

Non Human 411

Chapter 411 Vim – Hyacinth

Renn huffed loudly as she hurried to keep up. Her footsteps sounded haphazard, as if she was utterly exhausted.

Typically she shouldn't be. She should be tired, since we'd not gotten any good rest on our way here, but we'd not been very strained during our trip here. She should not be acting as if she was on the last reserves of her energy. She was practically stumbling just to keep pace with me. Plus I'd been walking slowly. Calmly. As calmly as I could, at least.

I didn't want to destroy the Cathedral as I walked to the Chronicler's office. No matter how furious I was, I knew there were not just dozens of members here, many who were innocent, there were also hundred if not thousands of innocent humans too. Who had no idea about our drama.

They did not need to suffer just because my people were foolish.

And foolish they were.

All of them.

"Vim...!" Renn gasped my name as we rounded a corner. She nearly slipped and fell in the process, so I slowed to make sure she was okay.

She righted herself, gasping for breath... and I wondered just how much stress I'd placed on the poor woman. She was covered in a glistening layer of sweat, and she was walking as if under great strain. As if the bag on her back was a thousand times heavier than it actually was.

Renn had been fine until Randle had showed up. Until she had placed herself between me and him.

A foolish act. But one that made me want to kiss her all the same.

The only reason I hadn't was because I knew in this moment now, I was not safe. Not to anyone.

She had been willing to risk my wrath to stop me from killing Randle. Even if he had been at fault entirely. Even if it was what I should have done.

So few today, if any, were capable of that anymore. Those proud, brave, souls were gone. Lost to time. The few who could possibly claim to have even a fraction of her bravery could be counted on one hand. She's met most of them.

"Deep breaths, Renn," I whispered as I reached out to take her arm as she stepped up to me. I made sure to be extra careful as I gripped her arm, to steady her.

She nodded, doing so. "I'm... suddenly very tired..." she said as she stared down at our feet. As if she was too exhausted to even lift her head to look at me. Although her hand was at an angle that would have allowed her to grip my arm in return, it didn't. Her hand listlessly hung open above my forearm, half clasped and trembling.

It had terrified her this much. Those moments in Oplar's Mailroom had been so stressful she looked as weak and weary as she had when sick in that inn, back south.

Yet she had endured it. She had not wavered. She had stood her ground against me. Even as her eyes had filled with tears they had not left my own.

Squeezing her arm a little, I relished in the feeling of her sweat and warmth. Even beneath her thick sleeves and coat I could feel it all.

"Hm..." I nodded, and wished I had it in me to ask her to sit down. To rest. To let me do this, and for her to just... sit back and relax.

But I knew she'd not allow such a thing. There was no point in asking, or even ordering her to do so.

It seemed my wife had decided to do what no one else has ever done before.

"Being my shackle is hard, huh?" I asked.

Renn's arm tightened in my grip as she actually pulled downward with it, as to force her whole body to shift so she could raise her head enough to smile at me.

"You're worth it," she said with a strained voice.

Was I...?

At least she thought so.

"You're doing great, Renn. Luckily for you I'm now rather calm. I might even only break a single brick this time," I said with a small smile.

Renn smiled back at me, and it looked utterly lovely as she half giggled and half choked. "Stand tall, Vim," she said between her laughs and gasps.

I nodded. "I'll try to stand as tall as you Renn, but that will be hard," I said.

Her hat shifted, and I had to reach up to grab it. Her ears had fluttered so strongly it had been about to slide off. I didn't blame her, or fault her. She was a mess, and it was my fault not hers.

"Come on. Let's get this over with," I said.

"Mhm..." Renn nodded, her eyes looking a little strange as I turned and stepped forward. I didn't release her arm, and Renn finally grabbed my arm in return thanks to it.

I supported her the rest of the way, which felt a little odd. It was hard to tell how much of her reliance upon me, her weight as she leaned into me, was from actual need and not want. But something told me it was quite a bit of it.

So Renn grew like this under severe stress. This was... interesting, to learn.

Though it might just be an accumulation of it all. Our trip here had not been too eventful, physically at least, but it been stressful for her. On many occasions.

Hell, it had been stressful for me in certain ways too.

Reaching the Chronicler's office, I was glad to hear the sound of a pen scratching paper coming from within.

"Deep breaths, Renn," I said softly.

"Be gentle with me, Vim," she begged softly in return.

My shoulder ached as I rolled it a little too strongly. "Say that under different circumstances, not here," I said stiffly as I opened the door.

With a foot.

Renn yelped, just as the little monarch did. The door banged open, snapping off its top hinge as it ran into the shelf that stood next to the door. Several books and items clattered off the shelf from the impact, making the monarch make a chorus of noises as it hopped off the desk and darted around a bit on the floor only to disappear under another shelf, running away.

"Such bloodlust! It's been many a years since I've last seen it... and, to no surprise; it's as strong and as pure as ever, isn't it?" The Chronicler said as she calmly reached over to put her pen away. She deposited it into the inkwell as I strode into the room.

A little annoyed the fake saint was acting far calmer than my own wife at the moment; I glared down at the old woman who pretended to be blind. "You types always claim such a thing. Yet I've never once actually shown you true bloodlust, so it annoys me to hear it," I said.

The Chronicler frowned at me as I released Renn's arm. She didn't release me though, and in fact had doubled her efforts. She now held my arm with both of hers, rather tightly. If not for the way she did it, I'd have thought she needed it to stay upright considering how desperately she clung to me.

She was trying to do the same with this fake saint as she had with Randle. But unlike him, she wasn't able to put herself between us. The large desk stopped that.

If Renn could even trust her own legs to support her anymore, that was.

"You're saying this is not real bloodlust?" the fake saint asked.

"You're still breathing, aren't you?" I asked back.

The old crone slowly smiled as she sat back a little, as if to relax. "So I am," she admitted.

About to say something, someone ran into the room. Renn jumped at the quick footsteps, tugging on my arm since she had almost fallen over as a nun ran past me and around the desk.

Mapple didn't actually try and put herself between me and the Chronicler, but she did glare at me with a look of utter shock and worry.

"Vim is upset with me," the Chronicler said lightly.

"You think?" Renn wheezed.

"Um...!" Mapple panicked, looking from me to her elder, and then she looked at Renn with a look of utter despair. Her eyes were obviously pleading, as she made a terrible whine of a noise.

Renn quickly shook her head, having noticed Mapple's look, and I wondered if maybe these two had spoken more than I had thought. Hopefully they weren't friends.

Mapple would die to protect the Chronicler. Even from me. Even though she knew how pointless it would be to stand against me, she'd still try. So hopefully if it came to that Renn would find it in her to forgive me.

"Hm. Oh my... it is good to see you Rennalee. Excitingly so. Congratulations, by the way," the Chronicler then said, speaking as if all was well.

I reached out and tapped the desk with a toe. It jolted and skidded along rug and stone as if a grown man had just slammed into it with his full weight and force.

The Chronicler didn't even flinch, even as the desk bumped into her a little. Mapple on the other hand fell backward, grabbing desperately onto the Chronicler's chair for support... almost mimicking Renn in the method she did so.

"I'm not in the mood for games," I warned the woman.

"It seems not. A pity. So? What has angered you to this degree then?" she asked with a sigh.

I narrowed my eyes and did my best to not just step forward and grab her. The desk was wide enough that I would have had to lean all the way across it to do so, but I was in the kind of mood to go through the desk to do so if I had to.

Keeping still, I clung to Renn's clinging as I did my best to remain calm.

For her.

"I built these halls. I laid these bricks. Do not make me tear them all down," I warned her further.

The Chronicler finally showed an emotion other than indifference or gentle surety, and it was one that pissed me off even more.

A cocky smirk.

"My, Vim. That was quite blunt. Particularly for you, too. Unusual... for you, especially. But I and the rest had assumed she would change you. I suppose such changes affect everything, not just certain aspects. The gentler you get with her, the harsher you will possibly get with the rest of us, is it?" The Chronicler hummed as she nodded. "Fine. I'm willing to accept that bargain. Then what is? What would you like to know, or hear?" she added, as if content to accept my terms.

"How about you just start speaking and we'll go from there," I said.

"My cousin is alive."

Standing still, I ignored Mapple and Renn as they glanced at each other, and then at me.

Saying nothing, I waited for me.

The Chronicler sighed as she shifted in her chair a little. I heard her knee pop as she did, though I didn't know if it was because of my kick to the desk earlier or just her old age. "Light is alive. As are... several members whom I've omitted and lied to you about throughout the years. But before you scorn me about it, know that I had been sworn to secrecy," the Chronicler said.

"By who...?" Renn whispered for me.

"Why, Celine, of course?" she answered, as if it was obvious.

Mapple groaned and stepped back, away from the chair. She slouched as she actually took a few steps away, as if suddenly not willing to take the Chronicler's side in this.

"I think she just abandoned me..." the Chronicler said with a sad frown, sounding actually hurt for once.

"You're a fool...! This is Vim you're taunting!" Mapple hissed.

Renn nodded quickly.

The Chronicler only deepened her frown. "Taunting...? I am not. I am simply stating facts. If I wasn't Vim would have already taken my heart," the Chronicler said simply.

My eye twitched, and I wondered if I should just start accusing her already. What would it take to break her damned composure?

Lomi's village? Randle's injury? Should I bring up a prophecy or two?

I'd kind of planned how I'd have confronted Light, but not her. To me the Chronicler had not been the real threat. Just a pawn. Yet right now she was the one I was confronting.

The Chronicler then sighed. "Really, Vim. We're on the same side. We always have been. What is the problem? What has earned your ire?" she asked, sounding almost as if she was being genuine in her desire to know. As if to help me confront the cause.

A part of me knew not to trust her... but another part of me knew that it might not be an act at all.

Light very well could have kept her in as much of the dark as the rest.

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Celine had all those years, after all. She had manipulated the Saintly Sisters with ease. Even after her death, and theirs, they had likely not ever known such a fact.

Some long heartbeats came and went as I glared at the fake saint. Her faintly glowing eyes, a dim mockery of real ones, held my glare with ease... even as Renn glanced around and coughed.

"Do... you really not know why he's upset?" Renn asked.

The Chronicler frowned, but didn't shake her head or shrug. "Maybe. Is it the plan for Lumen? He does not like such great schemes, never has, but I had already told him of it... he had seemed willing to ignore it, so I had thought it was fine to turn the plan into an actual result. He's furious, but he hadn't even flinched or narrowed his eyes at the mention of Light and the rest, which means he's likely known of her existence from the beginning. It's a little sad you've never reached out to her though, if that's the case, Vim. The poor girl thinks you hate her, after all," she said, speaking calmly as she did.

"Holy One...?"

I didn't turn around to see who had spoken, but I heard the sound of more footsteps. People had gathered.

"Shoot..." Mapple groaned as she hurried around the room, giving me some room as she did, and hurried to the door. She quickly hushed them and sent them away, nearly barking the orders when they didn't obey immediately. Renn turned, made a noise and then released me as she went to help. It sounded like Mapple was struggling.

Feeling a little lost for a moment, I wondered if she actually believed what she was saying. Her frown, and the way her eyes were dimly glowing, told me she likely did.

"Why did you banish one of your most fervent supporters?" I asked her as Renn and Mapple finally got the door half closed. I heard it scrape against the wooden door frame, telling me it hadn't actually closed. They had just maneuvered it enough to look so.

The Chronicler shook her head. "I did not banish Randle purposefully, Vim. He had attacked Light. He forced her to defend herself, he stepped beyond his station. Is that why you're furious...? Really? Over Randle's banishment...? You've hated that man since you've met him!" she said, sounding shocked.

"You threatened him! You pushed him beyond his limit thanks to your threats!" Renn said hurriedly as she stepped back up beside me.

She sounded far better all of a sudden. She was even standing up firmly. Either she had gotten over her bout of stress, or the new stress and anger had given her new strength.

"Well... yes? He wasn't willing to listen to reason. We gave him the option to assist us, in fact we had even made plans with him in mind the whole time until he became frantic and foolish. Once he attacked Light, and still wouldn't bend on his animosity even after being incapacitated we decided he was no longer worth the risk to keep around. For anyone, thus his banishment," the Chronicler said.

"He tried to strangle Light. I saw it; he had lifted her off the ground. Her face had gone all white before she had used her powers," Mapple said from behind. She was still near the door. Though likely not to keep an eye on it, but simply to be closest to it in case she needed to flee.

The Chronicler nodded. "You know Light, Vim. She tries to see the good in everyone. Even until it is too late. She tried to reason with him, and even after he tried to kill her she still spared him and only wished for his banishment from the church. Not from the Society proper. He is still a member, just no longer a member of the cloth," the Chronicler said, as if it was a great mercy they had given him.

A mercy. To a man who has spent the last five hundred years doing nothing but dedicating himself to this place. The people here. The orphans. The members.

Without them he was nothing. And without him many here would not exist.

It seemed time had not erased Celine from Light.

She was already acting just like her mother.

Abandoning anyone, even those who didn't deserve it, the moment they didn't do what she wanted.

But...

Even if that was cruelty... was it the same kind of cruelty that got Lomi's village burnt...?

Meriah had been so confident. But...

The Chronicler sighed as she crossed her arms a little onto her desk. She had to lean forward a bit to do so, since the desk had skidded away from her from the earlier commotion. She looked far too tired to be anything but calm.

Could she act this calm if she actually had something terrible to keep hidden...?

Somehow I doubted it.

Plus...

"What were you going to say earlier?" I dared to ask.

The Chronicler frowned and tilted her head at me. Her eyes glowed a little brighter, maybe a small candle's worth of light. "What part, Vim?" she asked.

I gestured to the woman next to me with a tilt of my head.

Her frown deepened. "Rennalee...? Hm..." she thought about it for a moment, and Renn shifted and glanced at me. As she did her hat slid off, which she ignored. "Ah. I was going to congratulate her on your consummation. Yes. Well done, Renn. It's a lovely, healthy, thing. I look forward to the fruit it may soon bear... it would be nice to witness such a thing before I pass, especially if it's by his hand," the Chronicler said with a happy smile as she gestured at me.

My mind whirled as Renn shifted again, her ears fluttering. "Consu-what?" she whispered at me.

"You're kidding...!" Mapple whispered loudly, sounding as shocked as I felt.

Very quickly I controlled myself, and kept myself from blinking or doing anything too odd.

I didn't want her to realize what I had just figured out.

Especially since it might be the only thing I now had above them. Above them all.

Light too.

For once I knew something they didn't.

Something actually useful.

"She's congratulating us on our marriage, Renn," I said softly, trying to remain passive.

Her ears fluttered even more. "Um... thank you? Why are we talking about this and not Randle now?" she asked, sounding upset.

"Because to her it was of no importance. Not even enough to list in the things that could have infuriated me," I said simply.

Renn glanced at me, then back at the Chronicler... who simply nodded. "Yes? I do feel his loss. He's been a staunch ally, and we could have used his insight and skills, undoubtedly so. But the Society... or well, the church, cannot keep such dangerous individuals within our halls. Too many of our cloth are fragile things. To be honest I'm not sure how Randle had almost killed Light. She's not like the rest of us, but more like you, Rennalee. I had not thought it in him, or capable of it even, so it had been quite a shock! But, well... it's not like he's ever shown what he could do before, so it's not unbelievable," the Chronicler said as she shrugged.

I nodded. "A loss, but nothing more we've not endured before," I said.

My wife startled, spun to look at me with wide eyes and an obvious look of utter shock. I ignored her though as I sighed and glanced around. To check the room.

It seemed all I had destroyed was the door. And part of the shelf next to it.

"Why did you send Mapple and Less to protect Renn? Knowing I was near?" I asked, turning topics a little on purpose.

Mapple made an "Eep!" noise as I glanced at her.

"What...?" Renn asked as she turned to look at Mapple.

"Oh my. So he caught you, did he? Figures. I swear her lack of faith is as bad as Randle's insanity, sometimes," the Chronicler huffed a sigh as I looked back at her, and did my best to ignore Mapple's sad whine that followed.

Why was she always so cruel to those who were so loyal...?

"I'll not tell you. You'll just get more furious with me than you are now. Just know she is important... but so are all of our members, Vim. We had known you had sent her off alone with that human. We didn't trust the human alone with her, so just wanted to be sure. Plus Less had some duties she needed to tend to up that way anyway," the Chronicler said.

About to further prod into such a thing, Renn stepped forward and slapped the desk. "What about the vote! Why are the two of you beating around the bush!?" she shouted.

The Chronicler sat up straighter. "The vote...? You mean the one concerning Vim's failures? Of course we're handling it. Just like last time Vim will have to give concessions, but all will be well. We've already ensured it," the Chronicler said simply.

"W...what?" Renn leaned back a little, her tail swishing wildly beneath her coat as she tried to process not just what she was hearing but what she was seeing.

The Chronicler really looked calm. Too calm.

And I now knew why, so I wasn't too bothered by it. But Renn obviously didn't. But that wasn't her fault.

Renn simply didn't comprehend what motivated those like her. I'd not properly explained it all to her. I'll need to do so later, tonight, so she would understand from now on.

Until then though, I'll need to guide this moment. These topics, and conversations, until we left. I finally knew something none of them did, and I didn't want to waste this opportunity.

"But... Crane's going around and turning everyone against him!" Renn shouted.

"Crane...? Nonsense. Crane is a sweet woman, but her brain is as light as her feathers. She's sparked a conversation most are not ready for, if they ever will be, so it has indeed become a hot topic... but it is and will be fine. We've made sure it stays a simple discussion, not of Vim's being but his actions. Like the other times this has happened, it will only end with a slap on the wrist and the Society will calm down afterward, you'll see."

"Are you the ones who started it?" I asked.

"Nonsense. But we took advantage of it, of course. Oplar is handling most of the letters for the votes, so our census isn't completely accurate, but by our count you'll lose by about one sixth of the votes, but we'll make sure it's limited. Our original plan was for you and Renn to help build the new diocese in Lumen as punishment, but I'm sure we can add a few small things if you'd like," the Chronicler said with a smirk.

Renn stood up and stepped back from the desk, nearly bumping into me in the process. "You're all mad!" she said. Reaching out, I grabbed her by the shoulder gently. Doing so made her turn and snarl at

me. "Vim! They're treating it like a joke!" she said angrily as she pointed at the fake saint sitting before us.

"I told you Renn, this was a possibility," I said.

"We've been worrying over it this whole time!" she said, her voice cracking as she did. I noted her eyes had begun to grow red and glossy.

"I apologize... Vim, you should know better than to think we'd just let something like that transpire under our very noses... really, now," the Chronicler said gently, looking actually bothered and hurt.

I remained calm, and quiet, even as Renn started to cry. "He's even considered doing something stupid over it! You're jerks! All of you!" she said as she began to tremble again.

The Chronicler slowly started to stand, and I went still as I watched the old woman start to shake herself. And not from strain of standing.

"Wait... please don't weep, dear...! Vim! Say something! You should not have allowed this to torment her so!" she shouted at me, actually upset.

"You could have at least told us...!" Renn shouted as she went to cleaning her face. Was she already getting control over her crying?

The Chronicler slowly shook her head. "No... We don't tell Vim of such prophecies, Renn. He doesn't like them. Though... I suppose there is fault to be seen in our lack of informing you. I am sorry. I'll make sure from now on that..." the Chronicler was about to promise something I could not allow, so I stopped her from doing so.

The shelves around us rattled, and books and other objects fell from them as I held onto Renn and made sure she didn't fall. Mapple released a tiny yelp as the Chronicler fell back to her chair, though not from fear but simple necessity. She had not been able to stay upright during the commotion.

Lifting a hand, I pointed a stern finger at the Chronicler. "Careful," I warned her.

