

Non Human 311

Chapter 311 Oplar's Mailroom

Oplar's office was far cleaner than I had expected.

It was a large room, with many smaller rooms all connected to it. There was a huge square table in the center, but the center of it was raised and fashioned into large wall-like boards. They were littered with letters, notes and maps. They were the messiest part of the room, but they were still in an ordered fashion with not a one being unrelated to the stuff around it. Around the large table, except where there were open doorways to the other rooms, were shelves aplenty. Each shelf had rolls of scrolls, stacks of books, or bins full of papers and notes.

The whole room smelled of paper and ink, but there was also a strange smell of metal. Maybe silver or coins? It'd not surprise me if one of the rooms had boxes full of money or something, based off the smell.

"This is Nessa. And over there are her daughters, Bless and Laura," Oplar introduced me to her human workers, and I happily smiled in greeting.

"Oh...? Is she the one? Vim's wife?" Nessa hurried away from the shelf she had been standing in front of to approach. As she did her daughters, who both had been sitting at the square table in the center, stood up as well.

"She is the one indeed! So careful what you say, no talking about your fantasies of him you've had over the years, girls!" Oplar happily said as she stepped away to head into one of the side-rooms.

I stopped looking at her as I glanced at Nessa, the older woman who had stepped forward to extend her hand in greeting... who had flinched and groaned.

“Uh... she’s teasing. Really,” Nessa said quickly, as if embarrassed.

I smiled as I took her now fidgeting hand and shook it. “It’s okay; I know what she’s like. My name is Renn, it’s nice to meet you,” I said.

Nessa relaxed rather visibly as the two younger women approached to meet me too. Only one of them was dressed in the gray robes of the church, the other and her mother were dressed like common townsfolk.

“Renn? Where you from?” the one without the robe asked.

“The far north. Where it snows more than not,” I answered as the one in the robe held her hand out and smiled gently.

I took it and noted the thin fingers. She felt odd for some reason. Odd enough to make me question if she really was human or not. They were human though, I thought. Oplar had mentioned that they were not just humans, but from one of the orphanages the Society ran. At least, Nessa was.

“Laura. It’s a pleasure to meet you Renn, I’ve always wondered what kind of person Vim would find himself attached to,” Laura said as we shook hands.

I frowned. "You're not Bless?" I asked. She was the one wearing the robe!

Oplar's mighty laugh filled the room, even though she herself was still in the other room. "Right!" she shouted between her laughs.

I smiled gently as the girl in robes blushed a little, as her sister leaned forward and patted the girl in robes on the shoulder. "Ma' got us mixed up. But it's not their fault, I got married early," Bless said.

Oh...?

The three women smiled and giggled at each other, obviously finding humor in something they've all long since seen as a family joke or something.

The sight of them all acting so familiar made me somewhat jealous for some reason.

Not just because I longed for that familiar closeness... but also because I now wanted to work here.

If this was the kind of environment Oplar got to enjoy all the time, then it was no wonder she was such a jubilant person. I wanted this too!

"Still! I must say I'm very interested. I know this is likely rude, so you can brush it off if you want, but I really wish to ask..." Nessa stepped closer, and I smiled as I perked up as she glanced around... as if someone else would suddenly appear if she didn't. Then after confirming we were all alone, she nodded

and lowered her voice. "Vim. Is he the type to whisper? Or does he keep that monotone voice and attitude? Even when flirting?" she asked.

I couldn't help it, I laughed.

The three startled a little, but eventually went to smiling and giggling too. "He does whisper sometimes!" I told them.

"Aye he does! They flirt something mightily, like I told you!" Oplar said as she returned to the room.

I nodded. "Yes. He has an odd way of doing so, but he does indeed flirt with me often," I admitted.

"Gosh...! See! I told you we should have went!" Bless said to her mother.

"What? It's rude to intrude..." Nessa mumbled.

"Intrude...?" I asked Oplar who stepped over to me.

"To our party. Many of the humans were invited, but they all decided it was rude to intervene," she told me.

Ah... "Really...?" I asked the three.

The three nodded gently, and I felt oddly humbled.

Honestly I would have been more than happy to have the human members come too. If anything it had bothered me that they hadn't, and the few who had shown up had only done so to drop off food and drinks as if mere servants. But I understood why they hadn't, all the same. Plus...

Smiling at them, I wondered what to say or think. They had not come out of respect. To let us all feel comfortable, and have time alone.

Such a strange kindness.

"Well, I'd offer to let you three see it for yourselves but sadly we need to go. I'll be heading out again, Nessa," Oplar said as she lifted whatever she had gathered up in the other room. It was some kind of leather pouch, like a side bag. Maybe it was full of letters.

Nessa nodded gently at Oplar. "We shall do our best without you, O' dear leader," she said to Oplar.

Oplar chuckled and nudged me with an elbow as she did. "See Renn? I'm so important they can't wait to get rid of me!"

I sighed at her and glanced to the three women. "I feel for you. I bet half your duties are cleaning up her messes," I said.

"What! I take offense to that; I make bigger messes than that! They'll need multiple jobs to handle them!" Oplar declared, laughing as she stepped away to head for the door to her office.

I shook my head at her as Nessa and the girls smiled and nodded. "Farewell, then. It was nice meeting you Renn. Are you leaving with Oplar? Or?" Nessa asked carefully.

"Ah. No. I'm not leaving with her but I am leaving in a few days. With Vim," I said.

"Hm..." Nessa frowned and nodded, and I wondered if it'd bother them... Or Oplar, if I asked if I could come visit them again before I did.

I kind of wanted to spend time with them. I wasn't sure why, but...

"You can come visit them if you want Renn. Just don't bring Vim when you do, they'll write letters and spread who knows what kind of stories about you otherwise," Oplar said happily.

"What? Only a few, maybe two or three!" Bless said with a laugh as she stepped away to head back to her chair.

"We would not. Not a letter," Laura argued worriedly.

"I'd like to visit, actually. Do you all work every day here?" I asked.

"All but the holy day," Laura said.

Oh. I didn't know what day that was... but if it was just one day then I was bound to run into them again if I came here every day for the next few days.

"Okay. I'll come visit. I'll make sure to bring Vim too, when I do," I said as I turned to join Oplar. She had already opened the door and was now waiting for me.

"Please do!" Bless shouted from her desk.

"Yes. We'll look forward to it. I'll make sure to prepare snacks," Nessa said.

"Goodbye Renn," Laura said lightly.

Waving goodbye, I decided to do just that as I left.

Oplar shut the office door loudly with a huff, and I heard the small chatter of hushed whispers from the three women as we stepped away.

“Should I not?” I asked Oplar. Had that huff been one of annoyance?

“Huh...? Oh. No. You can visit. Nessa and her family are one of the few people I trust here. Fully. I’d not let them work in my mailroom otherwise, Renn,” Oplar said with a smile. A real one.

“Then...?”

“I’m tired. I’ve been up the last few nights, and my head still kind of hurts from all the drinking,” she told me.

Oh. “Yet you’re going to leave? Shouldn’t you rest?” I asked.

“I can’t. I have the vote letters to deliver, and exchange. Coming back here because of the fires put me behind schedule and stuff.”

I nodded. “Right... I forgot about those,” I said. So that was what that bag was. Either letters to inform people of the vote, or responses and letters to other members who wanted to talk about it with others.

“Don’t blame you. I’m actually kind of frustrated over it. Mapple had the nerve to suggest the other night that the church should take over the vote letters. That it was too important to be trusted to just me and my crew. The nerve of her!” Oplar’s voice had begun to rise as she spoke, and I found myself getting heated alongside her.

"Mapple? Really?" I asked. She had been rather rude the other night, asking odd questions about Cat... who I hadn't even met yet by then, so I hadn't been sure how to deal with it. Luckily Randle had been in the room with me when Mapple had confronted me, and he had kept most of the conversation focused on him and helped me out.

He was in actuality a kind man. Being a priest suited him greatly. Even if he hated Vim.

"Right? That stupid slug!" Oplar said loudly as we rounded a corner.

"Slug...? She's a slug?" I asked. No way!

"Huh...? Oh. No. She's not... I'm just angry, you know?" Oplar said apologetically, as if Mapple was the one to have heard her.

"Oh," I frowned at her. I had believed her, so I felt a little embarrassed.

"If you do visit the mailroom, make sure you don't let anyone in. Only a few people are allowed into that room unsupervised, so just assume anyone other than Ness and her family are trying to get in without permission and kick them out," Oplar said, changing subjects before I could ask what Mapple really was.

"Ah. Okay. Sure," I nodded quickly, accepting such responsibility without hesitation.

Mail was important. Lumen had a similar rule for their mailroom too. And...

Thinking of Lumen's mail room, I frowned. "Do you run Lumen's mail room too?" I asked.

"Yes. Indirectly. Nessa's brother runs it. A man named Gram," Oplar said.

"I met him! He was a grouchy man, but stern and a hard worker," I said. I honestly had not enjoyed working at the mail room in Lumen, even if I only spent the single day there, but not because the one in charge of it had been brunt and rude. Rather I had not liked how it reminded me that I had been missing out on relationships, and all the communications they brought, for so long.

Lomi's letter had been the first one I'd sent and received after all these years, so before then it had been a little painful. It made me feel sad that even very young humans had people to send letters to, sometimes many at once, and I had nothing and no one. Now though I wasn't as bothered by it. Oplar had brought me many letters, and I planned to write and send a few before we left here as well.

Oplar grinned at me. "Yeah? He had been such a baby when a boy, always running to Nessa and crying in her arms," Oplar said with a laugh.

Huh... I smiled at that. So that meant Oplar's been overlooking that human family for a while. That was kind of neat.

"Speaking of letters though... how does one go about submitting one here?" I asked. In Lumen I had asked Gerald to handle it for me. I'd written it, but had just given it to him.

“There’s a box in the mailroom. If I’m not here just leave it in that box for us members, it’ll get priority. Next time you go Nessa can show you. Just plop it on into there and I’ll make sure it gets to where it needs to. Or at least sent off by someone who will, if I don’t take it or Vim,” Oplar explained.

I nodded and smiled. A box. Okay.

I’ll drop a few into it before we leave then. That would give me an excuse, to give Vim, as to why we needed to go her mailroom as well.

When I do I’ll also leave one for Oplar herself. I bet she’d enjoy that.

“So uh... since we’ll not be seeing each other for a while, can I ask something for the road?” Oplar then asked.

“Hm?” I smiled and tilted my head. What’d she need or want?

“You and Vim. You went downstairs right? What for?” she asked with a huge smirk.

Oh...? “How’d you know?” I asked. Vim and I had gone down there a little after breakfast the other day. We had gone down there from a room near the mansio. A room that had looked like a storeroom, which had been a little dirty and dusty. Basically a place that not only hadn’t looked frequented, but had been out of sight and mind.

Oplar's smirk turned into a wry grin as she shrugged lightly. "Jelti saw you two. She thought you two had entered one of those storerooms to be alone, and... you know. But then she remembered there was an entrance in that room, and so..." Oplar explained.

"There really are no secrets here are there? So much for a holy place," I said lightly.

Oplar guffawed at me, and laughed heartily as she nodded. "Isn't that true!"

Smirking alongside her, I sighed and nodded. "We just walked around down there... and then used the baths. He was trying to be nice, he knows I like to bathe even though he doesn't. I think he feels bad for some reason, he's been really gentle with me lately," I told her.

Oplar's laughing softened, and then she went quiet as she pondered my words. "Baths...?" she mumbled.

"Down below," I said gently, to remind her of them.

She frowned and shook her head. "I didn't know there were any down there."

Oh...? "If it was meant to be a secret, you better go with me to beg Vim for forgiveness since you're the one who asked," I said, teasing her.

She flinched. "Thank goodness I'm leaving!"

Laughing at her, I nodded. "But yes there are. Really big ones! More like giant pools, really. They're fancy and make bubbles too, somehow. It had been nice," I said.

She sighed at me. "I know I had asked but now I just feel jealous. Even if I found a man I doubt he'd do something as silly as take a bath with me like that, all romantic like," she complained.

"Hm...? Why not?" I asked. It was romantic, but Vim didn't really do it to flirt like that. We had genuinely just sat there talking. And not even really about anything important. The most important thing had been him promising to go get a few proper set of clothes before we left. He had offered to let me pick them out, and go shopping with him here in town.

"Not sure. It's probably because when I think of the really romantic types, they're not the type I want. I want a more serious man... so maybe I just assume he'd not be into something like that, I guess," Oplar said as she pondered it.

Oh. Right. She wanted a man strong enough to protect her. That meant one not only strong physically, but emotionally and mentally. A warrior, basically.

"Would you want that though?" I went ahead and asked.

Oplar hummed a little as she thought about it. "Maybe. No? Yes? I don't know... I'll have to think about it. Wouldn't it just turn into a lovemaking session? Then you'd have to bathe again anyway, right? Hm..." Oplar rambled and I felt a tiny blush form.

Right. That was usually what people assumed, I guess.

Great. Is that what everyone thought of when Vim and I took baths together? I mean... they weren't outright wrong, were they? That was what one expected...

I huffed as I thought of Lumen. My bet originally with Vim had been to take a bath together. I had lauded that fact loudly, and proudly. To everyone.

My face grew hotter as I realized they had all interpreted it the same way Oplar had.

Great. Just great. Stupid Vim.

"Maybe I would...? I don't know Renn. I'll admit lately I've been thinking of a lot of odd things, thanks to you, but this takes the cake. It's so silly yet somehow strangely important all of a sudden," Oplar then said.

"Huh...?" I made her think odd things?

She sighed and nodded. "I'll ponder it. Alongside all the rest of the stuff you've said and done," she decided with a nod.

"What stuff...?" I asked carefully. What did she mean?

"You and Vim. And the things you like and dislike. Watching and talking to you has made me re-assess my own desires a little. It's weird, but I don't know how else to explain it," she told me.

We slowed a little, and once we came to a stop Oplar gave me a small smile. One that was a little too timid for her face. It didn't suit her.

"I've not been rude to you, have I?" I asked softly, worried.

Oplar's smile disappeared as she quickly shook her head. "Heavens no! Not at all! You've been a joy to travel with, Renn, and I wish I could keep doing so! I just... well..." Oplar shifted and glanced around, and I knew it was because she had just shouted a little. Maybe she didn't like drawing attention to herself here in the halls of the religious. After a moment she eventually calmed down and sighed. "I find your relationship with Vim lovely. I hadn't realized he could be so gentle in that way. I mean... he's always been gentle, Renn. I've seen him do things for us members that most wouldn't believe. Even tiny little things. But for you it's like all of his gentleness is... just always constant? And more pure, I guess? It just confirms I've been right all this time. So it's a good thing, really," she said.

"Confirms?" I asked.

"That I want love. Not just a physical relationship. Not just a child. I want a companion," she answered without hesitation.

I gulped at the serious and pure words, and nodded. "I'm sure you'll find one, Oplar," I said gently.

She really will. She was such a lovely, happy person. How could someone not love her?

Oplar gave me a lovely smile as she nodded back. "I hope so."

How lovely, yet sad all the same.

I was glad now I hadn't mentioned to her that I had been jealous of her workplace. It may have seemed more like an insult to her than genuine, if this was how she truly felt. My longing to have simple friends, and responsibilities as she did, might have seemed very rude and shallow. Especially since the truth was... I would not trade my position for hers, ever.

There was a strange sense of wonder knowing someone was jealous of me. Of what I had. I wonder if this was the first time someone had so genuinely said such a thing to me before? Others have mentioned it, sometimes off-handedly and other times a little more seriously... but had any of them said it so purely before? Had any phrased it in such a way, that had actually been affected so visibly?

For a few moments we stood there, awkwardly smiling at each other... and then Oplar stepped forward. She extended her long arms, and didn't even hesitate to wrap me in a hug.

I returned it and laughed as we squeezed each other. She really was strong.

“I’ll be off Renn. Stay safe until I see you again,” Oplar said warmly.

“Mhm. Stay safe and stand tall, Oplar.” And I vowed once again to try and find someone for her.

I still wasn’t sure how I’d accomplish it... but I’d try all the same. Somehow.

She sniffed and squeezed one last time... and then we separated.

I gulped and wondered if I should go with her. I wasn’t sure where she was headed now, since she had mentioned earlier that she had a few stops before leaving... but...

Yet as she nodded and stepped away, to head down another hallway... I realized why she had said goodbye.

Randle was approaching. He must have been waiting for us to stop talking.

As he approached I watched Oplar as she stepped past him. The two nodded to each other, but said nothing. It seemed they really didn’t get along.

It was a little sad honestly. It wasn't like they hated each other... they just simply had their own beliefs, and were so deeply dedicated to them that they didn't allow themselves to see past them.

"It seems you two have become very good friends," Randle said as he stepped closer to me.

I nodded. "She's a good person," I told him, unafraid to say it.

Randle smiled at me. "She is. Regretfully my... associations have diluted our relationship. Though here in the future that might change a little, mayhaps," Randle said gently.

Oh...? "Should I comment on that or not?" I asked him.

"I'd rather you didn't. Not yet," he answered with his gentle tone.

I nodded, and obliged him. Instead I turned, and gestured to see if he'd be willing to walk with me or not. I wanted to go find Vim now.

Randle obliged me in turn, and we soon went to walking side by side. Though not as quickly as I had been with Oplar. Randle was a slower walker than her.

"I've come to make a request of you, Renn," Randle said quietly as we walked.

Glancing at the priest, I wondered what to say or do. Vim and I hadn't spoken much about Randle yet, so I wasn't sure just yet what to think of him.

He hated Vim... but at the same time respected him. Plus he had in a way already proven to me how trustworthy he was.

He had held my ancestor's heart, and Celine's letter, all this time. Him not informing Vim about them was one thing, considering both his aversion to Vim and Vim's aversion to prophecies... but he seemingly had also not informed the Chronicler about them either. Vim had found that very interesting. It told me that at least for things that were a personal matter, that were special, I could trust this man. So I wanted to. I really did. Even if he seemed to be at odds with those I loved.

"Are you going to ask it while Vim isn't here on purpose?" I asked carefully.

We weren't alone in the hallway. These large hallways of the Cathedral were often the opposite of empty. Right now we were alone enough we could talk without being heard, especially by humans, but I was still not going to say certain things without care. Just in case.

Randle chuckled. "Possibly. I will admit I had hoped to find you alone... though I would have asked it in front of him all the same," he admitted.

"Oh...? Then okay then," I said, nodding.

He smiled at me, in such a way that I was reminded once again that he was old. Very old. He had just smiled at me as if I was a young child in his eyes. I'd consider it condescending if not for the fact that he genuinely was old enough to look at me so. Plus I'd seen him smile in the same way to Vim, so it was likely just something he did without realizing it. And not with malice.

"I have a letter. One I'd like delivered without anyone knowing about," he said.

"Even Oplar...?" I asked. That was odd. Oplar was not a part of the Chronicler's group, so if he was worried about such a thing like her finding out then it should have been fine to utilize Oplar's services.

"Especially Oplar," Randle stated.

"You just saw how much I cherished her, are you sure you wish to say that in front of me?" I asked.

He smirked. "I say it not because of that, Renn. Rather... because if Oplar found out, she'd then become visibly friendly with me. And I can't have that. Not yet," he said quietly.

I slowed a little, and noted the approaching group of sisters down the hallway. They had rounded the corner and were quietly talking amongst themselves, but I knew better than to think they were harmless.

Those were the Chroniclers people. Her eyes and ears, as Vim called them.

“Should we talk in private?” I offered.

“Yes. We should,” Vim said.

I startled, and spun to glare at the man who had just made the hairs on my tail stand up.

Vim was right behind us, behind me, and smirking at me as I hissed at him. “Jeez! What’d I say about this!” I angrily said.

Randle next to me paused, and I tried not to notice the fact that he had not jumped or startled at all. Either he had noticed Vim this whole time, which was possible, or he had nerves of absolute steel like Vim.

“That you’d stuff your tail in my mouth. Feel free to do so,” Vim answered with a smirk.

I’m doing it! Tonight! My heart was still thumping. It wasn’t fair. This hallway was made of smooth stone. The type that made footsteps sound loud, and helped voices carry a far distance. Vim should not have been able to sneak up on me like that, even with my ears beneath my hat.

“Careful. He might bite it off in his sleep,” Randle warned gently.

“Not if he gags to death first,” I said.

Vim's smirk grew. "Wouldn't be the first tail to suffocate me."

Randle sighed as I glared at the man who looked far too amused at my disgruntled self.

"The fact it probably wouldn't bother you annoys me more than it should," I said with a huff.

He frowned. "It'd bother me. Who knows where that tails been? Knowing you, you've even painted with it and stuff so I bet it's got a bunch of filthy stuff on it," he teased.

The fact he was right made me even more upset.

That's it. I'm totally messing with him tonight.

Even if he doesn't fall asleep, I'm doing it anyway!

Or at least I'll slap his face with it. He was so scared of touching my tail and ears, for whatever reasons, so I bet it'd be quite unsettling for him. Maybe just as unsettling as it was for him to startle me like he did.

Vim's lovely smirk grew a tad, as if he could tell what I was planning... so I smirked back.

Two could play his game.

Hopefully my attempts didn't backfire on me, though.

Chapter 312 Trek

Studying Renn and Trek, I felt oddly at ease.

The two were sitting on a small bench, on a small outcropping on the roof of the Cathedral. We weren't far from the mansio, and other Society areas, but we were alone and away from everyone. It allowed the two to talk quietly, without being bothered or interrupted, while also allowing Trek to watch the oncoming sunrise peacefully.

It'd be his last sunrise. And somehow Renn seemed to be doing a perfect job of being there for him through it, yet quietly distant enough to not bother him while doing so.

How did she do it? She had a smile. A warm gaze. She had shed a few tears during their conversation so far, but nothing too bad. Nothing too wild, like the full on sobbing and weeping she did occasionally.

It made me jealous somehow. And made me wonder why I had been apprehensive about this these last few days.

I hadn't needed to worry after all. Somehow that made me very proud.

Trek was an odd man. One with a human appearance but with a mind more akin to Nann and Nasba. The type of mind that was little more wild and uncontained than a human's would be. He was quiet, and simple, but had strange wisdom all the same. One beyond a human's capability. Not because a human couldn't be wise, but instead because a human simply couldn't be what they weren't.

They barely lived long enough to be themselves sometimes, after all.

"And then there's us..." I whispered as I thought of the man sitting behind me.

I shifted enough to see the reflection in the window. To see the priest sitting not far behind me. He was still sitting calmly on the bench near the wall, hands clasped on his lap, and looking as much at peace with himself as Trek did.

Randle's ability to sit for long periods without issue annoyed me. Because it reminded me of myself.

I knew what it was like to sit still for long periods. I knew it well. And I knew how no matter how still or serene one looked, the mind within could be a raging storm unlike no other.

Usually I'd say the priest's mind was as serene as he looked... but I suspected right now it was far from it. Randle has begun to, unwillingly, step outside of his comfortable box he called his life... and was doing it in odd ways, with odd concerns as he did.

Sometimes our kind simply grew so smart and wise that they became stupid. As if going in a full circle, or something.

Well... I suppose I shouldn't outright call the man stupid.

His methods were fitting, honestly. For a man such as himself.

His request of Renn had been simple... but momentous.

He had a letter. For Lilly. A woman he had once tried to banish and kill.

A letter to beg for help.

"It shouldn't be long now," Randle said lightly, likely because he had noticed my look.

"Hm. Renn's grabbed his hand, to hold it as they watch the sunrise. She's a gentle woman," I said, agreeing with him.

"And what does that make you, O' Protector?" Randle asked.

I'd have narrowed my eyes, since usually such a statement was accompanied with a snarky tone... but this time it hadn't been.

