when he was helping with whatever they summoned him for...

That meant he and I might get to spend many days alone together here.

Doing my best to not find such an idea too exciting, I kept my pace even with Vim as we neared the larger cluster of buildings.

They were mostly two or three stories tall. And large. They were all made from dark wood, with even darker roofs. They kind of reminded me of some of the buildings back home, in the north. It was a little nice to finally see familiar styled buildings again.

All around us, and the buildings, were farms. Not all were being used at the moment, with some just growing grass and flowers, but a good portion looked to be growing wheat and corn. Off in the distance, looking like large blobs of darkness in the seas of golden and green, were other buildings. Some looked huge from a distance, which made me wonder if they were barns or something else.

"Why's this place called the Summit Vim? We're no longer on the mountains," I said. In fact all of the mountains were surrounding us. As if we were in some giant bowl or something.

"It's a reference from their origin. A long time ago a god lived here. It was considered the summit of all civilization because of it. It's... a shadow of its former self, to be honest," he said softly.

Glancing at Vim, I noted the way he had explained it to me. That hadn't just been him telling me this place's history... that had been genuine sadness over the history he was sharing.

"So... kind of like the Keep?" I asked carefully.

He nodded. "That's a good way to think of it, yes. That had been a true capital castle, though. This place was fancier than it is now, by a long shot... but it had still been kind of primitive really. There were just more people, and they had this huge towering building. Their god lived at the top of it, overlooking the whole area. Think of a giant spire, kind of like those monoliths back at Landi's."

"Did gods live on top of those too?" I asked.

Vim did something he hadn't done in a long time.

He stopped walking, out of surprise of my question.

Although a little sad that I'd shocked him to such a degree again, I still found myself smiling a little at him. He looked absolutely troubled... as he reached up and rubbed his face, looking tired all of a sudden.

"Sorry," I apologized, though I still smirked at him.

“No you’re not,” he grumbled.

My smirk turned into a happy grin as I nodded. I wasn’t.

Vim eventually sighed, but nodded. “They hadn’t lived at the top of them, no. But those monoliths were indeed made by what you’d call a god.”

“Oh...? Then why so bothered over it?” I asked.

“Because only you could have a mind that is more beautiful than the rest of you.”

My smile went stiff, and my tail coiled upward, to try and wrap around the bag hanging at my waist.

After a moment I coughed and giggled. “Jeez, Vim!” I said as I reached over and smacked him lightly on the arm.

He huffed at me as I snickered and enjoyed the moment. Really! I had been kind of joking earlier about the flirting, but maybe I shouldn’t have!

I was only able to giggle for a short while, as I realized there was someone waiting for us. A single person, amongst many houses.

He was rather noticeable... mostly because he was dressed in all black, and was rather large. He was a portly man.

“That is...?” I asked as we walked towards him.

“The current elder of the village. By the way... please don’t get too bothered, Renn. Or offended,” Vim said softly.

“Hm...? Is he going to be rude?” I asked.

“No. He won’t be. But... well... haven’t you noticed?” he asked.

Noticed what?

Glancing around, I frowned until I saw movement. In one of the larger windows on the nearest building.

Focusing on it, I realized quickly what Vim meant... and had meant, all along.

The village wasn’t empty, or quiet at all.

There were likely dozens of windows in sight, on all the nearby buildings... and darn near every single one had someone staring at us from them. Some had multiple pairs of eyes peering out from behind curtains and shutters.

“Oh...” I groaned as I realized what he meant.

“Yeah. It’s not their fault Renn. I’ll explain it later, when we’re alone. But they have good reason to be scared of me,” he said.

“Why’d you not explain it earlier?” I asked.

“Oplar,” was all he said.

Ah...

Feeling a little stunned by such an obvious reason, I did my best to not say anything as we stepped off the path we were on and onto a brick village center courtyard.

The bricks were rather uniform, reminding me of Lumen, but they were a strange yellow color. Almost brown. Maybe they were just old.

Walking onto the bricks, I glanced past the buildings nearby and realized this whole area was layered with bricks. It was actually surprising... It was definitely a courtyard, similar to what the Weaver's Hut had, but on another level. The place was massive... it'd take me several minutes to run from one side to the other.

It was like a whole town itself. Maybe that was what it was meant to be.

"Welcome, Vim," the large man said as we drew closer.

"How've you been, Thrain?" Vim asked as we paused a few feet from him.

He gave Vim a soft smile as he nodded, and I noticed the way his chin moved as he did so. "I've been well. Though to be honest I've had some troubles lately," he said.

As he spoke, what I had noticed before became even more obvious.

Thrain looked fat. He looked very large... His neck was round, and he didn't have one chin, he had two... maybe even three.

Yet not an inch of his body was soft. His skin didn't jiggle. The fact I had noticed it so quickly made me realize how odd it was. Maybe he wasn't fat? He looked it, but...

He turned and gestured behind him. "Shall we?" he invited us to follow him.

Vim nodded as Thrain turned around and began to walk. As he did, I paid close attention to the way his whole body shifted and moved under his thick black clothes.

Yes. He was fat. But it wasn't a soft fat. Something told me if I touched him, he'd be as hard and solid as Vim was.

Interesting. I wonder what they are. It must be related to his bloodline.

"Oplar is here as well. She ran off earlier though," Vim told him.

Thrain chuckled, and once again my deductions were proven correct. His whole body was stiff. "She'll turn up soon enough!" he said happily.

Hm...

As we followed Thrain past buildings and deeper into the center of the village, I did my best to ignore the stares. From windows. From half open doors.

There were a lot of people here, based off all the eyes staring at us.

What was odd though wasn't just the fact that they were all hiding away in their homes... but that none of them looked fat like Thrain. Most looked normal, and were even dressed in similar clothes I'd see at any major human city. They weren't wearing leather, but cotton and other flaxes.

Glancing at Vim, I noted the soft smile on his face. Either he and Thrain were friends... or he actually liked it when everyone ignored and hid from him.

Maybe they did...? Usually when we go to a Society location he does get swarmed at first. With questions, requests, and stories. So... maybe he actually liked it when he was kind of left alone?

It was rather quiet.

In fact... it was strangely quiet.

I was used to silence. Especially when Vim and I traveled, and even more so when we traveled through open plains or dense forests. Yet...

This wasn't some distant, un-lived and empty area. This was a town. A village. One of the biggest in the Society, even.

Yet it was as quiet as the forests we had just traveled through to get here.

Realizing it was so quiet made me feel a little anxious. My tail became a tad stiff, and I rolled a shoulder... as if it was stiff from carrying bags for so long. Yet I hadn't been. The only bags I carried were tied to my waist. The small ones, holding letters and other small items. Vim was carrying the larger bags, and Oplar had the others.

We rounded a large building and the bricks changed color. They became a whiter, cleaner, style... but they also became larger. The yellowish bricks had been about the size of my feet. These were as long as my forearm, and about half as wide.

It was interesting that the bricks were different colors and stuff, but all of the houses were bland browns and blacks.

“Ah!”

I turned as we passed a large building, which was obviously some kind of house. The front door shut, and I heard the typical sound of a mother scolding a child.

Smiling softly, I wondered if maybe a kid had tried to leave... not realizing who was outside. Did that mean the parents and elders all forced the children to not come near Vim...?

That was a rather sad thought.

A few minutes later we approached a large four-storied building. One without people staring out of its windows.

But there was another. A tall woman stood at the entrance, right outside the door. She was thin, and was glaring daggers at us as we neared.

Doing my best to not feel more awkward than I needed to, I strode up to the door alongside Vim... As Thrain simply walked past the woman, and went into the building.

“Hey there Ash,” Vim greeted the woman.

She didn’t respond. She simply narrowed her eyes. She didn’t even scoff, or huff at us, as we passed.

“Um...” I waved lightly at her as I followed Vim into the building.

The tall woman noticed my waving, and me, as if she hadn’t noticed me before. She blinked... and calmed down a little as she nodded at me.

I stepped past her, and into the building, and smirked a little in victory.

She followed us in, closing the door behind us, and the moment she did... the world stopped being quiet.

Pausing a tiny moment, I glanced back... and ignored the tall woman who went still at being looked at.

Past her, I could hear voices. People talking. They were too distant and muffled to make out, but it was clear that the village had just relaxed a little.

Because Vim was now in this building.

Was this where we'd be sleeping?

Turning back around, as to not further disturb the tall woman, I picked up my pace to follow Vim down the hallway. I peered into each room we passed, and was both surprised at how clean and fancy this place was... but also realized quickly that this was likely where we'd be staying.

There was a strange coldness in the building. A lack of smells. It was clear no one lived here, actually lived here. There was no smell of cooking, or sweat. There was the faint smell of dirt and old wear and tear, but also the smell of someone having recently cleaned. I smelled wood that had been wiped down. Rugs that had been aired out. And the shelves and tables I saw were noticeably missing a layer of dust.

This was either some kind of weird office building, or this was basically an inn. Somewhere the village cleaned and routinely up-kept, but wasn't lived in.

Rounding a corner, we immediately stepped into the first room on the right. It was a larger room, with a large square table. A table of deep red.

Rather impressed with the table, I stepped over to it as Vim and Thrain both went to sit at it. Instead of sitting right away, I ran my hand along the surface of the table, and was a little stunned to feel how smooth it was.

My hand even made tiny little squeaks as I ran it along the surface...

How'd they sand it so well?

Thrain coughed lightly, and I glanced up from the table and found that not only was he and Vim sitting... so too had the tall woman. And they were all staring at me.

Right.

I stepped around the table, to sit next to Vim. As I pulled the chair out from under the table, I noticed our bags near Vim's feet. He had taken them off as to sit comfortably.

Sitting down, I smiled gently at the two across the table from Vim and I, and happily went to waiting for whoever would speak first.

"I thank you for coming, Vim," Thrain said after I got comfortable.

"Hopefully you hadn't waited long. I just heard from Oplar of your summons about a month ago," Vim said.

Thrain smiled as he gently waved Vim's worry away. "Our request this time is... rather serious, but it is fine. We sent word only a few months ago," he said.

"Hm. Before that I do have letters for you... unless the request needs immediate attention?" Vim asked.

"Ah. No. It can wait," Thrain said with a nod.

I perked up as I reached down to my waist. I untied and opened the bag made from monarch leather, and then hesitated.

Which letter? I didn't remember any addressed to Thrain...

"The red ones, Renn," Vim said gently.

Ah. I nodded as I quickly dug out the few red envelopes. They were indeed the only red ones I had.

As I leaned forward to hand them to Thrain, I hesitated a small moment as I realized both Thrain and the woman, Ash, were staring at me with odd looks.

“Hm...?” I did my best to not get too bothered by their strange looks, and gladly didn’t have to try too hard or for long. Thrain smiled and took the letters after only a moment of hesitation, and Ash likewise calmed down as he did.

“Thank you... I’m sorry, I’ve been rude. My name is Thrain the Fifth. Welcome to the Summit... Miss...?” Thrain introduced himself and held out his hand. He had even stood from his chair, as to be proper.

I too quickly stood and quickly took his hand. “Renn...! It’s fine... I get it, I think,” I said as I took his hand.

“Renn...?” Thrain frowned as we shook hands, and I gulped at the feeling of solid stone.

His hands were harder, rougher, and thicker than Vim’s. To the point it was almost unnerving. It was like holding a brick.

