

Non Human 301

Chapter 301 Return to the Cathedral

Walking quietly behind Oplar, I wondered why I'd been underground so much lately.

We were under the Cathedral, and I think we were not just a single floor below... but very likely three or more. It was hard to tell since we'd gone not just down stairs recently but had then climbed back up some only to descend again shortly after. As if going over hills.

Oplar and I had only made a few turns since entering these catacombs beneath the Cathedral, but we'd passed many dozens of other hallways. Some massive, others small enough that my shoulders would have touched both walls if I had entered them. As if they weren't hallways at all.

It was like a maze down here. And something told me it had been made this way on purpose.

"The man you're about to meet doesn't like Vim, Renn," Oplar said as she slowed a little.

"Oh?" I perked up that.

"His name's Randle. He's a priest. He... works under the Chronicler, but it seems lately there's been a rift between them. I don't know the whole story, since he and I don't get along well either, but you can basically assume anything said or done to him will be relayed to the Chronicler immediately after. Even with them at ends they're still conspirators," Oplar told me.

“Uh... okay...?” I said. Was that a bad thing...? It’s not like I was bothered with such a thing. I had nothing against the Chronicler, or her people. As far as I was aware, at least. Plus what little I knew that could somehow harm Vim was stuff I’d never share with anyone, ever. Like his strange exhaustion, or his monarch friends.

And the other secrets, stuff like Narli the Saint, I’d never share either. I had no right to endanger their lives, and I cherished them far too much to even think about revealing their secrets or location.

Oplar came to a stop, and I did too. I studied the way she tilted her head and scratched at her neck... and I realized she was on edge.

Had something happened...? How? We’d only just got here. This afternoon.

Upon reaching Telmik, Oplar had taken us to the house in the Cathedral. The one Vim and I had stayed at last time we were here. Silti and Angie were both there right now, likely sleeping. The two had eaten their fill, and then they had both grown sleepy. Hard to blame them since our journey here had been long and hard, especially for them. Between the caravan being attacked and Oplar taking us through dense woods on the way here, they had been pushed to their limits, I think.

Honestly I had planned to join them. I had been about to undress and go take a bath right as Oplar returned to the house, intent to drag me down here.

Oplar turned and sighed at me. “I’ll be honest Renn... I’m worried,” she admitted.

“About what, Oplar? Is everything okay?” I asked.

She nodded. "It is... I think. As you know I don't get along with the Chronicler and her people. Randle is one of them. But although I don't get along with them, I can trust them. Or well... at least, I thought I could. I've always hated them, but knew when it came to the Society they could be trusted. That they'd never do anything bad concerning the Society and its members. That they'd always have the best in mind for us," she said.

I slowly nodded as I realized what she was saying. "There's doubt now. Why?"

"Two reasons. Randle and the Chronicler's sudden issues are alarming. And then there's this vote. It seems they agree with it. I don't know to what level or depth yet, but they are excited about it. That's not a good sign," she said softly.

Shifting a little, I glanced past her and down the dark stone hallway. There were no lit lanterns down here, but there were tiny holes here and there in the ceiling. Ones that let in a little light, from somewhere up above. Sunlight, maybe, though their true purpose likely wasn't for light but airflow. I could feel tiny breezes coming from some of them occasionally.

But still, those tiny little rays of light were starting to become dim and few and far between. I knew it was near the time for the sun to set, but something told me it was more than that. We were starting to get deep enough that the sunlight just couldn't reach us down here.

"The vote I understand, to a point... but why would their internal strife bother you so much? Maybe they just had a fight or something," I said. Such things happened, after all. Especially when one took into account how long our kind lived. Throughout hundreds of years it was inevitable that one would have disagreements, eventually.

She shook her head. "Randle has been one of the most devout and loyal members of the Chronicler's cloth all this time. Since before I was born. He had served her sisters. He had served Celine," she said.

Oh my. He was old then. "I see... So it's startling and out of character," I said.

"Very," she said with a nod.

Hm...

"Why am I meeting him then?" I asked. She hadn't really said the reason as to why. She had simply shown up earlier, asking if I'd come with her for a moment. I had been hoping that we'd be doing something else. Like meeting Vim, or maybe another member here like Henrietta and her family or going to get special food or something.

Instead we were doing this. Going deep under the Cathedral, where no one could see or hear us, to meet someone she didn't trust and who also didn't like Vim at all.

If not for the fact that I knew Oplar could be trusted, I'd be worried for my own safety.

"He asked to meet you. Plus he has something he wants to show you, and he's the one who will be handling Angie. He overlooks all the orphanages here," she said.

Oh...! "Okay... should I worry? Should I not give Angie to him?" I asked.

Oplar grinned at me. "What would you do, Renn? Raise her yourself?"

I nodded. "That or take her elsewhere," I said. Vim had told me that Frett and others had all wanted children. Angie was human, of course, but I knew I'd be able to find somewhere for her. The Weaver's place would work; they had many human kids there.

Her grin died a little as she realized I was serious. "I see. I'm sorry, for not realizing how serious you are about kids. I may have just come across as crass," she apologized.

"How so?" I asked. She hadn't seemed so to me.

"I'd not cared much for her. I figured we'd just hand her off to Randle and be done with her. I'm sorry," she apologized again.

Hm... "It's okay. I know she's human, and all, so I know it's just how it is," I said, forgiving her.

She shook her head. "No. You're right. Just because she's human doesn't mean anything. She's still just a kid. One we'd taken responsibility for..." Oplar said, and then let loose a deep sigh. "If my mother had been here she'd have hit me something fierce," she added.

I smirked at her. "Mine would have eaten her, so that even-outs our scales out I think," I said.

Oplar flinched. "Really...? A kid?"

I nodded. "Likely. They had hated humans something fierce." If she hadn't eaten her they would have at the very least killed her.

My friend looked at me with a pitiful glance, and then sighed again. "All right. Basically Renn... just be on your guard. I don't know what's going on anymore. Randle and the Chronicler going on the outs is almost as alarming as this vote about Vim. It makes no sense. Them both happening at the same time..." she shook her head. "Not a good combination."

"Should I trust him about Angie at least?" I asked, since she hadn't actually answered my original question about it.

"Oh. Yes. You can. He's had Vim legitimately slaughter his own people, people of the cloth, who he'd caught molesting or harming the children he's in charge of. I don't like Randle, but you can indeed trust him with children. Vim trusts him in that manner too," Oplar said.

Oh my. I nodded. "Good," I said.

"Hm... Strange, isn't it Renn?" Oplar asked.

"Being underground so much lately? Yes. I don't like it to be honest. I think it's the lack of fresh air and not being able to see the sky," I said as I glanced up at the stones above us. Plus it reminded me of those sewers in Lumen. I didn't like it much. At least it didn't remind me of that pit.

Oplar laughed. "Right! Cat indeed! I actually find these halls very comforting! Makes me feel all cozy," she said as she returned to walking.

I smiled at her. "So if you ever disappear to hibernate I just need to check down here, huh?"

"Indeed! My office by the way is near the door we used to come down here. The one at the end of the hall. It has my name on a plaque near it," she told me.

Nodding seriously, I dedicated that information to heart. "Okay. I'll make sure to visit and bug you when I can."

"Please do!" she happily agreed.

Grinning at her, I was led farther down the darker hallway... until we came to a hallway that was lit up.

A few small lanterns hung from metal hooks along the wall, to a room that was brightly lit. One with a door that was open.

Oplar slowed a little, and then stepped closer to me. "Remember. He hates Vim," she whispered quietly.

I nodded, and didn't respond since I wasn't sure if I should or not.

After all it didn't matter if he hated Vim. As long as he was a decent man, who truly supported the Society... it didn't matter if he hated or love him.

Just as it didn't matter to Vim either if he hated or loved its members.

At least, that was what I told myself as Oplar and I approached the room and then stepped through the open door.

"Randle, I've brought her," Oplar loudly said as she stepped into the brightly lit up room.

I scanned what looked to be a small study. There were bookshelves, a large desk, and three separate smaller tables with chairs littered amongst them. There was no fireplace, but there was a mighty large light fixture hanging above everything which... strangely looked similar to the odd glowing lanterns at Lumen's Society housing. The one that didn't burn anything and instead just gave off light.

The room was a little better furnished and decorated than I had expected, being down here so deep in the basement, but I was happy to find it so. It felt cozy and not claustrophobic. I was almost able to trick myself into thinking I wasn't underground thanks to how comfortable it seemed to be.

"Thank you Oplar. And thank you too, Rennalee, for coming even though I'm sure you're tired," A taller, thin, man spoke gently as he stood from behind the desk.

“Renn-a-what?” Oplar turned to look at me before I could say hello to the man who was obviously a priest. He wore robes commonly seen all over the Cathedral, though his looked a little old.

I smiled gently at her. “That’s my full name. Have we been so busy I’d failed to tell you?” I asked, feeling a little bad. I had seen her as a good friend all this time, so I’d hate it if she thought otherwise.

Oplar gave me a mighty grin. “What the heck! That’s cute as all can be! Rennalee eh? Sounds fancy. Like one of them smozey aristocrats,” Oplar said happily.

“Smozey?” I asked.

“She means schmoozy. She said it incorrectly,” the man corrected her.

“Bah! Shut it you! Not everyone can schmooze, you know!” Oplar said to him with a dismissive wave and then she stepped over to me. She patted my shoulder gently and grinned at me. “I’ll be heading back, Renn. You can remember how to get out of here right? Or should I come find you later?” she asked.

“I can get back. Thank you Oplar,” I said. Although this place was a maze, our route here hadn’t felt so. I could get back rather easily.

She nodded, and I noticed the way her grin looked sad. She gave my shoulder one last good, gentle, squeeze and then she stepped out of the room and into the darkness.

I watched her go for a moment and realized she had just ran away. I couldn't blame her, but...

Looking back at the tall man, I found him stepping up to me. He extended a thin hand and arm, which emerged from his very thick gray robe, and he gave me a warm smile.

"My name is Randle. I'm one of the bishops here, but amongst the Society the thing I proud myself the most of being is the one who acts as confessor, and keeps watch on those with naught else," he introduced himself.

"Confessor...?" I asked gently as I took his hand. It really was thin. And he felt a little weak, and not just because he was being gentle. He must not be a predator.

Randle gave me a very warm smile. A recognizable one. One the old folks gave to children. "I'm one who hears the confessions of our people. Basically I'm the one who gets told everyone's secrets and sins, as to help talk them through them. To find ways to absolve them of their sins, and worries, when able," he explained gently.

Ah... "Nory had wanted to be what you are," I said softly as I remembered. She hadn't called the position a confessor, though.

"Nory...?" Randle frowned at me as our hands separated.

"A human I had lived with for a long time. Before joining the Society," I said.

"I see. Very interesting. I'd heard you were very interested in our faith, but hadn't heard you had experience being so close to it," he said as he gestured to a nearby table. One with two large chairs sitting before it.

I nodded as I stepped over to join him in sitting down. "Much to Vim's annoyance, yes. I do like it. I'll admit I have some... concerns over it, but so far out of all the religions I've encountered it's the one I find most interesting," I said.

"Oh my. To hear such a thing fills me with glee. May my lords forgive me," Randle said seriously as he sat down across from me. I felt my ear twitch beneath my hat, since I had not believed what I'd heard for a moment.

He had sounded so genuinely sincere just now.

"Why would you need forgiveness for that?" I asked.

"Because the glee comes not from another soul finding its way... but instead at the idea of Vim's disgruntledness as his wife does. It must annoy him desperately, and my joy in such a thought is quite sinful," Randle told me honestly.

Stunned a little, I couldn't help but laugh. "At least you're honest!" I said.

Randle gave me a gentle smile. "One must be. To not just be what I am, but to be what I wish to become," he said.

“What is it you wish to become...?” I asked. Wasn’t he already basically at the top of the food chain? Not just in the Society, but his church too?

“An angel in my heaven, of course,” he answered without hesitation.

I blinked at the man’s very obvious, and instantaneous, proof of his beliefs.

It made me feel strangely unsteady. As if I was someone who just... wasted her time and life. As if compared to this man, I was minuscule, somehow.

It made me feel uneasy.

Maybe this was what Oplar hated about him. That pure confidence and dedication was not normal... especially not amongst our kind.

Vim had that kind of confidence, though for different reasons.

“How’d you know I’m Vim’s wife...?” I asked. I had only recently been telling people such a thing.

“Oplar told me,” he said.

Ah. Interesting. She hated him, but yet told him that all the same. I wonder why.

“I’m told you don’t like Vim. And based off what you just said earlier, I’m to assume it’s true?” I asked further.

He gave me a gentle smile. “I hate Vim. He’s in fact the only man that I do hate in all this world. However... my hate is not that of true wickedness,” he said.

Frowning at the priest, I shook my head. “How could hate not be wicked?”

“Because my hate for him is not out of what he’s done, or who he is. But rather what he could be and his lack of willingness to become it.”

Ah...

“You wish he was better,” I whispered.

Randle nodded. “Verily. And he can be. Could be. My hate of Vim is not of the man himself, but the man he should become yet refuses to do so. I want Vim to be better. Vim doesn’t think he can be, or doesn’t wish to be. Other than that though, I find Vim to be one of the most trustworthy, and devout, men I know,” he told me.

“Devout...?” I asked. Vim? Really?

He nodded. “Vim is the epitome of our faith’s morals. Whether anyone, even the Chronicler or her clan, wants to admit it or not doesn’t change that fact. You could take Vim and dress him in one of the prophet’s robes, or angel’s garbs, and no one would notice the difference. Not from his actions, at least,” Randle said as he placed his arms on the table between us and clasped his hands.

“Huh... I’m surprised to hear you say that,” I admitted.

“I’m sure. Most say the same.”

I bet.

“Can... can I know why I had to come here? Why didn’t you just come to us up there? At the house?” I asked what had been bugging me since the beginning.

Randle smiled gently at me. “Two reasons. Or well, honestly maybe three. First... I ran into Oplar a little bit ago. She told me, roughly, what happened and I asked if I could see you when I could. Since I have something for you. Oplar was the one who decided it should be now and not later. Secondly, I was in the middle of finishing something that had to be handled now and not later. I had just handed the letter off a few minutes before you and Oplar arrived,” Randle said with a point to the desk he had been sitting at.

“This is your office?” I asked.

"It's my second one. There's one up above in the main halls, but I prefer this one. I like the quiet when working," he answered.

I see. Maybe this area was more frequented than I thought. Oplar and I hadn't passed anyone down here, but based off all the hallways there was no doubt there were many routes and paths.

I should keep my hat on and tail hidden, then. Just in case.

"And the third reason?" I asked.

He smirked at me. "I had not wanted the Chronicler to know we met. Not yet anyway."

A little surprised, I remembered what Oplar had mentioned.

They were having problems. Him and the Chronicler.

"Can I ask why...?" I asked.

"Of course you can. It concerns you after all. It's because of the vote. She'll claim us meeting is my attempt at swaying the vote, or influencing it. Which is ridiculous, but it's her method of politics," Randle explained.

I frowned at that. "I doubt there's anything you can say or do which would change how I'd vote," I said.

"Of that I have no doubt. And I'm glad to hear it, too," he said.

I hummed at the man, and wondered if he really was as honest and truthful as I perceived him to be.

A part of me wanted to doubt his honesty... since it was seemingly so real.

Had Vim ever mentioned this man to me...? I didn't think so. That was too bad. I could usually trust Vim's comments about people, even when he made them offhandedly. It was how I sometimes knew who could be trusted and who couldn't be.

"Why do you care if she thinks such a thing, though? And why keep it a secret? Is it not a sin to do such a thing?" I asked him, to see what he'd say.

"Because there's an issue. Between me and her people. I've recently learned of something they've done that I do not approve of, or ever will. So... in Vim's way of putting it, she and I are currently at ends with one another. I'm trying to properly handle it the best way I can and know how to. Also, I'd not keep our meeting a secret nor will. If anyone ever asks, I'll readily tell them we've met and even all about anything we speak of. It's not a secret I hide, but simply one that won't get shared if no one asks about," he said.

Ah... I see. "You're hoping no one will notice or assume, then?" I asked.

He shrugged but said nothing.

“Oplar might speak of it. She likes to gossip,” I said.

“She might. But she also hates the Chronicler and all her people. That hate extends to me too, because of it. So I highly doubt the Chronicler will learn of us meeting from Oplar, if at all,” Randle said.

“You don’t think I’d tell anyone?” I asked.

“No. I believe you’ll keep it a secret. Especially after I show you what I need to... And to be perfectly honest I could not imagine Vim growing close with someone so unwise such as that. In fact, even if I had not heard of your quick mind from so many others, I still would have assumed you to be far wiser than most could imagine. Vim would not choose someone not so, I believe,” he said.

It was a little worrying to hear such a thing. That meant people really were talking about me. Though it was to be expected, being not only a new member, but also Vim’s wife... but to also have been already banished from so many locations as well. It was still concerning to know that people didn’t just gossip about what I’ve done, but also the type of person I was.

Even more so it was worrying that he was saying such things so seriously. It meant whatever was happening here, in this room and the Cathedral itself concerning the Chronicler and the rest, was something of note. Something beyond just a simple hello.

Shifting in my chair, I studied the man in holy garb and wondered if maybe I shouldn’t have come.

"If I get involved in anything too serious, Vim will be upset with me," I warned him.

Randle slowly smiled. "I know. But I'm hoping his love for you will overlook it. Also, if anyone should worry over Vim's wrath, it should be me I think."

Well... he was right. "Does Vim hate you?" I asked.

"I don't know. A part of me thinks he does... but..." Randle hesitated a moment, and I was surprised to see it. This was the first time he'd not answered immediately without such hesitation. How interesting. It made his honesty seem all the more real, thanks to it. "He has always been willing to hear me out, and listen to my advice. Even when upset. Plus... over the years he has trusted me on a few things too. Things he's not trusted others with. So even if he hates me, I can say with confidence that hate is like my own for him. One of respect, not rage," he finished.

Slowly nodding, I believed him.

"So... for what reason would you risk the Chronicler's, and possibly Vim's, ire?" I asked, a little excited to find out myself.

Randle nodded as he stood.

Without a word Randle stepped over to the door of the room... and shut it, then promptly locked it. I would have been a little off-put by the action, if not for the fact that I knew he was weak. Too weak to

hurt me in any way. He stepped over to his desk afterward and he bent down a little behind it, and I heard a drawer latch open. One that had been locked.

He grabbed something within it, and I sat up straighter as he stood back up... and I noticed the thing in his hand. A small pamphlet, akin to a book with a soft cover. He then grabbed something else. A bundle of cloth.

Returning to the table, Randle handed me the small book-like object, which I hurriedly scanned for any hint of its purpose but couldn't see them. The book was made of nice leather, but had nothing engraved upon it or sewn. There was no title, or anything to tell me what it was.

Before I could ask about it, or open it, Randle then took a small breath and drew my attention.

"It only took three hundred years but there you have it. I only have four promises left now. I wonder how long they'll take me too," Randle said, though somehow not to me and instead himself.

Three hundred years...?

I sat up a little straighter as I lowered the book to the table. I kept my hands on it, but only because it suddenly felt very precious for some reason.

"What is it...?" I asked softly.

“Celine’s letter. To you,” he said.

My whole body stiffened, and I gulped.

Randle nodded softly at me. “I know not what you know, so I of course am assuming certain things... since you’re his wife. But knowing Vim, he’s likely kept you in the dark as much as the rest of us. Part of the reason I hate him, you know, is his penchant for secrets,” Randle said as he sat back down. As he did, I noticed the way he hid the cloth bundle still in his hands. He had hidden it into his sleeve and under the table, away from my sight.

“I know who Celine is. Or well, I’ve heard of her. She was a saint,” I said.

He nodded. “The last true saint of our people. The Chronicler and her clan have given birth to saints over the years, and have acquired a few here and there occasionally, but Celine had been the last true one. The last one with a true connection to the divine. Her powers had been the real thing, not the sham mockery the Chronicler and her clan perform,” Randle said.

I noted the disgust in his voice when talking about the Chronicler, and did my best to see past it. Not because it bothered me, but because it told me that their little spat was likely far more serious than Oplar or Randle even described it to be.

Still...

“You said this was a letter for me,” I said as I glanced down at the book in my hands.

I heard his robe shift as he nodded. "It is. I was told to give it to the one who Vim marries without the steeple, who descends from the Orb of Night," Randle said.

Frowning, I glanced at the man. "Steeple? Orb?" I asked.

Without answering Randle lifted his arm... and finally revealed the other item he had grabbed from his desk.

The thing was wrapped in a cloth of leather, a leather that looked suspiciously similar to the material on my waist. The same type of leather that hung on my belt, the pouch Vim had given me for the letters.

I gulped at the thing as he held it up, and I recognized its shape.

"A heart," I whispered. I couldn't see its glow, but there was no mistaking that shape. And what else would he have wrapped in that special leather?

Randle blinked, and then he smirked gently at me. "I do apologize, Renn. You look tired and I'm obviously making it worse. As mentioned, I had planned to call upon you later. But Oplar is Oplar," he said gently, as if feeling bad about what was happening.

Sighing softly I nodded... and then frowned. I did feel exhausted. Even though I was a little excited too, right now, I knew without a doubt that I probably looked tired to him. I still needed, and wanted, my bath and I wasn't sure what to say or think right now either.

The book, Celine's letter supposedly to me, made sense... but...

A monarch's heart...? Why was Randle showing me it? Did he want me to hold onto it until Vim got here?

"Wait... why do I need to see this? Shouldn't you give it to Vim? He should be back soon," I asked.

Randle paused a moment... and then I noticed the odd look on his face.

"I see. You know what it is yet you can't tell. Interesting," he mumbled softly.

"Excuse me...?"

Randle then gently placed the leather-wrapped heart onto the table. Right in front of me. He went to tugging on a few of the leather ends, and quickly unfolded them. A dark black orb of glass revealed itself, one that had tiny little circles floating inside of it.

I leaned a little closer, transfixed by the things inside. It too had a tiny storm in it, like the others I had seen, but this one had little odd-colored circles similar to bubbles floating within. They kind of looked like...

Actually...

Staring into the black orb, I wondered why it looked familiar. It glowed a little, but so had the others. In fact this one wasn't glowing as much as Miss Beak's, or that blue one at the Keep. This one was more similar to the one I'd handed Landi. It didn't seem as dull though. Maybe the glow was just a different shade of black?

Plus the tiny little torrent of a storm within it was a little lopsided. It wasn't a perfect circle, like the bubbles were. Instead it was almost like... well...

It looked like an eye. As if the glowing storm inside it was a pupil.

Though the pupil was not human shaped at all. Instead it was more angular. Sharper.

Reminding me of...

"Wait..." I whispered as I recognized the eye. One I'd not since seen my youth. Since my home and family.

Since I had buried Witch and set off on my own.

"It's the heart of your elder, Rennalee. The heart of a jaguar."

Chapter 302 Legends Amongst Legends

This morning was the first fresh one in a long time.

There was no heat from distant fires. No smoke and ash staining the wind and air.

Just a cool morning sunrise, unbothered and typical. One I'd seen so many times and would continue to see forevermore.

Cat sniffed as she finished waking up. She let out a deep sigh which turned into a heavy yawn as she stretched nearby. I then heard her whole body shiver thanks to the morning chill.

I had kept the campfire going through the night, out of kindness, but had yet to really feed it this morning. I had expected her to sleep for another hour or two. She must be either hungry, or need to...

Yes. Cat slowly stood, on her unsteady feet, as she stepped away from the small camp. To go and relieve herself behind some bushes.

As she did I went to add the last few branches I'd gathered to the fire. We'd be leaving shortly, but I wanted to make sure she warmed her body fully before we did so. It'd likely stay cold and chilly through the morning, even until long after the sun fully rose into the sky.

Winter was here once more.

“Good morning Vim,” Cat said as she returned. I noted the way her limp wasn’t as bad as before. She must have been half-asleep and stiff just now.

She was still in no condition to walk far, or run, but I was glad all the same to see her healing. I had worried I’d permanently limped her, but it looked like she’d be fine. A few weeks and she’d likely return to walking normally.

Likely a result of her youth. Had she been a decade or two older, my accidental harm could have done far worse damage to her.

“Morning. We’re out of tea leaves, I apologize,” I said.

“It’s okay. You said we’d reach the city soon, right?” Cat asked as she glanced away, to the edge of the forest we were in.

The open expanse of hills and plains just beyond the forest were dazzling in the morning light. There was no more smoke or ash in the air, but there was a faint haze of morning mist everywhere. Particularly near the large grass plains and the rivers that ran through them all.

Telmik was not in sight, but a few smaller human settlements were. The nearest looked like only a few dozen buildings large, but one off in the horizon looked rather large. Even from here I could see the glistening of roof-tiles and windows. I didn’t know the name of it, since I rarely passed through it on my travels. It was situated a little south-west of Telmik. Usually I approached Telmik from the cardinal directions, not at an angle like this. It’s been a long time since I’d needed to bypass the main roads out of necessity or urgency. Many years.

I'd been avoiding them since I had been carrying her. It made us appear strange, even though there was likely many strange sights at the moment. There were likely hundreds if not thousands of people heading to Telmik, fleeing the devastation of the fires. My carrying Cat on my back while we hurried would be odd, but likely overlooked because of it, but I still didn't want to risk it until I needed to.

"Soon; as in tonight, soon, likely. Telmik is still a good day's distance away. I plan on stopping at that larger town there in the distance for a moment, to let you eat and rest," I said.

"Oh..." Cat nodded as I stepped away from the now stronger fire. It should help keep the morning chill from seeping into her bones now.

I sighed a little as I wondered how much trouble waited for me in Telmik.

This supposed birth of a new monarch, and the saint who had foreseen it, were troubles indeed but honestly only the lesser of them.

Another location destroyed. While I was but a few miles away. It'd not look good, and would only further feed the doubts and complaints of those spurning this vote against me.

A vote to depose me. From a position that once they had begged and pleaded me to take.

Maybe Miss Beak was right all along. That all my efforts would be in vain. That even those like Renn, the long-lived non-humans, would all inevitably do as the humans had done. Simply taking more time to forget what the humans quickly did in a few generations.