The Chronicler groaned as she shifted and righted herself. She flinched, in a way that told me she had likely bruised herself in the fall. "See what I mean...? We'd like to tell Vim things, but he gets like this when we try to! We can beat around the bush with them, or hint at them, but nothing more!" she said loudly, annoyed.

Renn glanced around, and then turned to look behind us. "Are you okay Mapple?" she asked softly.

"Yeah. I'm... just going to sit here okay?" Mapple said quietly, with a whisper.

Renn nodded and then looked back forward, to the Chronicler. "I'll hear them. From now on," she said.

The Chronicler perked up, and I knew better than to try and stop it any further. If I did Renn would just become upset with me, instead of them.

So before anything stupid could be said, I sighed and gestured for the fake saint's attention. "So who else is on the chopping block?" I asked.

"No one of great importance, Vim. In reality even Randle could have been left alone, even after attacking Light. But he kept pressing the matter. The fool even tried to barge into her chambers in the middle of the night, after waking from his treatment hours after the incident. It's why they left for Lumen a little earlier than planned, just to avoid the drama," she said.

Damn it Randle...

Renn's ears twitched as she glanced at me, her eyebrows furrowed in worry. Like me she had heard plainly the sad truth.

Randle very well had likely deserved his banishment. At least from what we've heard so far.

And even if I doubted everything the Chronicler was saying... it didn't matter.

None of it did.

Because they were basing their actions not on me at all... but Renn.

Glancing at the woman somehow centered amongst prophecies and schemes, I felt horrible.

She frowned at me, noticing my look, and I wanted to wipe her face. It had tears and even a little snot on it.

Staring into her stress-filled eyes, I wondered what to do. What to say. Who to kill, and who to spare.

If I let this continue... she'll just keep getting wrapped up in these people and their prophecies.

Light was like her mother. Her treatment of Randle was proof of that. Even if Randle had acted out of line, I had doubts to the level of severity they were claiming. Randle had said he had grabbed her by the collar, not the neck. But was that just him misremembering thanks to the rage he had at that moment? Or was it more?

As much as I hated Randle, I'd bet on his word over theirs. Though Mapple... had said she had witnessed it. And although Mapple was on their side, dutifully to the point of obeying people who were cruel to her... she was not a liar. At all.

But I could deal with Randle's indiscretions later. Even if their claim was true, even they say he is not to be removed from the Society. Just the church. Here. Telmik. As long as he was gone before winter's end, he was not an issue.

My concern now was Light and her schemes. The Chronicler could see beyond what was in front of her, but not the future or past. Only a real saint could do that. Which meant all of the prophecies she's been relying on, and hinting at, were from other saints. Celine or her daughter Light, most likely.

And it was clear now, based on how the Chronicler had just panicked over Renn's tears that something was amiss. She was not the type to actually care if someone wept or not. Not like that.

The Chronicler had not cared for my anger, Mapple, or the people who may or may not have heard us. Instead the only thing she had panicked over during this whole conversation had been something else entirely.

Renn's emotions.

She had not wanted Renn to be angry with her. To be burdened. It was not like her to show such emotion. Especially not over another's.

Which meant if these prophecies of Renn were what they were basing everything off of, which I had no doubt of now, then it was inevitable that she'd try to use Renn as Celine had used me.

I didn't know the purpose. I didn't care. It didn't matter.

All that mattered was that Renn was spared from that terrible fate.

Nothing good ever came from prophecies. Whether you try to fulfill them, or stop them, the result was always the same.

Disgusting failure.

"Vim...?" Renn whispered my name, likely growing uneasy over my long silence.

I'd not confronted anyone yet over the possibility that they had burnt down Lomi's village. But that was because I knew I'd not get the real truth.

Rather I'd get one, but it'd just be the truth the Chronicler knew. The one Light had given her. The one Light had manipulated and controlled to make them all believe and parrot.

Just as her mother had done.

I needed to confront Light. She was the source of all this. Until I did... anyone I killed, or threatened, would just be victims.

Victims of Light's trickery and my own hatred.

And I was not going to slaughter out of pure malice.

I did that once. Never again.

Looking back at the Chronicler, I found her trying to organize her desk. A lot of it had become cluttered during the commotion. She was moving books, picking up a spilled inkwell and pen, and adjusting a thin white cloth that covered most of her work area.

"Hyacinth," I said her name.

The Chronicler froze... her eyes going dark for a small heartbeat, then they grew brighter again as she looked up at me.

"Yes Vim...?" Hyacinth whispered back.

"I plan to step down as Protector. During the vote, while most of the Society is here. Properly. No matter the outcome," I told her.

"Wait...!" Hyacinth started to stand, but flinched and sat back down. The way she had did so told me her knee had just gave out on her.

Mapple made a noise as she hurried to her feet and ran around the desk to the old woman. She didn't help her to her feet, but hovered around her patiently... waiting to be told or asked for help.

"Vim..." Hyacinth groaned through clenched teeth.

"I'll be letting everyone else know too. We've got about a little over a year before the vote, so I suggest making the proper preparations for my absence while you can. I'll be heading to Lumen soon, if you have any letters or need me for anything... just let me know," I said calmly, as if I'd not just moments ago been considering ending her life.

Bending down I picked up Renn's fallen hat. She glared at me as I placed it upon her head, nodded at her, and then took her hand.

Taking Renn with me, I left the Chronicler's office.

Chapter 412 Renn – Schemes Amongst Tombs

Walking behind Vim, I shifted the bag in my arms a little since something within it had been poking me in my right arm. Not so badly as to hurt, but it was bad enough to want it to stop doing so.

"Stay here Renn," Vim said softly as he gestured gently at me.

I nodded a little sluggishly as I finished messing with my bag. Vim stepped down into a small stairwell, one submerged in utter darkness, leaving me behind.

For a few moments I heard his heavy footsteps as he descended down into the darkness, but then even his footsteps faded away. Glancing around the entrance to the dark stairwell, I wondered how he was able to tell which tomb or vault he was supposed to enter. There were no signs, no markings, and no way to tell if any of the seemingly random stairwells led anywhere important. Especially since there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to their placement. I could probably remember which was which, had I been the one reclaiming stuff I've stored away decades ago, but I knew now that Vim struggled with such things. He's lost entire safe-houses before, over the years, after all. It made me wonder how he was able to remember some things, yet not others.

We had just walked down a long hallway here far underneath the Cathedral, one that had been so packed of these tombs. This hallway though that we were currently in, only had this tomb and two more down the way. Then the hallway met with another, one that was larger and had a slightly different style of bricks for its structure. There were no lights down here. We were below even the section where there was water and little holes for light. We were even below the baths Vim and I had used during our last stay here. Vim had offered to bring a source of light, but so far I'd been fine. The only places I couldn't see well enough in to function were the little stairwells and hallways that led to tombs. As long as I stayed in the main hallways, I was fine.

Like usual we were alone down here. And judging by the stale air and the smell of stones and dirt, we'd likely been the only people down here for a very long time. It made me wonder just how many people even knew these underground areas existed.

Vim had come straight here after talking to the Chronicler. I was honestly... a little relieved. I was upset and bothered, of course, over how it had gone and how indifferent the Chronicler had acted and seemed... but at the same time I was super relieved that Vim had not needed to kill anyone. Even if a part of me wanted them to be punished for their foolish deeds.

And although him informing the Chronicler of his plan to step down was a terrible thing, he had made it clear he wouldn't do so until the vote a year from now. That meant I had time to change his mind. To alter the course, and maybe even convince him otherwise.

"If that's even possible..." I whispered as I stared at the bag in my arms.

It was my bag, the one I always carried around, but it was now full of stuff that wasn't mine.

Vim had been spending the last hour or so gathering up things he felt were no longer safe to leave here. He had gathered some from a storeroom first, and now was going in and out of what he had called tombs. The last thing he had brought out had been a small bag of what had sounded like coins considering how they had clinked and clanked when he handed them to me.

"If what's possible, Renn?" Vim asked as he emerged from the dark.

Shifting a little, I frowned at him. When had he neared the stairwell? I hadn't heard his footsteps. "Are you really robbing graves, Vim?" I asked instead.

"Basically. Here, Tor's heart. Or well, his elder's heart," Vim said as he stepped up out of the small stairwell and up to me. He messed with my bag in my arms as he placed what looked like a small black leather pouch into my bag. It had looked the shape of a monarch heart.

"So you're okay with giving it to him?" I asked, a little surprised.

"You promised you'd bring it to him, didn't you?" he asked.

I had... but... "Why would you leave it here all this time, Vim? You've said you didn't want them to have hearts before," I said, concerning the church.

"They hadn't known about it. And sometimes the best place to hide a tree is within a forest," he said.

Right...

Vim then turned and headed deeper down the hallway. I joined him, walking a few feet behind him as I shifted the bag in my arm and wondered how much more he'd collect down here. The bag was almost full, since it still had my stuff in it too. We hadn't had the opportunity to go to the house and deposit our stuff yet.

"How are you feeling, Renn?" Vim asked, his calm voice not echoing down here even though our footsteps did.

"Tired. And I want a bath now, I feel grimy thanks to the sweat," I said honestly. I felt like I'd just spent the last week fighting and running for my life. My clothes under my cloak and outer layers felt weird now, and my whole body ached a little. Particularly my shoulders and legs, for some reason.

I saw him nod in the dark. "I'd offer to take you to the baths above us, but after we're done here I want to go back up top. To check on Randle and the rest before we get complacent," he said.

"Check on them...?" I asked, picking up my pace a little so I could walk beside him.

"Yes. Randle is acting odd now, so I can't count on him doing what he's always done. So I want to make sure he doesn't do anything stupid," he said.

"What has he always done?" I asked.

"Be smarter than most," he answered.

Hm.

Vim then slowed, and stared down a new hallway. One that didn't seem to have any of those weird stairwells that led to tombs, but instead normal doors lining its walls. Wooden and stone ones. It was dark enough I couldn't see the end of it, but it looked like the others around here. A hallway that seemed to go on endlessly. I stared down the hallway too for a bit, then glanced back at Vim. He was still standing there... just staring off into the dark hallway.

"Vim?" I asked gently. Was he okay?

He took a small breath, coughed and nodded. "So... um... Rennalee," he said my name, and I squeezed the bag in my arms as I nodded quickly at him. He gave me a gentle smile, one that honestly didn't fit the moment. It was the smile he usually gave when we were alone, and flirting over dinner or something. Far from chaos and drama. "We have issues, as you can obviously tell," he then said.

I nodded again. "A lot, I think," I agreed.

"Yes... so what did you get from the Chronicler's words and actions? Just then?" he asked, pointing above us.

I couldn't actually tell if we were directly under her office or not, but odds are we were. Vim was odd like that sometimes, able to pinpoint such things with ease.

"She either knows nothing, or knows everything and is just... very good at playing the fool," I said, reliving the moments again.

While Vim had gathered up the items in my bag, I'd listened and watched Chronicler again and again in my mind, trying to find out the meaning and truth of everything that was going on. Oddly, thinking back of those moments revealed more about Vim than it had her and her schemes.

About half way through our conversation, sometime around when Mapple and I had shut the door or at least tried to since Vim had broken it, Vim had... seemingly relaxed a little. He had originally seemed intent on getting the truth out of the Chronicler, and possibly even furious enough to do something about it if she didn't reveal it. Then before I knew it he had calmed down, and had eased up on his questioning.

Was it because of what she had said about Randle? What Mapple had said, maybe? That he had not just attacked Light, but had tried to attack her again after being forgiven for doing it the first time? Did that justify his banishment, and loss of arm, to Vim? Did that justify Vim's lack of asking about Lomi's village, or their schemes? Did he believe them about how they were manipulating the vote?

"Do you believe what they said about the vote, Vim?" I asked.

"Yes. They've done such things before. I told you that it was possible that it was just a scheme of theirs," Vim said.

"Yet you still plan to step down...? Why?" I asked.

"You focus on that part right now Renn? Really?" he asked as he shifted a little, to face me more properly.

I nodded. "Obviously?"

Vim studied me for a moment, and then sighed. "Ignore that for a bit. Let's focus on what was said, or rather what the Chronicler said," Vim said.

"But...!" I stepped forward, and the bag I held clattered a little with noise because of how brisk of a movement I had made. Vim though just gently raised a hand and shook his head at me.

"We'll talk about that after, I promise. For now I want to talk about their schemes," he said.

Glaring at him for a moment, I grumbled and reluctantly nodded. "Fine. If what they're saying is true, about Randle and the vote, then that means they're not actually trying to harm you in any way are they? So it's just the standard schemes of the church, isn't it? But what about Lomi's village? What about what Meriah claimed? Why didn't you place down the map that she drew, which led to their village?" I asked. That very map was in my bag too.

"Because it wasn't time for that yet. Odds are Light is pulling the strings. Even if I confronted the Chronicler fully, in theory I could punish her or kill her for being involved, but odds are she doesn't know much more than the bare basics. She's not capable of seeing prophecies Renn," Vim explained.

"So... you're just going to leave her be until you face Light?" I asked, not really liking the idea at all.

"To confront her here and now would send this church into chaos. I will kill and punish her if she's actually guilty, if you'd like, but will you be able to look the many members who live here in the eye as you tell them they must now flee into hiding? Abandoning the home they've had for centuries?" Vim asked.

I gasped a bit and stepped back, quickly shaking my head. "No," I whined at the idea of doing such a thing. There weren't just our own members here, but dozens if not hundreds of humans too. People who had grown up here, in those orphanages. They did not deserve such a fate at all!

"Then this must be handled properly. Plus... I'm not saying I don't think they're not guilty Renn. In fact, now that I know what I know, I'm more inclined to believe that they are not only guilty... but guilty for the wrong reason," Vim said.

"What... what do you mean?" I asked.

He pointed at me. "She congratulated you."

I blinked and nodded. "For marrying you, yes."

He shook his head. "The word she used, and what she said afterward, was very telling. Tell me, you've spoken with her a few times. Alone, even. Has she ever told you of any prophecies? Or brought up our relationship?" he asked.

Lowering the bag a little, I frowned at him. "Prophecies...? No... But she's spoken of our relationship since I first met her, back when we first came here," I said.

"How so?" Vim asked.

I sighed at him; since it was obvious Vim was onto something now. I couldn't understand why this was more important than him stepping down, or Randle, or the vote, or anything else... but fine. I'd indulge him, for now.

"She teased me at first. She knew I liked you even back then, and basically told me you hadn't noticed yet but would so not to worry about it much. After that, our conversations have been... short? Usually you're there when I talk to her. You were there when I put my name in the tome, and gave them my word for the banks and letters. When we were here last time I only spoke to her a couple times. That one time with Mapple and another time with Angie. She congratulated me then too, on my finding your heart and taking ownership of it. We spoke more about my trip, how I've enjoyed myself, or about Angie than we did anything else though," I said as I thought about all the conversations related to her.

Though...

It was weird so many people kept referencing Vim's heart when it concerned my relationship with him. I had simply assumed it was just a term or phrase we non-humans used, or maybe the religious did since it related to their gods and divine monarchs. But...

"Did any of Celine's prophecies mention you and me? Our relationship?"

I lifted and squeezed my bag again. "Vim..." I whispered.

"This is important Renn," he whispered back.

Staring into his eyes, I suddenly felt cold. Even though it was winter, these tunnels and sub-floors were actually a little warm. So I knew it wasn't because the temperature had changed.

"You're going to make me sweat and hurt again," I said softly as I stared into the eyes of Vim who was being completely serious.

He seemingly actually wanted to know. But I didn't want to tell him.

I couldn't.

He had warned me. He had told me already.

Here in these very halls. Upstairs, on that bed in the mansio. Elsewhere throughout the world.

Vim has made it clear that if I, or anyone, ever told him a prophecy of our love he'd abandon me on the spot.

So...

"So she did," Vim then said.

"Vim!" I shouted at him, suddenly more afraid than ever. Nearly dropping the bag, I caught it just in time before it slammed into the floor. The stuff within clanked and made noises as I panicked and stepped towards him. "You told me not to ever tell you!" I shouted further.

"You don't need to tell me the actual prophecies. Just if there was one that directly concerned you and myself. In the way of love or something," Vim said gently as he reached out. His steady hand grabbed my elbow and arm, and as he did I actually felt a little steadier. A little relieved. I leaned upon his grip, his firmness, because I suddenly felt weak.

"You said to never tell you," I whispered up at him, my ears twitched as if suddenly terribly itchy.

He nodded. "The word she had used, Renn, is consummated. It doesn't just infer marriage, it means to finalize it. Particularly, usually, it's done while in bed together. To them, in their religion, it extends beyond that to include the act of trying for a child," Vim explained.

My ears stopped fluttering as I narrowed my eyes at him. "Huh?"

Vim's own eyes narrowed too. "Yes. She was not congratulating us on our marriage, Renn, she was basically congratulating you on becoming pregnant, or at least attempting to do so. Did you not note her comment afterward?" he asked.

Frowning terribly, I heard her words again in my head. They rung a little, as if loud, as I smirked and laughed at that. "Why's that so important, Vim? Why's it so serious to you? Isn't that just what one expects from a husband and wife?" I asked. Especially newlywed ones!

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Really! That was why he was being so odd? That was what had been bothering him?

Relaxing a little, I allowed a great sigh of relief to escape. How wonderful. So it hadn't been something terrible.

"Ponder it deeper, Renn. For a moment. Consider that fact, and who she was, and what I've told you about her. About how she doesn't have the ability to see prophecies. And take into account the fact they had sent Less and Mapple to watch of you, and protect you from afar, while you traveled to Lilly's with Cat. While I was away from you," Vim said gently, squeezing my arm as he did.

I smiled at Vim for a moment as I did as he told me to. I thought about the Chronicler... her position... the things Vim was pointing out, and I took into account how serious Vim was taking it and...

"You're saying Light, or another saint such as Celine maybe, had a prophecy about us. That I would have a child," I said softly, being very careful to not say too much.

I couldn't tell Vim of Celine's note to me, about not letting my daughter touch the moon. If I did he might do all he could to ensure we never had children, just to avoid that. And such a thing would break my heart in ways I couldn't describe. The mere thought of it made me want to curl up in a ball and weep.

Vim though nodded. "The Chronicler firmly believes it. I have had a few odd conversations with her, especially a few years ago before you and I became what we are. I remember them now for what they were. She had not been teasing me, but had already expected it. She had known it. I had played it off as her just being odd, because she likes to pretend she knows more than she does. But now, today, her little quips are rather obvious. I've always thought they had a saint hidden away, but had always assumed it to be a human one. One incapable of knowing or seeing anything about me. But if she's been in contact with Light all this time, her knowing stuff about us this entire time makes sense and explains it all," he said.

He was speaking seriously, but luckily didn't look furious or upset. If anything he looked... worried. His grip on my elbow and arm was gentle, but firm.

"Okay...? I know you hate prophecies Vim, but it's not like I knew of them before you and I became something special. Or are you going to actually stop loving me over this? If you actually try to end what we are over this, I'll kill you," I said stiffly.

Vim blinked... and then smiled and laughed at me. The way he did so made me calm down a little, since it was not the laugh he had when I made a funny joke but instead when he found me adorable. "What...? No. Like it or not you're stuck with me. I still don't want to hear any prophecy you know Renn, and I'd likely fight them if I heard one, but I'll not actually divorce you over one. I promise," he said calmly with a smile.

"So...? Then why is it such a big deal, Vim? So they had known of our meeting and eventual relationship from who knows when? Why does that matter? Why does that change if they are guilty or not, or should be punished? Why does that mean you should step down as protector?" I asked.

"Because it means they're basing their actions on misguided information. A false prophecy," he stated.