He was gentle though, and didn’t squeeze my hand anywhere near hard enough to hurt me. He likely didn’t know how strong I was, and it was a kind gesture on his part. But... even though he didn’t squeeze very hard, I couldn’t help but notice and acknowledge that he was likely very strong. He wasn’t weak or frail at all, and not just because he was so firm and hard.

“Are you a wolf, Renn?” Ash asked as I went to sitting back down, done shaking Thrain’s hand.

“Uh... no. I’m a cat. A jaguar,” I said.

Ash's eyes narrowed at me, but not in the way she had been glaring at Vim earlier. It was clear she was more shocked than angry.

"A jaguar...! Fascinating. I wonder from which line you hail...?" Thrain asked as he placed the red letters aside, next to him.

Oh...? I had thought he'd go to reading them. Maybe they weren't for him, or maybe he suddenly found me more interesting and important than they.

"I uh... I don't know. My elders were big, and had black fur, but I don't know more than that... I'm sorry," I said, unsure of what else to say. Hopefully I'd not receive the same treatment here as I had at the Bell Church.

Thrain tilted his head and Ash coughed a smile. "He means which god you hail from, dear. Who created you?" Ash asked.

Created me...

My tail coiled around one of the chair's legs as my grandparents stories rushed through my mind.

They had said similar things.

"I'm sorry... I don't know," I said honestly.

Thrain chuckled as he waved at the tall woman. "Now, now, Ash. It's very rare nowadays for anyone to know their heritage! If anything it'd be stranger if she did, actually!" he said happily.

Ash knowingly nodded, understanding.

Although glad the two weren't making a big deal out of it... I was also a little peeved at the way they were acting. Had they just somewhat insulted me? Did they think themselves better because they knew their supposed creator, while I didn't? Or was I just reading into them a little too much, because I was upset they had reminded me of my grandparents?

"I apologize Renn. My name is Ash. Me and my husband welcome you to the Summit," Ash then said as she bowed her head a tad.

Oh...? I glanced back and forth for a moment, between the two.

They were married...!

"Thank you...! I've never been somewhere with so many of our kind in one place, so I'm a little excited to be honest," I said to them.

The two smiled and nodded. "Right? We're quite proud of our numbers. We're not just amongst the largest; we're also one of the oldest locations in the Society too! Our people lived here far before the Society was even a thought!" Thrain said proudly.

Oh. Right. Their god had been here.

Yes... that likely had been a long time ago...

I nodded as Thrain crossed his arms, which was a feat considering how thick they were.

"In a day or two it'll get lively again. You'll enjoy seeing us at our best, I promise!" Thrain added with even more pride.

"Hm!" I nodded again, and actually was excited to see it. Hundreds supposedly lived here, and I believed it based off all the buildings. Some were so distant they were blurry. I could see hundreds of people living here.

"Yes. Vim has rules, but they're not extended to any other visitor. Please relax and feel free to enjoy our home, Renn. We are not predators, but we're a proud bloodline. We shall not shy away just because of what you are," Ash said to me.

My tail coiled harder around the chair's leg. "I see... Thank you," I said, unsure of how else to respond to that.

It was... kind. In a way. Yet... also a little painful. To have people assume things about me just by looking at me. I should be long used to it, but lately the places we'd been and the people we've met have all been... well...

Rather welcoming and nice. A lot of the more recent locations had welcomed me even without saying such a thing.

“Shall she be needing her own place to sleep, Vim?” Ash then asked him.

My ears fluttered a little in annoyance. Why ask him and not me? “I’m okay staying with Vim,” I said before he could speak up.

If either of them were bothered or startled by my answer, they didn’t show it. They simply nodded and smiled. “Okay,” Ash said.

Calming down a little, I wondered if maybe I was... being too defensive. Maybe they weren’t being rude at all, and I was just reading too much into their words and actions. Between this place and its people being so rude to Vim and their question about my so called creator... well...

“Well then... If you don’t mind Vim, I’d like to go over the letters first,” Thrain said calmly as he grabbed them.

Oh...? Was he asking us to leave the room, or was he going to just sit here and read them in front of us?

Instead though he stood, as did Ash.

A little surprised, I remained seated since Vim did too. "This house is fully furnished, Renn. Please feel free to make yourself at home. If there's anything you need, just let someone know and we'll get it for you," Ash said to me as Thrain stepped around the table, heading for the exit.

"Oh... okay...?" I shifted a little uncomfortably as Ash smiled and nodded, and then went to follow her husband.

The two left without another word, and I gulped as I listened to them silently walk down the hallway... to the front door... then out of the house.

They shut the door behind them, and my ear fluttered because of it. "Vim...?" I asked as I turned to look at him.

"Hm?" he tilted his head at me as he went to stand up too.

"This is where we're staying?" I asked.

"Yeah."

Huh...

“And they’re just... going to leave? Not even going to tell us what they summoned you for?” I asked.

“It must not be that concerning. It’s fine. He’ll either come back later, or in the morning,” Vim said as he bent down to pick up all the bags he had just discarded a moment ago.

Feeling a little out of place, I too slowly stood. The room was big enough Vim didn’t need me to get out of the way or move my chair as he walked around the table and left.

I followed after him, without even putting my chair back properly.

He rounded the corner, heading for the entrance, but instead of leaving he went into one of the rooms near the front door. A large sitting area, with a huge couch and big chairs.

I stood in the hallway for a moment, and studied the place.

It really was nice. The floors were wood. Smooth. The ceiling was high, but had rows of designs on the edges where it met the walls. The doorways were thick, though without doors, and rounded at the top instead of flat like usual.

“I... figured it would have been a shack, or something. Or maybe some kind of prison,” I said softly as I stepped into the room.

Vim chuckled at me as he put the bags down onto the floor next to the couch. "They... don't like me, Renn. But they themselves are not bad people. They're odd, sure, but their oddness is normal. Most of our people used to be like them. Stuck in their strange ways. In fact a long time ago they had been considered some of the most human-like amongst us," he said.

Them...?

"They do look human enough... except for Thrain," I said.

"Hm...? What about him doesn't look human?" he asked, interested.

"His fat. It doesn't jiggle, and it isn't soft at all."

Vim paused a moment, then he chuckled softly for a tiny moment. "Right. Doesn't jiggle."

Although upset he found my words so humorous, I couldn't help but smile at him as I watched him nod and smirk.

"What are they, Vim?" I asked.

"They're cavy. Little pigs. Guinea pigs. They're a type of rodent," he said as he sat down on the couch with a huff.

Little... pigs...?

I shifted as I tried to understand Vim's meaning. He had called them pigs, but yet called them a rodent.

Thrain being a pig did somewhat make sense. I've patted many fat hogs, and sometimes even though fat they were hard to the touch. As if full of air and swelling, about to burst. Especially when they were on their side, snoring away.

But... rodents...?

"So... tiny pigs?" I asked.

He nodded, but paused. "Ah. No. Not actual pigs. Think more like a fat rodent. Imagine a rabbit and a mouse mixed together, kind of," he said as he explained.

A rabbit and mouse...

"Why's he so hard then?" I asked as I neared him. There was a small knee high table in front of the couch, which was between us.

“He’s just strong. He’s an oddity for his kind. Most of them are rather frail beings,” he said as I stepped around the table and went to stand in front of him.

“And they’re married?” I asked.

“Thrail and Ash? Yes. Have been for a long time. They have a few children, but I’ve only ever met one of them and only for a moment,” Vim said.

Oh...

My tail laid onto the table, going low, thanks to how sad such a thing was.

“It’s not that sad, Renn. As I’ve mentioned... they have good reason for being so upset with me,” he said gently.

“You’re their protector, Vim. You’re a kind man. It doesn’t make any sense,” I said. I’ve tried to imagine what he could have possibly done, but it was hard to imagine why an entire village would despise him so much that they’d not even leave their homes when he visited. If I was understanding it properly, he wasn’t even allowed to meet the children of those who did at least talk to him!

Vim was not a cruel man. Anything he had done, or could have done... had to have been for good reason.

I shifted as I stared at the man relaxing on the couch. He had a tiny smile on his face, enjoying my own frustrations.

“Is this place your mistake, Vim?” I asked.

Vim’s smile died, and I felt the room grow colder. As if a sudden chill breeze had just pass by. Yet this building was well made. Not a draft could be felt, or heard.

“No. That happened a long time ago. Even before this place,” Vim answered.

I gulped and nodded. “Okay...”

He sighed and leaned back a little more. The couch surprisingly didn’t creak or complain at all as he did so, and he nodded. “Remember how I said that a god was here?” he asked.

I nodded.

“It was their god. The one they worshiped,” he said.

My eyes narrowed as I slowly nodded again... and somehow knew where this was going. “Right...” I mumbled lightly.

“I was the one who killed her,” Vim said.

For a tiny moment I couldn't comprehend his words... but then as I did...

Smiling softly, about to laugh at the ridiculous and even audacious comment... I stared at the man who was staring back without a smile or frown.

He was serious.

Wobbly stepping forward, I turned and basically fell onto the couch next to Vim.

Surprisingly the couch was very soft. Soft enough it hadn't even bothered my tail at all upon sitting on it.

“You okay...?” he asked softly as I stared blankly at the nearby window. It was half covered by a large drape. I'll need to close them soon, once it grew darker... so that no one outside could see in and...

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I reached up to rub my eyes. They suddenly hurt. “You killed their god,” I whispered.

“Yes. And uh... a lot of them too, while at it. They had not been happy at the time, at all, so...” Vim had started to mumble, as if ashamed.

And he should be.

“No wonder they hate you! No wonder they’re terrified of you!”

I heard and felt Vim nod as I stopped rubbing my eyes. “Yes. Exactly. Their hate is justified. Understandable. I took their holy figure and slaughtered her. And had done so brutally, too. I... honestly Renn, I had not done it in a way that had been fitting for the moment. Think of what happened with Tim, but far worse,” Vim explained quietly.

Staring at him, I felt a strange cold chill run up my tail and spine.

If this wasn’t his mistake... just how bad had that been, then?

I wasn’t entirely sure yet what to think of these gods so many people spoke of. Were they literal? Figurative? Is the god Vim was speaking of a real god, like the one in all those scriptures... or was it like the gods written in those fairy tales and legends... like the ones the pagans sang about?

Or well...

Did it matter...?

Even if she hadn't been a real god, and just a person... a normal person... it didn't matter. They all saw it in black and white. They saw their god, and Vim. Their god and the one who killed her.

Their god and their devil.

"Why'd you do it...?" I asked softly.

Vim finally smiled, but did so sadly. "I'll not answer that, Renn. Not yet."

For once I wanted to smack him. To grab his head and shake the truth out of him... but I didn't. I kept myself under control as I looked away from him, and shook my head. "I wanted to hate them. For being weird. For acting kind of rude. Now I pity them," I said.

"They are pitiful, Renn... why do you think I'm so willing to endure their hatred? It's not just my belief in free will here... it's my penance," he said.

Grabbing my knees, I squeezed them. The thick cloth and leather straps that ran down them, connecting my thigh pieces to my calf pieces, protested under my grip. "I... I need a moment. To process this," I said honestly.

"Hm." Vim simply nodded as he sat back, going quiet.

He remained quiet for a little over an hour... as I deeply pondered him and his strange, yet great, failures.

I continued to ponder and debate. To weigh certain questions against others. To try and comprehend the strange fact he had so simply said.

He had killed a god.

Vim was capable of killing gods.

It shouldn't have been so surprising... he was able to kill monarchs. Giant creatures with strange abilities... but...