To forget all I've done and blame me for their own faults and failures.

It'd be hilarious if it wasn't exactly what had happened last time. This same thing had made me flee to a far corner of the world.

This time though my mistake was not a singular big one... but instead many small ones.

I had failures. I had no right to claim I was faultless, or that I was doing good enough. It was the truth that I've been a subpar protector... but...

What more could I do? Short of breaking the very rules I agreed to abide by, my own ethos and morals, what more could I do?

I couldn't force them all to obey. I couldn't impose strictness upon them. If they wanted to live as they did, endangering themselves and all the Society at large, what was I to do about it?

As I stood here and fretted over it all Brandy and the rest were involving themselves in the creation of a new nation. A new form of commerce, even. They were creating a nation not of monarchies and bloodlines but coins and debts. A capitalist city-state that hasn't existed in hundreds of years. They were making themselves into the giant nail that would stick out for all with the power to do so to strike them down. And by doing so they endangered the Society as a whole.

And they weren't the only ones currently making themselves into a lightning rod.

The Chronicler and her ilk had made a massive church. A genuine religion that now supposedly had close to a million followers and devotees. A religion that swept through not just a single nation but most of them around this corner of the world. She and her people, first started by Celine, had created something so powerful and overbearing that they no longer could control it. It had grown so large it took all they had just to remain a part of it. They no longer ruled it. No longer controlled it.

The Church of Songs was no longer just another puppet of the Society but instead its own being. Its own creature. And instead of being its master, holding the reins, we instead guided it by a carrot with a long stick. Something that could be snatched away or outright ignored, at any moment.

They had created something to protect themselves and the Society, and in doing so had made the very thing that many in the Society must now fear.

Then there was no end to the many smaller locations, and groups, who all had their own designs and foolish fantasies. Lughes and his paintings. Landi and her quest of children. The Weaver, letting her family grow as big as a whole village without care or worry. Tor in his canyon, spreading his mist. Even Merit with her recent attempt at creating her oasis. Though that had luckily only ended with the destruction of her kingdom and her associates and not the Society as a whole.

There was a never-ending string of failures and dangers. And although I could be blamed for not properly protecting them, could I really be blamed for them as a whole? It's not like I wanted any of them to come about.

I helped when asked, but I'd not once placed down the banner or flag of conquest anywhere.

Yet...

This had been a long time coming. Even before the wars. Even before the kingdoms that fell.

Celine had seen it herself. She too had known the Society would eventually break and crumble. From their own hands.

Yet to watch it happen... To allow it all to fall apart while I was here to stop it...? It was almost enough to make me want to break my own shackles, my own rules, even though I knew even if I did the end result would be the same. Even if I forced my will onto others, or became the ruthless tyrant some of the Society members dubbed me, it wasn't like it would change the outcome. The failures would still happen, even if at a later date and for different reasons.

But there was still a sinking resentment, for it all to have happened this way. Over tiny failures and not large ones.

And for it be spurred even quicker by this vote...

I blinked as I tried to remember if Celine had ever mentioned such a vote. Over the years I've had plenty of votes like this happen. Though they were usually not about removing me as the protector, but instead the direction the Society was going itself.

The last big one had been the split of the Society. Not long after Celine's death. The one that resulted in so many leaving this land and sailing west.

Was I the target this time because I really had screwed up, or was it simply because there weren't enough members left anymore to point fingers at? We were down to a few thousand at best anymore when including the humans. Not enough.

"Can I ask why you're letting me rest so much?" Cat then asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Hm?" I frowned at the woman who was once again reminding me of Renn. Was it the way she was smirking shyly at me?

"You say Telmik is only a day or so away at your pace. Which means you should be in a hurry to go, since that means to you it's within reach. Yet..." she gestured around her, likely with the intent to gesture at me letting her rest further.

I sighed at her. "Yes. I'd hoped to use this moment to speak with you," I said.

Her shy smile wavered a little. "About...?" she asked carefully.

"My people. The ones you're about to meet. The Church of Songs," I said. In reality I spoke of the Society, but I'd not tell her that.

She nodded, interested.

“What do you know of them?” I asked.

“Only that they’re powerful? I’ve never met any of its members myself, other than the devotees as we traveled here,” Cat said.

I nodded. Powerful. Yes. To humans they might seem so. “Has your saint ever dealt with them?” I asked.

Cat frowned and shrugged. “I don’t know? I don’t think so. We keep to ourselves mostly, Vim. Our village is about a hundred strong, with a few families that live nearby. I bet two hundred at most if we really gathered everyone. Other than the few times Elaine sends people out to stop something horrible from happening, we don’t even really mingle much. We don’t even get traders or visitors, for crying out loud,” Cat said.

Interesting. That meant their village was likely deep in the wilderness. “Saints usually like to be amongst their kindred. Does she not desire finding others like her?” I asked.

Cat smiled gently at me. “Of course she does. But she knows if she does it could lead to her death, or ours.”

Right... I nodded. “Saints are always hunted,” I admitted.

“You promise you’re not hunting her too, right?” Cat asked worriedly.

I nodded. "For so long as I can confirm you and your friends had nothing to do with the birth of a monster, or the creation of those fires, then yes your saint is safe from me. In fact if she really does wish to hunt and stop such calamities from being born, then we'd be allies," I told her honestly.

Cat smiled at me and seemed relieved. "So... we'd be friends. For real? Once you meet her and find out she is truly a saint," she said.

"We weren't friends already?" I asked innocently.

Cat paused a moment, and then giggled. "I guess! What would your wife think though?"

"She'd likely love you. She has a soft spot for women like you," I said.

The young human tilted her head and frowned, not understanding what I meant.

But there was no reason to explain to her.

"Renny right? Sounds familiar for some reason..." she hummed as she pondered, and then smirked. "Ah. Like Rennalee. Yes. She has the same name as the sister of our first saintess," she said as she remembered.

A loud snap startled Cat, who yelped and quickly stood up.

Looking down, I found I had been standing on a half exposed root. I had crushed and snapped it with my weight. The broken piece was exposed, dripping sap and other gunk onto my foot beneath it. I lifted the foot, and noticed the several inch deep footprint I had left behind. The other side of the root was buried into the dirt, flattened with the rest of it.

“What the...” Cat whispered in awe at the sight as I took a very deep breath.

“Rennalee?” I asked the woman who flinched again. This time thanks to the tone of my voice.

Cat shifted and looked around, as if suddenly in danger. “Um... well... it’s the name from a legend. From my village...” she whispered quickly.

Closing my eyes, I groaned as my muddled mind quickly made sense of it.

Reaching up, I cupped my face and wished to scream.

“Vim...?” Cat asked worriedly as I stood there before her, hating everything and everyone for a moment.

“Tell me the legend, Cat,” I asked gently as I got control over my fury. Before I terrified this poor girl into a heart attack or something worse.

Cat stood up straight, and flinched. This time not because of my tone, or because I had caused a loud noise. Instead it was because she had leaned too heavily on her hurt hip. She grabbed at her side, though her hand had nothing to grab at. She was scrawny so she just grabbed a handful of her clothes. "Um...! Well... our village. It was started by a saint. The first one. The ancestor of Saint Elaine. One who had made friends with a servant of a god. Rennalee. She uh... they were sisters... and..." Cat slowly stopped speaking, and I knew it was because she saw the turmoil and despair plainly upon my face.

Of course.

Damnation.

Utter damnation.

"Is that why your friend had been named Nory?" I asked softly.

"Oh...? You know the legend too? I thought it had been just our village!" Cat smiled, happy to hear I knew of her village's old tales and customs.

Closing my eyes again, I felt weak all of a sudden.

Renn. My lovely Rennalee.

Why was the world so focused upon you? Why would fate not leave you be...?

How was I to protect you if the whole world was out to get you, my love?

“Vim... what happened? What’d I do?” Cat asked worriedly as I shook my head at her.

“Nothing. It’s my wife I need to stress about, not you,” I said.

What was I going to do now?

I had killed Renn’s people. The children of her friend. That witch. I had slaughtered them over a misunderstanding.

Feeling absolutely horrible, I turned to find a place to sit. Luckily there was a nice sized stump a few paces away. There were others nearby too, but it was the closest. A result of us camping at the edge of the forest. These areas were always harvested for lumber by nearby villages. I sat upon it with a huff.

“Um... I don’t understand...” Cat wobbled a little as she stepped closer to me, away from her fire. I should tell her not to. She needed to stay warm, since I planned on running shortly with her on my back. My quick pace made the chilly morning air even colder, so I needed to be careful.

Especially now that I knew she was a descendant of Renn’s precious family. If I let her get sick and die too...

I shivered at the idea.

Though...

I frowned as I realized I now likely didn't need to really question Cat on where her village, and thus her saint, were.

Renn would know. She had mentioned she knew where their village and home was. What had she said about them...? That she hadn't visited them in a long time, right...?

But... her friend... that witch... she had died before she had met Nory, right...?

That meant Renn had visited them throughout the years. And likely told them about them. Maybe even visited there with Nory in tow.

They couldn't have been that far apart, likely, then. Renn always claimed she hadn't traveled far, and I highly doubted she had done so with Nory. Supposedly that nun had been a frail woman, one who suffered from torment and torture during her youth. Likely not one to travel far, at least willingly.

"Vim...?" Cat stepped up closer as she worriedly studied me. She looked genuinely concerned for me. It made me feel like shit.

“Sorry. I uh... just realized something rather important,” I told her.

“I can tell... is it what I said...? Is it because we both know the same legend...?” she asked, putting one and two together.

“Kind of...” I told her honestly.

What was I to do...? Was there a point in keeping it a secret...? It wasn't like Renn was anyone else but herself. Would this human notice? Even if Renn kept her ears and tail hidden... odds are she'd not realize, but... The real question was if Renn herself could keep it secret. She was so damned overprotective of kids and women as it was, what would she be like with someone who was a descendant of her friend? One she considered family, basically? Renn would see this young woman not as a friend, or someone needing help, but a literal family member. As if a long lost niece or something.

“You really are strong, huh Vim. Look at this.”

I looked down to her feet, where she was pointing. Her foot was in the footprint I had left behind. It being in the sunken spot told me both how deep I had actually pushed down in my panic, but also how tiny she was. Her foot had plenty of room within my print.

Cat grinned at me, enjoying every moment of it.

Humans. I swear. “Should see what happens when I really get shocked,” I said.

“I bet! Wonder how your bed survives when you couple with your wife!” Cat said happily.

Frowning at her, I couldn't help but chuckle. What a statement. And, couple? Really? The people of this era didn't use that term much anymore. It made her statement of her village being kind of isolated all the more believable. It was something Renn would have said.

Cat then frowned and hummed as she stepped out of my print and crossed her arms. “Actually I feel sorry for her. I hope you're gentler with her than you are with me,” she noted.

“She's a bit stronger than you. But yes, I do my best,” I said.

“Oh? Is she like you then? Blessed?” she asked.

I nodded. That was a good way to explain it, I guess.

“Hm... wonder what it's like. And I wonder what the difference is between two blessings? I had thought Brave had been really strong too, but you had dealt with him as if he was but a child. Are different saints really that distanced in their powers?” Cat asked as she pondered it.

“No. Not at all. I'm special, that is all,” I said.

Poor man. Being seen as having a lesser status or blessing all because he had encountered me.

That wasn't fair to him at all.

"Hm..." Cat hummed as she stepped away, to sit back down next to her fire. She had likely grown cold, and my footprint was no longer interesting.

As she sat down, I found myself calm down again. The realization that Cat was from the village, and thus family, of Renn's witch friend was startling but honestly not that surprising.

After all how many saint families could even exist up in the north? If anywhere at all? Such bloodlines were so few and far in-between it was more a miracle that they even still existed than it was that they were related to Renn in the first place.

Though...

"Your legend. You said it calls Rennalee a sister?" I asked, wondering why she had spoken of her so lovingly. Hadn't Renn said she had killed the witch?

She nodded. "She saved the Saint and was considered her sister. She had joined her side, betraying her creators to do so. It's a lovely story. Supposedly she had even visited the village a few times, even after the Saint's death. She evidently still wanders the world now," Cat said as she picked up a stick, to poke and prod the fire in front of her.

Hm. So no mention of Renn killing her friend. Was that on purpose, I wonder?

Quite interesting. Maybe Renn's deed, a thing she seemed to blame herself for and deeply regretted, had a more serious story than I had assumed. It was also interesting that she was something of a legend amongst Cat and her people. I wonder if other legends existed of her up north. Hadn't she mentioned Lujic and Ginny, those kids, still had descendants somewhere? I suppose it was fitting that the woman I chose was similar to me in that aspect. Leaving footprints upon history without even realizing it.

Still...

This changed things.

Coughing, I shifted a little to better face Cat. I had not sat down on the stump with much thought, and as such had done so facing the other way. I turned around a bit, to properly face her.

"Cat," I said her name, and she looked up and smiled at me in a way that told me she really was as young as she was.

She was too innocent to have really realized how deeply I had been bothered by her words, and the information they had brought. She was too young to notice much more than the deep footprint I had left.

Too young to realize how serious the situation was.

“Yeah?” she asked as she pulled her stick out of the fire. It had a tiny lisp of flame at the end.

“I’d like you to help me, if you would,” I asked of her.

“With...?” she asked as she tilted her head.

“A scheme. One that I think would suit both of us,” I proposed.

Cat frowned. “I had not thought you the scheming type,” she said slowly.

“I’m usually not. Except when need be.”

She hummed, but nodded. “Okay... what is it then?”

“I want you to keep secret what we’re doing,” I said.

“Ah Vim, I warned you I was going to tell your wife all about what has happened. I’ll not keep it secret, not even if you beg!” Cat said happily, laughing.

I smirked at her childish teasing, and nodded. "Of that I'm perfectly fine with. What I meant instead was everything to do with your quest, what happened, and your saint. I ask you to keep that all a secret from here on out," I said.

Cat's happy smile died as she realized what I meant, and then she furrowed her brow at me. "I... don't understand."

I nodded. "I'd like you to keep it a secret. From the Church of Songs and everyone there. Instead... we'll tell them that you're someone I know. Say, a friend of a friend. That I'm only helping you get home to the north. I'd like for us to pass through the Cathedral, without alerting them what we're doing and where we are going or who we are going to see," I said, explaining.

For a long moment Cat studied me, and then she shifted ever so slightly. To put her stick back into the fire. "Can I ask why?"

"You may. And I'll explain it once we get there, properly. But for now just know that it'd be better for both of our sakes if we kept it a secret. I don't want the Church of Songs to know of your saint, not even the hint of her. And I'm sure you too don't want your saint being known either. It's something I think you don't want anyone to know, really," I said.

She nodded slowly. "Right... it is supposed to be a secret we take to our graves," she said gently, as if afraid to admit it.

"She'll forgive you once I explain to her how convincing I am of making people give up secrets," I told her.

“Ah yes. All the horrible torture I endured, I bet,” Cat said with a sad smirk.

I nodded gently at her. Yes. I’d not done much at all. Cat had kind of just said it without hesitation...

“Okay... that’s fine. I basically shouldn’t be telling anyone anyway, so in a sense I’m not really doing anything bad. So you just want us to meet your friends and then head northward right? Without them realizing what we’re doing? That’s easy enough,” Cat said, finally agreeing.

“Thank you. In return I’ll introduce you to someone very neat. Look forward to it,” I proposed.

“Neat...?” Cat tilted her head at me as she pondered my meaning, but I didn’t clarify.

After all there was no point. She’d be meeting Renn tonight, likely. Odds are I’ll not be able to contain myself and will run quickly once we get going.

“Wait...” Cat dropped her stick, as it finally dawned on her.

Oh. Seems I underestimated the young girl’s mind.

“Your wife...!” Cat’s eyes went wide as she put it all together, and realized the truth. That my Renn was her Rennalee from the legends.

Smiling gently, I nodded.

“My wife is Rennalee. Your ancestor’s friend,” I introduced both myself and Renn once more... and strangely...

I felt rather proud to do so.

Chapter 303 A Bison

I felt like how Vim sometimes looked.

My exhaustion was my own fault though, not like his own.

Another day without sleep. This combined with our rough trip here from Hornslo, and the days without sleep which I had there thanks to the dangers of the nearby fires, were starting to take a toll upon me.

Yet I had no one to blame but myself. After all not only was I safe here in the Cathedral, in this mansio, I had nothing to stop me from sleeping.

No one was bothering me. I had no dire duties to tend to. I was in no hurry or needing to flee...

In fact I had a wonderful bed. Below me now. The same one Vim and I had slept on when we had been here, even.

Yet even though its softness called for me, I felt no desire to crawl under its blankets. Instead I kept on reading.

Shifting a little, I turned another page. I had to do so carefully, since the pages had started to rip in their old age.

Celine's letter had been three separate things. The first was a genuine letter. To me. Addressed to "His Heart."

It was obvious the meaning. It wasn't just the implication of the one who had captured Vim's heart, but something deeper. Something more precious.

She had phrased it that way on purpose, and I knew as to the why.

After all, Vim didn't have a heart. Per his own words.

Celine had known Vim better than I had thought.

Her letter, the first one, was simple all things considered. It simply asked me to be the one he needed to be. To be there for him. To love him. To help him. And thus in turn, help the Society and the world along the way. If one read between the lines a little, it was clear she was trying to ask me to make sure that Vim continued to be the Society's Protector. Although she didn't outright say it, it was clear what she meant.

Particularly the most interesting bit of the first letter was her mention of helping Vim accomplish what the gods had set him forth to do.

It meant in her eyes, in her opinion, Vim had a genuine purpose. One given to him by a higher power.

It worried me, since I wasn't sure if it meant she had simply believed so or if it was the truth. She had been a real saint. A powerful one. Even Vim had mentioned that Celine had been one of the greatest saints he'd ever known.

Yet... the way she phrased it...

If she was speaking literally... and did indeed intend to mean, and imply, that Vim had been created for a genuine purpose...

What was I then to think of his aversion to them? His very creators?

Especially since I had to admit something I'd not really considered before.

The gods were, or at least had been, real. And Vim himself was proof of it. He spoke of them not as something distant and vague, but instead something real. Something annoying, even.

He spoke of gods the same way I spoke of my family. Something that had been very real, yet wished with all our hearts hadn't been. So it was... an odd thing to consider.

Vim after all hated gods... and although he may sometimes make snide remarks of their lack of godliness, he at the same time has not once denied they had existed.

Which meant there was a very good chance Celine's words were not figurative but literal. Maybe Vim really did have a purpose he needed to fulfill, and I needed to help him do so.

I'd talk to him about it once he returned.

For now though I needed to worry about her other two letters.

The second had been several pages long. And seemingly written long before she had met Vim. Her first few sentences had described it to be her ninetieth time writing them. Meaning she had kept track of how often she had re-wrote them. Though if she had re-wrote them so often out of need, because of losing the letters or them fading and falling apart from time as the ones in my hands were, or if she had needed to add and change them as the years passed, I had no way to tell.

The second letter was her telling me, the Heart of Vim as she called me, that it was now my job to guide him. It spoke about how Vim, for all his greatness, was like a ship upon the ocean. One without a sail or rudder. That if he did not have such things, given and used by others, he was almost as useless as a bucket with a hole in it.

Which was funny since Vim had at one time made a joke that buckets were supposed to have holes. I wonder if there was a correlation there.

“He doesn’t know about these, though,” I whispered ever so gently as I turned another page.

The third letter was a list of prophecies. Dreams. Things that Celine had foreseen, and that had yet to come to pass before her death. Things she had fretted over.

Things that had concerned Vim.

There weren’t many. It was only two pages long, and most seemed a little... jumbled. For instance the first page, in the beginning of it, spoke of a kingdom of non-humans. One that had tried to be an oasis in a dry ocean. A kingdom that Vim, and his heart... which was me, needed to keep a watchful eye upon it. To not allow it to fall.

Regrettably I feel that her prophecy was too late.

Merit’s Kingdom had been dubbed by Vim and others to be an oasis. And it had fallen long ago.

I gulped as I slid my fingers ever so gently down the decrepit pages. I read her prophecies, one by one, and decided that only three seemed like something I should really worry over. The rest were like the kingdom of an oasis. Prophecies that seemed to have little information to rely on, or something that had likely already long since happened.

The first was about a friend. It said someone important to Vim would arise to try and take his place. And that we shouldn't let it happen, or else the world will suffer greatly. It bothered me because of the vote that was getting ready to happen. What if they were related somehow? I couldn't think of any supposed friend he had who could replace Vim though, so maybe I was reading into it too much. Could it mean one of those monarch friends he spoke of? It was hard to imagine a normal person being capable of doing what he does.

The second, on the back of the first page which was scrawled alone without any others... meaning it had been added after, as if an afterthought: spoke of a monarch that eats the dreams of those who are awake. It said Vim needed to hunt it down or the world would end.

That scared me, because I believed it. And because it made me very wary of its meaning.

A monarch that eats the dreams of those who are awake.

Could it have something to do with how Vim's not been able to sleep lately? It was a long-shot of a connection, but I couldn't outright think of anything else that may be related to it.

I shook my head as I turned the page once more, to the last page in the book.

The last prophecy, which was also the very last entry in Celine's little book of a letter to me... was something troubling. Something that had kept me up through the night.

"Don't let your daughter touch the moon," I whispered as I read it again.

Blinking heavy eyes, I felt like trembling.

What a statement. What a warning. How was I supposed to interpret that?

Don't let your daughter touch the moon.

That was it. Nothing more. Most of the other prophecies had a few sentences at least, but this one was simple and to the point.

Would Vim understand the meaning if I showed it to him?

Celine had not mentioned anywhere in the letters that I shouldn't, or couldn't, share with Vim. Yet Randle had told me that Celine had specifically told him not to let Vim see them.

The why was obvious. Vim likely would have destroyed them. But now that I'd read them, multiple times even, I'd never forget them. Although I wanted to cherish them, and keep them forever, I'd not mind exchanging this booklet of letters for Vim's insight.

Was it fine to show him now...? Or should I continue keeping them a secret?

After all, these prophecies... although most seemed un-noteworthy to me, there was little odds that Vim wouldn't find them far more serious. He may well see each and every one as dangerously foreboding as the last one was to me.

And troubling indeed that one was...

This had been her letter to me. Not to Vim.

That meant the daughter she spoke of was mine.

My daughter.

Granted... by all counts said daughter should be Vim's too, but...

Well...

If it had been addressed to Vim, although it would have troubled me... it would have also not made me panic as readily. After all Vim was old. And would likely live far, far, longer than me. Which meant him having a daughter with someone else wasn't just a possibility, but likely something guaranteed. It was a simple fact of life that I didn't want to acknowledge, but knew was there deep down anyway.

But this hadn't been her letter for him, but for me.

So it was my daughter she spoke about. My daughter she prophesied.

How did that work? How had she known I'd be a jaguar, yet not know my name? Or maybe she had, but didn't feel the need to put it to paper? Maybe it was her attempt to keep me safe, so that if anyone read these letters they'd not be able to immediately deduce they were for me? Like the Chronicler, or Randle, for example?

Taking a deep breath I slowly closed Celine's letter. I made sure to not let any of the pages shift or fall out of place, since a few were loose and no longer bound to the binding. Randle had apologized for its condition, but I couldn't fault him for it. It was actually surprising it had lasted this long, really. Even if it had supposedly been sealed into a vault, away from all elements, all this time.

And it hadn't been the only thing either...

Reaching over to pick up the heart, I frowned at it.

"Is that you great-uncle?" I asked it.

The black orb, which did indeed look like a cat's eye, didn't seem to acknowledge my touch or question at all. It was a little warm, like the others had been that I've touched, but this one seemingly didn't pulse as often Miss Beak's had done. I'd only felt that heart-beat like pulse twice since being given it.

Randle had called it the Orb of Night. It was an apt name, I suppose, since the inside of the heart did look like the pitch black of a night sky. The tiny little circular things floating around did kind of look like stars, I guess...

But why call it orb and not heart? Or was that just his way, Celine's way, of keeping sure no one would put one and two together if they heard its name. Kind of like how she had not used my name in her letters?

Heart of Night made it clear it was a monarch's heart. While Orb of Night just implied a strange orb. Maybe a weird jewel, even. A typical thing to find in a church's vault, maybe?

Running my thumb along it, I sighed a little.

So my great elder had indeed been a monarch. I mean... it was kind of obvious, but...

"I wonder how Celine got your heart, though," I wondered.

Randle had only been told that the one to become Vim's heart would be a descendant of this orb. He had no idea where she had gotten it, when, or how. And from what I'd been able to gather from what little we had spoken about...

Randle hadn't wanted to get very involved at all. Either his hate for Vim was strong enough to keep him from getting too interested in me, or the things around me, or his faith was so pure he simply didn't have any desire to know what he wasn't supposed to.

Still... I turned the heart a bit, and watched how the strange eye shape inside it seemed to turn too. As if it was always staring at me, no matter which angle I peered into the orb. It was unsettling, honestly.

Did this mean that Celine had been alive when I had been too? After all I had helped kill the elder. The witch and I had done so together.

It meant that this was either not actually the heart of my elder, at least not the one I knew personally, or...

"I'm a lot older than I thought..." I mumbled at the possible reality.

It was possible, of course. I told everyone I was roughly two hundred because it felt like I was. I had watched Lujic grow from a young boy to a withered old man. I had watched him sire and raise several generations of children. I had watched Nory grow old too. And I had watched, from a distance, my friend the witch's family grow into a large village.

I based my age off them. Off the kids and Nory's lives. They had grown old, and then died. One after the other. With a few years between, give and take, and I claimed two hundred years of age.

Yet the reality was I had no idea. How long had I lived at home? With my family? How long before that snake had shown up, and the witch? How long had I spent with the witch? How long had I spent traveling alone, before I ran into Lujic and Ginny? And how long after that had it been, really, before I ran into Nory?

What if I was three or four hundred years old all this time...? If not older...?

“Hopefully Vim doesn’t think I’m too old now,” I mumbled.

Would he be able to tell if this heart was related to me somehow? Something told me he’d be able to tell.

Also...

Staring deep into the eye-like heart, I wondered if maybe this was another option for me.