My tail perked up a little as I instantly understood his meaning. "I'm not pregnant yet," I said.

He nodded. "No. I'd hope not."

Frowning as I pondered that fact, I shook my head a little as I failed to comprehend its importance. "How does that... change anything? What if they're just off a little? Like how Elaine once saw you and I meeting her for the first time together, not separated like we had been?" I asked.

"That's just it. They likely did see a future. Maybe even a guaranteed one. But they think it's not the future, but the present. If the Chronicler believes you are pregnant with my child, it explains a lot actually. It explains the vote. It explains Light's return, amongst the rest. It explains their attempt to protect you, while we're separated. It could even in a way explain Lomi's village," Vim said.

"How...?" I whispered.

"What if we would not have met had their village not burnt down?"

My stomach turned as I shook my head. "I don't like that," I said stiffly.

"Me either. And I'm not saying it's plausible or anything, just that it's an idea. The others are more believable. Light might not have returned until they believed they could either fully control me, kill me, or accept me. You becoming pregnant, with my child, and becoming my wife could be viable routes for those things in their eyes. Them protecting you is the same thing. If you had gotten hurt or died while I

was separated from you, on Society business, I might have become a problem. The vote too, especially, because it will allow them to modify my agreement with the Society to their fitting and needs while taking your situation... our situation, in account. They likely would have used your pregnancy as to manipulate me. Didn't you hear what she said? She mentioned making you and I help build their new church in Lumen. I'd not do that right now, since there are so many who need my attention... but with this vote, and you being pregnant? Maybe I would have. Or maybe they fear us having children will make me want to step down or something. It could be anything really, but the source is all the same," Vim said.

"You're stepping down anyway, already!" I shouted at him, remembering the thing that annoyed me most right now.

He had just said many good points, which really disturbed me, because I found myself believing him more and more with every word he said. So I tried to focus on the most important thing right now, not their schemes that may or may not destroy the Society but his guaranteed failure which would.

"Yes. And she had gotten shocked over that. Terribly so. Which only further proves my theory. I can't say for sure, it might not even be about me at all, but I can't imagine why else they'd act so oddly just because they think you're pregnant," Vim said as he released my arm and crossed his.

A little sad he had let me go, I huffed at him. "Are you sure you're not really overestimating me, Vim? Or this supposed theory? What if they just had a prophecy a long time ago of me showing up and getting pregnant? What if it's just coincidence?" I asked.

"It might be. But I don't believe in coincidences," he said.

Me either. But still...

"You're saying this is all my fault," I whimpered as my heart thumped in my chest.

The vote. Their schemes. Randle getting hurt and banished. A good portion of the Society losing trust in their protector, to the point of even denying him the right to visit them! All of it...!

"What...? No... Renn, no, not at all!"

"Isn't it...? You're saying their schemes are somehow because of me? My presence? Our relationship?" I asked quickly as my head began to hurt.

Vim grabbed me by the arms, and I actually dropped the bag this time because of it. It fell upon my feet, and I was thankful I was wearing thick boots because the stuff in it would have hurt otherwise.

"Renn, that is not what I was saying at all. Even if my theory is right, even if they're basing all their actions and schemes around the prophecies around you, it is not you who is at fault but them. You are just a tool for their own twisted desires and ideals. I don't blame the sword, or the one who fashioned it, but the one who swings it," Vim said quickly.

Staring up at him, I squirmed in his grip. I wanted to grab at his arms and hands, but the angle just wouldn't work thanks to where he had grabbed me. "What if it is me?" I whispered.

"Then all the more reason we deal with it properly. Let us go to Lumen and confront Light, let's handle it," he said firmly.

"Together?"

His left eye narrowed as he smirked. "Why wouldn't we do so together, Renn?"

"They don't want me in Lumen..." I said softly as my eyes began to water.

"Screw'em."

"Vim..." I groaned.

He nodded. "Screw them. Plus you hadn't been actually banished Renn, just told you can't stay there without me being near you. And who cares even if they did? They can technically only banish you from their halls, not the city itself, anyway."

But... "But...!"

Then I was lifted. I startled a little, letting out a tiny yelp as Vim lifted me off the ground. He did so gingerly, but did it while holding my arms still. I was lifted upward high enough that I felt a little silly as my feet and tail dangled and I stared straight down at his upturned face.

"What are you doing, Vim?" I asked as I sniffed and smiled. Was he trying to replicate what Oplar had done a little bit ago? If so he was doing it wrong, the angle and height was all off. Plus she had more so did it for only a few moments as she turned it into a hug. Yet...

What a neat feeling...! It was a little uncomfortable, since although Vim was holding onto me carefully it didn't change the fact I was still dressed in heavy clothes. The weight and feel of my many winter layers didn't feel comfortable while dangling like this. He was nearly holding me up above him as a parent would a young child, to make them laugh and play with them. But none of the pinching clothes or tugging could diminish the lovely feeling of being held upward like this. It made me feel...

"Why are you smiling like that?" Vim asked with an odd tone.

"Like what...?" I asked back. I could feel the weird smile, so I knew what he was talking about.

"I was going to shake you a little. To shake the stupid out of you, but maybe I should shake you for another reason," he said with a smile.

"Rude!"

He nodded as if it was obvious. "Do not blame yourself Renn. For any of this. I have the blame. They have blame for being foolish. If you want to accept blame for something... then just accept the fact you're too gentle for your own good," he said.

I tilted my head at him and a lot of my hair fell down, sliding out of my hood and from behind my back. It rained down, smacking Vim in the face before hanging a little before him. "What will you do if you find out Light was responsible for burning down Lomi's village?" I asked.

"I'll kill her. And any who were involved. But I'll need to do it correctly, and will need to make sure others know the truth. If I slay her, and her compatriots, without first revealing the truth than all it will do is turn the whole of the Society into our enemies. It's the same reason I didn't fully confront the Chronicler too. I'm not sure yet if I want to do that just yet," he said honestly.

"Yet you'll still step down...? Why, Vim? Why abandon them? They need you," I asked.

His eyes softened, and I shifted a little... and wondered if I should ask him to put me down or not. It was a fun feeling, but I wanted to give him a hug too.

"I told you to find a solution, Renn," he said.

"You told me I had until the vote. But I still want to know why you're so willing to abandon people you've spent untold years and grief to protect and uplift, only to abandon them so heartlessly," I said.

Vim then lowered me. I smiled as my feet met the ground, and I shifted and moved my shirt and clothes a little, since they had slipped a bit. Vim released my arms, but his hands lingered a little before me. Right in front of me, half-cupped as if...

Staring at them for a moment, I smiled and took them. We clasped hands, and I nodded at him. I had wanted a hug, but this was fine too.

"Did you see and hear how the Chronicler treated Mapple?" he asked.

I nodded quickly, a little upset he had brought it up. I had been enjoying the moment, and that was a sad thing to talk about. "I had. She's cruel to her."

"Over the years I've heard and seen them say terrible things to her, and send her on terrible tasks just because they see her as expendable," he said.

Frowning, I nodded. "Poor Mapple," I whispered.

She had seemed odd, but no one deserved such a life.

"Celine had treated everyone like that. She had indeed loved non-humans. She had cherished humans... but when it came to her goals and dreams, people were nothing more than tools. The Sisters, Chronicler's siblings and cousins, were the same. Are the same. And it seems Light has inherited their methods and perspective. If Randle really had attacked her in such a manner, and pursued them even after losing his arm and being separated from each other, then it's hard to deny his wounds and banishment. But her quick decision to cut him from the church, as swiftly as she had cut off his arm, is an obvious trait. Celine had been the same way. She would abandon and remove any who she deemed more trouble than they were worth. It was why Merit and so many over the years were members, yet only distantly and tried to expand beyond Celine's reach," Vim explained.

Slowly nodding, I gulped a little. "And what does your rules say of such people, Vim? People that would toss aside even the good so readily?" I asked.

Vim was quiet for a moment, but then nodded. "That's the problem, Renn. If it was just one or two people... I could justify punishing them. But what if it was a good portion of the Society that supported

such things? Even if manipulated and misguided... what if Light's actions, which spurred Randle into such an extreme reaction, is and was supported by a large portion of the community? Then it would not be the will of one but of many. And thus..."

"Thus you'd allow it. Because it would be what they wanted, and you doing something about it would be forcing them all against their own wishes," I said knowingly.

He nodded.

I sighed at him. "So you stepping down is truly your way of keeping the peace. You wouldn't actually want to support such people so cruel, nor sow discord, so will step down to diffuse and avoid it completely," I said, admitting and accepting what he's been saying this whole time.

He nodded again.

"Why did you allow it back then, Vim? With Celine? If she was like this too, why did you put up with it all?" I asked. Especially since supposedly there had been massive wars and infighting back then too.

"Because I felt responsible," he whispered.

"Responsible...?"

"For non-humans. As a whole."

I frowned at that. "I don't understand that, Vim. If you feel responsible... why doesn't that encompass this moment too? Why wouldn't you just endure it today as you had back then?" I asked.

"Multitude of reasons. For now just know it's related to my mistake, Renn. At least, a part of it. I feel responsible for the current state of non-humans. How they live. Their numbers. Their lives and even their happiness, too. I feel... regretful. So I've been trying to pay for what I had done all that time ago. By protecting them. But my rules, my ethos and beliefs, have always kept me from doing certain things or going too far with it. For instance I will not eliminate another race just to ensure the longevity of another. So I'll not kill humans in mass just for the non-humans. That had been a big debate back during the wars... Light herself had been involved in some of them," he said softly.

I gulped at that. "If you step down... or rather, now that you're willing to do so... does that mean you no longer feel that desire? That you no longer feel responsible? For us?" I asked him.

Vim's eyes softened a little. "I still do. I always will. I just... know better than to keep doing the same thing over and over for eternity. That is insanity. If I step back and allow Light and the rest to keep doing as they are, with their schemes, then the end result is obvious. Because I've seen it a thousand times. That route only ends with me making another mistake. I can live with hating myself, I've been doing that. I can't be the cause of the Society's final death knell. I refuse," he said.

"But the alternative, Vim... to abandon the rest of us just because of a small portion does something wrong? Even if more than half are on Light's side, that still leaves hundreds of people Vim! Hundreds of souls!" I argued.

"So then you better figure out how to stand tall for me, and figure out a solution for us all," he said.

My grip on his hands tightened to the point I knew nails had pierced skin and bones had creaked. Vim didn't even flinch as he allowed it.

"Vim..." I whispered.

He nodded. Firmly. "Figure it out for me, Renn. Do for me what Celine was supposed to have done. I gave her the chance, and this is where it brought me. A Society of tens of thousands of your kind, with hundreds of thousands of humans to support it, reduced to a fraction. Entire kingdoms reduced to tiny enclaves hidden within human settlements and dense forests," Vim said as he gestured with his shoulder around us... then he smirked and nodded again, as if at himself. "To a Protector who would have been voted out of his position, possibly the Society itself, had the people in charge not manipulated the votes," he added.

Groaning at him, my ears fluttered as I tried to comprehend everything.

Suddenly everything seemed inconsequential. The vote. Light's schemes. Possible traitors, and who knows what else. Even Randle's predicament suddenly felt small. Insignificant. But it wasn't. The poor man had just lost everything. Yet here I was... once again being tasked with something momentous. Something that I knew I wasn't ready for, at all.

"They're scheming around you. Whether you're the cause or just a byproduct doesn't matter. Use it against them. You're smart Renn. Smarter than all of them, and you got the strongest bundle of muscles right behind you. So figure it out, fix the problem and if you can do it I'll think about staying the Protector," Vim said.

"Stand tall," I whispered, understanding fully what he wanted. What he meant.

What he needed.

He nodded. "Stand tall."

For a moment we just stared at each other, and then I loosened my grip on his hands. I stretched my fingers a little in-between his, since they had gone stiff from the strain of clasping so tightly.

"Sorry," I apologized.

"Hm. Honestly I had expected blood to be drawn today, though honestly had not expected it to be mine..." he said with a slight mumble.

Laughing at him, I nodded. "Right!?"

He sighed, and then bent down. Our hands were a tangled mess for a moment until I finally released him, and he gathered up the bag I had dropped. He didn't hand it to me though, and instead just patted it. "Just two more things, then we can go back upstairs," he said.

"Hmph. You know if we were going to grave rob you should have told me. I would have worn a mask or something, to enjoy it better," I said as he turned away, as to return to walking.

"We're not robbing... Just picking up stuff the dead don't need any more..." Vim defended himself, pausing a moment to glance at me with a look.

I chuckled at him, and smirked happily as I pointed at myself. "Can I go into the next one? Or is that seen as sacrilegious?" I asked.

"Hm...? You can. They're just very dark and the air in them isn't safe so I'd been having you stay outside. Just make sure you hold your breath as long as you can and it should be fine, if you'd like," Vim said.

Nodding quickly, I decided to try. "I've never seen a tomb!" I said as I stepped forward to join him.

"Hmph. Technically you have, just not these types is all," he said.

"Maybe... by the way Vim, do you know any prophecies about us?" I asked as I took my place next to him.

"What do you mean...?" he asked slowly, carefully, as I actually walked past him. He hadn't returned to walking even as I did so.

Twirling my strained fingers around each other, I shrugged lightly as I thought about the one Celine had mentioned. And how Randle had known, and called me Vim's heart, when he had handed her letters and my elder's heart to me.

If I, who actually knew such prophecies existed, had not put one and two together back during that conversation... how did he do it so quickly? Did that mean he didn't just know of them, but maybe knew in more detail than I did? Vim kept a lot of secrets, so it actually wouldn't surprise me at all to be honest.

"Well... you connected the dots so quickly just now. About what the Chronicler was thinking, and her meaning. So... I was just..." I felt an odd blush form as I turned, and found him many steps behind me.

He was glaring at me.

Then off down the hallway... somewhere in the darkness, I heard something crack.

I flinched as I heard a brick fall onto other bricks. Tiny echoes of rubble and rocks clattering made my ears flutter, as my ears shifted wildly while I tried to figure out where the sounds had come from.

Giving him a very worried smile, I quickly waved at him. "It's okay. Never mind! Just uh... forget I said anything!" I said quickly, before he broke more and the whole cathedral fell upon us.

Vim took a deep breath, released it, and nodded as he stepped forward.

Standing still, I did my best to keep my smile big and happy as he walked up to me. "Maybe they don't have any prophecies. Maybe they just see your brazen attitude and simply assume the obvious. Schemes by my enemies. Schemes by my allies... and now schemes from my wife? I should rebel," he stated as he stepped past me.

Smirking at him, I resisted the urge to laugh.

"If that's the case then at least actually get me pregnant, Vim. If all this drama is actually because they think I am, I may as well get something out of it all," I said with a huff as I stepped forward, to join him.

He scoffed.

Chapter 413 Vim – Chimes of Hope

Renn's voice was distant, but obvious in my ears. She was a few rooms down from me, and I could hear the many others she was currently heavily debating with.

Oplar was the loudest of the group, but even quiet Hands had spoken up loudly during the debates. I was a little worried that a few of the members, such as Jelti and Karma, hadn't spoken up much but I knew it was likely just a matter of time before they did.

Pretty much everyone was there with Renn. Even Mapple. A few of the humans were even there, such as Oplar's mail girls. Though I'd not heard much from them really.

Debating like they were doing was a healthy thing. No one really ever shared completely similar ideals and beliefs. No two people were the same, deep down, so it was a good thing they were actually arguing and debating on what they believed was right and wrong amongst themselves.

I, being the protector, was staying out of it.

And for once I had a companion.

"It's a good thing I've learned to write with both hands, though I can tell it'll take time to make it proper and clean," Randle said lightly as he continued writing in the small book.

He was settling his affairs. And judging by how many reports and signatures he's had to sign since he sat down across from me it was a lot more than I had assumed.

We were in his normal office. The one he rarely used anymore. Down the hallway a bit was a large room perfect for group talk, which I knew was likely a mess right now. Renn and I had gathered up a bunch of extra chairs and tables from nearby rooms for everyone who had slowly showed up to talk in depth about what was happening, and the hows and whys.

"Might start practicing with your feet, or mouth, just in case now," I said lightly as I slowly ran my finger along the edge of the letter I was pretending to read.

Randle paused in his writing to look up at me. "Why Vim, that's absolutely hilarious," he said flatly.

"I do think so at least," I said with a nod.

"Hm... Have you ever gone a long time without a limb, Vim? The few times I've seen you lose one they always seem to be back by the next time I see you," he asked.

"Usually they grow back quickly, because they get torn off during battle. During battle my abilities are more... active. I heal quicker than normal. That being said, I have lost limbs and stuff during my more normal moments. When that happens it can take a bit for them to grow back, though I couldn't tell you how long it actually takes... it's been a long time since I've had to worry about it. I want to say a week or two? But maybe it takes longer...?" I wondered.

Randle was quiet for a moment as he stared at me, and then he put his pen down. "You know... I don't think I've ever actually talked to you about such things before," he noted.

"No. I don't think we have," I said.

He hummed for a moment, as we then heard a group of voices all talk up at once. They all seemed to try and get heard over the others for a moment, before a single deeper voice broke through and silenced the rest.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Sounds like Apso. He arrived a few weeks ago with his wife," Randle said.

"Apso...?" I mumbled as I tried to remember who the heck that was.

"They live a little to the west of here. They're those canines that moved closer to be near Henrietta and her family, you helped move them here about a decade ago from their short stay in Lumen," Randle reminded me.

"Ah..." I nodded, and felt a little panicky.

I'd forgotten all about them... have I even visited them since taking them to that small village nearby...?

No. But they did live close enough, only a few days away from here, that I suppose if something was wrong and they had needed me they'd have been able to get help all the same.

"They don't like you much. They were hoping to have a child, as to set them up with Fizz. Well, so far no children," Randle stated.

"What...? Why are you saying it like that, as if they blame me for their lack of children?" I asked.

"Because they do. One of their visits here, while visiting the dogs, you made a small comment to Henrietta and Fizz that they had taken offense to. They've never gotten over it," Randle said.

Frowning at that, I shook my head and struggled to remember any of the details. "What had I said?" I asked. Usually I wasn't the type to make off-handed comments like that. I knew better.

"I don't know Vim. They're pagans. It's why they live there and not here. They don't like me much either," he said simply as he leaned back a little and stared at me.

I sighed and nodded. At least this Apso wasn't speaking anymore. Now it sounded like Sillti, the new addition here. She was asking a question.

"Are she and Link still a thing?" I asked.

"Too much so. It's almost annoying," Randle said as he nodded.

Good. That was good.

Tapping my letter, I wondered how long it had been since we were last here. Two months? Three almost...?

Yes. Very good. If they were still together this long then there was good odds it'd become something permanent. That was wonderful. For both of them.

Link was an odd man, like his father, and Sillti was... well... one I had worried over originally. The poor girl hadn't just been slightly abused by her husband, I had killed him too. Publicly at that. A lot of people ran from the Society after such an experience. So her finding and clinging to someone else so quickly was actually a good thing. Especially since I knew Link was as good as he was odd.

His father had been a great, loyal, man. I expect him to be the same. Made of the same cloth.

Randle then coughed, clearing his throat. I glanced at him, wondering if dust had gotten into his throat or something. This place wasn't the cleanest, likely thanks to his lack of using it lately.

He collected himself well enough, telling me it had been on purpose. "Tell me Vim... how often have we disagreed?" he asked.

"Most of your life, I'm sure."

"Hm... indeed. When I think of you, I only think of chaos and failures. The sieges. The executions. The banishments... but today I wonder who is truly to blame for all that? What if I've all this time been blaming the wrong man?" he asked.

"If you're going to try and be poetic or philosophical, don't. I'm beyond such petty absolusions," I said.

