

Non Human 421

Chapter 421 The Silken Band

"Eventually married couples get their own tent. For now you'll have to make do," Thomas said as he guided Slip and I through the encampment.

The Silken Band was far bigger than I had expected. There were likely thousands of people here... and considering we were leagues from any settlement, human city or otherwise, it was clear they were all bona-fide members.

No wonder they were both so well known amongst the humans, but also so willing to let Slip and I join so readily. A group this size likely had what Vim would call a revolving door. Whatever that meant.

"We're not married," I said, reminding him for the third time since meeting him.

Thomas ignored me, and pointed to a large red tent. One that had strange designs sewn into it. Ones I didn't recognize. Some kind of animal, maybe? "That's the mess hall. Get food there. They serve three meals a day, and usually have leftovers and snacks throughout the rest of it. But they do run out, and if you piss off the cooks good luck ever getting a decent meal again," he warned.

"Noted," Slip said, taking his warning to heart.

"What've we got there, Tommy!?" a woman shouted as we passed.

"Fresh blood, married blood too!" Thomas shouted back happily.

A few of the nearby mercenaries clapped in hollered, welcoming us into the band... as I frowned and felt like leaving it already.

How many times did I have to say we weren't married? If this was a running joke, it was going to get old very fast.

Slip giggled softly next to me, and elbowed me. "See? Just accept it already," she teased.

I ignored her. "How do we get assigned jobs?" I asked.

It was clear now that this band was big. Too big. Too big for them all to go on every job every time. Thus the group we had worked and traveled with here, escorting those prisoners. That had been ten men, and that was a fraction of their force.

"You get put into a group. As I said. You're in mine, as I've said. So from now on you go where I go, and do what I tell you, until you prove you're worth more elsewhere. Which won't take long based off what I had seen. Just put up with it, and you'll have your own banner in no time and your own tent. I promise," Thomas said happily, both teasing me and being serious.

I sighed at him, since that hadn't been why I had asked.

Why did he seem to think I wanted my own men and tent so badly...? Was your own tent really that big a deal?

Was having your own soldiers and group that big a deal? My mother had asked me to not draw too much attention to myself, so I didn't want such a thing even if it was something to be desired. Yet it seemed to these mercenaries that was everything they could ask for.

"Won't take him long. Just wait till you see him on the actual battlefield," Slip said happily.

"I bet. I'm not stupid, I saw you move that wagon. You don't look it but an ox you are," Thomas said happily, speaking of me and my strength as if I was some neat new toy he had found.

"Arrows even bounce off him, just wait till you see it," Slip added, bragging.

"Now that I would like to see!" Thomas said.

Let's not.

Hopefully joining this band wasn't going to be a mistake...

It didn't take long for us to be brought to a huge tent. One that looked as if it could hold hundreds of people. Thomas took us to one corner of it, where a couple rickety cots were hidden behind some thicker curtains and drapes. "Cleanest beds available, plus you're tucked away in the corner. Try to keep

it down, remember quite a few of the men here are quick to jealousy and several haven't had a woman in months. Just a fair warning," Thomas teased as he gestured at the cots.

"So... this tent is yours?" I asked as I turned to look at the few people in here. A few people were hidden behind their own curtains, sleeping or resting, and the rest that either had their curtains drawn back or were sitting outside of their little sleeping areas were all relatively ignoring us. A far cry from the boisterous shouts from those we had passed on our way here.

"No. My crew isn't here at the moment. This is something of a communal sleeping area. They'll be back in a few days; you'll get to introduce yourselves then. For now just get rested, make friends, and stay out of trouble," Thomas said... and then abruptly turned and left.

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Watching the man go, I felt strangely mystified.

Were all larger mercenary bands this... lax? Or was it just something unique to this one, or maybe to him?

"What were you expecting, Branch? To get sent straight into battle or something?" Slip asked as she stepped forward to our new sleeping area. She went to putting bags down and getting situated without any hesitation.

"Well... maybe? I need to earn money," I said.

"We will. You will. These larger groups don't move as quickly as the smaller ones, but when they do move it's momentous. You'll see," Slip said as she went to taking off her boots.

Shaking my head at her, and the rest of the humans who so obviously didn't find this odd, I decided to just let it be.

Oh well.

As annoying, and odd, as this place was... it was perfect.

There were enough people here I'd blend in. I'd be able to linger, for possibly years. Plus there were enough seasoned warriors that I'd not stand out too much on the battlefield. They had been joking earlier, but as long as I was careful those jokes would eventually fade away and be forgotten. Hopefully, at least.

Plus maybe I'll get lucky and Slip will find another man to catch her eye. I liked the girl, but only as a friend... plus... I mean...

Glancing at the woman who was already half-naked, I sighed and at the sight and went to make sure our little section of the tent was private. I pulled the drapes around our beds more closer, as to make sure no one saw her.

"I'm going to wipe off and sleep, Branch," Slip said happily, excited over the idea. I knew she was tired, so I had expected it... but like usual she didn't hesitate sometimes, even when she should.

"Enjoy yourself. I'm going to go... mingle," I said, using one of her words.

"Hm. Have fun. Make sure you slip into my bed when you come back, else they'll find it weird," she said as she yawned.

"Feh."

Leaving her alone, I stepped out through the drapes and went to leave the tent. I didn't worry about anyone doing anything to her, this place seemed very orderly.

Plus she was crazy.

I knew many of our members did such things with humans. Some even fell in love, married them and had children with them.

But the idea of it sickened me. Almost enough to make me want to puke.

Though how I was going to tell Slip that without breaking her heart...? I wasn't sure yet.

Just another thing I needed to figure out. One of countless.

"There he is! Come here and arm wrestle me, I hear you're as strong as an ox!" a large armed man shouted at me as I left the tent, barely making it half a dozen feet from it.

Smiling at him, and the small crowd around him, I decided this was exactly what I'd been looking for.

There were the mercenaries I knew, and expected to see!

"What do I get if I win?" I asked as I stepped forward.

The small crowd around him burst into laughter, which only drew more attention. But I could tell by the sounds of the laughs that it was all in good fun. None had been offended, or found me wanting. If anything it seemed they were glad their new comrade was the type to say such a thing.

"Get the table ready!" the large man barked as he finished laughing, grinning wildly in anticipation as they cleared the table of cups. They also pulled the chairs away from it, likely so we could stand as to use our weight and torque as we arm-wrestled.

I didn't plan on winning. But it would be a good way to gauge how strong a human could be, particularly one as big as him.

Walking over to the table, across from the muscular man, I smiled as I held my hand out. "Branches," I said.

"Branches? Klime," the man took my hand, shaking it in introduction.

Nodding at the man, we both shifted our hold as to prepare for the wrestling. The crowd around us grew closer, and louder.

While holding the man's hand, and seeing just how big he was compared to me... especially since my arms were rather thin. They always have been. I realized this was the first time I've done such a thing since leaving home. I used to do this with mother and Vim often.

Yes. This would work. I'd be able to put up with Slip and all these odd humans here, like Thomas, for some time. Long enough to learn more of the world, and my place in it.

This was much better than being a merchant, working for the Society, or hiding like those at the Sleepy Artist or my siblings. This would be fun. Painful sometimes, but fun.

"Ready?" a man asked the two of us, and we both nodded.

"I hear you pushed a prison cart on your own. I want to feel what such strength is like," Klime said with a grin.

"I had only pushed it a few feet..." I groaned. Why were they all making such a big deal of it? We had brought those prisoners here, and it had started to roll away down the slight hill it had stopped on after

they had emptied it. It had rolled towards Slip so I had simply stopped it, and pushed it back up the hill a bit.

They all laughed a bit, and I sighed and decided to lose. I'd hold a bit as he tried to win, but then give up and let him win. I'll do it in a way that lets him think I'm no pushover, but nothing as special as he thinks I am. To squash these stupid rumors.

My mother had warned me about standing out. Vim had ordered me not to. My father begged me not to.

And I knew they were right. It wasn't good for our kind to stand out. Humans liked the strong and the unique, but only to a point. And only until they grew to fear them... so...

Time to lose. Proudly. Like an owl would.

"Go!" the man slapped the table, loudly, and we were suddenly arm-wrestling.

Then I failed immediately by breaking the man's arm.

Chapter 422 Wars

I had wanted to learn about the world.

Not just the world itself, or the humans... but the true world beyond the trees. The world that didn't exist in stories. The world my gentle father avoided to speak of. The world my mother cursed. The world the protector... protected us from.