But... I had still seen him as something normal. I knew killing giant, powerful, creatures was possible. I'd seen Witch do it with but a touch. A frail woman who was practically human in every other way.

Yet a god...?

I twitched as my head began to ache a little.

The sun had begun to set. My stomach started to grumble in complaint. My tail began to itch beneath me.

And still Vim said nothing. He remained still. Waiting patiently...

Then, right before I was about to speak up... the door opened.

“You all better have food ready!” Oplar shouted as she entered the house.

Vim sighed as he stood, and I had no choice but stand and join him.

It wasn't Oplar's fault. It was my own. It took me far too long to sort my thoughts and feelings about it.

Plus... helping them cook, and then eating dinner, was a great excuse to give myself more time.

More time to figure it all out. More time to understand...

And most importantly...

More time to ignore the very weird thought that had sprung forth the moment he had told me what he'd done.

Only something, or someone, special could kill a god.

And that fact terrified me beyond reason.

I wished to forget it. To bury it deep forever.

Vim was not supposed to be something so special as that...

Because then I'd not be able to make him my own.

Because I was not special. Not enough to match someone like that.

And that was what terrified me more than anything else.

Chapter 278 Thrain's Request

Sometimes the places that I felt most comfortable were where I didn't belong.

But...

Was this really a place I didn't belong?

I glanced to my right, at the pair of ears near my face. They twitched ever so softly, which told me she had felt me turn my head.

Over her head, between her ears, I could see the book she was reading. Her finely manicured nail was softly rubbing the bottom of the page, as if anxious. A quick glance at the words on the page told me she was in the middle of a heated scene. The main character had just met the man she was being betrothed to. By force, by her father. If I remembered correctly it'd be here where she'd start to plan her scheme to usurp her father and take his crown for herself.

Renn would likely verily enjoy such a story. Especially a plot such as that. I could see her liking the character, and her personal convictions and the things that drive her. Her desire to choose her own husband. Her desire to find freedom by taking on one of the greatest burdens one could and becoming the ruler of a mighty nation.

Renn was rather similar. She wasn't afraid to desire and chase after something that many, if not most, would find either foolish or even lackluster in worth. She didn't do what others would. She was a woman who didn't hesitate to reach out for what called to her... even if what she desired was so strange.

She could have anything. Anyone. Yet she chose something stupid.

Me.

She could have went anywhere in the Society. Picked any of the locations. Picked any of the men or even any of the women. She likely could have picked several had she felt the desire to, as well.

Yet here she was. Sitting with me instead.

She had started reading the book not long after the sun had risen, and since turning the first page hadn't looked away from it.

Her ears twitched again, and I smiled as I looked away from her. She was still aware of her surroundings, but she was definitely engrossed in the story.

Renn... she was a romantic too, wasn't she?

I thought about it as she turned the page, a little quickly. She couldn't wait to see what happened next.

A part of me didn't see her as a romantic. She wasn't like Sharp. But...

Yes. She was. Even if I didn't want to admit it.

Though... it wasn't like I found such a thing to be bad, or unattractive. I just didn't like it when such desires and schemes were directed my way. At least, not usually.

I shifted ever so slightly, as to raise my left arm and hand. I rested my head against my fist, and was glad Renn hadn't been bothered by my movement.

We were on the couch, and Renn was sitting up against me. It was actually a little awkward, since the couch was so soft. I kind of sunk into the backrest, thanks to how fluffy it was, and as such wasn't able to give Renn as much body to rest against as she would usually have at her disposal. I had to sit at a small angle to make sure she could rest against me comfortably, so as she'd not rock or fall over.

Renn didn't seem to mind at all. She was more than happy to sit there reading her book, humming softly as she dived into the world and its characters... but me...?

I was facing a new kind of hell. One I'd not known before.

A long time ago I had once been tortured. It hadn't lasted long, but it had been brutal. It had occurred while I was young, not long after my parents died.

I'd always believed it was those moments that had made me a man. Not my parent's deaths. Not my actual growth. Not the first time I'd lain with a woman or killed someone. Not my first war. It was those few days of torture that had given birth to the man I was today. By force.

Those days had genuinely been painful. I would and did not wish to relive them.

Yet here I was, debating which was worse. Those long brutal days... or this.

It wasn't because of how I was sitting, or for how long. I was not uncomfortable at all. Nor was it because I was actually in pain. I honestly didn't even feel that tired. The couch was soft. Renn was warm.

Her humming was far from grating on the ears, and was instead almost musical enough to lull me to sleep.

I honestly had nothing to complain about. I should be grinning in joy, in fact.

Rather...

“Hm...” Renn huffed quietly as she turned the page. She must not have liked the marriage candidate the main character’s father had chosen, at all.

I resisted the urge to gulp as her tail slowly rose upward, and then slapped back down. It was a very cat-like movement. One that told me she was annoyed. That up and down movement was unmistakable.

Her tail slapped again. And I’d have smirked at its movement... except it was slapping my thigh. She had laid it across my lap as if I was some pillow. And...

It slapped my thigh again, and I closed my eyes and did my best to imagine the pain.

That blinding pain that had engulfed me. That had nearly broken me.

The pain that I’d never felt again since. I reminisced for the first time in centuries about those moments... Hoping the memories would distract me.

Renn shifted a little, tilting away from me... as she leaned forward as if to read closer. The movement was normal, and not even really worth noticing... but as she did so she also leaned away from me. For the tiniest moment, I was free of her touch... then she leaned back again, thumping me as she turned another page.

Internally flinching, I rubbed my eyes as gently as I could so that she'd not notice.

I'll never dub what had happened to me torture again. That hadn't been torture. It hadn't been anything more than simple pain.

This was true torture.

How did anyone survive this...? How had I? It's not like this was the first time I've had a woman act like this... Celine had used to sit back to back with me, as we talked and she wrote in her journals. It had been something we had done often. She liked to write in her journals in the meadows, outside.

I hadn't even blinked at those moments. I had even forgotten about them until now. They had been that uneventful, and without note.

Yet here I was... breaking out in a cold sweat...

This was somehow harder than her sleeping next to me.

Why? Why was this making me so anxious? Why did it bother me so much?

It made absolutely no sense. I couldn't even remember feeling like this even when I had been a young boy. I'd never been this anxious or...

Renn then released a huge sigh as she lowered the book to her lap. She left it open, and for the tiniest moment I thought I was free.

Maybe she needed to use the restroom, or wanted to eat. Or...

"Is the author really a woman, Vim?" Renn asked. She leaned back a tad, to rest the back of her head against my shoulder.

"Yes... why...?" I asked as I did my best to calm down.

Maybe her asking questions and talking to me would make this easier and distract me.

"I'd not think like this. Like... her. This queen. She finds things attractive that I'd not take note of... or would find unappealing, even," Renn said as she tapped the book.

Smiling at her, I wondered what kind of specific thing she was talking about. I could remember the scene, to a point, but nothing specific enough to understand what she actually meant. "Not every woman, or person, is the same Renn. Everyone all has different preferences. Plus it is still just a character in a story," I said.

I was living proof. What was it about her simple antics right now was making me so weak? She was just sitting against me. It wasn't even that sexual.

"True... but honestly I had expected something... well... different. Merit and the others seemingly love this character, and her romantic encounters," Renn said with a strange tone. She sounded upset... but not so much at the book, but herself.

Was she... angry that she wasn't enjoying it as much as she had expected herself to?

"It gets spicier later, if that's what you're upset about," I said carefully.

Her tail thumped my thigh again. "Does it...?" she asked, turning to glance at me again.

I nodded. "Yeah... and she does mature and change throughout the story. I'll not spoil it, but the series covers many decades of her life," I said.

"Oh...? Is she the author? This princess?" Renn asked.

Princess...? Oh. Right. The main character isn't a queen yet.

Hm... "No. It's a purely fictional story. I like the way your mind works though," I said.

She giggled, and I flinched at the feeling of it. It felt wonderful.

"I know you do," she said happily as she leaned even more against me.

I should have kept my damn mouth shut...!

Renn moved ever so slightly... as if swaying to some unheard melody. As she did her tail also started to move again, though this time instead of thumping up and down it swayed back and forth, likely alongside whatever song she heard in her heart.

"Is it hard? To make a book?" she asked.

"Depends on how you want to make it. It's not the simplest process, no, but it's not so difficult we couldn't make one if you wanted to," I said. Did she want to try her hand at writing stories?

"How many have you made?" she asked further.

Huh...? Oh. The one I sent Rapti. "That hadn't been a real book, Renn. It was a report. It had been during the beginning of the wars, and Celine was busy. So sometimes when I returned to Telmik I didn't have a chance to meet her and tell her of what happened. So sometimes I left those reports for her. I just wrote in blank booklets or pamphlets... sometimes I just wrote on scratch paper, or on the back of scrolls," I explained.

"Hm... Have you ever written a real book then? Like this?" she asked.

"No. I... used to read a lot. I used to devour books like you do those berry smoothies. But I've never written anything like that myself," I said.

"You like to read?" she asked as she leaned back a little more. The tip of her left ear was now close enough to touch me. I had to lean my head away a tad, since the tip of it kept brushing against my jaw.

"I did. Or well... maybe I still do. But I'm busy nowadays," I said.

Plus today's world wasn't well equipped at producing anything really worth reading anymore. Even the human societies and cultures were... a little primitive and lackluster at the moment. They were all still recovering from the wars. Most places, even the larger capitals and kingdoms, didn't even have libraries anymore.

"Hm..." Renn hummed thoughtfully, and I wondered what she was scheming. Hopefully she wouldn't start reading aloud. As much as I'd enjoy hearing her read the story, using her own voice to give the characters life...

I weighed the idea of listening to her read aloud. I'd enjoy it, actually. I'd likely find it quite lovely.

But that was the problem. I'd enjoy it too much. It'd just be even more torture for me.

I lost even when I won. What was I to do with myself...?

A part of me wanted to go back to the awkward silence of last night.

Oplar had somewhat interrupted our conversation. About what I'd done to make the people here despise me. And Renn had... oddly gone very quiet after I had told her. And although she had somewhat returned to normal during our cooking of, and eating, dinner... She had returned to that strange silence afterward.

She hadn't even said goodnight to me last night. She had simply crawled into bed next to me and fell asleep. It wasn't until this morning that she had spoken to me, and she's not brought up what I'd done since.

It had bothered her. I still wasn't sure yet which aspect bothered her the most... but it was obvious it had done so deeply. Rather deeply.

To be honest I had expected it to. It was why I had tried to not bring it up around Oplar, even though Oplar knew full well what I'd done. It wasn't like those here kept it a secret or anything.

Renn was free to come to any conclusion she liked... but I hadn't wanted Oplar's opinions to alter them... in any capacity. Oplar didn't believe in faith. At all. So her stance and opinion on the matter was heavily skewed in one direction.

My happily humming companion on the other hand, even if she didn't subscribe to religion... found it to be something precious. Even if she didn't believe that the being I had killed had been a god, a real one or not, didn't matter. To the people here, these residents of this town, she had been.

To them she had been a real deity. Something important beyond measure.

So my slaughter of her was very serious. And very cruel. Sacrilegious and debase. It was not something to be so easily or readily overlooked and dismissed.

I couldn't help but smile at the memory of her furrowing her brow, going deep in thought as she pondered it. It meant she had heavily weighed what I'd done, and likely had found me at fault.

She hadn't asked for the whole story yet, of course... but...

Either way I was glad she was willing, and able, to judge me in such a way.