"Ah, but are you? You are if you're a higher being, but regretfully you claim—rightfully so, to not be. So...?" Randle asked, undisturbed by my tone I had tried to use to diffuse this topic.

Wanting to roll my eyes, I shifted a little and flung the letter onto the desk. So that I'd not rip and tear it in my annoyed state. "Semantics, Randle. I may not be a higher being, but I am so old and strong that I simply cannot be compared to a normal man. It's ridiculous to claim so," I said.

"Yet it seems with age does not always come wisdom. Though... maybe your actions do indeed have wise reasons, I just can't perceive them all," he wondered.

Shaking my head at him, I wondered if his banishment and failure to protect his home and purpose had made him insane or just simply melancholic. "If you really want to have this conversation, have it with Renn. I'm not in the mood," I said.

"Hm... I might. But I'd like to have it with you all the same," he said.

"Please, Randle. I get enough of this from her, and I don't even like you. Technically I'm supposed to hate you right now, what with you being banished," I said.

Honestly I was growing tired of such conversations. I still felt slightly exhausted from the one I recently had a little bit ago with Renn, concerning my theory about their prophecies centered around her. Renn had oddly understood where my thought process came from, and even seemed to slightly agree with me, which worried me terribly.

It meant she likely knew of a prophecy. Maybe from Celine, or one of the saints she's met throughout her life. It made me wonder almost if Renn had known all along about us, or rather what we'd become. But I knew better than to actually believe so. Renn wouldn't have tried to stay at the Sleepy Artist back in the beginning if that had been the case. Plus, in the beginning, she had acted a little distant with me. As if on edge or worried. Though it had been because she had feared my banishing her from the Society, or finding her wanting, so I knew it wasn't because she had worried over my not liking her.

Whatever prophecy she knew of, was something recent. Something she'd heard after meeting me. After joining the Society.

Luckily Renn hasn't spoken of them with me, and hopefully wouldn't ever, but it was obvious she knew something she wasn't telling me.

Add that to the way the Chronicler acted, then it all made obvious sense.

I missed the days where I didn't have to deal with such things. Longed for them, even.

"Such an odd way of life. To allow your own emotions and feelings to be controlled by archaic rules set by another," Randle then said.

Reaching up, I rubbed my eyes. "By my parents you're insufferable," I said.

Randle was silent for a moment, but I knew it wasn't over. I stopped rubbing my eyes and glanced at him, he was staring at me oddly.

"What?" I asked.

"Who were your parents, Vim?" he asked.

"A mother and father. Typical. Like everyone else has," I said.

"Hm... I think not. Are they still living?" he asked.

"No. I'd threaten that you won't be either here soon if you keep it up, but regretfully I'm starting to like you," I said.

He chuckled and nodded. "Oddly I can tell. I wonder why that is...? Is it my banishment? Do you like that I've bitten the hand that fed and supported me all this time?" he asked.

"I do. But no. I respect a man who stands for his convictions. I also respect one who knows when he's beat. You're both of those and more," I said honestly.

Randle frowned at me for a bit and then smiled. "Thank you, Vim. For the compliments I've never received before," he said.

"Don't tell anyone," I warned him.

He nodded. "Yes. A terrible thing, to admit one is actually a good man."

I shrugged as I reached to the pile of letters. The unopened ones.

Grabbing a random letter, I sighed as I opened it and unfolded the few pages. The writing was a little messy, but I was able to read Nebl's writing.

For a moment I read his letter in mock silence. The voice filtered from down the hallway were actually dim and faded. I heard them thanks to whom and what I was. But I knew no human, and maybe even most non-humans, could make out any actual words being said likely from even before that room's door.

The room was quiet, yet loud all the same as I turned the page and read the last bit of his letter.

"If you step down Vim... There will be nothing to stop them."

I finished reading Neble's letter before looking over at Randle. "What?" I asked with a sigh.

"All of those like me, on all sides of the pews, will suffer. They will slowly, yes over decades, remove everyone they disagree with. Oplar. Jelti. Henrietta. Even those like your friend there, Nebl," Randle gestured to my letter, which told me he recognized the smithy's color. "All of them will be seen as potential threats, such as they had me. The only ones who will likely escape such a thing are those like Link and Hands. People who are useful and not a threat to them. People who can be controlled and contained, and do not desire anything more than their simple lives," Randle said.

Although I agreed with him, I still shook my head. "How is Jelti and the dogs a threat to them, Randle?" I asked.

"The same way you are Vim. You give members the knowledge that other choices are available than the one dictated upon them. You give options. Jelti may not actually grant them... but she shows them that they are available, simply by existing. The dogs as well. They do not belong to the faith, yet through their own struggles and efforts have built one of the greatest support systems for the downtrodden. They like such service, but do not like the fact they do it while not wearing their symbols and preaching their words," Randle explained.

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"Thanks for reminding me that I've always hated your way with words," I spat as I tossed Nebl's letter onto the desk.

"I've spent most my life preaching the words of my gods. I've had the best teachers."

I scoffed as I slowly stood up. The chair I had been sitting in creaked a bit, but didn't break as I tapped the desk and glanced around. I wanted to pace, but this office was slightly cluttered. There were boxes everywhere, likely because it was all being packed away.

"If I stay the protector of the Society... I'll be forced to intervene. That means actual confrontation. With a good portion of the Society, to boot. Even if what Light and the rest of her ilk are doing is infuriating and wrong, a large swath of our people support them. Or rely on their support enough to take their side even if they don't actually wish to. We're talking hundreds of our members," I said.

"Members misguided," Randle noted.

"Doesn't matter. No matter their reasons, their support is still support. Listen to them," I said with a gesture to the wall. The voices weren't loud, but one could tell they were still in a heated debate. Had been for well over two hours by now. Even some of the people I would have thought to be outright against Light and their tactics were voicing their support in them. As if they were too passive to even think about biting the hand that fed them. "The Society is split, and if I or Light take a stance against the other that split will only grow and fracture into more. And this time it won't end with just a group leaving for a different horizon," I said.

"Are you sure, Vim? Not long ago you would have likely included me in those numbers, in that group that supports them, yet look at me now," Randle said as he lifted his missing arm.

"Really...? Then tell me Randle, how many will be leaving with you come the end of winter?" I asked.

Randle sat up straight, his eyes going a little wide... and his shoulders slowly slumped into a haunch. Then he reached up, as if to cup his face, but he had done so with his missing arm. He noticed, and quickly lifted his other hand to hide the self-hating smirk that now covered his face.

A long silence followed, and then I heard Renn's voice. She said a few things, and then it sounded like Jelti had responded.

I focused on their conversation a moment, even though I could barely make heads or tails of it, and then sighed and looked back to Randle.

"I had not said that to be cruel, Randle," I said gently to the priest... rather, the excommunicated priest who looked like he was about to weep.

Randle took a deep breath and lowered his hand. I was glad to not see any tears or glistening eyes. "I know, Vim. But that had hurt me deeply. More than the loss of my own arm. You're correct. Entirely. My current order, my group, is fourteen people. Five of which are full-blooded members. At least, so I've always believed them to be a part of my group. As of now, this moment, not a one has taken a stand to join me. Though... all but a few have come and wept alongside me, to pray with me. Several have also vowed to keep watch over the orphanages while I'm gone, once I'm gone," he corrected himself. "Light has agreed to keep them in place, in their positions, as to not disrupt the children."

Turning a little, I glanced at the covered window. Should I open it? It would do this room good to have a small breeze, even if a chilly one.

"You can't blame them, Randle. This is a home. And more importantly; a purpose. You of all people, now that you must leave, should know how precious this place is for people. There's a reason that over the years so many have killed themselves after getting banished from here," I said.

"Poor souls, may they rest in peace," Randle whispered as I heard him make a small prayer movement.

"Some religions say suicide grants eternal damnation," I said lightly.

"Heavens forgive him...!" Randle whispered louder, and then went to mumble a small prayer.

I sighed lightly and stepped away from the table. To walk around it, and look at some of the boxes. To see if anything interesting were in any of them.

It was time I found Renn a few neat little knickknacks. It's been awhile since I've given her such silly gifts.

"Even if you had said that in hopes of planting the seed of doubt within me please do not do so ever again. What if the gods heard you and took ideas from it?" Randle said stiffly as I opened the lid to a box.

"Funny," I said.

Randle obviously didn't find it so. "Please Vim... I know you feel disenchanting, but do not allow us lesser souls to suffer your indifference. It is beneath you," he said.

"Ah, there's the old Randle. How've you been?" I asked, amused to hear the old him.

He scoffed at me. "I'm going to tell your wife you've been mean to me."

I laughed. "That's something a woman should say."

He shook his head at me as I closed the box and went to the next. That one had just been boring books. "Your views of life are so odd sometimes, Vim."

"Maybe."

"All the same... Surely there are more than you're implying?" Randle asked.

"More what?" I asked.

"Members who won't side with Light," he said simply.

Ah. "I don't know, Randle. While we were up north I spent time with Windle to try and calculate it. We couldn't even agree on the actual number of members in the society. How many members do you think there are?" I asked.

"In the whole of the Society...? I don't know. I only know the numbers of the devout, or those I keep in contact with. And as you've likely noticed, many nowadays do not wish to talk to me. My... past has burnt bridges that I now need," he said softly.

Nodding as I opened another box, I smiled at the little statues carved from marble. "Well Windle thinks at least half the Society either is a part of the Church of Songs, or at least lives under their banner. Either relying on them completely as to survive, or entwined within their circles enough to be considered members of the cloth all the same. Like those at the Crypt or scattered amongst the churches, like Rapti," I said.

"How was Rapti, by the way?" he asked as I picked up one of the statues.

"Troubled. She has banished Crane from her home. She has doubts and concerns, but had not wanted this to happen. She isn't sure really what to think or do, I believe, but will likely end up voting in my favor... maybe..." I said, hoping not to have to say aloud Rapti's true beliefs.

"Hm..."

Whoever had carved this statute had done so properly. It was smooth, well made and the dimensions were even correct. It was too bad they all seemed to be religious motifs... I put the statue back down and shifted through the box, looking for one that Renn might find interesting.

I didn't find any worthwhile, so I went to the next box.

"What are you looking for Vim?" Randle asked softly.

"Something to amuse Renn with. Not really a gift, just something to make her smile," I said as I found a box of chimes.

Smiling as I lifted one of the small wind chimes, I studied the tiny tubes that dangled from the little fixture they were tied to. The tubes made noises, telling me they were made of some kind of clay mixture. They didn't produce very high notes, but it was pleasant on the ears.

This would do.

I put the box back together, and placed it away as I lifted the wind chime and untangled the hanging tubes a little. As I did they dinged and chimed as I walked back over to the desk.

Sitting back down, I put the chime down and nodded. Content.

Once done I went back to the letters. I picked up the next one, yet before I could open it I found Randle staring at me.

Rather sadly.

"What is it?" I asked. Why did he look like he was about to weep again? Had I said something again?

"You'd abandon all of us for her. Yet I can't find it in me to fault you for it," he whispered.

I blinked at that, and lowered the letter I had been about to open. "Randle... you seem to be misunderstanding something, just as Renn is," I said carefully.

"How, Vim? You've never looked like that, never smiled and acted oddly, for any of us before. Maybe to a degree certain members, like Lilly or Berri, but never so dutifully. And now that you have her, you plan to leave us to our own devices. To be at the mercy of those like Light. To be chewed and spat up like dried straw," Randle said stiffly.

I sighed at him. "Really Randle. No need for such dramatics," I said.

His sad expression immediately darkened, and he stood. He reached out, as to slam the desk with both hands, but thanks to his missing left arm he had stumbled and flinched, since only his right had hit the table. He had instinctively expected his left fist and arm to hit the desk too, so when it hadn't he had nearly tripped.

He glowered at himself, the sleeve dangling from his left arm, and I spoke up before he could say something that he'd later regret. "I do plan to step down as Protector... but I don't ever remember stating I planned to leave the Society," I said, a little loudly.

Randle startled again, his mouth opening as to speak... but he was silent as he pondered my words. Then he coughed and stood up straighter, brushing his robe as if he was suddenly dirty. "You... have a plan?" he asked carefully.

"I do. Hundreds. But really right now the only plan is to confront Light, and hopefully do so in a way that allows her and those like her to either be punished or removed from their positions of power without risking a total collapse of the Society. I doubt that will be possible, however, thus my plan to step down," I said.

"Vim..." Randle groaned at me, telling me he had a lot to say about that.

I nodded though and continued. "By stepping down, I'll be free from the few rules that still contain me. I'll no longer have to constantly be on the road, always checking on everyone. Which means I'll have time to properly assess and address the issues most dire," I said.

"Such as...?" Randle asked as he slowly sat back down.

"If the Society really does split, then those abandoned by the church... by Light and the rest, will need support. I plan to dedicate my time to them," I said.

Randle's face contorted a bit as he pondered for a moment. "You're suggesting another society, aren't you?" he whispered.

"Not really. Regretfully, in a worst case scenario, let's assume I cannot properly handle Light and the rest. So I leave them be. If I do so... I'll not be able to keep abiding by them, their actions and faults. But at the same time I don't know if I'll be able to just outright abandon the hundreds of souls who will follow them. So I can't just completely separate myself from them. My plan in that scenario is to stay a part of the Society, but simply as a distant member. I'll help those who need it, those who request it of me. And if along the way new villages, communities, and groups want to form, distant from Light and the rest, then so be it."

Randle reached up to rub his chin in thought, and properly used his remaining arm for once. I watched him ponder a moment and the nod. "As you did the last time. You helped them leave, even guided them to the other lands, but then returned. You're choosing the lesser of evils, to help all you can while not sacrificing your own beliefs," he said.

"It should have been obvious," I said. Though maybe not. I'd basically told Renn the idea already and she still focused completely on the simple fact I was stepping down. Like Randle she still thought, and saw it, as me abandoning the Society as a whole. Though for her it was likely more an emotional thing than not.

"Yet you claim, even if the vote goes well and you can handle Light's infractions properly... that you'd still step down anyway? Why?" Randle then asked.

"Because whether I like it or not, our current predicament is what led to this point. Honestly it's been a long time coming, and as you know it's already happened many times before. I... we, need a more proper solution to it. I've still not decided what that proper solution is, but I've decided cutting the cord for now to be the best step towards the correct action," I said.

"Cutting the cord? Do you refer to cutting an umbilical cord? What a term, Vim, even for you," Randle said as he leaned back a little in shock.

My eye twitched as I gestured at him. "Plus," I started, to get him off that term. "My stepping down as I did will bother and confuse them. Chronicler and Light won't understand it. It lets me, a predictable man, be unpredictable," I said.

"They'll just do as I had just done, and chalk it up to your love for Renn won't they?" he asked.

I nodded. "Undoubtedly. But that's still an unpredictability. This is me we're talking about," I said.

"Yes... it is."

Hmph.

"And if more stand up against you than you think Vim...? What if you're wrong in assuming only a portion will side with Light? What if more than half the Society turns against you?" Randle asked.

"Windle believes they will," I said, telling him the truth.

"Do you?"

I hesitated a moment, but then nodded. "I do, actually. In fact, I think that's why Renn's so opposed to the idea even though she knows I'd still help and be here for the Society even after stepping down. She knows that if it gets to that point, I might not even be welcomed in the Society anymore anyway, so even the few I could save would be lost to us. She has a right to fear it, but the alternatives are worse for everyone involved," I said.

"What would you say to forming another Society, Vim? Honestly?" Randle asked.

"I'd be against it. I'd do it if enough members demanded it, but in my opinion that will just whittle the numbers further. The Society is already so spread out, and so many are so... different today, that it'd be terribly difficult to hold any large groups together anymore under a smaller banner. In reality it's barely holding together as it is, obviously," I said with a gesture to the nearby wall. Someone was shouting again.

Randle slowly nodded. "We're the dying embers, aren't we?" he asked.

"If that."

He went silent, so I picked up another letter once more. I sighed and leaned back, opening the letter... as Randle pondered life, and I read of a request most interesting.

It seemed Renn and I would need to make a small stop on our way to Lumen.

"It terrifies me, Vim," Randle whispered, making me tear my eyes away from the request to find a wife.

"What does?" I asked gently to the man who looked in pain. Was his arm hurting him...? I had checked it, the arm had been forcefully imploded by divine energy but whoever had tended him had done a good job. They had amputated a few inches above the actual wound, and had tendered it properly. It would heal fine, and swiftly. Though I knew it likely ached something fierce.

"You sound lost. Something I've never thought you could be. Even though I've always believed you lost in your own way, you have never sounded so. Yet here you are... spouting things that you don't sound as if you believe at all," he said.

My eyes narrowed. "That's why I used to hate you Randle. Stop noticing things like that," I said.

He smirked at me, but it didn't last long as he nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be..." I heard a door open and the voices grew a little louder. A little clearer. Someone was either leaving, or the discussions were over.

Randle turned a little, to listen as voices and people filled the hallway just outside our door.

"Don't be Randle," I said again, getting his attention before we stopped being alone. He turned, frowning at me with a question on his face. "My being lost is better than me knowing what I should do. Because I don't want to do what I should do," I told him.

His eyes narrowed, and I knew deep down he knew exactly what I was alluding to.

"You used to allow Celine to decide. Who will you let choose now, Vim? Rennalee...? She's too gentle," he said quietly.

I nodded. "She is. I've... hinted at it to her. But I don't think she's realized it yet. Might not ever do so. She has a side to her capable of doing it, but she's so enamored with the Society I don't know if she'll be able to realize my meaning before it's too late," I said.

"That's cruel Vim. Even for you."

It was.

"But she's my only chance, Randle," I said.

He shook his head. "She's our only hope, then," he corrected.

We went silent as people walked past Randle's office. I could hear half a dozen tiny conversations between all the people. Some were growing louder, others more distant. I couldn't really tell if everyone sounded happy or upset, but I was also trying to not really notice.

Randle and I nodded to each other, deciding silently to end our conversation here. For now, at least.

The door opened, so I went to pick up the wind chime. I smirked at her and dangled it as Renn walked in, who perked up and gave me a brilliant smile upon seeing and hearing it.

"Wow!" Renn hurried forward, abandoning little Angie who had been walking right next to her. She hurried around Randle and the desk to take the chime from me, far more happy to focus on it than tell me and Randle how the debates had gone.

"How pretty! Look Angie!" Renn turned, dangling the chimes and making them sing out as she hurried over to show the young bison... who looked utterly uninterested as Renn went to show them off to her. Yet she amused Renn anyway, nodding and reaching out to flick the little tubes.

Yes.

Hope indeed.

Chapter 414 Renn – Troubles Brewing in the Cathedral

Sometimes I wished I didn't need to sleep. I enjoyed lying in bed with Vim. Especially when he was willing to whisper and talk to me through the night, about anything and everything. But these last couple nights I've been so tired that I fall asleep the moment my head hits a pillow, so he hasn't even been sleeping with me. I go to bed alone, and wake up alone.

"Dumb...!" I whispered harshly as I rounded another corner.

Just where was he...! I hated it when I woke up and he was gone. In the beginning it was understandable, since he was always busy and there was always stuff he needed to do or check on... but right now I had a very serious concern. One that wouldn't die down no matter how much I knew was ridiculous.

A part of me was terrified Vim would run off to Lumen without me. To face Light and her group. Either in anger, or because he felt I shouldn't get involved or something.

It was in truth a useless worry. Vim wouldn't do such a thing... but...

"Oh! Renn!"

I slowed a little and smiled at Fizz. The young girl hurried over to me as I glanced around for her parents. They were usually not far behind her, but this time it seemed she was alone.

"What'cha doing?" Fizz asked as we stepped up to one another.

"Looking for Vim, have you seen him?" I asked the young dog.