But I had not wanted to learn about it this way.

Kneeling down, I felt strangely weak as I stared at Slip's still face.

"I'm sorry Branch. So... so sorry..." Klime whispered behind me. The large man shifted, and the wet ground made odd sounds as he did.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed it out as I reached over to touch the woman's face.

She was cold.

But at least she looked at peace.

"Who else...?" I asked softly as I glanced around. Slip wasn't the only body lined up here in this mud. There were dozens, and not a few were covered in sheets or blankets.

"Sammy. Plieter too, and his sister. I... don't think anyone else from our group fell, but..." Klime went quiet, as if embarrassed. Likely was.

I sighed again, and this time it hurt a little. Sammy? Naft and her brother...? They had died with Slip...? I wonder where their bodies were.

"Anyone else hurt bad?" I asked. If we had this many deaths in one battle, there would undoubtedly be those who had survived... but only that, and only for now.

I heard the large man nod his head, since he still wore his thick leather armor. It made strained noises as he moved and shifted his upper body. "Several injuries. Welp lost an arm, and they don't think Vivi will survive the night. They're the worst. The rest have normal injuries. Broken bones and whatnot," Klime said.

By the dead gods, it was that bad...? It would have been faster to have been told who had survived unscathed then, from our little group.

For a long moment I sat there, staring at Slip's face. It was a little dirty, and she had a dried up cut on her cheek... but it was relatively unharmed. A rarity amongst such battles as this. I knew the reason many of the bodies nearby had been covered with blankets was because of how gruesome they had been, not because anyone here actually wanted to be pious or respectful.

Her cause of death was obvious. A half broken shaft from a spear was extruding out of her chest. I knew if I stripped her of her armor and clothes, I'd see that it lodged near her birthmark. It was one of those thick javelin-like spears, ones that were not thrown but shot from artillery equipment.

She had likely died quickly. If not instantly, at least in moments. A good death and likely why she didn't have a terrible expression frozen on her face as so many usually did.

Klime stayed quiet, but remained standing behind me. Even as people ran past, barking orders. The battle was over, we had won, but now it was time to secure the prisoners and gather wounded and dead. Usually people lingering, like we were, got yelled at.

No one did though. It was likely because of Klime. The large man was unmistakable, even at a distance. It made me wonder sometimes if he had non-human blood flowing in his veins. It was crazy such a tall, broad shouldered, man went battle after battle without getting hurt too badly. Usually men like him were targeted first by arrows and the cocky looking to make a name of themselves.

He was just that strong. That lucky.

Like me.

Patting Slip's head, I felt tired as I glance again around her. At all the bodies nearby. This was just one of the many places they were being gathered and placed. Some men were heading this way, pulling a horse along behind them. One that undoubtedly had a sled-like thing behind it, with bodies stacked upon it.

What was the point of winning if it cost this much to do so...?

It wasn't even as if we had been fighting for some great cause or reason.

We had simply been employed by one noble, to attack another. We had been hired to settle a petty dispute between two powerful families.

I wasn't even sure what the dispute was about. Likely something stupid. Honor or something.

"Go check on the wounded. Get them anything they need," I said as I slowly stood.

Klime didn't answer, or step away. I turned to find out why, and found him frowning at me.

"Klime?" I asked. Was he disobeying me, or something? Not something he did. Ever.

"You... going to be okay, sir?" he asked gently.

Oh.

I nodded. "Yes."

His frown deepened, and I knew it was because he hadn't believed me. I could read him rather well, which was rare for me. Usually it was hard for me to tell what a human was thinking about.

Actually... I'd gotten better at it, hadn't I? Likely thanks to the years with all of them, in the Silken Band.

How many had it been... anyway...?

Glancing back down at Slip, I hesitated as I realized she did look older. I hadn't noticed originally, thanks to the grime all over her face... and of course, how peaceful she looked. But I could see it.

She was old. Far older than she had been when we met.

"Klime..." I spoke up, as I tried to remember how long I'd known her. How long I'd been here, a member of the band.

"Boss?"

"How old was she?" I asked.

"Slip...? I... don't know, sir. A little older than you, I'm guessing."

That was no help. I wasn't as old as he thought I was. I was older than most of them combined.

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"When'd we join...? How long ago?" I asked instead, choosing a different path to my answer.

"About six years ago...?" Klime answered.

Six...?

That was all...?

Maybe dying aged you quickly, or something.

Why had I never noticed before...? How many hundreds of people have I killed? How many thousands have died around me?

I really should pay more attention.

While staring at Slip, I noticed an odd blurriness. I blinked a few times, wondering if something had gotten into my eyes or not... but realized after a moment what was wrong.

Reaching up, I wiped the spot under my eye near my nose that I had felt it sliding down... and then stared at the glimmer of a tear on my fingertips.

Right...

Lowering my hand, I nodded. "She was one of those pagans, wasn't she?" I asked Klime.

"Yes Boss... From up north. Think they like to hang their bodies in the trees or something, but I don't know the actual process," Klime said gently.

I nodded. "Find someone who does. We'll at least honor her... and the rest too. How about the others?" I asked.

"I'm... not sure about Sammy. Never talked about such things. The siblings though, they had been part of that church in that nation to the south. The singing church one," Klime said.

Ah...! I knew that one. That was the Society's.

Those ones got buried proper. That'd be tough to do in this mud; we'll have to take them a bit away from here. Not too big a problem. "We'll... bury them properly. Let's do the same for Sammy, just in case," I said.

"Sure Boss," Klime said simply.

I noted his tone. He was unsure of himself, but not willing to argue or question. Either he found my sentimentality odd... or was just stunned and emotional himself.

Either way didn't matter. Every group in the Silken Band was allowed to subscribe to their own beliefs, and perform their own rituals. As long as they didn't interfere with the jobs assigned to them. Now that the war was over, and the battles won, we wouldn't need to worry. I'd be able to spend time and resources on our dead and wounded without hesitation.

Turning to face Klime again, I nodded at him. "Go get someone to gather up their bodies. I want them gathered before they just start burning or burying them," I said.

Klime hurriedly nodded. "Right Boss," he said and then turned and hurried off. He kicked up the slushy mud as he ran towards the tents nearby.

I watched him run for a moment, to see if I had not noticed any injuries. I didn't see any. He ran fine, even seemed to not be exhausted at all.

He definitely was not entirely human. Though not a non-human himself, he undoubtedly had our blood in his veins... no matter how thin it were.

Oddly enough I'd been keeping an eye out for others of my kind. I had expected to run into more of them out here. Maybe not on the battlefields, but at least... somewhere. Yet as far as I was aware, I'd not met any non-humans lately. At least, none that weren't members of the Society.

It made me wonder if I wasn't as astute as I hoped I was. I mean... sure, I didn't notice a lot of things. Such as Slip's aging. But that was for human stuff, wasn't it...?

Maybe I wasn't as good as I thought I was.

A part of me wanted to think I was strong. Wise. A good leader, and an even better soldier. But the reality was I didn't hold a candle to my mother.

Not as good a warrior as my mother. Not as wise as my father...

Maybe I was as bad as my siblings, maybe they were right. Maybe my way of life was wrong. Maybe I myself was wrong...

"Boss...?"

I blinked, and then blinked again when I realized my eyes were blurry once more, and turned to find Klime and a few of the other guys. I was glad to see familiar faces, ones that weren't cold and peaceful looking. A few had grimaces of pain or displeasure, but at least they were alive.

"We'll gather up Slip and the rest. If... you're ready for us to do so," Klime said, gesturing to her.

I gulped and nodded. "Yeah... yeah."

Stepping back, I felt oddly unsteady on my feet... for what was likely the first time since I was young. The last time I felt this dizzy was when Vim had been dangling me over a cliff, holding me by my ankle as he did. He had been upset that I had broken my sister's toy.

Somehow this was scarier.

Klime and the rest had brought some kind of stretcher and a bundle of blankets. They were respectful as they gathered up Slip, putting her on the stretcher. Once they got her away, they went a few dozen feet to the right and gathered up another body.

Sammy...? They had been that nearby and I hadn't noticed?

Jeez something really was wrong with me.

Once they got both the bodies situated, Klime walked over to me and nodded. "We'll take them to our tent, and then get a proper cart and take'em to that forest we passed on the way here. The one a day or so away," he said.

I nodded. Yes. "That sounds good. Thank you, Klime."