He had asked Narli, back at the Keep, if I had been able to absorb Miss Beak’s heart. She had never told me, and seemingly him, the answer... but something told me that was because there was none to give. It had been a difficult idea in the first place, seemingly, but...

What if it was the heart of my elder...?

That meant it was of my blood, wasn’t it? Or rather, I was of its?

Then... if so...

Footsteps drew my attention from the heart in my hand, and once I confirmed someone was walking up the stairs... I went to slide the heart under the nearby pillows.

I hid the heart as Sillti stepped in front of the room's door and pushed it open. It hadn't been closed, but it had been just barely about to be. It smoothly creaked as it slid open and she gave me a kind smile upon realizing I was still awake. "Renn, a man named Randle is here to see you," she told me.

Oh...?

I turned my head, and thus my ears a little... and sure enough, yes. I heard Randle talking to Angie downstairs.

I really was tired. Usually I'd have noticed him opening the gate, let alone talking to Sillti and Angie.

Actually it was a good thing it had been Sillti who had come up here and not Angie. My hat was off my head, sitting nearby the edge of the bed.

I went to putting it on, but didn't have any pins. The last few Vim had made me had broken yesterday. I had taken my hat off a little too harshly, in both my exhaustion and negligence. I had been focused on Celine's letter.

"You look tired Renn," Sillti said as I clambered off the bed. I left Celine's book on it, and the heart beneath the pillows. Sillti and Angie both didn't enter my room; they had each chosen their own rooms down the hall.

And even if they did I doubted either of them would know what they were, or would do anything to them. At worst they might read the book, but I genuinely didn't mind that. Celine's little letter had been personal but not very revealing honestly.

"I am, to be honest," I told Sillti the truth as I stepped out of my room and we both headed for the stairs.

"Is it because Vim's not here, Renn?" Sillti asked softly.

I paused in front of the stairwell, and frowned.

Was it...?

For some reason that made a lot of sense.

"I'm sure he'll be back soon. He's Vim after all," Sillti said kindly.

Smiling at her, I nodded. "He is. But that's the problem, he has no concept of time at all," I said with a sigh as I stepped down the stairwell.

Sillti giggled, and as we descended to the first floor... I realized it was oddly quiet.

Leaving the stairs, I found Randle and Angie near the table. The two were frowning at each other.

“Angie...?” I asked. What was wrong? Had something happened? There was an odd heaviness to the air and...

“Why did no one mention she was a bison?” Randle asked.

“Huh...?”

I frowned as I watched Angie scratch the side of her head. Her thick hair sounded odd.

“Wait...!” Sillti stepped forward, and giggled happily. “You are, aren’t you!” she happily said.

“No one ever asked,” Angie said simply.

Feeling a little light-headed, I groaned as I realized how obvious it actually was.

Not only was her hair thick. Too thick for a normal human, she was odd herself. All of us had noted her strange maturity for her age.

“Well if this is the case I’m of course even more willing to help, but...” Randle shifted a little and looked upset.

Right. She didn’t belong in a human orphanage at all then.

“Angie you should have said something,” I said gently.

“I thought it was obvious,” Angie mumbled.

It had been. How had no one noticed? “How come Oplar didn’t notice?” Silti asked as she stepped up to Angie and ran her fingers into the girl’s thick hair.

Watching the way Silti brushed Angie’s hair, I felt a little jealous. I wanted to touch it too. Was it like Merit’s hair?

“I love Oplar but she’s never been the most observant creature,” Randle said with a sigh.

Oh...? I wonder if I should take offense to that or not. Since I was supposed to be the very definition of such a creature.

“So what’s this about an orphanage?” Angie then asked stiffly.

Randle smiled gently down to the young girl, unafraid to face her glare. "Nothing you need to worry about any longer. I had been told you had been a human, young bison. Since you are obviously not, you belong amongst us. The Society. Not human children," Randle said plainly.

"What's it like?" Angie asked, as if she hadn't just heard Randle's lovely little comment about where she belonged.

"The orphanages...? Well... like schools, mostly. We've found dedicating the children to learning and simple chores for most of the day keeps them not only out of trouble, but helps them further along down the road. Plus it lets us find the ones with sharp minds and instincts, and put them to good use if they'd like to become something more than they are," Randle said swiftly.

Interested I stepped forward. "Is it nearby?" I asked.

"The one here is indeed nearby. It's to the south of the Cathedral, between the Cathedral and the Pulpit."

Pulpit...?

Randle noticed my confusion and smiled at me. "The large building where we give sermons," he explained.

Ah... I nodded. He spoke of that large theater like room, with the large platform they gave sermons from. That meant it was near those weird arches and towers. The ones that led to the market roads. I'd walked through them before.

"Is it fun?" Angie asked further, not even caring for my and Randle's conversation.

"The orphanage...? Well... It can be, I suppose. Many children laugh and play most of the time there. I don't allow hardships upon them. Though to be honest the orphanages elsewhere sometimes have issues. We have one in a city to our north, near the border, that regretfully I had to shut down a few decades ago. I found out the priests there were selling the children to northern nobles," Randle said.

Jeez he really was honest. Even to children.

I wonder if that was one of the events Oplar had spoken of. One of which he had sent Vim to correct and handle.

I could only imagine how furious Vim would have been. Selling children was the very opposite of his belief in free will, after all.

Angie shifted a little. "That doesn't sound fun at all," she mumbled.

He chuckled softly. "No. It hadn't been. But I am proud to say for every child who we've failed, there have been well over a dozen or more we've helped prop up to become better than they ever could have been without us. Many of the children who grow up under our watchful eyes end up becoming prominent people. And not just as members of the church, but the Society too. Many of them help us in ways you'd never imagine," Randle said, speaking proudly of his project.

“Hm...” Angie hummed up at the priest, and I wondered if she was interested.

Surely she’d not ask to live there right...?

Wait...

“Angie... what of your family?” I asked.

“Gone. I told you that,” she said calmly.

I shifted and felt horrible. So they really had all died...? In those fires...?

If so then why hadn’t Vim returned already?

Randle sighed gently at us. “Well... I’m going to go get Jelti. Renn, would you please accompany me?”
Randle then asked.

Frowning at him, I wondered what he was scheming. I did actually have things I wanted to ask him, but to be honest I was tired. But I knew better than to let my annoyance show or interfere as I nodded.

“Sure. Okay,” I said.

“Thank you. I’ll be back later. Shall we have lunch together? I’d like to hear both of your stories if you’d be willing to share them,” Randle asked both Silti and Angie.

“Oh? Sure...?” Angie frowned but nodded.

“Mhm...” Silti nodded too, but not as firmly. I knew why, though.

Her story was not one she really wanted to share, after all.

Randle smiled and nodded and then turned, to head for the door. I was about to follow him... but paused and realized something.

“You’re a bison,” I said down to the girl.

“Yeah?”

“I see...” I reached up and took my hat off. Angie tilted her head at me as I smiled down and flicked an ear at her. “I’m a type of cat,” I told her.

“I know. I saw your ears while traveling. You should be a little more careful,” Angie said simply.

My shoulders drooped a little as Sillti giggled and patted Angie's shoulders. "Now, now! Maybe she just instinctively knew you were a bison all along!" Sillti said, coming to my defense.

"Hmph. Though I admit I didn't realize you had a tail until last night. So that at least you hid well," Angie said as she glanced down.

Was it visible...? No. it wasn't. It was still firmly tucked away beneath my leather skirt.

"Ah. I saw that too. It had been poking out a little when you returned last night, Renn," Sillti said gently.

I sighed. "Great. Don't let Vim know," I said.

"Oh I will!" Sillti said with a grin.

Groaning at her, I stepped away as I put my hat back on. Randle had paused at the door, and hadn't opened it yet. Likely because I had taken my hat off.

"It is a little odd none of you had noticed," Randle said gently as he opened the door and we left the house.

“Yes. Now that I think about it I think she had noticed what I was when we first met. She had sat with me and Oplar and ate, and she had acted a little odd for a young girl at the time,” I said as Randle closed the door behind us.

“Hm... from what I can remember she is young though? I believe she’s only a decade or so old,” Randle said.

“Oh...?” I paused a moment in front of the gate and glanced back at the house. “Then why does she act so mature for her age?” I asked.

“Some of our kind are like that. Humans can get like that too. Especially ones who suffered trauma,” Randle said as I opened the gate.

“Trauma like her family dying in front of her,” I said as I understood.

“Yes. I’m surprised you asked of them so blatantly. I figured you for a more gentle soul, particularly towards children,” Randle said as I stepped aside to let him through first. I didn’t know if he was strong enough to open or close the gate or not. Though he likely was, since he had arrived alone it seemed.

Siltili hadn’t been strong enough. And I wasn’t sure yet if Angie was either now... I had assumed she hadn’t been, but...

“Some things need to be asked even when it hurts to do so,” I said simply as I shut the gate behind him.

“Isn’t that the truth...” Randle whispered with a sigh.

I waited a moment to tell which way we were to go. Randle shook his head, still lamenting over what I’d said, and then stepped to the left. I followed him down the hallway, heading away from the direction where I’d normally go to typically find another member here. The Chronicler’s office was the other way.

“Why are we to get Jelti?” I asked.

“Now that I know young Angie is one of us, she needs to be properly assessed. To make sure she’s okay. Physically and mentally. Jelti is the best for such things, when it comes to children. She’s very good with them,” Randle said.

Ah... “Did she seem hurt to you?” I asked. I hadn’t thought she was.

“No. But one must never be too careful when it comes to children,” he said.

Right... he was very protective of kids...

Somehow that made him a good man in my eyes. “Are you married, Randle?” I asked.

“Huh...? No. I’m a man of the cloth,” he said.

“And that means...?”

“That I’m to never wed. Plus even if I wanted to, I’m too old now, so it is of no matter,” Randle said simply.

Frowning at that, I wondered if he meant that in... certain ways.

If so then it was likely not wise to ask what he had thought of Sillti. Plus it may be rude to ask anyway, if he took his faith that seriously.

“You seem tired Renn. Are you well?” Randle then asked.

I noted the gentle tone he had used. He had been utterly genuine in his worry.

“I am. I’m just... I have a lot on my mind is all,” I told him the truth.

I knew he didn’t want us talking about Celine’s letter, or the heart. In fact he may never again bring them up to me.

Honestly I couldn’t blame him. Although this section of the Cathedral was not as frequented as other parts, it was still a place where you were commonly running into people. People of the cloth mostly.

Randle and I were alone in this hallway right now, but I knew better than to think the stuff we were saying couldn't be heard elsewhere.

There were other floors above us. Some of the windows were open. A few doors we passed, although closed, I knew likely had people just behind them. Plus here in these stone halls, voices carried oddly.

And who was to know who was friend and who was foe? At least, for Randle. Thanks to his split with the Chronicler.

"Of that I have no doubt. I hope soon Vim returns and you can rest easy. Is there anything I could do for you until then?" Randle asked.

Huh... "I think I'm okay," I said carefully. That wasn't his attempt at inviting me to have a private conversation, was it?

"All the same. I'm always here, Renn. I know not if you've ever confessed or not but it is a very relieving commitment. I cannot count how many times I've heard of the perfect night of sleep people have gotten after confessing. They say it is a bliss unlike any other," Randle said.

Oh. Maybe he was just being... well... himself. A priest.

"I confess to Vim sometimes," I told him.

Randle stopped walking.

Keeping myself from smirking, I watched as the man's face furrowed in troubled confusion. He was having difficulty with processing what I'd just said.

"He gets all flustered, too, when I do," I told Randle.

The holy man closed his eyes, took a deep breath and smiled as he sighed. "I bet he does."

Chapter 304 His Return to Renn

Stepping up to the door... I spent a tiny moment to listen to the sounds just beyond it.

The mansio was quiet. Almost as quiet as the whole Cathedral. I heard the very faint sounds of a single fire. One that was about to go out. One that had been burning for too long without a new log. I heard the snores of a couple people. I didn't recognize them, but I blamed the thick door and walls on my lack of being able to. I heard no voices. No talking. No humming. No loud Oplar... though I hadn't expected to find her in the mansio this late anyway. She had her own room here at the Cathedral, her own bed.

Reaching out, I grabbed the handle to the front door and hesitated.

There were multiple sleeping people in the house. It could be either two or three people and they were all on the second floor... and most sounded female.

Yet why didn't any of them sound like Renn...? Her snoring, even when light and faint was rather distinct. Something I should be able to recognize easily. It was nothing like Cat's stuttering snores as she slept on my back. Yet I couldn't tell if any of the sleeping people were Renn.

Maybe I was tired or something.

Shifting the sleeping Cat behind me, I decided to just go in.

Opening the door, I was glad to find it was unlocked. It would not have surprised me to have found it locked, what with me not being here. And in fact I was a little bothered that it had been. Yes it was safe here, within the Cathedral and within this little courtyard protected by the very heavy gate, but it was not a place I wanted Renn being so comfortable with such as to leave her front door unbarred in the middle of the night.

Maybe these last few years with me, and not needing to lock doors because of it, had diminished her urgency of keeping safe. I'll need to address that.

The reason as to why it was unlocked became clear, though.

Renn froze upon seeing me. She had been about to bite down on a small pastry. Some kind of bread muffin. By the look of the crumbs on her face, she'd already eaten several.

She was alone at the table and the nearby fireplace was burning but indeed low on fuel. It needed another log placed upon it.

“Vim...?” Renn let out a tiny little whisper of a greeting, and I smiled and raised my finger to my lips. To tell her to be quiet.

Although she nodded, she stood up quickly. Her chair squeaked as she stood, and then she hurried over to me. Her tiny muffin bounced on the floor and rolled away as she hurried to me.

I braced myself, and flinched as Renn wrapped me in a hug. If she even noticed that I had someone on my back or not, she didn't show it. Her arms wiggled and slithered between my and Cat's body as she squeezed me and buried her face into my chest.

Half tempted to drop Cat right here and now, so I could return the warm hug, I somehow resisted the urge and only returned Renn's lovely greeting with a single arm.

Although I too squeezed her close... I felt like a complete ass all the same. A single arm wasn't enough. I should be embracing her with everything I had and...

“Let me put her down, Renn, before you take it any further,” I whispered quietly, before I gave in to my urges.

“Mhm...!” Renn made a tiny noise, akin to a sob, but didn't let me go.

Taking a small breath, I indulged in her scent for a moment and then gently pushed forward. I stepped forward and Renn obliged me, and allowed me to enter the house. She remained wrapped around me as I turned to close the door... and then headed for the stairs.

“Any rooms empty?” I asked quietly.

Renn only nodded.

Pausing before the stairs, I wondered how difficult it was going to be to ascend them with her wrapped around me... I could do it easily, of course, but could I do it without waking the one on my back or any of those upstairs sleeping? But I didn't get to figure out if I could do it or not. She actually found it within her to let me go.

“At the end. Hurry,” Renn whispered as she stepped back, and wrapped her own arms around herself.

I stared at the woman I loved for a moment, and worried for her. Why'd she look... hurt? Or rather, maybe exhausted...? Had something happened?

Was that genuine pain on her face, or was she just caught up in the moment and barely able to hold herself back from my touch for even just a few seconds...? As lovely as that would be, I knew better than to think that was the case.

Something must have happened. Of course it had. The world was not kind, after all. Not to us.

Forcing my eyes away from her, I walked up the stairs as quietly as I could. As I passed rooms, I noticed a few things.

Two rooms had sleeping members within them. Their doors were closed. One of the snoring members sounded oddly young... which made me wonder if maybe Fizz had come to visit or something. It made sense, she had liked Renn and gotten along well with her during our last visit.

And also, surprisingly, the main bedroom was empty. Its door was open, and the bed was slightly a mess, which told me that it was likely Renn who had been sleeping in it. Though why she was not sleeping in it right now was another question entirely. It was the dead of night.

Going to the last room in the hall, I quietly opened the door and picked one of the beds. There were three in this room. I pulled back the covers, and with a little gentle pushing I un-wrapped Cat's arms from around my neck and placed her in bed. I covered her up with the covers and she immediately rolled over, and with a deep sigh of relief went to fall back asleep.

Good. She'll be fine for now.

Stepping out of the room I gently closed the door and headed back down the hallway.

I barely made it to the bottom of the stairs before Renn wrapped me in a hug once more.

This time she had full authority of it. And didn't hold back. I felt ribs strain under the pressure as she squeezed me with what I assumed was all her might.

It felt strangely good.

"I'm glad you're okay, Renn," I said softly as I wondered if I should take her out of the house or not.

Where to take her though...? There were a few locations we could go. Some rooms nearby. The underground catacombs too. But I didn't want to go too far from here. Last thing I needed was for me to be gone and for Cat to wake up here and panic. Especially if whoever was sleeping in the same hallway ended up being someone with traits that were readily visible. Although I had slightly explained to Cat about Renn, the general idea of the Society and its purpose, I'd not gone into great detail. Not enough to keep issues from arising if I wasn't careful.

"Vim...!" Renn let out a tiny whimper as she said my name, and clung to me even harder.

Wrapping my arms around her, I closed my eyes and enjoyed the moment.

She was warm. Trembling, too. But not just from the cold. She was squeezing me with so much strength that she was trembling from muscle strain. Hopefully she didn't pull a muscle or something.

Leaning down a little, I brushed my face against her ears and into her hair. I took a deep breath of her... and...

For a tiny heartbeat...

I was at peace.

I forgot all about the Society. The human I'd been carrying for days. The bison family I had failed. The Cathedral around me, and all its annoyances. The soon to be headaches and drama I would undoubtedly have to endure. The requests for help. Reporting of my failures, and hearing reports of the failures of others. The vote. I forgot it all.

I forgot about my past. My future. Everything.

Everything except the woman in my arms.

The relief at finding her safe was now very obvious. I had been doing my best to ignore the panic on the way here, over having lost her because I had left her behind with the others. To search for a family that I hadn't even ever found. But now that she was in my arms once more... I had no choice but to admit that the feelings had been there. The feelings of pure dread and terror. The worry and fear.

It was those emotions that had brought forth all the mistakes I'd made. The killing of Cat's friends had been because I had been in a self-imposed rush. I had allowed my worry for Renn to turn into blunt rage. My harming Cat, dislocating her hip, had been from similar stress. I've hurt plenty of people with my great strength before, killed them too, but usually only when during great stress myself. Like during the middle of battle, or when heavily distracted.

I knew this would come to pass. I had known that my affection for her would disrupt me, and distract me. I had known it would come. I had expected it. Yet it felt like it had arrived too early.

If I was already this bad... what would happen next? In a year? Two? A decade? A hundred...? A millennia?

How bad would my love for her become... and how badly will it affect my dedication to the Society...?

Renn's ears fluttered against my face, and I smiled.

Thank goodness she was safe.

Renn's squeezing softened, and I felt her trembling change a little. It had gone from being because of her overexertion of squeezing me, to crying.

Luckily she did so quietly... and into my chest. It was muffled, and not a deep sob but just... gentle. Rubbing her back, I smiled at her. Yes. Those were tears of relief.

"Shed some for me too, would you?" I asked her kindly.

Renn giggled gently, and I loved every moment of it.

Letting a few moments come and go, basking in each other's existence, I eventually patted her back and nodded.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked softly.

She nodded.

“Oplar and Sillti?”

Another nod.

“Anything bad happen while I was gone?”

She was about to shake her head, but then hesitated.

Oh...?

Renn sniffed heavily, rubbed her face against me, and then took a very deep breath. “I have so much to say,” she whispered with a crackly voice.

Oh no. “What happened...?” I asked softly.

“A lot. But...” she hesitated, and I realized why.

She didn't want to wake anyone.

"I'd take you elsewhere Renn, but I can't. I can't stray too far from the one I brought back with me," I told her.

"Who was she?" she asked.

"Your friend," I said.

Renn's ears fluttered, smacking my face. I couldn't help but chuckle at the feeling, and I lifted my head and stood up straighter so that she could look up and glare at me.

"Who...?" she asked again.

"A friend. Of yours. Truly," I told her as I glanced around to check her for any wounds. She looked tired, exhausted, but not harmed or dirty. In fact I could even smell that she had recently bathed, likely only a few hours ago.

Her eyes narrowed at me as I studied her, and I basked in their gleam.

"You're beautiful," I whispered as I stared into them.

Her pupils contracted, narrowing at me, and then she gave me a lovely smile as if to prove I was right.

“And you look absolutely filthy,” she said with her smile.

“Mhm. I’m sure. Cooked a few times, I think,” I said. I still wore the half-burnt clothes. Since we had entered Telmik in the middle of the night I hadn’t bothered with my appearance.

“One too many times,” she agreed.

I nodded and glanced to the fireplace. Speaking of being cooked alive had reminded me of it. It was about to go out.

I’d not let Cat get sick and die after all I’d done to get her here safely. This house was strangely cold, maybe the fire hadn’t been going for long even though it looked half dead already.

Renn allowed me to drag her over to it. She obliged in letting me pay attention to something else for a moment, but she kept her arms around me as I went to adding wood to the fire. I had kneeled to do so, and Renn had gone to clinging to me from behind. I remained kneeled even after I finished with the fire... as to enjoy the feeling of her clinging to my back.

Yes. She belonged there. Not that other cat.

“What took you so long?” Renn asked softly from behind.

“I failed to find the bison family. I spent a little time looking for them. While I did I ran into someone you’ll be very interested in meeting,” I said.

“Hm...?”

Closing my eyes, I ignored the warmth of the fire in front of me and basked in hers instead. “We have much to talk about,” I said.

“Mhm...”

I frowned at the odd way she had responded. Her humming and mumbling was common during moments such as these... since she was the emotional type, but...

Turning a little to glance at her, I raised an eyebrow at the way her ears hung next to my face.

“Renn...?” I whispered softly as I felt her hot breath on my neck. She had rested her head on my shoulder and... She didn’t respond. And instead...

A tiny snore filtered through her hair and into my ear, and I couldn’t help but smirk at her.

What the hell...? Had she gotten so emotionally bothered at seeing me that she had passed out or something...?

I was half tempted to wake her, but knew better than to do so. Maybe she had been tired or something. She did look exhausted, with even dark circles under her eyes. Not a common sight for her, really. Even when she had gotten sick after visiting Landi she hadn't look as weary as she did now. Had she not gotten any sleep this whole time?

Glancing at the logs I had just put into the flames, I noticed the amount they had already been burnt.

We had been kneeling here for more than a long moment. I had simply not noticed thanks to my enjoying it.

Still, as much as I loved the feeling of her on my back I couldn't let her lay there all night.

It took a little careful maneuvering, but I'd recently gotten a lot of practice at shuffling women on my back, so I easily got Renn up against my back and stood. I lifted her up, and smiled happily at the feeling of her sleeping on my back.

Her arms were around my neck, but not as tightly or hesitantly. They felt almost lazily rested upon me. Her legs didn't wrap and squeeze around my waist either.

She didn't feel half-asleep on my back as Cat had done, but instead full on in a deep slumber. As if she instinctively knew I'd never let her fall off.

Yes. That was how my woman should be. Not out of place upon my back, but domineering it.

Carrying Renn upstairs, I took her to the bed. As I went to pulling back the blankets... something shifted beneath them.

Staring down at the white creature, I glared at it and the ball of darkness it was wrapped around.

The tiny stoat made a noise up at me, as if annoyed I had pulled back its covers.

"I suggest you run," I warned it.

It let out a tiny cry as I reached down to grab the thing it was wrapped around. The monarch's heart thumped as I grabbed it, and the tiny stoat let out a whine as it stood up and flicked its tails and whiskers at me. It was annoyed I had stolen its source of warmth.

Ignoring the monarch that still lived; I stared instead into the dark heart of a dead one.

What had Renn gotten herself into...?

This was not a powerful heart, but it was a heart for sure. Where had she gotten it...?

The stoat made noises at me as it bounced over to one of the pillows. It dug itself under it, curling up beneath it. Its tiny head poked out beneath the pillow to stare at me, its long whiskers wiggling in annoyance at me.

“Hmph.”

Turning around, I gently lowered Renn to the bed. She slid off my back rather easily, and didn’t wake at all as she was placed onto the bed.

With a small sigh I went to shifting her around. She had looked terribly uncomfortable the way she had slid off me. Completely unlike Cat earlier, who had rolled over immediately as to sleep in a better and more comfortable position.

As I moved Renn, putting her head on a pillow and covering her with blankets, I was glad that she was wearing light stuff. Thin shirt and pants, nothing that would bother her as she slept.

Patting her shoulder ever so gently as I finished tucking her into bed, I glanced at the monarch still hiding beneath one of the pillows.

“You should know better,” I warned it gently.

It chirped at me, but didn't leave its hiding spot.

Fine. Renn would probably enjoy waking and finding it in her bed anyway. It was lucky it was so cute looking.

Staying near the bed, and keeping my hand on Renn's shoulder, I glanced down at my other hand. The one that held the heart.

Lifting it a little, I stared deep into its core... at the very obvious eye deep within.

Was that a cat's eye...?

Surely not. Right...?

I couldn't imagine Renn meeting, and thusly killing, a monarch. So it was likely she had been given it by someone. But who...? The Chronicler...? I couldn't believe the Chronicler would give her something so precious. Even if Renn had been going around telling everyone she was my wife, there was no way that old crone would willingly give up something like this to her. She wouldn't give hearts to me without a great effort and ruckus for crying out loud.

So.... Who...?

What schemes had she gotten involved with this time? While I was away?

How should I crush them? How to best protect her?

She was so, so precious. So delicate. So fragile. To me she was even more delicate than the other cat in the room nearby. Her snores were the loudest amongst everyone sleeping right now.

Squeezing the heart, I debated putting all my strength into the act.

I had cracked that one. The one given to Landi.

Could I do it again?

I hadn't tried with Miss Beak's heart. I hadn't wanted to. It had been my friend's. This one though...

For a tiny moment I considered it... until Renn moved.

She shifted, and rolled over a bit. To lay on her back. As she did her hands found my own. They wrapped around my hand and forearm, hugging me closely. I had to bend a little to comply, as she snuggled into my arm in her sleep.

Right. She always clung to me. Especially lately...