Fizz frowned and shook her head. "Not this morning. I saw him last night, with you, but not since," she said.

Great.

"Did you lose him?" she asked with a grin, as if it was hilarious that I could do such a thing.

"I might have. What're you doing Fizz? We're not near your kitchens," I said. We were in fact on the other side of the Cathedral, near the section that opened up out into the city proper. Where there was a massive market and stuff.

"I too have lost something!" she declared, and then glanced around for a moment... and then gestured for me to bend down a little. I obliged the girl, and she stood up closer as to whisper in my ear. "I'm looking for a date!"

"A... date?" I asked. Did she mean a partner...?

"There's a ball coming up! Next month. But it's one of the ones that you're supposed to go with a partner, and I don't have one yet," she said with a hushed voice.

A ball...? "What's a ball?" I asked.

Fizz leaned back a little and she gave me an odd look... then she softly smiled at me. "It's a party. The church holds them often; sometimes they're for the wealthy, sometimes for charities or something. This one is for the nuns and priests. It's a family only thing, but this year it was decided no unaccompanied children," she said as she explained.

Oh! Vim had mentioned those once. That he had participated at some when he had returned from his islands. Before joining the Society.

Still... Frowning at the way she had phrased it, I spent a small moment wondering if I had misunderstood... but then figured I had somehow, but wasn't sure how. "Don't they just mean that a parent has to accompany a child?" I asked.

"Nope! Coupled guests only! So mom and dad can go, but I can't without my own partner and I'm having a horrible time finding one!" Fizz said with balled up fists.

Really...? "You're adorable though?"

"Right! But none of the boys my age want to go with me! So I thought I'd check the schools, so I've been sneaking away and checking the boys there but none seem interesting," Fizz said with a sigh.

"Interesting?" I asked, I wonder what she meant by that.

I see though. She wasn't actually looking for a partner. She just wanted to go to this party, and to do so needed someone to go with. Such a thing made her seem more childish than usual.

"Yeah... I asked Angie if she wanted to find one with me too but she just scoffed at me. I swear, I don't know what a bison is but they're probably boring creatures. She never wants to do anything," Fizz complained.

Oh...? That's too bad to hear. Angie was very mature for her age, though there was no telling how old she actually was. But whenever I spend time with her Angie has always seemed like a calm and gentle person. I've never felt bored or bothered by her. "Maybe she's just not interested in such things yet?" I suggested.

"Maybe. Do you know anyone Renn? Are you going to be here? You'll go with Vim if you are, so I couldn't ask him either..." Fizz complained as she crossed her arms.

I smiled at that. "Your mom wouldn't like that anyway," I said.

Fizz paused, and then broke out into a laugh. "Right! She'd probably hate it worse than you would! So weird!"

It was.

"But... still... a young boy, huh..." I thought about, and realized that I couldn't think of a single one.

In fact there weren't many children here at all, to be honest. Fizz and Angie were the only non-human ones, though I've heard and met a few human children that were a part of the Society...

"Nope... I only remember girls," I said. "Can you go with a girl? If so maybe we can convince Angie to go with you?" I asked.

"To a church ball? You're kidding right?" Fizz asked with a stale tone.

Hm.

"You said you'd ask Vim...? Does that mean you can go with someone older? Or would be able to?" I asked.

"I don't know? But that'd be weird wouldn't it?" she asked.

Right... "It would..." I said with a nod. So even she was aware it'd be odd.

Yet going with Vim wouldn't have been...? Maybe it was because he was the protector...?

"Well... if you can think of any let me know. There's supposedly going to be a bunch of members showing up soon, maybe I'll get lucky and one will bring a boy my age that doesn't look like warts on a pig!" Fizz said happily as she stepped away. "Later Renn!" she shouted as she ran off, not even wanting to hear my response to her crazy suggestion.

"Warts on a pig..." I whispered.

What a statement! I'd never heard such a thing before, but the meaning and implication were utterly obvious without needing to be told! I indeed could think of quite a few men, and even some women, who could have been described in such a way!

It was almost frightening how accurate it was, honestly. And for it to have come from that adorable, cheery, little girl...

"Sounds like something Vim would have said," I mumbled as I turned to continue searching for him.

Hurrying along, I slowed each time I passed a group of nuns or priests. I was wearing the church attire here, as to better blend in than my thick leathers and clothes, but I knew running around would have made me seem odd all the same.

Really. Where was he? I've checked Randle's offices, both the one above and below ground. I've checked Oplar's Mailroom, the kitchens, all around the mansio... I'd even checked parts of the underground tunnels, and the Chronicler's office.

Right now I was heading towards the orphanages, since they were along the way to Hands' office and Link's too. If I didn't find him by the end, I wasn't really sure where else to look anymore.

The Cathedral was huge, so I knew he could be anywhere. There weren't just several floors beneath the thing, there were dozens of floors above it too. And some of the spires were so big, so tall, that they were nearly castles unto themselves.

Slowing a little, I frowned and glanced at one of the nearby windows. It revealed a small garden area, not as big as the mansio area, but just a small area with flowers and grass. It was wet, since even though it wasn't raining it had been raining earlier.

They were hard to make out, since the garden area was so small, but I could see some of the towers at an angle from the window. They loomed upward, so tall and flat it was as if I was looking up the side of a massive cliff face.

I'd like to go up one of them. To see what was at the top of them. Maybe if I didn't find Vim I'd just do that.

Enjoying the idea, I eventually checked the orphanage area and found that the schools were in session. None of the classrooms had their doors closed, so I was able to quietly walk by them and peer into them. I looked for Randle and Angie as I did, but didn't see neither. I paused to listen to one of the older women give a lecture to a large group of kids, about some kind of fish from the sea, but eventually found it boring and continued on. The next classroom was quiet, with the kids all writing diligently.

Staring into the classroom, at the kids with their heads hung low over their desks... I felt a little jealous.

Was school fun? The kids looked focus, and a few looked bored, but...

Right before the teacher, an old man with a huge beard, noticed me I stepped away and left the classroom behind.

Maybe I could ask Vim for permission to sit in on one of them one day. Would it be weird?

Leaving the school and orphanage area, I eventually found myself walking down the hallway that led to both Hands' and Link's offices. I found Hands' office to be locked, sealed shut, and although found Link was available... he wasn't available enough to talk to me.

The large man had a large group of people, all loudly talking to him. They sounded like they were debating something important so I hurried away before he noticed me.

I hadn't noticed Sillti, but knew not to find that odd. The two were madly in love still, I had teased them a little over it last night and during the Society-wide meeting the night before. I was glad for it, honestly. And a little jealous too.

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They were very flirtatious and open about their love for one another. To the point that many here, not just Angie, found them to now be utterly insufferable. To the point they don't even want to look or talk to them. I suspected it was a combination of plain annoyance, this church's atmosphere, and in some cases envy and jealousy.

"I wish Vim was more open too," I whispered as I rounded another corner.

He did display his affection for me. He even openly told people he loved me, or that I was his wife... plus we did flirt, even sometimes in front of others... but there was still a part of me that felt like Vim was sometimes just a little too distant.

It wasn't his fault. I knew it was just the way he was. He was old, in a way. So old that he just took things... slowly. Calmly. He didn't rush. Not for that kind of stuff, at least.

"Rennalee!"

Going still, I turned and smiled at the young bison who had shouted my name. She picked up her pace, hurrying after me. She passed a nun, who giggled at her, and then hurried up to me.

"Hey Angie. I was just at the orphanage, didn't see you there," I said as she stepped closer.

A little too close, in fact.

Frowning down at the young bison, I wondered what was wrong as she stepped even closer, and reached up to grab at my robe.

For a tiny, impossible moment, I panicked... but then calmed down a bit as Angie's calm expression told me all was well. She was just... being odd, maybe.

"Renn," Angie tugged on my robe, whispering a little.

Oh...? Was I going to get to whisper with someone else twice today?

Seemed I was. I bent a little, and smiled happily as Angie went to whisper into my ear. Unlike Fizz though, she didn't whisper into my human ear, but instead whispered a little above it. To where my hat was. To whisper into my proper ears. It told me that Angie was more in tune with our non-human selves

than Fizz was. Even though Fizz was stronger and thicker in the blood than Angie. Angie couldn't open the gate to the mansio, but Fizz could.

"Is it true?" she whispered.

"What?" I whispered back.

"That Randle is leaving? Being banished?" Angie whispered with an even quieter voice.

I frowned for a moment, and wondered why she was asking this. As far as I had been told, Randle's banishment... his attacking of Light and the subsequent fight and bloodshed, had happened weeks ago. In fact Angie and I have spent some time together recently these last few days. Not just during the member's discussion the other night either. We've had several meals together, and she's even showed me her office at the orphanage. Though in reality it was a shared office with the other teachers.

Why ask now? And not these last few days?

I nodded carefully, since I wasn't sure what to think of what was happening. "Yes. I'll be honest I don't agree with it myself, but yes. He raised his hand to another member, she defended herself and although called for his banishment did so only of here, Telmik, and of the church. Not the Society, though," I said gently.

Angie leaned back a little, but I remained a little bent forward. Just in case she wanted to whisper some more.

We were relatively alone in the hallway... but like the older nun who had giggled at her earlier, there were people around us. I could hear footsteps and voices, though they were a hallway or two away from us, or in other rooms nearby.

"I don't understand, Renn. He's a spineless coward. He'd not attack someone!" Angie said sharply.

I smiled gently at the young girl who suddenly looked absolutely worried.

Did she think it was all a lie...? Even Vim believed it happened. And he knew Randle better than most did, I think. Even if he didn't want to admit it.

"Even the spineless stand for something, sometimes, Angie. And Randle himself admits to it," I said.

Angie's bottom lip quivered for a moment, and then she sighed and looked down at our feet.

Hm...

Did she care for the man...? It seemed so.

"Have you... not talked to him about it, Angie?" I asked.

She shifted a little, half nodding and half shrugging. "He told me he was banished, and will have to leave before winter's end. But he's been so busy and..." she mumbled.

I see. Has he been ignoring her, maybe? Randle did seem a little... ashamed. Even when I spoke to him he did so only gently and only answered questions. As far as I was aware the only person he's actually been talking to with in any real depth was Vim, and Vim wasn't telling anyone what they had spoken about.

Poor girl. I reached out and patted her on the head. She kind of glared at me as I did so, like usual not caring much for the touch of people. "A lot's happening right now... do you want to go find him with me? We can force him to sit and talk to us if you want," I offered.

Angie's glare softened a bit, and she sighed at me. "No... it's fine. I need to... consider things, now, instead," Angie said.

Consider...? "Consider what, Angie?" I asked.

"Everything."

Pulling my hand away, I hesitated a bit. Angie's eyes had gone a little cold, as had her tone. And not because I had been messing with her hair.

Bending down a little more, I crouched a bit as to look her in the eyes. The young bison blinked, and actually smiled a little at me as she noticed me do so.

"Just know Angie... no matter what happens, Vim and I will always be on your side. No matter what you hear, or even what you believe... know if you ever need any help of any kind, you need only ask. You'll get it," I promised to her.

The young bison studied me for a moment... and then gave me a sad smile. "I appreciate that, Renn. Unlike the others I don't blame my family's deaths on Vim. I know he would have saved them had he been there, or known about it. But... my fear is not for myself," she said.

A little stunned, I nodded slowly as I held her gaze. Her statement was not too surprising. I had known for some time that many blamed Vim for the more recent deaths and losses of our members. And not just of Angie's family, too. But what did surprise me was Angie's confidence.

Angie was far more mature than I had thought, and I had already thought her mature as it was!

"What do you fear then...?" I whispered, since I heard footsteps behind me. They were distant still, but I didn't want to risk it.

Angie shifted, and I noticed the way she glanced over my shoulder. She had also noticed the people heading our way.

"The children. They're all human."

I slowly nodded. Right. The ones in the orphanage. "Yes...?"

"I overheard one of them. A tall lady with white in her hair of black. One of the ones who banished Randle. Claiming the era of humans was to end soon," Angie said quietly.

Frowning deeply, I nodded gently as I absorbed what she was saying.

A tall lady. With black hair, that had white in it.

Landi's sister maybe...? Landi had a white stripe in her eyebrows and hairline... But... "Era of humans...?" I whispered that odd term.

In essence it was. Even Vim considered it to be their era, and not ours. We didn't have the numbers anymore, so it made sense.

But...

It was to end soon...?

"I didn't understand it either. So I looked it up in the library and asked Flexa about it, a really old nun who can't walk anymore. Era in that context means rule. Basically today is the era of humans, because they rule the world," Angie said, explaining it to me as if she had just found upon a great secret no one else knew.

I nodded slowly as my ears fluttered under my hat. Angie was suddenly more expressive than ever before! She had a furrowed face, and her hands were in front of her, with wiggling fingers as if she wanted to do something with them but didn't know what to do. She looked cute; though it worried me how scared she seemed to be.

"So to claim that it's the end would mean..." I added for her.

She nodded briskly. "That new rulers would come into power. And it'd not be human ones."

Although I couldn't imagine how humans could be brought that low in today's world, I decided to entertain the idea for a moment since Angie was taking it so seriously.

"And that scares you, Angie?" I asked.

"It means the children are in danger! If they want to kill them all, they'll start with them! And without Randle here, how can I protect them against people who want to slaughter them! When I can't even protect myself!" Angie spoke quickly, and although with a hushed voice also squeaked a little in strain as she grew even more emotional. She actually stepped forward a bit, nearly bumping into my knees as she did.

"Right...!" I felt my own heart thump harshly as Angie stared at me with terror filled eyes. She looked more terrified now than she had that night at that inn. Near her home, and those raging fires. When she had been abandoned by that human who had found her on the side of the river, unconscious.

Angie nodded quickly, making small noises as she did. She looked like she was about to cry, which almost made me want to cry with her.

This was why she was worried for Randle. She saw him as the only thing protecting the children.

How was someone so young so motherly?

And how had I not thought of this before...?

Maybe this was another reason Vim didn't want to recklessly confront Light and the rest... because he knew that, like these children here, far more than just our members would then become at risk. They would then be in danger. And it would unroot and sow discord in so many different ways...

It wasn't just here in Telmik, or the churches. Lumen was the same. Lumen's Society, the Animalia Guild, employed thousands of people. Those were families. Innocents.

Did we, us non-humans, really have the right to so greatly impact so many?

Did anyone? Or anything?

Taking a small breath, about to say something, I heard the sound of small whispers and laughter. The people behind us were near enough now that they would soon be able to hear us whispering, especially with Angie being so emotional.

We couldn't have this conversation here.

"Come on Angie. Let's go tell Vim about this," I said as I stood and held out my hand to her.

Angie took it, but hesitated. "Why...?" she asked.

It was my turn to hesitate as I stopped myself from turning and walking. "Why not...?" I asked. Why wouldn't we tell Vim such important information?

Hadn't she just said she trusted him? That she knew he'd not abandon her and her family? Even though others claimed he had? I wish I knew who was telling her such things, though...

"They're not members," Angie stated.

For a small moment I couldn't comprehend Angie's words... but then I realized exactly what she meant.

They were human. Children, yes, but human nonetheless...

And... she was right.

The orphanages were run by the church. By Randle and our people, sure, but not because they were our children. From what I'd been told about them, the children themselves were not members. What happened was as the children grew up, as they were taught and examined by those overseeing them, those like Randle picked out the ones who could be trustworthy and useful. And only then, after proving themselves, did they actually become members...

So technically...

Angie was right.

So in her opinion, her view, asking Vim... the Society's Protector, made no sense.

Because he protected us. Only us. No one else. Ever.

The realization made me sick, since it meant that this has likely happened countless times throughout the years.

How many other members have worried, panicked, and maybe even got hurt or died because they had not believed Vim would have helped them? Not because they hadn't trusted him, or thought him capable, but simply because they thought he'd not do so even if they asked? Because it had not concerned the Society proper or its members?

"Only a couple are picked in each group-year, Renn. At best only a handful are chosen! This year only three are being chosen, and they all went with Light and the rest to Lumen, the rest here aren't members!" Angie said quickly as the nearby nuns approached.

Feeling a little tired all of a sudden, I nodded. "I know. It's okay. Let's go find him anyway," I said, trying to hide my real concern as I smiled and waved to the nuns who walked past.

They waved back, more so to Angie than me, and we were left alone.

Odds are they had simply thought we were sisters or something. Maybe mother and daughter. Angie wore a similar robe as I did, though her color was different.

"Okay... but I'll cry when he tells me not to worry about them and that he won't help," Angie said with a weird groan as we started walking, hand in hand.

"So would I," I admitted.

Angie glanced up at me, so I looked back at her.

Squeezing her hand, I smiled down at the bison. "So let's make sure he doesn't say something like that, okay?" I suggested.

Angie stared up at me, and then her eyes grew firm as she nodded.

"Mhm kay!" she said, a little childishly.

Chapter 415 To be an Owl

Side-Story – Branches – A Mercenary – Prologue – To be an Owl

Waking up in a river was surprising... but being dragged out of it by Vim was embarrassing.

"You alive?" Vim asked me as he lowered me to the ground. I breathed in, as to respond, but ended up coughing up a lung instead.

Rolling over, I heard Vim's heavy footsteps as he stepped away. The loud river behind me wasn't anywhere near enough to mask the sounds of all the tiny little pebbles on the river bank crunching and breaking under his weight.

"Hm... Quite a fall. You're definitely your mother's son. Not sure most others would have survived such a thing," Vim said as my coughing continued. He was likely looking up the river, to the huge waterfall I'd just fallen from.

What were the odds he was here...? To save me when I needed him? It's been almost three years since I last saw him, so for it to have happened now...

No... if he was here now, that meant he'd been here for some time. Likely watching me from afar, as I fought up there.

He really was like my mother. She too would have sat back and watched me fight for my life, though I don't know who would have saved me first. Mother would have pulled me from the river too, but something told me she would have waited longer and would have been crueler about it. She'd have kicked me right now, for instance, as I spat up all the water that just nearly drowned me.

Spitting one last time, I groaned as I looked up... at Vim.

The protector looked human. Always had. But that was only on the surface. If you spent a moment to look closer, to really look, anyone would immediately see he wasn't human.

He didn't smell.

He sometimes weighed nothing, and other times was so heavy the very earth groaned in stress underneath him.

He had confidence in his eyes no one could match. Not even the greatest of warriors had eyes like he did. They were heavy. The type of heavy that made me want to look away whenever they looked my way.

Luckily for me they were focused on the waterfall nearby instead.

"Thanks Vim..." I said and groaned as I finally started breathing calmly enough to do so.

"Hm... A little reckless wasn't it? To fight so many on your own?" Vim asked as he turned to look at me.

Instinctively I looked down and away. I played it off by trying to sit up. It was hard, since I felt so weak and tired, but I got myself righted upward as I nodded.

"Yes. It was," I admitted.

He chuckled at me. "You really are like your mother. I hear you've become a mercenary?" he asked.

Didn't I look like one? Hadn't he been watching? Not only had I just been fighting for my life against a dozen men, I was adorned in armor, and I could feel I still had a few of my knives and weapons on me... though I no longer had my larger sword. It was likely at the bottom of the river, beneath that huge waterfall. Wonder if I could swim down and get it, or if I'd just drown again.

But I knew the truth of his comment. He had asked for more than one reason.

"I... I'm trying to be one, yes," I said as I finally looked back up at him. As I did, I found my eyes stopping at his neck and chin. I felt disgusted with myself, since it was such a silly fear to have.

It wasn't like I was actually scared of Vim. Not only was he the Society's Protector... he was my mother's friend. Her dearest friend. She spoke of him with almost as much love as she did my father, sometimes to the point he got jealous.