The large man shifted, glanced at our fellows... then looked back at me and nodded back. "Alright boss..."

He lingered for a moment, and then stepped away to join the rest and take the bodies away. I didn't join them, even though I felt as if I was supposed to. It took actual effort to not step forward, to walk alongside them as they quietly carried Slip and the rest towards the tents.

While they left, I glanced around... feeling suddenly lost.

Slip was gone.

She had been the only one to know what I was. Who I actually was. Being a pagan, and since I had felt... responsible for her, I had opened up to her more than I should have. And she had repaid that loyalty until the end. Not only had she kept my secret all this time... she had did her best to always help me. To sit and explain stuff to me, stuff I couldn't ask anyone else about since it would have revealed I was different.

Although not the first human friend I'd gained... I had no choice but to admit her death, her loss, was hitting me different.

But should it have...?

Not only did humans die quickly, aging faster than we owls... this was war. We lived as mercenaries. A lifestyle that didn't allow one to grow old in the first place.

If anything her lasting as long as she had...

"Didn't she... want to find a home...?" I whispered as I remembered.

She had. That had been the whole point. It was why we had joined the Silken Band, originally, back then. I had wanted a steady source of income, as to keep us fed. But the real goal back then was to have earned enough to buy her residence rights to a town.

Some noises drew my attention from Klime and the rest, so I turned... to find a cart being pulled over to the pile of bodies. A bunch of younger men hurried to unload the cart. Although they rushed, and looked scared and exhausted as they did, they didn't just toss the bodies onto the pile. They carefully laid each one down next to the other, respectfully.

I noted their insignia on their backs, dedicating it to memory. Their group was a good one, to treat their dead fellows like they were. No one would have been able to complain even if they had tossed the bodies like sacks of dirt.

Watching them for a moment, I wondered... how old was I?

To me they looked young. Almost too young to be doing the job they were doing. Most still had baby-fat around their cheeks. Usually such fat was long gone by the time they reached these types of battlefields. The lack of constant food took care of that usually, then the stress and heavy labor took care of what survived that.

Yet... honestly, was I any older?

I mean sure, I was over a hundred years old. To humans that was ancient. They spoke of their great-ancestors as if forgotten legends sometimes, and when you did the math you realized they were talking about people younger than me half the time.

But... what if one compared our ages in a certain perspective...?

If I could live a thousand years, or more, like my parents... then wasn't I in theory the same age as those boys there?

A child.

A genuine child.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly let out the air that tasted of metal.

"I need to distract myself," I decided.

Stepping away from the pile of bodies, I went to rejoin Klime and the rest. As to help them with the last rites of our fallen comrades... and also to busy myself.

There was no one left to swing a sword at, regretfully, so it would have to do.

Chapter 423 A Society's Letter

"Boss?"

Looking up from my desk, I frowned at Klime as he walked into my tent. He was followed by a hooded figure, who at first I didn't recognize... but then I saw the familiar necklace that was partly hidden by a scarf.

"Ponli!" I smiled as I stood, greeting the Society messenger.

Klime's obvious shock at my recognizing the young man was ignored as I reached out and took the messenger's hand.

"Branches. I'm glad I found you, your band like always is scattered all over again. Was worried I'd spend the whole winter looking for you," Ponli said with a cockeyed grin. He had a small scar on his face that had come from a boot.

My boot. From when he had been first set out on the road, on his first mission for the Society delivering letters.

"Klime, let everyone know not to disturb me," I said as our hands separated.

"Oh...? Sure Boss..." Klime looked a little hurt, but obeyed. He stepped away, ducking as he left my tent thanks to being taller than the flap openings.

Ponli and I watched him leave for a moment, and then I gestured for him to sit with me at my desk. I only had a small stool for him, but he wasn't a very big man so he easily took it.

"How've you been Ponli?" I asked as I went to start the fire. I could have asked Klime to do the little tasks, but I knew better than to do so.

Even if I wanted to trust him to such a degree... and even if he likely deserved it, having been so loyal all these years, I wasn't going to risk it.

I didn't mind having human friends, or comrades.

But I had learned my lesson. Harshly.

I'd not get hurt again.

No more Slip ups.

"Honestly rather good. I think I've found myself a wife. One of the reasons I'm glad to have found you so early, now I can return to her before she forgets all about me," Ponli said with a small laugh as I got the

fireplace going. I added a few logs to it, and then put the metal cook top over it. I stood, stepping away from the fire as I smirked at him.

"Did you now? That's great. What's her name?" I asked.

"Nessa. She recently got promoted to head clerk of the mail room in Telmik," Ponli proudly bragged.

I frowned at that as I went to get tea ready. Clerk...? Of the mail room?

Gosh the world was still so big, even after all these years. Whenever you think you knew it all, you were slapped in the face with the revelation that there were parts of the world you didn't comprehend.

I had never really thought about it, but it was obvious. Of course the letter system of the Society would need such things. Even the most basic of communication logistics needed record keeping... and the Society was far from basic.

"In other words someone well connected. Hopefully you impressed her good; I've come to fear women that are well-traveled and worldly. They always know better than me," I said, thinking of Slip.

Ponli chuckled as I placed the now ready teapot onto the fire. As the water prepared I gathered up some clean cups from a chest, handing him one as we waited for the water to heat enough.

Although I had joked, I had been serious. I liked this human. He had earned my trust, and not just because of the scar I'd kicked into his face.

I hoped he was happy. And would be happy. Not just because he was a member of the Society, either.

"I have three letters for you. And a message," Ponli said as he went to shuffle a bag at his side.

He put the empty cup down, and dug out the letters. I took them happily, immediately noticing not just my father's envelope on top.

Although I wanted to hear more about this clerk of his, I knew better than to waste his time. I placed the other two letters I didn't recognize down and went to opening my father's.

It like usual was many pages long. Telling me in detail about the family, the forest, mother's latest antics... such as some trip she and Vim had gone off on for months without warning, and finally a small request to come home. Which likely meant, even though he didn't say so, that I had a new sibling to come see.

That was really the only reason they ever asked me to come home nowadays. They knew I still hadn't found what I was looking for, and respected me for it. But I knew better than to not indulge such a request.

Family was important. Maybe I'll get lucky and this one will be a sibling I can actually get along with.

While still studying my father's writing, the pot on the fire started to make the familiar noise that told me it was ready. Before I could grab it though, Ponli was already moving. He went to finish making us tea, making me feel like a poor host. But I let it be as I sat back down in my chair behind my desk, and went to opening the other letters.

"Your group looks good. Lots of new faces," Ponli said as he made me a cup of tea.

"The Silken Band has been recruiting a lot lately. We've done well the last few jobs, so we got a healthy batch of them. Honestly I'd have preferred less, but... you know," I said with a shrug.

"No. I don't. Why would you want fewer members...?" Ponli asked as he frowned at me.

"Because if you grow too big too fast, you lose trust. We just got as many new recruits as we have veterans... since I just lost a good handful to the call of retirement. That means for every trusted member I got, I have one that hasn't been tried and true. Makes it hard for all of us, since now there will be doubts and concerns. Basically it's an emotional thing," I said.

"Hm... I wouldn't really know. The only new recruits we get are those already in the Society, from the orphanages, so we don't need to worry about such things. In a sense we already have that trust, I guess," Ponli said as he finished making himself a cup of tea too.

Oh... hm... I nodded a little, realizing that was likely correct.

Another aspect of his life I'd never considered.

"Honestly I'd prefer it your way. Not like we can though. Mercenaries don't really just... grow up out of nowhere, you know?" I said.

"I suppose," he said with a chuckle.

Smiling at that I went ahead and read my next letter. It was only a page long, and surprisingly was from a name I didn't know.

"Who is this...? Cathrine?" I asked him as I read the letter asking to meet. She lived near Telmik, and wanted me to visit her next time I was in her region.

"A newer member. She's a bird like you, she's looking for a mate," Ponli said simply as he sat back down, sighing as he took a drink of his hot tea in relief.

"Oh."

Feeling strange all of a sudden, I slowly put the letter down.

I'd heard about this. Never thought I'd get one though, being not just who I am... but whose son I was.

Either this Cathrine was eccentric, or desperate. Maybe both.

I knew I needed to respond, since it was the honorable thing to do... but I wanted to ignore it for a moment as I went to open my last letter.

This one was at least from someone I knew. One of the people that lived in Telmik. Link.