Sighing softly I knelt down next to the bed, to let her cling to my arm. Even if it put me in an awkward position. I'd endure it. A few hours of discomfort meant nothing if it made her happy. Even if it was just this simple happiness while she slept.

Resting against the bed, I smiled at her.

I had expected me to be the one to shock her. Yet here she was, shocking me instead.

While I stared at the heart and her, the little stoat monarch squirmed slowly across the bed to Renn. It crawled onto her pillow, and ignoring my glare it snuggled up against Renn's head, between and under her ears as if for warmth. It curled up amongst her hair and ears, and then let out a deep sigh as it settled in to fall back asleep.

As it did one of Renn's arms left my own. It slithered upward as she rolled over a little, and patted the tiny creature gently... as if she was awake. She wasn't, and her patting quickly ended... but her hand remained on the monarch... thus leaving only one of her hands and arms on my own.

The tiny monarch's whiskers shifted a little, moving some of her hair... as it peered out at me through her floes. Then it blinked... and then slowly closed its eyes, to sleep.

I glared at the thing, since I felt it was taunting me.

I had taken the heart it had been sleeping with... so it had taken a different heart in exchange.

Damned thing.

The thought of a monarch stealing my heart, for the first time, after stealing so many myself was wickedly amusing. It made me smirk and want to laugh, but I kept quiet as to not wake Renn up.

Enjoying the moment, I sat there as the night dwindled on. Doing my best to not just ignore the church, the world around me, and the heart in my hand... I focused entirely on my sleeping companion, basking in her presence as to both calm down and rejuvenate me.

This may be the first time I've ever returned to Telmik with such joy and urgency. And although glad to finally have such simple joy, it was also terrifying.

Usually by now I'd already be searching out the Chronicler. Or getting reports from Link or Oplar. To find out if anyone in the Society needed me elsewhere, urgently. By now I was already planning on leaving, and preparing to do so. I rarely stayed here long anymore. Even when Celine had been alive my visits to Telmik were usually short. Short and blunt.

Yet I had no plans on getting up. I had no plans of leaving her side. No gumption to search out the Chronicler, or check for any letters of help and assistance. I simply sat here next to the bed, uncaring of the world around me.

If anything proved my love for Renn... If anything proved my love was real, it was this. I'd never once abandoned the Society for any reason. Not even Celine had been able to make me ignore them,

although she had tried desperately to do so. Yet here I was, half tempted to pick Renn up and run away to some far corner of the world without telling anyone. Even her.

My love for her was dangerous. And not just for myself, or her. But for the world. The Society. Those around me.

I once almost destroyed the world from hate. Hopefully this time I didn't do so out of love.

Still... even if my love for her was dangerous. Wrong, even. Even if it brought forth problems and chaos... I'd more than happily accept it. I welcomed it, even. As worrisome as it were, it was still enjoyable. I still didn't hesitate. I wouldn't.

"I love you Renn," I whispered ever so gently as she slept.

Hopefully the Society... and this world, will survive my love for her.

Chapter 305 To Wake Amongst Friends

Something woke me by tickling my face.

I couldn't help but smile, since in my half awake mind I for a tiny moment thought it was Vim.

But Vim wouldn't do such a thing. Not yet, anyway.

Opening my eyes to the small creature, I couldn't help but grin at it.

It really was adorable.

The little white monarch made a chirping sound at me, and bounced around the bed a little. As if excited to see that I was finally awake.

Sitting up, I let a huge yawn as I felt the little weasel thing bounce around near my legs. As I stretched, I strained my ears to listen to the world around me.

I was alone in the room, but that wasn't too much of a surprise. Based off the bright sunlight sneaking into the room through the heavy curtains it was the middle of the day. Vim was likely busy, having returned finally. There was likely a lot he had to do. A lot of people he had to meet and speak with.

So him not being next to me in bed upon my waking, and I not hearing his voice amongst the chatter coming from the floor below...

Although disappointing, was understandable.

"Yes, yes, good morning to you too," I said to the tiny monarch that bounced over to my lap, almost as if it was dancing around.

It was a monarch... right? Was it able to talk, I wonder? Or at least understand people?

Sometimes it acted as if it did, then other times it acted like the basic little animal it seemed to be.

Petting the small thing, I basked in its fluffy cuteness for a moment. It didn't purr, but it did wiggle its little whiskers something fierce as if in joy.

As I petted the monarch, I yawned again. I didn't feel tired anymore, having gotten the first good night of sleep in a long time, but I almost felt like not getting up out of bed. Not because I wanted to go back to sleep... but simply because I wanted to lay down and just enjoy the moment.

But I knew if I did I'd miss out on the people here.

After all now that Vim was back... there was no telling when we'd leave again. For all I knew we'd be setting off today or tomorrow, so I really shouldn't waste any more time.

"Come on. Let's stop being lazy," I said to the little creature as I rolled off the bed.

As I did I realized I was almost naked. Either Vim had helped me undress, or I had done it while asleep. Considering the way the clothes were neatly folded on a nearby chair... something told me it had been Vim. Usually I just tossed them mindlessly when half-asleep, and they ended up all over the place.

Getting dressed, I made sure to grab my hat. Just in case.

Upon opening the door, I had expected the little monarch to run off... but instead it clambered up my leg, up my side and back and onto my shoulder. It nuzzled against my cheek for a moment, and I couldn't help but giggle at it.

It really was adorable. Even if it had tried to nibble on my heart.

Wait...

Pausing a moment, I frowned as I realized the heart was gone. I stepped back over to the bed and patted all around, in and under the covers and pillows, and groaned upon realizing it really was gone.

Had it fell off the bed and rolled somewhere...? Or...

"Vim..." I whispered, and hoped, it was his doing and not something worse.

"You didn't eat it did you?" I asked the tiny creature on my shoulder.

It chirped at me and tilted its head, as if to play innocent.

Surely not... right? It had nibbled on the heart, but it had been unable to actually put it into its mouth. The heart was bigger than its head. So I had not thought it possible for it to eat or swallow it. Maybe I had been wrong...

It was a monarch after all... maybe it had methods...

In fact maybe the idea of eating a heart wasn't how I thought it to be. What if the phrase was more figurative than literal...?

Huffing, I decided to just find Vim. He likely had it.

He had carried me to bed last night. I had been absolutely exhausted, and barely remembered it, but I knew it hadn't been a dream. I had felt his touch. His warmth. Heard his voice.

Not even my dreams were that real.

Walking downstairs, I was a little surprised to find Sillti and Jelti and no one else.

"Oh! Morning sleepy head!" Jelti greeted me with a smile.

"Morning... where's Angie?" I asked. The young bison was usually up by now, and I could have sworn her bedroom door had been left open and she hadn't been in it.

“She went with Vim to meet Link. Link knew her parents, they were friends,” Jelti said.

Oh...! I smiled at that. “That’s good,” I said.

“The human is with them too,” Sillti told me.

“Human...?” I wondered what she meant. What human...?

“The one Vim brought home. Supposedly she knows you?” Jelti said.

Wait...

Right. He had indeed brought someone home. I had thought it had been one of us. A bison, maybe, or someone else who had been displaced by those fires... but a human...?

“Who was she?” Sillti asked.

“I don’t know?” I answered.

“Oh...? So you didn’t know her? Did Vim make a mistake?” Jelti asked, surprised.

“I’m not sure, I’ve not met her yet,” I said.

“Then how do you know you don’t know her?” Sillti asked.

“She was asleep, and then I fell asleep shortly after so...” I said with a huff.

Sillti shook her head at me. “I swear you old ladies are hopeless. Between her and Oplar what will become of the Society?” Sillti wondered.

Frowning at her as Jelti chuckled softly, she nodded in agreement. “I still can’t believe Oplar never realized. I thought maybe she had been keeping quiet about it, as a joke or something silly, but for her to genuinely not have noticed Angie was one of us...? She’s even met the girl for crying out loud,” Jelti said with a sigh.

“She had...?” I asked. That was worrisome. I wanted to defend my friend but if she had...

“When she was a baby, I guess,” Jelti nodded.

"I don't think that's the same, Jelti. Babies are ugly so you'd never expect something like that to end up cute like Angie," Sillti said.

I laughed at her as I stepped over to the table. The little monarch squeaked at the two, and Jelti noticed it.

"Oh my. Took a liking to you did it? That's rare," Jelti said.

"Is it...? Seems friendly enough," I said as I reached up to pet it again.

It had showed up the other day. I couldn't admit aloud the reason it had shown up had likely been the heart, and not me, but it was the truth. Odds are it only liked me because I had been carrying around the heart this last week.

"It is cute..." Sillti mumbled while staring at it.

"It usually runs off if anyone tries to touch it," Jelti told her.

"Want to try?" I asked as I bent forward a little.

Sillti perked up and did indeed do so. She reached out to pet the creature on my shoulder, but before her hand reached it the thing had leapt from me and to the table. Then without stopping it jumped off the table and darted to a nearby window. One that had been left cracked open.

"Aww..." Sillti sadly watched the cute thing jump out the window, escaping.

"See? Told you. I've only got to pet it a few times in my life, and it's usually when I catch it sleeping somewhere," Jelti said.

"You'd think it'd be scared of her. Being a cat and all," Sillti said as she frowned.

"That's true..." Jelti frowned as well as she studied me.

"Maybe it's because I smell like Vim?" I wondered.

The two paused a moment, and then Jelti bellowed a laugh. "Don't joke like that!" she said happily.

I smiled at her and nodded. Yes. I had thought my joke had been good too.

"That is funny. I have noticed Vim has no smell, I had expected him to be stinking something fierce this morning when I saw him all tattered like he is," Sillti commented on the man I claimed as my husband.

“He had looked rough,” I admitted. Last night’s memories had been more about simply basking in his presence, but I too also remembered his appearance. He had looked dirty. Filthy. And his clothes had been horribly shabby and destroyed, looking as if he had just been burnt alive or something.

Odds are he had been. He had likely entered those fires.

“Vim’s never cared for his appearance. Supposedly back in the day he’d return all the time as filthy as a mutt who just found a nasty gutter. It got so bad for a while there he hadn’t been allowed to enter the Cathedral unless he took a bath first,” Jelti said.

I frowned. “He was that bad?” I asked.

“Well... I don’t know honestly. It might have just been a few times it happened and so stories spread because of it. For as long as I’ve known and seen him, although he sometimes shows up with tattered clothes and stuff it’s usually not too bad. It’s not like he intentionally tries to get nasty I think,” Jelti said as she thought about it.

“Hm...” I wondered if it was just his old age that made him so uncaring. It was undoubtedly mostly thanks to his lack of smell, bad or good, but you’d think he’d still at least try to be representable and clean.

“That being said!” Jelti then leaned forward, growing serious.

Nodding, I held her gaze as she glared at me. What was wrong?

“You sure you didn’t hear anything?” Jelti asked.

“Huh...?” I frowned at her. Heard what?

“Yes. I woke up a few times to pee, once I even snuck a glance. He had just been sitting next to the bed holding her hand in the dark,” Sillti answered.

My shoulders slumped as I realized what Jelti was being so serious about. There had been nothing wrong, at least not in the grand scheme of things.

“You can’t be serious,” I said with a smile.

“I am! You’ve been on edge this whole time, not sleeping a wink, and you just sleep half the day away after Vim’s back? How could I not expect something to have happened!” Jelti defended her interested loudly, and with a huge grin.

Sillti sighed as she leaned forward to rest her head on her hand against the table. “I like gossip, but I’m going to be rather honest watching them be so lovely just makes me jealous and my heart hurt,” she said softly.

Hearing that made my own heart hurt. I felt like I should apologize for some reason.

“I’m telling you Sillti, if you really want to find a new lover just stay here. You’re cute so you’d have your pick of men,” Jelti said with a smirk.

“Human men,” Sillti said stiffly.

Jelti shifted a little and her smirk softened, but she said nothing to counter Sillti’s statement.

Had she taken offense, I wonder? Being with a human herself.

“Has she met Link or Hands yet?” I asked.

Jelti giggled. “No. But I mean... well... hm... I guess I shouldn’t use my own preference here... I’ll take you to see them, if you’d like,” Jelti offered to Sillti.

Sillti seemed to like the idea for she smiled and nodded quickly. “Oh. Yes. Please.”

I was half tempted to join them. It’d be interesting to see and watch Sillti meet men as she looked for someone. Especially since I planned to help her, and many like her, do that very thing.

“Well... you never know I guess...” Jelti said with a sigh.

“Are they that bad?” Sillti asked me worriedly.

“Not sure. I think Jelti’s just biased though, remember who she’s married to,” I said.

“Says you...? You married Vim of all people,” Jelti said in defense.

“Don’t even start. I still can’t wrap my head around it,” Sillti said.

Jelti laughed. “Right! What’s she even see in him?” she happily joined Sillti in teasing me.

Shaking my head at them, I wondered why it was so strange to some people that I’d chosen Vim. Didn’t Sillti always complain that watching the two of us made her heart hurt? How could he be so bad if just seeing us together made her that melancholic?

“Marrying a god shouldn’t be possible anyway,” Sillti said with a sigh.

I shifted as Jelti also glanced at me with a look.

Right. She was one of those.

Speaking of that I'd not really asked Jelti or anyone else yet what they thought of the vote. I had meant to speak with Randle about it too, since he seemed to be someone important in the Society and well respected... but the few times I'd been able to talk to him we'd not spoken of it. Either we had spoken of Celine's letters, the heart, or just the world in general since he didn't like talking of secretive stuff out in the open.

I didn't want to ask about it in front of Siltti though. Even though she knew of it, and had even told me she thought it was stupid we would try to get rid of Vim, it still felt odd to do so.

It felt like it should be a private thing to talk about, for some reason... even though it was in fact supposed to be something openly discussed.

"Oh. Vim did ask me to let you know to go see Randle," Siltti then remembered.

"Hm...?"

"Trek," Jelti stated.

Oh.

Oh no...

"Already?" I asked.

I had not met Trek yet. Though I had known he was here... and I knew why he was here too.

Oplar had told me. He wanted Vim to perform his last request. To end his life.

I had honestly been hoping that it wouldn't happen, so had been trying to not bring it up... as if my lack of mentioning it would ensure it'd not happen, somehow.

"Don't cry, Renn. The man's old and tired. I've seen it before. Even if Vim didn't do it he'd just... wander away and disappear, never to be seen again. At least this way we know he ended his life peacefully and we can lay him to rest," Jelti said gently.

"I uh... don't want to talk about this either, honestly," Sillti whispered.

Jelti glanced at her, and I flinched.

Right. Rollo. Her husband.

"I uh... will go see Randle then..." I said as I stepped away from the table.

"Later Renn!" Jelti waved me goodbye, not bothered by Sillti's suddenly sullen look.

“Let me know how meeting the men go,” I said, hoping to brighten Sillti’s mood.

Jelti laughed. “I bet it’ll go horribly!” she said.

Sillti huffed at her as I opened the door and left the house. The two went to teasing each other, with Sillti bringing up Jelti’s lack of taste since she didn’t like men in the first place.

“Well... she’s not wrong...” I mumbled as I headed for the gate.

Though Jelti wasn’t too wrong either, honestly.

I myself would not have chosen Hands or Link. At all. For a multitude of reasons. Even if Vim hadn’t been in the picture.

But Sillti was not like me. Who’s to say she’d not take one look at either of them and simply fall in love?

After all it wasn’t like they weren’t good men. Dedicated to the Society. Trustworthy.

They were just... unique in their own way.

Closing the gate behind me, I hesitated a small moment.

Jelti struggled to open it. She could, I've seen her do it, but it was difficult for her. And Sillti couldn't do it at all.

Hopefully the two would be okay...

This gate was the only way in and out of the courtyard as far as I was aware. Unless one broke a wall, or the windows, of the Cathedral around it.

Breaking the windows would be easy, since there were so many of them and they were so big... but...

"I'll be sure to return quickly," I decided, just in case.

Heading left, I decided to check the underground offices first. Randle hadn't said anything out loud about it, but I've come to realize he had been keeping his distance from the Chronicler. That meant not using his other office, the one near hers, very often.

A part of me wanted to go find Vim instead, but I also knew not to bother little Angie if she was visiting a family friend. Plus I worried over intruding in another way... I had once scared Link. I worried of doing so again. I wanted to wait and ask Vim what I should do concerning those like Link who I'd bothered before and if I should give them distance or not.

It would break my heart to walk into the room and have Link panic or run off at the mere sight of me. Especially if only a few moments before he had been in a lovely conversation with Angie, talking about her parents.

There was a strange and humbling sadness knowing there were people here, and at many other locations, that I had to keep a distance with and be careful around. As to not scare or frighten them. It made me feel horrible, but at the same time reminded me just how different I was from others.

I couldn't imagine just outright running from someone at the mere sight of them. Or startling and weeping in terror from some small action or comment.

Not that I couldn't break over words. I've done it before. But they'd have to be very harsh words, and said by people I cherished deeply. It was hard to imagine an off-handed comment from someone I barely knew could send me to my knees... but... well...

"Maybe that's why. Maybe they do cherish everyone in the Society so are just extra sensitive," I wondered. It made sense, in a way. Though it wasn't the truth for me it could be the truth for them.

Granted maybe for me that wasn't true, was it?

Had I not been deeply affected by the words of that old woman? Grandmother Plumb, at the Bell Church? The one who had noticed my scent was the same as the people who had destroyed her home so many years ago?

That had deeply bothered me... but...

I'd still talk to her, if I could. If anything to hear the story. To hear the truth.

Walking down the hallway that led to Oplar's office, I noted her door was shut. I debated knocking on the door for a moment, but decided against it and instead opened the door to the catacombs beneath. I entered the dark stairwell, and closed the door behind me.

I'll leave Oplar alone. She was busy. I had talked to her last night, not long before everyone had gone to bed, and had heard she had a lot of letters to go through thanks to the vote. There had been dozens waiting for her and dozens more waiting to be delivered.

Maybe I should offer to help, somehow. Or would that be seen as interjecting myself where I didn't belong...? Being Vim's wife and all.

Still it'd be fun to help if I could. Maybe I'll knock on her door and see if she's in there after talking to Randle.

It didn't take long to reach Randle's office, now that I was more comfortable down here. I'd only come down here twice, but that was all it took to become familiar with such places anymore.

Finding the door open, I smiled and knocked on the door's frame to let the priest know I was here. He was sitting at his desk, focused on something he was writing.

“Ah. Renn. How are you?” he like usual was very welcoming as he smiled and greeted me.

“To be honest I’m good, but something tells me I won’t be, here in a moment,” I said.

Randle frowned. “Oh...? And here I thought with Vim’s return you’d be overjoyed. What happened?” he asked worriedly.

Was that genuine concern for my happiness, or was he just worried about Vim? Or well, not for Vim’s well-being but rather his mood. Odds are he knew full well how dangerous Vim was, being as old as he was. Maybe he was worried about someone putting Vim in a bad mood.

“I’ve been told about Trek,” I said.

Randle sat up a little, and then leaned back in his chair and seemed to grow softer... as if he had just relaxed. “I see,” he said softly.

I nodded as I entered the office, and smelled something a little off. Had one of our members been here recently...? I didn’t recognize the scent, but it was definitely not normal. Not a human, nor food or drink...

The priest chuckled at me. “Well I’ll be. You smelled Mapple just now didn’t you?” he asked.

“Mapple...?” I asked as I sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

“A member of ours who prefers the roads of the cold north over a warm home and the company of friends.”

Oh...? Wait... “I’ve heard of her. I believe Rapti mentioned her once,” I said.

Randle tilted his head. “Did she...? Interesting. Sure you didn’t mistake her name for another?” he asked.

“Another...?” I asked.

“Meriah, maybe?” he suggested.

Oh. I recognized that one too. The one that Vim had sent to find out more about Lomi’s home village’s destroyer. Although interested I shook my head. “No... I’m bad at many things but I’m rather proud of my memory. And I clearly remember Rapti saying Mapple. Vim had heard it too.”

Randle’s eyebrows met as his frown deepened. “I had not doubted you, Renn... but rather just surprised. Mapple and Rapti aren’t on the best of terms, you see... I can’t imagine Rapti speaking of her, not even as to complain or disparage her, she’s not the type to do so,” he said.

Oh...? “No... I’m very sure she had mentioned that she had visited her... she had nothing bad to say about her,” I said as I remembered that conversation.

The priest before me leaned forward onto his desk and clasped his hands as he studied me. "Your memory is that flawless, isn't it?" he asked in awe.

I nodded. "So I'm told."

"Very interesting. What a very unique trait to possess. It makes me want to have you copy books for me," he said.

"Copy books?" I asked.

He nodded and gestured to the shelves around us. "Books fade and wear over time... as you've likely no doubt noticed. So it's often we need to re-write them, copying them and making new ones as to preserve the knowledge within them. Your ability to remember such things flawlessly might be suited for such record keeping. If you ever wish to settle and wish to spend your time immersed in the written word simply let me know, I'll happily support you," he said.

I smiled at the offer. "Careful that actually sounds very interesting," I said.

"Oh? So there's a chance?" he asked.

"Maybe one day. Right now though the most important thing to me is to stay with Vim and travel with him," I said. To meet as many people as I could. To experience as much as I can.

To be with him.

I was itching to go find him this very moment, but I knew he'd show up any moment anyway so it was fine.

Randle gave me a warm smile as he nodded, as if genuinely pleased to hear such a thing.

Then... after a moment he sighed and nodded again, this time less happily. "But yes... Trek has indeed come to beg Vim for his last rites. A terrible, heartbreaking thing, but one we must face with not just steady backs but smiles as well," Randle said.

I gulped and nodded. "Yes. I agree. As much as it hurts, if it's truly what he desires then we have to support him as we can," I said.

"Hm. I figured you'd share Vim's sentiments, though to be honest I also somewhat expected otherwise... why is that?" Randle wondered as he thought about it.

"Usually they say opposites attract, right?" I suggested.

"Maybe. But Vim is different. He's so set in his ways I couldn't imagine him being comfortable with someone who wasn't like him. At least to a point. Yet... hm... maybe it's because you're a predator...? Yet that makes no sense, since predators are usually more inclined to support the Endling tradition..." Randle rambled a bit as he pondered why he had found me so strange.

“May I ask is it always Vim...? That does the deed?” I asked, not really willing to sit here and let him ponder why he found me strange.

“Hm...? Oh. Well... usually, yes. A few times it has been asked of others, though. Usually a family member. Parents, or such. Though it’s been many decades since anyone’s asked anyone but Vim,” Randle said.

I see... So it wasn’t just something Vim did.

“Where is he? Trek?” I asked.

“A few hallways down. He’s asked to be left alone. I can ask if he’d like to meet you, though, if you’d like,” Randle said.

I hesitated. I had wanted to talk to him. I had wanted to talk to someone ready, and wanting, to die. To... pick their brain a little, as Vim would say.

“I don’t know. Would it be rude to ask?” I asked.

“Slightly. But... it’s moments like this, at the end, where such rudeness is sometimes appreciated,” Randle said.

Hm... “Then yes. If you’d ask, please. Though you can tell him I’m not sure why I wish to talk to him, or what I’d say... to be honest I guess I just want to speak to him or else I’d regret it later, after,” I said.

Randle kindly smiled at me. “That, Renn, is exactly why it’s worth talking to him.”

Chapter 306 To be Distracted

Stepping away, I backed out of the room quietly and without being noticed.

Closing the door ever so slowly, I breathed a tiny sigh of relief upon having escaped. The room behind the thick wooden door was noisy. Noisy of laughter and what seemed to be several conversations going on at once.

It had been one thing to sit with Link and Angie, hearing them talk about her family and sharing stories, but it was another thing entirely for me to sit with a large group.

Oplar, Link, Angie, Jelti and Sillti were just too much for me. Far too much all at once. Especially since more members were to show up at any moment.

I stepped away from the door and headed down the hallway. Towards the kitchens where I’d left the human.

It’s been a few hours since I left her with the dog family. I had no doubt that Cat was fine. She had fully agreed to keep her saint and her home a secret, and had seemingly been keeping that secret without fault. But it was a good excuse for me to sneak away from the noisy group, at least.

Still... I paused a tiny moment to glance back at the door, and the noise filtering out from it.

Where was Renn, I wonder? When Jelti and Sillti had arrived I had expected Renn to step through the door behind them. The fact she hadn't kind of worried me. It wasn't like her to miss out on such a gathering as that. One so full of her friends and those of our kind.

Hopefully she wasn't sitting alone at the mansio... waiting for me.

I'll go check to be sure. After making sure Cat was fine.

Dressed in the light grays of one of the temple's workers, I was unbothered and unnoticed as I strode through the large hallways. They were a little more populated than normal, thanks to an upcoming sermon this afternoon. One of those larger once-a-month ones they did.

Hopefully Renn hasn't been getting awestruck and honey-eyed by them again...

Smiling at the idea, I found myself to be in a good mood.

Very strange for me. Especially considering where I was.

I thanked my mood on Angie and Renn. To find the young bison here, picked up by Renn and the rest... even if unknowingly, was very heartwarming. It was sad to hear Klamma and Baren were gone now, but it was far better for a child to keep on living in place of her parents. There was no parent who would choose the opposite... or well, no good parent at least.

I'd not asked Angie for the details yet, but I would need to eventually. It'd make her cry, likely, but... well... it was my job. I needed to verify for sure they were all gone now and not just hurt somewhere and needing help. I'll do it later tonight, after she spends the day with the rest of the members here. Maybe the time with friends and fellows would blunt the bitterness of me asking of their fates a little.

Other than the fires, I was glad to find no one else had been lost or needed immediate help. In fact, with Crane having resurfaced, by all counts the Society was doing well. Angie's family being lost, Trek wanting to end his life, and this vote against me had all been the only bad news waiting for me here.

Even Lumen was going well, it seemed.

By all counts it was a good season. As good as we could get anymore, really... even if the vote was more dire than I had expected.

The vote was worse than I had thought. I still needed to talk to everyone about it, having only heard the finer details from Randle but what I'd heard so far made me sick to my stomach.

Crane and Rapti's actions, their doubts and questions, had given birth to the idea that I was no longer needed.