There were too many in the Society, in the world even, that forgave or didn't comprehend the severity of my actions sometimes. They allowed their personal feelings, and even their indifferent attitudes, to overlook so much...

I'd be lying if I didn't claim that one of my personal opinions and requisites to call someone friend, was for them to not forgive me so easily.

I was looking forward to the conclusion she had come to.

And so too the many more she'd eventually reach down the road. Although as terrifying as it was to imagine her learning so much about me... it was all the same exciting, too.

How would she judge me? Would her love falter? Grow more pure? Would she sigh at me, or smile?

I couldn't wait.

"Vim..." Renn's tone changed a bit, and my heart thumped. Was this it? Would she bring it up now?

Yet before she could continue, someone knocked on the front door.

I frowned, and not just because we were being interrupted again.

I hadn't heard them approach at all. Strange. This whole building was surrounded by flat grass and brick stone.

Renn really was distracting me.

Renn huffed, yet didn't move. She remained leaning against me, which meant... well...

"Come in," I said loudly, since it was clear Renn had no plans to let me up as to open the door.

"Vim...?" Thrain's voice sounded a little worried as he opened the door and entered.

It only took him a few steps to reach the front room, and he paused halfway through the doorway upon finding us.

I studied the large man's shocked face for a moment, and wondered if Oplar hadn't told him about us yet. He looked absolutely stunned.

It was too bad Renn was facing away from him. She'd have enjoyed his expression.

"So it is true..." Thrain whispered, to himself, as he collected his nerve and entered the room.

Ah. So maybe Oplar had warned him. He had simply not believed it.

“Have a seat,” I said with a tiny gesture to one of the larger chairs across from us.

Renn tilted her head a little, as to watch Thrain sit down. He did so wearily, as if suddenly exhausted.

It likely looked normal, thanks to his size and appearance... but the reality was Thrain was not a weak or unhealthy man. He could run for miles without breaking a sweat. I’ve seen him do it.

“No one ever believes it,” Renn said simply. She hadn’t needed to see his expression after all. She had likely heard his shock in his whisper, and his unsteady self as he sat forward.

“I still don’t either,” I told her.

Renn’s ears fluttered for a small moment, and then she giggled as she leaned even harder against me.

I tried to ignore her happy moment as I focused on Thrain... who although was still quite obviously shocked, he was at least calmer now. He even had a faint smile forming on his face.

“I must say I’ve... never considered it. Is she uh... are you like him?” Thrain asked Renn.

“I’m far more selfish than he is,” Renn answered.

Thrain frowned in a way that told me he had completely misunderstood her meaning.

Moving just enough to cross my arms, I ignored Renn's tail that thumped me in annoyance. She must have thought I had been about to stand up. "I can be pretty selfish," I said, defending myself.

"What...? Once every thousand years? Please," Renn said.

Hmph.

"Well... Um..." Thrain shifted a tad, and his clothes strained thanks to it. He was unsure of what to say, or do, it seemed.

"How've you been Thrain?" I asked, in an attempt to break him free of the weird atmosphere. I had asked yesterday on meeting him, but I knew the kind of man he was.

He never gave the full, honest, answer right away. It took a little prodding to get it from him.

"Oh... Not well, to be honest."

I nodded. I had assumed so. He and his wife had been odd yesterday. A little... too distant. Not just with me either, but with each other.

They'd never been the most... active couple, in showing their affection, but they had seemed a tad unnatural. They had sat a little stiffly. Hadn't looked at one another. He hadn't even helped her with her chair, either. He was usually a gentleman.

I'd have blamed Renn's presence, but I knew better than to do that. Thrain and Ash weren't as prickly about visitors as the rest of their people. Plus Renn's ears and tail made it quite obvious she was one of them. A non-human. There had been no doubt of her allegiance. They knew I'd never bring a human here, yet they always panicked at first until it was proven those I brought were non-humans.

Was an odd discriminator practice... especially when one considered what their supposed god had forced them all to do, and be.

"The world has gotten noisy again, Vim," Thrain said as he leaned back in his chair, relaxing a little.

"Has it?" I asked. I didn't like that I had thought similar not too long ago. I wonder why he believed so as well.

"Has it not?" he asked back.

Hm...

"This place seems rather quiet, though," Renn said gently.

Thrain perked up, as if he had somehow forgotten Renn was even here. Then he smiled and nodded. "Yes. We're rather proud of our simple lives. But fear not, it can get noisy. It's just... well..." Thrain went quiet, and coughed.

"Vim's here," Renn finished for him.

Thrain's eyes went a little wide as he quickly shook his head. "No...! Or well... yes. When he first arrives, there's no doubt the village grows a little weary and quiet... but it usually returns to normal after a single night. No... rather, there's... well... another reason..." Thrain went quiet again, and I wondered if I should ask Renn to step out or not.

Renn turned to look at him, her ear brushing my own as she did.

"You don't seem too bothered by him, honestly," Renn said as she studied him.

"Hm...? Vim...? Oh. No. I'm disappointed in what he did, but I don't hate him for it. Nor do I fear he'll harm me or my own, either. Most here would not agree with me, but I know Vim is not the kind of man to act rashly. I... don't agree with his choice, but I know why he made it and where he came to such a conclusion," Thrain said, telling her what he has told almost everyone else I'd heard ask him a similar question.

Renn's ear fluttered and she hummed. "I'm... honestly very humbled to hear you say so. I'll be honest I don't know the whole story yet... but just so you know, I'd understand if you hated him. Or despised him. You'd have a right to, considering what he did," Renn told him.

Oh...? Interesting. So that was the conclusion she came to.

Thrain smiled at her. "A very predator-like perspective. And an interesting one, coming from you. Especially if you're what I think you are," he said.

"And what do you think I am, exactly?" Renn asked, her voice told me she was smirking and amused.

Thrain hesitated, and then glanced at me.

I frowned, and wondered if maybe I had misread him. I had assumed he had been simply talking about her being my wife... did he think she was something else? Something different...?

Surely he didn't think she was a god or something, right...?

"You're... well... His wife, aren't you?" Thrain asked with a point at me.

Renn huffed. "Technically? No. But I'd both like it and be content if you thought so," she said.

Thrain's eyes narrowed as Renn shifted a tad, as to side-glance me with a glare.

“Against my better judgment, yes. She’s become my companion,” I told him, and her.

She sighed. “I know it’s just your personality, and you don’t mean it in any negative way at all... but I really want to sometimes hear you use other words to describe our relationship, Vim,” she said.

“I’ll do it next time, honey,” I said.

Renn immediately froze, and then sat up a tad as to really look at me. She looked just as shocked as Thrain had upon walking in.

Thrain coughed a laugh. “Well, I’ll be! Where has this Vim been all this time?” he asked loudly.

“Right here?” I answered.

Although Renn had a weird smile on her face, she calmly sat back down against me. Her tail had started to coil around my thigh, though.

“I’ll say not, Vim. If you’d been like this the whole time my people may have warmed back up to you by now,” Thrain said.

Renn made an odd noise as she shifted a tad. “It’d humanize him, sure. But don’t let him fool you, that’s the first time he’s ever called me honey,” Renn said.

Had it been...? Are you saying I'd never teased her that way before?

Maybe not...

"Indeed... maybe I should have the two of you wander around, or eat amongst the village. I wonder if it'd work..." Thrain began to ponder as he schemed.

I sighed. "Before we get involved in all that, can I know why you've summoned me?" I asked.

Thrain startled, and I realized I probably shouldn't have been so abrupt and rude about it.

He now looked hurt.

The large man shifted a bit, and frowned in a way that told me something was wrong. Which was odd... he hadn't told me right away upon meeting him, so whatever they wanted from me couldn't be that dire or serious... could it?

The village had looked fine. I didn't, and hadn't, smell anything wrong. No fires. No bodies or corpses. No death.

But...

Thrain glanced to my right, at Renn. The way his eyes lingered on her told me he was now studying her in a different light. Before he hadn't believed his eyes... well... now he didn't want to believe them.

Was he not just coming out and saying it because of her...? Surely not, right?

"Ok... Vim. I'm so terribly sorry, but..." Thrain then nodded to himself, and focused on me.

Oh? Was he going to ask for some privacy? Really?

"You really... the two of you... are you married or not?" he asked.

I sighed as I rubbed my eyes.

Renn giggled at my discomfort. "We basically are... but we've not had a wedding or anything," Renn answered him.

Maybe I should file for a divorce.

“Huh... I’m half tempted to ask for an invitation,” Thrain said lightly.

Please don’t.

“Thrain...” I said stiffly.

He jolted a smidgen, and then quickly nodded. “Right... sorry.”

No he wasn’t. Oh well. Least it meant whatever I was here for was no big deal. Maybe they needed something made for them. Another waterwheel maybe?

Thrain took a tiny breath, and nodded ever so gently. “It’s my nephew, Vim.”

“Hm...?” I frowned as I wondered what that could mean. His nephew? Was something wrong with him? Is that why I had been summoned?

If he was sick or something why hadn’t they brought me straight to him? Or him to me?

“He’s committed an unforgivable act. He... murdered another. Out of pure jealousy,” he said as he went to rubbing his temple.

Renn slowly sat up. For the first time since we'd sat down this morning, we were separated. Or well, her tail remained on my lap, but not her. She turned, as to properly sit on the couch and face the man.
"Murder...?" Renn asked.

Thrain nodded and sighed. "He's from Ash's side of the family. As you know, Vim, they can be... very possessive. But he took it to another level entirely. The lad recently married a young girl. A beautiful young lady, who is just... as pure and lovely as they come. She was nice to everyone. Friendly. Supportive. She came from a long line of highly regarded members of our village," Thrain explained.

"Did he kill her too?" I asked worriedly.

"No. Thank Viva! The poor girl is distraught, but she's fine. The lad, my nephew, killed the other man because he believed him to be trying to steal her from him. It was absolutely unneeded and wrong. The man he killed wasn't married, but there had been a good reason for it," Thrain said quickly.

"Reason?" Renn asked.

"He hadn't preferred women," Thrain answered.

"Ah..." Renn nodded, understanding.

"If such a fact was well known, why the murder?" I asked.

“Who’s to know, Vim? The lad had tendencies of violence. He had gotten into a few fights with others, mostly because he was jealous or quick to anger... but many in Ash’s family are like that. Ash once beat me back and blue for just seeing another woman naked, on accident! It’s just how they are,” Thrain said.

Renn shifted a tad.

“Beatings aren’t the same as outright murder,” I said.

“No. They’re not...” Thrain said softly.

“So... I’ve been summoned to...?” I asked slowly, to verify what I expected.

He nodded. “We’d like you to be his executioner.”

Chapter 279 To Fetch a Plan, Well?

“This isn’t right, Vim,” I said as I watched Thrain leave. He walked with a slight slouch, as if carrying a heavy burden.

“What isn’t?” Vim asked from the next room. The one that led to the kitchen.

“They’re using you. They don’t want to take his life themselves, so they’re making you do it,” I said as I stepped away from the window, as to enter the hallway and find him.

I followed his hum through the next room and into the kitchen. He was opening the smaller pantry door that led to the cold room. A room full of metal lined boxes with ice. He must be hungry? Or had he heard my stomach gurgle earlier as Thrain left, after he asked for permission to begin planning the execution?

Although I was a little peckish, I was honestly a little too upset right now to eat. Or maybe this would be a good time to have a snack, as to calm me down.

“They just want you to stain your hands, Vim, so they can sleep at night. It’s wrong,” I said as he dug out some slabs of meat from the ice boxes.