He was asking about the latest news, of the wars up here and whatnot. Like usual. I didn't get a letter from him every year, but it wasn't shocking or new.

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"What was the message?" I asked as I went to grab some paper, as to write responses.

"A prophecy. I've been told by the lady of flowers to warn you."

I sat up straighter.

Ponli nodded as he lowered his cup. "A pair of metal tongs will hit you in the head."

I blinked... and wondered what to make of that. "Wait... what? Is that it?" I asked.

He nodded and shrugged. "Yeah?"

"How's that supposed to help with anything!?"

I had shouted too loudly. I flinched as the tent flap opened up, and Klime's big head peaked in. "Boss?" he asked worriedly.

"We're fine!" I shouted.

He flinched and ducked back out, and I sighed and forcefully remembered that I should keep my voice down. Blasted man was loyal, but too loyal... if such a thing was possible.

Ponli chuckled at me. "That's all I was told. Not often I get to deliver a prophecy, but I've heard most are like that. Almost useless. Though it'll likely make sense to you when you need it to," he said.

Sure... pair of tongs... "Like... the metal pincher things?" I wondered.

Ponli shrugged. "Don't know."

Great.

Well, when the day comes I'm standing against a foe with a pair of metal tongs I'll know, I guess.

Maybe Vim and mother were right about prophecies, after all.

Sighing, I went ahead and started on my responses. I began with the one for Link, since it was the easiest. In fact it was what I had been doing, before Ponli showed up. I had been writing my reports for those greedy captains of the Silken Band.

"I delivered letters to your siblings too, by the way. On my way up here."

"Hm? Which ones?" I asked as I continued writing.

"Trunk and Seed. They joined up with a few other members and are traveling the Nation of the Blind and the coast, being merchants," Ponli said.

Oh...? "They had said they wanted to do that," I said. Last time I'd been home they had brought it up, surprised it took this long for them to do so.

"Kind of odd, your siblings. Trunk wouldn't even talk to me," Ponli said.

"He's shy. Like my father."

"Yet a traveling merchant," he said with a small laugh.

Right?

"All my siblings are weird. The only one that hadn't been is gone now," I said.

Poor Leaf.

"Hm... including yourself in that, are you? Most of the Society does find your mercenary life a hot topic you know," he said.

"I'm sure they do," I said as I finished Link's letter and went to respond to my father next. I planned to head home, but wouldn't be able to do so right away. It might take a year or two before I could do so, since I was responsible for this group in the band. Ponli would get him the letter before I'd see him.

Ponli sipped his tea as I wrote, and I heard a wagon pass nearby. The sound of Klime's voice as he barked orders to unload it told me it was the shipment of food we'd ordered from the nearby town.

While I wrote, Ponli listened to the sounds outside and hummed. "You're going up in the world, aren't you? Won't be long until you run the whole Silken Band, huh?" he wondered.

"Let's hope not," I said.

I didn't want to admit it, but I knew soon I'd have to deal with that problem. Several of the captains were starting to voice their desire to make me one too. To join them on their little council.

One did not turn that down for long before issues became serious. If you didn't accept promotions in mercenary bands, the leaders began to worry that you were planning on leaving. To take those who wanted to serve under you elsewhere, separating the band.

Which meant becoming an enemy. A threat. Because not only did you just take a bunch of qualified mercenaries with you, there was now a good chance you'd meet on the battlefield one day.

So far they'd only hinted at the desire to make me captain... but I knew in a few years that desire will turn into a demand.

Which meant I'd either have to become said captain, or leave.

"How long have you been bringing me letters, Ponli?" I asked as I thought about it.

"About twenty years now."

Hm... and it wasn't long after he brought me that first letter that I had been given my own group. Ten men to give orders to, under Thomas.

Now Thomas was dead, and I had nearly two hundred that I commanded. Not just a group, but a company.

Pausing in my writing, I tapped my feathered pen a bit as I realized my life as a mercenary was likely coming to an end. Maybe not in the next few years, but definitely in the next decade or two. For me though that was just right around the corner.

"Branches?" Ponli frowned at me, liking wondering what was bothering me.

I shook my head, deciding to keep my worries to myself. "Are you heading straight back to Telmik?" I asked as I went to finish my father's letter.

"No. I'll be heading eastward a bit, passing through Twin Hills. Vim recently took a family there, we're supposed to keep tabs on them in case they don't like it there," he said.

"A family...?" I asked.

"Of foxes, I guess," Ponli said with a shrug.

Huh... foxes and snakes. Funny. Wonder what those old snakes thought of that. They were kind people, but I had not thought them willing to let others live with them like that.

"You know them well, don't you? They're near your home after all," Ponli said with a knowing nod.

"Kind of. I spent some time there when younger, to be taught how to live amongst humans," I said.

"Huh... so you guys actually do that. Makes me wonder what those who don't associate with humans are like, for you to need such training," Ponli said with a chuckle.

"It's better if you don't know," I said simply. There were plenty of those types still left in the Society, though not as numerous as before.

They'd kill him on sight, member of the Society or no.

Finishing up the letter for my father, I sighed as I folded it up properly... and glared at the last one. The one from that woman.

"Did you meet her?" I asked.

"Who?"

"This woman. Cathrine?" I asked.

"Oh. Yes? She's pretty. She has feathers in her hair, they're this silver color," he said with a point to his head.

Silver...?

For a moment I wondered what to think or say. I mean... I wasn't going to lie. I was interested.

Not only was this the first letter like this I've ever gotten, I couldn't deny the fact that I too had the desire to find someone. After Slip's death, I've realized that I missed the relationship we had built. I had always considered her a friend, being a human as she was I'd not indulge any further than that, but today I realize we had something more than that.

I'd not told anyone else here that I wasn't human. Only Slip had ever known. But even if she hadn't known, we had been closer than I was with anyone else today. Klime and the rest were wonderful people, utterly loyal beyond belief, and I did see them as friends not just comrades of arms... but... well...

There was no comparing the two types of relationships. What I had been with Slip was far more important than what I had with the rest.

I missed it. That strange feeling. I had felt calm around her. Comfortable. Even when she had been teasing me and annoying.

To the point I almost didn't want to even think about her. It hurt to do so, even though she had died years ago.

Though... would I be able to have such a relationship with this bird...? She was just looking for a mate, wasn't she? Sometimes that meant all they wanted was children. And once that was accomplished we went our separate ways.

That wasn't what I wanted. Was it?

I groaned as I realized I needed time to think about this. To debate it, and weigh my own desires. I'd thought of it, of course, but rarely and never too deeply. I was too busy half the time to even think about such things.

But I didn't have time to think about it. Ponli had to go. He had duties. Important ones. I might be able to get him to stay the night though...

"Do you want to rest, Ponli? The night?" I asked, kind of hopeful he would.

He though shook his head. "I'd like to get on the road if I can. Like I said, if I don't hurry home I might miss out on getting the love of my life," he said, rather seriously.

Although not happy to hear so... at the same time I was.

I was jealous. He was being serious. He had that look on his face, the same one he had back when I had kicked him. The look of a man willing to die for his desires.

Wished I knew what that felt like.

"Alright. Let me just finish this real quick then..." I said, deciding to just wing it.

I'd meet her. Was no harm in not, really. Mother would be happy if I did too. She's always asked why none of us have had any children yet for her to dote on.

Plus...

While I wrote a response to this Cathrine, I thought of my parents.

The demure and shy father, and the headstrong mother who was stronger than anyone I've ever met. Other than Vim, of course.

I wasn't sure if I wanted what they had yet, but... I had to admit...

It was close. Probably closer than I wanted to admit.

Plus... for a bird, creatures that were more like father than not, to reach out to me like this...? Maybe, just maybe, she'd be someone I can put up with. After all she had sent a letter to me, not one of my brothers. Or any of the other birds in the Society. There were even a few at Telmik, like Karma. Why pick me over him? Or any of them? Maybe she was more like me than not?

A little excited as I wrote, I tried to not get my hopes up.

"Going to meet her?" Ponli asked as I wrote.

"May as well."

"Hm..." he made a noise, but I didn't ask why or what it had meant.

Once done, I bundled up the letters and handed them off. Ponli accepted them with surety and confidence, putting them into his pack... and then we shook hands once more.

"Safe travels," I said.

"For the Society," he responded.

I nodded gently. "For the Society."

Chapter 424 Siblings Fowl

Walking through the street, I slowed as I rounded a corner and stared at the tall buildings.