They weren't outright calling for my banishment, and really not even the removal of me being the protector... but rather to place new rules and expectations upon me.

My failures were not being called out as to punish me, but rather to imply that a new method of protection was needed.

They basically wanted to give each location the right to accept my help or not, and allow them to pre-set how I deal with certain locations and what methods I used to do so. To make it so that the only places I was allowed to assist, in any form, were the ones who allowed it to happen. And only by doing so in the method they wished. No matter the consequence.

In a certain form that was how the Society already functioned. There were after all several locations, like the Summit we had just gone to, that were structured in such a way... but there was a hidden poison in their demands. One that had not existed out in the open, until now.

Doubt.

Pure and simple doubt. Doubt over me. Who I was. What I was.

A part of their demand of creating new rules concerning my duties... was to hear the truth. For me to tell them what I was, in full.

They phrased it in a way that it made no sense for anyone to expect certain results from me without knowing what I was and wasn't capable of.

“An honest request,” I mumbled regretfully.

It was honestly not something to be angry over. They had the right to know the man who was protecting them. They had a right to know his birth, his past, and especially his convictions. One needed to know such things as to entrust one’s life to someone. Even if their true purpose to finding out was nefarious in nature.

Whether anyone wanted to admit it or not didn’t matter... but this was all the result of not just my own failures but more-so my own secrets.

Everyone who had known more about me, who had trusted me, that had relieved and calmed everyone else down since they had been trusted and respected... were gone.

Celine was gone. Rungle was gone. Lawrence’s brother was gone. Mordo’s wife, Nann’s husband, Abel’s father... Even those who still lived, like Nebl or Berri, had become reclusive and were no longer as involved in the Society. So their voices were not as heard, or known. Even if they emerged to try and settle the Societies fears, it’d have little effect. Most of the Society didn’t even know who they were anymore. They didn’t know what they had done, how they had done it, or how the Society only existed today thanks to their sacrifices.

Everyone who I had called friends were either dead or retired... so this result was not only to be expected but one that was a long time coming.

But what was I going to do about it...?

What could I do about it?

The vote was going to happen. No matter what. It was destined now. The whole of the Society would know of it within the year. Hundreds if not thousands of people will show up, or send their thoughts and votes via letters over the next two years. Especially since they were going to allow the humans to vote on it too. I would have praised them for such a thing, but the only reason they were allowing it was because they hoped the humans would overwhelmingly vote against me.

And I was going to do nothing but sit back and let it happen.

The world became noisy as I neared the kitchens, and I allowed the hubbub to distract me from my thoughts. I stepped into the large kitchens, passing through people hard at work. They were preparing for tonight's sermon, since they'd then hand out food and alms afterward.

I smelled stew and freshly baked bread. I debated grabbing a few pieces for Renn, but decided against it as I walked past rows of tables stacked with loafs of bread.

Entering the main kitchens, I quickly found Henrietta. The small woman was standing next to Cat and Fizz, and all three of them were busy kneading dough.

The three were talking lightly, with smiles and calmness, and it made me want to not disturb them. They looked like they were having fun.

"Where's John?" I asked as I stepped up behind the three.

A few of the human workers nearby glanced at me, but returned to their work shortly after. Henrietta spun around, holding a thick chunk of dough in her hands, as she gave me a huge grin. "Vim!"

I smiled in greeting and hoped she didn't try to hug me. She was covered in flour and dough.

"Daddy's in the next kitchen!" Fizz told me from over her shoulder. Unlike her mother she kept focused and continued kneading.

"Hm," I nodded and glanced at the human standing next to Fizz. Cat's unruly hair was tied into a tight bun behind her head, and she was smiling unsurely at me... or rather Henrietta.

"Are you hungry, Vim?" Henrietta asked as she lifted the dough in her hands, as if to offer it to me.

"Not yet," I said.

Henrietta wasn't fazed. "Thirsty?" she asked and stepped closer.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a portly woman pause in her kneading to look at us. She had a crazy look of shock on her face, and I did my best to ignore her.

"Not really. The rest are all getting together to have dinner together, will you be going?" I asked her.

“Are you going?” Henrietta asked.

“We’re going!” Fizz said, uncaring of what her mother had just asked.

“Good. Let your dad know too, don’t let him work the night away and forget,” I told the girl.

“He does that sometimes!” Fizz said with a laugh.

I smiled at her and glanced at Cat. “Would you like to go find Renn with me, Cat?” I asked her.

The human spun, almost as violently as Henrietta had just done earlier. “Really! Yes!” Cat shouted in excitement.

The whole kitchen went quiet for a few heartbeats, and I kept my smile even and ignorant of her outburst’s reaction. Cat noticed, glanced around, and went red in the face as she turned back around to try and return to her kneading.

“Vim. Snacks...?” Henrietta said softly in the awkward silence, breaking it.

I sighed at the two of them as Fizz giggled. “She’s been looking forward to meeting Renn. Won’t shut up about her,” Fizz told me, also ignoring her mother.

I’m sure. She’d been that way with me too along the way here yesterday. Once she realized my Renn was the same one from her legends, her Renn from her village’s legends she had become almost a different person. A fanatic, almost.

It worried me, but I was sure it’d be fine. I met humans like her sometimes. Those who worshiped us. Though I wasn’t sure yet if Cat’s fascination with Renn was faith or simple awe and excitement.

“Clean up and let’s go,” I told the human.

“Sure you don’t want snacks, Vim?” Henrietta asked again, as some of the dough in her hands dripped down to the floor. It fell from its own weight, since she had been rolling it before spinning around.

“Bring some to the dinner later, I’ll try one then,” I told her, feeling bad for her.

Henrietta’s eyes began to gleam as she nodded quickly. “Okay! Sure!” she said happily.

Fizz sighed as Cat hurried to take off the apron she wore. She wiped her hands and arms with it, and stepped away to put it on a nearby table. One with other aprons and napkins upon it.

“Thanks for watching her for me,” I said to the dogs.

“She’s fine. I feel sorry for Renn though, I think she’s like my mom,” Fizz said with a glance at her mother who was smiling up at me with a flushed face.

“Hopefully not...” I mumbled as I smiled to Henrietta, who smiled back at me. As if she hadn’t even realized we had been talking about her. Likely hadn’t.

I had honestly thought that with Renn going around telling everyone she was my wife Henrietta and those like her would have settled down... but somehow it looked as if it had only made her worse.

Maybe I should kiss Renn in front of everyone later. Would that work...?

“Ready!” Cat returned, excitedly. She still had stains of flour and dough upon her, particularly on her cheek, but I wasn’t going to bother her over it.

Nodding, I looked back at Fizz and Henrietta. “Thanks again. Remember, don’t be late. They’re already all getting together,” I told them.

I didn’t need to tell them where everyone was. There were only a few places that they all gathered here in the Cathedral, at least in larger groups. It wasn’t like how it used to be, where the whole Cathedral was for non-humans. It was now a place of humans, which my people simply... existed within.

It was their home, yet wasn’t all the same.

"I'll make sure we leave soon!" Fizz said, taking charge.

Nodding again I stepped away, and led Cat out of the kitchens.

"See you later Vim! I'll bring treats!" Henrietta shouted at me as we left.

Waving gently at them, I ignored the stares from the other soup-kitchen workers. They were heavy and judgmental.

I'll not return to the kitchens for a while...

"Uh... I think she loves you, Vim," Cat whispered as we left the kitchens.

"She does. Weird isn't it?" I said.

"Very. She's married and has a kid. And this is a church. And you're married too!" Cat spoke loudly and she sounded like she was having fun.

"Yes. Very annoying," I agreed.

“You sound bored,” she said with a giggle.

“She’s been like that for longer than I can remember, so yes it has become boring,” I said with a sigh. And discomforting. She should at least not act like that in front of her husband and daughter. It made me feel like some kind of bastard, even though I didn’t reciprocate or support her misconceptions.

“Oh...?” Cat hummed at that, and I wondered if she had any idea how much time I was speaking of.

It was clear that Cat had started to put one and two together... especially since this morning she had sat and had breakfast with Jelti, Oplar, Angie and Sillti. They had spoken a bit, and had mentioned offhandedly a few things that would have normally made a human startle and panic... yet Cat had simply smiled through it all, unbothered.

It helped that although a member of a similar faith as the one here, she was still in the end a type of pagan. A member of a cult. One who lived amongst a genuine saint. One with divine powers. Her witnessing literal miracles helped in her making sense and not being startled or scared over us non-humans, I’m sure.

“This place is pretty nice, by the way,” Cat said as she stepped a little closer, since we were being approached by a group of robed sisters.

“In some ways, yes,” I agreed.

She hummed as we walked past the group of sisters. They said nothing to us, and kept their heads low. They were likely preparing to pray at the Steeple.

“I’d like to sit and listen to their sermon. Could I?” Cat asked.

“You can. It shouldn’t be too different than yours,” I said. Renn would probably enjoy going with her.

“Probably, but I’d like to hear it anyway. But... I’d like to meet Rennalee too... Mhm...” Cat groaned as she debated her inner desires.

Hmph. Though I couldn’t believe someone would actually place a sermon over meeting Renn... Renn would probably relate to her if she heard such a thing. It made me shake my head.

“Did anyone bother you while you were Fizz and the rest?” I asked.

“Huh...? Bother how?” she asked.

“Just... anyone? Did anyone come up to ask questions?” I asked.

“Oh. Yes, actually. Some woman. Fizz and Henrietta told her to not bother us while we cooked and shoed her away,” Cat said.

“Did you catch her name...?” I asked. A woman...?

Cat shook her head. “She wore the robes here though. And I think she was one of your people, based off how they acted,” Cat said.

Robes...? And my people...?

It wouldn't have been Renn. Even if Renn wore the robes here, there was no way Henrietta and Fizz would have shooed Renn away like that. And...

Jelti, maybe. If not Jelti then it had to have been one of the Chronicler's people.

Something told me it wasn't Jelti. Jelti and Henrietta got along well.

I had asked the dogs to keep everyone away from her for me, but they wouldn't have been abrupt and rude about it. Not like that. Not to their friend.

“Vim,” Cat drew closer and whispered.

“Hm...?” I slowed a bit to look at her.

“Renn... your wife... how should I address her?” she asked quietly.

“Address...?” I paused a moment and frowned at the human. “Oh... Just call her Renn, Cat. She was your ancestor’s friend, but she wasn’t and isn’t anything more than a normal person,” I said.

“Somehow I doubt that, Vim...” Cat mumbled.

I smiled at her. “She’s special in her own ways... and special to me... but she really is just a normal woman. You’ll see. Just... treat her normally. Or rather, treat her like a friend, since that’s what you are to her,” I said.

Cat studied me for a moment and then took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. I’ll try,” she said.

“Good. Also... If you steal her from me I’ll slaughter you and your village,” I warned her.

Turning forward, I returned to walking. Cat remained behind me, stunned... but eventually groaned and hurried to follow.

She giggled after catching up to me, telling me she had thought I had been joking.

Which was likely for the better, really.

“You said that so seriously...!” Cat said after her moment of giggling.

Yes. I had.

We rounded a corner, and I slowed upon noticing Hands.

Hands grew a huge smile at the sight of me and hurried towards us.

“Oh my! Vim! Returned? When? How've you been?” Hands spoke quickly, rambling his questions as he hurried over to me.

I smiled at the man as he clapped happily, as if to praise me for returning home safely. “Returned last night. Though not sure how long I’ll be here this time, I have something that needs to be dealt with in the north,” I said.

“Ah. Yes. The whole world, all corners, are troubled aren’t they? Such a pity,” Hands said with a sigh as he nodded.

“Heading to the get-together?” I asked.

“Indeed! Yet I see that you are not...? Assistance? Do you need some?” Hands asked, and offered, as he glanced to the woman next to me.

Like his father Hands was always willing to help in any way. Even at the cost of fun and socializing. It made it hard for me to hate him when he did stuff like that.

“No. Thank you though. I’m off to find Renn, they’re friends you see,” I said with a gesture to Cat.

Cat had been about to introduce herself but Hands just clapped quickly again and nodded. “Oh my! Precious things, aren’t they? Yes. To be treasured and enjoyed while they can. Time is not a waste when spent in such a way, right?” Hands said with a grin to the human woman.

She shifted a little and nodded, and I could tell she wasn’t sure now what to say. His strange personality and quick speaking was likely too much for her. Too odd.

Still he was not wrong, even if he had said it oddly. Spending time with friends, especially the human and short-lived ones, was a very good use of a resource we could never attain again.

He had basically said I should hurry to take her to Renn, since Cat didn’t have long left to live.

“Renn. Rennalee. You married her, yes?” Hands then turned his attention to me, as if forgetting all about Cat’s existence.

“Yes,” I said gently. So he had heard already?

Hands hummed at me. “A mercy?” he asked softly.

Ah...

I gulped and smiled at him. “I hope not,” I answered him truthfully.

Hands, like his father had been, was too smart for his own good. They had been blessed with the kind of brains that allowed them to comprehend things that others couldn't. To comprehend things that most couldn't even fathom. This was why I had hated his father, though. The way he had noticed things that bothered me. The way he had just outright said stuff I didn't even allow my own heart to acknowledge. Especially since I knew deep down neither of them ever meant any ill-will behind their statements.

They kind of reminded me of my parents, somehow.

Hands hummed softly as he lowered his hands, a rarity for him. They hung at his sides for a moment as he shifted ever so slightly. “Ceremony?” he asked.

“Not yet,” I answered as my eye twitched.

“Shall I prepare one?” Hands asked, growing excited.

“Not yet. I’ll be busy for a time,” I said.

He frowned but nodded understandingly.

“Have you seen her?” I asked him.

“Rennalee? Yes. She is with Randle and Mapple, in his office,” Hands said with a gesture behind him... telling me that was where he had just come from.

“Mapple...” I put one and two together as I nodded. So she had been the one to bother Cat and the rest, then. She didn’t get along with Henrietta and had likely bothered them as to inspect Cat. To see if she was a threat to the church, or the Society.

And when the dogs had barked her away, she had gone to find Renn to get answers from her instead. Directly.

“Careful Vim,” Hands warned me gently.

I blinked and stood up a little straighter, and realized I had likely just showed my emotions on my face.

“Right... Sorry. Thank you. I’ll go save my wife then, and will see you later Hands, at the get together,” I said to the raccoon.

He nodded quickly. “Yes...! Yes, very good! Farewell, friend of Renn, may your time not linger!” Hands bid farewell as he hurried past, heading towards the meeting room everyone else was in.

Cat waved him goodbye as she watched him hurry away, and then she smirked at me. “Time not linger?” she asked me.

“He’s saying your time is precious and you shouldn’t waste it,” I translated for her as I stepped forward, to head for Randle’s office.

It was the one up here, and not down below. Hands would have pointed downward had it been the other one. So it was just a few hallways away.

“Huh... So he was being nice?” Cat asked as she followed by my side.

“Yes. In his own way,” I said.

“Did you just recently marry Rennalee?” Cat then asked.

“Basically, yes.”

“Huh...” Cat hummed at that, and I wondered how it had taken her this long to realize it. Surely all the others had mentioned such things by now? It seemed to be something most of them wouldn’t shut up about.

Though that was an interesting thought, wasn't it? How long had it been since Renn and I had met?

We'd met during the beginning of winter in the north. Spent a season or so traveling south, and then east through Lumen... We had waited at the Nebl's place for the passes to thaw a little, and then spent the rainy season in Lumen and then summer in the south. Yet along the way back north we had ran into the late summer and early autumn storms, those monsoons. Then the rainy season again, and now it was growing colder. The winter was back upon us.

This would be our second winter together then... wouldn't it? Right...? If one went ahead and included the winter we had met during?

Why did it feel like I'd known her longer than that? It usually took me a couple years to fully circle my northern and southern routes, so the timeline synced up rather well. I had spent a tad too long in Lumen compared to normal, thanks to what had happened, but that too also happened occasionally. Same with the few stops along the way during our route, like the quarantine checkpoint at the City of Stone, and the few days we had lingered in that one small village while Renn recovered from her sickness. They had been unnatural stops for me, but nothing more than normal. Every circuit I did through the Society had me always going to and fro, doing things here and there that took time out of simple necessity.

I'll need to ask Renn. She'd likely know exactly how long we'd been together, or at least known each other. Her memory would find the answer swiftly.

But that was interesting. That meant it had only taken a year or so for us to form a relationship. For me to have fallen for her. Though I doubted it had took that long. Even from the beginning I had noticed my eyes drawn to her, even though I had misunderstood as to the why.

Such a short time to grow so close. Especially for me. But it was honestly not a surprise. Throughout my long life, those I had called friends were always those who proved themselves to me quickly. Even if it took decades or centuries for me to truly learn about them, I usually began to trust them from one of our first meetings. I valued those who proved themselves honorable, and trustworthy. Like Lilly, or Lawrence. People who had proved from our first meeting that we had similar values, or at least similar enough beliefs in how the world functioned and how we should exist within it.

Two years...

It had to be at least two years. Eventful years, yes, full of drama and adventure... but somehow still normal and without much fuss.

Still...

Ceremony...? It was typical of Hands to ask about it. He was an odd man, but he actually really enjoyed such festivities. He particularly enjoyed setting them up, as if it was a game to him. I wonder if he had helped Jelti with her wedding. I'll need to make sure to congratulate her properly before we left again.

As we walked I pondered that for a moment. Although it had made my eye twitch to hear about such a foolish thing... Hands wasn't wrong.

Renn would like such a thing. I bet she'd weep happily during such a festivity. Especially if we invited all of her friends.

But... just how would I do such a thing? What would the Society think if I allowed it? What issues would it cause? What drama would it give birth to?

I shouldn't allow it. Especially right now during this vote. No matter how simple, how quick, we did it... all it would do was give Crane and the rest of the dissenters more ammunition against me. To hold a wedding, or any kind of ceremony, right now while they were claiming I did not properly tend to their needs would just be the final nail in the coffin for my position.

So I shouldn't allow it to happen. I should make it clear to Renn that something like a wedding wasn't feasible. At least not right now.

But... How was I going to be cruel enough to deny Renn such a simple pleasure?

"Vim...?" Cat's voice broke through my thoughts, and I realized I was standing in front of a closed door.

Randle's office. I could hear voices beyond the door, within. Renn's was one of them. She didn't sound too upset.

Cat shifted next to me, unsettled. I was likely being very odd to her, but she seemed used to it already. Our trip here had me getting lost in thought on many occasions, so she likely just thought I was weird and it was normal to her now.

“Not everyone will go. I expect the dogs to not show up,” Mapple said with her stiff tone. They must be talking about the little get-together going on.

Surprisingly for her, they would show up.

“Everything okay?” Cat asked quietly.

No. There were lots of problems. Ones I needed to face, but didn’t want to.

But that was my life. Since I was too strong for actual enemies, the world sent me problems I couldn’t face with my strength. They focused more on my heart, which was strangely feeble at the moment. When had I become so weak? I used to pride myself in being strong enough to endure what broke everyone else, physical and emotional. Yet here I was wavering just because I couldn’t stomach denying Renn something as silly as a wedding.

It was a foolish worry, especially since there was so much more to worry about. Things far more important, and far more dire. There were people in danger. People doubting me. The Society was fracturing again, and instead of worrying about it I was instead wondering what material I should use to make her rings out of.

“Want me to open it?” Cat asked gently.

Taking a small breath, I shook my head as I reached out to open the door.

Before I could Renn opened it, greeting me with a lovely smile that broke my heart... because it made me instantly forget about the rest of the Society upon the sight of it.

Chapter 307 A Party Held Distantly

I had no words to describe what I was feeling.

My heart was frantic. Being pulled every which way and I wasn't sure which to confront first.

The heart and letter Celine had left for me?

Trek? That quiet man's humble request?

Angie and the strange threat that had destroyed her home and was possibly assaulting the Society?

Should I focus on those alive, those I called friends, instead of the future and the past? Should I spend time with those who I hadn't seen in years and may not get to see again for years more?

Maybe I should lure Vim away, to spend some quiet time with him. It's been almost two months since I'd seen him, and I had so many questions. So many things I wanted to say to him. He was here, not far from me, and yet I felt as if there was a terrible distance. One I wanted to eliminate as fast as possible.

Or... should I focus on the human girl, Cat? The long descendant of my very special friend and teacher, Witch? Someone who was, to me, a miracle.

To think I used to sit and count the moments. Hating them as they came and went without purpose or reason. I used to beg them to hurry. To come and go.

Yet now they were fleeting and I couldn't hold onto them long enough. They were now so very precious.

Hopefully everyone else would forgive me for picking the one who had the fewest of such moments amongst us.

"There's a little over two hundred of us now. Though we don't all live in the same village... we're kind of spread around the area, now, for one reason or another. But the main village, near the lakes, is still strong! Not only is Elaine there, so too are many more. Almost ninety of us, I think," Cat happily told me all about her home, a home I used to call home too... so long ago.

I nodded happily, not afraid to let my eyes well with tears. "I remember those lakes," I said.

Cat grinned happily, blushing a little as she nodded. She looked drunk, and her speech was starting to slur a tad. But who could fault her? She wasn't just drunk on me and the moment, considering she was now on her third cup of liquor.

We were sitting alone at a smaller table, away from most of the rest. As far as I was aware nearly everyone was here, that was a part of the Society. Even Trek, the man who wished to die, was here. Though he too sat alone, over in a corner while he drank quietly.

The only member who wasn't here, as far as I was aware, was the Chronicler. And although I wasn't entirely sure as to the reason why, I knew it was likely on purpose and not because she was late. We'd all been here for hours after all, and it was now late in the night. A few people were even talking about leaving, saying their goodbyes for now to those they had been spending time with.

Little Fizz was one of them. She hurried over to our corner of the room, and I turned a little to greet the young girl. She was just as I remembered her on my last visit, which was a little concerning. Would she remain tiny like this for very long?

"I'm going to bed!" she proudly declared to me and Cat as she slapped the table we sat at.

"Good! Get your beauty rest!" Cat shouted back.

Fizz laughed at her and pointed. "She's drunk!" she said, as if it was hilarious that a human could get drunk.

"Am not!" Cat defended herself, but with enough of a slur in the voice that anyone who heard her knew the truth.

"Goodnight Fizz. Thank you for earlier," I said.

"Earlier...?" Fizz turned to me, frowned, and then she realized what I was talking about as she glanced at the human woman who was now taking another drink. She nodded as she understood my meaning, and

gave me a smile. "It's all good! If Vim makes you leave early, please come let me know so I can say goodbye," she said.

I smiled warmly at the young girl and nodded. "I'll make sure to do so," I said.

Fizz gave me a grin and then turned away, hurrying off to say goodnight to the next person. She headed over to Oplar, and I wondered if she was going to say goodnight to everyone.

She and Angie had seemingly tried to become friends, but it seemed it hadn't gone well. I wasn't sure the reason as to why, but I'd have ask Link and Oplar later. They had been nearby when they met, whereas I hadn't been. I had been one of the last to arrive here to the party, though not on purpose.

"I'm not drunk, you know? Really," Cat defended herself again as she placed her cup down onto the table, and sniffed.

Was she about to cry...?

"Stupid girl. Just because her mom's so pretty," Cat mumbled as she turned to glare at Fizz.

Oh...? I mean... Henrietta was pretty, but why did that annoy Cat?

I smiled at her, and knew better than to think her comments were anything but her drunken ramblings.

Maybe it was time I took her back to the house too. If she was this bad already.

“You’re pretty too, Renn. Don’t you worry. You got nothing to worry about!” Cat then said to me, pointing at me as she did.

“Uh... okay?” I nodded at her, and wasn’t sure what she meant once again.

Wait...

I frowned as I realized she had connected Henrietta and me, and then our's looks, all at once in her drunken stupor.

Right... she had spent time with the dog family, for most of the day. While Vim did whatever he had to do before this party she had helped out in the kitchens alongside the dog family.

Maybe Henrietta had said something... concerning Vim and me...

“Really. You don’t need to worry. He loves you so much he hurt me, you know? Broke my hip and everything...!” Cat rambled on, and I couldn’t help but smirk at her.

Yes. She had told me already all about their trip here. How Vim had killed her friends. How he had helped bury them, and how sad he had looked while he had done so. And about how she had teased him, and flirted with him, or at least tried to. She had begged for forgiveness, since as she claimed it wasn't her fault. She hadn't known he was mine until later on, so it wasn't fair to blame her for trying to steal him from me.

I wasn't sure how Vim dislocating her hip on accident was a form of flirting, but to her it had been so. I'll need to ask Vim later if he saw it as something similar too.

Earlier before coming to the party she had pulled me aside to tell me about the saint who lived amongst them. The one who had sent her on a quest, and why she had met Vim while doing so. I was glad she comprehended how important keeping such a thing a secret was, but it also interested me how she had made it very clear that Vim had wanted her to keep it a secret too.

She found it lovely that the man I had picked was the type to go against his supposed loyalties, the Society, as to protect and keep safe my own desires and important people.

I found it lovely too.

"Why not finish that last bit, Cat? Then I'll take you to bed," I suggested as I pushed her cup closer to her. There was a few drinks left.

"What...? No. You go to his bed, not mine," she mumbled as she picked the cup up, obediently.

I giggled at her and nodded. Yes. It seemed she was very aware that Vim and I were married... and as such, being special as I was to her, it was very important that he and I didn't break any supposed rules that married people obeyed and followed.

It was funny, honestly. I'd actually not have any problem sleeping with Cat. She was basically a daughter of my friend... even if she didn't look like Witch at all. So to me it'd be like sleeping with family. As I'd slept with the kids and Nory, or one of the other society members. Not only would I be happy with it, I knew Vim would understand.

Yet it seemed if I tried such a thing Cat would freak out. Since to her it was wrong... somehow.

As Cat drank from her cup I glanced around again. I found that a few people were leaving the room, alongside Fizz and her family. Hands was joining them, as was Oplar. Several others, like Randle and Mapple, were also tidying up the table they had been sitting at as to leave.

Hm... it seemed the party was over.

It was a little sad, honestly. I had arrived late, and although hadn't spent the whole party with Cat I had honestly not spent as much time with everyone else as I had wanted to.