“That is one way of looking at it, I suppose,” he said without much care.

“Vim...” I groaned as he shut the ice-box and then left the cold room. He shut the pantry door firmly, and sighed at me. “Don’t sigh at me! This is important!”

He nodded as he stood there for a small moment, staring at me. “It is. But, Renn... there are many reasons why this isn’t as bad as you’re making it out to be,” he said.

“Name them.”

Vim tilted his head and nodded. “Firstly, I have no doubt the man did indeed murder him. Thrain and the rest here hold trials. They’ll ask witnesses, investigate, and will even allow the whole village to participate. They’ll debate and argue over the right or wrongdoings, and will then reach a consensus on

what should be done about it. If they're calling for his death, then that is the will of the village. And trust me... there are many here who are very, very, stringent and strange. They would not be allowing this if there was a modicum of doubt in his criminality," Vim said.

"Vim there were several of your words there," I warned him.

He flinched and nodded. "Basically Renn, this village has old, wise, and also very by the book individuals living in it. If they claim this man did the deed, and deserves death for it, then there is little doubt in my mind they're right," he simplified.

Grumbling a little, I nodded and gestured for him to continue. "Another reason?"

"Killing someone is hard. Especially when it's someone you've known for a long time. Particularly family. They do not need to ask me to execute him, Renn... they're asking me to do it out of mercy. They're a religious people, although their religion is not like any you know. In their faith killing is a cardinal sin. Something that dooms their soul. Me taking up the mantle of executioner is simply a favor. A way to be kind to them. And he is not the first I've had to kill in this way, and will definitely not be the last," Vim said.

I shifted a little and glared at him as he stepped over to the larger table. He placed the chunk of meat down, and went to light the nearby oven fireplace. It was a large, white brick layered thing built into the side of the wall. It took up nearly half the wall on its own.

"I'm not... arguing the man doesn't deserve death. Just as you took Tim's life... I get that it has to happen, sometimes. But that's not the point," I said as I watched him open the little iron gates of the oven furnace section.

“What is?” he asked.

“These people. They hate you. They’ve banished you. Yet they make you do their dirty work. Can’t you see the problem?” I asked.

“I can. I see where you’re coming from very well. But... I’ll counter your point with one of my own,” Vim said.

I waited as he lit the fire. He quickly shut the iron gates, and then turned around to face me.

“Hm...!” I nodded, waiting to hear it.

“I killed their god, Renn. I slaughtered their ancestors. This used to be a thriving community, thousands strong. They’ve grown since, but they’re still a shell of their former selves. I was the one who laid them low. Not time. Not the church. Not a Monarch. Me. I owe these people... and whether that is protecting them, playing along with their little rules, building waterwheels and farming tools, or yes... even playing executioner. That’s what I’ll do,” he said.

Biting my cheek, I felt my tail bump into a nearby table. I glared at Vim for a moment... and eventually had to sigh and look away from him.

Not only was he not wrong... he wasn’t going to budge. At all.

“You disagree...?” he asked softly.

“No. Not entirely. It still upsets me, however,” I said.

“And that’s okay. To a point Renn... I agree with you. But that’s because I believe a person should solve their own problems, if able. But really... Murder is cause for banishment in the Society anyway, Renn. In fact, death is the proper punishment for it. Most locations charge death for death... So in theory this shouldn’t even be something to debate,” he said.

“I know that, Vim... I get it. I just don’t like how they’ll actually summon you just to dirty your hands like this. It’s wrong,” she said.

“It’s wrong to me and you, because of our views of life. But Renn... I do remember you once mentioning you’d have asked me to kill your family members. Instead of using your own hands to do the deed. What’s happening here is similar, born from the same emotion,” he said as he turned to start preparing the meat.

My breath caught, and I shivered a tiny bit. “You remember that...?” I asked, surprised.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You forget a lot of little things we talk about, Vim,” I said softly. He never seemed to forget the important bits, but...

“Hm... do I? Here I thought you were taking over my memories and thoughts, I hadn’t thought it possible to forget anything like that about you,” he said lightly as he went to cutting the meat into smaller slices.

Smiling at him, I wondered if he even realized how happy it had made me to hear that he had remembered such a thing.

It had been something said so long ago, and said quietly in passing...

Stepping forward, I carefully stepped up to him. He had his back to me, since he was focused on cutting the meat. I slid my arms around his waist, wrapping him in a hug.

“Renn...?” Vim didn’t turn, but he did pause in his cutting for a moment.

“Why’d you kill their god, Vim?” I asked.

For a few of his heartbeats... he said nothing. Then he chopped a piece of meat, a little loudly, as he returning to cutting.

At first I thought he’d ignore the question... as he had done last night. I was about to complain, since at least last night he had told me he wouldn’t answer it, and hadn’t outright ignored me... but before I could, he took in a small breath.

“Their god had been cruel, Renn. In... very disgusting ways. I’ll not get into it now and here. Ask Thrain and his wife if you’d like. They’ve kept good records of the past, and are not afraid to speak of it.”

I turned my head, as to put my right ears, both my human and my cat ones, against his back. To hear his heartbeat a little better. “If they’ll tell me, why can’t you just say it?” I asked.

“Some things you need to learn from others, not from me. If you have to know I feel what I did was justified. But... the method in how I did it was not. As I mentioned. I had been cruel. I had stopped cruelty with another form of it. And that is why I must now earn their forgiveness,” he said.

I gulped and squeezed him a little tighter.

Although it was... very sad to hear him speak of such things...

It was also this part of him that I loved.

He was a strange man. Capable of great feats, and could change the world in crazy ways... And I knew without a doubt, that if most other people had such knowledge and power as he... they’d not have been like him.

They would not have such remorse, or such piety. They would be cruel. Diabolical. Evil.

So in all truth it was... a good thing that Vim was like this. Otherwise we’d all be worse off for it.

But at the same time...

I really wished he didn't have to be.

"Are you a god, Vim?" I asked softly.

He chuckled, making my whole body shudder. "No. Not at all. I've told you... if you really must have a term for what I am, I'm closer to a monarch than anything else. Though I lack the vital parts to be one," he said.

Although it bothered me he had still not outright told me exactly he was... I also calmed down a little.

Not a god. And that small chuckle had been genuine. The kind of real laugh that told me he hadn't been lying at all with his denial of it. He found it hilarious that I'd even think such a thing.

Feeling a little relieved, I smiled and closed my eyes. To listen to his heartbeat as he continued to prepare the meat.

He being so special that he could slaughter monarchs and gods was worrying... but as long as he wasn't some higher power then at least I had a chance.

"I don't like how you made me seem hypocritical by the way," I teased him.

"I hadn't meant to," he said softly.

"You should have. You were right. It was rude of me. I'd like to be special to you, but... the reality is everyone's special. That all of the Society is special to you. I shouldn't be the only one who is allowed to lean on your kindness," I said.

"Technically as my wife, you should have certain privileges that no one else does," he said.

"Like what...?" I asked, excited to hear what they could be.

"Who knows...? How about for now, would you like minced stew or steak?" he asked.

"Minced, of course," I said, as my stomach gurgled again.

He chuckled, and for a small moment I was pulled around the kitchen. He went to preparing the stew he had mentioned, gathering up other ingredients and finding a large pot. I clung to his back as he prepared what would be our lunch.

“Want me to fetch the water?” I asked. The well was behind the house. Oplar had drawn from it last night, and I assumed it was because Vim wasn’t allowed to go out and get it.

“Hm... you’d face your fears for me?” he asked.

Although I wanted to cling to him for a bit longer, I had no choice but to let him go as I stepped back. “I would,” I said sternly.

He really did remember the little things too, didn’t he? I wonder why he forgot some conversations and not others. Maybe he didn’t forget anything when it concerned me? Now that I considered it... usually when I had to remind him of something, it was about someone else. The name of a human we had met on our travels, for example.

If that really was the deciding factor for what he treasured in his memory then... well...

How could I then fault him?

He turned and smiled at me. “You sure? I’m allowed to draw water, Renn. There’s a fence back there, it mostly blocks me from sight,” he said.

Oh. I hadn’t known there was a fence back there...

“Hm... Is it a big well?” I asked worriedly.

“No. Plus it’s half covered in a wooden lid. There’s only a small slot for the bucket to come up and down through,” he said.

“Ah. I can do that then, yes,” I said, happy to hear it.

He smirked and nodded, and gestured to the other side of the kitchen.

I followed his point, and found the small stacks of buckets.

Nodding, I hurried off to help.

It took a few trips, to provide Vim enough water for his cooking... and on the last trip, I found Oplar in the kitchen.

“Now Renn, I trusted you. You were supposed to not let him cook,” she said happily.

“It doesn’t smell bad, so I think he’s just making a normal stew,” I said. It was already boiling and cooking, and had been for a long moment. If it was one of his other weird dishes it’d have begun to stink already.

“Yeah but he’s Vim. He can make it weird even with normal ingredients and under a watchful eye,” Oplar said as she groaned at him.

Vim ignored her as he stirred the large pot. The cooking oven was also hotter, and I could smell some kind of bread inside of it. When’d he even prepare it?

Putting the last bucket of water down onto a counter, I smiled at Oplar. She looked happy, somehow.

Maybe this friend of hers was a guy...? Didn’t Vim mention once she was on the hunt for a husband?

“If I had cooked what I wanted, you’d not have come home tonight,” Vim said lightly.

“More like I’d not have come home for a month!” Oplar said, laughing afterward.

I smiled and nodded. “Yes. It’s one thing when you cook in an open field or something, but who knows how bad it’d be in a house,” I said. It was interesting that I hadn’t realized he’s only ever cooked his strange meals out in the open as we traveled.

Maybe he didn’t want to be rude so he didn’t cook weird stuff in other people’s homes.

“Right? Might be wise to build a separate kitchen, Renn,” Oplar said.

“Hm?” I tilted my head at her. What’d she mean?

“When you settle? He’ll obviously want to cook sometimes, and you’re too kind to outright ban him from doing so... thus a separate kitchen. I suggest downwind, or over a hill,” Oplar grinned at me as she explained what she meant.

A little stunned, I couldn’t help but grin back at her. “You’re very right!” I agreed.

This was why I liked her so much. She had such a strange thought process, and it usually led to something cute.

Oplar chuckled as she nodded, agreeing with me.

Vim though just glanced at us, looking like his typical un-amused self.

I stepped over to Vim, and glanced into the large pot. It sure enough looked like it was starting to really cook. There was even a bit of froth at the top.

Watching him for a moment, I realized I really was hungry.

It was actually still a little early for lunch, but...

Glancing at Vim, I noted the soft smile on his face. He was staring at the pot he was stirring, but was doing so absentmindedly. He looked like he was just... happy to have nothing happening. Nothing serious, at least.

Though...

I turned to look at Oplar. "Have you heard about this uh... execution, Oplar?" I asked.

"Hm? Yes. I've not met the man himself yet, but I've heard the story. Let's hope that Vim's not the jealous type, Renn, else the world will tremble," Oplar said, not missing a chance to tease us.

Although the idea of Vim killing other people just because I talked to them, or flirted or something, was a terrifying thought... it still brought a small smile to my face as I brushed his leg with my tail. "He seems to do fine, really. He grumbles, but he's not stopped me yet, or hurt anyone just because I smiled at the wrong person," I said as I thought of all the times he had teased me about flirting with our members. Particularly the female ones.