Yet it was just... well...

"Hm... Was this a job then? Who were they?" Vim asked with a gesture at the waterfall. I wonder how many of them had been left up there. Would they come down here to see if I actually died or not...? Surely not. No human could survive that fall, as Vim had said even most of we non-humans would have failed to do so. I didn't see any on the cliff up there from here, but I wasn't sure how long I'd been floating in the river unconscious.

"I'd taken a job to guard a road nearby. I'm not sure who they were but they attacked us all... we were outnumbered and forced to flee, I drew their attention so the others could escape," I said, explaining how I got to this point.

"Well, you did that at least," Vim said.

I nodded. I had. Hopefully I'd done it well enough, and long enough, that the rest had gotten away.

Gosh I was tired. My shoulders were slumped, and I knew if I had inherited my parent's wings they'd be all sprawled out right now. I felt as if I was about to fall over and pass out.

But I couldn't. Not yet. Vim would take care of me, I'd no doubt of that, but I needed to talk to him a bit before doing so.

"You feeling okay? You got some bruises and cuts, any broken bones? That fall must have hurt," Vim asked as he stepped closer and knelt down, to study me closer.

I blinked, and held his gaze for a tiny moment before looking away. "I'm exhausted... and I hurt, but I don't think my life's in danger," I said.

"Good. Your mother would not be happy with me if I let you get hurt while under my watch," he said with a grin.

No. She wouldn't be.

"Yet she would have let me drown," I complained.

"A learning experience. She's drowned before many times and survived, so would expect you to do so as well," Vim said simply.

Drowning and surviving...? Multiple times?

I wanted to scoff at that, but didn't.

Since I knew he was telling the truth. Mother was of course... mother.

She was far stronger than me. Even without her wings.

Shifting a little, as if to prove to him I was at least a portion of my mother's strength and fortitude, I forced myself to my feet.

Vim remained kneeling a moment, staring up at me as I wobbled a little unsteadily... and then he stood and smiled at me. He reached out, grabbing my arm right before I fell over. "Careful Branches. You probably have a concussion, you can't seem to focus," he warned.

My head did hurt. And it was ringing a little. "Probably..." I admitted.

"Do you need to hurry to your comrades? Or can I set up camp to let you rest a bit?" he asked.

I gulped and shook my head. "We failed. If anyone survived they'll all be running away to wherever they go. No point looking for them," I said.

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"Such are mercenaries," he said.

Right... they had codes and honor, but only to a point.

"You did tell me to become a knight instead," I said lightly as he guided me away from the riverbank. He took me closer to the dense forest nearby, until we found a rotting stump. He let me sit upon it, and I groaned as I did. The act of sitting made me feel all the stiff joints and pain amongst them.

"Knights can be just as dishonorable. They just don't usually get in such situations where falling over a waterfall is needed," he teased me.

Right... I bet.

Vim immediately went to starting a fire. He cleared out a little section of grass and dirt, preparing it for a campfire and within moments had a large fire going. I sighed in relief at the feeling of warmth, as I realized I was soaked. My clothes, starting to dry from time and the warmth of the flames, were becoming uncomfortable.

"Thanks again, Vim," I said as I went to start undressing.

Vim said nothing as he stepped away from the fire. He went to gather up more wood, rummaging around the area as he did.

Fully undressing, I sighed at the feathers on my thighs. I didn't have many feathers, and I groaned as I plucked a broken one near my knee.

I stared at the broken feather, and the way it was bloody and askew.

Ever since leaving the nest, I'd not grown any new ones. Which meant each one I lost... was well...

Glancing down at my thighs, I felt strangely weak all of a sudden as I counted them. I had half of how many I had left home with.

"What's wrong? It shrinks when cold, don't panic," Vim teased me as he returned, putting another piece of wood onto the fire as he did.

Ignoring his comment, I lifted my tired hand to show him my broken feather. "I'm losing my feathers, Vim."

He paused at that. He put down the pile of wood he'd gathered near the fire, not into it, and stepped over to take it from me.

Vim studied it, and then me for a moment. "You don't grow new ones?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Huh... well... hm..." Vim seemed unsure of what to say to that, and then handed me back my broken feather. I almost didn't take it.

"Is something wrong with me?" I asked worriedly.

"Likely not, Branch. You probably stopped growing them once you reached maturity. Your parents would know better and more about it though, maybe go home and talk to them about it? Want me to take you home?" he asked.

I shivered a little. "No. Not yet."

He nodded, as if he understood, then he turned and walked away again. A few moments later he returned, with a large log. He dropped it nearby, and went to sitting upon it.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Not yet."

He nodded again.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed and glanced down at my thighs again... and particularly at the spot that was now skin.

Really. It wasn't like I had many in the first place...! Some of my other siblings had feathers all over. On their stomachs, arms and legs, and backs and stuff. I though only had them on my thighs, and mostly on the front of them.

If I lost them all... other than my larger pupils, I'd not have anything to prove I was an owl...!

The mere thought made me sick to my stomach. It hurt more than falling off that cliff and waterfall. It hurt more than failing a job, or being stabbed and hit with a club.

Why hadn't I been born with wings...? Sap had them. Sure, she wasn't even strong enough to flap them or fly, but at least she had them. Plus she had feathers all over...!

Even my lesser siblings, the ones who were stupid and wanted to live like humans, had more feathers than I did.

I sniffed, and to try and distract myself from my stupid depression I looked up at Vim. He was sitting calmly, staring at the fire between us. As if ignoring me.

I knew better though. Vim was... just... well... Vim.

He was kind. Gentle. Like a giant old tree, Vim was always quiet and collected. Even during the fiercest of storms he never flinched.

"Did mother ask you to check on me?" I asked.

"I check on everyone, Branch. That's kind of my job. But if you must know Windle is the one who asked of you on my last visit," he said.

Right. Of course it had been father.

"How are they?" I asked.

"Fine. A harsh storm came and went, breaking one of the bigger branches off the sacred tree. I helped them clean it up a bit," I said.

Wow... "Did it hit the house? Which one?" I asked. I'd heard such a thing had happened before, but in my life had never seen it myself. Of course it'd happen while I was gone.

"It landed on the other side. The one that curved oddly," he said as he waved a finger around, as if to display how it curved.

Huh... that was likely the big one that branched off into other ones, half way up the tree. That wasn't just big; it was as big as most trees were. Thicker. Good thing it hadn't landed on anything.

"Everyone's okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Your family is well, last I knew. Your mother is all upset because of something Celine did, you know how they are, but all is well," he said.

Right... the saint. I myself had only met her a few times, since mother didn't want me associating with her.

Vim shrugged a bit as he continued. "The Society is fine. I think some wars are about to start, but as of now nothing to worry over," he said.

"Yeah... there have been a lot of jobs lately," I said. The last town I had been in, I had left it before the sun even fell. I had found a job that fast. Not normal in my experience... though I mean, I've only been a mercenary for a few years now. So not like I had a lot of experience.

"You join a band yet?" he asked.

"No. None of have invited me."

Vim frowned at that. "It'll come. You keep jumping off waterfalls and it'll happen in no time."

I smirked at that. "Sorry, Vim."

"For what?"

Unsure of why I'd apologized... I just shrugged.

Vim hummed a moment, and then reached up to scratch behind his head. I watched him as he did, and wondered if he actually itched like a normal person did... or if it was just a habit he had. "Well, I'm glad you're doing alright. You dropped your sword in the river, didn't you?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Hm... your mother would tell me not to get it. To make you suffer the consequences of your actions..." he said as he glanced to the river. With him bringing it up, it became louder in my ears.

I shifted a little. "Then... don't get it," I said, deciding.

He glanced back at me. "You sure...? That sword is valuable."

I nodded. I knew. He had made it for me. "I know. But you're right... I'll not learn otherwise, will I?"

"Eh... I'd argue you'd learn even more if you got it back. You'll now be more conscious of it, and try not to do it again, if you had it in your hand," he argued.

"I'm sure. But... you're right. Mother would tell me to leave it."

He sighed but nodded. Hopefully I'd not offended him.

"Well... alright then," Vim said with a nod, seemingly fine about my decision.

Breathing a small sigh of relief, I nodded back... and then felt bad for a different reason.

Now I'll need to buy a new sword.

Did I have enough...? I got the up-front payment for this job, but now I won't get to collect the rest of it... having failed.

Rubbing my face, I suddenly regretted trying to live up to my mother's expectations. But it was too late now.

Vim chuckled at me. "Tough isn't it?"

"Why is it, Vim? I figured it'd be hard, but this is just..."

"Because you're not human. You're an owl. But it's fine, Branch. Just take it a day at a time."

I sighed and nodded. Right.

Blinking a little, I realized I suddenly felt... exhausted. The kind that made me a little worried.

"Lay down and rest, Branch. Even your mother wouldn't complain over that," he said gently.

"But..." I didn't want to. Not only could there possibly be enemies still nearby, I was supposed to be stronger than that. I should be getting up, getting dressed once my clothes were dry, and then going back up there to get revenge. That was what mother would have done.

Vim though waved it off. "Get some sleep. You look like you're about to fall over anyway. It'll all be fine."

Hm...

I nodded, deciding to just let it be. It wasn't often I got to rely on him or anyone anymore... so maybe I should just take him up on the offer.

"One day I won't need your help anymore..." I promised as I went ahead and laid down. Luckily the ground was soft. The grass felt oddly good on my bare skin. And the nearby fire kept the chill at bay.

Vim chuckled again. "May that day be eons from now."

I pondered that, and its meaning, as I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 416 Value of a Coin

"Five per battle. Every consecutive battle in a row gets you two extra," the money girl said as she dropped five silver coins onto the table in front of me.

I studied the way the silver coins rattled and settled, and noted how dirty they were. A few had dents; one was so bad that I knew some people would likely not accept it as payment. Especially out here this far north.

Their bad condition was the least of my worries, though. The sad reality was I'd just signed up for a losing battle for what was the equivalent of two simple meals.

Yet as bad their condition was, and how little value they had, I had no choice but to reach out and scoop them up.

At least this band paid up front. Most didn't do so until after the battle was over. Hoping that we'd die on the field and not need payment.

Likely a hint at how desperate they were for every pair of wings, and a sign of how stupid those like me were to accept them.

"Food?" I asked as I held the coins in my hand, judging the weight of them. They were a tad too light, but that might just be because of their condition and not because they were counterfeit.

"One meal a day during the engagement. If you get injured enough, such as a lost limb or something, you'll receive medical attention and one month care," she said smoothly, answering me in the same way she has likely answered hundreds of others today.

I nodded. That was reasonable. Not the best, but I'd had worse.

"Go find a wagon, you'll be given some equipment on the field," the girl said as she went to make a little mark on a ledger. As she did, and I stepped away, a tall and lanky man stepped up to take my spot. He grunted, not saying a word, as she went to explain the process and pay to him too.

As I stepped away, I glanced at the four guards standing near the girl and her table. Behind the table, hidden underneath it, was what had sounded like a box full of coins. She had scooped up my payment from it, and was now doing the same for the lanky man too. Although the silver coins were subpar, and from a nation whose currency was failing, that box still held wealth. Enough that usually they'd be a little more careful with it. But I doubted anyone would try to steal it here, even from this group destined to fail. Even if you did kill all four of them, there were dozens more all around us and hundreds more around them. No one wanted to fight so many at once. Not willingly.

I left the little recruitment stand, and glanced around at the small encampment. There were dozens of tents of varying sizes, flags with emblems flapping in the light wind, and probably almost fifty wagons and carts scattered amongst them all. It was a noisy place, since everyone was readying for the battle about to happen in a couple days.

Sighing softly, I glanced down at the five coins in my hand. They looked how I felt.

Old. Weathered. Broken and worthless.

Sometimes I wondered if I was making a mistake. My siblings undoubtedly didn't struggle like this. They were stupid, but at least they didn't need to worry about food or clothes. But that meant living off the Society. To suck that tit like a worthless leech without any shame.

Putting the coins away, I went to find the tent where I could buy a meal. Usually before such battles the ones who hired us mercenaries had little areas where we could either spend money, or receive whatever stipends they gave for joining. There might even be some stalls set up by the local villagers nearby, as to profit off all this commotion. Some of the larger mercenary bands even had traveling merchants that followed them, though weren't officially a part of the band itself. More than a few times I'd encountered what had felt like whole towns set up, either along roads or right outside proper towns. Not too long ago I had walked through what had felt like a sea of stalls and tents, since there had been hundreds of them. Each selling whatever they were trying to peddle.

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Here though it looked like my options were limited.

In this case other than the coins it seemed all we'd get was that single meal. I might as well find out if they'd give it today, or if I had to actually wait until the battle itself. If not I'd be using my first, and likely only, paycheck to eat.

It's been almost a week since I'd had a good meal. I was doing my best to not notice how much my stomach hurt, but it was growing hard.

Before arriving here I had tried to hunt, but hadn't happened on anything to catch. Not even a rabbit. Hopefully my mother never finds out how poorly I'm doing, otherwise I might lose my right to fly alone in this world.

"She'd likely sic Vim on me..." I groaned at the idea as I found a larger tent, one with a bunch of benches and tables... and a huge pot being simmered and cooked in the middle of it.

The smell alone made me wheezy. It smelled so good it hurt. So I hurried over to it and the two men who were working it. One was stirring it with a huge stick, another was chopping up what looked like chunks of a deer hind on a table nearby.

"Is this the free meal, or do I gotta pay for it?" I asked gently as I tried not to stare and drool at the stew.

"Regretfully it's the free one. Good for you that it's free, but bad for you that it's rationed. Grab one of the bowls," the man stirring the pot said with a point to a stack of small wooden bowls in a box nearby.

I nodded as I grabbed one, and upon doing so realized why he had said what he did.

It was tiny. So tiny it was comical.

But it was better than nothing.

"Doubt you need that big a pot if this is all we get," I said lightly as I stepped over to the man and the pot. He took the bowl from me and dunked it into the stew, and I noticed he made sure to get as much of the actual meat and foodstuff in it, and not just broth, as he could. It was a kind gesture, especially for a mercenary such as me.

"You'd be surprised. If you're still hungry after, which you will be, that tent over there is the local baker's guild. The agreement with the Lord is they're the only ones allowed to sell food out here to us," the man said as he handed me back the bowl.

I nodded in thanks, both for the information and the food. "Thank you," I said as well, and stepped aside since a pair of men walked over to grab some food too.

They of course had not provided anything to eat the stew with, but I didn't care. I gulped and ate the few bites given to me quickly. The stuff tasted good at least.

"Branch?"

Lowering the bowl from my face, since I had been gulping down the last bit of broth, I licked my lips as I turned to look at who had addressed me.

A woman I didn't recognize relaxed a little at my looking at her, and she gave me a gentle smile as she gestured behind her. "My brother recognized you. He asked me to come invite you to our little group," she said.

Brother...?

I leaned a little, to look past the woman. She was about my height, and although wasn't scrawny she didn't look like much. At least, she didn't since she was a human. I tried to think of what scheme she was planning, since I didn't see anyone I recognized in the direction she had pointed.

Such things were common amongst mercenaries. They formed little groups, little platoons, often. It was a way to keep safe while in armies that only held your allegiance with a few coins. They were as quickly as to betray you as you were them. So having someone by your side who was in the same position, who you could rely on and they you, was important. But...

Why had he sent her to fetch me and not come himself, if this was true...?

She noticed my doubt, and turned to point better. I followed her thin finger and found him. He was working a few tents away, helping load a cart.

"They wouldn't let us ride unless he helped load. Otherwise he would have come to say hi himself. If you're willing to join us, we'll give you a share of our meal we're about to have," she offered with a small smile. One that told me she knew full well her bribe was going to work, before I even did.

I shifted a bit and glanced down at the tiny bowl in my hand. Its emptiness made my stomach hurt even more.

"Not much to share, is there?" I asked as I lifted the bowl.

She snickered at that. "We have our own food. Come on," she beckoned as she turned away. She didn't wait to see if I'd join her or not, she knew I would.

Chapter 417 Defeat

Picking the girl up, I flinched at the sight of the horsemen coming our way.

They had to go through half a dozen groups of soldiers to reach us, a few actually armored for such cavalry, but I knew it wouldn't take them long to do so. There weren't just over twenty of them, they all were fully armored and had these huge halberds they were swinging around with far too much ease to not be suspicious. One of the horsemen was even now riding into a line of infantry, and I watched him cleave a man in two at the waist with a single swing.

"I'm on the wrong side," I finally admitted as I hefted the girl on my shoulder. She didn't make a noise as I turned to look at her brother.

There was no need to pick him up.

I stepped away, and tried to rub the left side of my face on the girl's side as I did so. An arrow had skidded off the top of my head earlier and the flow of blood leaking from the wound had blinded me in my left eye.

Carrying the girl, I was let through one of the larger... and likely last lines of defense. The wave of spears and shields parted for me, but just barely. I bumped into the soldiers as I carried the girl to the back lines, heading for the farthest rear of the army.

"Hurry up lad!" a man shouted at me as I passed.

The battlefield like always was loud. Though usually it wasn't so loud here at the rear. People were shouting, orders were being barked, and there were screams of pain and grief... and most importantly...

"Shields...!" only a single word of warning came. I flinched as I hurriedly glanced back and above, at the sky.

Arrows. Lots of them.

Shields began to rise around me, but no one in my direct vicinity had anything big enough to hide under alongside them. All the bigger shields were behind me, at the front of the line. The ones back here were the stuff that barely covered the person they were attached too...

And no time to reach any of the nearby embankments, trenches or tents.

With a single breath I gathered my strength and ran forward, as hard and fast as I could away from the line of soldiers being targeted by the rain of arrows.

I only made it a few dozen feet before I began to hear the arrows land. For a small moment all I heard was the whiz of air from the arrows flying, and then I heard the metal on metal as sharp arrowheads hit armor and shields. I heard arrows thunk into wood, and then finally heard the cries of pain as arrows met flesh.

Instinctively knowing some were about to land upon me, or at least around me, I flung the girl on my shoulder over and in front of me. I skidded a bit, trying to cover at least her head and upper body with my own, and was glad I did so. An arrow hit my upper left shoulder before I even fully got her situated.

Being hit so cleanly, and so quickly, sent me into a small panic. But a few heavy heartbeats came and went as I heard arrows land around me, but not in as much quantity. Another hit my lower back, but it didn't stick. It bounced off me and didn't puncture, likely hitting one of the thicker parts of my leather armor... or simply having lost most of its momentum somehow in the air.

"Gather up! Regroup!" Orders were barked over shouts of pain, and I dared a small glance to the sky. The arrows were done.

A little relieved, I quickly gathered up the girl again. I did a once over on her, to make sure she had no more fresh wounds such as arrows sticking out of her anywhere, and once I was sure she was still alive I returned to running towards the rear.

Before I got too far I heard the sound of battle. Of men running into men. Armor clanking, and people dying. People that had been shouting orders were no longer doing so. Words of surrender were being given. Mud and dirt was being torn as people ran away.

I didn't need to turn around and look. I knew the sounds I heard well. Any soldier who's fought in sieges or wars knew those sounds.

The last line of defense was being broken.

I needed to get to the surgeons tent before they reached us.

Picking up the pace, I did my best to ignore the pains burdening my body. I didn't like the way my left shoulder hurt, where the arrow was still lodged. It was the kind of pain that told me it had not just punctured deep, but had broken bone. That would take time to heal, even for me.

"Need to hurry or I won't get that time," I groaned as I ran past a broken siege weapon. Some kind of large ballista. It was cockeyed, one of its main wheels up front half submerged in mud. It looked like it had sunk when fired, and in doing so the thing broke from the odd movement. A man was lying against it, dead. His bloody face and chest told me he had not been hurt in the war proper, but likely from the siege weapon itself. He had been hit by the weapon as it broke, it looked like.