Turning, I shifted just enough to face Randle but remain able to see out the window. I'd have to turn my head a little to accomplish it, but I wanted to keep an eye on Renn and Trek until the end. Just in case.

Last thing I needed was for Renn to try and take the man's life herself. I didn't think she'd try, or that Trek would ask her to, but you never knew anymore.

"I've always tried to be gentle with our members," I said honestly.

Randle didn't even blink as he held my gaze. "Just our members?" he asked.

"Well... no. I was raised to be gentle to the whole world. A price of being blessed with my strength. It was a mercy forcefully instilled within me. However, that mercy does diminish and even disappear when our members are weighed against the world," I told him.

"Some would praise that," he said quietly.

"Only some?" I asked with a smirk.

Randle finally broke his serene peaceful look as he glared at me. "What would you have me say, Vim? My faith gives me one law. The Society another. I break a law no matter which side I take," he said.

"I wasn't telling you to. Nor do I expect anyone to. Even though everyone seems to think otherwise, or have simply forgotten, one of my agreements with Celine was to bear that burden for them. To do what they, what you all, cannot," I reminded him.

Randle blinked and sighed. "So true. To be honest I too have pondered that. Most of our members don't even know of your agreements with Saint Celine. Or only know portions of them. I used to think it was fine, since as long as you followed them dutifully it mattered not... but maybe their lack of knowing, or caring to, is partly to blame for their recent antics," Randle said.

"See? Too wise. Too wise for your own good," I said.

Randle tilted his head at me, which told me he hadn't understood my meaning. But it was fine.

Looking away from him, I stared out the window at Renn and Trek. The sun was rising, albeit slowly.

"Think he'll still ask for death?" Randle whispered. Dared to.

"Yes. Renn would not be crying otherwise," I said. Her face was glistening. She was weeping as we spoke.

"A pity."

I nodded. It was.

“And so too is it a pity she has such a bleeding heart, Vim. I am glad for it, of course... but... honestly it may have been better for us all for your wife to have been colder of heart than you,” Randle said gently.

“So that she could do what I can’t? Or to force me to do what I won’t?” I asked him.

“Both.”

Hmph.

Watching Renn as she heaved and breathed, trying to contain her weeping, I wondered if I should hold her while we slept tonight. Or well, this morning. The sun was just rising, but we’d not been to bed yet. Not since the other night. Maybe an early nap, or outright slumber, would do her good after this. She’d likely appreciate it.

“You seem to vastly cherish her,” Randle then said, as if he could hear my thoughts.

“I’d not trade her for the world,” I said.

“How about for the Society?”

The window cracked.

A giant crack, starting at the bottom left corner, shot upward and outward through the pane. It branched, and I half expected it to shatter as the crack reached the other side of the panel.

Once the small room quieted, and the window stopped breaking, I shifted ever so slightly... as to make sure I didn't just fall through the floor. Some of the stones I stood on had shifted. The bricks, though heavy and numerous, had barely withstood me. I'll need to check this area of the building later, to make sure it didn't collapse and kill a bunch of people.

"I... My apologies, Vim. That had been mighty rude of me," Randle apologized, and sounded not only genuine as he did so... but calm too.

Glancing at the man, I glared at him. "I hate that you aren't scared of me," I said truthfully.

Randle finally smirked. "Really? Is that why you've always been curt with me?"

"No. But it's a thing all the same," I said.

He sighed at me, but his smile remained. "Funny. I wonder why? Are you really that prideful? I had not thought you the type," he said.

“Huh? Oh. No. I’m not that kind of prideful to be offended by someone braving my sight. Rather it just tells me how strong your faith is. It means you don’t fear death at all, because your faith is greater than even things you can’t comprehend. In all my life I’ve only met a few men with such strong convictions, and never once have I ever been able to break them in any way. Rather than hate you, it makes me respect you, and that’s what I hate,” I told him.

Randle sat up a little straighter, and for a small moment I studied his shocked expression... but I looked away to check on Renn and the duck, just in case.

For a few long moments, I watched the two in the distance as they watched the sun rise. The two had gone quiet. They weren’t talking anymore... and were just basking in the moment.

With the way they were holding hands, and the way Renn was crying, you’d almost think they were related. Or lovers. Husband and wife maybe. It made me jealous.

“Thank you Vim.”

I blinked and turned to look at Randle. He had lifted a hand to wipe at his face. I frowned as I watched him wipe a tear away.

“Thank you. I don’t think I’ve ever received such a handsome compliment before,” he said softly.

I shifted, for a different reason, and was glad the window didn’t shatter this time. The stones beneath me did shift a tad, but not enough to dislodge and break the window again.

“Hm...” I nodded, and said nothing more... because I wasn’t sure what else to say.

I had been of course serious in my remark... but I hadn’t meant to make the man actually shed a tear over it.

Maybe he was just emotional. From not just all the stuff happening, like with the Chronicler, but also the scene before him. Trek and Renn.

Had... had I ever seen him cry before?

Surely, right?

I mean... he was a very religious man... those types, those like him, they were usually sentimental... right?

For some reason it bothered me that I couldn’t remember him ever crying before. In all these long years, full of strife and sorrow... I don’t think I’ve ever even seen him shed a tear.

“Why have you and I not talked before? Why did it take this long? Have we wasted these years?” Randle then asked, though it sounded almost as if he was asking himself... or maybe his gods, instead of me.

“Now, now, Randle. Don’t go becoming friends with me, that’s no fun,” I said as I watched Renn’s ears droop a little.

Trek had just said something. That had had made Renn lower her head and close her eyes.

Had he just asked her to come get me...?

Glancing away from them and to the distant sky... I wondered if that half-risen sun was enough for Trek. Or... maybe he wanted the end to come during the sunrise, not after.

Looking back at the pair, I realized I had not mistaken it. Renn was about to stand up from the bench.

“It’s time,” I said as I stepped away from the window.

I didn’t hurry, but I felt like I was rushing all the same as I went for the door. Opening the door to the balcony area, I stepped out into the chilly morning world right as Renn stood from the bench.

She noticed me quickly, and her face scrunched up at the sight of me. I tried not to smile too largely as I approached, since I knew she’d likely grow upset with me if I grinned too largely during the current moment of sorrow and pain.

Yet I couldn’t help it. Her face was a wreck of tears, snot, and grief... but the source of it all was beautiful. She was beautiful, her heart was beautiful.

How many could weep so strongly for a man they had only met a few times? Who they had only spoken to for a few hours?

Such pure emotions and the strength to feel and face them was what I felt drawn to. Because I wanted to share in them.

To share my own with her.

“Vim...” Renn mumbled my name quietly as I stepped up to the bench, and I glanced down at her hand.

It was still holding Trek’s. She wasn’t letting his hand go.

Hopefully she wasn’t squeezing too hard. Trek wasn’t as weak as some ducks, but he wasn’t strong either.

“Thank you, Rennalee. For sitting with me,” Trek said to her.

She turned, her face scrunching up again as she let out a tiny whine of discomfort. She visibly struggled for a few moments, and then took a deep breath.

“Yes... thank you too,” she finally got some words out, and then she sniffed and nodded.

“Mhm... Goodbye Rennalee. I hope every pond you land in is calm and warm, and all your eggs sing noisily,” Trek bid her farewell as their hands separated.

“Mhm...!” Renn made a heart wrenching sound as she nodded, and then she stepped backward. She almost bumped into me, so I reached out to pat her back. To let her know it was okay, and to be careful.

She turned, glanced at me just long enough to break, and then hurried away.

She ran strangely slowly, for her, and she wobbled as she did. I worried for her as she nearly fell over right before the door, and then disappeared beyond it.

Hopefully Randle would be kind enough to sit with her as she wept.

“Such a kind woman. I almost wish to live just because of how bad it feels to hurt her so,” Trek said.

“Almost?” I asked as I glanced at him.

Trek wore a kind smile. “Almost.”

I nodded, and sighed as I sat down next to the duck.

He shifted a little, but not because he himself had done so. I had sat a little too harshly, and the bench had moved because of it.

"I know, Trek. I do. But I have to ask all the same. It's part of the process. Are you sure?" I asked, hoping he didn't take offense.

"Hm. I had wondered if you would ask one last time. I'm not offended. Yes. I'm sure," he answered.

He hadn't looked away from the sunrise once since Renn had left.

"Okay."

Reaching over, I grabbed the duck by the back of the neck. I did so tenderly. Gently. Without any twitching, or shifting. I rested my hand, cupped against the back of neck, with the same easiness as I would hold a newborn baby.

He'd feel my hand, but no pressure. No strain. And no hesitation.

"Thank you Vim," Trek whispered.

“Goodbye Trek. May you soar on your next journey too,” I said.

He smiled again... and right after he took a deep breath, I squeezed and turned my hand.

The action had been instant. Like turning the handle on a door. One moment Trek was sitting up straight, with a smile, the next his head was turned at an impossible angle.

His neck had broken cleanly. A little quietly, strangely. Only his hands had twitched, and only for a single moment, and only once.

His heart had gone still. His deep breath had slowly released itself, and his lungs had not tried to inhale another. He didn't tremble after, or twitch. His eyes didn't move.

It had been a smooth death.

I had worried over it. He had wanted me to end him this way, so that he could watch the sunrise as it happened... so that even if he survived for a few minutes after the deed, the sight of the sunrise would remain and stay with him through it all.

Yet it seemed it hadn't been needed. He had perished instantly.

“Goodbye,” I whispered as I held his head and neck, to make sure he didn’t fall over just yet. His head was limp in my grip. Lifeless. If I let his neck go he’d slump over and maybe even forward, off the bench.

I knew sometimes that the brain could keep thinking. Even after such a total and complete cessation to a bodies functions. So just in case... just in case...

Even if his eyes had already dulled. Even if his eyelids had already half-closed. I’d hold his head steady, and let him watch the sunrise to the end.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I looked away from him. I instead chose to look out at his sunrise.

Hopefully it had been beautiful to him. Hopefully his last sunrise had been worth it.

It was a little cloudy. A little windy. But maybe it was perfect all the same, to him.

“All those piers. All those times we had to drain and refill that pond...” I said as I remembered the dozens of times I’d helped him do such things.

There had been times those ponds had started to empty. Drying out. It had taken a lot of effort to renew and fill them back up. It was the natural order for such ponds to come and go, just as rivers and lakes did over great lengths of time. But Trek of course had not wanted to allow that. Come hell or high water he’d keep the pond his family had grown up in clean and healthy, no matter what.

Guess I'll never need to worry over those ponds again.

A cry drew my eyes to the nearby door. The broken window next to it was just cloudy enough I couldn't see within it, but I didn't need to. Renn's weeping was noisy enough that I didn't need to see her to know what she was doing.

I'd seen it before. Several times.

Her. On the ground. Curled up in a tiny ball, with her tail wrapped around herself.

Weeping her massive, yet fragile, heart out.

Poor girl. She had been so happy earlier. Both Oplar had left; saying goodbye with love and good things to say, and then Randle had gone and asked her a favor. One that had made Renn swell with pride.

She had been so jubilant. So happy. Even when upset that I had startled her, sneaking up on her and Randle as they talked, she had beamed a huge smile at me while grumbling and threatening me with things far too cute to be threats at all.

She had been pure bliss itself.

Then this. In less than a quarter of a day later, she had gone from one of the happiest women on this planet to one now crying her heart out.

What was I to do though?

She had wanted to be like me. To live my life. To join me on my path.

I had warned her. I had. Several times. She's had plenty of opportunities to step away. To separate from not just me, but what I did.

"Maybe she still will," I whispered.

I blinked as I realized that was why I had been worried. Why I had stressed over her spending Trek's last moments with him, together.

Yes. I was worried. That this would hurt her. Deeply. Scar her for life.

What if she couldn't endure? What if she couldn't persevere?

She had endured Ruvindale. Lumen and all its chaos. She had endured Landi and her monarch. The plague and the boy. Miss Beak and those mercenaries, or rather more particularly that man. The brother of the one we had left at the Crypt. She'd also seen and watched me punish Tim, and execute Rollo...

By all rights she should have already endured greater heartache. Lumen's chaos she had blamed on herself, unjustly, in part. Ruvindale had been painful because it had been so sudden. A home she had not even settled into yet had gotten destroyed and ripped asunder. And all the other events to boot, each one making tiny cracks upon her heart.

Yet... there was a different depth to the wounds made by moments like these.

A different kind. A deeper pain.

A more personal ache.

Spending the last moments with someone who was a friend, only to take their lives yourself... was harder than slaughtering a million enemies. It was harder than burying friends and loved ones, slain by nature or foes.

Most couldn't do it. Most couldn't do it even when they needed to.

Turning my head, I glared at the head I held in my hand. The one a little lopsided. A little tilted.

He was lucky he had been a good man. He was lucky he had been so humble in his request, and had found my wife so lovely.

I'd have torn his head off otherwise just now.

Renn's wails grew softer, yet to my ears they grew louder all the same. I heard Randle's soft voice amongst her weeping. He was praying. Knowing him he had knelt down next to Renn, placed his hand on her back and gone to praying for Trek.

It should be me there next to her. Holding her.

Instead I held the head of a dead man. The very one who had cut her soul so deeply.

"Please stay strong," I begged and pleaded as I listened to the woman who had claimed my heart cry in sorrow.

Please.

For yourself.

For me.

For the Society.

Because if she broke... if I lost her over this... or any of the future cracks that would inevitably come...

I'd likely break too.

Then... who knows what I'd break afterward.

Chapter 313 Ventures To Be, Shared

"He could barely look me in the eyes when we said goodbye! So adorable," Siltti said happily.

Angie groaned as she reached over to grab one of the toasted breads she and I had made for breakfast.

"Why leave in the morning at all?" I asked as I too reached out for a piece of bread.

Angie sat next to Siltti, who sat across from me at the table in the mansion's front room. Cat was still upstairs, snoring the morning away. It seemed the young woman had become rather lazy since meeting me, or maybe she was still recuperating from her journey south and eventual meeting of Vim during those fires. Vim had not only hurt her he had supposedly carried her without much rest, and knowing Vim it had been harsher than Cat had explained it to be.

"Jeez Renn. You don't linger, it's improper," Siltti said with a smile at me.

Linger...?

I glanced at the young bison she sat next to, and noted the twitching eyes as Angie chewed on her bread.

She was growing annoyed over Sillti's love-talk, and it showed.

To be fair it was time she could talk about something else. Sillti's been rambling on about Link and their new romance for most the morning. I honestly was very happy for her. I was of course not sure yet if their relationship was serious or not, since it was so hard to tell with our people sometimes, but at the very least at the moment both Sillti and Link seemed absolutely in love and were enjoying every moment of it.

How could I not be happy over such a thing? Even if I was tired of hearing how adorable Link was when he acted timid.

"He's a very nice man. I'm glad you all convinced me to come here and not leave the Society, I'd not have met him otherwise," Sillti said with a smile to me.

"I'm glad too," I said.

Angie shook her head as Sillti happily giggled, acting like a young girl in love for the first time.

I mean... I understood it. I did.

Link although a monster of a man was as timid as the tiniest mouse. And it seemed Sillti found such a thing to be insanely attractive and lovely. Where I would have been bothered by such tepidness, like him not being able to look me in the eye over merely saying goodbye after a night of romance, she latched onto it as if it was a treasure without compare.

The reason was very obvious.

Link had the size, the strength, and the age to act snobbish and rough. His appearance alone was intimidating. If he had been a human, or maybe even any other non-human male, he likely would have been very braggadocios and proud. Yet he was everything but. He was a complete pushover, gentle beyond the word's meaning, and seemed to be quite a romantic to boot.

The man was likely everything Rollo wasn't, or hadn't been, and thus Sillti's happy fascination with him.

Yet it just seemed... so quick. So instantaneous.

It bothered me for some reason. They had just met, and she was already talking as if they would soon be wed and living together and all the other stuff that came with it. It was one thing if it was just them having a little fun... but that was not at all what she saw their budding relationship as.

Maybe I was the weird one. No one else seemed to be bothered by the sudden relationship that had sprouted without warning, other than Angie of course. But she didn't count; she seemed to be disgusted by anything remotely romantic. Even the hint of flirting made her gag.

"I'm going to go have lunch with him later. Would you like to join us Angie?" Sillti asked, not hesitating to invite her.

"No," Angie said without hesitation.

Sillti's smile softened but only a tad. If anything she seemed a little happy over the young bison's quick denial. "He worries for you. He even offered to let you live with him if you'd like, or near him. I guess there are a few rooms in his hallway that are available. I plan to pick one too, so we could all be together if you'd like," Sillti told the girl.

"I'd rather live in the sewers," Angie said.

Sillti laughed, and I recognized she hadn't realized Angie had been completely serious in her statement.

Though... maybe it hadn't been the whole truth.

Link had been Angie's family's friend. He had been close with her father.

It made me wonder and worry for the young girl.

What should Angie do...? What would she do? Where would she go?

Randle, upon noticing that Angie was one of us and not a human child, had stopped any effort in taking her to one of the orphanages. Angie had oddly taken an interest in them, but I wasn't sure yet if she had gone to look at them or not.

I personally hoped she didn't choose the human orphanages, no matter how nice they were. But it's not like I'd stop her if she did. She did look like a child, and was one, even if she didn't act it.

"So you plan to stay here Sillti? At least for now?" I asked.

Sillti glanced at me and nodded quickly. "Oh yes. Definitely."

Good. I wasn't sure what to think of her quick latching onto Link, or his seemingly acceptance of it too, but it was better than the alternatives I guess.

"Why not just move in with him then? Share his bed? Is it even big enough for the two of you?" Angie asked as she side-glanced Sillti.

Sillti laughed at the bison, reached over and patted her shoulder. "It's huge! You have to crawl out of it!" Sillti said.

Angie's face scrunched up in disgust. "I shouldn't have asked..." she mumbled.

Smiling at her discomfort, I realized that was a funny thought though. Link was a massive man... his bed must be mighty indeed.

Maybe that was what Vim needed. He sometimes seemed to not relax and lay as leisurely as he'd wish, because he worried over the bed breaking from his strange weight.

Rather than a massive bed... maybe he needed one made of his steel...?

I should suggest it. He had brought up not too long ago us making a home somewhere, for us and us alone. I bet he'd like that, or at least find the idea amusing.

"I'm glad the Society seems so vibrant. You and Vim. Henrietta and her family. Hands even has found someone he's trying to court! Just recently! It's so much better than the Summit, I can't believe I ever thought it was stupid to leave," Sillti said happily as she reached out for a piece of bread herself.

"How's it different? Weren't there plenty of families there too?" I asked. There had been plenty of kids running around; many had even watched Rollo's execution.

"We don't pick our families there," Sillti said.

Angie paused, mid-chew and glanced at the guinea pig next to her. "Huh?" Angie said for me.

Sillti nodded as she took a big bite of her bread. "We're paired up by our births and placements. Second sons for second daughters, and such," Sillti said with a mouthful.

Angie groaned as she shook her head and likely not just because Sillti was displaying bad table manners.

"You're kidding me. I thought you said you chose Rollo in hopes of teaching him to be different?" I asked. Surely she had said that, right?

"Well... I had hoped to? But I wouldn't have chosen him otherwise?" Sillti said with a shrug, as if it was obvious.

I groaned as I lowered my head and rested it on my hand. Suddenly my head hurt.

"It's not that bad Renn. Sometimes we choose for love too. Ash and Thrain had done that. Most though don't, for one reason or another," Sillti said as she finished her mouthful.

Not that bad...? She basically just said she, and many at the Summit, hadn't any say in their lives. Their husbands and wives were picked for them. By someone else.

Feeling a little sick, I wondered what to even say. If it was like that, and had been all this time, then that meant Vim and the rest knew about it and were okay with it. I mean... it made sense, from Vim's perspective. If the whole village accepted it, and found nothing wrong with it, then he'd never interfere or do anything about it... but...

Well...

Wasn't that a form of stealing one's free will? To force someone into a relationship with another?

"She looks very troubled," Silkti mumbled to the bison next to her.

"I am too. But it explains a lot," Angie said with a dull tone.

"Explains what?" Silkti asked, and I heard her grin.

Looking up at her, I sighed at her happy smile. Either she knew full well, and found it funny that Angie and I found it disagreeable... or she was just that happy about her recent find with Link as a potential partner, and was overlooking it completely. Either way, I decided to not make a big deal out of it.

I couldn't change it, and I wasn't even sure how you would do so even if I wanted to, or had the right to. Not to mention it was likely more common than I thought, even if I didn't want to admit it. Arranged marriages existed amongst the humans too, though I wasn't sure how common they really were.

The Queen's Lament, that story written by one of our members, had similar tropes and cultural ideas within it. I had talked to Vim about them a little, while we had stayed at the Summit, but hadn't realized just how close I had been to genuine articles at the time.

"Oh well... as long as you're happy, Silkti," I said, deciding to just let it be. For now.

"I am!" Sillti happily said.

Angie sighed as she reached for another piece of bread. There weren't many left, I should have made more.

I always underestimate how much our kind ate. Even Sillti and Angie, one a scrawny dainty woman and the other a genuine little girl, ate far more than normal. They had eaten two whole loaves already. Not including the single piece I'd taken so far.

It made me further appreciate Lumen and all it accomplished. Food costs alone for our Society was likely a massive burden. A single member could out-eat a full human family every day, so it was likely expensive just to feed us. Let alone all the other costs we incurred.

"If you stay here Sillti, what do you plan to do? For work?" I asked.

"Hm... Link invited me to help him out. But I'm not sure how much I'd like talking politics all day or dealing with humans. I'll figure it out though," Sillti said without much worry.

I nodded. Good. At least she had thought about it already.

"I wish to see the orphanage," Angie said between bites.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

"Oh...?" I perked up at that as Sillti tilted her head.

"The human one?" Sillti asked.

Angie nodded.

"Randle didn't take you to see it already?" I asked.

She shook her head. "We got sidetracked. I went to go see Link instead... which I regret now," Angie mumbled.

"What! Why? I'd not have ever met him otherwise!" Sillti complained.

"Exactly," Angie said.

Sillti sighed and shook her head at the girl. "Whatever you are must be weird. Some kind of cow, right, Renn?" Sillti asked me.

"Says the pig," Angie said as she reached for the very last piece of bread.

Before the young bison could grab it, Sillti reached out to grab it first. She lout out a happy "Ha!" as she stood from her seat and hurried off towards the front door.

Sillti opened the door, hurried outside, and ran off.

"Does falling in love make you stupid?" Angie asked me as we both stared at the woman who had just acted a little out of character.

"Maybe. Sometimes. Yes?" I wondered.

"Hm... She'll not be able to open the gate," Angie said.

"I know. I'm waiting to see if she comes back, or not," I said.

Angie frowned as she nodded. "Makes sense."

Smiling at the young bison, I was a little glad she hadn't grown upset over Sillti's odd outburst. She looked annoyed, but more so out of exhaustion than anything else.

A noisy creak drew my attention to the front door, which Siltti had tried to close in her exit but had failed to do so. It was cracked open just enough that I was able to hear the sound of voices as the gate was opened... and then closed once more.

"Someone let her out," I said, recognizing the metal grate sound.

"Oh?" Angie turned, and a few moments later as we waited the door slowly slid open as Vim stepped into the house.

"Did you two tease her or something? Her face was as red as could be," Vim said as he entered the house and shut the door behind him.

"No?" Angie said, sounding a little upset he'd think so.

"She had tried to tease Angie, I think it backfired a little though," I told him.

Vim nodded with a frown, as if that made perfect sense as he stepped over to the table.

Smiling up at him, I liked the new set of clothes upon him. I had picked them out yesterday. After handling Trek's body, Vim had kindly spent the day with me. We had gone shopping, and then spent some time in the church with Angie and Jelti.