But it wasn't entirely my fault. A couple of the groups had become rather small, and their conversations had wandered into territories I had not wanted to be a part of. Hands and the dog family, for instance, had gone into full blown diatribes about some new kitchen that they planned to build. The conversation had not only been something I had found a little boring, they had been vocal about how they planned to not let the Chronicler or her people work on it. It had felt more like a personal speech against things they didn't like than anything else.

Oplar and Link, with Angie and Sillti listening intently, had rambled on all night about the plague and the wars. It had been interesting to a point, but hearing about cities collapsing and militaries forming wasn't just boring it was scary and sad... so I had stopped listening and participating in those conversations as well.

Then of course you had Randle and the rest of his flock. They had been the more quiet table of the room, other than Trek's of course, but that very quietness had been the problem. The air around their table had felt stiff and cold... as if they hadn't wanted to be here in the first place. Oddly it had seemed like their tense atmosphere wasn't because of the surrounding tables and the conversations at them, but rather instead between themselves.

I hadn't spent very much time with Mapple and Randle, but it had seemed like there was an issue between them. Maybe it was related to whatever grievances Randle was having with the Chronicler.

Jelti and Vim had bounced around all the tables, and had been the ones to interject and change topics every so often. Without them I bet several members would have gone the whole night without talking to certain other people. Right now Jelti was saying goodbye to Link, and Vim was walking over to Trek.

I was very tempted to get up and hurry over and join him. But I knew that this might be the first time Vim got a moment alone with Trek since returning... so I kept my butt firmly in my seat.

"Renn...!" Cat drew my attention as she scooted closer to the table, and reached over to me. A strangely dry hand grabbed my arm as she groaned at me.

"You okay...?" I asked. She looked in pain.

“No. I need to pee.”

I laughed at her and nodded.

She really was Witch’s daughter! Only they could be so brazen!

Only they could latch onto me for support without any hesitation.

Standing up I went to grabbing the daughter, or rather descendant, of my friend and teacher. I helped her to her feet, and had her wrap an arm around my shoulder as to keep her from falling over.

“Thanks,” Cat said as I headed for a door in the corner. This large meeting room had not only bathrooms, but a bedroom too... though I wasn’t sure who would ever use it, or why.

I took Cat to the restroom, helped her wobble into it, and then went to standing just outside door to wait for her.

While waiting I waved goodbye and goodnight to Link, Randle and the rest. They all left without saying much... and eventually it was just me, Cat, Vim and Trek.

Thanks to the world suddenly getting very quiet, I was now able to hear the soft whispers from the other side of the room. From the corner where the dead man sat.

Although my ears kept pointing their way, to try and hear better, I did my best to ignore the whispers I was hearing.

Those words were personal. They didn't belong in my ears.

Though...

Studying the two, I couldn't help but smile at the way Vim leaned forward and said something with his silly smirk. Whatever he had said made Trek smile too, and then chuckle lightly.

How nice.

The door to the restroom opened, and Cat groaned as she walked out.

"Okay. I'm done," Cat moaned.

I noted the way she had said that. She hadn't just meant she was done with the restroom, she meant in general.

“Want to go to bed?” I asked.

She nodded stiffly.

Right. Yes. She was done for the night, ready to call it a day. She looked almost sick, somehow.

Although she looked sick and wobbled, she didn't need my help as she stepped away. I gestured to the door, to which she nodded with a moan and went to follow me out of it.

I didn't bother Trek or Vim as we left, since they seemed to be in a deep conversation. But as we left the room... I paused a moment and wondered if maybe I should go say goodbye and goodnight to Trek.

I had no idea when Vim would do the deed, after all. What if he did it now? Tonight?

I gulped, but Cat latched onto me. “My head hurts!” she complained as she clung to my arm.

Smiling at her, I decided to just... let Trek and Vim be. Even if I never saw him again, I wasn't sure if it mattered. Not that I wanted him to die... but... well...

He had not wanted to meet me. Randle had asked, and he had said no.

End of story.

Even if it hurt.

“Not sure what I’d even say to him anyway,” I whispered as I helped guide and half-carry Cat back to where we were sleeping.

“Say to whom?”

I paused and glanced to my left, and then downward.

Angie.

“Hey Angie,” I said. I had thought she had left earlier. Hopefully she hadn’t been in that room this whole time, and I’d just not noticed. The girl was tiny, but usually I was far more perceptive.

“Are you going back to the house?” she asked.

I nodded to her.

“Good. Let’s go,” she said with a nod.

Frowning at her, I nodded and glanced around.

We were alone in the hallway. No one else was around.

Had they all left her here? What about Sillti?

“Link and Sillti like each other, I didn’t want to go back to his place with her. That’s gross,” Angie said with a sigh.

“What!” I startled, and Cat groaned in pain since I had moved so violently.

“Renn...” Cat whimpered and I laughed a little.

“Sorry,” I apologized to her and turned to look at the young bison. “You mean it? Link and Sillti?” I asked.

Angie frowned up at me as she nodded. “Yes. Didn’t you notice? They were flirting the whole night,” she said.

Oh my...! I hadn't noticed! At all! All I had noticed and heard was Oplar and Link's ramblings about the wars and stuff...

"That's adorable," I said happily. It was too bad I hadn't noticed or got to witness any of it. How had they flirted? Link was a giant of a man, and so timid... I wonder how he had spoken and acted around her. I bet it had been cute.

"More like gross. He's a lizard," Angie said.

Ah... he was. "More grossed out over that than his size?" I asked.

"Yeah...?" Angie nodded as if it was obvious.

Hm. Interesting.

Wait... "How old are you, Angie?" I asked.

"Old enough to know not to intrude on them... but young enough that they should have at least made sure I was able to get back home," Angie said with a huff as she crossed her arms.

Giggling at her I nodded. "Right...! Oh... does that mean you can't open the gate?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. I can't."

Huh... That was odd. I had been told that a bison was a large and stocky animal. Strong and stout.

Though I suppose she is tiny still... though Fizz wasn't much bigger, and she was perfectly capable of opening and closing that gate...

"Your friend looks like she's going to throw up," Angie warned.

"Yes. I feel her muscles tightening, so let's hurry," I said as I picked up the pace.

Luckily we weren't far from the house. A few hallways, a couple corners, and then through the gate we were.

I opened and closed the front gate, and Angie opened the front door for me as I carried Cat into the house.

"Mind grabbing a bucket for her, Angie?" I asked as I carried Cat upstairs. My human friend was now barely walking on her own feet.

“Mhm.”

Going to the far room, the one that had multiple beds in it, I laid Cat down in one of them. I wasn't sure which she had slept in last night, since they had all been freshly made, but I suppose it didn't matter.

Once we had put her to bed, with a bucket and a pitcher of water for support, Angie and I left the poor girl to sleep off her drunkenness.

“You seem fine,” I noted as Angie and I headed downstairs. She had drunk as much as everyone else had.

Though not the exact same liquor, she had still drunk alcohol all the same. It bothered me for some reason, but it seemed completely normal... and I knew that Angie even if what we considered young wasn't actually as young as she appeared. Plus she really did seem perfectly fine.

“I'm not human,” Angie stated.

Right...

I'd say the same about myself, but I hadn't drunk anything other than the berry smoothies Vim had gotten for me.

“Should... I go clean up after everyone, you think?” I asked Angie as I thought about it. Although we hadn’t made much of a mess, I could remember the tables in that room. They had been littered with plates and cups.

“No? Jelti said her people will clean it up later. I asked,” Angie said as she went for the kitchen.

Hm...

Standing near the fireplace and table, I wondered if I should light it or not. It was a little chilly, since winter was drawing close, but was it cold enough for a fire just yet?

Would Cat need a fire...? She was human... I’d hate for the poor girl to get sick. Thanks to this house being in an open courtyard it did sometimes get a little chilly during the night.

“Renn?” Angie called out for me, so I turned and hurried down the hallway.

Finding her in the bathroom, where the bath was, I frowned at her. She was kneeling on the ground, in front of the cubby where you would make a fire to warm the water in the tub. She had gathered some wood together, but was struggling with lighting it, it seemed.

Stepping into the bathroom, I kneeled down to help her. Instead of just lighting it for her, I made sure to show her how to properly use the fire starter stick. It was an elongated stick, that when struck against a type of flint rock caused sparks. This one though only really worked when you struck it from an angle, one that was almost as if hitting it from upside down. It was a little deceiving in purpose.

“Thank you,” Angie said as the fire grew in strength and she went to adding the larger logs to the kindling.

“I’ll help you gather water,” I said as I stood... and then realized something.

“Bucket is upstairs,” Angie said.

Right...

“Why’s there only one bucket?” I wondered as I looked around for another. Usually there were a couple in such bathrooms...

Actually why did we need a bucket at all? Why hadn’t Vim built this house like he had those in Lumen, where water could be drawn from those pipes he liked to make?

Wasn’t Telmik older? And hadn’t he helped build it too? Plus I could have sworn he had mentioned he had recently rebuilt this house not too long ago.

Another thing to ask him about once I could.

If I didn't get the chance to spend time with him soon it'd take months just to ask all the questions I kept gathering, wouldn't it?

Angie found one in the kitchen, and a few moments later we had filled the bathtub up for her. The young bison didn't even wait for the water to fully heat up before getting in.

She let out a deep sigh as she laid back in the bath, sounding far older than she looked and was. It made me smile at her.

I let the girl bathe and relax, and left her alone. It wasn't long after I lit a fire in the fireplace that the front door opened, and Vim stepped into the house.

Standing up quickly, I resisted the urge to run over to him and wrap him in a hug.

He had returned alone, with no one on his back or accompanying him, but he had a jug in his hand and a bag in another.

"Here you go," He handed me the jug, which I found was the leftovers of my berry smoothie.

Happily accepting it, I wondered why I had forgotten it... and also how I had left any for there to be leftovers in the first place. Hadn't I emptied the two jugs he had given me...? I could have sworn I drank all of it long before Cat had finished her third cup of alcohol.

As I poured some into a cup, I realized this wasn't leftovers at all. The smoothie was too smooth. Too clean.

This was fresh.

Feeling oddly warmed by Vim's strange ways of displaying his love for me, I listened as he climbed the stairs. He entered our room, and I heard him put something down onto the bed... and then he went farther down the hallway.

There was a tiny creak of a noise, likely a door opening, and I realized he had peeked in on Cat.

A few moments later he returned downstairs, and glanced down the hallway.

"Angie's taking a bath," I warned him, before he decided to check on her too.

I wasn't sure if Angie would be offended or not by Vim seeing her naked, but there was no point risking it.

"Hm... I'm glad all is well then," he said after a moment.

I had many questions, countless concerns, and a terrible desire to wrap him in a hug... but I held it all back, locking it all away for now. Instead I simply placed the pitcher down; I tapped my cup a little and then lifted it. "Want some?" I offered.

Vim smiled and shook his head, and instead stepped over to me.

I stood up straighter at his approach, and suddenly all my questions and concerns disappeared.

Staring up at him, I felt a strange sense of comfort. My shoulders slouched a little. My tail stopped swaying heavily, and the whole world just suddenly seemed...

Calm.

"This is the second time now. Isn't it?" he asked gently.

"That we've met since you've been back? No. We've seen each other three times," I told him. Did he forget we had said a few words to each other when he had introduced me to Cat? Outside of Randle's office?

He frowned for a moment as he pondered my words, but then he shook his head. "No... I mean this is the second time we've spent time apart," he clarified.

Oh... I couldn't help it, I smirked happily and gripped my cup tighter. So he too had noticed it. "Technically also the third."

“Really...?” his frown deepened.

I nodded. “Just recently. Lumen, and Ruvindale. We separated for a few weeks when you left. Before... all the chaos,” I reminded him.

“Ah. That is true, isn’t it,” his frowned softened as he nodded, understanding what I meant.

Here I’d thought he’d argue that didn’t count since we hadn’t been close back then. Not as we were now.

Yet it seemed he had not only understood my meaning, but had agreed with me. That somehow made me happy.

Shifting a little, I glanced down at the rest of him. He wore proper clothes now. Ones not riddled with holes and burn marks. Though I didn’t care much for the... “Hm...” I paused a moment as I realized he was wearing a very cheap set of clothes.

“What is it?” he asked as he glanced down at himself.

Reaching out, I grabbed his shirt. He had tucked it into his waistband, as if he was actually someone who lived and worked here in these saintly walls of stone. Somehow it ill-suited him. “Where’d you get these clothes?” I asked. They felt very rough, and prickly. Definitely not something I wanted him to wear to bed.

“Randle. I told him you’d complain about them,” he said.

“Hmph,” I huffed as I stopped messing with his clothes and stepped back a step... both to stop myself from wrapping him in a hug, and to get a better look at him.

Vim tilted his head at me, and I noted the way he smiled at me.

“I’ll not hug you while you wear that prickly stuff,” I said, doing my best to not grin at him.

“Then I better ask Randle for many more sets, I think,” Vim responded.

My tail twitched, and I felt stupid. I had walked into that one.

I’d lose terribly if I didn’t change the topic a little, then.

“Did... did you grant Trek his wish already?” I asked quietly, and mentally kicked myself as I did.

Why change the topic to something so sad and depressing, Renn!? The atmosphere just now had been wonderful! I had just tossed a perfect chance to tease him a little.

“No. It was going to happen tonight, or rather he wanted it done during the sunrise... but he’s decided that he wants to meet you. So he shall stay alive for one more day,” Vim said, completely unbothered.

My chest tinged with pain. “Really...?” I whispered, no longer upset over having brought it up.

He nodded and smiled at me.

“Why...?”

“He saw you sitting with Cat. A human. He asked about what was going on, I explained it to him. At least the general story. He found that very interesting, enough to stay alive another day,” Vim explained.

I smiled at that. “So he found that more interesting than me being your wife?” I asked.

He nodded, and then frowned. “Right... that is true, isn’t it? There are many members who are friendly with the humans, so I wonder why it interested him,” Vim said as he thought about it.

“No matter. I look forward to talking to him... should I go see him now?” I asked.

“No. It’ll be sunrise soon, let him enjoy it. If you talk to him now, before sunrise, he might ask me to fulfill his request today so...” Vim said.

“Ah... right. Yes,” I nodded quickly, agreeing with him.

It was a little manipulative but Vim was right.

Even a single day more was precious.

“Renn.”

Looking up, I startled a little upon finding Vim right in front of me.

“What...?” I leaned back a little, and gripped my cup tighter. A little bit of the contents had spilled out of it upon my earlier jump, and was now running down the back of my hand.

I ignored it as I stared into his eyes.

They were very focused.

“I missed you,” he said softly.

My arms went weak, and I startled once more. This time because I had dropped the cup. I hadn't needed to panic though. The cup had landed safely, and cleanly, into Vim's hand. As if he had expected it all along.

I groaned at him as he chuckled and returned the cup to me.

Taking it back, I sighed deeply at him as I took a drink. The first drink since pouring it. I had done so to hopefully calm my nerves, but it barely worked.

I should have partaken in alcohol with everyone else.

"Gross."

I jumped again, but not as sharply as before. Vim turned a little, and we both watched as Angie stepped out of the hallway. She now wore only her shirt, which slightly clung to her body. She hadn't dried off completely.

"Gross? Really? I've not even gotten a kiss yet or anything," Vim said to the young bison, unafraid to challenge her accusation.

"That's exactly what's gross about it. Don't you two be gross too..." Angie mumbled her complaints about us.

Although her grumbling seemed completely serious, I couldn't help but smile and laugh at her. "I wish we were!" I said.

Vim sighed at me as he went to sit down at the table. "Let me guess you didn't like your mother's favorite pass-time," Vim said.

Hm...? I glanced at Vim and noticed the smirk he had. Was he teasing her?

"It's not wrong or anything... just don't do it out in the open! Is that so hard to ask?" Angie complained further as she too went to sit at the table.

Vim chuckled as I put one and two together.

I see. So her parents had been what Vim called frisky. Maybe that was why she found flirting and stuff so disagreeable.

Hurriedly taking a seat, to join the two at the table, I happily smiled as Angie reached out for the pitcher. "What's in this?" she asked.

"Renn's favorite," Vim said as I went to get her a cup.

Angie sighed. "Gross."

Chapter 308 Conversations Amongst Hearts, Blades, and Tears

"I know it's just... a piece of metal, Vim. I know. But...!" Renn sniffed as she stared down at the broken sword lying upon the bed between us.

Smiling gently at my companion who was weeping over a broken chunk of steel, I feared the day she actually lost something precious. If she got like this over mere objects, then how bad did she get when she lost those she truly loved? She had wept fiercely several times on our journey so far. She had cried mightily upon being banished from Lumen. She had cried alongside Pram and Lellip upon bringing Nebl home from the mine, as if she had been a member of their family all along. She had shed many a tears for many reasons, even things I'd not understood completely. From mighty moments like Brom's death. Miss Beak's death. To simple little things like my accepting of that baby boy at the Nation of Stone's checkpoint. And that was not to mention and other small moments... but...

What to make of these tears?

They weren't being sobbed as harshly as when she had been banished. Her heart was not shattered into a million pieces right now, nor was it bleeding.

Her heart was simply bruised. She was grieving. Enough to weep, but still have a small smile as she did so.

Almost as if she cried in joy and not sorrow.

"It stood tall, though. It really did," she then added between her tiny cries.

"I can tell," I said.

She had already told me all about it. Her journey here. Her staying at an inn at Hornslo. Angie showing up in the middle of the night, as if being abandoned by the humans who had found her washed ashore on a nearby river beach. The caravan. The attacks by bandits. The four men she had killed with this blunt, now broken, weapon as to protect Oplar and the rest.

She had even told me of her deep regret for not doing more. How there had been others there, other humans, that had died because she had not gone to protect them. She had chosen to stay close to Oplar and her small group, Silti and Angie, instead of straying from them. Even as the humans nearby were killed and their goods stolen.

I was very happy to hear that, even if it made her weep even harder.

Renn sniffed as she wiped her face with her arm again. Her sleeves had become a mess, stained by snot and tears. Just how did someone cry so much?

Alongside her broken sword were the other items and objects that have been either bothering her, or have become important to her, since our parting. The heart. The small journal from Celine. A map drawn by her and Cat; a messy thing from them comparing memories of the north. It seemed Cat really wasn't sure where her home was, at least when compared to here. So Renn had filled in the blanks a little.

Honestly out of all the items the broken sword was what felt the most out of place... at least to me... but I knew to Renn it might just be the most important thing here.

I was doing my best to ignore the book. The heart was important, but the book terrified me. For more reasons than one.

I knew I'd have to address it, and soon, but for now I was glad that she was so focused on the least important item here.

Reaching out, I grabbed the broken blade. It had never been a very long sword in the first place, since even though Renn had the strength to wield damn near anything she wanted I had not wanted her to do so unwisely. If she had wielded a huge weapon, even if perfectly capable of doing so, it'd have drawn eyes. Made people wary of her on the battlefield.

A smaller sword, meant for a woman or child, was better suited for her. Because it only made her opponents further lower their guard and underestimate her.

That misjudgment on her enemy's part was another layer of security for her. An extra blanket of protection. It was valuable.

Lifting the blade, I grabbed it by the broken end. It was the first time the blade felt sharp since its creation.

I studied the knicks and rolls along the remaining blade's edge. There were many, and more than a few were not from our training. I recognized a roll from a rounded armor piece. A curl near the broken tip from hitting bone. There was a gouge in one of the handle's cross-guards, where a blade or something had likely bounced off as she parried or locked something.

"I'm sorry, Vim," she mumbled softly as she watched me study it.

"The fact it bothers you so much worries me, Renn. The point of this thing is to be used to keep you, and those you protect, safe. If it breaking, being lost, or any other number of fates is what it takes for it to fulfill that role than so be it. In fact I'm extremely proud that it did what it needed to do, in the moment you needed it to do so," I said.

"But..." Renn frowned at me, her lips quivering a little as she did. It was adorable.

How many swords have I broken?

How many spears?

Hell... how many weapons and tools in general? How many have come and gone? How many have I grabbed just once, for mere moments, and never again?

Untold thousands.

"The only tools I've ever cherished in my whole life," I ran my thumb along the sharp point of the blade. It was sharp, but not sharp enough to cut me. "Are the ones my parents made me," I told her.

Renn sniffed and sat up straighter.

“Though, oddly, it wasn’t until they were gone that I did so. While they had lived... I had paid no heed to them,” I said as I thought about it.

“That’s a little normal, maybe?” Renn offered a tiny comment, with a tiny voice.

I shook my head. “No. But I had my reasons,” I said softly.

For a long moment there was silence between us, and I sighed at myself.

Just tell her the truth, Vim. Tell her why. Give her the reasons.

She’d understand.

Yet instead the words wouldn’t escape, so instead I rambled on about something else.

“Clothes. Weapons. Tools. Even homes, houses or stuff like that... I’ve honestly never cared for them,” I told her.

Her ears fluttered a little as she nodded gently at me, but stayed quiet. She was completely intent on hearing what I had to say.

“Yet lately I’ve grown to notice a change,” I said as I reached down to tap my stomach. The prickly shirt I wore was a stark reminder that I had chosen wrongly. I should have found something nicer to wear. So that Renn would have hugged me on sight, and not held herself back. Then I lowered the blade and put it back down, tapping it lightly on the handle. The steel let out a small ring of a sound, which was diluted and muffled by the bed and the fluffy blankets it rested upon. “From clothes. To weapons, to even little tiny things like pins,” I added.

“They’re all broken,” she mumbled softly.

I nodded. I had noticed. She had worn her hat to and during the party, since humans had come and gone during it. Her hat had slipped a few times, especially when her human friend Cat had drunkenly clung to her. She didn’t have any pins left to hold it in place anymore.

“I can re-forged it Renn. You should know that. It will have to be mixed with other steel, but it can be remade. I promise,” I told her.

She nodded quickly. “I know...! I know. I just... felt as if I should apologize,” she said.

“Because to you it was a gift. From me. A precious gift,” I clarified.

She nodded warmly at me.

I sighed at her, but not because I was upset or disappointed. Rather the opposite.

It wasn't fair she was so adorable.

"You did well Rennalee. I'm very proud of you," I said again.

She nodded. "Mhm...!"

I had of course already praised her greatly. Several times. But like the many times before she had accepted the praise with such heartfelt seriousness, it felt as if I'd not given her any yet until now. It only made me want to praise her more.

"Concerning the heart..." I said as I changed topics a tad, and reached out for the black orb. I picked the heart up, and stared into what was obviously a cat's eye.

It was interesting. There were gems sometimes that had such a pattern within them. A trick of light and angles. As far as I was aware only a certain types of gemstones could have it, and they were exceptionally rare. Some of them even changed colors.

It was the type of unique prettiness that if it had been a typical jewel or gem, it would have been hidden away in some king's treasury or church's vault. Maybe inlaid into a crown or neck piece.

"Could it be my uncle's? My elder?" she asked excitedly.

Studying it, I stared deep into the dark orb.

Celine had called it the Orb of Night.

She was not one for theatrics...

“Celine was not a woman to give things names without purpose. Especially not something like this. She saw hearts of monarchs as holy artifacts. She would not have dubbed it such a thing. Are we sure Celine called it that?” I asked Renn.

“She wrote it in the letter,” Renn said with a glance to the pamphlet booklet.

I had not read it yet.

I didn't want to.

Didn't plan to.

The mere fact I had not known about it until now was proof enough that I didn't want to even look at the damned thing.

A prophecy. For Renn.

Ridiculous. I'd throw it into the fire if not for the fact that I knew doing so would break her heart.

"Want me to read it to you, Vim...?" she asked softly.

Ignoring Renn, I tapped the heart with my thumb and wondered if I had ever seen such a heart before.

There had been a few black hearts. The one we had given Landi hadn't been a true black. It had been more of a really dark purple. This though was night itself. An abyss. What Celine had dubbed it was apt, if anything.

Yet the other black hearts had not had such a symbol within them.

And its symbol was rather clear.

A cat's eye.

"It may very well be related to you, actually," I said after a moment. After all how many monarchs had been fashioned after great cats?

I could think of only a few, and none had been black leopards or jaguars.

“Really...!” Renn sat up a little more and leaned forward, suddenly very excited.

I nodded as I held the heart out to her. She happily took it, her tail wiggling like mad behind her as she cupped it in her hands and grinned at it.

“Didn’t you kill your uncle?” I asked.

She nodded. “Witch helped me. We shot him with arrows she had used her magic on... or uh... her divine power,” she corrected herself as she explained.

“Fascinating. That must have been painful for her,” I said.

Renn paused a moment and glanced up at me. “Yes. It had killed her,” she whispered.

Right... I’m sure it...

Wait.

“Didn’t you mention you killed her?” I asked softly.

We were alone in the house right now, but I still spoke quietly just in case. It was the middle of the day, and Angie and Cat had gone to listen to a sermon. The only reason Renn hadn’t gone was for the very reason we were sitting together on the bed, talking over these items. Still... I couldn’t help if wonder if we should have these conversations elsewhere, or later. The Chronicler had eyes and ears everywhere; though I didn’t sense any nearby at the moment I wasn’t going to be foolish.

“I had...” Renn nodded, speaking just as softly. I knew she had not done so out of concern of who was listening, but instead because of how sad and hurt she was over her answer instead.

She gripped the heart tighter in her hand as she stared at me, although she was now blankly staring at me. I had sent her thoughts into something painful.

“Did you... or she, not procure the heart? After you slayed your uncle?” I asked carefully, trying to stay on topic but... change it a tad.

This saint of hers. This Witch... she must have used her powers too heavily, and then suffered from them. Renn likely had ended her life to put her out of her misery.

If that was the case I wonder if her actions against her family members, her killing of them, had been for the same reasons or not.

“Um... no... Actually that’s a good question. Why hadn’t she got their hearts?” she wondered.

"Their...?" I asked. She spoke of multiple?

She nodded. "We actually hunted half a dozen of them. She had called them Elders or Great Ones, depending on how powerful they were. A giant white snake, which had been able to talk. My great-uncle. The rest had been... big, but simple animals. Unable to reason, and acting purely on instinct," Renn informed me.

I shifted a tad on the bed, and was glad that it was re-enforced. If it had been a normal bed it might have broken just now.