"Hurry the hell up!" a woman shouted at the man following her. Another group of soldiers, ones that had abandoned their weapons and even their helmets, were hurrying another direction.

Those who had finally realized the battle was lost were now trying to escape.

Too little too late.

But I was here with them, running, so I wasn't any better.

Rounding a large tent, I finally found the white flags fluttering in the wind. The healer's tent. Where surgeons and doctors would be.

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Picking up my pace, I ran past a horse that had no rider and wasn't strapped down. It watched me run past but otherwise ignored me.

The tent was a busy place. There were people running around all around it, and not just because people were panicking over defeat. People were carrying boxes full of supplies, or injured people. I ran past a pair of men carrying another on a long shield, using it as a stretcher. I beat them to the tent, entering it through one of the four large entrances.

I was a little surprised at the lack of commotion within. Considering the battle was lost, and all the people running around, I had expected the tent to be full. To be littered with bodies and people screaming in pain. Instead I found a rather clean, for a surgeon's tent during a war, and also far more empty beds than I should be possible.

Hesitating a moment, since it felt almost wrong to find it in such a condition... I wondered how it was possible.

I rarely visited these kinds of tents. Even when hurt. Because I didn't want to risk being caught. And because even when I got hurt, I didn't need such help.

But...

It did seem somewhat normal. There were a bunch of men and women, and even nuns. It was a little relieving to see the familiar religious garb amongst the people helping. I didn't agree with them, but their being here made it more likely nothing was wrong at all... and that I'd be safe here for the time being.

No army slaughtered the religious nuns who helped the surgeons. They wouldn't dare. Not only would they lose the support of the ones helping them, they'd quickly become the defeated army once the holy knights heard of it. More than a few powerful bands and armies had been wiped out from such mistakes over the years.

Walking over to a bed, one that was freshly made, I placed the girl down onto it. She groaned in pain as I did.

Next to her was another clean bed. They both, and the floor beneath them, had not a single drop of blood or grime upon them. The bed next to it though had a man upon it, one missing his right arm and with half his head wrapped in dark bandages.

Glancing around as a nun hurried over, I tried to rationalize the lack of injured. But found it hard to do so.

Yes. Something was weird here.

"Sir you have arrows in your back," the nun said, speaking oddly calmly as she did.

"Tend to her first. She was hit in the head," I said as I pointed to the girl I'd just saved.

The nun didn't hesitate to oblige. She turned, shouted a few names, and then went to checking on the girl.

I ignored the nuns and doctors for a moment as I stepped back, to both take a breath and relax a little.

No matter if something was odd. As long as they did their job.

Choosing to sit in the other clean bed, on purpose, I flinched as I reached up to wipe some more blood out of my left eye. It was not flowing as strongly as it had been before, but it was still warm. And not from my own body heat.

"Here."

I looked up, at an older woman who was offering me a towel. It was stained but steaming. I could smell that it had just been taken out of a boiling pot. Odds were not far outside the tent were many such large pots, boiling the grime and nastiness away and out of such things.

Taking it, I thanked her as I wiped my face off, and was glad to finally see out of my left eye for the first time in a couple hours.

With my sight returned, I realized they had stripped the girl. A man was now cutting something from the girl's back, likely a shard of an arrow or something based off the way he was pulling it out of her.

So she had gotten hit by one. Damn. What was the point in me covering her then...?

"You're next. Sit up straight," the older woman who had given me the towel said as she walked around the bed, as to look at my back.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I felt her touch my left shoulder. She hissed at the sight of the wound, but I didn't worry.

To them I was likely going to be a serious patient. I had far more wounds than the girl I had just brought them. They were still fussing over her, now focused on the large gash on her head. The one from the metal fist that had knocked her out. From the man who had killed her brother.

It was too bad. He had been a funny man. I had originally been annoyed at being called out and invited by him and his sister... since it meant I had once again been recognized, but I had quickly lost such frustrations while spending time with them on the way to this battlefield. They had been a humorous pair of siblings. Their jokes had made me laugh.

"This is going to hurt, young man," the old nun warned as two others came over to help. One of them carried over a small bundle of sharp looking tools, likely to cut out the arrows stuck inside me.

"Will she be alright?" I asked.

"As long as she doesn't pass in the night. Head wounds like that can be either the end of them, or just a passing headache. Now take a breath and don't move or you'll be lame," the old woman said, a little callously, as I felt her rip open my shirt as to get to the arrow.

Taking a small breath, I nodded.

Right. Humans were so odd sometimes. Sometimes frail. Sometimes strong.

"We've lost...!" a man shouted as he entered the tent, with a limping man clinging to him.

"Of course we did, you idiot!" a man from a nearby bed shouted angrily.

"No thanks to those damned mercenaries! I knew relying on them would get us here!" another shouted.

"Big talk from men who can't even hold a line!" the man nearby, the one not many beds away from me and missing his arm, shouted angrily. His voice was slurred, thanks to his facial wounds.

For a brief moment the tent became loud, as people began to shout at each other. Most of the arguments came from those wounded, those lying on beds or sitting on chairs. Ones either getting treatment, like me, or unable to move on their own thanks to their injuries.

I ignored them all and stayed out of it as the arrow in my shoulder was dug out. I didn't flinch, even when the knife they used to do so clipped my shoulder blade. The nun doing the work hissed at herself, having noticed what she did, but she didn't say anything as she quickly finished her job.

Sighing softly, as some soldiers around me groaned in pain, some argued with themselves over whose fault it was for our defeat, while others quietly died... I glanced at the girl I'd saved. She had woken up, likely thanks to all the noise. She was still lying down, but was now holding her head. She flinched upon touching her head-wound, and glanced over at me.

"Stay there and rest," I warned her.

She flinched again, but obeyed. She laid back down, and I noticed the way she began to breathe quickly. Sharply. She was starting to weep.

Likely just realized, or remembered, what had happened. She had been right next to her brother and watched him die.

"One more," the nun working on my wounds said as she went to cut at another part of my back. The lower left area, where I had not even realized I'd been hurt. But as she did whatever she did, a sharp pain ran up my spine because of it. Whatever had been stuck in me had been deep.

Shaking my head, I sighed again.

Third loss in a row. Not only was I now hurt, I was now once again unemployed.

Need a new band, again.

Chapter 418 Slip

"Branch!"

Waking up, I grabbed my sword as I quickly sat up to face whatever was wrong.

There had been no need to startle. I found the girl sitting next to me, with a look of pain. She had flinched at my startle, and it had likely hurt her head. I looked around, finding us alone. The sun was still rising, but it was high enough that both the chill in the air was gone and the sky was bright and blue.

I had expected when going to sleep to be woken up. We weren't far from the battlefield, and although the battle was over and they had allowed us to go freely without demanding anything there was no doubt in my mind that there would be opportunist all around for some time.

Slavers, bandits, and even fellow mercenaries hoping to make up for the losses they just incurred would be on the lookout for easy prey. And a small pair of, what looked to be injured, mercenaries was usually one of the first type of victims.

But there was nothing. No one. Even the weather seemed nice.

"What's wrong?" I asked. Why had she shouted to wake me...? There didn't seem to be anything wrong.

"You're bleeding again," she said worriedly as she pointed to my shoulder.

Oh.

I sighed at her, and myself, as I put the sword down and finished sitting up properly. The makeshift bedroll I'd been sleeping in was indeed a little soaked, not from sweat or morning dew but my blood. I must have rolled over a little too harshly and opened up some of the wounds on my back.

"I'll be fine..." I said, before the girl could start to fuss over me.

She gave me a look, one that told me she only saw and heard a male's bravado overriding his common sense, but I didn't pay much mind to it.

She was human. And like all humans they weren't capable of understanding.

Such wounds were not a problem for me. Not after being treated and cleaned out by those surgeons. In fact, I could already feel the itching of their healing. They had bled last night, sure, but by the morrow of next day such a thing would be impossible.

"Branch, you should at least let me clean them again..." the girl suggested as I went to stand up.

I was up now.

"I'll be fine. I'll clean up in a moment... how long have you been awake?" I asked as I glanced at the nearby campfire. It was burning, but not blazingly strong as it had been last night.

"An hour or so. I'm used to getting up earlier, I... was responsible for breakfast and stuff, so..." she began to mumble softly as she explained why she was an early riser.

Right.

She had recovered well enough to travel, though was having terrible headaches. But her brother did just die. It was actually rather telling on how strong she was, internally, at how well she was taking it... but every so often little comments like that slipped through her defenses.

"I'd tease you about the lack of breakfast then, but that'd be in poor taste," I said as I knelt down near the fire. I warmed my hand a bit, since they ached. During the battle my sword had broken, and I had been forced to fight with my fists. I knew I had many broken bones within them, since I could feel their aches and pains, but they were also inflamed and cut up a bit too.

It was one of the reasons she and her brother had fallen. I had targeted another soldier, as to take his sword for my own, and while I had been doing so they had fallen victim to another. Because I had stepped away.

Though there was no telling if it would have gone any different. Such was the way of war.

"Branch?"

I turned, finding the girl with a bundle of cloth. Wet cloth.

"I said I was fine," I said.

"It'll get infected if we don't keep them clean," she warned.

Well... she wasn't wrong. Not entirely. But I couldn't help but feel like she was being overly pushy with her compassion.

Either her attempt to keep me happy, so I'd not abandon her, or she was just feeling... emotional.

Or well...

I sighed and nodded. I sat, and took off my shirt to let her wipe off my wounds and pour water on them. I genuinely didn't need her to do so, but I figured it was easier to just let her do it and get it over with than continue arguing with her.

"How about you? How do you feel?" I asked as she wiped my back off.

"My head still hurts, but I feel fine everywhere else. Even the hole in my side doesn't hurt much," she said.

Right. She had been hit by an arrow too, amongst other things.

Arrows.

I scoffed at them. They hurt, and killed often. Though usually not from the impact itself. Most people who died from them did so hours, if not days, later. From festering wounds and infections. Especially since some people tainted their arrows intentionally. It wasn't uncommon for mercenaries to soak their arrows in manure or something the night before a battle.

"So... um..." the girl continued to wipe my back, even though it was likely time she finished. I turned a bit, to glance over my shoulder at her. She shifted a little at my look, and nodded. "Where we headed?" she then asked.

We...?

"I need to find another job, fast. I'll be hungry again soon if I don't," I said with a sigh.

The meal she and her brother had fed me the other day had been a nice one. They had caught a small boar like animal, and had been willing to share with me its delicacies.

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It was one of the reasons I had tried my best to keep them safe... and also why she was still alive.

It wasn't often people in this line of work were generous, especially to someone like me. It made me feel like I had a debt because of it, even though I knew my mother would say that debt had long since been paid.

"So... another band?" she asked, a little excitedly.

She knew I had noticed how she had included herself in her question, and had ignored it.

"If I can. That or even just guard duty or something, somewhere. I don't know of any upcoming battles anytime soon around here, so not sure yet. I guess we can..." I paused a moment, and felt stupid.

I was including her already!

Turning around, the girl stood up straighter. She had been kneeling a bit as to clean my back, but was now acting as if on attention because I was some boss about to bark orders. It was an odd thing to see since she was looking down at me.

"Your brother's dead," I said.

A pain expression flashed on her face as she smiled. "Yes."

"I'm not stupid. I know you two would not have been doing this if you had other options... but now you don't have a reliable partner. A man. It's best you think of other options. You got any family?" I asked.

She shook her head.

Great.

I sighed as I looked away from her, since she was making me feel like an ass.

What would my father say here...? My mother would tell me to not get involved, but he'd not shut up about my responsibilities and...

"I can cook and sew. I can get a job working in such things, but all the cities around here have huge fees to become a resident of. We were planning on making enough to buy rights to live in one of the river towns around here," she then said.

Right... a common story amongst mercenaries. But for once I believed it, and not just because the boar she had cooked the other day had been tasty.

"How much is it? To buy resident rights?" I asked. I'd never looked into it, since I didn't ever need such a thing. Not just because I had no plans to become some common worker in some common town, but because I had the Society. They would get me a resident's permit anytime I asked.

"Near the coast we talked to the noble's attendant. It was fifteen," she said.

Fifteen...? "Fifteen what?"

She startled. "Penk."

Gods! That was more than I'd make in a dozen battles!

I felt my body relax a little, to the point I nearly fell backward. I had to catch myself before I did so.

Fifteen penk... by my wings, what a sum!

No wonder people never moved from where they were born! I always wondered why humans never moved around, if anything just to live somewhere different every so often! This was why! It was too bloody expensive!

"Some are cheaper. Kevin, one of my brother's friends, told us of a smaller town to the west where it's only six. But you have to pay half a penk a year in extra taxes for four years afterward," she said, speaking quickly as she did.

I shook my head at that. That was still a fortune. That was more than most households made in a whole year, wasn't it? I could have sworn my father told me that an average household made a couple penk a year...

How'd towns grow then...? There had to be something else at play...

Also, did that mean the Society paid that fee anytime one of our members requested it...? So many of our kind moved around a lot, either traveling on purpose or having to move elsewhere every so often just to stay safe. Since people, humans, noticed their un-aging faces or their traits or something...

Feeling a strange new respect for the Society, I wondered how much wealth it held to be able to do such a thing. Even my own siblings have used that service several times, I'd helped a few of them move alongside mother and Vim just recently.

Actually...

Reaching up, I scratched the side of my head. I felt a bit of dried blood in my hair, though odds are it was from one of the few head-wounds I had gotten and not from rolling around in my sleep and the blood from my back.

Those horsemen. That had ridden through the lines of our offense the other day.

They had undoubtedly been non-humans. Surely. A few of them had been swinging around poles of iron and metal that most humans couldn't even lift with all their might, let alone with one hand and while riding horseback.

Had I actually been fighting fellow Society members...? Hopefully not. Last thing I needed was for Vim to be the one to wake me up with a startle, as she had just done. How would I be able to look into my mother's eyes if I did that? Upset Vim and the Society in such a way...? Gods it would be embarrassing as hell, my siblings would never stop squawking about it and...

"Um..."

I stopped thinking for a moment, remembering the human girl was still here. Right.

"Sorry. I had been lost in thought. You done with my wounds?" I asked, gesturing to the towel she held. It wasn't as badly stained as I had thought it would have been after wiping my bloody back off.

"Yeah... they actually look very good. Even that bad one on your shoulder already looks like its healing over," she said with a smile, as if glad to let me know.

Feeling bad again, I wondered if I should ask if she wanted me to check hers. She could check and see the one on her side and stuff, but not the one on her head. Should I at least look at it...?

"Yeah... well..." I coughed, and decided against it. For now. She looked fine. I didn't see any blood, and her pupils didn't look off or strange. She didn't even look pale or hungry, which was odd. Didn't humans usually feel the cold real bad during such mornings? I was fine, but she shouldn't be. It wasn't like she was wearing much, just a couple thin layers. Maybe it was just because she was used to it.

By the sounds of it her and her brother have been mercenaries for some time. Maybe even longer than me. Odds are she was more accustomed to living like this than I was, strangely enough.

She gave me an odd smile, one that made me want to look away, but I held her gaze. To confront her, and my strange sense of responsibility concerning her.

"What's your name anyway?" I asked.

Her smile flinched, and she frowned at me. "You don't remember...?"

I shook my head.

She sighed, but her smile didn't fade too much because of it. "Kathrine. My brother called me Slip though," she said.

"Slip...?"

"I slip a lot. Like while walking," she said.

Huh... hadn't noticed. Maybe it was something she had done while younger. A few of my siblings had been clumsy like that too, Sap had been lucky enough to inherit our parent's wings yet she wasn't able to control them properly. Too weak. They were always bumping into things, and getting stuck on doors and stuff thanks to it. My other siblings used to tease her about it, making fun of her name as they did. Since the humans used the term sap derogatorily around these parts.

"Is your name really Branch? Like a tree branch?" she asked as I stood.

"Yes. Technically it's Branches," I said.

"Huh..."

I ignored her look as I glanced around, to make sure we were still alone. We weren't far from a river, and were in a rather wooded area, but there was a road not far from here. It was close enough that if we spoke too loudly, such as if we shouted, we'd be heard by those traversing it.

"For now, if you're okay with it, let's stick together. I owe your brother that much at least. But I'll be trying to join another band, so be prepared for that," I said as I decided to just let her join me. For now at least.

At least until I got over this stupid feeling of responsibility for her.

"Right...! Thank you, Branches. Really," she squeezed the towel tightly as she nodded at me, happy to hear it.

"Let's get on the road then, before we attract trouble. You seem to know this area well, any suggestions?" I asked as I went to put out the fire.

"If we head north a bit, following the bigger river nearby, we'll reach Ruvindale. There's a guild there for mercenaries we can use to find one to join," she suggested.

In Ruvindale...?

I nodded, deciding that was a good idea. The Sleepy Artist was there too. I could use the opportunity to check on it, and write a letter home.

"Let's go then," I said.

Chapter 419 Ruvindale's Slums

Like always the Sleepy Artist stunk.

I was sure it was just the paint and stuff, but it put me on edge. It made me want to leave, enough so that like always I turned Lughes and Crane's offer down.

"I'll be fine. I actually have someone I need to keep an eye on, so it's okay. Thank you though," I said gently, trying not to be too rude.

"Someone to keep an eye on...? Why not bring them here? We'll make dinner," Lughes offered with a frown, as if unable to comprehend why I'd actually turn him down.

Gosh he was making it hard to do so though. Dinner? Really? I bet it would be delicious...

"She's not a member. Plus she's human, and doesn't know about us," I said with a small shrug.

"Ah... that is a thing, then, isn't it?" Crane said with a nod.

"It is. Though soon that might not be much an issue. Vim is bringing us a human resident! A special one!" Lughes told me.

"Hm...? Vim is?" I asked.

"Should be here any day. I've not met her, but I've heard good things about her. She wants somewhere... quiet to call home," Crane said.

I'm not sure I'd call this place quiet; to be honest... but it was away from everyone else at least. The few members farther north from here were the solitary types. The ones that didn't want you to visit in the first place.

"Well... If I end up not finding a band to join I'll stop back in and see her, I guess. If Vim shows up while I'm here, let him know we're staying in those visitor tents outside the city," I said.

"What...? In those slums? Branches, please... just stay here. If not here, at least an inn. We have friends here, they'll happily get you a nice room," Crane said worried.

I smiled at my fellow bird, and nodded. "I appreciate it Crane, but it's okay. As I said I got responsibilities, plus I'm hoping to not be here long. We talked with a recruiter this morning first thing, it sounded good. They have a contract with escorting a bunch of prisoners, so we might have work right away," I said.

"Gosh... prisoners?" Crane worriedly frowned at that, glancing at Lughes as she did.

I ignored the look they exchanged, and the thoughts clearly written on their faces. As easily understood as some of their paintings.

They didn't understand my lifestyle at all. But that was fine. They didn't need to.

Only I needed to.

And well... my mother, I guess. She understood.

Vim did too, oddly.

"Still... I'm glad you're all well. Give Shelldon my hellos, if I'm here past the morrow' I'll come visit again," I said as I picked up my bag, as to leave.

"Goodbye then! Remember to not fall in battle, I've yet to paint you!" Lughes reminded me.

I laughed at that as I left, waving goodbye to Crane as I did.

Shutting the door behind me, I ignored the dingling bell and the soft conversation I had left behind. They were talking about how odd I was, but I was used to it. Many in the Society found me and my family odd, even the members that were more like them than me and mother.

Though it did offend me a little, I didn't let it bother me or get too upset over it. Because I knew I was being odd.