His new clothes were a darker gray, with black seams. The material was some kind of cotton, and was light enough that I knew he'd wear them to bed. It was why I had picked them; I liked the feel of them and the look and colors. I wasn't bothered by him wearing them, and I'd not be bothered laying against them either.

"Angie of the Fields," Vim then said to the young girl.

She sat up straighter and turned to look at him, and did so with a serious look.

Sitting up myself, I apprehensively waited for what Vim was about to say. He had a small smile, but had his more serious expression mixed with it.

And fields...? Hadn't she lived on a mountain?

"Renn and I are to leave soon. We head back north, to settle tasks. Oplar left the other day, and many of the other travelers are on similar tasks and business," Vim told her.

Angie frowned at him. "Meaning if I don't want to stay here, I need to go with you," she said, understanding with her wisdom beyond her years per usual.

He nodded. "Oplar and others should be returning before I do. Likely within a few months. And the Chronicler has other people showing up too, who will then be heading to Lumen. So there are options. But if you are unsettled or unwilling to linger here for many months I suggest joining us north," Vim explained.

"Who is up north?" Angie asked.

"Several larger communities, and many more smaller ones. They range from mixed communities, some like here that exist within human settlements, and others that are distant and hidden from human eyes. There are fish, ducks, foxes, sheep and many other more even natured people of all types and shapes. Religious and not. Loud and rowdy to those meek and quiet. Places with just women, and places full of families. There are a few women and families to the east that are looking for children too, if you'd like to have that kind of living environment. We could ask Link for any insight to any families or locations with other friends of your family as well, if you'd prefer to go somewhere and be with those your parents had known and trusted," Vim said.

I smiled at Vim's gentle, yet honest and very mature, method of asking Angie what she wanted to do.

He spoke to her with his typical gentleness... but not outright as if she was a child to be coddled. He was genuinely giving her the option to pick.

I really liked that part of him.

"I can pick a place to be useful, can't I?" Angie asked him.

"Of course. If you wish to have a task to fulfill, big or small, you simply need ask for it or claim it yourself. Is there something you'd like to do?" Vim asked without hesitation.

Angie nodded and looked down, to the table. To the empty plate between us, that had crumbs of the breadstuff we had just eaten. "I'd like to work with children. I hear there are orphanages," Angie said.

"Children...? The orphanage system is one for human children. There is no true orphanage system for our kind," Vim said gently.

I glanced at Vim as he spoke, and found that information interesting. I had assumed so... since it seemed anytime Vim happened upon a child of our kind, he simply took them to the closest suitable location. Like Lomi to Twin Hills, and Fly to the Bell Church.

Though I had taken Fly, I guess.

"I know. Randle told me. Can't I help with that anyway?" Angie asked.

Vim gave Angie a kind smile as he nodded. "Of course you can. Why not stay here then? Randle oversees the orphanage here, he can help you learn the ropes and acclimate to it. Maybe one day you could be entrusted to oversee one of the other ones elsewhere, down the road," Vim suggested.

I smiled and nodded, even though Angie wasn't even looking at me. She was entirely focused on Vim.

Yes. I liked very much how he had said that. Not only had he not hesitated to support her desires, he had also done it in a way that slightly emphasized her staying somewhere safe where she could have an eye kept on her and be taught as needed. Even if she was very mature for her age, she was still young. And even more so looked it.

She wasn't like Merit. She wasn't even strong enough to open and close the gate. I'd not feel comfortable with her venturing out into the world on her own. Not yet.

Plus... I liked how he had also given her a slight hint to something that could happen in the far future.

To oversee an orphanage herself.

It was such a simple little comment, but it both gave her something to look forward to... and also made her beam him a proud smile as she nodded quickly up at him.

"Okay...! Yes. I'll do that," she agreed without hesitation.

My eyes watered a tad, and I felt happy all of a sudden as I studied the young bison that now was happily smiling at the plan and future laid before her.

How lovely.

I wasn't sure why she had such a fascination with children, or the orphanage, but it seemed to be something deeply engraved into her. I remembered her showing an interest in them back when Randle first met her, when he had realized she was a bison and not a human.

From the moment she had heard of the orphanage she had wanted to learn more about it.

Maybe some people were just... inclined to do such things.

I myself feared such a place. Such a position and responsibility.

The idea of being responsible for dozens if not hundreds of children, human or no, made me quiver and terrified.

Not because it was likely hard work, and a loud and noisy, but because of the implications.

I had barely survived losing two children. What would it be like to fall in love and raise dozens at once? Particularly ones that grew old and withered away in the blink of an eye?

Vim stepped around the table, passing Angie as he grabbed the chair Siltti had just abandoned. He patted Angie on her head, which made her happy smile diminish a little but not go out as she groaned at him. "Looking for friends, or did you inherit your mother's motherly nature?" Vim asked as he sat down.

"Children aren't gross," Angie said with a huff as he stopped ruffling her hair.

Vim frowned and tilted his head at her... and then glanced at me.

"I think she's only partly serious," I told him.

Angie huffed again and crossed her arms. "I am!"

Vim's smile softened, and I wondered if he understood what she meant or not. I wasn't sure if I should inform him or not, so instead leaned against the table and nodded. "So we're leaving, Vim?" I asked.

"Yes. I've done what has needed to be done, and if Angie wishes to stay here as does Sillti then we can continue on our path," Vim said.

Ah. Right. "You've already talked to Sillti about it?" I asked. She had just told Angie and me not too long ago she planned to stay here with Link.

"She and Link seem to have found a link," Vim said.

"Fwah," Angie let out a weird snort as she grinned.

I stared at her for a moment, wondering how she had made that sound that had just come from her, but she blushed a little and looked away instead of making the sound again for me.

Oh...? Were such silly little jokes her weakness then? Or had that been so funny to her because of who had made the joke, and not the joke itself?

"Is it normal Vim?" I asked, deciding not to tease the girl too much. Even though a few quick ideas of how to make her laugh came and went.

"What's that?"

"Our members uh... linking together so quickly?" I asked, and almost flinched as Angie jolted and lowered her head, as to hide her face behind her thick hair.

Woops. I had just decided not to tease her, hadn't !!?

"Yes and no. Some would find them growing so close so fast weird, but the rest would find it perfectly normal. You will either find they'll become inseparable, thus having many children over the years, or we'll return and find them not only no longer close with one another but in relationships with other people," Vim said.

Angie lifted her head, and I noticed her face quickly pale a little. It had been slightly red, she had been snickering. "Are you two like that?" she asked us.

"Hm...? Having just a fling? No. If I tried to fling her away before even doing anything she'd likely bite my throat," Vim said with a sigh.

I smirked as Angie frowned at him, and then glowered and sighed. "Gross."

"Your parents had been married, right Angie?" I asked, doing my best to not smile too happily. I had enjoyed what he had said.

"Yes. They had been gross too. I told you that," she said.

I nodded. She had. "Is it related to our bloodlines then, Vim? Do Link and Sillti not find it weird because of what they are? Or is it something deeper?" I asked.

"A mix of both. Sillti's odd, being where she's from and her... circumstances. And Link is odder too. But his parents had been very devout to each other. So I'd expect him to be the same way. Randle actually commented earlier that he worries Sillti may uh... well..." Vim glanced at Angie, who was staring at Vim with as wide and interested eyes as I likely had, and then he sighed. "He worries she'll hurt him," Vim then finished saying, as he sighed and shook his head.

"Why'd he shake his head at me?" Angie asked me.

"I think it's because you had been so interested in what he was saying. He probably just realized you're more mature than you look," I told her.

Angie frowned and nodded, as if that made sense.

"She reminds me of her mother," Vim said.

"Well duh?" Angie said.

I smiled at the two and realized that Vim had likely known her parents rather well. Or at least, well enough.

How sad. That meant they had been his friends, or something like it. Maybe people he liked, or thought well of. Maybe that was why he had rushed off so quickly to try and save them.

That also meant Vim had met Angie before. Maybe? Was that why Angie had acted oddly when we spoke of Vim on our journey here? Had she been old enough when he had last visited their home for her to remember him...? I knew occasionally Vim took years to visit the same place twice, for one reason or another, so I wasn't sure how long it'd been since he had last gone to their home. We'd not talked much about Angie and her family yet so I didn't know how well Vim had known them.

It was hard to judge Vim's closeness to Angie and her family based off their interactions. Many in the Society treated Vim like some distant uncle, or a close family friend, even when they barely knew him... so their little quips and conversations even though beautiful were not a good basis to judge such a thing on.

"What of Cat?" I asked, changing the topic a tiny bit.

"I'll tell you later. Angie, shall we go find Randle and check on the orphanage? Let's go take a look to make sure you'll feel comfortable with it, if you'd like," Vim offered.

"Oh...? Sure," Angie nodded, and I noticed the way she tried to not let her eyebrows and general facial features rise and shift into happy and excited shapes.

"Mhm..." I shifted a little. I wanted to go with them, and see these orphanages, but... Could I endure it? Would I be able to walk in and then walk out of that place, without joining Angie to a life of dedication to such a venture?

"You, Renn, can meet us there later. You have a few stops you need to make before you can join us," Vim then said, before I could decide if my heart would survive seeing a bunch of orphans or not.

"I do...?" I asked as my left ear fluttered a little. Had Vim noticed my worry? He had that smirk on his face. The one he used when he was amused by my internal conflicts.

"You do. You have a lunch date with the Chronicler, and you mentioned you wanted to do something at Oplar's office. Between that and the gift Hands has for you, you'll likely be meeting us not long after we're done I'm sure," Vim said with a sigh, as if he was talking about a bunch of stuff that he himself had to do and wasn't looking forward to any of it.

I though grinned happily. "I see. Sounds like I'll be busy then," I said.

"Yea, yeah. Stop flirting, let's go!" Angie said loudly as she hopped off her chair.

Before Vim stood to join her, I reached out with my tail under the table. I brushed his knee with it as he stood, and he noticed. He said nothing as he gave me a gentle smile and nodded, as if understanding my meaning.

Waving the two goodbye, I sighed at myself.

We were back together, yet somehow I felt distant all the same. I knew it was just because he's been busy, and we did just yesterday have a little date-like moment but...

Sometimes I wished he was completely mine.

Sharing was hard.

"Hurry up!" Angie's voice carried in from the outside as Vim shut the door behind him, hurrying to join the young girl now on a mission.

"Yes... Very hard to share. Especially when they so desperately needed him. As much, if not more, than me," I whispered.

I heard the gate to the mansio open and shut, and I stood from the table too.

Time to wake up the lazy Cat.

Chapter 314 Randle's Orphanage

Little Angie was smiling as she talked to the older human nun. The quiet classroom allowed even their low voices to carry, letting me hear them even from a distance.

Angie was asking the nun about the children's meals. More interested in the food than the school we were in. Food was more important than lessons, after all.

Other than Angie and the nun, it was just me and Randle right now in this classroom. The kids had already been given their morning lecture and were now doing chores elsewhere. They'd return later for one last class and then head off to prepare and have dinner together.

It was honestly a very good system, and highly beneficial for everyone who went through it. This era did have schools, but it was mostly for the upper echelon of society. Rarely did a commoner's child get any proper education except from what little their parents could give them.

I knew that, thanks to it being run by the Church of Songs, they likely also somewhat indoctrinated them into their religion in the process... but there was little I could do about that. After all the alternative was far worse for these kids. A little biased learning was a small price to pay for the rest of the stuff they received alongside it.

"She seems determined. I believe she's fully well made up her mind," Randle said quietly.

I nodded. "She had done so the moment she heard about what you're doing here, I think. Klamma had been rather motherly too, must just be a trait of theirs," I said.

"Nothing wrong with that," Randle said.

No. There wasn't.

Renn was like that too. It was why she had not really wanted to join us here, and why I gave her a way out of having to do so. She cared too much for children in a way, if such a thing was even possible.

Glancing around the classroom, I noted the stone floor. It was old and weathered. In fact it seemed... familiar...

"Don't recognize it, do you?" Randle asked.

"Hm?" I frowned as I shook my head.

"This is the old church, Vim. The first one. The one Celine made."

Ah...

I took a small breath as I nodded. Right. This was indeed where she had originally given her sermons. Before the Cathedral had been properly built, and Telmik around it. It was likely the oldest section of this whole city.

"Celine gave me permission to use the old buildings as the orphanages. I've up-kept them, as I'm sure you'd expect, but I've also tried to keep them the same all the while," Randle explained.

"I see..." I mumbled. Was that out of reverence for their humble beginnings, or his pious nature speaking?

The two of us became quiet again as Angie and the old nun headed for one of the doors. One on the other side of the room, a smaller side-door not the main double doors Randle and I were near. They were talking about going to the nearby kitchens they used for the orphanage.

"Nancy and all the rest here are the best of the best, Vim. I've taken great care to ensure all of those involved are suitable for this type of task. You need not worry over Angie here," Randle said calmly.

"I always worry, Randle. That's my problem," I said.

He shifted next to me as we watched the old nun, Nancy, open the door for Angie and let her through. The nun gave us a tiny glance and a smaller nod as she followed Angie out of the classroom, closing the door behind her.

I sighed as we were left alone. "Does she know?" I asked.

"Nancy and two others do, yes. The rest don't as of now, but there are a few I plan on telling shortly. I try to always keep a few in the loop, in case moments like this occur," Randle explained.

Made sense. Especially if he carefully chooses who works here and whatnot. He'd have to explain to a young woman why she would not notice him aging throughout the decades as she grew older and he still kept being the same.

Stepping deeper into the classroom, I studied the small desks and tables littered around. They weren't in rows, but seemed to be centered around the room in a circle instead. So that the teacher could stand in the center. I wasn't sure if each and every chair would be filled during their lessons, but if they would be then there were quite a few students. At least thirty.

"We teach the humans simple lessons. As they grow older we begin to figure out who is efficient at what, and send them down those paths. Those good with numbers work with them, those who'd rather work physical jobs sent to where they'd be happy and so forth," Randle explained.

I nodded. I figured. It wasn't like they could outright teach any type of higher education, unless to specific individuals. Not so much out of ability, but need and purpose. It was dangerous to teach humans advanced things. It was hard to trust them, or those who they'd teach later in life themselves.

Stopping in the center of the room, surrounded by the tables and desks, I felt odd.

How long had it been since I'd given a proper lecture?

Nasba and Nann always wanted me to give one each time I visited. So in a sense you could say I had recently done so... but I had just told them a story. Not a true lecture. I also have been teaching Renn, slowly, piece by piece along our journey... but those conversations were mixed with flirting and somber emotions. It wasn't the same either.

Mother would be upset with me. She had wanted me to teach my fellow man.

How I've failed her.

"Vim..."

I turned a little and found Randle nearby. I had left him near the double-door entrance and he was now standing in the center of the room with me. I hadn't noticed his approach.

"You've done well, Randle. You should be proud of yourself," I told him.

He blinked, and simply nodded. It seemed he was growing use to my sudden praise, stuff he'd not heard in centuries. That kind of annoyed me.

"We try Vim. I try. Although humans, and fleeting, they are still children of our creators. We are all siblings in the end," Randle said, being the priest he had moulded himself into over a millennium.

I nodded at him as I glanced at one of the nearby tables. It was a larger one, where multiple kids sat at once during their lessons. It looked older, but not messy. I saw no scribbles, no marks from sharp points or knives, or any kind of graffiti or wear that kids usually did absentmindedly to such desks. Either the nuns who taught them were strict, or the kids were in general orderly. Likely both.

Randle cleared his throat, and I looked back at him. He gave me the kind of smile that told me he wanted to say something. Likely something he'd been wanting to say for a long time.

"Why not take a seat?" I offered. There was a chair in front of me, sitting alone and not near a table or desk. It wasn't a full sized one, but it wasn't so small he'd be unable to sit in it.

Randle frowned, but then nodded and stepped over to it. He sat down in the mid-sized chair with ease, not bothered by its smaller size. He nodded at me again once seated, and took a small breath before speaking. "The Chronicler and her people are planning a coup," he then said.

I frowned at him. "They've been involved in many coups, Randle," I said. Many I had helped with myself.

Randle shook his head slowly. "A different type, Vim. One not of politics, or monarchies but instead of faith."

My frown deepened. "I don't understand."

The priest took a breath and nodded. "She recently got one of her flock, an older woman named Telieve, into the seat of a cardinal. The first female cardinal in over a hundred years," Randle said.

"Some coup, to force gender equality," I said.

Randle smirked at me. "If that was all it was, I'd not even mention it Vim."

"I figured. So...? Is this what has bothered you?" I asked. Seemed not as important or dire as I had assumed. Maybe Randle was just too old. Too set in his ways. Maybe he was afraid of change, even simple ones.

"Yes and no. It was the first step. Since then she and her people have begun to... remove individuals of importance. Archbishops, bishops, ministers... they've been quietly and swiftly replacing many for their own desires," Randle said.

I shrugged lightly. "Still a normal event, Randle. How many purges have we done over the years?" I asked. I knew of at least three myself, and knew they'd done more without me too.

"These aren't purges Vim. This is not her removing those who threaten, or could threaten, the Society. This is her taking over the church."

I kept my thoughts on that inside. Taking over the church? So what? We used to rule it with an iron first, back during Celine's rule and the Chronicler's sisters. Why would that be a bad thing now?

I too didn't outright trust, or like, the Chronicler... but when it came to the Society she could be trusted. For everything else I honestly didn't care, not anymore.

Randle must have noticed my indifference for he smiled at me. "I know. You let us do as we wish. Free will. But there's a problem, one I don't think even you can allow," he said.

I shrugged lightly, telling him to continue.

"They've written a new bible," the man finally revealed his true issue.

Although a little stunned, my shock was more at how serious he had said it... and how stupid the true problem was.

A new bible...? So what?

"You don't approve," I said carefully, doing my best to not scoff at him.

"I'd not be too bothered by it... if they hadn't changed the teachings. But they've done more than just shift around stories, or passages," Randle said as he stood from his chair. He began to pace, and I realized he was terribly bothered by this. His face was furrowed in stress as he shook his head. "They're no longer preaching gospel, Vim, but laws. Rules. They plan to use the new gospel to create sheep, not believers!"

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

His voice had grown in volume and his tone had deepened, he was growing very upset very quickly. A rather startling thing to see. Randle was usually a very calm man, even during stressful moments.

Though this might likely be the first time he's openly spoken of this, and his frustrations of it all, so it had likely been bottled up for a long time. Years likely, even.

If that was the case I'll be gentle with him and listen. Even if I found it ridiculous.

"And she does not hear your complaints of it, does she?" I asked.

"I've not brought it up with her yet," he said as he stopped pacing.

I blinked at that, and shifted a little. "Why not...?" That was strange. They were actually very close. Too close for such secrecy and bottled up emotions such as this.

"Because that is just the beginning, Vim. They've done more. Something almost just as bad as changing the gospel," Randle said as he looked at me.

"Hm...?"

The priest I've known for hundreds of years held my gaze with a haunted look. "She's been communicating with Celine's daughter, Vim."

Now I was worried too.

Before I could say anything Randle stepped closer and shook his head, lowering his voice into a whisper. "She's alive. She has been this whole time. She left with the rest, to the other continent, in secret," Randle spoke quickly, revealing a secret I'd always assumed but never believed.

"Randle..." I groaned as I was about to tell him not to lie to me. To not say what he was saying. To not do this.

He didn't care or even notice my threat. "I don't know what they're planning Vim, but it has to do with this vote. They have been waiting for this moment. Maybe even planted the seeds of doubt themselves," he told me.

It was my turn to take a seat, but I remained standing even as I closed my eyes and groaned at the sudden headache.

"She's alive...?" I asked.

I heard his robes shuffle as he nodded. "Light's alive. And they're planning something, Vim. Something traitorous," he said stiffly.

Damn.

A part of me was happy to hear it. I had always felt horrible about not being able to find and save her. Celine had so desperately begged me, even on her deathbed, to find her. To protect her. The daughter she had found that had never been in her prophecies. Only seen indirectly when involved with me, or

others. Light had never been seen by Celine on her own in her dreams. Never on purpose. It had been why she had not been able to tell me where she had been, or how to actually save her.

Yet this meant there were schemes. Terrible schemes. Ones I now needed to worry about.

Ones that were hundreds of years in the making. Ones that had begun if not from Celine's death, even before it.

"Do you know what they're doing?" I asked. He hadn't outright said it, even during his moment of stressful panic so...

"No," Randle shook his head quickly. "I could probably find out if I inquired, but I've been afraid to. If I confront them about it Vim, and it's something terrible, I'll be forced to make a stand. To stand against them. I'd not survive. And I have people who rely on me. Many people," Randle said with a gesture around him, at the empty classroom.

Right.

Not just the kids either. Those like Jelti and Henrietta were under his banner, not the Chronicler's. Oplar too, in a way.

"Don't push it. What does she think of all this then? Everyone here knows you and her are having issues," I said. The Chronicler was not the type to kill Randle, not outright, if they had a simple disagreement but she'd not hesitate to remove him from his position if she thought it was necessary. She'd not kill him or banish him, being a member of the Society, but she'd not hesitate to banish him

from both the church and this location. Excommunicated. He'd lose his political and religious power. It'd be nearly the same as death for him, since he'd then be unable to help those he needed to.

"She thinks my current dissatisfaction is simply over the new bible. I've not revealed yet I even know about Light's involvement," Randle said.

"How'd you find out?" I asked.

"One of her followers. Was talking to Mapple and I overheard certain names and put one and two together with what I'd heard and known previously," Randle said.

I frowned at that. "Mapple...? Really?" I asked.

"Strange isn't it? It makes me wonder if the Chronicler wanted me or others, like you, to know. Mapple isn't too good at keeping secrets," he agreed.

No. She wasn't. Not those types at least. "And you think this vote is the cause? Or the reason for it all?" I asked.

"Likely, Vim. I don't know if the Chronicler really started it but I have no doubt she's furthered it along and aided it. She's taking advantage of it, and the chaos it will bring," Randle said.

I sighed as I glanced around, to make sure we were still alone. I could hear the sound of children in the distance, but they were still not nearby. Likely a few rooms down or something. Or down a nearby hallway. We were still alone, and in fact more alone than one usually were here in the Cathedral.

Thus why Randle was speaking of this now. He felt comfortable here. Safe. This was his domain, not the Chronicler's.

"What will you do, Vim?" Randle asked me.

"Nothing. Not yet. The Society has a right to this vote. Even if the Chronicler and Light are scheming around it... that changes nothing. In fact their schemes are their own right too, unless it endangers the Society I can't do anything about it," I said.

"Once again you stand by and fail us," Randle said with scorn.

I nodded. Yes. I would. I was.

"Maybe I should go to your wife. She has more backbone than you," Randle threatened.

"You can if you'd like. Just as I'd not stop you or them, I'll not stop her either," I said. Even if it terrified me to do so.

Randle sighed at me, exhaling the anger he had just been building up. "I told you this in hopes you'd offer insight Vim. To tell me why it was okay, and why it would be. Not so that I'd worry even more," he said.

I smiled at him. "You should know better."

"I should," he agreed.

Crossing my arms, I sighed again and wondered what to even think.

Celine's daughter was alive. And she was scheming with the Chronicler. Knowing that woman, maybe even giving her orders. And they wanted this vote...? To depose me?

Celine's daughter going against me was an odd thought. But it wasn't an impossibility. Maybe she faulted me for her mother's death...? For the wars? For not keeping the Society together...? There was plenty of possible reasons and those were just off the top of my head.

"What are you thinking, Vim?" Randle asked.

"Things that hurt. Tell me, I had assumed you'd vote against me during the vote... yet you speak as if you won't be," I noted.