Oplar paused a moment, and then burst out into a loud laugh. "Has he now!" she shouted between her laughs.

My smile grew as I watched her happily enjoy herself.

"If you should worry about anyone, it's her, honestly," Vim said lightly.

My smile faltered, but didn't die. I glared at the side of his face as Oplar renewed her laughing fit.

He wasn't really wrong, was he? He often flirted with waitresses and stuff while we traveled... and when he did, even in the beginning before I'd even realized I'd fallen for him, it had annoyed me.

But it wasn't my fault. Some women were just... very beautiful. Enough so to make me worry.

Plus he so rarely flirted with me as it was, so when I saw him do it to some random stranger it just made me worry and doubt myself.

"Ah, I'm jealous. My father used to get in mighty difficulty too! He was very attractive and it always got him in trouble," Oplar said as her laughing died down.

"Oh...?" I found that very interesting. It wasn't often men of our kind were attractive. There had been only a few I've seen I'd consider so, like Gerald, and honestly I myself hadn't felt any attraction towards them. He was beautiful, though, there was no denying that.

Oplar nodded as she crossed her large arms. "Mother wasn't bad either, had she been Vim?"

"Kathy was beautiful, yes. She was also a phenomenal card player," he said.

I blinked. Vim had not just said that to be kind. He had meant it.

“Of course that’s what he remembers about her,” Oplar said with a small snicker.

“Card?” I asked.

“A game. Kind of like your little war board game,” Oplar said.

Oh my... “I’ve never seen that. Crane’s little journal had mentioned it, but I hadn’t ever gotten to play it,” I said as I remembered.

“Journal...?” Oplar tilted her head at me, and I kept myself from flinching.

Oops. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought that up.

“In Ruvindale. When we found they were gone, we had tried to find traces of them. Her journal had been on the floor, we read it to see if she had left a note or anything. She hadn’t. We burnt it, along the rest, with the building,” Vim explained for me.

“Ah. That makes sense. Sheesh Renn, your memory is scary,” Oplar noted.

Was it...?

Everyone always said so, but it just seemed normal. Why couldn't others remember as well as I, I wonder? Maybe Vim knew why. He had called it something once. At the Smithy...

"I'm sure there's a set of cards here somewhere. I think I remember Celine playing with them last time she was here," Vim said.

My ear fluttered as I glanced at him.

Celine had come here with him too?

I had known of course that Celine had traveled and met with mostly everyone. She had been the one to invite and convince most of the Society to join, as well as the one to found it... but I think this might be the first time Vim's outright spoken about those ventures.

They had likely traveled together a lot. Like we did now. Together...

Wonder if they had slept in the same bed, as we do.

If they had... was it the same bed? He had allowed me to pick which room, like usual, and I had chosen the only bedroom on the bottom floor. It was near the kitchen and bathroom, and also had the second largest bed in the house. I had not chosen the largest, because it had been just... a tad too big.

There was no point in sleeping together if Vim could squirm away from me with plenty of room to spare.

Oddly though he had mentioned that it was the same room he always slept in. He had found it humorous that I had chosen the one he used all the time.

Although I too found it neat... I knew the truth.

It was simply the first room in the hallway. Before the stairs, even. He simply chose it because it was easiest. The quickest to reach. Not for any other reason. Odds are he likely never even slept in it when he was here, alone or no.

But... if Celine was a factor...

“What’cha thinking about, Renn?”

I startled, and almost bumped into Vim as I turned to find Oplar right next to me. She was grinning down at me, amused.

“Uh... well...”

“Step back you two. I got to get the bread out,” Vim warned as he patted my back, as to tell me to step away.

I obliged, and coughed as Oplar and I stepped out of the kitchen and into the next room.

This room had a large rectangle table. With lots of chairs. An obvious dinner table. I grabbed hold of one of the chairs, and tugged it a little... but didn't sit down yet.

Oplar sat down on the other side of the table, opposite of me, and I could tell she was anxiously waiting to hear my thoughts.

A part of me wanted to share them. Because I knew she'd laugh at them. And I liked to hear, and make, people laugh.

But... this thought...

“What do you think, Oplar? About them making Vim kill this man?” I asked.

“Hm?” she frowned, and I knew it was because she wasn't happy to hear this topic. She had wanted something else to be shared. She accepted it though, and shrugged. “It's fine isn't it? Vim's very good at killing. Plus it doesn't bother him. I know this might seem weird to you, Renn, being a real predator and all... but taking a life is hard. It's terrifying. I can understand why they don't want to do so,” she said.

Oh. Right.

She was a coward.

Or well... was it really cowardice to not want to hurt someone?

Honestly it wasn't. I shouldn't use that word to describe her; even if it was the one she used herself.

Still...

Real predator...?

What a phrase. I'd think a bear was one of the greatest predators of them all, so...

Maybe she didn't see herself as one, being unable, or unwilling, to hurt someone.

"And honestly Renn... Someone who would murder another for such petty reasons has no place in the Society. In my opinion, the world either. Just how cruel does one need to be for such a thing to even happen...? I couldn't imagine being so jealous to actually kill another because of it. Though, granted...

I'm not married nor ever have been, so maybe I'm simply unable to imagine it because of that reason. But still," Oplar said.

"I'd get angry at Vim, but I couldn't imagine killing the one he was flirting with either. Though I might be similarly unable to imagine it too, since the one I'd be more inclined to hurt is Vim... and it's not like I can actually kill him. So..." I said as I thought about it.

Oplar chuckled at me. "See? That's how I'd be too, I think. Even if another person really pushed and swarmed all over my mate, it'd not be them I'd be angry at. It'd be the one who didn't properly refuse them," Oplar nodded, agreeing with me.

Well... That was partly my reasoning, I suppose... Though not the whole of it.

The reality was I simply expected Vim to attract people. Even if he was plain looking... he was in my personal opinion quite a catch. So it was just to be expected that he'd get targeted and have interest. So to fault them for what was basically normal and natural was silly. It was like faulting a wild animal for hunting a small pet, or a monarch for hunting one of us. It's not like they had true reason, they acted mostly on instinct.

"Speaking of mates... is your friend here one of the candidates?" I asked, hoping to find out more about her friend, and to slightly change topics. The current one was kind of depressing.

"Huh? Oh," Oplar laughed a moment. "No, no! Kabbly is just a good friend. She's older than my parents! She and I just get along well," Oplar said as she waved the funny question out of the air.

“Ah.” I nodded, and found it interesting that for her it wasn’t the fact it was a woman that disqualified her from being a candidate but that she was simply too old.

Oplar then crossed her arms and hummed. “Actually I’ve started to consider maybe finding a human, to be honest. I really, really, don’t want to... but...” Oplar groaned as she spoke.

Feeling a little sad for her, I nodded. “That’d be rough. Even if you waited until closer to your end,” I said.

“Oh...? You’ve thought of it too then did you?” Oplar asked, surprised.

I nodded. “I had. After... well... after the children died, I vowed to not get close to a human again. I ended up doing it anyway, with Nory, but at the time my thought process was to wait until I was old before doing it again. So that as they aged and died, so would I. So it’d not be as painful,” I said.

“Many have done that,” Vim said from the kitchen.

Oplar hummed at us. “But how would I know when it was time? Most of us have no idea until we just... start rapidly aging. Some don’t even age at all, and just pass in their sleep. Looking nothing like the old farts they are,” Oplar said.

I smirked a little at her phrasing. “I’d always assumed I’d feel it in my bones... plus my grandparents had looked a little older, but you’re right... they weren’t all hunched over and wrinkly like the humans get,” I said.

“Wrinkly,” Oplar smiled at me.

What...? That’s what it looks like.

“Do you uh... have a specific thing you’re looking for? A type? Or well...” I hesitated, since I was unsure of how to properly phrase the question.

Oplar’s grin died a little, and at first I thought I had insulted her... but instead she leaned forward, clasped her hands on the table and nodded with a serious expression. “There are a few things, yes,” she said calmly.

“Oh...?” I nodded, and forced my ears not to flutter in anticipation.

“I’d... not be able to be with a religious individual. Or if they are one, they’d have to be willing to not force it on me, or even bring it up. Which is why I’d just simply rather not try with one, as to not cause problems. I... don’t want it, but I think it’d be rude to force someone to abandon or ignore their faith, so...” Oplar said. She spoke evenly, but I could tell she was taking this conversation very seriously.

I nodded slowly as she frowned and nodded back, but more so absentmindedly than at me.

“Plus I’d genuinely like someone not afraid to protect me. I... can’t do it. I run away. I hide. I even can faint under the right circumstances, so having someone else capable of handling those types of scenarios would just be for the best,” she reasoned.

“Right...” I nodded again.

So far it seemed somewhat reasonable. Wanting someone that could protect you was... well... genuinely understandable. Even I'd dreamt of such a thing when younger. Even when I had been with the kids, or Nory, I'd always wished I had someone else with me to ensure that next level of safety that I couldn't provide on my own.

The religion aspect was also not that big of a deal, I'd think. There seemed to be many non-religious members in the Society as far as I could tell... Although I couldn't see limiting myself over the religion thing had I to choose, but that was mostly because I didn't mind it. If anything it kind of bugged me that Vim was so against it. Not because I wanted him to be religious, but rather it meant he had a legitimate reason to dislike it... and it worried me. I knew he disliked it because of his intense belief in free-will, but there was an obvious underlying reason too... and I worried over it. I feared the day he'd share it with me, even though I so desperately wanted to know it.

What if his reason for detesting religion would spur my own dislike of it? The thought kept me up at night sometimes.

“And... well...” Oplar coughed, and I allowed a tiny smirk to show as I realized she was suddenly embarrassed. “I'd really like someone shorter than me, too,” she mumbled.

I blinked, and was a little surprised. “Shorter?” I asked. Really? She was a little taller than Vim was! Vim wasn't the tallest, of course, but he wasn't short either. From all the talks and things I've seen, women usually wanted someone of similar height, or even taller, so...

Oplar nodded though, confirming it. "Yeah... Most men my size are real bulky. Muscular or fat. I just... well..." she shrugged, and I could tell she was genuinely a little embarrassed. She even looked like she had a small blush forming.

Huh... "So... you like men like Gerald?" I asked.

She flinched, and I heard Vim snicker in the kitchen behind me.

"Don't laugh at her!" I shouted at Vim.

"No. He's right. You're right. I do... Though a little shorter, remember? He's as tall as I am," Oplar said.

Oh. "So Gerald is out just because of his height?" I asked, a little confused. From what I remembered he hadn't been very religious, if at all. Though...

"He's also like me, Renn. A coward," Oplar added.

"Right..." I nodded. I had remembered that fact not a moment after saying it.

"Other than that... just someone whose kind I guess? Plus maybe someone willing to travel with me too. I'm always on the road after all," she said.

Hm...

Shorter than her. Not muscular. Not religious, yet also willing to protect her if needed. Plus the traveling...

"See...? Not many to choose, are there?" Oplar asked with a tiny grin, noticing my thoughts.

"Well..." I hesitated. Why did it seem like there wasn't?

Most of the men I could think of that even came close were either already a part of a family, or... well...

"Oplar's main issue is she wants an actual husband. Not just someone to have children with," Vim said as he peeked his head into the room. He stood in the doorway separating the kitchen from here, and leaned against it.

"Well yeah? I'm not Landi," Oplar said with a huff.

I nodded. Yes. I'd not want that either. At all.

"Is that what you'd prefer, Vim?" I asked, wondering about how he had said that. It was almost as if he was saying it in a way that he found it ridiculous she wouldn't be willing to consider options.