This town wasn't as big as Telmik, or any of the other major cities, but it was still large. And a lot of the buildings here were several stories tall, at least three or four floors, and...

"Which one was it...?" I grumbled as I studied the row of buildings.

Why'd they all look the same? A few had shops on their first floors, which were open even during this rainstorm, but I couldn't remember which building my sister lived in.

Was it the second? Third? Damn it, this was why this nation needed to make addresses already. Why were some nations so bloody behind the others? How hard was it to just have a few numbers in front of a door or above a window? Really.

Giving up, I decided to ask one of the workers on the bottom floor. I knew in towns such as these, everyone basically knew everyone.

I hadn't wanted to draw attention to myself, and thus my sister, but it was better than just knocking on random people's doors.

Usually I'd smell her out, but this place stunk terribly of humans and the nearby river. I'd not be able to smell easily.

This was why we owls belonged in forests. Away from people. Surely.

Walking up to the first shop, I got the attention of a younger woman. She perked up at the sight of me, likely thinking I was customer, as I pointed upward. "Do you know if Crown lives in this building? Or one of the ones around here?" I asked.

"Crown? The pretty tall girl? She lives across the street, there," the woman answered smoothly, without hesitation, as she pointed behind me.

Oh. Darn. I was way off.

I nodded at the woman. "Thank you."

"Hey, you should at least buy something for the information!" the woman shouted as I walked away. I didn't stop walking, uncaring as she mumbled a complaint about me as I left.

Unluckily for her I was too broke for such a thing.

Approaching my sister's home, I was glad to find the shop at the bottom was closed. I rounded it, found the stairwell that led to the upper floors, and ascended.

She was on the third floor. I remembered that much at least.

Knocking on her front door, I waited patiently as I heard soft footsteps within. They rushed a bit, and then I heard the clanking of a lock... then the door only opened a finger's width... then shot open quickly as she realized who I was.

"Branches!" Crown smiled at the sight of me, making me feel a little strange as I nodded.

"Crown," I greeted my sister, and was glad to see she looked well.

That shop-girl had called her tall and pretty. I myself didn't see the pretty part, but I saw the tall. She had inherited our father's height, though not much else from our parents.

"Come on in! Before you get more rain in," she said hurriedly as she stepped aside, to let me in.

I nodded and entered her home, and upon doing so smelled her finally. I frowned at the smell, since I didn't understand why I hadn't smelled her outside. It was a strong smell, one unmistakable to noses like mine.

"How've you been...? Look at you, you look just like a mercenary, my gosh... I heard what you were doing, but didn't think you were taking it this far!" Crown said happily as she helped me take off the only bag I was carrying.

Like always she was an upbeat, happy sounding, girl. And very active. Once she got my bag off me she hurriedly went to helping me get off my jacket and stuff too.

It reminded me somewhat of Slip, which made me almost want to tell her to knock it off... but I kept my mouth shut as she helped me get out of my soaked traveling clothes and then invited me into her house proper.

Following her to the living room, I glanced around at the somewhat messy house... and wondered if all homes in cities looked like this.

There was a bunch of furniture, shelves, and a bunch of little random things here and there. She wasn't messy in the sense she had clothes everywhere, or dirt and garbage... she just had clutter. The kind of clutter that made me antsy.

"I'm surprised to see you! This is great, I was just crying the other night because I was lonely!" Crown said excitedly.

Shifting a little, I turned to look at my second youngest sibling.

Crying...? She wasn't joking was she?

Feeling terrible, I wondered what to say as Crown hurried to move the blinds to her window. She let in more light, though it didn't do much. The world outside was stormy and cloudy.

"What are you doing here? It's not often you come this far south anymore, right?" Crown asked as she went to reveal another window. A smaller one across the room, near the fireplace.

"I had a job nearby. Figured I'd come check on you before heading back north," I said, not telling her the full truth.

Honestly I'd come down here to meet Cathrine, the bird at Telmik. Or at least, that had been the plan. It was why I had purposefully taken a shitty job down here.

Shouldn't have done that. But... if my sister's earlier comment, and her strange sudden joy over seeing me, was as real as it looked... maybe this was hadn't been a wasted trip after all.

"You mercenaries sure do travel a lot. Trunk and Seed do too. They visited a few months ago, but they don't come this way much anymore. They've been sticking to the coast," Crown said as I went to sit in one of the chairs in front of her fireplace.

"They're still playing merchants are they?" I asked.

"They were going to buy a ship, with the twins, but decided not to. I guess Seed doesn't like them much, since the brother is always trying to get her into bed," Crown said as she went to light the fireplace.

"What...?" I found that to be unpleasant news.

"Hm. You'd not know, brother, but we owls are well desired! At least, she seems to be..." Crown said, her voice becoming a little soft as she spoke and lit the flames.

Studying her back, I saw beneath her thin garment the feathers hidden beneath it. They ran down her back, all the way to her rear. I'd be jealous if she didn't sound so sad all of a sudden.

When had my sister become so pitiful? I've always been a little... distant from them, since I didn't like how soft they were in the spine like our father, but I'd never really hated them. Not truly, at least.

They were still nest mates after all.

"So... you guys get invitations often...? You know, to meet others?" I asked carefully. I wanted to ask if she knew this Cathrine, since she likely did. A lot of the members in this region, here in the Nation of the Blind, knew each other. Knew each other well.

"Hm. Sometimes. I turn all of them down, but I know Seed meets each one. That's why she's traveling around with Trunk, she's looking for a husband," Crown said.

I blinked in surprise at that. I hadn't known that at all.

"I see," I said softly, unsure of what to think of that information.

Seed was the youngest of us. Barely fifty years old. And... she was already looking for a mate? And being so serious about it...?

"Why not that twin then...?" I asked, feeling awkward as I did.

Crown turned, standing away from the healthy fire as she grinned at me. "She doesn't like pushy men. She wants someone like father," she said.

Oh.

For some reason that hurt to hear. Was that why Cathrine had turned me down?

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"Is... that what you look for too?" I asked as my sister went to sit down near me. She pulled her chair a little closer to me before doing so, as if giddy and excited to talk with me. A first in a long time for me to be so welcomed by a sibling like this.

"Me...? Honestly I'm not sure what I want. There's a few men here trying to catch my feathers, but I've not decided on any yet," she said happily.

"Why's that?" I asked, hoping to hear more. Not just because I was interested in her love-life, but because I hoped it would reveal more of my own failures.

She hummed and frowned. "I'm still... debating, I guess?"

"Debating what?"

"If I should risk falling in love with a human or not."

Oh.

She had meant men around here, as in literally. Human men.

"Crown..." I whispered her name, suddenly worried for her in a new way.

She nodded quickly. "I know...! I know. But... well... it's hard, Branch. Our people are nice and all, but most don't want to settle down. They just want either you know what, or just children. They don't want to live with their partner, or join their parliament. To them it's weird," she said as she shrugged.

"Right... I've heard of that..." I mumbled, afraid to admit that was why Cathrine had turned me down.

So it wasn't just men, then. Or maybe she had just used it as an excuse to spur me. I'd never know, really.

I sighed a little. "Just... be careful, Crown. Humans are... well..." I hesitated a moment, since I realized I knew humans rather well now. Hard not to after decades of living amongst them.

"I know. I not only need to find one willing and able to overlook the fact I'm not human, but then I need to handle the harsh reality that they'll die before me. But... it's not like I'll live much longer than them, Branches. Look at me, I'm younger than you but I look older than you. I'm not as thick in the blood," she said with a point to herself.

Frowning at her, I wondered what she meant. "You look young, Crown? You look pretty."

She grinned, blushing a little as she did. "Thanks...! But I'm serious. You still look like a kid, almost. Like you're not even twenty yet. I got a mirror in my bedroom, I know what I look like Branch. I look older than you, trust me."

Huh... "I look young still...?" I asked as I reached up to touch my face. I'd seen mirrors of course, the Society had plenty, but I've never cared much to look in them.

"You do," she said with a nod.

"Too young, maybe? Do you think it'd turn off a mate?" I asked.

Crown frowned and sat up a little... studying me a little differently than before. "I'm... not sure? Though I might be the wrong one to ask. You're my brother, you know? I'd say you look fine...? A lot of women

like youthful looking men, too. Plus you got that mercenary look, what with your scars and stuff. I bet you're more popular than most think, aren't you?" she asked with a tiny smile.