"You'd think I'd vote against you...? Really?" Randle tilted his head at me in shock, and then he smirked. "I hate you Vim, for not being the great man you should be, but I'm not stupid enough to claim you're not the only reason our Society still stands. I do agree, to a point; with some of their complaints and worries... since I've had them myself all this time, but I'd rather have you as you are than lose you completely. And I fear this vote, if it goes badly, may just result in such a thing if we aren't careful. Though no one else seems to even realize how detrimental that would be, I think," Randle said.

Huh... "And your letter for Lilly...?" I asked.

He shifted, and I wondered if I had touched something he hadn't wanted to speak of. But he took a small breath and nodded. "She's one of the few who had known Celine. Like you. And thanks to what happened... and has happened... I can trust her to be honest with me about the Chronicler and Light. I can trust her if I need to take a side, one against them," Randle explained.

"You plan to wage war...?" I asked. That was the only reason to stand alongside Lilly against the Church.

He quickly shook his head; to argue against it... but then hesitated. "I... I don't know, Vim. I have a terrible suspicion that is what is coming. Light left with all the rest, without even letting you know all this time. Yet they return? Showing themselves now? Right during this vote...? Something terrible is about to happen, Vim, and although you need not worry over it... and may even support it even if it's terrible thanks to your beliefs, the rest of us are not that strong. What of these children? Those like Angie? Or Link and Hands...? What of Henrietta and her family, Vim? Jelti? Those in Lumen, or throughout the rest of the Society...? Do you know how many are at ends with our church, Vim? Honestly?" he asked me.

I shifted. "Hundreds," I said.

He nodded stiffly. "Nearly half. And of the half that aren't, that doesn't outright mean they are members of the cloth. They simply live amongst us. Alongside us. They may even wear our robes, but are pagans

or something like them. Those like Sharp or Rapti. The Chronicler and Light would not be any kinder to them than they would those like Lilly," he warned.

"You're speaking of a cleansing, Randle," I warned him. Something Celine herself had never even dared to whisper, even when it sometimes needed to happen.

He went pale in the face but nodded, unafraid to argue with what I'd just said.

I flinched and shook my head. "You fear the Chronicler and her ilk might actually try to split the Society. On purpose," I said, understanding what he meant.

He nodded again, but remained quiet.

Great. Just great.

Hopefully he was just panicking. Hopefully Randle was just...

I groaned as I rubbed my eyes. Randle was not one to panic. Not like that. Not like this.

If he firmly believed this could happen, to the point he'd tell me all this and even send a letter to Lilly... then...

"I know Vim. I'm speaking aloud things that shouldn't even be whispered let alone thought. But..."
Randle whispered again, and not just because some of the distant voices had grown nearer and louder. He was scared of saying it aloud too.

"Okay. Let's just... handle it. We'll speak more of this before I leave," I said. Maybe I should deal with this before heading north to that saint. But how...?

My statement, and Randle's frustrations, weren't incorrect.

Even if they were scheming such things I couldn't do anything. Not yet. Not over mere speculation or rumor. Not until they actually did something. Not until blood was genuinely spilled.

Even if I believed Randle about this, I couldn't just march into the Chronicler's office and demand the truth. Not without causing more problems... not without breaking my own rules.

"Light's coming back?" I asked softly. I was still shocked over it.

Celine's daughter. Alive. Coming home.

What would I say to her...?

What could I say?

"I believe so. I think she's already here. Landi's sister, Less, do you remember her? She's coming here. Under the guise of opening a new church in Lumen. I believe some of those amongst her group are Light and her people. The Chronicler isn't acting as if more subordinates are coming but instead someone important. Too important," Randle said.

Great. Just great. "We should let Landi know," I said. If her sister still lived and was here, she had a right to know. Plus we might need her if that's the case.

"You sure...? And you found it odd that I'd call upon Lilly?" he asked.

"Landi now owes me a favor. A big one. Plus..." I hesitated to say it aloud, but knew I had to all the same. "If they really are scheming something terrible, having a few strong allies nearby would be wise. I'm powerful Randle, but as you know I'm still just one man. I can't be everywhere at once," I said. Not to mention thanks to my own rules I may be hamstrung on certain things, and unable to act when needed.

If Randle was this stressed, it wasn't just because of the change of gospel and my being possibly banished or removed from position.

He was worried about the weaker members. The humans. Those who the Chronicler and her people saw as threats.

As he had mentioned. Hundreds of people.

And they were scattered every which way. Too spread apart for me to protect all at once. Many of them, like he said, even lived amongst those of the cloth. Like at the Bell Church or the Keep.

He nodded slowly. "Would Landi abandon her kingdom for this favor?"

"Actually yes. Since that favor fulfilled that kingdom's purpose in the first place," I stated.

"Huh..." Randle nodded, impressed, but didn't press it or ask for the story behind it.

I sighed as the sound of children's voices grew louder. They were headed this way. Maybe not to this classroom, but they'd be passing by soon. Walking through the same hallway Angie and that old nun had just left through.

"We'll speak in depth later. Shall we speak in your office tonight? The one below?" I asked. I had more questions and concerns but for now I just needed to gather my thoughts.

He nodded. "Bring your wife. I may need her insight," he agreed.

I groaned but begrudgingly nodded as I turned to leave. Insight. Sure. More like he just wanted another person to take his side and try to convince me.

Leaving the classroom, and Randle behind, I felt my eye twitch as a whirlwind of thoughts came and went.

Randle could watch over Angie... I now had a few things I needed to do.

Things to ponder. People to see.

Maybe even people to kill. But I'd put that aside for now.

For now.

Chapter 315 Hands's Gift

Closing the door to Hands' office, I paused at the sight of a nun. One I recognized.

"Hello Mapple," I said as I glanced around.

She was alone... and had obviously been waiting for me.

I moved the small box Hands had given to me to my left hand, and wondered if she had ambushed me or had simply not wanted to bother Hands as he and I spoke. He was a little odd, so it did make sense... but at the same time I also knew Mapple was the type to be odd herself.

She had rubbed me wrong a little the other day, by questioning me about Cat before I had even met the woman. Was this going to be the continuation of it?

"Rennalee. May we talk?" Mapple asked gently.

I noted the tone, and realized she wasn't as... prickly as she had been the other day. Maybe her fervent accusational demeanor the last time we met had just been her worry and concern for the Society.

"Sure?" I nodded and agreed as I stepped away from the door. Once again even though I could no longer hear the incessant ticking of the clocks, they still echoed in my head. Maybe that man's strange personality and slight craziness was from the constant noises and ticking of his room. It'd make me go crazy if I had to live in such a place.

Mapple joined me as we left and I headed for the mansio. I wanted to go find Vim, but wanted to drop off the small box I carried before I did.

"Did he give you a clock?" Mapple asked as we walked.

I frowned at that. Could she not hear the lack of ticking coming from the box?

"No... I'm told he gives clocks to people he expects to never see again, is that true?" I asked, hoping to not have to tell her what Hands had given me.

Mapple smiled softly and nodded. "Yes. I'm told he does it out of instinct. No one is sure how he knows, but so far as I'm aware he's never been wrong. Once he gives someone a clock, the two genuinely never meet again," Mapple said.

Oh...? So it was more than just a parting gift of some kind...? How interesting!

"Why a clock you think?" I asked.

"Maybe a way to inter one should value time?" Mapple stated.

I nodded, that was a good way to think of it.

Doing my best to ignore the box in my hand as well as I could, I slowed a little as we rounded a corner. "I hear you're not a sister, Mapple," I said gently.

Mapple didn't seem bothered. "I'm not. I do not believe in their god, just my own," she said.

"Your own...?"

She nodded. "My creator. My ancestor. You know them as monarchs," she said.

Oh.

"Yet you wear their robes," I noted to her attire.

Mapple smiled at me. "Yes. I know. A conundrum. Think of it as my way of showing respect to the people and the faith that have welcomed me, even during my heresy," she said.

Huh... "I see," I said. How neat. She was more than she seemed.

"How about you, Renn? I hear any day now you too may be wearing these robes," Mapple said.

I slowed as I frowned. "Me...?" I asked. Was that what people were saying about me...? Or was it because I did wear them occasionally, when given permission. But I knew she wasn't speaking about me simply wearing the robes. She meant it in a way more than just as a dress or garments. She meant instead that she and many others expected me to become a member of the church. A sister, like many others.

"Are the rumors wrong?" Mapple asked.

"Well... I don't know. Vim likes it when I wear robes, but he'd likely not be very happy if I wore them every day for the rest of my life," I said with a smile.

Mapple stopped walking, her eyes going wide in shock. I too paused, and felt horrible. What if my little joke just how had been interpreted wrongly? She looked as if I had just slapped her across the face!

"I uh... it was a joke. A small one," I said gently, since it seemed Mapple still was shocked.

She blinked, and then frowned... and then smiled. "Yes. It was," she stated.

It was my turn to frown. What'd that mean...?

Mapple returned to walking, forcing me to join her. She giggled a little as we finished rounding the corner, and I heard voices in the distance. Common in this area, we were near the places of worship. "What a joke indeed...!" she happily said, still giggling.

Was she teasing me...?

Vim did and didn't like it when I wore those nun robes. As much as he hated my fascination with religion, he seemed to find it interesting all the same. Plus I think it was something of an amusement to him. He liked how I could look so comfortable in such attire, looking the part of a nun, yet flirt and join him in his teasing all the while. So it wasn't entirely a joke, really. Though I had intended it to be such.

Once Mapple finished giggling, she sighed. "I hear you're leaving soon. Tomorrow maybe?" Mapple asked.

"Oh...? Yes. You know how Vim is," I said.

While staring down the hallway, at a group of people in the distance, out of the corner of my eye I noticed Mapple glance at me. "Yes. I do know," she whispered.

Nodding as I glanced at her, I wondered suddenly if she was like the others. Those who, for one reason or another, wanted Vim for themselves. That whisper had been rather telling.

Really, Vim. Just how many women are smitten with you? It wasn't fair... did he not know in my long life I've only had a handful of men ever even try to flirt with me? Granted he had many more years on me, but still...!

"Well... I'll leave you be then. You must have stuff to do, and might want to rest as you can before he drags you off on another journey," Mapple then said.

"Oh...?" I frowned at her and paused as she nodded and smiled at me, and then patted me on the back.

"See you later Renn. Safe travels, and stay warm. Winter will be upon us again soon," she warned.

"Right... goodbye Mapple," I nodded and wondered what to say.

Hadn't she wanted to talk...? To ask something...? Why else had she been waiting for me outside of Hands' office?

Yet Mapple simply nodded and turned, and headed back down the hallway we had just come from. As if to head back to Hands' office.

Huh...? Had she gotten the answer she had wanted? Was it about the gift Hands had given me, maybe? Maybe she had only wanted to know if he had given me a clock or not? Or maybe she had simply just wanted to chat a little, happenstance letting us meet. Or had she just simply... forgotten her question during our conversation?

"Odd woman," I whispered as I turned and returned to walking.

Though I was likely not much better. Vim always found it odd that I'd focus on weird things, sometimes.

Glancing down at the little box in my hand, I smiled at it.

Hands was odd too. But I was thankful for it. His oddness had allowed me to get a hold of something neat.

Passing a group of people, I turned another corner and headed for the hallway which would lead me back to the mansio.

As I walked past the group, I noted the sound of a light cough. One that was eerily familiar. I paused a moment, and felt my ears twitch beneath my hat.

Glancing at the older woman who had coughed, I narrowed my eyes as I watched her cover her mouth and cough again.

Hearing it again made my stomach turn.

Yes. That was the same cough those sick people had back south. The cough of that plague. The one I had when sick too, after visiting Landi's kingdom.

I stepped away, since I wasn't sure what to say or do about it. Vim and the rest had said it was already here, just not as bad, but...

I'll let Vim know. Not that he would likely do much about it, other than warn those in the Society who were already fully aware of the disease... but...

Hopefully it wouldn't spread too badly here. And if it did, hopefully no one in the Society would suffer from it.

It didn't take long for me to return to the mansio. I found it empty, which wasn't too surprising. Sillti had basically latched onto Link, and was already moving into one of the rooms near his. She had shown it to me earlier since we had passed one another a few hours ago. I had just left the Chronicler's office and found her carrying a box. Jelti had given her some supplies to more easily settle into her new home.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Angie was with Vim and Randle, at the orphanage. Oplar had left. Cat was with Henrietta and the rest of the dogs at the kitchens. She had enjoyed working with them and asked to do so once more before we left. As to basically pay the Society and this church for housing her and feeding her while she was here. Cat saw her labor as payment, and honestly I was glad she was such a person. I liked it when people repaid the kindness given to them, even if it wasn't needed.

Climbing the stairs to our room, I quickly deposited the box onto one of the smaller dresser tops. I laid it next to my little blue box of nail cutters and polishers, amongst other things. I knew soon I'd have to pack it all away, since Vim planned on us leaving either tomorrow or the next day.

"Witch..." I mumbled my friend's name and wondered what to think of what was happening.

A saint. One of her descendants. One who had a prophecy, a dream as Vim called it, of the birth of a monarch. One that had worried her so desperately she had sent Cat and many of her colleagues to their doom. Or well, not intentionally. Vim killing them had been a terrible accident, one that I'd not really talked to him about yet.

Cat had told me what had happened, and how and the why... but I wasn't sure yet what to think of it all.

Vim was strong. Strong enough to kill on accident. I knew this well. He's not only told me of such incidents before, I've seen it. In the way he breaks things on accident. Half the time absentmindedly, the other half thanks to great emotion or shock.

So I could see how it had happened. He had happened upon a strange group of humans, dressed oddly near the home of members of the Society. Ones who had known about the fires, the source of them, and speaking of a saint and a monarch. Vim likely had been agitated. Bothered. Upset.

He very likely killed them thanks to fury, but not on purpose. Even Cat, although saddened over what had happened, didn't seem to blame Vim at all... but that might also be thanks to the fact she saw me and Vim as something akin to a legend. My fault really, being a friend of her ancestor. She saw me as some kind of weird fable. A marvel. Something wonderful, yet sacred.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I left the room and headed downstairs. Stepping around the corner, to enter the front room, I came to a stop upon finding Vim.

He was sitting at the table, hands clasped and resting upon it. Looking utterly relaxed, yet stiff and stressed at the same time.

Basically his typical self.

"Vim?" I asked. When had he come in? He hadn't been at the table when I entered earlier, and I hadn't heard the door open or the gate either... Why was he so sneaky sometimes? At least this time I hadn't jumped and my heart hadn't tried to escape my chest.

Though there was something strangely eerie in the way he was quietly sitting there... why hadn't he greeted me back yet?

Walking over to the table, I debated saying something silly or wrapping him in a hug. Instead I patiently waited for him, as always, and placed my hand on the back of one of the chairs. I stood there, smiling at

the man who hadn't even looked at me yet. His eyes were as sharp as ever, but I could tell he wasn't staring at anything directly. He was deeply pondering something.

After a few minutes, Vim then blinked and nodded. "Did you like Hands' gift?" he asked.

I smiled and nodded. "Yes. I look forward to adding to it, with my own notes," I said.

"Hm... A dangerous thing, Renn. As you know there are only a few maps of the Society in the whole world. And they usually never leave the rooms they are hidden and stored within," Vim said.

I nodded as I pulled the chair back, and sat down. Sitting across from him, I copied Vim and laid my arms down and clasped my hands. "I find it hard to think something in my possession, while standing right next to you, isn't as safe if not safer than anywhere else in the world," I argued.

"Even I fail and make mistakes, Renn. Plus there is the human error to factor in," he said.

"If you don't want me to have a map, Vim, I'll destroy it," I said, deciding to not argue further. Maybe he was being serious about it. His free will allowed me to receive it, and Hands to give it, but because of who I was he was still voicing his opinion to me.

Vim smiled at me. "No, Renn. I'll not make you destroy a gift. Not like that. I just... wish for you to be careful with it is all," he said.

I nodded. "I will be. I promise." In fact I planned to not add to it and mark it myself until I knew it was perfectly safe to do so. In fact...

"Hm..." he nodded back.

"I don't need a drawn map, Vim, to remember locations I've been to or who's there," I reminded him.

He chuckled and nodded. "That I know well."

"So... did you bring it up to remind me? Or warn me?" I asked.

"Neither. I was using you as an excuse to distract myself from my own mind," Vim said.

"Funny, usually I'm the thing you need distraction from," I teased him.

Vim smirked at me and nodded, a little happily. "Right?"

I smiled too and nodded. "Want me to keep distracting you or would you like to talk about it?" I asked.

His hands shifted ever so slightly. I didn't glance at them, but I heard the way his fingers tightened around each other, and his very skin made noises as great stress and pressure pushed and pulled thanks to his grip.

Was it that bad...? Maybe I should change the topic then.

I shifted a little and gulped. "I heard a cough. On the way back here from Hands' office. From one of the local women. The same cough we heard in the south," I told him.

He nodded. "The plague is here already too, yes. But not as prevalent. Either the northern folk are hardier, or with the death of the monarch that birthed it the disease has lessened in its effectiveness. There are many people bedridden right now, sick, but the death rate is far lower than the south," Vim said, unbothered.

"Anyone in the Society sick?" I asked.

"Not that I'm aware of, here at least. But yes there's been a few members who have gotten sick, or are currently sick, per reports and letters."

"Seems like you're not too worried about it," I noted.

"I'm not. The Society has faced plagues before, and with the source gone the disease will either fade away into obscurity or mutate a few times and either become super deadly or become a common flu. Nothing to fret over," he said.

"Uh... I'd say becoming super deadly would be something to worry about, since I already thought it was such a thing as it was," I said.

He smiled at me. "Truly deadly diseases kill so quickly they can't spread properly. Think about how long it takes for people to travel from city to city, or nation to nation. If the disease infected quickly, and killed even quicker, it'd not be able to spread much. It'd eliminate itself purely through its lethality," he explained.

Hm... I nodded as I understood what he was trying to teach me. It made a lot of sense.

"What's a flu?" I asked.

"A type of sickness. Did you meet Mapple? I smell her on you," he asked, changing the topic.

Oh...? Was that on purpose, or did he just not care for the conversation?

"I had. She had walked with me for a short moment, we hadn't really said much. She asked if Hands had given me a clock or not," I said.

He smirked. "I see. She had hoped he had, I bet."

"So it's true? She likes you too?" I asked.

"Mapple? No. Not at all. She's like Landi. She wants a child, particularly from me for some reason. But she actually hates me furiously. It's a weird thing I try not to address," he said.

I groaned and shook my head, and looked away from him. Really. What was I going to do with him?

"I know right? Ridiculous. She's not my type at all."

Raising an eyebrow I quickly thought of Mapple. She wore those thick robes, so it had been difficult to really tell what her body had been like but her face hadn't been too uncomely. She had looked a little older, but not enough to make her seem outright old by appearance alone. In fact, now that I thought about her, I could see that many men likely would have thought her to be pretty. She had a pretty smile.

"So I'm your type?" I asked.

"On occasion..." Vim unclasped his hands, and I watched as he leaned back. The chair he sat upon creaked, but didn't break. "I planned to leave tomorrow, but something came up. We might be here a few more days," he informed me. I kept my own hands clasped, however.

"Hm? What happened?" I had thought he had wanted to go see Witch's descendant as quickly as possible.

"Randle. He's told me something that's... worrisome. We're going to meet him later, to talk about it, and I'll decide what to do next from there," he said.

"I see..." I whispered. Was it something to do with me? Or was it concerning the stuff happening, like the vote or Randle and the Chronicler's issues?

"Also, there's a chance we may be separated again," he then said.

"Huh? Why?" I asked. What happened now?

"Fly," he said.

I sat up straighter, and my hat slid off my head. It fell to my lap, but I ignored it as I glared at him. "What happened, Vim?" I asked, suddenly very worried.

"She's not doing well. She's getting into fights with those at the Bell Church. I'm not yet sure how or why, but Plumb has requested her to be taken elsewhere. They feel she is not a proper fit, or that it would simply be best if she went elsewhere for her own sake," he said.

My clasped hands gripped together tighter, mimicking Vim's. Though mine didn't make weird noises, even though I had gripped tightly. "What do you mean, Vim?" I asked further.

"Exactly what it sounds like, Renn. Fly is having issues. Those at the location have suggested, and in a way requested, that she be taken elsewhere. It happens."

"She's just a child," I said, growing angry.

He nodded, unafraid to hold my gaze which was now a stern glare. "She is."

"Plumb is the elder, right? The one who had banished me?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Thus why I can't go with you. Being banished," I said. It was a true banishment. Like the one I had received in Ruvindale, not Lumen.

He nodded again.

I clenched my jaw and shook my head. "When'd you hear about this?" I asked.

"Yesterday. We've been busy," he said.

"You should have told me right away...!"

"I know. I'm sorry."

I was about to growl at him some more, but calmed down. He looked genuinely hurt.

"Sorry," I apologized, realizing I was being unfair. After all... we had recently been dealing with serious issues. Trek's death, for one.

He gave me a gentle smile. "It's fine Renn. I'm upset over it too. I actually have a plan, if you'd like to hear it," he said.

I nodded.

"I want you to take Cat up north. To Lilly. To both deliver Randle's letter for him, but also to ask for her assistance," he said.

Assistance...? "For what?" I asked.

Vim's eyes narrowed. "To protect you."

I blinked. "Protect me...? From what?" I asked.

"That's just it Renn," he whispered.

Shifting a little, my heart thumped for a few moments as I calmed down. I was still a little upset over hearing the news about Fly. That poor girl didn't deserve to be banished. And fights? What'd that mean? Who'd get in a fight with her? What for? Who was tormenting that poor bird?

"What's happening, Vim?" I asked again, since he hadn't continued after a moment of silence.

Vim took a deep breath and sighed, and had been about to answer... but the metal gate squeaked as it was opened. I turned, and heard voices. Angie. Sillti. Link.

"We'll talk later," Vim said softly as he stood, to open the door and greet the huffing young bison who sounded upset.

"I'm glad you're moving out, you've become insufferable," Angie complained as Vim opened the door, and I smirked as I found out why Angie was bothered.

Sillti was clinging to Link's massive arm, giggling happily. Likely doing it just to tease the poor young girl.

Link's face was flushed red, and became even redder upon seeing Vim and I.

"Why Link, look at you. Your father would be proud," Vim said, teasing the giant man.

Link immediately lifted his free hand, to cover his flushed face, as Silti giggled and Angie groaned.

Chapter 316 Troubles Over Tea

Closing the door behind me, I sighed at the sight of Renn and Randle.

They were sitting at the table in his office, and they both had little cups in their hands. They weren't steaming anymore, but I could smell the freshly brewed tea. The fireplace nearby wasn't burning too strongly, and the kettle was no longer hanging over it but instead resting in front of it on a small metal plate.

During my short absence they had seemingly settled in, as if old friends. It kind of annoyed me how quickly the two had become so comfortable with each other.

Even if Randle was a trustworthy man, and honestly a good one, I still didn't like the idea of my wife being all chummy with a priest.

"Welcome back," Renn said with a smile.

I nodded as I stepped deeper into Randle's office, and wondered if I should have not returned so quickly.

I was honestly tired of these conversations. Of this place. Of the people here.

I wanted to leave. Now. To run away.

But I couldn't, and not just because there was still things to do and conversations to have.

Renn was here, after all, and I couldn't leave her here. Not alone. If I did then I'd likely return and find her not just listening to sermons, but giving them, and I couldn't have that. At all.

Stepping over to the table, I ignored Randle's odd glance as I went to sit back down next to him. He likely found it odd I would sit next to him and not Renn, what with her being my wife and all.

"Well?" Renn asked. She was excited to hear what had happened.