“Hm? Me? And miss out on all our little talks and your funny noises as we travel? Not likely,” Vim said.

Funny noises...?

Oplar made an odd noise before I could ask what he meant, almost like a scoff, and I turned to look at her. She was a little wide-eyed, and startled. Then she groaned and lowered her head to the table, thumping it down with enough force that it sounded like it had hurt.

“Oplar...?” I asked worriedly. Was she okay?

“I’m fine. My heart just filled with jealousy is all,” she mumbled, her face planted firmly on the table.

Oh...

Smiling gently at her, I decided to help her find someone. I... wasn’t sure at all how or where, but it had to be possible.

Honestly most men, especially our non-human ones, were scrawnier. There were a few like Link, but most were like Gerald or Windle... though I suppose most weren’t necessarily short. Plus most weren’t religious either... but at the same time most absolutely detested the idea of traveling let alone on a constant basis.

In all truth her real problem wasn't so much their appearance or lack of interest in traveling but instead their fight or flight responses. They were mostly all like her... cowards.

Though... she wasn't the only one in such a precarious situation, was she...?

I hesitated a moment as I realized that there were likely many people who were like her. Not too recently at the Crypt I'd even thought about it. Sharp was a romantic, and lonely. Frett's issues. She had chosen Tim because she had no other choice... And even before that was Landi... though her desires weren't very romantic.

It was almost concerning as I suddenly realized how lonely many of our people were. And how many of them were desperate, and looking... Riz had been so hurt by the news of Brom's death because she had fallen for him. The first man she'd ever met her age, or near it, in the Society. As if it was some kind of instinctual thing to just... pick the first suitable partner you found.

Although at the time of joining the Society I had been so... star-struck... I had to admit I too had the hope, deep down, that I'd find someone as well. Though I'd not expected Vim to be the one I'd pick.

And the main reason so many were struggling was simple. They weren't able to meet. To see one another. To talk, or give each other chances...

Fidgeting a little, I felt oddly excited as I quickly thought of a plan. One to set in motion, slowly, and carefully. One that Vim would likely roll his eyes over.

One that might help everyone... not just Oplar, but any who needed it.

"I'll stay on the lookout for you, Oplar. Vim's a jerk. He might know someone perfect for you, but simply forgets all about it when he sees them. I'll keep you in mind as we travel around," I said gently to her.

"Mhm," she made a happy, yet sad, noise as she nodded.

Vim chuckled as he stepped back into the kitchen, to return to cooking.

Let him laugh. This was serious.

It might be one of the most important things I'd done yet.

As long as I didn't overstep my welcome, of course...

Chapter 280 A Matchmaker in the Making

This bed smelled a tad.

It wasn't really a moldy or musky smell... but odds are not too long ago a cat had found its way in and slept on it. And not the one sleeping on me.

Renn was oddly clingy tonight. Not only was she really lying on top of me, she had even grabbed with quite a bit of force. My left chest would have bled all night if her nails hadn't been recently clipped and rounded.

The worst part though wasn't her extreme skin-ship. Instead it was her snoring. It was rather bad tonight. She snored sometimes, but usually never loudly nor often. Tonight however it was bad enough to make me wonder why. She had been getting sleep, and didn't feel warm enough to be sick... Though it might just be the simple fact her mind was tired, not her body. She has had some troubling things to address lately. Like the execution.

Though it wasn't all bad. Thanks to the higher elevation, the incoming winter, and the fact Renn had left the window open... it was actually a tad cold. Alone I wouldn't have even noticed the chill, but with her warmth it was made more obvious. Yet it was that same warmth that made it feel good.

Granted... it might just be that open window that had made her cling so closely to me all night long. Even though the blankets were thick, and she was completely under them.

I'd oddly grown used to this. To a point. It still bothered me when she first latched on every night... and it bothered me deeply when she mumbled things I didn't want to hear... But I no longer worried too much about crawling in bed with her. In fact it was a little startling at how quickly I was growing accustomed to it. If anything it was too fast, really. Maybe I should worry, yet for different reasons...

Particularly, how comfortable I strangely felt. Usually I'd feel itchy by now, or my muscles would ache as if strained. Yet right now I felt oddly calm, as if I was at peace or something. Which made no sense, since I was neither alone nor on a far off distant island.

Me. Comfortable. With her drooling and snoring away upon me.

What was the world coming to?

A bird landed on the windowsill, and I glared at the thing. It was a hand sized blue thing. Likely some kind of sparrow. It chirped at us, and I narrowed my eyes at the thing.

Really...? I had kind of hoped for a few more hours of peace.

Renn however had obviously heard the darn thing. Her tail which was wrapped around my left hand and arm coiled tighter, and she stopped snoring.

The bird chirped again, and hopped around a bit. As it did, another of its kind landed next to it. The two immediately went to chirping at each other as Renn woke up.

I closed my eyes and did my best to ignore the feeling of her body as she stretched and woke up. I take it all back. I wasn't comfortable at all.

"Morning Vim," Renn mumbled as she pushed herself up off my chest. The thick blankets rolled back and down her body, and she yawned hard enough to release some hazy breath in the chill morning air.

"The birds came to wake you up," I said.

She turned and grinned happily at them. "So they did. How cute."

Cute? Them...?

Through half-closed eyes I glared at the woman above me. We were now farther apart than we had been in hours. With only her tail, parts of her side, and her hands touching me. Suddenly she felt strangely distant. It unsettled me. I suddenly felt naked, somehow.

Renn stared at the birds with a happy smile for a moment, just basking in their chirping. The way her hair shifted a bit as she tilted her head at them made me want to reach up and touch it... but I kept myself from breaking just yet.

I'd survive another morning. I had survived the night. I could survive this.

Surely...

"It's a little cold," she said as she realized it.

"Well..." I refrained from pointing out the open window.

She shifted a little, to grab the thick blanket and pulled it back over her. Although she did so, she didn't lay back down. Instead she sat up even more, and simply sat there next to me.

That was better. It hurt to not have her on me anymore, but this was something I could keep my defenses up against.

Sliding up a bit, I too sat up. I made sure not to bother her tail though, since it was still somewhat wrapped around my forearm. Which was odd. Usually by now she'd release me from it, as to stretch it out.

I had noticed that lately she touched me with her tail more often. Not just in bed either. Or when we were alone. She was starting to do so even in front of other people.

Just how far would my walls fall, I wonder? It has been almost two years since the two of us had met, yet... such time meant nothing to me. It was a heartbeat, at best.

One of the birds flew off, and the one left behind chirped a little sadly before it took flight to follow.

"Aw. Maybe I should find some seeds or something," Renn wondered.

"We'll not be here that long," I said. Thankfully.

"Oh...? Are we going to leave after the execution?" she asked.

I nodded as her tail finally began to uncoil from my arm... yet it was doing so slowly. Every inch of it sliding away felt like it was taking an eternity to do so. Those few moments as it slid away felt longer than the two years I'd known her.

Renn hummed as she stared at me, and I hoped my will was strong enough that she couldn't notice my anxiety over her. If she did... something told me she'd only grin and torture me even more.

She shivered, and pulled the blanket closer around her. I relaxed a little as she did, since it meant she hadn't noticed at all.

Such a thing would relieve me, if I didn't know that such a thing was only temporary. It might not happen now. Today... or even anytime soon... But eventually she'd see through even my greatest defenses.

Renn yawned again, and I watched the way her face contorted to do so.

It was quite a contrast, really.

Renn wasn't very good at hiding her emotions. Even those who barely knew her could read her like a book... usually thanks to her ears and tail, but even her face displayed them with great surety. Yet... for as animated and expressive she was, Renn could also be rather composed amongst others. Even with those she considered good friends, like Merit, she was sometimes noticeably doing her best to not show or reveal her inner-most thoughts. It rarely worked, but the effort of her attempts could be seen.

Yet with me... especially with me... There was none of that at all. Renn genuinely didn't seem to feel the need, or have any desire, to hide anything from me. She didn't hesitate to reveal any face, emotion, desire or thought around me. Such pure openness was intoxicating, and was why I loved to tease her. When I did it right the displays of embarrassment, confliction, and pure love were just... well...

There was no doubt how comfortable she felt with me. She wasn't afraid to let me see anything.

Compared to me...

Feeling like a complete ass, I sat up a tad bit more as her tail finally freed me from its grasp. I was glad that I had somewhat used the hand to push me up, else I might have tried to grab it.

Staring at her... I tried to remember other women I've slept with. As to try and remember if I had ever felt so foolishly defenseless with any of them as I was with her... but as I tried, I strangely found myself unable to think of any of them.

Anytime I tried to think of other women, I instead just focused on her. As if even my mind agreed with Renn's opinion on sharing me with others.

It was a strangely comforting thing, even if terrifying.

"Did you get any sleep, Vim?" she asked gently.

“A few hours,” I said.

She relaxed a bit, and nodded at me warmly. She was glad to hear it.

“Think the execution will be today?” she asked.

“No. Thrain, or Ash, will come to officially inform me of the day and time. They’re... punctual. They have rules and stuff about how it’s done,” I said.

“Oh...? Wait... how does it happen, exactly?” she asked.

“In public, for one,” I said.

She groaned. “Really...?”

I nodded.

“Hmph... Do I get to watch...?” she asked.

“Do you want to?” I asked, and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not sure. I'll think about it."

I nodded. "Never seen one before...? Not even a hanging or something?" I asked. A lot of human towns did so in this era. Nearly all of them, actually.

"Oh I have. Just a little bit ago I saw a head just... disappear," Renn said as she raised her hands, and popped them open as to display how it had happened.

Grimacing I nodded. "Right..."

She giggled at me. "But yes. I've seen more than just you killing people. I've seen hangings. Burnings. Axes and stuff too. Lujic had been a knight, remember? He was involved in that stuff a lot... regrettably," Renn said.

Ah. Right. The boy. "I was a knight once," I said.

"Huh...? Really?" she asked.

I nodded. "For a short time... it was after I came back. From my islands," I said as I thought about memories I'd not remembered in years and years.

She hummed at me. "Did you wear armor and stuff?" she asked as she reached over and touched me.

Using all my mental fortitude to ignore her fingers running along my chest, I nodded. "Occasionally. They even dressed me up in a fancy suit for balls and stuff," I said.

"Balls...?" she asked as she stopped moving her hand.

Thank goodness.

"Yes. Giant parties for the rich and powerful. Stuffy things that are almost as fun as telling people stories of my past," I said.

Renn broke out into a happy laugh, and patted my chest as she did. "I bet...!" she shouted.

Watching her laugh, I allowed a tiny bit of pride to fill me.

I had made her laugh. Me. She laughed because of me. I could die happy now.

"I'm surprised you've only been a knight once, Vim. Is that the time that painting is about then? The one where you're wearing armor in the Cathedral?" she asked.

Huh...? Oh. Right. She saw that.

“No... That was just the most recent memory I had thought of. I guess... technically I had been a knight back then too. But to me a knight is one who swears a vow of fealty to a liege lord. Back then I had no such vow. I was simply a warrior. A soldier. A man on the battlefield,” I explained.

“Hm... Where’d you learn to make steel?” she then asked.

Steel...? Why ask that? Why now...? Oh. Wait. The picture. That painting. Right... I had been wearing that armor.

That hadn't been steel, but it had likely looked like it to her eyes.

Jeez... I did my best to place myself on guard, since I had almost outright answered her without thinking.