"You hunted monarchs," I whispered as I realized what she was saying.

"Well... she did. Witch did. I only helped her. I hadn't realized what they were until recently, though. I... I honestly am not sure if Witch did either. To be honest I don't know if Witch had just been... simple, or unaware, or had instead just kept it all a secret the whole time," she said.

"What do you mean?"

Renn sighed as she lowered the heart, and put it down onto the bed between us. Back in the same spot it had been earlier.

"Witch had been very educated. Like you, she knew... a lot of things. Stuff back then I hadn't comprehended. But when she spoke to me... or about stuff with me, she had sometimes..." Renn

hesitated as she found the word, and then nodded. "She simplified stuff. Kind of like how you sometimes do so for me, or our other members."

"Did she ever call them monarchs?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Never. Not once. And in fact I distinctly remember her telling me that the snake had eaten my uncle, my elder. That she had sensed my blood-line within it. Then years later, my uncle had showed up again. She never really explained how or why that happened," Renn said as she thought deeply about it.

Sensed her bloodline...

"This snake. The one that attacked your family?" I asked. She had mentioned it offhandedly once.

She nodded. "It ate a few of them."

How interesting.

It seemed my lovely wife had a vivid history. One she herself seemed to not even realize was special.

"Then that means one of them had been a monarch too. Had a heart. Even if tiny and weak," I said. Especially if this saint had noticed such a thing. Not even the weakest saint would have made such a mistake as that.

Renn's eyes went wide at that. "Really...?" she asked.

I nodded. "It's a reasonable explanation. Saints sense the hearts, Renn. They don't sense anything else about a monarch. The stuff they sense, outside of their abilities such as prophecies and stuff, are related to divine power. The stuff touched by gods. If she sensed you, your family, in another monarch... then yes. That meant at that moment a second heart had been inside of it. And if it had just eaten one of your family members, then..." I shrugged as I stopped explaining it.

Renn sniffed again. "I wonder who it had been..." she whispered.

"All the same. It could be your uncle's, or another distant ancestor. I do find it very odd that a saint would not have procured the hearts. They glow in their eyes. I'm told it's the same glow their eyes give off. Are you sure she didn't gather them in secret? Without you noticing?" I asked.

Renn frowned and crossed her arms. I studied the way they hugged her chest, and for some reason wondered when she had last bathed.

She didn't look dirty, at all, and of course she didn't stink or anything... but...

Should I invite her? Even if she had bathed earlier this morning, or last night, she'd probably jump at the chance.

I had planned to show her the catacombs anyway. It'd be a good excuse. I could take her to those baths... show her the statues and vaults...

"She may have, Vim. I don't know. I don't remember her carving the corpses. In fact I even remember asking a few times why we didn't, if at least for food. She claimed they were holy creatures. Beings made by gods, and should be respected as such. I felt back then that she had somewhat revered them, even though she believed she had a holy duty to slay them on sight," Renn said.

"Saints see them as divine beasts, but at the same time also see them as monstrosities. Demons and such. It's what makes Cat's quest so believable," I said.

"Why is that Vim? Why would a creature that is basically a saint be seen as a demon?" she asked.

I blinked and wondered how the hell she had realized that monarchs were saints, but then realized I had just told her such a thing myself.

I had told her the hearts glowed like a saint's eyes. From their perspective.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed at myself.

Renn shifted a little, and her tail tapped the bed a little loudly. "Sorry. You don't have to answer, Vim... instead would you answer something else?" she asked, and offered me a mercy.

I nodded slowly, and wondered what she wanted to know.

“How do you ignore it?” she then asked.

“Ignore what?” I asked carefully. Please don’t ask how I ignored the allure of her body, because I still wasn’t sure how I did it either.

“How do you ignore their betrayal?” she whispered.

Ah...

“That’s one extreme to another,” I whispered back.

Renn’s eyebrows met as she scrunched her face up. “I know...! I’m sorry... I just don’t know where to start or what to say...” she began to mumble as she uncrossed her arms and went to twirling her fingers together.

Smiling at her, I nodded. “I’m ignoring those here who wish to vote against me, because their votes are not out of malice. They do not wish to banish me, Renn, they simply wish things to be different. And I can’t fault them for that. Hard to blame someone for wanting a better life,” I said.

Renn sighed at me. “I hate that part of you, Vim,” she said.

“I know. It’s okay.”

I hated that part of me too, after all.

“Do you know who is voting against you then...?” she asked.

“I have a few ideas. Yes,” I admitted. No one had outright said so to me, yet, but the few I’d spoken to about it like Randle and the Chronicler had told me that more than a few here were willing to vote against me. In one form or another.

Renn sniffed again as she shook her head. “That’s disgusting. I don’t understand it. How can people be so unthankful?” she asked angrily.

I hummed at her and wondered if I should really let this conversation happen here and now.

It of course needed to happen... for many reasons. But at the same time... well...

I had been enjoying talking about other things with her. I wanted those conversations to continue. This one just hurt. At least the other ones, even if they made her cry, were able to make me smile or enjoy them.

“What are you smirking at? This is serious,” Renn nearly growled at me, and I sat up straighter as I realized I had indeed been smirking.

Lifting a hand to cover my mouth, I wondered why I had been smiling just now. Hadn't I just been upset? Over having made her angry and allowing the conversation to grow lukewarm and lead into territory that made both of us upset?

“Jeez Vim...” Renn grumbled as she sighed at me.

“Hm...” I pondered it for a moment, and then nodded. “I'd been happy,” I admitted.

“Of...?” Renn asked cautiously.

“You. It seems I really like how angry you get when our members seem to betray me, from your perspective,” I said.

For a few moments we sat in silence as I nodded again. Yes. That was it.

Her anger and discomfort over their votes, their beliefs and foolishness, made me happy.

It felt good to have someone get upset for me. Over me. It made me feel... well...

Loved.

“Well if that’s all it takes to make you smirk, then you should be smiling all the time. I’ve lately been very upset with the lot of them for some time,” Renn said.

“So true. Can I ask a favor from you? In return I’ll give you a gift, if you’d like,” I offered, hoping to slightly change the topic a little.

“Hm?” Renn obviously knew what I was trying to do... but allowed it anyway as she eventually nodded and smiled at me.

Glancing down at the white journal, I glared at the damned thing. Lifting a hand, I dared to point at it.

“Would you destroy that? For me?” I asked.

For many painful heartbeats... Renn not only didn’t answer, she also didn’t move. Not even her tail or ears twitched.

I kept myself from gulping or shifting, and held her gaze as she glared at me.

“After you dedicate its contents to memory, of course,” I gently added after a bit of silence.

Renn finally moved. She shifted, and grabbed at her knees. She sat up straight, and took a deep breath. As if she was suddenly being lectured or something.

“Why, Vim?” she then asked.

“You say it’s from Celine?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Are you sure it is?” I asked.

“Randle firmly believes so. It’s also the same writing as that other book. The one you had let me read the first time we had come here,” she said.

My eye twitched as I nodded. “Great. So Randle read it too,” I complained.

“He said that he’s had to rebind it a couple times. To keep the pages safe,” she said as she leaned to the left a little, as if looking past me. There was no one behind me though, just the mirror in the corner of the room.

“Well... knowing Randle he very well may have not actually read it. But all the same,” I said as I nodded.

“It’s beautiful, Vim. I bet even you would cry if you read it,” she whispered.

“No. If I read that thing... I promise you, I would do a lot of things but crying would not be one of them,” I told her.

Renn’s eyes narrowed, and she was about to say something. Something that may have ruined a lot of things... so I raised my hand to hush her.

Her pupils narrowed at me, becoming similar to the shape of the one found in the monarch’s heart in-between us. “Don’t say a thing of its contents, Renn. Please.”

“Why Vim...? Why does it bother you so much?” she asked.

“I had not known of that thing’s existence. She had given it to Randle. For safekeeping. All this time. Do you not wonder why?” I asked.

She hesitated. “For a good reason, I assume...?”

“I despise prophecies, Renn. They are an insult to free-will,” I told her.

Renn blinked, and all of her anger and discomfort immediately vanished.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. "There's more to it than that. I'll not lie to you. But that's one of the biggest reasons I hate them. Prophecies. Fortunes. Destinies, or anything like them... I despise them. In my youth I had hunted such things down as ferociously as I had the monarchs and their creators. That book. That letter... I can tell it means a lot to you. But if you value my love at all, Renn, from this moment on... you will never speak of it. Never mention it again. If it was up to me I'd have not allowed you to read it in the first place," I told her.

Renn's eyes grew a little watery as I spoke, but she didn't start crying. In fact... she seemed to even harden her heart a little as she focused on me.

"Why didn't Randle warn me of this?" she asked stiffly.

"I could give you a dozen reasons and they'd likely all be wrong."

Renn glanced down at the tome, and glared at it.

"Rennalee... I should have phrased it better... I'm not upset you had read it. In fact, to a certain degree... I'm glad you did. Maybe there was something in that book that you needed to read. Maybe it was something that will change the world. Or save you, or someone else. But no matter its contents... it is everything I am not. I hate saying this aloud, and it terrifies me to do so in fear of what it might do... but..." I slowly went quiet, and realized I was about to say something that may very well ruin our relationship.

Renn's gleamy eyes widened in apprehension, and I realized I was now going to have to say it. No matter what.

Gulping, I nodded. "If I heard a prophecy... one that told me that our love was destined or some such... I would abandon your love, Renn. That is how badly I detest such things."

Although I really didn't want to look into her eyes, in fear of seeing something within them that I shouldn't... I held her gaze all the same. Even as she flinched and narrowed her eyes, and then glanced down at the book once more.

"So please. Don't tell me what was in it. Even if it wasn't a prophecy at all, and just a simple letter from her to you. Just... let it be. Let it be something private, between you and her," I begged.

Renn took a very deep breath, and I heard the tiny cracks within it. She was about to weep again.

"How did you love her, and she you, if you hated such things so much?" she asked with a thin voice. One that was about to break.

"By pretending. The both of us had been fully aware of it, yet had ignored it. Danced around it. And as I told you, Renn, I hadn't loved her like that. And she hadn't loved me like that either. In fact, today I'd be willing to admit to you that she hadn't loved me at all... and in fact had only done so to use me. To manipulate me," I told her.

It was a truth I'd never told anyone. But it was the truth all the same.

Celine had used my affection and pity of her and her people against me. And had done a splendid job of it, too.

“And you had allowed it,” she whispered.

I nodded. “I had.”

Renn reached out for the book, and I did my best to not look at it as she did so. She grabbed it, picked it up and sighed at me.

“I’ll burn it. But I want to read it once more before I do,” she said.

I nodded gently.

Renn sniffed at me, a long heavy one, and then glanced at me with a glare.

“Hm...?”

“What do I get in return, then?” she asked accusingly.

I smirked.

Chapter 309 Statues and Catacombs

Vim was humming.

Within halls of stone, his deep hum echoed onto itself. Somehow forming a whole new melody. One that didn't clash with its original form, but instead molded into it. Adapted it.

Perfected it.

As if his humming wasn't the tune itself, but the instrument to give birth to the real song he wished to sing.

It was a little haunting, to be honest. Because it told me that he was doing it on purpose. Which meant he had spent so long in such locations where sounds acted weirdly that he could accomplish such a thing with ease.

Although lovely, it also reminded me that Vim was terribly ancient. And for some reason that simple truth bothered me in ways I couldn't understand.

I carried a small lantern. It was honestly not bright enough to illuminate the hallway we were in now. Even for my eyes.

I followed not far behind Vim, but every so often I had to pick up my pace. Ever since a little bit ago we had begun passing statues that made me pause. To both study and stare in awe. Vim although paused as well as to allow me look at them, seemed to also not do so or even want to when he did occasionally.

I'd wonder if he didn't notice when I stopped sometimes, but I knew he did. He was acutely aware of me, and what I did at all times, so it was not that he didn't notice when I slowed or paused... but rather that he didn't wish to let me study certain statues too deeply.

There didn't seem to be any real rhyme or reason to which statue he'd let me study and which ones he wouldn't, but I figured he had his reasons.

Rounding a large corner, a new statue came into view. They were brighter than most things down here, being made of a strange stone Vim had called alabaster. It gleamed in the candlelight in ways that made them almost seem to come alive.

Lifting the lantern as we neared the statue, I frowned at the strange box-like structure.

Was it just a box...? It was a giant cube, or something. It had plenty of little designs upon it, maybe words or symbols, but I couldn't see the outright meaning of the sculpture.

"It is a piece of salt."

Frowning, I looked away from the odd cube to look at Vim... who had not only paused with me this time, but had stopped humming too.

“Huh...?” I wasn’t sure if I had heard him right.

Salt?

“That is what salt looks like. Or rather what it would look like, if you could see it up close,” he said with a point to the statue.

Looking back at the cube, I shifted a little and wondered if he was teasing me.

“Salt,” I stated.

“Mhm.”

Really...?

I tried to envision the many times I’d held salt. I had to admit that... yes, sometimes it did seem like salt formed tiny little shapes. Little cubes especially... but...

“Are you teasing me?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

“Okay... why did you make a statute out of salt?” I asked.

“I hadn’t. Eyes had. Hands’s father. He found it fascinating. Several of these statues were made by those like him. Eccentrics,” he said.

Frowning deeply, I wondered what to think of this.

I’d only seen a handful of other statues so far... and none had been as odd as this. It was why I had not been able to understand why Vim allowed me to study some and not others. Most had been animals, or people. This was the most outlandish one by far. None of the others had been weird enough for him to have any reason to keep me from studying them too closely.

“I’m very confused,” I told him honestly.

Vim chuckled at me. His noises echoed a little, sounding a little different than his earlier humming yet the same somehow. “I’m sure,” he said.

Lowering the lantern, since the block of salt wasn’t detailed enough to be too interesting, I turned and stepped over to him. I illuminated him a little better, and his silly smirk.

He was enjoying this.

“Are there a lot of statues down here?” I asked.

“There are three halls. We just entered the first,” he said with a gesture behind us.

“Long halls,” I noted. We’d been walking for many minutes.

“These catacombs cover most of Telmik. They had been made before the wars, right as they begun. Their original purpose had been to eventually house and keep safe the whole of the Society... I’m not sure if it’s a good thing we had never needed them, or not,” Vim said.

“Now the Society could fit in just a few of these hallways,” I noted.

“Hm...” Vim nodded a little sadly, and I realized I had just hurt him.

“Sorry,” I apologized.

“For speaking the truth? Please.”

I nodded, but dedicated his sad smile to heart and memory. My words had indeed hurt him. Although truth, as he said, and the fact I had not said them out of spite or malice... it still made me feel horrible all the same.

Everyone else in this world, even the Society, hurt him all the time. Sometimes intentionally.

I didn't want to be counted amongst that group. Not anymore.

I wanted to make him happy. Not sad.

Vim turned, with a light gesture to me, and I followed him away from the giant cube of stone.

We walked for a bit more until another statue came into view.

This one was of a person, but a tiny one. Rather two tiny ones.

Two small kids stood side by side, holding hands. They both had their arms out, as if waving at something... and looked oddly human. I didn't notice any outward non-human traits upon either of them.

"Left and Right," Vim said with a point to them.

“Why would anyone name children such? How pitiful,” I asked. “Or is it a representation not a likeness?”

Vim chuckled. “It’s because they had been inseparable, and always stood that way. He on the left, she on the right. They weren’t siblings. In fact the two hadn’t even been able to understand each other for a long time, speaking different languages and all,” Vim said.

Raising the lantern I stepped closer to the statue. Although obviously children, they had been carved to be a little bigger than what was likely their life-size representation. They were about as tall as me.

“Who were they?” I asked softly as I studied the detail on their clothes. Whoever had carved this one had done a fine job. I could almost make out loose strands of thread on their clothing, as if the statues were wearing real clothes and wasn’t stone at all.

“Celine had found them on islands along the west coast. Guarding a monarch. I met them afterward, having been sent to slay the monarch. They had not wanted to let me do so,” Vim said.

I shifted and glanced at him. “Did you really?” I asked.

“Kill them? No. But I had beaten them. They may have looked like children Renn, but they hadn’t been. They had been older than you. I subdued them, killed their monarch master, and then brought them back here. They spent a few decades here with Celine and the rest and then eventually died in their sleep one night. I never found out why,” he said.

Feeling a little sad, I lifted the lantern higher to get a better look at their faces. It looked like the girl had freckles. How had they shaped stone to represent that? It didn't seem like any of these statues had paint or anything upon them.

"Who carved this?" I asked.

"I don't know. There's usually a mark or name somewhere on the statute, you can find it if you want. Later," Vim said.

I huffed at him and stepped back, before I decided to actually search for it. I had noted his tone; he had not wanted us to waste time on it.

He strangely seemed to be in a hurry. Even if seemingly in a good mood, and walking leisurely with me.

"Why is it some of our kind grow up quickly and others don't?" I asked as we left the statue of Left and Right behind.

"Not sure. The longer lived amongst us usually do spend more time as children, but usually not much longer than a human would. Then of course you have those like Merit, or Sharp, who are just... tinier than usual," Vim said.

"Were all of Merit's people like her?" I asked.

“Yes. Even their elders had been small, looking like kids.”

Huh... “Am I small to you?” I asked.

“You’re scrawny, yes. But your height and frame is rather normal I think. As I’ve mentioned before you look like a young woman who just entered her adulthood,” I said.

“Some would say that’s young looking,” I noted.

“Some would.”

“How long had you been a kid then, Vim? You’re so ancient I bet it had been a long time,” I said.

Vim chuckled at me and tilted his head. It looked odd in the darkness and shadows of these halls. “Not as long as you think... though let me think...” Vim slowed as he talked, and I smiled and waited for his answer. Then he returned to his normal pace, upon remembering. “I’d spent longer as a child than normal, especially for a human, but I definitely wasn’t small for long. I was about this size not long before I first declared war, and that hadn’t been long after my parent’s deaths. Don’t ask me how long that had taken. I don’t remember or care to,” he said finally.

Interesting.

“So you partook in those wars from a young age, then? Considering?” I asked.

"I had," Vim answered simply.

I of course noticed his abrupt answer, and decided it was time to change topics.

Before I could though the next statue came into view. This one was something I recognized.

Stepping up to a series of books stacked upon each other, I marveled at the details. Some of the books were propped open, as if in the middle of being read, and I could actually see the words and pictures upon the pages... as if...

Drawing closer, I reached out carefully... and with as much gentleness as I could muster, I touched one of the pages.

And found pure stone.

"How did someone make this?" I asked softly. It was as thin as a hair. Yet felt as solid as any stone brick around us. How was it so thin, yet had words etched into it?

"A lot of time and carefulness."

“Who made this one?” I asked as I stopped touching the page, in case I broke it on accident.

“Eyes and Hands did it together.”

A father and son effort... amazing.

Stepping around the statue, I studied the books. Some were as tiny as real ones, others were comically big. There were several pillar-like stacks of them, but there were also free floating ones that were made to almost look as if they were falling from the stacks up above, out of sight. Their pages were flapping in the wind, or at least looked like they were.

“So uh... what’s the main story? Or point?” I asked. It seemed each statue had some greater meaning to it, but this one seemed odd. If it was to try and represent knowledge, why make it seem so cluttered and messy, what with the falling books and stuff?

“Their minds.”

Frowning, I turned to look at Vim. “Their minds?”

He nodded. “This was their attempt to display what their minds looked like. Or felt like.”

Looking back at the statue, I took a deep breath and sighed. “No wonder he fidgets so much,” I said.

Vim chuckled at me.

“What would mine look like, then?” I wondered as I stepped over to Vim.

“I could actually represent it perfectly, but if I did I’d then have to explain something to you that would subsequently break it,” Vim said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked with a smile.

“A joke. Come, the next one is important.”

Oh...? I hurried to follow him, and even went to walking next to him as we headed deeper into the darkness.

The hallways down here were a little cold, but not enough to bother me. In fact I was a little surprised at how... dry it was down here. I had expected it to be a little damp, like the Keep or those sewers in Lumen had been.

“Is there one here for you? Your mind?” I asked lightly.

“No. I barely let my own self into my mind why would I let others see it too?” he said.

Giggling at him I nodded. “That’s true!”

How fun...! There was a lot to worry about right now, but at the moment I was just... happy. Enjoying life.

Plus I kind of knew what he was about to show me. He had mentioned it off-handedly once. Back when we had spoken of his parents. At the Crypt.

He had mentioned there was something down here that could be used to show me them. And with these statues, it was rather clear what that something was going to be.

Enjoying the moment, I happily kept pace with Vim... until he began to slow.

Off in the distance, at the end of the hallway... was another statue. One half hidden by a brick pillar. It looked a little smaller than most of the others.

“Vim?” I asked gently what was wrong as I slowed alongside him.

“Hm...” he nodded but didn’t clarify... as we then stepped in front of the statue, and came to a stop.

Ah. I see.

Lifting the lantern, I took a small breath and sighed at the sight of who was undoubtedly Vim's mother.

Unlike all the other statues, this one had not been crafted to be fantastical or larger than life. The woman stood on a very small pedestal yet wasn't much taller than me all the same.

"You lied Vim," I whispered as I stared at the woman.

"Hm?"

"She's beautiful," I said as I stepped closer, lifting the lantern.

He scoffed at me, but I paid him no mind.

Vim's mother was a tad shorter than me. She was dressed in very odd clothes, crafted somehow to look like silk yet was firm and straight. She had a tiny smile on her face, as if being mischievous, and had one hand on her hip and another holding up a scale.

I gulped at the obvious implication of the thing she held, and her stance. It was unmistakable the way she was smirking and had her whole body tilted at just the right angle... as if about to sway to a beat.

She was judging something. Someone. Maybe Vim himself.

Though that interpretation might be getting influenced by the scales she held up. They looked real enough to start swaying, but were likewise carved from stone too. I'd wonder why he hadn't just used real scales, to save the effort, but this was Vim we were talking about. He was odd that way.

Oddly the scales were righted evenly. And nothing was upon them, even though the detail of the carved stone was undoubtedly fine enough for there to have been so.

In fact...

"Is she unfinished?" I asked. It looked like her hair had been tidied up, to have bows or something put onto the locks, yet there wasn't.

"Oh...? You noticed? I think you're the first to do so," he said, surprised.

I nodded as I glanced down her body. Her strange clothes were... outlandish. Why'd they look so weird? She had buttons on them, in strange places, and it looked like her pants were oddly loose, yet had pockets all over them. They parted and opened near her feet, as if becoming a dress, and she wore light sandals.

As far as I could tell, like Vim, she looked perfectly and utterly human.

“You have her smirk,” I said as I looked back up at her face.

“Hmph.”

Smiling happily, I wondered what to say... and how to say it.

“She’s beautiful Vim,” I said first.

“Hm.”

“And smirking like she’s judging you. Did you do this on purpose or was she always looking at you like that?” I asked.

“Isn’t it weird? It had begun to take that shape before I even realized it. Originally I planned to craft her in a serene pose, sitting down. When I think of her it’s that which I see, not this. I see her sitting at a table, smiling gently as she got lost in thought,” Vim said.

Huh...

“What was her name?” I asked.

"I only knew her by mother, Renn," Vim said gently.

Ah...

I shifted a little and glanced at him. He had sounded sad, but he had a smile on his face. He was good at smiling even while hurt.

He nodded at me after a moment. "Mother and father. That's what I knew them as. When they spoke of each other in front of me, they even used such terms themselves. I genuinely do not know their names," he said.

I gulped at him. "Were they... like those who didn't believe in such things?" I asked. Like the Clothed Woman, maybe.

He frowned and shook his head. "No. I just never got to learn them. Don't cry Renn, it's not that sad," he said softly, noticing full well I was about to.

"But...!" I felt a little silly as my face scrunched up and I looked back at the wonderfully crafted statue.

She really was beautiful. Her smirk alone made her adorable...

Taking a deep breath, which came in and left a little wobbly, I felt horrible.

He had entered war not long after his parents died. He didn't know their names. He had grown up fast, he thought.

The pieces were coming together, and quickly.

His parents had died early. While he had been young. Even for him.

"Father isn't here. I never crafted him," Vim then said.

"Why not?" I asked with a sniff.

"Not sure. Honestly you're lucky I made this one. No one's ever realized who it is, but it's still out of character for me. I wonder what had made me so melancholic as to shape it?" Vim crossed his arms as he pondered his own past, and I huffed at him.

"No one else knows who she is?" I asked.

"No. As far as I am aware. Not sure how they'd figure it out, either."

Hm... I wonder why he had made it then. He did seem to cherish and honor his parents, but this was indeed out of character for him. Even that nameless, unmarked, gravestone at the Crypt had been hidden away and not spoken of to anyone.

Anyone but me.

“So she’s not finished... what were you going to add? Or will, Vim?” I asked as I returned my attention to her.

“She always had stuff in her hair. Flowers and such. Plus I planned to add to her clothes, the scales, and other stuff. Never got around to it,” he said.

I see. I had thought so.

Stepping around the podium a little, I leaned forward between the nearby wall and the statue. To see the rear of it.

“Really Renn?” Vim asked lightly as I studied her backside.

“What? I wanted to see how detailed you made her,” I said.

He sighed at me as I stopped checking. He had indeed made her very lifelike, but not a hair of her was out of place or improper.

She was done so well she could have been placed up top, in the Cathedral or the surrounding churches and no one would have found her out of place. Though her clothes were a tad odd...

“Is that the kind of clothes people worn back then?” I asked.

“No. Not at all.”

Oh...? Creative design then, maybe? Or...?

Studying the clothing a little closer, I wondered how one even put such a thing on. It almost looked like she would have had to tie each and every button up as to fasten it. There were dozens, all over the place. Surely that was more of a pain than it needed to be?

Maybe the buttons weren't buttons, and I was just misunderstanding what I was seeing... or maybe they were buttons, but not purposeful. Maybe they were just attachments, like designs or patterns. Basically just add-ons to make the clothes more interesting and unique, and not for purpose.

I kind of wanted to try and make a shirt like it, just to see what it felt like to wear it.

“Well...? Is she what you expected?” Vim then asked.

“No. Not at all,” I answered honestly.