I nodded. "You were right Randle. They're here," I said.

Randle let out a sigh, but not one of relief but instead exhaustion.

"Did you talk to them?" Renn asked.

I shook my head. "I just saw Less at a distance. I didn't see Light, by the way, nor smell her... or sense her, either," I said.

"Sense?" Renn asked.

"Light is a saint, Renn. Celine did not just adopt her out of love, after all," Randle informed her.

I nodded. "They're staying in the northern wing, Randle. Like you assumed. Mapple is tending to them," I said. It was how I had found them; I had followed her from afar. It felt weird to be sneaking around the church in the dead of the night, since I usually never did or needed to do such a thing here, but it was better than the alternative.

"So they're here already..." Renn hummed as she pondered that fact.

"It's not a surprise. They had been in the Nation of the Blind, so couldn't have been too far," I said.

Randle nodded. "Yes. A few weeks away at most, I think," he added.

I sighed as I crossed my arms. For some reason I felt like I wanted some of that tea they had, but I resisted the desire and urge.

Renn's ear fluttered, as if my sigh had somehow bothered her, then she took a tiny sip from her cup and then nodded. "So... what will you do? Are they enemies?" she asked.

"Enemies...?" Randle groaned the word, and the accusation, and I could hear his disgust. Not just that Renn would suggest it... but that Renn was likely not wrong to assume so.

"They're still members, Renn. Even if they're scheming little shits," I said.

She smirked at me. "That upset over them? Is it because they're members of the cloth, Vim, or is it something more?" she asked.

"Far more. Yet less, too. Less is Landi's sister, by the way," I told her.

Renn's smirk wobbled as she shifted. "What? Really?" she asked.

I nodded as Randle rubbed his eyes, as if tired. "She looks just like her... though wearing the robes of course," I said with a shrug to the man next to me, in his priestly garments.

"Huh... That's uh... surprising, yet not, somehow," Renn said.

"Right?" I agreed.

"Ah... Vim... what am I to do?" Randle though didn't seem amused at all, and for good reason. He looked how I felt as he leaned forward, putting his cup down so he could rub his face and eyes with both hands and not just one.

"Whatever you want to, Randle. If you wish to confront them then do so. If you wish to join them, do so. Or just let them be? To be honest their schemes may remain just that, schemes and plans. After all to truly purge the church they need full control over it, and the support of the rest. That all relies on them taking over Lumen, and me being banished completely. You're talking about things that won't happen or can't for years down the road," I said.

"For a man unchained by time, you sure do let it protect you," Randle said.

I smiled at that. "Right?"

"Personally I think it's more indifference than that, Randle. Vim wouldn't care, or be bothered, if they voted against him and the church became different. I think that's why he's not as bothered over it as you are," she said.

I nodded. She was right. Although I was upset, and bothered, by the Chronicler and Light's schemes and secrets... it was in all honesty not that big a deal to me. Not stuff I really needed to worry about right now, at least.

Plus it was nothing new. There were always people causing problems. For not just me, but everyone. The world. It just so happened it was now my own people. And even that wasn't something new, either.

"The problem, Renn, is Vim will be able to deal with it down the road, as he says. That's a fact. But the problem with that is how many lives will it cost us before that happens? How many will be lost? How many souls? That is what I fear," Randle told her.

Renn shifted, her ears drooping a little as she nodded... as if she both understood his point and related to it too.

I studied the way Renn frowned at Randle, as if sharing in his grief all of a sudden.

She was bothered by this, but not about to weep or grow into a rage. In fact she seemed relatively calm, even though Randle and I had just explained to her what was happening. That the Chronicler, and Celine's daughter, had been planning a coup and many other schemes for the last few hundred years... and were now finally hatching those long nursed plans.

Maybe Renn's calmness about it was because she too realized it wasn't that big a deal. Or maybe she just hadn't yet comprehended how serious it all actually was.

Randle wasn't wrong after all. I could, and likely would eventually put a stop to Light and the Chronicler's plans... but how long would it be before I did so? How many years? Decades? Centuries?

Odds are many could die, or be lost to us, before I made a move. It's happened before.

Light's mother was proof of that.

"Is uh... I know this is an odd question, but who's in control? Light or the Chronicler?" Renn asked.

"Light, no doubt. She's not as old as the Chronicler, but their age difference isn't enough to justify eldership. Plus many amongst the cloth would kneel in front of Light first before anyone else, simply for being a real saint and also the daughter of Celine," Randle said.

"Then uh... isn't what they're doing simple? If Light is her daughter, and this whole church is Celine's legacy... isn't technically it all hers anyway? To do with as she pleases?" Renn asked.

Randle groaned and I smiled. "I like how your mind works Renn," I told her.

"Hm...?" Renn tilted her head at me, not realizing how genuine my words had been.

I liked that simple way of looking at life. It was rather predator-like, thus Randle's groan, but it was also the truth.

This church, and in fact the whole faith it produced and housed, were all Celine's. Her hard work. Her legacy, as Renn had called it.

Light did indeed have full claim to it. More so than anyone else.

"I see now why you were so confident, Vim. I regret even considering it," Randle said as he picked his cup up, to take a drink and relax a little.

I smirked and nodded. "Right? I warned you," I said.

Renn smiled, even though she didn't have any idea what we were talking about. Which was funny, since we were speaking about her.

Randle had thought he'd been able to use Renn. Or at least convince her, to join him in his beliefs and convictions. To take his side in this matter, in an effort to convince me to act rashly and against my own rules.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

He hadn't expected Renn to basically take my side completely, without even realizing it.

"Why can't you just... talk to them Vim? Why does this need to be all secretive and stuff anyway?" Renn asked, uncaring to inquire what we had just said.

"If I do it could force the issue. Make Light and the rest act rashly, since they might fear what I'd do first. My best course of action at the moment is to just... let it all be, until they confront me and address me directly. Something they will likely do during the vote, if not even to the whole of the Society too," I said.

"And by that time it will be too late. Because they'll have sowed enough seeds of doubt, bribed and cajoled the rest to their side and you'll simply frown and nod when they banish you from the Society proper," Randle said coldly.

Renn's eyes narrowed and I studied them as they glared at the priest I sat next to. "If that is the will of the Society Randle, then nothing will be or can be done about it. What would you have me do? Slaughter everyone who dares to vote against me? Some protector," I said.

"I expect you to root out corruption. Before it can bear its ugly fruit," he argued.

Renn lowered her cup to the table, and tapped it with one of her nails. "I agree with him Vim," she then said. Randle perked up and I sighed as she nodded and continued, "I'm not fully aware how bad the situation is... obviously. Since I don't see why Randle is so worried. Not yet anyway. But if what Celine's daughter and the Chronicler are doing is so dangerous and bad, then shouldn't you stop it? Before it destroys the Society?" she asked.

"He should. Yes," Randle hurriedly agreed and said.

"Should I then destroy Lumen, Renn?" I asked.

She hesitated, and Randle flinched.

"They're not about to banish the protector, or other members," Renn argued.

"No, but their greed will bring death. Inevitably. And is going to, if not already is, funding Light and her people's plans. What if to stop them, properly, is to destroy Lumen and all it gives the Society? All the wealth and safety it provides through it all?" I asked.

Renn shifted in her seat, not happy to hear my argument. At all.

"If I were to snip this supposed tree of corruption now, before it buds and sprouts, then I'll need to start doing the same for any and all such plans. Lumen. The old kingdoms. Tor's kingdom, or rather he himself. And so many more. The argument of stopping someone before they even start is a flawed one, in this case at least," I said.

"And thus our people's doubts and complaints Vim. Celine would have stepped in, and would have made you join her too, had she still been alive," Randle said.

"And I would have complained and voiced against such actions, as I had many times back then," I said.

He took a small, sharp, breath as to give a response... but bit his tongue and instead went silent. He simply shook his head in disgust, instead.

"Uh... not to sound callous, but earlier Randle said a strange word. Cajoil? What's that mean?" Renn then asked.

I smiled at her, and before I could answer her Randle did. "Cajole. To coax. Persuade. Or to convince someone to do something, usually with nefarious or underhanded tactics. I was basically saying Light and the rest would convince other members to their side without the best of intentions, and they'd not realize it."

"Ah," Renn nodded, making sense of it.

"And I'm not saying I agree with what they're doing. Nor that it shouldn't be addressed. I'm just saying... rushing into a confrontation with the Chronicler and the rest right now would be a foolish thing to do. Many in the Society rely on them, their network and people, this church and its crutches. Risking it through chaos such as infighting is the last thing we need right now," I said.

Renn slowly nodded. "He has a point Randle. Even you're worried for your orphans and people. It's why you're being so careful too," she noted.

Randle took a deep breath and sighed. "Yes. Thus why I had hoped Vim would have simply handled it upon my mentioning it. You sometimes do, Vim," he said weakly, as if defeated.

"If you had genuinely believed I would have done so, you'd not have written that letter," I said.

Renn nodded. "I'll get it to her, by the way. I'll leave tomorrow," Renn said, telling Randle.

"Oh...?" he glanced at me, since he noticed the way she had said it.

I nodded too. "I have a few things I need to take care of. One of our newer members, Fly, isn't settling in and nesting in her new home. It's become an issue," I said.

"The bird girl? I heard of that. The Chronicler asked if I'd send Meriah there if you didn't return quick enough," Randle said.

"Meriah...? I thought she was a traveling nun," Renn asked.

"She is. Basically," I said.

Renn frowned at me and then glanced at Randle, and I realized what her real question had been.

"She doesn't like the church, Renn. In fact she hates it so much it's a problem. It's why I can trust her when it comes to such things," I told her.

Her frown deepened. "He's a priest," she said gently.

Randle chuckled and nodded. "I am. But I also raised the girl, in a way. She had been orphaned. And the Chronicler and her sisters had abandoned her, thanks to her hatred for the cloth. So I took her under my wing," Randle said.

"A nun who hates the church?" Renn asked, interested.

"She has a unique story. And she's not the only one. Where is she, by the way?" I asked Randle.

"Last I heard still up north. You might encounter her if you spend time up there," Randle said.

Good. I planned to.

Renn smiled and nodded at me, glad to hear it. She too wanted to meet the woman who had avenged, or at least found out had done the deed, Lomi's family and home.

"So, you'll head to the Bell Church and she'll head to Lilly. With that human in tow? Lilly will not like that," Randle warned.

"Ah..." Renn realized something obvious, that she had forgotten. We had Cat to worry about.

"It'll be fine. I'll be quick anyway, and it's not like they're that far apart. A few weeks separated at most, I'll likely get Fly before Renn and the human even reach the Owl's Nest," I said.

Renn nodded, as did Randle.

"Wait... are we just done talking about Celine's daughter all of a sudden?" Renn then asked, realizing we had switched topics.

"I've given up on it for now. If I keep stressing over it I'll lose what little hair I have left," Randle said.

Renn frowned for a moment, and then laughed. "You have a full head of hair, Randle!" she said with a grin.

"Ah, you'd not say that if you had seen me in my youth!" Randle said as he grinned back.

I nodded. "He had long flowing hair, Renn. Longer than yours," I said. It had indeed been full and luscious, I'd forgotten about that.

She giggled at the thought. "I see!"

"We'll deal with the Chronicler and Light, Renn. Randle knows I'll do all I can once I can. Plus don't forget he has plans himself, what with his letter and all," I said, pointing it out to her.

"Ah... right," Renn nodded gravely.

Randle sighed. "And you Vim? You'll do what you said? What you promised?" he asked me.

"What'd I promise?" I asked.

"Landi, Vim," he said stiffly.

Ah. Right. I ignored Renn's look as I smiled. "I'd not promised anything, Randle. But yes. I'll send her a letter. I'll leave it in Oplar's office before I leave," I said.

"Thank you," he said with relief.

"Landi? What for?" Renn asked, excited to hear of her friend.

Randle said nothing as I went quiet too, and studied my jaguar sitting across from us.

She looked happy. Too happy to be talking about schemes. I had no doubt she comprehended most of what we'd talked of, and were talking about, but it still seemed like she had this childish innocence to her all the same. Honestly... she was likely just happy that I was including her in this. She seemed full of energy.

"Well?" she asked further, tired of waiting on me as I fell in love with her again.

"I'll let her do it. It won't look strange if Renn sends a letter to her friend," I said, deciding that was the best course of action.

"Ah. Why did I not think of that? Maybe I should have you destroy that letter, and just deliver it vocally," Randle said as he pondered it.

"No. Lilly won't outright believe it without that letter, I think," I said. Especially since Renn may very well meet her before I did. Lilly didn't trust anyone anymore, particularly not those like Randle. They had abandoned her once. She'd not forgotten such betrayal, and never would.

"I suppose that is true," Randle thankfully agreed.

"We'll stay in contact from now on. Keep me informed Randle, when you can," I told him.

"Should I send you the letters or her?" Randle asked seriously.

I debated it a moment. "Her," I decided.

Renn grinned and nodded. "Through Oplar right?" she asked.

Randle nodded softly and sighed. "Maybe you're right Vim. Maybe this will all just... blow past over time. To be forgotten, and laughed about, later," he said.

Renn's grin slowly died, since Randle had gone all glum again. "Possibly. Most things do, in my experience," I said.

"How did Celine do it, you think? Knowing all the things she did, and seeing them? How did she handle the stress of knowing what could happen, and would or might?" he wondered.

"I'd argue she hadn't done it well at all. Do you forget her long nights scribbling in those books?" I asked.

Renn's shoulders lowered, and I noticed the way she gently smiled at us. She sat back a little, as if to try and physically distance herself from us. As if to give us a moment of privacy, in her own gentle way.

"That I do. Speaking of books, I hope you did not make her destroy the one I just recently gave her," Randle said, bringing up that stupid letter.

"I've already burnt it, yes," Renn answered softly.

Randle groaned again and turned to glare at me.

"What? With her memory she could recreate it, stains on the pages and all," I said defensively.

"Maybe I should vote against you," Randle complained.

"Right!" Renn happily laughed, nodding quickly.

Rolling my eyes at them, I leaned forward to rest against the table as the two went to talking about all the ways I was a callous bastard. Though Randle never used any harsh words, he still found ways to say it all the same.

I planned to have us leave in a moment. It was late enough it was time we left. We'd draw attention otherwise. Attention none of us needed right now. Plus...

Staring at Renn as she listened to Randle tell her a story about a library I had burnt once, I wondered why I had so readily involved her in this.

It wasn't as dire as Randle believed it to be, in my opinion... but it was still serious. Still worrisome. Plus it proved something terrible, that I wasn't sure yet if Renn had noticed or not.

It proved the Society really was fractured. That it wasn't a single entity and a danger to itself as much as not.

It proved that at any moment it could collapse. This little social experiment could fail, and disappear. Like a whisper it could fade away, as if it had never been spoken at all.

Yet even with such danger and threat... life continued.

I had members I needed to check on. Members I needed to help, like Fly. I had Renn's friends, Cat and her people, that I needed to address. The saint. The supposed monarch that had given birth to the fires.

I still felt the exhaustion tugging at me.

There was, like always, much I needed to worry about. Many things I needed to handle, and deal with.

Yet...

"Well from now on just let me read them first! I'll remember them. Not only will that preserve them, it'll also annoy him too so it's a win-win!" Renn happily declared, telling Randle she would happily support him in preserving things I'd rather be left alone, or outright destroyed.

Randle of course readily agreed, happy to hear it, and I couldn't help but sigh.

Sigh and smile.

Chapter 317 Leaving Telmik, Once More

Cat groaned as she climbed up onto the horse.

I smiled up at her and watched the way she shifted and got comfortable. Yes, unlike Elisabeth, Cat would be perfectly fine with riding a horse.

We were outside of Telmik, at some kind of barn that the church owned or ran. It was a little chilly since it was still early morning, and we were all ready to leave. We had two horses, and our bags were packed, and only Vim was here to see Cat and me off. We were alone, except for a distant fenced in pasture. Horses were walking around within it.

Stepping away, I smiled up at Vim who patted the horse I'd soon be riding. It ignored him, almost completely as if he didn't exist, and instead turned to blink at me.

I reached out to pet the creature, and nodded. "You promise you'll be quick?" I asked.

"As quick as I can be. Stay with Lilly until I meet up with you," he said, and reminded me for the tenth time.

Nodding, I didn't bother telling him I knew full well and had no plans to do anything but. Really, I know he worried for me thanks to how deeply he loved, but still!

"It should only take me a week or two to reach you, by the time you get there. Stay on the main road until you reach Parker. Then head north-east, until you reach that river. Cross over the river, follow its stream, and you'll reach the forest. The dark forest, and then the Owl's Nest," Vim reminded me, once again.

I nodded. "Right."

Not only had he gone into great detail to tell me how to get there from here, he had gone over the map Hands had given me. The map was stupidly detailed, almost to the point it was scary. But although detailed beyond reason, it had no notes or marks for the Society locations. Not a one. It was my job to add them, supposedly.

A job Vim really didn't want me to do, yet seemed willing to let me do it all the same.

"And you. If I find out you ran off with her I'll track you down and make you wish I didn't know thirty odd ways to cook a cat," Vim said as he turned to look at my human companion.

Cat laughed loudly, making my horse flick its tail in annoyance. I could tell by her laugh, and how loud it was, that she had not believed him at all. She had thought he had simply been teasing her.

I though had heard the truth.

"Thirty odd ways?" I asked him gently.

He flinched and then glanced at me. "Cats aren't very tasty, honestly," he admitted.

"I'm not?"

His eye twitched as Cat snickered some more.

We held each other's gazes for a moment, and he sighed and smiled at me. "I'm sorry we're separating again so soon," he apologized.

Ah. He was going to ignore my comment. Darn. I had wanted to tease him about how he's really not gotten a taste of me yet, so how would he know if I was tasty or not?

Oh well.

Before I could say anything Vim stepped forward, grabbed me by the waist and then lifted me up. I lifted a leg so I could easily be placed onto the back of the horse. It shifted a tad as I was placed down, but didn't seem to even notice me being put on its back.

Putting my feet into the little stirrups, I smiled at the strangely comfortable feeling of this horse's saddle. For some reason I found it very accommodating. Maybe it was the strange cushion fashioned into the leather of it.

Vim handed me the reins, which I took gently and smiled down at him. From this angle I could see one of the lines in his hair. A scar on the top of his head, that was only visible at an angle thanks to his hair. It looked as long as my hand.

It was so weird. He scarred up, yet they faded quickly. He no longer had that little scar on his eyelid or eyebrow, from when I had cut his eye with my nail. It had faded a long time ago... yet other scars still lingered. I wonder how that happened.

A part of me wondered if maybe the scars that lingered on him were given to him not by people, but rather monarchs. Divinities.

"Ride swiftly, but not so fast that it is strange. Keep to the road, don't interact with anyone, pay the fees and taxes when you have to, humbly, and if you stop at any inns always stay in the same room," Vim said as he went to check the bags on our horses, again for the third time.

Cat giggled nearby. "Yes father," she teased him.

Vim glanced at her, but said nothing as he finished checking my bags and went to hers. She didn't have as many as my horse did, but she still had a few. Most of the bags were full of supplies that we'd need on our travel up north. Sets of clothes, particularly for the cold that would inevitably come, and then of course food and water.

Once he was done checking on Cat and her bags he returned to my side. The horse jerked a little at his approach, as if startled. I had to pat the creature's neck to calm it down with a hush.

It didn't take long for the horse to calm back down, and once it did Vim patted my thigh. "Don't take the horses into the dark forest, Renn. The bear will hunt them. Leave them with Cat and have Lilly return with you to guide her through the forest," Vim said.

I nodded. "Right. Oh... uh... what of the horses then?" I asked.

"Let them go? They'll be fine," he said.

I frowned but nodded.

"What a waste," Cat groaned.

Vim ignored her as he squeezed my thigh ever so slightly. The squeeze made my tail want to twitch. "If for some reason Lilly denies Cat entry, then simply go to the nearest town and wait there for me."

"Plobo," I said with a nod.

He frowned. "Plobo?"

"That's the name of the nearest village. I passed through it on the way there last time," I said, reminding him.

He smirked at me. "I see."

"I've not been there but I've heard of it!" Cat said.

Vim sighed and nodded again, and then he released my thigh. "Travel fast and sure. I'll see you when I can," he said in farewell.

Unauthorized content usage: if you discover this narrative on Amazon, report the violation.

I nodded slowly. "I'll see you later, Vim. Stand tall," I said.

"Stand tall."

I heard Cat flip her reins a little, to get her horse moving. But I remained still as I stared into Vim's eyes.

I wanted to hug him. Kiss him, even. But it seemed he didn't plan to do any such thing.

He'd indulge me if I asked for it, I was sure of it... but...

Well...

I wanted him to do it. Out of his own desire. Not because I simply wanted it.

"You're very tasty Renn. That's the problem, I don't want anything else anymore because of you," he then said with a smirk.

I squinted my eyes at him as he patted my thigh one last time and then stepped away.

"Now you two are just as bad as Sillti and Link," Cat said as she ushered her horse past me.

"Hmph. I'll believe that Vim when you do finally take a bite," I said to him, ignoring Cat this time myself, and then ushered my own horse forward too.

Leaving Vim behind, I felt my face grow warm as I felt him stare at me. After a few good moments, I turned a little... and found Vim standing in the same spot I had left him.

He smiled at me, and I felt my face grow hotter as I lifted a hand to weakly wave goodbye to him.

He waved back, and I sighed.

Once again separated. Hopefully this didn't become a habit.

I mean... I was glad that he trusted me enough to help him, and do things for the Society... but still!

Looking back forward, since the road we were about to head upon had carts and other people upon it, I shifted a little and reached up to make sure my hat was still firmly pinned to my hair. It was.

We had a slight journey ahead of us. Not as long as the journey south, to the deserts and rocky hot lands, but it was still a distance. Especially since Cat was human, and still had a very slight limp. It was why we were riding horses and not traveling by foot.

Vim expected it to take a few weeks for us to reach the Owl's Nest, Lilly's home. He believed there was a chance he'd even beat us there, in fact.

Honestly I planned to hurry, if I could. These horses should help with such a thing.

"Do you know how expensive these horses are Renn?" Cat asked.

"Hm...? No. But I know they're not cheap," I said.

"Not cheap at all. Our whole village only has six of them, and two are too old anymore to do any real work," Cat said with a sigh.

"Well... If we can find a way to not let them loose you can have them then, once we get you home," I said.

"Really...!?" Cat happily turned to grin at me, excited to hear so.

I nodded. I wasn't sure why she couldn't have them, especially if Vim didn't care if we just let them go free and loose anyway.

Plus it wasn't like I'd need them after. Vim didn't seem to like traveling by horse. Or wagon or cart. Though I've noticed he seemed to be a fan of boats, or sailing, for some reason.

I wonder why one was okay but the other wasn't. Was it simply the water? Or was it something silly, like the fact you didn't have to feed a boat?

"Thanks Renn. What should we name them, then?" Cat asked.

"Um..." I hesitated. Names. Right. They did name horses... Vim of course hadn't mentioned any such names. He had simply gotten them from that barn, I think he had even gotten them without telling anyone either. There had been people working the barns nearby, but none had come over to talk to us or even really glanced our way even as we tied our luggage to the horses.

"Yours has that white patch on its nose. As if it sniffed a bunch of snow. Call it Snow-Sniffer," Cat suggested.

I laughed at her. "It does indeed look like it nuzzled snow," I agreed. It was a burgundy color, similar to my hair, but it had a few small white patches notably one on its muzzle.

"Hm...! And this one shall be called Perch!" she happily declared.

I smiled at the woman who seemed suddenly young, or at least acting it. "Perch?" I asked. "Because you, a cat, sit upon it?" I asked.

She nodded happily, grinning at the fact I had understood.