The answer honestly didn't matter. Not anymore. Not to her. But... I didn't want to accidentally answer the wrong question if she poised it. So I needed to be careful.

“My parents taught me how,” I told her.

Renn blinked and focused on me. A tiny, squirrely smile, wormed its way on her face. “I see.”

Before she could ask anything else, I went on the defense. It was easy since that smile was similar to the one in the back of my mind. The one I had seen last night.

“What were you scheming, Renn? Last night?” I asked.

“Hm...? Well I thought about ripping out some of your chest hair but...”

“Wait what? No. When you had been talking with Oplar. Over dinner. You had a weird grin on your face the whole time,” I said. My hair? What the hell? It wasn’t like it’d hurt... plus it’d grow back almost overnight, but still...

“Oh. Well...” Renn grinned, and something told me it wasn’t because of what she had just said... which made me even more worried.

“Well...?” I asked gently.

She took a small breath. “I was just thinking... that I could help them, you know?” she said.

“Help who...?” I asked. Oplar? The people here? My hairs?

“Anyone who wants me to. Like... Oplar. Or Sharp. Or Frett. Or Landi, and Riz, and Merit, and...”

I raised a hand, and flinched as I realized exactly what she meant. “Wait, wait...”

“They don’t travel around. Plus many of them, like Sharp, don’t even let people know! They only hint at it, even to me, so I think with the right methods... and a little luck and pushing, I can get it done and...!” Renn started to babble excitedly, and I wanted to groan... but kept it in.

Damn it all. To think I had thought I had gone on the defensive. All I’d done is fall right into a trap. A trap full of love, sweetness, and everything good in the world.

The worst kind.

She was suddenly very happy. Her tail was squirming around under the covers, all over our legs. Her ears were fluttering in excitement, and half the blanket had fallen off her. Under any other scenario I would have been dumbstruck by her beauty, yet right now...

“Plus, I know you think about it and realize it, Vim... but you just respect people too much. You’d never suggest it, or say anything. So even if you’d think someone was perfect for another, you’d never even let them know...! I heard all about it from Celine, how her husband had been nearby in the beginning. And you had known of him. She could have met him years earlier! Even Riz complained!” Renn continued to prattle.

“Neglecting the idea she’d not have fallen for him had she seen him first... let’s instead focus on something else,” I said as I smiled a little. She nodded, waiting expectantly. She wasn’t even offended

over what I had just said. "You can't force people to settle down with someone, Renn. What are you going to do? Just bring someone to the other person, drop them off, and say good luck?" I asked.

"Huh? Not at all! We'll start with letters. And I'll draw them. Paint them. So they can see what each other looks like. Then maybe we can also make a place somewhere, somewhere localized and safe, that people can visit and spend time with each other. You've already suggest we could make a home, so," Renn continued to expand on her idea, and I felt hopeless as I realized that she had not only decided to do this with a serious dedication... but was already thinking that far ahead.

The worst part was she wasn't wrong... and was definitely on to something. Even I recently had been thinking that we needed to change it up, and find a way to bring forth new members. Either from finding others, or increasing the births...

"Just think, Vim... a tiny little place, like the Crypt or something. Or the Weaver's Hut. We could have those who want to try, or had decided to meet the person they were communicating with, come there to stay and then..." she leaned forward, drawing closer. I did my best to not recoil, since her touch right now would have made me want to use it against her.

Touching her would quiet her, if I did it properly...

I gulped the idea away and nodded. "Renn..." I said her name, and got her attention. She paused mid-sentence and nodded happily at me.

"When'd this idea start...?" I asked.

"Last night," she said.

So that was why she had been snoring. Her mind had likely been essentially chaos until she had fallen asleep, thinking of all the different plans and the people she'd use them on. It was a miracle she had gotten any sleep at all. Probably only had fallen asleep because of how happy she was. Falling into slumber over the natural high from all the joy and expectations of her ideas.

For a long moment we stared at each other... and then she scooted a tad closer again. This time, I wasn't able to resist. I moved my thigh a little, as to not be so directly touching her. Luckily she didn't notice, since she was so focused on the conversation.

"I think it's worth a shot Vim... even if we only helped one or two people, wouldn't it be worth it...?" she asked gently, as if begging. Her voice had suddenly taken on a sweet tone. One I'd only heard from her a few times in all I'd known her. And even then, never as purely or said while so close to me.

That tone was not what I wanted to hear so early in the morning. Especially not when we were both in bed, and she as naked as the day she had been born. Plus with the world having just the right amount of chill in the air... and her bubbly joy so thick in the air I could taste it, and...

Blinking out some weird thoughts... I sighed and slowly nodded. "... admit that I too have been worried over the same problem," I admitted.

Renn crawled closer, putting her hands onto the bed as she did. Suddenly she was so close her longer hair dangled down onto me. "Right...! You've kind of mentioned it a few times, too! How hard it is to find partners, and stuff. I think if we worked together Vim, we could definitely accomplish some good! For everyone!" she said excitedly.

I nodded as I stared into her gleaming eyes of beauty. Although I nodded, it wasn't because I fully agreed... it was instead because I would have nodded and agreed to anything she had asked of me in this singular moment.

Which was why I needed to regain control over the moment. Or else...

Taking a breath, I regretted it as her scent filled me. Looking down, away from her eyes, I regretted it again and then looked to the left. "I'm willing to try, Renn, if you are," I said.

"Really...!?"

I nodded. Please don't hug me. Not now. Not here. Not this way. "Hehe!" She laughed... as she did.

The huge hug was awkward since I was sitting up against the baseboard of the bed. It left no room for her to fully get her arms around me... yet she didn't let it stop her, or bother her at all. She shook a little, squeezing me tightly as she giggled happily. "Thanks, Vim!"

Right. Yeah.

Totally...

I returned her hug with a small pat on the back, and after a few very impossibly tough heartbeats... I calmed myself and took control.

By the time she released me and sat back, I was no longer worried over the moment. She had her opportunity and missed it. Thank my parents that she'd never know it, though.

Really... what was I going to do with her? How could someone be so beautiful?

She wanted to help our members find love? From anyone else I would have scoffed and rolled my eyes... but from her...

Renn wasn't just smart enough... she was good enough of a person that it was entirely possible. There was no doubt in my mind that if anyone could accomplish it... it was her.

Plus... what could be more pure and lovely a task such as this? And she wanted to do it together? Me and her...?

"We'll work on it. Me and you," I offered.

She nodded quickly, and I noted a slight gleam in her eyes. Tears. Of pure joy.

"I'll be honest, Renn... I'm not a romantic," I warned her.

“No. You’re not. But it’s okay... I think I might not be either, to be honest. I’m not really liking that book yet,” Renn said as she crossed her arms in defeat.

“Don’t judge it until it’s over, at least,” I suggested.

She nodded, and giggled. “Right...! Just like you!” she said.

Just like me...? Right...

Says you.

“Once we’re... alone, we’ll talk more about your little matchmaking service... okay?” I asked, begged, pleaded.

She nodded happily. “Yeah...!”

Falling in love with those gleaming eyes full of hope and joy, I decided to just... let it be. To accept it.

If doing such a thing would make her happy... then why would I not give her every ounce of help that I could muster...?

She already had my heart. It'd not be long until she had my whole body, either, based on how close I had just come to succumbing to her. Then after that... She'd own my life and all it held...

There was no denying it. I'd give her anything if she but asked.

Myself. My knowledge. My skills. My power and all it could do...

The world itself...

Renn giggled as her tail finally snuck out from the covers. It swayed wildly, excited.

Hm... "By the way... Sharp...? Really?" I asked. Her?

Renn's giggling went soft, and her smile did as well. "Yes. She's very... very lonely. I don't know yet if she really wants a lover, but she definitely wants more friends. My first goal is to see if I can mend her relationship with Rapti, before trying anything else," she said.

Damn. So not only has she picked something ridiculous to dedicate her life to... it was also something impossible to accomplish.

Or well...

I shifted a bit, and smiled at her. "I've done the impossible many times," I boasted.

She paused a moment, and then gave me a massive grin as she nodded. "We'll do it, surely!" she agreed.

Surely.

Though...

Glancing at the window, and the brightening world just beyond it... I sighed in relief that this house was built distantly from the others. They had done it to keep me at arm's length. Yet it was moments like this that it was a blessing.

And...

Glancing at my happy companion, I knew what I was about to say might somewhat diminish her mood... but it had to be said. It needed to be.

"Today... why not take a look around, Renn?" I suggested.

She tilted her head at me, and her left ear flickered. "Hm?" She narrowed her eyes in a way that told me she had not liked what I had said.

Hesitating a moment, I realized she really didn't want to. She had no plans to leave my side.

Usually such a thing wouldn't have been possible. She loved to meet new people. See new things. It... was everything to her, almost. My little jokes about how she abandoned me for others when we stayed at places like this was actually not far from the truth. There were times I went whole days without seeing her, because of how involved and close she got with select members.

At the Keep she hadn't even slept with me, even though I had invited her to do so. Or well... I had not directly done such a thing, so maybe that was my fault. I had simply implied it. Hinted at it.

Yet I didn't mind such a thing. In fact quite the opposite. I was glad she was able to find such simple joy. I was even gladder that she was the type of person to not only befriend people, but prove to be a genuine and good friend as well.

Still... "You can hate them, Renn. I don't expect you to do what I do. You need not force yourself," I said gently.

Renn's narrowed eyes turned into a tiny glare. "I don't... necessarily hate them, Vim. I'm just... upset. Disappointed. I'm tired of meeting and learning about members who are heartless and unappreciative. They don't respect the wonderful things they have, and it angers me," Renn said.

I nodded. I had fully expected... and somewhat knew, she had such thoughts and emotions on the matter.

"I'm very glad you think the way you do. It tells me just how deeply precious you find the Society, and those in it, to be," I said.

"Vim..." Renn was about to say something, but I interrupted her.

"All the same... we'll be leaving soon. And if you're willing... I'd like to ask you a favor," I said.

What had been about to be a frown, or a deeper glare, turned into a tiny smile. "A favor?" she asked.

I nodded. "Would you please check the waterwheels for me? I built the southernmost one recently, and did some work to the others. Just... make sure they look and sound okay. Maybe ask around if there's been any issues with them and whatnot. I worry because of the execution they're neglecting to inform me of other issues," I said.

Renn's tiny smile died as she studied me... and then slowly nodded. "Okay. For you, Vim," she said softly.

"Plus you never know. You might find a good candidate for someone," I suggested.

She blinked, went a little wide eyed as her pupils narrowed... then she nodded seriously. "You're quite right..." she mumbled as she thought about it.

Smiling at her, I nodded back... and realized I should probably thank her. Properly.

Reaching over... I, as naturally as I could, grabbed her hand. She froze for a tiny moment; even one of her ears that had moved a bit had gone still. It was angled to the left a little oddly, as if it was tired.

Gently holding her hand, I smiled at her.

For half a moment I thought of lifting her hand to my lips. To kiss it. But I strangled that idea and buried it away before it could take over me.

"We stand tall, Renn. So that hopefully someday they will too," I said to her.

Her smile deepened as she nodded. "I know. I... try, Vim. And I promise to try harder," she said softly.

I sighed at her. She had misunderstood me. "You're doing better than you think, Renn. I'm glad you're finding your own place... even if it is playing matchmaker," I said.

She grinned and giggled. "Just wait, Vim. I've already got a few ideas, you know?" she said.

Shivering at the thought, I simply nodded and accepted my fate.