As they said, I was staying in the slums. The tent we were staying in, the cheapest place to sleep in town, was just a giant old tarp. I had worried about leaving Slip there, since it had been obvious some of the people staying in it had been... the less desirable types. Not even we mercenaries seemed to use it, which was telling since most mercenaries were unbothered by such things.

We were just too broke to stay at any actual inn, is all. Between Slip and I we only had enough to feed us, and even then we'd struggle to do so... and only then if we also added to it with hunting and fishing.

Hopefully the recruiter we had spoken to earlier had good news for us tomorrow morning. Even if we had to spend the next month escorting prisoners, it was at least something. They paid well, and their band was actually well known.

Or well... Slip had recognized the name. I had never heard of them.

How was it humans were so good at knowing what was going on in the world...? I was older than all of them, yet I sometimes felt like a child when listening to them talk. It was as if they could somehow talk to their fellows over long distances, instantly. There were times they spoke of rumors and happenings that sounded so recent, and so distant, that I couldn't comprehend how they knew so much details. Even I failed at such a thing, even for things I'd witnessed with my own two eyes.

Maybe it was precisely because they didn't live very long that they were so good at gossiping. They lived quickly, so were quick themselves...?

No matter.

Pausing before a store, I stared into the window of what was likely some kind of clothes shop. There was a very ugly dress, made of some kind of bird feathers, hanging on a rack in the window. It was too puffy, so big, that I doubted any woman could actually wear it. Even the larger women would get crushed by it, wouldn't they...? Or maybe it was light, even though so big and puffy?

For a tiny moment I thought of all my sisters, my mother, and those like Slip I've known over the years. I tried to imagine them all in it, and found myself shaking my head and walking away.

Surely it was just a display piece. Like how blacksmiths and artisans had projects on display in their storefronts too. As to show off their skill and expertise. Sometimes they had things on display that had no proper use, or had unrealistic proportions. One smithy near Telmik I'd visited had a huge sword, one so big and heavy that I knew even we non-humans wouldn't have been able to use it properly.

Vim was likely the only one in this world capable of wielding such a weapon... but those like him didn't need such things. Their fists alone were enough.

"Speaking of Vim..." I mumbled as I wondered if maybe I should pass on the job even if offered it. I'd like to ask him a few questions, and if he was going to be here soon this was a good opportunity. It's been a few years since I had last seen him. He had checked on me, back when I had first left the nest and became a mercenary, every so often. He's not done so lately, which told me he and my mother had decided I was capable enough to be left to my own devices finally... but... well...

Glancing at a nearby window, and the reflection of me upon it, I wanted to groan at myself.

Yeah. Definitely doing fine.

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Half-starved, covered in wounds, and jobless. Barely a coin to my name. Plus I was now responsible for a young woman, one who I wasn't sure yet what to even think of or do with.

She was a nice girl. She hadn't lied. She could cook, sew and mend clothes, and the few spars we had on our trip here had proven she was no slouch either. She was still just a human woman, but odds are she was unique. A rarity.

Mother would like her, probably. At least, as much as she could for a human.

But I knew better than to get too attached. Even if we hadn't been mercenaries, she was still in the end just a human. A poor one. One who had grown up on a farm, and had been told to leave since they hadn't been able to afford her. They had not wanted to keep her, since in their eyes she had been not worth the food and resources she took up in comparison to what she provided.

It was hard to understand, but I knew sometimes humans were like that. They could be as cruel, if not crueler, than we could.

"I don't want to get stuck with her, though..." I said as I returned to walking. I headed for the eastern gate, as to go to the slum-tent and check on the burden I was trying to figure out how to get rid of.

Part of the reason I wanted to see Vim. I didn't want any help myself, I'd not take money or resources from the Society... but she was a different story. There shouldn't be any harm to ask for a resident permit or something for her, right...?

Like The Sleepy Artist, there were many locations that had humans living amongst them. For some they were friends, others workers and servants. No matter where she went, or what she had to do, Slip would have a much better life amongst the Society like that than with me as a mercenary. Or well, with anyone as a mercenary.

Vim would understand, I'd think. Maybe. If not, if he didn't allow her to join the Society, he'd at least be willing to give me enough coins to pay for the taxes and fees as to get her residency at one of the towns nearby. Even here in Ruvindale, maybe.

Doing such a thing would be a great way to get rid of her without making me feel like an utter scumbag, at least.

"Gods I'm as bad as my siblings, aren't I?" I complained as I realized what I was doing.

I didn't want to be burdened. I wanted to be alone. It was one thing to be a part of a band, to have comrades and whatnot, but she was dangerously becoming something more. Something more akin to a friend, or worse.

I didn't want that, so I wanted to be rid of her. As if it was her fault or something. As if I wasn't just annoyed because I had to admit life was hard alone.

Our little trip here had only taken a week, but along it I had found out how nice it was just to have someone else around. She didn't just help out with hunting, cooking, and little things but did so much more. It was nice to have someone to talk to, and ask questions with. She had told me about the local news, bands and wars she knew of, the towns and their laws and rules... she helped explain more about the value of a coin, and whatnot, too. Stuff that my parents and Vim had tried to teach me, but I had not really absorbed properly for some reason. Maybe because I had been so excited at the prospect of leaving the nest that I had simply not paid as much attention as I should have. Or maybe because they had taught me so much too quickly, and so it had all blurred or something. I wasn't sure, but it didn't matter.

I had no choice but to admit I was enjoying her company, and she was useful. Even the fact that I occasionally had someone to keep watch while I slept, though rare I needed such a thing, was worth a lot more than I wanted to admit.

"Maybe this is why my father warned me. I had found his warning about friends odd, since it had come from him," I whispered as I passed under the gate of Ruvindale, and headed for the open pasture in the distance. There were rows of shoddy tents, and shacks past them. There weren't many people out and about out here and the few who were looked... unhealthy. One of the women I passed looked like she had a bad limp, and had a weird look on her face. As if she was half asleep, while she walked. Probably was.

Reaching the tent, I entered carefully. There was a group of people who were sleeping right at the entrance, for whatever reason, and I didn't trust them much. They were sitting together on broken boxes and crates, and the conversation they had been having came to a stop as I passed them. I ignored their looks as I walked over to our little section of the tent, where there were two small cots hidden by a thin white sheet. So thin you could see through it.

"You shouldn't do that in here," I said, warning Slip as I stepped past the sheet.

Slip startled, frowning at me as she glanced around and covered her chest. She had been wiping herself down. "Why...?" she whispered, worried all of a sudden.

"Because they can all see you through the sheet," I said as I grabbed her shirt off my bed and tossed it at her.

She put it on, though did so slowly. She didn't seem bothered, at neither me having seen her naked or my criticism of her actions. She was though staring at me rather strongly.

"What?" I asked as I sat down on the cot I had claimed.

"You stopped me because you're worried about me. Not because you want only you to see me," she said simply, as if it made sense.

My back straightened a little as I processed her words, and I wondered why she was even bringing such a thing up. "Yeah...? Look at the people here. You don't know what they'll do," I said softly.

"Hm... maybe. Brother used to warn me too, sometimes. Are you a religious man, Branch?"

"Kind of," I admitted. I wasn't like the humans, but I did have gods. We all did. They had made us. And unlike the humans, we actually had known them. We had proof of their existence, they didn't.

"Hm..." Slip frowned at that as she finished getting dressed. She grabbed the cloth she had been wiping herself down with, stared at it for a moment, and then gestured at me with it. "Are we a couple, Branch?"

"No? Did you think we are?"

"No. Not yet, at least. I was hoping we would be, though."

Great. "My mother told me any woman I brought home would have to be stronger than her," I said.

She smiled at that. "Really...? What a neat mother. Well? Am I stronger than her?" she asked.

Funnily enough if I and my family had been human, Slip might have been so. But unluckily for her, we weren't.

I shook my head. "No. Not by a long shot."

Slip's smile slowly died. "I see... that's too bad. Is that you telling me to give up on the idea, or are you being serious?"

Shifting a little, I glanced over her shoulder at the sheet behind her. I saw through it, just as the person approaching us likely did... and I studied the way the man walked.

He was carrying something under his cloak. A weapon maybe...?

I stood, and ignored Slip's worried expression. She had wanted an answer to her question, but I'd have to put that on hold.

Stepping away from Slip and our little cots, I walked out from behind the sheet as the man came to a stop a few feet away.

"I don't appreciate your comments," he said as he lifted up the thing he had hidden beneath his cloak. It was just some kind of metal stick. A poker for a fire, maybe.

"What comments...?" I asked. What had I said?

"It's one thing to deny me a show, but to claim I'm some scumbag? Who do you think you are?" he asked, his voice rising.

Calming down a little, thanks to the anger I recognized in his voice, I glanced around real quick to see if anyone else was going to join in on this.

It didn't look like it. There were half a dozen people, other than us, in the tent right now, and each one of them looked ready to bolt. Several looked terrified.

Maybe he was the local bully or something. This was the slums, as Crane and Lughes had pointed out.

"I think you've just proved whatever you assumed I had said, so what would you like to do?" I asked plainly.

There was no point trying to calm him down or avoid this. I may not be as knowledgeable as the humans about their culture, or their recent gossip, but I knew humans well enough. And what I did know well about them was their tendencies and how to deal with them. My mother, and Vim, had taught me more than I needed to know when it came to such situations. Even if I had forgotten most of what they had taught, as I had about their currencies and cultural rules, I'd never forget enough to not know when a man was out for my life.

He wanted blood. He was going to get it.

Though I did wonder what had actually set him off. Had my comments earlier to Slip, about not showing off her naked body here to these random people, really been that offensive...? I had thought such common sense was... well... common sense.

Oh well.

"Smart ass, are you? Fine." The man must have noticed the finality in my tone, as I had noticed his, for he smirked and scoffed and stepped forward.

"Branch...!" Slip called my name worriedly as the man approached, but I paid her no heed. I shifted my weight a little as the man lifted his metal weapon, as to use it like a club against me.

Were we going to get kicked out over this...? Maybe I'll end up accepting Lughes and Crane's offer after all.

"Humans..." I scoffed under my breath as the man attacked... and I dealt with him as I had been trained to.

Without any mercy.

Chapter 420 Prisoner's Wake

"Branches..." Slip whispered my name as she grabbed my sleeve.

I rolled over a bit, glared at the stupid woman, and sighed as I realized something was wrong.

Rolling over fully, I sat up a bit and nodded. "What's wrong?" I asked as I rubbed my face. I was tired for some reason.

Slip leaned closer, close enough I felt the heat of her breath, as she whispered. "One of the prisoners is trying to escape," Slip warned.

Waking up fully, I took a small breath and stood. The blanket that had been covering me, and what I had thought also Slip, rolled off as I hurriedly stepped away from the tree we had been sleeping under. I walked past the other guards, who were all still sleeping, and towards the heavy iron wagon that had been made into a cage.

"Shoot!" one of the prisoners made noise as I approached, confirming Slip's words.

They all shuffled a bit, but went quiet as their chains rattled and they all hurriedly sat down as I approached.

Glancing around the wagon, I wondered where the guards that were supposed to be on duty were. Slip and I weren't on duty, and wouldn't be till the sun rose. It was still hours from then. Which meant either the guards on duty were slacking, sleeping, or were a part of this little escape attempt.

Walking up to the wagon, I kept enough distance to make sure I didn't get a spear in the eye or something as I studied the bars for any sign of tampering. I walked around the cage, ignoring the cold eyes staring at me from within it... until I found both the problem, and the one making it.

"Really?" I asked as I stared at the broken board. A piece of broken wood was sticking upward in the cage, at enough of an odd angle that it was clear it wasn't right. They had been trying to rip up the floor, as to escape through the bottom of the wagon and escape the cage.

"Listen, just look the other way...! Please!" the man who had been sitting next to the broken wood asked with a hush.

"I don't get paid if you all don't show up, still in chains," I said as I bent down, to look at the bottom of the wagon.

"What's going on...?" a new voice asked, but from outside the caged wagon. A man approached, carrying a torch. Thanks to the light he brought, I wasn't able to make out the extent of the damage yet. My eyes had been adjusted to the darkness, and I had been fine, but now I was nearly blinded.

I had to step back a bit, squinting at the man and his bright torch. Damn humans and their need for light...!

"They were breaking the floor of the wagon, to escape," I said with a point at them.

"Damn it...!" one of the men inside the cage cursed, and then suddenly they were noisy. Metal chains clanked as one of the men stood and started kicking another, by the looks of it the very man who had begged me to look the other way moments ago.

I scoffed at the humans as they wrestled and fought each other, while in chains.

"Where's Franko and Paulie?" the man with the torch asked.

"If they're the guards on duty, I don't know," I said simply.

The torchman cursed under his breath as he stepped closer to the wagon. He lifted his torch, illuminating the wagon and its contents better. My eyes were still adjusting, but I was able to make out the couple floorboards they had torn up. It looked like they had made a big enough hole that a leg and thigh could get through, but not much else.

"Bastards. Hey! Stop that! The rest of you, stop them, if I have to come in there I'll break every ankle not just theirs!" the man with the torch shouted, rather loudly. Loud enough to wake up the other guards and mercenaries that had been sleeping nearby.

I sighed as the dark night grew loud, even as the prisoners settled down. The man who had been getting his ass beat groaned as he slid along the bars, to the ground. He looked bloodied. A little too bloodied. He'll need medical attention.

"Branch, was it? Good job noticing. Coleman! Sam!" the torchman yelled names, and hurriedly a man rushed over. A large man, with a barrel of a chest.

"Find Franko and Paulie. I want their hides," the torchman ordered.

The large man didn't even nod. He turned and ran off, even though he looked half asleep as he did so... you could tell by the heavy footsteps and the way he tightened his shoulders he meant business. That had not been a joke, I don't think.

"What's going on...?"

"Looks like they tried to escape."

"Idiots."

People began to wake, and I stepped back a bit. Slip and I had been hired to help escort the prisoners, but the main group that this torchman and the rest belonged to were an actual unit. They belonged to this Silken Band that Slip had recognized. I'd let them deal with it, since he seemed to be taking charge.

This sucked though. I still felt a little tired. Now that this happened, and everyone was awake, we'd likely return to marching. Which meant no more sleep for me, since our duties were during the day.

Glancing at the wagon, at the man who had been trying to escape... who was now lying on his side and groaning in pain, I hoped he had many broken bones.

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Walking away, as the world got brighter with more torches and campfires being lit, I went over to our little corner of the encampment. Slip had stood, but hadn't gathered up our meager belongings just yet.

"Did you stop them?" she asked as she studied the wagon. I glanced at it, and wondered how she didn't already know the answer. Maybe she couldn't see well from here...? It was a good distance. Maybe a spear's throw, with my arm at least.

"They stopped themselves. How'd you know?" I asked.

"The guards who had been on duty walked past us, whispering about it. They woke me up," she said with a point behind her, past the tree we had been lying against.

Stepping around the tree, I stared off into the darkness... and sure enough saw two silhouettes in the distance. Two men were running.

I sighed. They were too far to be found in time by the Silken Band members.

Which meant I'd either have to point them out, or go get them myself.

"Don't go get them. if you do you'll be suspected," Slip said softly.

"Hm...? How so?" I asked.

"We humans can't see well in the dark. They'll all think you only knew of them because you had been a part of it and only got caught in the act," she explained.

Oh. That made sense.

"So what should I do?" I asked.

"Either let them go, or go tell the captain... that man barking orders there," Slip pointed at the main torchman. The one who had walked up to the wagon first. "Tell him that I told you what happened. That they stepped on our blanket as they left, and I woke you up because of it." She said.

"Why would that change the outcome...? Aren't we still alerting them to something we shouldn't know?" I asked.

"Well... I'm a woman. Plus you look young, Branch. Just trust me. I suggest you tell him, if we want to get into the Silken Band getting noticed like this is a good opportunity. Go on," she pushed me a little, as if to usher me to do her bidding.

I groaned as I stepped away. "Should have never told you who we are..." I mumbled. Ever since introducing her to the Society, and those at the Sleepy Artist, she's become oddly commanding. She seemed to take a lot of joy in teaching me how humans worked, and whatnot.

I was thankful for it, of course, but... well...

If it was going to be like this... what was the point in leaving the nest...?

Had I not left as to spread my own wings...? If I just started following Slip's orders, even if correct ones, was that not failing at my objective...?

Tossing the thoughts aside I picked up the pace, as to act like I was hurrying. I got the captain's attention, told him of what Slip had told me and pointed in the direction towards our tree. Slip waved a little at my doing so, telling me she could see us from here. Though maybe only thanks to the torches everywhere now, which illuminated the area.

The captain quickly got some men gathered up, they all got onto horses and off they went. I was glad that I hadn't been ordered or asked to join them. I hated horses.

It didn't take long at all for the horsemen to return, though only with one man. One being dragged by robe behind the horse.

I flinched at the sight of him, since he looked a meaty mess... but alive.

"The other's dead, sir." The captain was told.

The group cheered a little, as if glad to hear it, and I realized I kind of agreed with them.

After all if their little plan had worked, and the prisoners had escaped, we'd all have lost our pay. And it was to be rather good pay, too.

While the man was interrogated, the rest of the camp prepared to leave. Although sunrise was still hours away, it was time to march.

"Did you get enough sleep Slip?" I asked my companion as I helped her bundle up what little we had. Crane and Lughes had been kind enough to give us a few traveling supplies, though most of it was for her. Even the bedding had been for her; she just opted and wanted to share it with me.

"No. But I'll be fine. I'll just sleep like a baby tomorrow night," she said honestly.

I nodded. I expected as much. Especially since I felt the tug of sleep too.

"You're a light sleeper, aren't you?" I asked as we finished preparing for the journey.

"Have to be, Branches. The world is harsh for women like me," she said softly.

She wasn't wrong, even if she never acted so with me.

"Time to move!" a man shouted loudly, telling everyone it was time to go.

"He's small for a captain," I said as I studied the man who stood near the one who had just shouted orders. He was shorter than me, and didn't look very strong. Usually captains and leaders of mercenaries were those who looked the part. Some bands even had people that acted like the leader to the public, even though they were ran and ruled by someone else. Perception was a lot for these people, after all. You had to look strong, just being strong wasn't enough.

I wonder if that was why Vim was challenged so often. He was strong beyond belief, but he didn't look it at all.

"We might end up joining them, Branches. So you better start remembering their names," Slip reminded me.

I flinched and nodded. "Right. I'll try," I promised.

Human names were so hard to remember. Their faces blurred, and it was so rare I saw the same one often enough to even take notice of.

Even Slip I had trouble with. Not with her name, but her face. A few times while in Ruvindale, before we joined this job, we had gone out into the town. Just to talk and walk around. A few times we had gotten separated in crowds, and when I had went to find her I had failed to do so. Even though she had been right in front of me.

It seemed I struggled to recognize human faces a little. An odd trait. One I'd need to ask my parents about, since I'd not thought it a thing.

After we finished gathering up our stuff, we went to join the rest of the group as the march began to resume. The wagon was already in motion, the large horses pulling it huffing loudly in strain as they did.

Slip yawned as we took position near the rear of the group.

Watching her yawn, I noted the way her face scrunched up in the process. As she did some of the nearby men glanced her way, and out of the corner of my eyes I noticed the way some of them smirked and smiled at the sight.

Was that considered cute...? Or adorable, or whatever? It was hard to tell. But why else would they have all looked at her like that...?

"What...?" Slip asked as she squinted and rubbed her face.

"Let me know if you get too tired," I said gently, deciding to just let it be.

I'll figure it out eventually. All of it.

That was why I was out here, after all. Alone. Away from family and Society.

To figure out everything I could, and spread my wings.

Figuratively, of course... since I had not been born with any real ones.