"Then wouldn't that work for mine too?" I asked.

Cat paused a moment, and then her grin turned into a beam of a smile. "It would!" she said with a laugh.

Enjoying her simple joy, I found myself glad to have her as a companion for this trip. Without Vim it was a little dreary, but she'd at least keep me company and make me smile all the same.

Not that Oplar, Silti and Angie, hadn't been good traveling companions. Not at all. Oplar especially had also been boisterous and full of joy, but...

Well...

"I'm glad to be going home, to be honest," Cat then said as our horses hooves began to make new sounds. We had left the dirt road from the barn and stepped upon a stone one. The main road. Not far from us was a large wagon, heading our way. It was moving slowly though, its huge wheels turning gently as it was pulled by huge oxen.

"To be honest me too. I look forward to the forests," I said.

Granted the north we were heading to wasn't my true home. Those trees were still that much farther north... but...

Well...

I smiled as I thought of the little section of forest that Witch and I had lived in. near those lakes. The same place Cat had grown up, and called home.

In a way that had been a home too. My home. For a short time.

"I'm not looking forward to the cold though. I kind of liked this region's dryness," Cat noted.

I nodded. "Yes. It is dry here, isn't it?" I said. At least compared to home.

Though not as dry as the south, that's for sure.

Guiding my horse next to Cat's, we both strode alongside the road. Keeping to one side, I noted the many figures in the distance. There were plenty of people upon the road, heading both directions. Some on foot, others not. Telmik like always was a busy place.

I knew it'd be like this for a few days, and then once we got far enough north the roads would grow empty and almost desolate. And the towns and villages would become far apart, and smaller and more close-nit.

A group on foot passed us on the road, and I noticed the bags they all carried on their backs. They looked worn and ragged.

We passed one another quickly and easily, but even during that short time I noticed that they were likely not merchants or workers. They reminded me of the people in that caravan from Hornslo, after the fires. People destitute and carrying all they owned, near the end of a long and tiresome journey.

"He's still watching us, Renn."

Turning, I smiled at the distant figure. Standing near the barn still was Vim. It looked like he had his arms crossed, and was staring out at us.

I wonder if he'd watch us until even I couldn't see him anymore. I knew he could see farther than me, but I never really figured out just how much farther.

Cat happily giggled as she looked forward again. "He seems very protective, but in a good way!" she said.

"Some would agree, I suppose," I said. In truth there were seemingly more who didn't, thus the vote.

Although Cat knew of the Society, since I and Vim had explained it, we hadn't really explained much more. I wasn't sure yet if Cat was to be considered a member or not, but something told me she wasn't. And oddly, it seemed that Vim wanted it that way on purpose. And not because he was being his typical secretive, protective self.

He had hid Cat, her village and family, and Saint Elaine from the Society. Even from Randle, and the Chronicler. Intentionally.

It made me a little nervous, since it was that very reason we were now traveling without Vim... and why he was obvious studying us even from a distance as we left.

He was not just watching me leave; he was likely watching to see if anyone followed us.

Who did he expect to pursue us? One of the members? A churchman?

If someone did follow us... what would he do? What would I do if he didn't notice or catch them?

What would Lilly do, if they followed us all the way to the Owl's Nest?

I sighed, and hoped it didn't come to that. It was one thing to get into a fight, or have to kill and hurt, enemies but... our own people...?

Vim hadn't seemed very worried over Randle's issues, and the things the Chronicler and Celine's daughter were doing, but I knew better than to assume he had written them off. He just simply worry and fret like we did, us normal people.

Cat brought her horse closer, and she grinned at me with a mischievous look. "Did you mean that earlier, Renn?" she asked.

"Mean what?"

"That he hasn't tasted you yet? Really? Or...?" her grin widened, and I groaned as I realized my teasing had just backfired onto me.

Like usual.

Chapter 318 A Bell Church's Feather

I arrived at the Bell Church right as the church bell was rung. The morning was a cold one, hinting at the harsh winter that was likely to soon be tormenting this region.

Although I was finally here, I paused a moment at the edge of the forest. On the small dirt path that faded a little just behind me. I studied the distant buildings. The church. The library. The community center, and the houses and storage buildings throughout the fields and opening in this dense forest. There were a few distant people walking around, heading for the church. I knew they were the stragglers. The ringing bell was not to wake people up, or to summon them to the church but to let everyone who wasn't in the church to know it was time to bow their heads and pray alongside the rest. The sermon had finished.

Good timing on my part.

I was glad to find the village fine. I had ran through the area decimated by those fires on the way here, to both check once more on Angie's home for anything I had possibly missed, and also to see if both the fires still raged and also if the creature or person who had started them would be there. Sometimes such individuals did return to the scenes of their crimes.

Sadly neither anything new had been revealed to me upon searching the bison's burnt home again, and also I found no hide or tail of the monarch responsible for the fires. Or any other strange individuals like Cat and her people. On a good note though, the raging fires had died down. They had genuinely decimated several hundreds of square miles of forests and fields, mostly in patches, but there didn't seem to be any more still burning flames. A small storm had formed not long after I had returned to Telmik, based off what I'd seen. The grounds had been mulchy and murky. What had been thick and dense forests were now slushy mud piles.

Still...

Shifting a little I glanced away from the buildings and to the farmlands nearby. I could see some of the cows in the distance, grazing. They were those stocky ones. Ones not for milking but instead their juicy innards and meat. I knew beyond those pastures would be pigs, chickens and many other farm animals. Enough livestock, and farmland, to feed the many people here and then some.

Stepping forward, I sighed again at the headache I was about to endure.

Not only was I here to deal with Fly and her situation, I was also here to speak with Plumb. About multiple things. Some things that the Chronicler and Randle hadn't even realized, or cared to, even.

But how could they? They were too concerned over their own lives. Their own passions. Their drama.

Their petty schemes.

Walking forward, I strode into the village calmly as the last rung of the bell echoed away, fading into obscurity.

It'd not be long and people would start to pour from the church. Plumb though, like most of the other elders here in this village, would be in that church for a few hours more. They'd pray and worship a little longer than the rest. Being so devout, and elderly. So instead of doing my usual, of going to the eldest of the location first, I instead decided to go to the opposite.

Glancing around at the houses, I made a tiny bet on one in the distance. Not the farthest building, but also not the closest. It was a two story building, but was smaller. Only a few rooms large.

"Will I be right?" I mumbled as I headed for it.

Of course I had no idea which house Fly was living in. Nor did I see anything outwardly visible to imply that was the one she was in, or living in, but I liked to trust my instincts. And right now my gut told me it was that building.

"Oh my!"

I paused, turned, and smiled and greeted Braid as she hurried over.

"I heard you might be coming, Vim! Welcome back!" Braid happily greeted me with a huge smile as she gave me a deep bow. As she bowed her thick braid rolled along her shoulder, falling forward in front of her.

"How've you been Braid? Read anything interesting lately?" I asked.

"Why yes, of course I have! The fourth installment Vim, as I'm sure you'd know!" Braid happily said as she laughed at me, finding it hilarious I'd even ask such a thing.

Right. Of course. "I myself didn't care for it," I said.

Her happy laugh turned into a wry smirk. "I bet! I knew you'd say that!" she said.

Glancing over her shoulder, I noted the other folks in the distance. Near the church. A few had noticed us, but as of yet no one else was approaching. Not too uncommon here. Many here were old, old enough to no longer grow too excited or surprised when I randomly showed up anymore.

Braid tilted her head, glanced over her shoulder at what and who I was looking at, and then sighed and nodded. "Sorry Vim," she then said.

"For...?"

"Not being able to properly take care of her. Fly. I mean, my apology is honestly not very genuine. It's not like I actually tried to do anything to make her feel better, keeping my distance and all, but... you know..." Braid shrugged, seemingly feeling bad as she realized she was apologizing for being a bad person.

"It's okay. I'm to assume Fly is fine still? Still here?" I asked.

She nodded. "She sleeps the mornings away. I think it's her way of hiding from the church bells, and everyone else. A lot of the people here try to always get her into the church, if they see her out and about during morning sermon. They're not forceful but they are pushy about it," Braid said.

I nodded and sighed. "Yes. I figured. Is that her home?" I asked with a point to the house I'd been heading to.

"Hm? Yes. She lives with Limb. Or well... had lived with Limb. Limb's now staying with Olivia," Braid said gently.

Limb... the girl with the missing arm. "Is she the one Fly got in fights with?" I asked.

"Huh? No. Not at all. Limb though couldn't handle the bullying, for trying to be Fly's friend. I'll be honest I'm not sure how it started, or who or how many were involved... but Fly's gotten into a few fights with several people. Notably the younger ones. From what I understand she and another one of the girl's butted heads a lot, and from there a tendency of bullying grew. And once Limb moved out and Fly got a whole house to herself it made some of the older adults get involved too," Braid explained.

"And why is that?" I asked, feeling annoyed.

"You know how some of them are here, Vim. We're supposed to share. A single person having a single home isn't fair... at least in their eyes," Braid said gently, as if she herself didn't see anything wrong about such a perspective, but also didn't agree with it. Like usual she seemed to be keeping a distance. Detached.

All she ever cared about was that library. Her books. Never much else.

"I see. Would you mind letting Plumb know I'm here? I want to go see Fly first before anything else, though," I said, asking a small favor.

"Sure! Before you leave though please come see me. I have a request," Braid said.

"Another book?" I asked.

She nodded quickly. "I'll give you the list!" she said as she turned to hurry away.

I sighed at her. That had been why she had approached in the first place then. Likely had been waiting for me. Usually she missed the morning sermons as much as Fly likely did.

Oh well. I didn't care for her indifference but I had to at least respect the woman's dedication and hobby. She had likely not helped Fly, or even considered it, but at the same time she had undoubtedly never bullied or done anything rude to her either. The lesser of the evils, in a way.

Turning away myself, I headed for Fly's home. Before anyone else could hurry over and bother me. It was a good thing that although still a village, they had larger distances between all the buildings. As to make each little home its own reclusive area, what with gardens and even small farmland patches.

Approaching the building, I slowed as I neared the front garden... and realized something a little sad.

The garden was well kept. Flowers. Bushes were tidy. The grass was a little long, but not so bad considering they really only had scythes and animals for lawn care here. Plus there were little pots and baskets around the front door. Not gifts left by others, but rather someone's attempt to decorate. You could tell whoever had done the decorating was new at it. Unaccustomed. There was no sense of order, or color coordination. it looked like something I'd do halfheartedly just to be left alone.

Fly's attempts. To make her home comely.

She had pride in her home. In her possession.

Pride of ownership was not common for someone who wanted to leave...

Taking a small breath I stepped forward once more, and reached the door. I debated just opening it but then remembered the young girl... even if covered completely in feathers was still just a girl. A young woman, even.

Knocking on the thick wooden door, I noted the sound of something clanking against the other side of the door. Something had been hung up against it? Or maybe was resting against the door? It didn't sound like a chair or box being pushed against the door, it had clanked too loosely.

For a few moments I heard nothing, but then I heard a tiny creak. Glancing up, I leaned back just enough to see the feathered head peak out from one of the windows above me.

A pair of sleepy eyes, joined by a frown, glared down at me.

"Morning Fly," I greeted her.

"Vim...?" she asked groggily, and I heard and saw her quickly waking up at the sight of me.

I nodded. "How've you been?" I asked.

A huge smile planted itself on her face and I felt my own eyes go wide alongside hers as she leaned even farther out of the window. I quickly stepped back a few steps, as to catch the girl who had just leapt from the window with a gleeful shout.

"How've you been!" Fly shouted happily as I caught the bundle of feathers.

Doing everything I could to be careful, and not hurt her, as I lowered her to the ground I sighed in relief as she giggled up at me and wrapped me in a hug as her feet touched the ground. She hadn't gotten hurt by me.

"It's been forever!" she said as she hugged me, and I patted her on the head instead of hugging her back. I was now worried over accidentally hurting the girl, since she was as tiny and thin as I had remembered her.

Though... definitely more jubilant. Hadn't she been rather demure before? Maybe this place had done her good even with all the issues.

"It's been a little over a year, yes. I expected bigger feathers by now, what's with you? Are you not getting enough food?" I asked, teasing her a little.

"Huh! No way! Look I'm totally taller!" Fly stepped back, raising her feathered arms to show off her half-naked self. She only wore a large toga type shirt, likely since it was easy for her to wear... and likely because she had just been in bed. Some of her feathers on her head were tilted at odd angles, akin to bed hair. Did that hurt?

"You sure...?" I wondered as I played along. Honestly she could be taller, but I couldn't tell.

"Definitely! At least by a few feathers! I used to not be able to reach this little hole thingy! Look now though!" Fly turned to the door, and promptly reached up to touch the peephole.

As she did I nodded, she could indeed touch it even if she was stretching with all her might to do so.

"So uh... Fly," I frowned as she turned and beamed at me, proud of touching the thing she supposedly hadn't been able to do before.

"Huh?"

"The door. It's locked," I said. I had felt its latch upon knocking on it.

Fly frowned and then turned... and her feathers slowly lowered all over her body, hugging her closer, as she realized what she'd just done.

"Shoot... um... well... The back window should be open," Fly said as she smiled sheepishly at me.

I smiled and nodded. "Let's check," I said.

"I could just climb back up there too, you know," Fly said, unbothered by her mistake as she lead me around the house to the back.

"I've no doubt," I said as she led me to a large double framed window which led to the kitchen. It was shut, but it hadn't been latched. Fly easily opened them, and grinned at me as if she had just accomplished a mighty task.

"Go on in, let me in. I once showed you my room it's only fair you return the favor," I told her.

"Oh yeah...!" Fly grinned at the idea as she hurriedly clambered up onto the window's banister, and then into the house. I watched her climb through the window, roll along a counter, and then fall to the floor in the kitchen with a light thump. She was fine though as she hurriedly stood and then hurried out of the kitchen and out of sight, rounding a hallway and heading deeper into the house.

I glanced at another door. One nearby. One that had likely led out here, to the backyard and shook my head at the bird. She could have just opened that one for me.

Typical bird.

Rounding to the front, I found the door open and Fly hurrying around as she cleaned up. She was in the middle of picking up small cushions off the ground, putting them properly onto couches and chairs. I glanced around the small living room, and once again realized the truth as I closed the front door behind me.

She was a clean person. The tiny mess she was cleaning up wasn't a mess at all, but instead her just properly organizing the few little things out of place. Birds were sometimes clean-freaks. But this wasn't her trying to clean up just because I had shown up unannounced... this was her wanting to show me her home. In all its full glory.

She was proud of this home. Proud to show it to me.

And it wasn't just a place she kept clean, either.

"So uh... well... wait! Is Renn here with you? Isn't she um..." Fly paused a moment as she put down the last pillow onto the couch, and worriedly glanced over at me.

"She's banished from here, yes. So no. She's not with me. She's fine though, and told me to tell you she misses you and looks forward to seeing you when she can," I said.

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

Fly beamed me a happy smile as she stood up and quickly nodded. "Yeah...! I'd love to see her again!"

I tried not to notice the pure joy in her voice. That hadn't just been a child's simple joy, but outright relief.

She missed her friend.

"So. Which chair do you think would survive me?" I asked as I looked around at the couch and chairs. They were all wooden, and honestly not that well made. Simple things, although covered in thick cushions and pillows. One even had a blanket neatly draped over it.

"This one's the sturdiest!" Fly said as she stepped over and patted the cushion of one of the chairs.

"Then let us see," I said as I stepped over to it.

She giggled as she stepped aside and I sat down into the chair. I made sure to leave my feet firmly planted, using them to alleviate some of the burden off the chair. Even with me being super careful, it still shifted and made noisy stressful complaints.

"Want something to drink? Eat? I got snacks! I can make you breakfast too! I got eggs last night," Fly rambled as she hurried away, heading back into the kitchen without even waiting for me to answer her.

I sighed gently as I listened to the young bird rummage in the kitchen, gathering up cups and plates of food and drink.

"Just a drink and some snacks. I've not worked up enough of an appetite this morning yet for a real meal," I said.

Fly giggled from inside the kitchen. "Funny!"

Had I said something funny...?

It didn't take long for her to return. She had a small platter, which wobbled a little as she placed it down on a nearby table. She didn't place it on the small coffee style table in front of the couch, but instead a taller table against the wall. She quickly went to handing me a small wooden cup full of some kind of

juice, and then went to putting a few tiny plates on the coffee table. They had tiny bread items upon them, from muffins to scones.

"Learnt to cook have you?" I asked. I remember her struggling one time with Renn and the others at Lumen, trying to cook a proper meal. She hadn't been too apt at it back then, having grown up in those sewers scrounging for food.

"Yeah...! Uh... Limb. She taught me," Fly told me as she grinned and nodded.

Taking a small drink of what was undoubtedly some kind of apple juice, I smiled and nodded. "Thank you."

Fly beamed me a happy grin and nodded as she grabbed her own cup and went to sit on the couch nearby. I noted the way her talon-feet hung just a bit over the floor, confirming she was still small.

"How've you been Fly?" I asked.

"Great! I have my own room! My own house! And it's warm, and even when a hard storm comes I don't need to worry about getting soaked. My feathers don't even get damp anymore," she said happily.

Nodding slowly, I tried to not pity the poor girl too heavily. Not just because I was about to ask, or rather demand, she abandon this place she now called home... but rather because I now pitied her for another reason.

She hadn't known what it was like to go through the wet season without getting actually wet. Or damp. The mere fact she was able to remain dry, even while during a harsh storm, was a wonder to her.

Just how were people mean to her? How did they stomach it?

"Other than the warm bed, anything else you like about this place?" I asked gently.

Fly nodded quickly. "The stories!" she said without hesitation.

"Stories...?" I asked.

"The ones grandmother Plumb and the rest tell. I love listening to them," she said with a smile.

I see. She likely didn't just mean the religious sermons, but the teachings the elders gave to the young. They did seem like stories usually, I saw how she could dub them such a thing.

"And I like to work in the big kitchen, with the others. Though it's a pain to get the flour and stuff out of my feathers," Fly said as she lifted her arms to shake them, as if they had clumps of dough and flour in them now.

"Feathers do like to get dirty," I said.

"Right? They take so long to dry too if I have to get them too wet," she complained with a smile.

Oh...? Must not be a waterfowl then. I never really considered what kind of bird she could be, since although covered in feathers and with talons for feet she was pretty much human everywhere else.

Those like her used to be normal. Common. Everywhere.

Now she was likely one of a handful.

"How's Renn? Where is she? Does she still blush like crazy?" Fly asked before I could ask more about her supposed home.

I blinked, and at first was a little stunned. Was this her trying to distract me from what I'd been asking, or pure and simple innocence? "Renn's fine. She's actually heading up north, on a small mission. She's escorting a friend back home, someone who sadly needed the help," I told her the truth.

Fly grinned and nodded, happy to hear it.

"And yes. She still blushes mightily. On saying goodbye to her, she had tried to tease me and all it had done is make her face flush in the process," I said as I remembered that look on her face. It had been wonderful.

Fly laughed at me. "So you two are still flirting then? That's good!"

Oh...?

Oh. Right...

I shifted the small cup in my hand as I realized something a little odd.

Back then, during that Lumen incident... Renn and I had not really been as close as we are now. We had been on the precipice of it. The step just before our relationship, but not there just yet. To Fly we weren't a married couple, or maybe not even a couple at all.

A part of me wanted to correct that misconception, yet at the same time I hesitated. To admit it, especially to such a little and innocent bird such as her would be the same as cementing the fact in history.

I mean, it was a fact. I saw Renn as she saw me, as she claimed herself to be. My partner. But...

"Vim?" Fly tilted her feathered head at me, and I sighed and nodded as I tucked the odd feelings away.

It felt good to feel so at odds with myself. To want to shout my love for Renn to the world, yet also hide it away forever, but this was not the time to indulge in such emotions. Not the time or place.

"I've heard you've gotten into fights Fly," I said.

Her happy grin went still, and then her whole body displayed her heart to me. The grin died. Her eyes softened, and with a few blinks went from happy and wide to half-closed and lowered in depression. Her shoulders slumped. She lowered her cup to her lap, mid-drink. Her feathers, all over her body, folded down and into her as if to hide herself and make herself as small as possible.

I'd just hurt the girl.

"Yes. A few, actually," Fly then whispered.

"With who?" I asked.

Fly took a deep breath and sighed. "Mostly Cynthia. But I've also gotten into fights with some of the other girls, even one of the older sisters too," she admitted.

It seemed she knew full well why I was here. To talk with her. Although obviously distressed and hurt, she spoke of it readily.

"Did you at least win?" I asked.

Fly perked up, raising her head to better look at me. She frowned, her eyebrows shifting, and then her feathers lifted a little as she smiled. "What...? Win?"

"Yeah? The fights? Did you win them or not?" I asked as I took a drink of the juice.

"Well... a couple, I guess. But I'd not really tried to hurt them, Vim... I just... wanted them to stop," she said as she gulped, but not because she had taken a drink from her cup. In fact she'd not taken a single drink from it yet.

"Stop what?" I asked as I was about to finish my own cup. I wasn't thirsty, of course, but the sooner I drank it all the sooner I could put the cup down and ignore it.

"Talking bad about Renn."

Pausing mid drink, I lowered the cup and frowned.

"What?"

She nodded and sighed. "It started not long after Renn left, leaving me and Wool here. At first I tried not to pay attention to it... I mean... I get it. Renn's family did something bad. I wasn't... I'm not one to say anything, considering where I come from, but!" Fly sat up straighter, her feathers going stiff as she grew agitated.

I kept myself calm as I realized what she meant, and did so rather quickly.

The people here had spoken ill of Renn. After hearing Plumb's side of the story, and likely maybe other stories about her too. Like her other banishments, or the chaos in Lumen.

Those here didn't take kindly to predators in the first place, let alone those who brought chaos with them. Many here had suffered under such people's wrath. Yangli and Prasta's mother was here. That lizard especially hated such people, since her son had been one of the worst of them.

"You got into fights over words, Fly?" I asked softly, and carefully. I had to tread carefully here.

Even if I was stupidly proud over hearing this little bird having done such a thing as defend my wife's honor, it was still a problem. Still an issue. A mighty one.

You did not attack other members. That was one of the cardinal rules.

"Well... no. Yes...? At first I just ignored them. Then they started to be mean to Wool too... but then... well..." Fly groaned as she shifted, and suddenly the girl wasn't just unhappy now... she was about to cry.

"Wool's started acting like them, Vim! And even Limb! I get it... I do... if you don't agree with them they don't hang out with you. Won't be your friends. Won't come over for snacks, or let you listen to their stories or read with them or..." Fly began to reveal more, and very quickly with every word she spoke she began to break a little more. Tears began to fill her eyes. Her feathers began to lower flat, hugging her as they shook. She had spilled a little of her juice onto her lap as she shifted and sniffed at me,

growing emotional. "I get it. But Renn's not evil! I'm not like those in the sewers either! Yet they all think we are!" Fly then said, raising her voice as she frowned at me.

I see. She had avoided, or spoken out against, their accusations and assumptions... and by doing so, likely again and again without giving in as Wool had, those words had turned into bullying. Bullying that was more than just them wary of her, or her connection with Renn.

Odds are the bullying wasn't even about Renn, or Fly's allegiances anymore. It was likely just the mere fact that she had opposed too many for too long, and was now ostracized in the village. Her roommate, Limb's absence, was proof of that.

"You should know how scared people get, Fly. Of others. Of things they don't understand," I said gently.

Fly hesitated, and her frown deepened. "But... she's not even here, Vim. And there's no terrible master to threaten anyone. No dinner table to be tossed into!" Fly said.