No. Not at all.

Deciding to change topics, since it hurt a little, I gestured at her. "You still a teacher?" I asked.

She nodded happily. "Yep! I in fact get my own class in a few months. No more assistant bird here!"

"Oh? Congratulations...?" I nodded, glad for her... even if I wasn't sure what that meant. Did that mean all this time she hasn't been teaching her own class...? What has she been doing then?

Crown looked happy as she shifted in her seat, bringing her legs up under her as she did. She sat like a kid, reminding me of our youth, as she grinned wildly at me. "It's fun you know. Plus I get to pick out those who join the Society. I've found thirty three humans you know? I'm rather good at it!"

"Thirty three?" I asked. That was amazing.

She nodded. "Most go to Telmik, for one reason or another. My most recent find, a young girl able to smell our kind, was sent to Lumen."

"Smell our kind...?" I asked. What'd that mean?

"She was able to smell us. Non-humans. Not sure how, but Randle knew about it. I guess sometimes, some humans are born with the ability to tell us apart by smell."

"Oh... like how we do. She must have our blood in her veins," I said, understanding what she meant.

Crown shrugged.

Interesting though... I had forgotten all about picking out humans for the Society.

A few names and faces came and went, like Klime... but I decided against trying. Not only were they mercenaries, the types the Society didn't like much... Klime and the rest were older now. Too old, really. Klime had grown so old I now only used him for clerk work. He didn't even go on the field anymore.

"Still... I'm glad you're doing fine. Is this expensive? To live like this?" I asked as I looked around.

She had a nice home, really. Even if a little smelly, and messy. My own tent, the one we carried and set up and pulled down all the time... was nicer in a sense. Had better furniture and stuff, but I'd have preferred this over that I guess.

Not as good as home though.

"Kind of? To be honest I'd be struggling if not for the stipend we get. Teacher's don't make much. Lot of my co-workers are scrawny, which is rare for humans."

Was it...?

"How big is the stipend anyway?" I asked.

Crown frowned at me... and shifted again. She tilted her head in a way that made my heart flutter.

Father did that movement too.

"You... never get it? Really? Jeez, Branches. It's basically unlimited. You get enough per month to survive twice over, and get more anytime you ask. I've never needed to ask for any emergency funds, the extra I get over my expenses is so much I've turned down the stipend a few times in fear of having too much in my home at once," she said.

Feeling sick over hearing that, I decided to just... forget it and change topics.

I was a captain of one of, if not the, biggest and strongest mercenary bands up north. Yet I was broke. Or at least, damn close to it.

Yet this was the life I'd chosen.

"Does anyone ever visit...? Other than our siblings?" I asked.

"Parents do. Vim does sometimes, he was here a few months ago. He had Oplar with him. She's fun. Every so often Randle visits, but I mean... he's not visiting me, he's just checking on the church and the orphanages here. The schools. I've been visited by others throughout the years too, a couple years ago a man visited to see if we'd be able to become mates. I didn't even let him into my house," she said.

"Why not?" I asked, not sure if I was glad to be back on this topic yet or not.

"He was a sleazebag. I'm glad I didn't. I found out later Vim banished him because he was caught buying human slaves," she said.

I sat up because of that. "Him...! I heard of him! Vim visited after that, he was in a foul mood because of it."

She found that really interesting. "Really? Did he have him with him?"

"No? He was banished, remember?" I said. Didn't I just tell her he visited me after the fact?

"Oh. Right..." Crown frowned and nodded.

"Makes you wonder sometimes, doesn't it? Buying slaves... I mean, we sometimes get them. Either as spoils or after a battle. So I know they're a thing, but still," I said.

"Hm...? What do you do with them?"

"Nothing? We let them go. You know the Society's rules."

"Right..." Crown nodded, and smiled in a way that told me she was glad to hear it.

Really, what'd she think? That I'd profit off them? Vim would beat me if I tried. Then after he was done, mother would finish the job.

There weren't too many rules about being in the Society, but that was one of them. Especially for me, since I was a mercenary.

Sighing a little, I leaned back and relaxed as I stared at the burning fire nearby. It was making the house a tad too warm, but I'd not complain. I knew that Crown wasn't as... adept at handling the harsher environments. She used to whine a lot back when we all lived at home, especially during the winter. She didn't like the cold, at all. One of the reasons she moved farther south. It rained a lot here, but didn't snow as often.

"Will you be staying long...? Can we have dinner and stuff?" Crown then asked.

"Hm? Sure." I nodded. I could stay a bit.

In fact... I was kind of hoping she'd let me. I wasn't sure why, but I was feeling rather...

Well...

Glancing at her, and the happy smile she had on her face as she swayed and hummed in joy, I realized rather quickly what was wrong with me.

I had been hoping that Cathrine, that bird in Telmik, would have said yes.

Her turning me down had hurt. In more ways than I understood. In ways I wasn't sure if I wanted to figure out, yet.

Plus I had a terrible decision to face when I went back up north, and returned to the Silken Band.

It was time I began to step down as captain. I was growing too important. Drawing too much attention to myself. I had gotten an earful in Telmik from the Chronicler about it, that she had heard too many rumors of some wondrous mercenary who had the strength of gods. Basically I was standing out too much.

But what was I to do then...? Go join some other band...?

It was why I had hoped that bird would have let me into her nest. It would have annoyed me something fierce to live in Telmik, but it would have been something to do. Something to look forward to. Something to experience.

"Branches...?" Crown said my name, and I glanced at her and found her happy smile gone. It had been replaced by one full of worry.

I coughed, clearing my throat. "Sorry. I think I'm tired," I said.

She smirked at me. "You look it. I have an extra bedroom, you know. Want to stay here awhile? I'd love to have you."

Could I...? "You sure?"

She nodded. "Yeah? You're my brother, for crying out loud. Sometimes our other siblings visit, or mother and father. One time mother stayed for almost a month you know? I was so surprised she lasted that long, but she did," she said happily.

Mother did...? "What for?"

"Not sure? She just... stayed here. I'll admit it worried me, since you know mother, but I enjoyed it. I really did," she said happily.

Huh... something must have happened. I wonder what.

Mother never lingered in human villages. Ever. For any reason.

Oh well.

"Then sure. If you're willing to put up with me."

"Only if you'll tell me all about what you've been doing! I've actually heard rumors about you, you know? The tall mercenary that rules the Silken Band!" she said happily as she hopped off her chair, running over to pat me on the shoulder before darting off out of the room.

"Deal. But only if you tell me in turn about all the suitors who've come to try and bed you, and why you've turned them away," I said, watching her go. Was she going to get properly dressed or something? Or maybe start cooking the dinner she spoke of?

Crown slid to a stop, before leaving the room. She turned, gave me an odd look as she turned her head in a way only we owls could. "What? What for?"

"To find out what I'm doing wrong, of course. I want to compare notes," I said, admitting it.

Crown busted out into laughter.

Chapter 425 Branches, The Mercenary

Walking through the field of tents and mercenaries, I wondered if this would be the last time I ever did this.

We just got done with a meeting. One that had been very important.

Our band, not just my group, but the whole Silken Band... all five thousand members, had been hired for one of our biggest jobs yet.

We were to capture a castle. One of the greatest sieges in recent years. A mighty feat, one we would likely end up failing to accomplish... based off the gloomy atmosphere of the meeting just now.

I sighed a little, glad to be done for the day. I honestly didn't mind planning and debating with the other captains, but by the dead gods did they sometimes annoy me.

They were all just human, after all. They couldn't think beyond their little heads.

To think I used to see them all as scary, super knowledgeable beings. The thought of being scared of a human today made me scoff and laugh, as if at some sick joke.

I couldn't though. Since I knew the truth.

Glancing around at the tents I walked past, and all the gleaming weapons and armor everywhere, I knew why I couldn't actually look down on them all.

Humans were terrifying. Even if stupid. Even if weak.

This group here, this Silken Band, could wipe our entire Society out if they wanted to. If they knew of our existence.

Or well...

Maybe.

I suppose it depended if Vim was involved or not.

I hummed at that thought, wondering how easily the fortress we were about to throw thousands of soldiers at to conquer would fall if we had Vim. a single man would change the whole thing.

Right now it was likely a fifty-fifty shot of winning. But if I had Vim...? If he was here, and willing to fight alongside me...?

The idea of failing wouldn't even be a thought. It'd no longer be some grandiose plan, with months of work and planning behind it, but instead a simple afternoon. One we could finish up swiftly enough to be back home in time for supper.