Vim hummed. “What had you expected?”

“I had expected someone pretty. Since you’re weird, you’d have not realized how pretty your mother was. That had been something obvious. But... honestly? I had expected someone not human at all. Or at least with traits, or something. Or maybe more imposing...? Bigger?” I said as I tried to explain what I had envisioned in the back of my mind.

I didn’t want to say aloud that I had expected a monarch, or even a god.

Although a tiny bit odd, she looked completely normal. She would have been able to mingle in any human village without a concern... other than the odd clothes he had given her in this form, at least.

“Bigger,” Vim chuckled at me.

I frowned at him. “I don’t mean her chest,” I said, knowing exactly what his chuckling was about.

“I figured.”

Sighing at him, I lifted the lantern again to see her face a little better. The small shadows that casted upon her face and head thanks to the lantern didn't bother her appearance much. If anything the shadows somehow made her seem more alive. More than just stone.

She had a tiny nose, I guess. Though it didn't make her ugly or anything. Her teeth were perfect looking, what few could be seen from behind her smirk, and her eyes looked steady and firm. Even though they had an obvious joy within them, they still felt steely and pure. But I wasn't sure if that was artistic design or the fact her eyes were made of literal stone.

"Honestly Vim... she had been beautiful. I wish I had gotten to speak to her," I told him my honest thoughts about her.

"Hm. I'm partly glad you didn't. Who knows what terrible things you would have concocted between you two... and then who knows what she would have imposed upon me afterward..." Vim spoke softly, but then shivered. Actually shivered, as if suddenly cold. "The mere thought of her snapping her fingers and making me a bumbling idiot who beckons to your every word...!" he laughed at himself at the idea.

Hesitating a moment, both because of his strange actions and words... I realized that although joking... he had been serious.

Snapping her fingers. Which would in turn make him a bumbling idiot, that beckoned to my every word...

I was sure many a son joked that their mothers had such power over them. But Vim's little joke just now had not been mere jest.

Studying the man who had said something terrifying, I found myself lightly smiling at him as he smiled at me. He had obviously not realized what he had just said.

Although my own mind was whirling from his words, I turned and did my best to keep my smile true and pure... as I made doubly sure he didn't realize, or at least I tried to.

"I'm surprised you even had the time to make this. Or is it a quick process? I'd think it'd take a long time to carve stone so finely," I said, asking a question that had been on my mind for awhile. It was a good excuse to change topics ever so slightly.

"Hm. It didn't take me too long I don't think. Plus it's not like I did it all at once. I worked on it in small intervals. Imagine piece by piece over years, basically."

I nodded. That made sense.

Plus he had sounded natural as he spoke. Vim hadn't realized he had just said something ridiculous a few moments ago.

Thank goodness.

"Think you could teach me how to do this too? Is it hard?" I asked.

"I bet you'd be better at it than me, by a long shot. Sure. One day," Vim agreed.

I nodded again, glad to hear it.

Glancing at the scales she held, I decided to go ahead and risk it.

“Why the scales Vim?” I asked.

“My mother had been a very literal person. My father had spoken in riddles. Bad ones. Maybe to counterbalance him, she was always a black and white type of person. She judged, weighed and spoke in ways that made you feel like she saw everything and knew everything even if she shouldn’t have been able to,” he said.

Since I wasn’t looking at him I was able to smile fully without him noticing. I felt the silly grin on my face as I studied his mother’s statue.

“So the scales...?” I asked gently, hoping he’d continue talking about her. I liked how calm and happy he sounded. Vim always sounded calm, even when he wasn’t, but there was just something about the current tone of his voice that made me feel warm inside. It sounded lovely.

“She was always focused on right and wrong. She used to teach me by making me debate against her, sometimes playing devil’s advocate. On purpose. It had back then been annoying, but today I’m thankful for it. I believe it was what helped me understand people better. Putting myself in their shoes and whatnot,” he explained.

“Devil’s advocate...?” I asked as I turned to look at him finally.

Vim hummed as he nodded. “Basically I was forced to argue against my own beliefs. To play a part, in an effort to broaden my own perspectives and understandings of the world. I sometimes play it with you when we talk, as I’m sure you’ve noticed,” he said.

I had. “So you do that sometimes to teach me?” I asked, finding that strangely amusing. How cute.

“Well... more that I just enjoy hearing your perspectives, and how you come to them,” he tried to defend himself.

I smirked at him and nodded. “I enjoy it too.”

He frowned at me, but said nothing as he shrugged.

Looking back at the statue, I wondered what to ask next. He seemed willing to fully answer certain things right now. He was in a good mood. Open. Loving. Yet he had also made me change topics and ask other questions earlier, so...

“Let’s go Renn. I don’t mind a little dawdling but spending all night down here would just get us in trouble,” Vim then said before I could think of something else to ask.

I frowned at him and shook my head. "I want to study her more," I said. We still had so much to talk about! What were her favorite foods? What had his father been like? He had mentioned riddles, but bad ones, what were those? What kinds? Would he share a few with me?

"I know. So it's up to you. Her or the bath," he offered me a choice.

"Bath...?" I turned to frown at him. What'd he mean?

He nodded. "That had been the original purpose of coming down here. There are special baths down here, similar in style to the ones at Lumen. I figured I'd bathe with you as an apology for being the kind of man to make you burn a letter as precious as Celine's," he said.

Oh... Oh!

"Why didn't you say so?" I asked excitedly as I stepped away from his mother's statue.

He smirked at me in the lantern's light. "I just did."

Well... "Yes you had," I admitted.

He nodded at me and then glanced at the statue. "You'll be able to see her again anyway. You can also come down here by yourself if you'd like, later on. I bet you'd be fine, hard to think you'd get lost with your memory and all," he said.

“That is a little true... I guess...” I mumbled. Honestly although I wasn’t scared much of the dark, I wasn’t sure yet if I wanted to come to places such as these by myself or not yet.

“Hm...? What’s wrong?” Vim noticed my discomfort, and I sighed at him.

“Reminds me a little of a well. If it was a little more damp I’d likely hate it down here,” I told him the truth.

Vim chuckled, and before I could comprehend what he was doing he had reached over and wrapped an arm around me. He pulled me closer to him, and the lantern clanked as it swayed harshly thanks to the sudden movement.

Going a little still, I couldn’t believe it. He’s hugged me, and touched me before, but never so obviously or in such a way!

I enjoyed every moment of it as we turned and started walking again, heading ever deeper into the catacombs. “Did you grab me to distract me from your mother, and the other statues, or because you actually wanted to?” I asked him.

“A little of both,” he answered honestly.

I sighed at him, but grinned wildly all the same.

Chapter 310 An Update and a Mapple

Well. This wasn't good.

"Who is she, Vim?" Mapple asked with her stern voice.

Like always she was one extreme or another. Either she was furious with me, or full of lust. Never anything in-between.

"She's just a human. One who has known Renn for years, as has her family. By all rights they'd be seen as Society members, if Renn invited them properly. They've supported and helped her over the years and she them," I said calmly.

"He's lying, Chronicler. He shows up with her on his back, covered in wounds and tattered clothes, from a fire that rages still and took the bison family from us. There's more to this story," Mapple spoke quickly, but firmly. Like always even when in a rage she was somewhat collected.

The Chronicler huffed lightly as she leaned back in her chair. "The bison family is not lost to us. Little Angie lives on, and is strong," the Chronicler said, as if to remind Mapple.

Mapple shifted a little, her eyes narrowing as she glanced at me. "I suppose that is true... thanks to your wife. Since Oplar hadn't even noticed," Mapple mumbled begrudgingly.

"Neither had Renn," I noted. I wasn't going to let them use their lack of noticing to tarnish Oplar's name or loyalty. Not when Renn and Sillti hadn't noticed either.

“Oplar should have known better. She’s met Klamma and the rest many times,” the Chronicler though didn’t hesitate to argue with me about it.

It was my turn to shift a tad, and I wondered if I should press it or not.

I mean... they weren’t entirely wrong. Oplar really should have noticed. Angie smelled like a bison, and her stoic attitude and demeanor were only further proof of her bloodline. But at the same time I didn’t like the fact that I knew they’d use Oplar’s lack of insight against her, and soon.

I may be the only one with a vote being called for, but I was not the only one being scrutinized.

“If you’re actually claiming that woman had anything to do with the bison’s then I really wonder what you think of me. Plus if that’s the case why hasn’t Angie said anything? The two had dinner last night, yapping happily as they did,” I said. Renn and I had returned from the catacombs to find them stuffing their faces. Sillti had seemingly latched onto Link, so hadn’t returned to the mansio.

“I wasn’t claiming that human killed the bison, or even started the fire. I’m just saying you’re not telling the whole truth,” Mapple said as she glared at me.

I sighed at her and wondered how long this was going to continue. She seemed to have a vendetta at the moment, and something told me the real reason for it was something far more mundane... and it wasn’t Cat or the fires, or even anything related to the vote either.

“Vim hasn’t lied since entering this room, Mapple,” the Chronicler said gently.

Mapple shifted and glanced at the old woman, and I could tell that Mapple didn’t like to hear the truth.

“To be perfectly honest, if you have any doubt about the woman then just go ask Renn. Renn would have dealt with the woman herself had she been an issue. She’s become extremely overprotective of those in the Society and those she calls friends. Angie happens to be one of them,” I said.

Mapple’s glare returned to me, and I knew it was because I had brought up Renn.

Which was why I had done so. To see if my assumption was correct or not.

“Your wife,” Mapple stated, and I noted the tone she had used. “Is another matter entirely.”

It was my turn to glare at her. “How so?” I asked.

Mapple’s eyebrows met as her glare turned into a full on glower. “She has no allegiances. Yet associates quite a bit with certain types and not others,” Mapple said smoothly.

So the problem really was Renn.

Was it just the fact that I had started allowing her to call herself my wife, or was this something more? Had Renn said something? Or done something? Was Mapple's sudden offense to her serious, or just some kind of petty heartbreak?

"Mapple, I'll not allow such talk within my halls. Rennalee has become his wife in more than just title. She has friends throughout the whole of the Society, many of which are my sisters and brothers, and neither they or I will allow you to say otherwise," the Chronicler said, speaking calmly.

Both Mapple and I turned to look at the old woman and her dull white-eyes. "I'd not meant to insinuate anything... Ma'am..." Mapple mumbled hurriedly.

"Good. Because that girl fits our robes more than you currently do, so I'd hate to have to have that conversation," the Chronicler stated.

I heard teeth grind and fists clench, but I didn't turn to look at Mapple. I kept my eyes on the Chronicler instead.

"I take offense to that. I'll... admit she loves your religion, but she's not yet pledged herself to it," I said, choosing the Chronicler to now be the bigger danger of the two women.

Chronicler chuckled at me. "See? Vim's still Vim. And you may keep telling yourself that, Vim, for as long as you wish to," she said with a smirk at me.

Rolling my eyes I turned away, to sit down.

“You’d take a wife who was religious, Vim?” Mapple asked softly as I sat.

“Not sure yet. I’ll let you know once it happens,” I said.

Mapple’s deadly glare had become a sad one, and I did my best to forgive her for her earlier accusational outbursts.

She was a pitiful woman... even if annoying. It made it difficult to be truly upset or bothered by her. I knew she’d not ever actually harm Renn, or anyone else, so I knew her accusations and bluster were mere words and noise. Yet... I still was upset she had chosen to pick Renn as a target all of a sudden.

Unlike most of the Chronicler’s flock, Mapple was not a member of their church. She was in fact one of the very few who dutifully obeyed the Chronicler yet was a pagan all the same. A fault of being raised by the Chronicler’s sister. Her real one. The one that had been the strongest of the saintly sisters.

Mapple’s adoration and loyalty to the Chronicler came purely from that motherly love which had saved and raised her. I had always expected it to never last, yet here we were... hundreds of years later, and her devotion was as strong as ever. Even when the Chronicler outright called out her lack of faith so readily, almost as if insulting her while doing so.

“I see. So it’s still something in progress. Ha...!” Mapple grinned all of a sudden, and I noticed her entire demeanor change.

She had just relaxed. Greatly.

Glancing at the Chronicler, who sighed and shook her head, I realized she had noticed too... and had understood the reasoning behind Mapple's sudden change of heart as easily as I had.

Mapple had just assumed Renn and my relationship was still a what-if; not a destined and done-and-done thing. Like others she had just concluded, mistakenly, that I was simply indulging the woman and not taking her seriously.

"Fine. I'm going to go talk to Oplar then, I'll get her report of what's happened," Mapple then said as she turned to go.

"Don't start no fights, child. We have other concerns than to cause strife where there doesn't need to be any," the Chronicler said as she left.

"I know! I know!" Mapple picked up her pace, and hurried out of the room... acting like a young girl as she hurried away.

I shook my head at the woman as she shut the door and left. "Are all of your children like that?" I asked the Chronicler.

"More than I'd like to admit."

Hmph.

The Chronicler sighed as she rubbed her temple beneath her headdress. "So much drama lately. I'd be worried terribly if not for Saint Celine's prophecies finally coming to pass," she mumbled.

I took great effort in ignoring what she had just said and glanced at the shelf near her desk. The one without any letters.

"I'm surprised there are no letters for me," I said, hoping to steer her from bringing up prophecies again.

"Hm...? Why? What has happened to make you think urgency was needed?" the Chronicler asked as she sat up straighter.

"Well... Lumen's become all weird. The plague and wars. Those fires..." I suggested a few things that might have, or even should have, made someone in the Society need my help.

"Lumen is blooming magnificently. We've been given authority to open a new branch there, to be built near the guild. The wars and plagues torment the humans, not us, and those fires are a recent disaster. If any others have suffered from them we'll not know right away," the Chronicler smoothed some of my worries as I frowned at her.

"A new branch?" I asked, hoping I had misunderstood.

She nodded and smiled. "Brandy is doing a fine job, that girl. Plumb and a few others plan to visit Lumen soon, to aid in it."

Closing my eyes, I kept a sigh from escaping. “What type?” I asked.

“A new dioceses. A basilica will be constructed, with the possibility of a new cathedral in time,”
Chronicler said happily.

Of course.

Honestly I shouldn't be too pissed. This was a form of protection of its own. The churches of the surrounding nations had begun to try and take over Lumen since its inception, and it was inevitable one of them took hold. If Brandy and the rest of the Church of Songs took the lead and took that position themselves, then it was a sure way to limit and control the church's power and keep our people safe even longer.

The problem with this though...

“What do those in Lumen think of this?” I asked.

“I'm told the vote wasn't unanimous but it was clearly in favor of allowing it,” she said with a small frown. She was upset it wasn't unanimous.

Just great. What was I to do? There was no doubt that Lumen would split... There were many, like Merit, who couldn't get along with those of the cloth there. Tosh was the same. They'd leave the moment Plumb or her flock came in and took over, or even hinted at it.

The only hope I had was that Brandy and the rest were smart enough to keep it separated. To not force those at the Animalia Guild to mingle and co-exist with those of the church.

Although upset, and not sure what to do or say about it, the Chronicler didn't mind. Like usual she was not offended or bothered by my animosity to her religion, and her papacy.

"Do you even have the numbers for such a thing? Anymore?" I asked gently. It took more than just a few people to overlook a mighty church. Far more.

"We do. We have thirty six here in Telmik, I plan to send a few to assist Plumb," Chronicler said.

Thirty six...? "You're kidding me," I said. We had that many members here? Since when? Or was she including the humans?

She smiled at me. "Ah. To surprise you so. It's been a long time since I've been able to. Yes. There are two churches in our order, belonging to the Society, which you do not know about. Most of them have decided to put their skills to use, finally," the Chronicler said.

I slowly stood up.

Staying next to the chair, I studied the white-eyed woman who pretended to be a saint.

“Can we trust these people?” I asked her calmly.

“You know several of them, Vim. Lady Less is amongst them,” the Chronicler answered.

I blinked and relaxed a little. Enough to sit back down.

“Oh,” was all I was able to say.

Less was still alive...? I shouldn't be surprised. She was as tenacious as Landi... and should be, being her sister and all.

Chronicler giggled at me. “How amusing. Lady Less and some of her people will arrive in a few months. I look forward to you meeting them; there are many young children amongst that number. Or well... not so much children, I suppose. They're like your lovely new wife. Young but not,” she said.

My mind whirled at this new information. “Just how many members still exist do I not know about?” I asked.

“That's it, Vim. My orders biggest secret all this time is them. Thirty six extra people... or well, twenty seven if you wish to be exact. You already know of those like Randle and Mapple,” she said with a small laugh.

Randle...? I wasn't sure about that. He may not be included in that number for very much longer. We'd not talked in depth about it yet, and he had asked me to find him before leaving again so we could, but I had already gotten the feeling that he and she were on the outs.

Which was likely the very reason the Chronicler had summoned her flock. The same ones she's kept hidden all this time. It wasn't just because of Lumen and her church's expansion... it was to bolster her numbers with the devout and loyal.

Sighing softly, I shook my head. "That explains those trips to the west. Let me guess, those churches I had built all those years ago?" I asked. She's sent me to the western coastal cities a few times, though always with others like Mapple or Randle. I had always known she had a few non-humans under her command I hadn't known of, but I hadn't expected there to be so many. I had expected it to be just a couple. Not enough to man a warship.

She smiled and nodded.

I see. So I did know about them, in a way. I had built their homes myself. Funny... I had recently talked about those churches with Renn not too long ago. I had told her how I had built them because it had been a punishment.

"Fine. Just... let me know if you need help, or anything," I said resentfully.

She nodded. "Of course, Vim. Though... I plan to ask Rennalee first."

My eye twitched. "Careful."

“Oh...? Warning me now are you?” she asked with a smirk.

“Yes. But it’s not a threat. It’s a genuine warning. Don’t think you can manipulate her like you do me,” I said.

“Hm... I’ll take that to heart.”

You better.

“Still I must say. I am rather pleased, all things considered. Yes we’ve lost a few members... Brom, Trek, Angie’s family... but considering there’re wars and a deadly plague, this season has been a gentle one,” the Chronicler then said.

“Trek’s not dead yet,” I reminded her. Later this afternoon I was supposed to take Renn to meet him. So odds are I’d do the deed tomorrow morning, during sunrise as he wished, but still...

“Hm...” She nodded. “And new members. A lovely sheep and a trouble making bird, to name a few,” the Chronicler said.

“Fly...?” I asked. Trouble making?

Chronicler nodded and reached over to a corner of her desk. She brushed aside a few papers, and plucked out a letter. One that looked a little crumpled. It was likely something older, a few months old. "Young Fly is not taking well to the Bell Church," the Chronicler said as she held out the letter.

I stood and stepped over to her desk. Taking the letter, I took a deep breath and readied myself for bad news.

Quickly reading the letter from Plumb, I frowned. "And why did someone try to take the poor girl's bedroom?" I asked.

Supposedly Fly had gotten into a few fights with some of the members at the Bell Church. The main reason being one had tried to take over her bedroom.

"I'm not sure. Plumb is a wise woman, but regretfully her old age has muddled her sense of reasoning. Odds are there is more to the story, Vim. All I know is we must find her a new place. Or at least consider it, if things don't change. It's not pressing enough to send you now, but I've suggested that the next time you take a route that direction to pick her up, less the poor village suffers from more chaos," Chronicler said.

I dropped the letter back onto her desk and shook my head. "That bird is a trauma victim. They should be gentle with her," I said.

"And likely had been. Many at the Bell Church are victims of such trauma, Vim," Chronicler reminded me.

All the more reason they should not be tormenting the poor girl. For such religious people they were sometimes very callous. I'd wonder if it was because Fly wasn't a member of their cloth but I knew Plumb and others there were not the type to be cruel to those who didn't share her faith. Not enough to cause such distress, usually at least. But there was no doubt there'd be little things that could give Fly grief. Tiny little things that alone meant nothing, but could stack and stack until they became as overbearing as a huge mountain of grief and stress.

Maybe Fly was like Merit. One who was not afraid to voice her opinions.

When Renn hears about this she'll be furious.

"I'll take her to Tor's village," I suggested. There were other birds there. Chickens, and doves, but birds all the same. Plus they weren't as strict on their religious members. There was a mix in that village, pagans and religious devout living side by side. The Bell Church didn't really have that, so it bred such contempt and bullying on those who didn't conform. Just like at the Crypt, or the Summit. Some folks could ignore it outright, or live through and past it, but others like Merit couldn't. They'd rather die or bleed than just lower their heads.

"A good suggestion. Though possibly consider the Crypt or the Weaver's hut, as well. That would be shorter trips too, for the girl covered in feathers," Chronicler suggested.

Hmph.

"Still. I have a question to pry, if you'll allow," the Chronicler then said.

"What is it?" I asked as I went to sit back down.

“You claimed the creatures in Lumen were not monarchs,” she said.

“Because they weren’t?” I answered as I sat down. The chair creaked a little as I did.

“I have a hard time believing that. I’ve gotten many reports, and not just from our own people, about them. Towering monsters capable of crushing entire buildings are not things of common birth,” she argued.

“Yet they had been. I had not sensed any heart within them, even as I stood inside them. They had also died and perished upon the rupture of their actual heart, the organ. Monarchs would not have died like that,” I said.

“Some would,” she argued further.

I glanced around for the tiny little stoat. It wasn’t here.

It had been bothering Renn lately, though I blamed that on the heart she carried. It wanted to eat it, but all it could do was lick and suckle on it. Its mouth wasn’t big enough to actually devour it.

“Leave the child alone. Actually... you’re right. Where is she?” the Chronicler wondered, realizing quickly who I had been looking for.

“Who knows. But anyway, no. I firmly stand by my assessment. They had not been monarchs. Even if their hearts had been deep underground, in their roots or tentacles, I still would have sensed them. Since the pulsations would have been in their bloodstreams,” I said.

She hummed. “So strange... how often have you encountered such creatures, Vim?” she asked.

“Honestly very rarely. Maybe a handful of times in my life?” I said. Off the top of my head I thought of those like the Shadow Bear near the Owl’s Nest. Or Bray’s children.

Odds are those creatures in Lumen had been the same. Not monarchs, but simply descendants of them. Monstrosities and beyond normal reason, but just flesh and bone all the same. A large step removed from a true monarch, but outwardly almost one all the same.

“And what of your mentioning of going north?” she then asked.

I stayed still as I nodded. “A few reasons. My original route was cut short thanks to the fires, and I have a couple things I need to check up there. First is a report from Meriah. I had her look into something for me. Then I also want to talk to Crane, to find out what happened, and then of course I need to check on the locations up north I hadn’t checked on last trip. I’ll head north-east, then west and south again. I’ll be quick about it, and return here in a few months. I plan to stay near here for the next few years, unless I need to go elsewhere for any reason,” I said, informing her of my plans.

“Because of this vote...? That’s not like you, Vim,” she said calmly.

“No. Between Lumen and the plague filled wars, I just want to stay where I can be contacted as soon as possible. We have many locations that are at threat, or on the precipice of being so. I don’t want to take any routes that send me way out again, as I’d just done, to avoid complications,” I explained. Plus those locations, like Landi or Secca, would be safer than most thanks to how isolated, or how strong certain individuals at them were. They'd be fine if I put them lower on the list of importance for a few years.

The Chronicler nodded gravely. “Yes. As much as I fear to agree, you are right. Should we perchance set up a relay system?” she asked.

“That’s up to you. The few times we’ve used it never really made a difference, but you never know when it finally will,” I said.

“Hm... I’ll debate it. When do you plan to leave then?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I’d like to leave as soon as possible... but maybe I should take a tiny detour. I could go to the Bell Church and then head north from there, to Twin-Hills. If you think Fly’s situation is that dire,” I suggested.

“I believe it to be, yes. And Plumb, even in her old mind's faultiness, mentioned that if we weren’t careful we may lose her. I’d rather not.”

Right... “Then that’s the current plan, if nothing happens between now and my departure. What we can do is if you need to alert me, is use one of the relay locations. I’ll start stopping at each one along the routes, no matter what’s happening,” I said.

Chronicler nodded as she reached over to pick up a pencil. Likely to go about writing down orders and notes, concerning what we were talking about. "Then so it shall be," she stated.

Hmph.

I stood, deciding I could stop enduring this conversation then. If I had no requests for help, and there was nothing dire to address... then it was fine if I left.

I'd have us leave in a few days then. There was no point dawdling here.

"The fires. Are you not worried about them?" the Chronicler then asked before I could step away.

Ah. Damn.

"Yes. But I ran around in those flames for several days. Over a week. I had not seen or sensed anything odd. Unless you count running into Renn's human friend, I guess. But that happens sometimes, it's not like the world is very big anymore," I said.

"Isn't that the truth..." the Chronicler mumbled as she nodded and went to writing.

"We'll speak again. Before I leave," I promised as I stepped towards the door.

For a few steps she said nothing, as she scribbled whatever she found important enough to dedicate to paper.

Good. I had honestly expected more arguing, especially when I had opened the door earlier and found Mapple fuming.

Honestly this hadn't gone bad at all. Mapple had calmed down. There had been no letters requesting aid, of any kind, and although there were a few small problems to worry about like the fires or Lumen's expansion... all things were going rather smoothly.

Easy as it goes, I suppose...

"I'm happy for you Vim."

Pausing before the door, I turned to look at her. The Chronicler, the fake saint, was smiling gently at me... as if I was something pitiful.

"She isn't done changing you... but I'm glad to see what she's done so far is for the better. I know you're trying to keep her away from me, but make sure you let me say hello before you leave again. I'd like to see how far she's come since last we met," the Chronicler said.

Glaring at her, I resisted the urge to tell her no.

“She’s free to do as she wish. As you all are. And no votes, of any kind for any reason, will ever change that fact,” I said.

The Chronicler startled as I turned and opened the door. Walking out of her office and shutting the door behind me, I sighed as I stepped away.

Everyone was always scheming things. Trying to tip-toe around saying words, or doing certain things. Acting as if they knew better, or knew nothing at all... no matter what they knew or how they knew it.

It was tiring.

And I was tired of being tired.

So... let’s go find the one whose only schemes were little adorable things that made my heart beat with a real purpose. Ones without malice and scorn.

Renn’s schemes were lovable... even if sometimes terrifying.