I nodded. "Yet all the same, you can't fault their fear. They have a right to it... just as you have a right to cherish Renn. Everyone in the Society has a right to their own opinions and beliefs," I said.

"I don't want to be friends with people who hate the person that saved me," Fly whispered.

My jaw clenched as I held the young bird's eyes, and their gleaming steadfastness within them.

The young bird was almost daring me to say otherwise. She almost looked ready to fight me here and now, if I started badmouthing Renn she likely would... or at least try to.

How wonderful. What beautiful loyalty.

How come I never got those eyes, even when I bled and killed? Even when I did the impossible? Those eyes so rarely looked my way... yet here Renn was, getting them again. It wasn't fair, almost.

"So their bullying started, the fights happened, over their disgust and hatred for Renn and those like her?" I asked to confirm it. I knew she was full with emotion, so it was the perfect time to ask.

"Yes. But I swear I didn't try to really hurt anyone! I was just tired of them pushing me, and trying to pluck my feathers!" she said.

"Pluck...?" I asked with a frown. So it wasn't just over words?

"Cynthia and the rest kept saying I was a predator. Like Renn. Since I got angry when they plucked my feathers," she said as she shifted and looked down at her hands, or rather the cup within them. She had calmed down a little and realized she had spilled some of her juice onto her feathers.

I kept a sigh from escaping as I nodded and understood what she meant.

She meant it literally of course. This Cynthia, and others, had very likely literally tried to or did pull her feathers out. On purpose. To see her reaction.

If Fly had reacted physically, with violence, they had likely claimed it was proof of her violent nature. That her reaction to such a thing proved she was dangerous, like Yangli, for growing violent over a tiny little slight.

Something not too uncommon amongst the Society members, regrettably. Few anymore today had traits such as Fly, so they didn't comprehend it. To them, they plucking Fly's feathers was the same as say... plucking a few strands of hair. An annoying, slightly painful, form of harassment.

To Fly however it had likely been terribly painful, enough to make her want to defend herself. Especially if such bullying was accompanied by harsh words and criticism. Of not just her, but Renn. The woman she saw as a savior, a friend.

"Did the elders not try to stop it? Did you talk to them about it?" I asked. Although Plumb and the others here were odd, they should have known better than to allow such things to happen.

"I... I did. I talked to Plumb. She said she'd scorn the others, and I think she did... but..." Fly shifted again as she reached over to put her cup onto the coffee table. She didn't want to hold it anymore, it seemed. Or drink from it.

"But it didn't stop?" I asked.

She shook her head quickly. "It did! In fact... lately they haven't done anything. No one has. I even a few days ago ate dinner with everyone and no one said a thing. Or did anything," Fly said.

I frowned but nodded. So Plumb had handled it... but...

Was that because she had handled it properly, or because she had told everyone that Fly would soon be leaving and to just keep their distance until it happened?

Leaning back in my chair a little, I sighed at the problem. It was honestly a common one. Especially for those like Fly. Those who had more non-human traits usually did find it hard to blend in and adapt. Though by the sounds, and looks of it, this was more on the rest of the community than she herself. Even if Fly had reacted violently to their taunts and harassment, who could blame her? Their plucking of her feathers had likely been painful.

Plus no one had mentioned Fly had truly hurt anyone, as far as I was aware. I'd have to confirm it first but as I recalled neither Plumb's original letter or the Chronicler, nor even Braid just now, had mentioned any deaths or maiming.

Though... could Fly even cause much harm in the first place? The poor girl, although very non-human, was rather weak. Comparatively.

"Vim...? I'm sorry. I really am. I... I..." Fly began to apologize to me, and as she did she finally broke. She sobbed as tears began to flow freely, and she started to stutter. She kept trying to say more, to tell me more and apologize for it all, but nothing but sobs escaped her lips.

Slowly standing up, I stepped over to the couch and sat down next to the young bird. I made sure not to break the couch as Fly quickly went to crying in my lap while wrapping her arms around my waist. I patted the young girl on the back, mindful of the girl's feathers as I did so.

"It's all okay, Fly. I promise. It won't just be okay, it is okay," I said gently to the young bird.

She squeezed me, but I barely felt the grip. She really was weak. Nothing like Renn, at all.

As she wept I glanced around the little living room, and wished I had brought Renn with me after all.

This would have been a great moment for her. Not because the moment was a good one, of course, but rather it would have suited her. Fly would have likely much preferred to weep in her arms over my own. I mean look at me, I barely said anything to comfort the poor girl at all yet!

"I tried...!" she cried into my lap.

Gently patting the bird, I nodded. "I know well how hard you try, Fly. So I believe it. I know you did," I said.

She had run into that sewer after all. When Renn had been kidnapped. In Lumen. That night, while I had been in those sewers searching for Renn... Fly had left the safety of the Animalia Guild as to find and rescue Renn. All by herself. The act had gotten her stripped of clothes, beaten half to death and thrown into a pit. A pit that had held her master, or at least one of them. A monster. A giant creature that fed on anything that moved.

She had risked her life. To help Renn. Without hesitation.

It had been why she had been so readily accepted into the Society. Even though she had originally, alongside the rest of her people, tried to capture Renn as to feed her to that very monster in the beginning.

I'd not verified yet what had honestly happened. I hadn't spoken with Plumb, or the others. I haven't talked to this Cynthia yet, or Wool and Limb who would also know more. But I didn't need to. I had no doubt of this bird's loyalty. To not just the Societies ethics and rules... but Renn.

"I tried," Fly mumbled as she began to stop crying as she began to fall asleep. The great emotions had taken their toll. Likely thanks to my waking her up but a few minutes ago.

Her arms slowly softened their grip, and her whole body relaxed as she drifted off into sleep. Her feathers also relaxed, going flat against her body as they did.

"I know," I whispered softly to the young bird.

I knew her struggles. Her emotions. I knew them well. As did Renn.

She had thought she had found a home. A place to live. In peace. In happiness.

And instead had only found another hell. Maybe not one as bad as the first, anywhere near, but...

Sometimes this hurt even more. To find people, and a place, you thought was better... only to realize it wasn't. The high expectations sometimes made the realization hurt even more than it really should. It was likely that very disappointment, that very disgust, which had fueled the drama. The fights. The disagreements. Their comments had drawn out her anger not just out of her loyalty and affection for Renn, but her disappointment and disgust with her supposed new friends and family.

Little Fly had expected this place to be better than the sewers she had grown up in, and had found them wanting. Or even worse, had begun to question herself.

We've lost many to suicide under such scenarios. Those similar to hers. Because they eventually begin to blame themselves. To feel lost, and alone. It was why those in charge, the elders of each location, were so quick to request a move of residence for those unable to adapt and fit in. It wasn't just cruelty, or a lack of heart, it was out of concern.

"Renn..." Fly mumbled a barely audible name as she fell asleep, and even began to snore.

I think this was the first time I'd ever seen her sleep. Maybe. I couldn't remember. I had watched over her during those visits last time I had been Lumen, but I had allowed Renn to take charge of her then. On purpose.

Renn... was it? Was she thinking of her because she had wanted to see her? Had my presence brought Renn to the front of her mind and memories...? Or was she apologizing to her instead of me, since it was in her name some of those supposed fights had occurred...?

Either way, I knew that feeling. I knew it well.

"I know, indeed," I whispered quietly, letting the girl sleep.

I knew how it felt to be disappointed. To feel what she felt now. Maybe not the bullying and ostracizing, since such things couldn't and wouldn't bother me... but I knew full well the feeling of disgust and disappointment. I felt it every day, almost.

I knew it. I understood it.

I knew.

But I didn't know how to fix it.

Not yet, at least.

Not the way I wanted to. Or felt like I should be able to.

Hopefully Renn could figure it out before it was too late.

Chapter 319 A Melancholic Storm

The light rain was making small puddles, and not just out on the brick road either.

Turning a little, I glanced at the roof of this makeshift barn our horses were stabled in. There were leaks, and more than a few. None of the puddles in the barn were bad, yet, but I knew by the time we readied to leave in the morning they likely would be.

"Sorry you two," I apologized to our horses, since I wasn't sure what to do for them. It felt bad to leave them in such a rickety, damp and cold place overnight... but the other inns hadn't had stables or anywhere for us to leave them. And I didn't want to risk them getting stolen in the middle of the night by leaving them out on the road itself.

At least this barn could be closed and latched, and the road it was on was not the main road but instead an alley behind the inn we were staying at.

Honestly I would have been fine continuing through the night, even with the light rainstorm, but Cat had grown tired. She had gone rather quiet, drifting in and out of half-sleep as we rode. She was still just a human, after all and they didn't do well with a lack of sleep.

Patting my horse one last time in goodbye and goodnight, I stepped away and left the barn. I closed the wooden gate behind me, but didn't lock it since the owner of the inn would do it. Plus there might be other visitors for the inn soon, since it wasn't just yet nightfall.

Plus most of our important luggage we'd already taken to our room. If the horses were stolen, although regrettable, we'd be fine.

Sighing as I shifted my shoulders a little, I hurried around the rickety barn to the inn nearby. The door leading into the building was propped open, letting some of the rain filter in, but I immediately began to feel warmer upon entering it all the same. The inn, unlike the stable, was well built. Warm. Comfy. It

even smelled good, which was a very unusual thing for an inn. They usually stunk horribly, yet this one smelled nice and relaxing.

Walking down the hallway towards the eating area, and the stairs to the upper floors, I paused to look at the source of the nice smells.

Resting on little shelves, were tiny little elongated bowls. Ones with tiny little candle-like incense sticks, which were slowly burning.

Such things were new to me. At least up here in the north. I'd seen plenty in the south, while traveling with Vim, but these were rare here. Rare enough to make me wonder how they had so many, and were willing to burn them without worry out in the open.

I knew they were just dried herbs, mixed in strange powder and glue, but usually they were expensive. Not just the herbs, but the glue and resin to properly prepare them. A long time ago I had bought a few for Nory, the handful of sticks I'd purchased back then had been as expensive as all the supplies and clothes I had purchased that same day.

The memory made me smile. Nory had enjoyed those smelly sticks, even though I hadn't. It was interesting that these didn't seem to bother me. And it was interesting to think on how different money was to me now.

Back then money had been so strange to me. Not just because it was hard to earn enough, but also because what had been great wealth to me back then was now a passing thought today. I had enough coins in my little satchel to probably buy this whole inn outright if I wanted to and still have plenty to spare. I couldn't have imagined such wealth in the past.

Yet money didn't matter anymore. Not really. Coins were now the same as just... supplies to me. Things I needed to properly travel, or buy the few little things I occasionally wanted. I paid so little attention to them sometimes that it'd not surprise me if one day I forgot or left the little pouches of coins somewhere on accident.

Stepping around a small corner, I entered the open eating area of the inn. It was a large open room, with high ceilings. Usually these areas weren't as fancy, since the higher ceilings and extra room took away from the bedrooms they could rent. This place though didn't seem to mind, and in fact tried to make even the little details luxurious. This room had fireplaces, little racks and stands to hang coats and hats, tables and chairs aplenty for single people or large groups. It was honestly one of the nicest inns I'd ever stayed at, which was saying something since Vim sometimes had us stay at the nicer locations, such as at the noble's districts.

Cat was sitting alone at one of the tables in the corner. She wasn't alone in this room, but it was still quiet. The two other tables with people at them barely had soft whispers, barely audible over the single fireplace that was burning with pops and cracks. It had likely been lit to stave off the light chill from the rainstorm, but there was also a small poncho looking coat hung near it from one of the coat racks. It glistened a little, implying it was soaked and being dried.

Walking over to Cat, I slowly sat down next to her. The table was a little bigger than usual, so sitting across from her would have made me have to speak up a tad to comfortably speak with her. It would have been awkward.

"How're the horses?" Cat asked.

"Fine. They'll definitely get wet though, I'm honestly a little surprised this nice place has such a worn down barn," I said.

She shrugged lightly. "Horses will be fine. They sleep in the rain in the wild anyway," she said.

Although true, I still felt for the animals. Even in the wild they'd try to stay warm and dry, wouldn't they?

"I ordered us some warm drinks and meals. I'm not really sure what they'll be bringing us though," Cat said as I glanced around the room again. No one was looking at us, or nearby, but for some reason I felt on guard. Maybe it was the incense; there was one in this room too near the fireplace. Although they made the building smell good, it was still odd and unnatural.

I should ask the innkeeper what kind of herbs the incense sticks were made of. It wasn't often I found such things to smell good.

Vim probably would have known.

"How far are we from those forests?" Cat asked. She sounded tired, and a little bored. She was likely just asking questions to keep herself awake.

"This town wasn't on the map, but the next one is. I overheard a few people mention a smaller village, Nasko, while we searched for this inn. It's a few days to the north. It can't be too far from Parker, I bet," I said. At least I hope it wasn't. We'd already been on the road for over a week, and it really felt like we should have made it there already.

It had felt like we had been traveling quickly, thanks to the horses. Yet I had a nagging feeling that I would already be having dinner with Lilly and Windle had I been traveling on foot with Vim and not with

Cat. Though that might have just been my own personal feelings on the matter making me believe in the impossible.

"Hm... I bet it'll rain the whole way there," Cat complained with a sigh.

I nodded. It likely would. The rainstorm we had encountered since this morning didn't seem like it had any intention to let up, though thankfully it didn't seem like it was going to grow harsher either.

One of the logs in the fireplace popped loudly, drawing not just my attention but a few of the other's in the room.

Conversations resumed, not bothered by the loud noise. "Hope they hurry, I'm starving," Cat mumbled softly.

I turned my head a little, to try and hear outside of the room. I heard mumbled voices, clanking metal, and the raindrops on the roof several floors above... but couldn't hear or tell if any sounds I heard were coming from the nearby kitchens. I blamed my hat.

Reaching up, I itched under my hat with a finger. Vim had made me a few new pins before we had left Telmik, but only a small handful. He had been busy, too busy to make much more for me. I hoped they lasted until I met him again. Having pins really was a necessity for me, really, and ever since constantly having them I had grown to rely upon them.

In my youth I had worn hats without pins, and a few times it had gotten me into trouble. Sometimes accidents just happened, like me being bumped into, a hard gust of wind, or just simply a sneeze or

cough was enough to dislodge it. So having a few pins to hold it in place, even just to a point, was valuable.

I should have Vim teach me how to make them too, even if I preferred to use the ones he made.

"How long did it take you and your group to get down here, Cat? To find that monster?" I asked.

"Hm...? Months. Brave didn't like us stopping at the towns, except when needed. So we usually camped in the woods when we could, or near streams," Cat said.

Right... They didn't trust people, not like more normal folks. "What was Brave like?" I asked. She, and Vim, had told me about him. Their knight. The saint's knight. A man who was the embodiment of his name, supposedly.

"A strong, stoic man. But he was nice and gentle. It was like he was a saint too, since he was always concerned about everyone and seemed so insightful. I wasn't too close with him, he was older, but I liked him. Vim reminds me of him, sometimes," Cat said lightly as she turned to look at the nearby doorway. She must really be hungry.

"What's it mean? To be a saint's knight?" I asked. Vim had called him that too.

Cat looked at me and frowned. "You don't know? I thought that was what you were, too," she said.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

Me...? "A knight?"

She smiled gently. "Maybe you are, yet just don't know it. Or maybe Vim's your knight...?" she went to mumbling as she pondered it.

I smiled at that. "I like that, but he's not just mine... I can't claim him like that," I said. Not yet at least.

"Hm. I don't get your society thing, but I'm guessing it's just a big family. Like us, all centered around Elaine..." Cat then released a huge sigh. "Still not sure how I'm going to explain what happened..."

"I'll help. As will Vim. Vim's a lot of things but he's not one to shirk responsibility. He'll admit to it, all of it," I said. We'd already talked about this, but it wasn't surprising she was still fretting over it.

She nodded right as movement drew my eyes behind us. I watched as a younger man entered, carrying a large circular platter on his hand and shoulder.

He glanced around for a tiny moment, saw us in our corner, and then came over.

I leaned back and smiled as he laid down the platter onto our table. It had cups, two pitchers, and four plates of food. A mix of meat, greens and bread.

The sight of a familiar dinner made me really happy, even if regretful. It was the same, typical, plain meal one always had up here in the north. One lacking fancy spices, weird plants or vegetables I'd never seen, and thinner meat such as from deer and not ox or cows.

"Thanks!" Cat happily thanked him as she quickly went to grabbing one of the pitchers, to start filling the cups.

He didn't stick around, hurrying back out of the room. Cat poured me a cup first, which I smiled at and accepted... and then frowned upon finding milk.

Right. She wasn't Vim.

It wasn't her fault though, so I did my best to not regret the lack of my favored smoothie and took a drink.

"Finally. I'm going to eat, wipe down, and then sleep. I'm exhausted," Cat quickly said as she went to stuffing her face.

See? I knew she was tired. So her earlier annoyance to the slow service was from a lack of sleep.

I'll make sure to let her sleep in a little then. Unlike Vim who usually made us wake at the crack of dawn, I'll give her a few hours past it just to be sure.

Reaching for my own plate, I chose the green stuff first. It was a plate full of leaves, chopped vegetables and fruit. Very typical of the north, since such things grew well here. At least, they did until one got too far north and the land became harder as it grew colder.

"I hate this kind of bread," Cat mumbled as she took a big bite of it.

"Oh...?" I glanced at the bread in her hands, and on our plates. She did? Wasn't that the softer stuff?
"Why?"

"Not sure. I feel like it's too soft, maybe?" Cat mumbled as she continued to eat.

I see. So she was used to the harder northern breads, having likely grown up on them and thus the softer stuff was simply new or different to her.

Strange. I'd prefer the soft stuff any day over the hard stuff.

Since Cat went to eating quickly, our conversation died down as I hurried to keep up with her. She wasn't like Vim, who seemed to always let me go at my own pace. No matter how crazy the world around us became.

Though that might just be something human. Now that I thought about it, most of the humans I'd known were similar. Always in a hurry.

Once Cat had her fill, I joined her upstairs to our room. We had ordered a bucket of hot water before our meal, and it was waiting for us in our room, but it was now lukewarm. Cat didn't seem to care, or notice. She wiped herself down and mumbled a good-night as she crawled into one of the beds.

As Cat shifted under the covers, getting comfortable, I glanced around our nice room. There were three beds, not two, and they were all rather large and comfy looking. Thick blankets and pillows, and there were rugs and decorations aplenty. There was even a small fireplace near the window, though I had no intention of lighting the logs waiting to be burnt within it. The room was actually a little warm, likely thanks to all the fireplaces already burning strongly in the building and the fact that the rainstorm wasn't a cold one.

Taking my hat off and putting down the pitcher of the remainder of the milk onto one of the tables, I stepped over to the only window in the room. It was a larger one, draped with thick curtains, and it had a large frame all around it. One that was recessed enough to be a small table, as if to put flowers or decorations upon it. There was nothing on it though, and was even rather clean. I wiped a finger along it, expecting dust but instead found it clean.

Yes. A nice inn. The owners were proud of their home, their business. And should be.

Oplar and others had mentioned some of our members have tried making such inns before. They informed me they never ended well. That such ventures usually ended in sadness.

It was too bad, honestly... but...

What if we made inns, yet not for the public?

After all was that not the main issue? That humans noticed what they shouldn't. That our members struggled to hide amongst the common customers for long. Could we not then just eliminate that threat? Subvert it?

Why not just make an inn, or location like it, that only our people could use? Like that mansio at Telmik, or those housing sections in Lumen and other locations?

I wanted to make a place our people could go to. I wanted to help people find family. Friends. Comrades. As hard as it was to imagine accomplishing such a task, since Vim never stayed in one location long enough to do so, I still liked the idea. I knew for a fact there were many like Sillti, who would happily travel to somewhere they could potentially find new lovers, friends or companions. What if there were dozens of people, if not hundreds, looking for such a thing?

If I made a place like this, an inn or something like it which those people could come to... As to meet fellow like-minded people, searching for similar things, then... wouldn't it work?

As I pondered such an idea, liking it a lot, Cat began to snore. I stepped closer to the window, which was made out of dirty and stained glass. It was hard to see through it, especially so thanks to the layer of water and droplets upon it outside.

Sitting down on the window's extended frame, since there was enough room to do so, I made sure to not accidentally lean against the window itself. Although it looked thick, thus its blurry glass, I knew the window pane was likely frail. I didn't want to break it, even if I could pay for it. Cat could get sick if the wind and rain was free to flow in all night long.

While Cat snored away, I leaned up against the window's frame... staring out through the cold, blurry, glass to the wet world outside.

I felt oddly melancholic. I was going home. To lands familiar. To people I'd known for hundreds of years.

I was even traveling with a friend! The descendant of someone I had once seen almost like a mother. My teacher. Witch.

So I should feel at ease. As if I genuinely had returned home, since everything about this moment was in essence everything I was used to. It wasn't foreign to me. It wasn't strange, or unsettling... it wasn't really new, or weird...

Yet...

"I feel lost," I whispered ever so quietly.

Lost and alone.

Again.

And the reason was obvious.

Reaching down to my waist, I unfastened the little monarch leather pouch that hung upon it. The few letters within were pushed up against the ends thanks to the small leather wrapping. I pulled the wrapped item out, undid the tiny little strands of twine holding it all together, and lifted the monarch's heart up to better study it.

Glancing down at my heart, the Orb of Night, I ran my thumb along it and its warmth. It didn't pulse as often as the other hearts had, but it still did it occasionally.

I was still not sure what to think of this heart. Or its purpose. It was a strange reminder at how ridiculous the world was becoming. About how there were people, and had been people, scheming and planning even before I had even known about any of them. And somehow those schemes had included me.

"Though maybe I could have been anyone. They're more centered around Vim, really," I whispered. After all Celine hadn't written my name in her letters. She had simply called me Vim's heart. That could have been anyone who had grabbed hold of it.

But how did one explain this then?

The heart in all its blackness shimmered, the eye within it glowing ever so distinctly. It almost looked like the eye itself was not a singular object but a huge group of tiny ones. Like a cluster of stars in a night sky.

A grim reminder of my ancestry. And a strange question.

Vim was right. Why hadn't Witch done anything about the hearts? This one particularly, if it really was my uncle's?

Even if she hadn't touched the bodies, the corpses of the monarchs we had hunted, after the deed out of faith or respect... she should have still known how dangerous these hearts were, right? She should have still known better than to leave them be.

Maybe I had simply not noticed her cutting them out. But if she had procured this that day, why and how did Celine have this? If it really was my uncle's heart, I couldn't comprehend how they could have acquired it. I had been with Witch until her end, and had never seen another saint during that time with her. Had they gone to the family after I had left...? It made sense, I guess. They may have heard of Witch and sought her out, only to find the family after her death. Maybe while there, talking to the family, they had found this heart there. Vim has mentioned that saints can sense these things rather easily, supposedly.

Though that didn't explain why they didn't know of the village now, and the saint who lived there today.

Taking another breath, I sighed as I went to put the heart away. I wrapped it back up, tying the leather around it carefully.

This was why Vim needed to stop leaving me. I still had so many questions. And it took so long to get answers out of him, and half the time I had to get them in pieces. He and I separating like this only made it that much harder to accomplish.

But his lack of being here to answer my questions wasn't all it was.

I didn't like being without Vim. I didn't like the fact that the world was growing odd and dangerous. That there were nefarious plans and schemes all around me, around us, and I felt like I had little to no ability to even comprehend them let alone face them.

Randle and the Chronicler. Light and those secretive members of the Society. Lumen and the church. Vim and his strange scheme of not telling anyone about Cat's true purpose or my friend's saintly descendant. Wars and plagues. The vote against Vim. Poor Fly needing to find a new home. And who knew what else the world was scheming or planning all alongside all of that.