Smirking at the idea, I entered my section of the tent ocean. My colors, my flags, began to appear as I headed for my tent.

"Sir!" some men stood at attention as I walked by, but I ignored them. I was in no mood to talk to anyone at the moment.

Plus if I did I'd get in trouble.

Hurrying into my tent, I sighed in relief to find mother still here.

She sat at my desk, looking over whatever report I'd recently received.

"Did anyone bother you?" I asked as I went to take off my cloak. It was too thick and heavy inside this tent. Mother hadn't had the fire pit going, but it was still warm in the sun.

"No? Your men obey orders well. That Klima kept them all away," Mother said as she kept her eyes on the report.

Good. Klima was old, but not useless.

"The battle is on. We march in the morning, and will be there within the week," I said.

"I see," Mother said as she put the report down and went to read another.

Feeling a little judged, I decided to let it be. I knew mother wasn't being callous... she was just this type of person.

Once she made a decision, she stuck to it. Come hell or high water. And she'd decided already to help me do this, and that was it. There was nothing else to talk about. Not at least about the decision, or the battle itself.

"Do uh... do you need anything? Want armor or something?" I asked carefully as I went start the fire at the pit. Not for warmth, but to make something to drink.

Mother didn't like alcohol, so I needed to make tea.

"No? I told you, I'll not participate. I'll stay out of it until you're ready to come home," she said.

Right... she had said that. She planned to stay back, away from the battle itself, until I came to her. To leave the Silken Band.

My plan was to do it a week or so after the battle started. Or at least, right before it ended. In victory or defeat, it didn't matter. I wanted to slip away, and leave, while the battle was at its peak. When most soldiers died.

To put my rumors to rest. For good.

For the Society.

"You know, Branches..."

I turned a little, pausing right before starting a fire, to look at my mother. She looked up from the desk, to me, and I didn't really like the look on her face.

It looked a little like when Leaf had died. That look of sorrow, or rather, the look that tried to hide the sorrow.

Mother had never cried in front of me. Ever. Not once. But I knew better than to think that meant she didn't have such emotions or feelings.

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"Yes, mother?" I asked carefully.

"You sure you want to do this...? You enjoy being a mercenary, don't you?" she asked.

Oh.

"Well..." I hesitated, and turned to stand up and face her. This was a conversation that should be had face to face, not while I was distracted. Let alone over a measly fire.

"I know you think you need to do this, because of what the Chronicler said... but don't let them choose for you, Branch. They're stupid. Do what you want to."

I nodded. Yes. I knew that. Mother had already said similar, when she had arrived yesterday.

"Right... but... well..." I shifted a little, feeling like a young kid again.

Mother held my gaze, waiting for me to find my nerve. I wanted to groan, since I really should be better than this by now. By the dead gods, I was several hundreds of years old... and I was a hardened warrior! I'd been a mercenary for most of my adult life!

"Crown... how is she?" I asked.

Mother blinked, and sat up straighter. "Broken. She had loved that man."

I nodded. Yes. I heard. My lovely younger sister, the only one out of all of them to treat me kindly and not shun me, had recently lost the love of her life. The man she had planned to marry. A human man, but still the one who she had given her heart to.

"I... don't want to end up like her," I told mother, honestly.

Mother frowned at that. "Like Crown...? Are you saying you love one of these mercenaries?" she asked as she glanced to the door, as if wondering if the person I spoke of would appear.

I smiled and shook my head. "No! No, mother. I just... I fear if I stay like this, like I am, then I will end up like her. Broken. Not so much over love, I guess, but... the result would be the same. I fear if I stay a mercenary, I'll end up wasting my life. Or at least, feeling like I did."

My mother's frown deepened.

She didn't say anything, so I decided to better explain. If anything, for myself.

"Basically... I want to try a different lifestyle. Maybe find a mate myself...? Or maybe just... do something different? I don't know. Maybe I should try and reach out to my siblings again, to rebuild my relationship with them," I said.

Mother sighed at me. "I'd never tell you not to do what you want, son... but you sound like you have no idea what you want," she said.

"I know. It's true."

"Is this because that bird turned you down? That Kathrime?"

"Cathrine. And... no? Yes? Maybe?" I said, gosh she knew? How embarrassing.

Mother scoffed. "That woman wasn't worth you, son. She's a harlot. Don't feel bad."

Harlot...? She hadn't seemed like that. Though that might just be mother being spiteful. She was like that, when it concerned us her children.

"All the same... I want this. Plus it's time. They're all starting to really notice that I don't age. Klime and the rest have obviously noticed, but don't care, but lately some of the other captains have too. Usually we have so many people die, and come and go, that no one lives long enough to notice... but we've become so big that the upper leaders aren't being replaced as often anymore," I said.

"Yeah, because of you."

Flinching at that, I nodded. Right.

I wasn't really sure if I alone was really making that big a difference... but I had no choice but to admit I was definitely making some kind of an impact.

I wasn't human, after all. Plus I was my mother's son. And I had been trained by Vim too.

Mother shifted a little, putting her head on her balled fist as she studied me. "So... you want a wife?" she asked.

Blushing a little, I shrugged. "Maybe...?"

She smiled at that, and I was a little glad to see it wasn't one of her teasing ones. She wasn't disappointed, she looked actually happy for me.

"Your father will love to hear that. He's been whining something fierce about our severe lack of grandchildren," she said.

I wanted to mention she herself had been complaining about it lately, but didn't. I knew better.

"I had been hoping Crown would have been the first," I said gently.

"Hm... it would have bugged me for her to have given birth to a human's child, but honestly I'd have preferred that over this..." she admitted.

Right... "Has she gone home yet?" I asked.

"No. But I plan to bring her home once I can. Windle thinks we should leave her alone, he says those with such broken hearts usually find someone else really quickly if you just let them be," she said.

Father said that...? "He would know, I guess," I admitted.

Mother scoffed at that as I returned to lighting the fire. I got it lit, and went to prepare the tea. As I did Klime peaked his head into the tent.

"Sir...? May I interrupt?"

"Come in Klime."

He did so, carefully... and I noticed the way he was doing his best to not look at mother. He kept his eyes on me, and I smiled at my old friend. He looked withered. Over the last season he had lost a lot of his weight, likely from some kind of sickness.

Another reason to leave. I didn't want to see him die.

"Captain Flour has requested a meeting with you. In an hour," he said.

I nodded. "I'll be there. Thank you."

Klime nodded... and then glanced carefully to the other side of the tent, at mother.

She didn't say anything to his look, but he still flinched as if she did and he coughed and looked back at me.

"I'd say don't be scared, but you should be. Mother is dangerous," I said.

"Hey...? I'd not hurt your men," Mother defended herself.

Klime shifted, and looked as if he wasn't sure if he should smile or worry.

"Thank you for making sure she's not bothered. Please keep doing so, as you can," I asked of him.

He nodded. "Of course, sir. Um... shall I prepare your dinner? Anything um..." he glanced at mother, and I knew it was because he wasn't sure what to say or ask.

"Please. Something hearty. In fact why not prepare a feast? For everyone?" I suggested.

"Oh...? You sure, sir?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Go ahead. Let everyone know, and get them all prepared," I said.

"Right away!" he sounded excited, and hurriedly left.

"A farewell feast?" Mother asked gently.

I nodded. "Was going to do it the night before the battle, but sometimes such things go awry. We might get there and get sent straight into battle, no time to drink and eat," I said. It happened more often than not, since we traveled a tad slower than other groups. Being bigger.

Mother hummed at that. "Make sure you make the food for us, son," she reminded me.

I nodded. I knew she'd say that, after having said such a thing to Klime.

Mother didn't eat anything made by humans. Ever. Never would, never has.

"I know. I'll handle it after my meeting."

"Flour, was it? A woman?" she asked.

"Yeah?"

"She worthy of being your wife?" she asked.

"She's human," I said as I stopped preparing the tea, to look at her.

Mother met my eyes, and smiled. "That's my boy."

Chapter 426 Sierra and the Summons of the Parliament

The world was getting odder again.

Watching the caravan pass by from above, I chewed on my strip of dried meat.

More people. More money. More mercenaries.

The town was growing quickly. How was it the humans knew this was going to be a place of importance...? I mean sure, they found silver and gold or whatever... but weren't there lots of such mines throughout the world? Most of them didn't have huge towns nearby. Why was this one going to be so special...?