I felt like the world was pulling every each way, and it didn't care that I was stretched thin already as it was.

I knew there was always a problem to be solved. Issues to address. Always sadness and grief... but lately...

Taking a deep breath, I sighed out the warm but still damp air. This room didn't smell as badly as the incense, but it at least also didn't stink too much either. It didn't feel nasty to sigh so deeply in here as some inn-rooms did usually.

The rain continued to pitter and patter against the window, and the world all around it. I listened intently to it all.

I wasn't tired enough to sleep. Not yet. Although strangely somber, I didn't feel like crawling under the covers of the comfortable looking beds at all.

Another thing Vim's lack of presence caused.

I hadn't told him how tired I had gotten during his absence. He likely had realized it, but we hadn't talked about it. I wonder if he'd laugh if he found out I shared in his strange exhaustion while he was gone. Tired and weary, yet unable to sleep.

"I hope you're nice to Fly, Vim," I whispered as I stared out the window, watching the raindrops roll down the blurry glass.

Be nice to her for me. Since it seemed no one else was willing to be.

Chapter 320 An Annoying Brick

The church was quiet. Usually church's were quiet, but not this one. The Bell Church was usually busy, with many members chatting away as they cleaned or prayed in this large church with its large bell up top. Right now though the only sounds were from Plumb's soft breathing and the sizzling of tiny little flames being put out one by one.

They had lit a bunch of small candles along the main altar. I could smell, and see the remnants, of burnt paper around the candles lain on metal plates. Either they had been burning prayers, wishes, or something like it. I didn't pry, nor want to; as I watched Plumb put another candle's flame out with her fingers.

"I have been told, by Brandy, that the woman I had banished is claiming herself to be your wife," Plumb said.

"It's not a claim. She is."

The old woman did well. She didn't flinch or pause for even a moment as she reached over to put out another candle's flame. As if she hadn't heard me at all.

"How strange. You taking a wife... I'd never thought it possible," Plumb said, still sounding as if she was talking about the weather. Weather that had gotten nasty. A small storm was here; though it was raining heavily there was no wind. So maybe not a storm and just a simple downpour. It was the time for such rains, and soon those rains would turn into snow and sleet.

"How do you think I feel?" I said.

She lifted her head, and I noticed the smirk on her face even from this angle. She put out one more candle and then turned to look at me.

Grandmother Plumb was old. Maybe not the oldest in the Society but she wasn't far off from it. Unlike many others though, like Randle, she looked genuinely looked her age. There were a few like Mordo that looked old too, but there weren't many who suffered the ailments and maladies that accompanied such age and wear. I used to think she'd perish and die in her sleep decades ago, when she started to rapidly age, but she still clung to life. It was almost annoying.

"Should I apologize?" Plumb asked gently.

"For banishing her? Or for doing so without hearing the whole story?" I asked.

Plumb smiled at me. "For doing it without your permission."

Hmph. "You know my rules. As elder of this place, and representative of the Church of Songs here... you have the right to dictate such things. Now if you had harmed her while doing so, without justification, I'd have likely said something but the only thing you had hurt was her heart," I said.

"Some would say such injuries are more dire than wounds of the flesh," she said.

"Renn would too, likely. But luckily for you she's also the type to forgive and understand. She wasn't happy with it, but she knows and comprehends the how and why. Her family had been cruel. Diabolical, even. Like many of our predator-like ancestors of the past. So she understands where your anger and fear come from, and respects it," I said. She and I had talked about it in depth during our journey south.

"Still... I feel like I should apologize to her all the same. I'm to head to Lumen soon, maybe she and I could talk when I do," Plumb said.

My eyes narrowed, and I wondered if she didn't know of Renn's quasi-banishment from Lumen. "I'm sure she'd be very inclined to do so. If even just to hear your story... and in truth I'd like to hear it too," I said.

"Then we shall speak of it then. No point wasting words now," she said as she turned to put out the last few candles.

I glared at the old woman. Great. Now if I asked about what had happened she'd just brush me off. I hated these old crows perched on the trees of faith. They were insufferable.

"Can we waste words on Fly?" I asked instead. Since I knew better than to get too upset over not being able to ask what I really wanted to.

I did want to question her. About many things. I really did. Not just her past with Renn's family either. There was the stuff concerning Celine's daughter, and the plots surrounding Lumen were rather concerning. I had hundreds of questions concerning them. But I knew better than to ask a single one.

Even if I was willing to break my own rules to demand the truth, or make threats, there was another underlying issue.

Plumb was old. Too old. Her mind had started to fail her, and I had noticed that fact decades ago. Who knows how bad it was now.

With her memory, and possible sanity, in question... there was a very good chance that Plumb honestly didn't know anything. Not because she had forgotten the details, or something like it, but instead because no one would have trusted her with the information in the first place. The Chronicler, Brandy, Light... they all used her and trusted her, but would not reveal their plans and schemes to her out of necessity. They couldn't trust her to keep it secret, thanks to her failing memory.

So there was no point in truly interrogating her, or trying to wring the information out of her.

Plus... even if she did reveal that she knew all about Light and the schemes of the church... did it matter?

It wasn't like I was going to do anything about it, after all. Not yet anyway.

Plumb let out a tiny sigh. "The young bird. Yes. A sad failure on our part," she said.

Oh...? "How so?"

"We could not convert her. Which would be fine, if not for the fact she has begun to sow seeds of aggression amongst our flock," Plumb said.

"Even if she planted those seeds, it was your people who watered them. Fly is a child. A victim of trauma and abuse. Even if she acted out, you should not have judged her so fiercely for doing so," I said.

Plumb nodded as she put out the very last candle. It fizzled loudly, as if it had scorched some of her skin on her fingertips in the process. A half moment later I smelled the burnt flesh, informing me she had indeed burnt herself. She didn't show any sign of even feeling it though as she turned back around to me and nodded.

"You're correct, Vim. You are. I have tried to warn my children. As have others. But the youngest amongst us, like all children, are rowdy and susceptible to opposing opinions and rivalries. The young bird in fact, I don't believe at least, has intentionally harmed or outright argued with anyone. But she does defend her beliefs and those she deems friends, one of which is your wife, with a fierceness not known amongst my people. Not anymore. And the rest of my young flock, regrettably, are too hardheaded to realize their actions and words are only making it worse," Plumb said.

I calmed a little as I realized she did in fact know that Fly was not at fault. That it was true Fly was the victim here, even if she possibly acted rashly on occasions when getting in fights or becoming violent.

"Are you sure there can't be a discourse? Or that time won't heal and numb such differences and problems?" I asked her.

Plumb shook her head. "I fear not. Recently a few of the older members have begun to make small little comments and remarks, parroting the words of the younger generations beneath them. I fear Fly's lack of willing to convert has made many give their grievances and petty differences greater voices. Many of the older members have tried to proselytize her, seeing it as if their duty. Even though I've told them such a thing is wrong, and that doing so would only further distance her from us," Plumb said.

Hm. So the old bag wasn't lost just yet. Interesting.

I nodded slowly, glad to hear it. "And your warnings are not effective?" I asked.

"They are to a point Vim. I give warnings, make comments, and have even punished a few... but such deeds only quiet the rabble for a short time. A moon or two at best."

I sighed. "Which means the only way to really stop it would be to inflict a harsher punishment. Which would only result in deeper division, and resentment amongst the community," I said, understanding.

She nodded. "Yes. Thus my request for her transfer to another location. Perhaps one with a more... understanding community," she said.

Right. It wasn't so much the fact these people were religious, it was the fact they didn't mesh well with predators. Or with those familiar with violence. It wasn't just a matter of faith, it was a matter of perspectives and beliefs. Thus their issue with Renn, and Fly's friendship with her.

It wasn't Renn's faith they had a problem with. It was her relation to her family. A family that had once long ago supposedly harmed Plumb. Renn was being ostracized for being related to someone who was violent and deemed unsuitable to life and the Society, and Fly took offense to that and as such they extended that same discomfort and disdain to her as well.

Then that was only amplified by Fly's likely stubbornness.

Fly, although weaker, was not like them. Thanks to her life, growing up in those sewers surrounded by those cannibals and abusers, simply had a different outlook of life. Plus with those here speaking ill of Renn, even if indirectly... well...

"You spoke with her. About this," I stated.

She nodded. "Yes. In depth. She spent a whole week with me. We spoke of possibilities. Of methods. We even spoke together with a few of those involved, such as Cynthia or Limb. Even Wool, the one she had come here with. It was after not just I, but she too, realized it was futile that I sent the letter to the Chronicler," Plumb explained.

So Fly had indeed known of the letter, and its meaning. That made her earlier pendulum of emotions more understandable. She had been expecting me, and my purpose of showing up.

"And Wool?" I asked. She was a new member too.

"She has not only accepted our faith, she has made herself right at home. She is of no concern. Or well, the only concern about her is she has become a glutton. I believe a lack of steady and good food most of her life has made her so. We can break it, and even if we don't it is of no concern. Of all the sins it is a lesser one," Plumb said with a smirk.

Hmph.

Although she seemed to recognize that Fly wasn't entirely at fault, she still obviously deemed Fly a lost cause. A failure, even.

It made me upset, but I kept my thoughts to myself as I nodded. "Then I shall take her and leave. I have other duties I must hurry to attend, so is there anything else I need to handle or deal with? If not I'll just take Fly and leave today," I said. I was not in the mood to stick around here any longer while I was so disgusted by Plumb and her people.

Sometimes I wished I could get banished from these places too.

"Hm... Let me ask the parish before you leave. Would you mind staying another night at least?" Plumb asked without much urgency. She either hadn't noticed my annoyance, or didn't care to. Likely both at once.

I nodded. "All right," I said. I could at least give them that. It was my job to always ask our members if they needed anything when I visited them, and it wasn't like Renn and her quest was that dire just yet. Especially once Renn got to Lilly.

If anything Renn staying under Lilly's watchful eyes, resting on her branches beneath her wings, was very calming and relieving. I genuinely didn't feel too worried for her at all at the moment, nothing like I had while searching for the Bison family or while taking Cat to Telmik.

I'll need to make sure Lilly knows how much I trusted her. I sometimes forgot to tell people when I did, being not one to share such personal things. But it was the truth. That little owl had long ago earned my trust and loyalty, and I had long since vowed to side with her even if... or when, the whole Society turned against her.

Which was why it was so surprising that Randle thought the same way. Especially since I had long since thought he had been amongst those who had turned against her.

"While you're checking the area, would you also consider how much materials we would need for a fence?" Plumb then asked.

I frowned at her. "For the whole village?" I asked.

She nodded. "I and others plan to head to Lumen soon, and we've considered making one for some time now. We don't need walls, or gates, but just a proper fence," Plumb said.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

A fence. Not walls or gates. So it wasn't so much for security, but sense of mind maybe? Maybe they planned to allow some of their farm animals to graze openly, what with fewer members to tend to them.

"Sure... I'll take a look. Though I'll not be heading to Lumen after here, I just passed through it," I said. I had stopped at Lumen on the way here, but had only been there long enough to make sure all was well. A few hours, not even a whole day.

"That's fine. I'll not be heading to Lumen until next year, as far as I'm aware," she said. "I bet Brandy will visit again before then anyway."

I nodded and realized she was now done talking about Fly. Just like how she had put aside our conversation of Renn, she was mentally distanced from Fly now.

She wasn't even going to ask where I would be taking Fly, would she?

"Then I'll do that now. Please ask around for any requests while I do, if there are none I'll be leaving in the morning with Fly," I said as I stepped away. I was growing upset with her, so I needed to end this conversation before I allowed my personal feelings to become vocal or noticeable.

"I'll do so, thank you Vim," Plumb said as I left the church.

Stepping out into the rain, I sighed as I closed the door behind me.

I allowed the rain to cool me off a moment before stepping away from the church. I had no real destination in mind, since I was going to just walk around the village for a bit, so I simply followed the path for now.

Really. I got it. I did. Fly was to leave. Maybe not banished, as Renn was, but the result was the same. Fly would likely never return here, and those here would just as likely never see her again. So Plumb's lack of caring, or concern, for the girl was understandable but... well...

What was the point of their faith if they were going to be so callous? The entire point of the Church of Songs, the main tenants and morals instilled within its teachings, were the ideas of helping the downtrodden. It was why their sisterhood was so large and powerful, in today's era women were the most pitiable. The ones most likely to suffer from either abuse or torment. Yet here was another instance of someone of that clergy, a high-ranking member in fact, failing to uphold even those basic tenants.

I'd blame her age and non-human side if not for the fact that I distinctly remembered her being different long ago. Plus it wasn't just her... many people in the Society, even those not a part of the Church of Songs or religious, had begun to harden their hearts. People were becoming less open to outsiders, and not as charitable or understanding.

So strange. In the beginning, when I had first joined, half of my tasks I'd been set upon by Celine and others were to weed out such people. To either separate such members, the ones capable and incapable of such kindness from each other. On more than a few occasions I had even been sent to outright destroy those who had not conformed to the Societies rules and morals.

I almost felt as if many of the members who had been perfect representatives of the Societies, of Celine's, morals and ethics were now becoming more like those we had not allowed in.

I had always complained about those too nice for their own good. Like the event in Lumen that had recently transpired. Brom's death, in my perspective, was a result of the rules I was beholden to. I should have outright destroyed those monsters, and the people who had fed them, from the moment they had shown themselves. But that went against not just Lumen's rules and votes, but Celine's. My contract was very clear. I was to always try to solve issues without violence, until it was the only option.

Yet now that some members were becoming colder of heart, and more like how I believed they should be, I was growing upset with them. I should be happy that those like Plumb had finally grown calluses. Instead I found myself upset and disappointed.

Was it because I myself had grown softer, or because the reasons they had all been using lately for their lack of mercy? Such as their accusations against Renn, or the lack of understanding with Fly?

"They're cruel to the wrong people, for the wrong reasons," I whispered as I understood my current discomfort.

Yes. That was it. That was it completely.

The Society mostly hated Lilly because of what she had tried to do. How she had tried to amass an army and wage war. They blamed her for risking the Society, and the kingdoms we had once ruled. To a point they had been correct in their accusations and hate. Although Lilly had tried her hardest, and had sometimes even been perfectly just in her actions, the end result was she and the others had gotten many members killed. Several of the kingdoms and wars during that time had been lost because of Lilly and her people's actions. So the Societies hate was, in a way, justified.

Same with Landi and those like her. She too had faults. She had genuinely broken up families, by sleeping with married men and such. Let alone the fights she had gotten into out of simple excitement and joy.

Yet I did not feel Renn's actions were as justifiable as those. Even if I stopped looking at it from the perspective of one in love, it wasn't like anything Renn had done so far had been intentionally cruel or even resulted in terrible disasters. Brom's death had even been an accident. One of those rocks could have landed upon him no matter where he had been standing in Lumen at that time.

And Fly's issues? Even if she was vocal about her beliefs and even been in a few scuffles, for them to just basically banish her over them...

I sighed again as I rounded a small patch of blue flowers. As I did I noticed one of the robed sisters in the distance. She carried a large umbrella and looked to be walking towards me, although slowly.

I didn't outright recognize the woman, but I also didn't really try to do so either. I was more concerned with trying to bottle up my thoughts and emotions.

I should be used to this. I've had to escort hundreds, if not thousands, of people to and from locations over the years for similar reasons. This shouldn't be bothering me as much as it did.

But I knew the true reason as to why.

Plumb had said it herself.

A part of Fly's anger, and her acting out, had been the comments she had overheard, or said to her face, concerning Renn.

My own discomfort came from the fact that I knew Renn would feel miserable when she learned the truth. She would blame herself for Fly's predicament, whether right or wrong.

"Vim! I heard you were here!" the sister drew close enough to speak over the rain, which grew a little louder thanks to her umbrella. It was made out of some kind of tanned leather, so the raindrops made noisy sounds as they landed and bounced off it.

Yet even though she spoke gently, I still was able to recognize who she was thanks to her voice.

"Prasta," I greeted the lizard gently, and noted the grin on her face as she lifted the umbrella a little as to look me in the eyes.

"How've you been Vim?" she asked happily.

"Well, all things considered."

"You look soaked! Want to share the umbrella?" she asked and offered, lifting it a tad as to offer it to me.

"Thank you but no. I need to leave shortly so I want to check the village first before I do, and by the looks of it the rain shall not cease anytime soon," I said without looking up at the sky.

Prasta nodded knowingly, but still went ahead and stepped closer. Half a moment later, a little awkwardly, Prasta and I were standing side-by-side as she held the umbrella up enough to cover me too.

Yes. She, like her husband and daughter, was a very kind and gentle soul. At least to those she deemed worthy of such kindness.

She had once handed out such piety and mercy to everyone, regardless of whom or what they were. That ended the day her son had killed her husband.

"How have you been Prasta? Any new equations?" I asked as I returned to walking. Prasta followed me, staying next to me even though she had just come from this direction. I made sure to walk slowly, for her.

She giggled and nodded. "A few! I planned to send you a letter soon. Look forward to them! I think I figured out how to calculate why a curvy brick wall uses less bricks than a straight one!" she told me happily.

I smiled at her. "This about the fence?" I asked. They wanted a brick one?

"It is! They were all arguing about what type, or how thick or wood or brick. They complained about how many bricks it would take, so I spent the last few weeks contemplating it. A curvy wall would use less bricks, and maybe even be more sturdy! No one believes me though," Prasta said with a sigh.

"It's true. Straight brick walls need to be thicker, either with larger bricks or multiple ones. They'll fall over and break otherwise," I said. Basically they needed more material, even if it looked like the winding and bending walls used more.

Prasta paused a moment, and turned to glare at me. "Don't say that! Jeez Vim you should know better!" she shouted at me.

Oh. Right. Yes. "Sorry. But I didn't say how much more efficient, or what type of curve to use," I said quickly.

Prasta immediately calmed down and frowned at me. "True... you didn't. Hm... I suppose I did already prove it was true, so I can't yell at you for just confirming that point, at least," Prasta begrudgingly admitted.

Smiling at her I nodded. "Right?"

She reached up to scratch her cheek, her scales making sounds as she scratched at them. She didn't do such a thing because they itched or hurt, but out of habit. She did it when in thought. "I wonder just how few bricks you could lower it to. I bet if you made tiny designs in the wall, leaving holes on purpose, you could get to a point you're using the least amount of bricks possible," Prasta said.

"Bricks or material? One is not like the other," I asked.

Prasta nodded. "Right. One could even make hollow bricks too, I suppose. But then what's the point? Maybe I should calculate the perfect brick wall, the least material used with the greatest efficiency," she said.

Feel free to do so.

She nodded as if I had spoken aloud, and I knew she would in fact figure it out. Even if it took her years.

We walked in silence for a moment as she pondered her new mind numbing distraction, and I thought about her daughter. Prasta at the Crypt. They had named their children after themselves. Yangli. Prasta. It had been a tradition of their people, to always carry on their names. It made it annoying back in the day, back when several generations had still existed together. Now though it was just them. Two Prastas. A mother and daughter.

Two family members who never talked anymore.

"Your daughter is doing well, by the way," I said gently.

Prasta paused for a tiny little moment, and then nodded. "I'm glad to hear that," she said, and sounded genuine to do so.

I felt a little awkward, since it seemed Prasta didn't mind at all. She had indeed been glad to hear her daughter still lived, and was fine. Yet she had no desire to know more. No desire to know what she was doing, or where she was.

It made me feel bad, since I felt responsible for their families decline.

I had killed Yangli. Both of them. Though one was out of mercy, I still felt worse about the father's death than I did the son's.

"Other than the equations, do you have any other requests for me Prasta? Before I leave?" I asked, deciding to let it be. It wasn't the first time I had felt bad about this, and wouldn't be the last. And just like all the other times, I knew there was nothing I could do about it.

"Hm...? No. I don't think so. You're here to pick up Fly right?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes."

"That's good, Vim. The poor girl doesn't belong here. She's not a predator, but she mingles with them. Her staying here would just bring heartache," Prasta said calmly, as if we were still speaking of the equations of bricks and walls.

"So I've been told," I said gently.

She nodded and sighed. "That other girl, Wool, is fine too although an air-headed glutton. I swear if it a person isn't one thing they're another. Why can't they all just be normal? I wish people were like equations," Prasta said.

I smiled at her. "Yet many equations are different parts of a whole," I countered her.

Prasta tilted her head as she pondered my statement, and then sighed at me. "You're right. I hate that. Dumb."

Yes. I was, sometimes.

"Have you talked with Fly?" I asked, since she had brought her up.

"A few times. I avoid those with violent tendencies Vim, you know that," she said.

"Fly's not a predator," I said.

"No, but she's not one to hesitate to hurt another either. She gave Cynthia a black eye not too long ago," Prasta said, and said it in such a way that told me that alone was enough for her to never want to associate with Fly. Ever.

"So I've heard," I said softly as we neared the end of this footpath. It branched from here, with one of them leading to the edge of the village. The one I planned on going down shortly.

Prasta sighed again as she paused with me at the end of the path. "Oh well. I'll leave you be then," Prasta said as she extended her hand to me, the one with the umbrella in it.

"Keep it. I'm already soaked Prasta," I said to the woman who was kind to some, and heartless to others.

"Hm... Oh! I heard of the vote by the way. Who's behind that Vim? The Chronicler?" Prasta then asked.

"I'm not sure. I'm trying to stay out of it," I said.

She smiled at me in a familiar way. I recognized the smile from the long past. She had smiled at me in a similar fashion after I had told her what I'd done to her son. "You are gentle like that. I sometimes wonder why you put up with us. For your information I think most here will vote in your favor, Vim. Too many of us have been saved by you to think you're at fault or failing us. It makes me wonder of the intelligence of whoever is planning this strange scheme. They have to be someone new, else they'd know better. Is your wife doing it? I hear she doesn't agree with many of our rules," Prasta said.

I shifted a tad, enough to make my left shoulder leave the safety of the umbrella and get hit by the rain. "Renn...? No. She may have at one time voted in their favor, against me, but would have only done so to keep me to herself. Today though she is simply disturbed by it. Are people saying she's the cause?" I asked.

"No. I just couldn't imagine anyone else being bold enough to try and vote against you. Oh well. Either way it'll be fine, I'm sure. After all even if they remove you as protector it isn't like you'll be banished from the Society. You'll still be around to protect us, all the same," she said with a nod.

I nodded back slowly, and wondered how many were like her. Or at least shared her same thoughts on the matter. Probably more than I wanted to admit.

They were surprised by the vote... but not sickened by it. They saw it as the possible scheme that it was, yet seemed to have no desire to stop it or call it out openly.

"Oh well. See you later Vim, safe travels," Prasta said as she turned.

"Farewell Prasta," I said gently as she stepped away.

I quickly returned to being drenched by the heavy rain, and felt a little warmer all of a sudden. Although the rain was cold.

Watching the lizard walk away, I tried to compartmentalize my thoughts again.

I hated some. Felt pity for others. Blamed myself for many, yet felt helpless and hopeless for the rest.

And right now I had no one to talk to about it all. Renn wasn't here with me. I couldn't vent to her.

Which was a funny complaint since I rarely talked to her about such things anyway, at least willingly.

I'll need to be careful next time I see her. While we had been at Telmik, although I had indulged in her presence I had made sure to distract myself enough to not get too deep into certain conversations. On purpose. Not just because we had been at the Cathedral either.

If I wasn't careful next time I spent time with Renn, truly alone, I might just open up completely to her. Although she'd definitely love it, and I'd be okay with it to a point... I really couldn't afford to do it. Not yet anyway.

"Fence. Of stone," I mumbled as I stepped down a different path than Prasta had just taken. To round the village, both checking on it and to try to guesstimate how many bricks and mortar we'd need to encircle it fully.

A good distraction. For now.