No matter.

Studying the people guarding the wagons of resources, I tried to tell if I recognized any of them.

I didn't, but knew it would only be a matter of time. It's only been a few years since I left the Silken Band, so I knew there was a high chance I'd eventually run into those I knew. I wasn't sure yet what I'd do when it happened, but was hoping it never did.

Swallowing the piece of meat I'd been chewing for longer than I should have, I glanced at what was left of the stick of dried meat.

Was it bad...? It didn't taste wrong, but it was way too firm. Unnaturally so.

I shrugged, and plopped the rest into my mouth. Oh well.

"Watch it!" a man in armor shouted at a pair of churchmen. They had drawn too close to the wagon he was walking next to. He thunked one of the church-robe wearers with the butt of his spear, forcing them away from the wagon and sending the one he hit to the ground in pain.

He scoffed at them and continued walking. The churchman got to his feet, wobbly, and went back to walking too. It was clear he was hurt, but he'd be fine.

I studied the man, dedicating his face to memory. Maybe I'll get lucky and he'll pick a fight with me later. I didn't like the way he had done that.

Men of power should never abuse it. If I had been in charge of these men, I'd have punished him severely for that.

Who were they anyway...? I didn't see any band insignia yet. No flags were flying; no emblem on any of the armor or clothes... not even the horses had colors on them.

Were they trying to hide who they were? Maybe they weren't a band at all, but bandits or something? If so they were rather well equipped for being so.

I doubted they were a part of the church at all, what with that earlier display, at least.

Sighing at them, I leaned away from the windowsill. I stepped back into my room, and wondered if I should hide up here until they passed or head on down.

A part of me wanted to find out who they were. It was not just interest either. My job was to guard the noble's mine here, and keeping an eye out for such threats was one of the things I was paid to do.

But did I want to get involved...?

"Maybe I'm just bored," I whispered as I decided to go get something to eat. I had eyeballed another strip of this weird meat, and realized it was because I was hungry. For more than just a snack.

Getting my shoes on, I got ready and then left my room. I lived on the second floor of a smaller building. The first floor was a storeroom for a nearby barracks, so I didn't have any neighbors... and I liked that. It was why I paid extra for it.

I'd arrived in this town not long ago, having accepted the job to be a guard for a nobleman. Somehow or another he found me likable, and now I was basically the guard of everything. I wasn't in charge of the guards themselves, there were others for that, but he wanted me to watch over not just his house anymore but the whole town. His mine especially.

That was fine. I didn't mind this. This job, this town, this lifestyle... it was somewhat similar to my life as a mercenary, but far enough from it that I didn't feel like I was doing the same thing again. I think it was the fact I was staying in one location, and not traveling around, that really made it feel different though.

"Aye Branch! We're having a drinking competition tonight, you in?" a loud voice asked as I passed a small eatery. The men sitting at one of the few outside tables waved at me to join them, as I waved them away.

"Not tonight," I said as I left, before they could bug me further.

Yes. That was one of the problems here. People were too familiar with each other.

This was a new town. Not just in my eyes, but the human's too. It had been settled a year or so ago, and so most of the residents... well, all of them really, were newcomers.

Most weren't even working the mines, which brought this town here in the first place. Most worked for all the supporting businesses that relished on the mine's wealth that it spewed. Restaurants, clothes, craftsmen, and so much more. Thanks to nobles moving here, there was even a growing market for the finer luxuries one usually didn't find in distant towns such as this. There was a statue carver that recently arrived, not far from my house. The man chiseled statues for a living.

And they were expensive too. I had gone to find out how much they cost, thinking of sending one home as a gift to my mother, and was sickened by how much he wanted for one. It would have taken me months of pay to afford it.

"If I took that stupid stipend, I could," I whispered angrily.

Really, why was my pride so annoying? Everyone else took money from the Society. No one found it odd, or weird. It was why it existed, after all.

Hell, recently one of those traveling merchants came here. They had the Society's emblem. That guild in Lumen. I could have asked them for money, using my password. I had nearly done it, but was glad I hadn't.

It'd make life easier, sure. But then what was the point...?

At least, that was what I told myself.

I rounded a corner, stepping onto the street that my house overlooked. The caravan was farther down the road, heading deeper into town. I studied them for a moment, debating if my hunger was more important or they were.

Before I could decide, my feet were taking me towards them.

I glanced around for the churchmen that the man earlier had hit with a spear, and didn't find them. But as I walked through the street after them, I heard people whispering about the newcomers.

"Another nobleman," someone said with a hush.

"Rude one, at that," their friend responded.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Hm. Someone had recognized something to have made such a connection, maybe.

I didn't know nobles. Although they were the ones that typically hired mercenaries, I myself hadn't ever dealt with them. We dealt with their servants. The people they sent to deal and negotiate with us. They rarely, if ever, came themselves.

Supposedly during the wars the nobles had hired mercenaries directly. Something to do with mercenaries judging their chances of survival on the noble who hired them. But that practice was long gone. Or well, likely abolished. On purpose. By those very nobles we used to judge.

I couldn't imagine a noble being awe inspiring enough to rely on. But mercenaries were a superstitious lot, so it had likely just been pure fallacy. Not something actually reliant on reality.

It didn't take long for me to catch up to the caravan, what with them traveling slowly through town thanks to the wagons.

Following them for a bit, studying them and listening to the conversations coming from them, I decided the gossip was right. They were just servants of some noble.

Explained their haughty rudeness.

Oh well. Even if rude it wasn't like I could do anything about it then. Another con of working for a noble, was that you were expected to play their games. Stupid games. The type that made even me regret partaking in them.

And one of those games was to not interfere in another noble's business. Not until given orders to, at least.

Since my interest in them was gone, I went ahead and got food. I ate, walked around a bit, checked on a few places in town that I frequented, and then ended up checking the mine.

It was busy, like always, but by the time I reached it the place was quieting down. They stopped working once the sun went down, which I never understood.

They mined underground. Into the earth. Where it was dark as can be... why did it matter if the sun went down up here, then?

But no matter. Once I verified the town was fine I went ahead and headed back home.

Maybe I should partake in that drinking competition. I was trying to not stand out too much, as to not replicate my earlier mistake... but at the same time I also had another goal while here.

I wanted more than just a new job. I was looking for whatever I felt like I was missing.

Father thought it was my desire for a wife. Mother hadn't really told me what she thought of my strangeness, but she supported me all the same. I'd not seen Vim recently, he's been busy. Supposedly he had some predator following him around, trying to woo him. I was jealous.

Walking through the streets of the town that was quickly becoming noisy, as people stopped working and began to prepare for dinner and drinking, I wondered how my siblings were doing.

How was Crown, I wonder? Last I heard she still hadn't gone home, even though still depressed over her recent loss.

I wonder how that felt. To have loved someone, cherished them so much, that even years later you couldn't get over it...?

When Slip had died... I'll not deny I had acted oddly. But I don't think it had bothered me for that long, or that deeply. Though I suppose I still did think of her, didn't I? That meant something, didn't it?

"Branches!"

Slowing, I paused and turned to see who had shouted my name. I didn't recognize the voice, nor the face that approached.

Frowning at the woman, I tried to not get too excited. What was this...? Was she going to flirt with me?

But no. Once she was near, I realized who she was. She had the necklace of the letter carriers.

"You are Branches, right? You look just like Bark!" the woman said with a grin.

"No I don't," I grumbled. Did I really? Please tell me I didn't.

She giggled at that as she waved at me. "I'm kidding. You do look alike though. I'm Sierra, I work for Oplar," she said.

I nodded. "Figured. How are you?" I asked.

She tilted her head at me, and I wondered if my question had been weird. "I'm fine! I'm glad I found you, I was told you set up camp here but wasn't sure how to find you. I'm glad I saw you just now," she said happily.

Right... "Surprised you recognized me," I said. I'd never met her before. Even if I did look like my brothers, it was quite a feat to have recognized me from a distance like that. No wonder she... wait...

I frowned at her. "You the one who can smell us?" I asked.

Sierra grinned happily. "Yep! Your sister took good care of me, I'm really thankful for her. I um... well..." she hesitated, and I wondered what was wrong. She then shrugged softly. "Sorry. I just felt bad for her. I heard what happened... I've been meaning to visit her, but haven't had the opportunity lately. They've been having us work like crazy for some reason, not sure what's going on, but yeah," Sierra said as she sighed.

Right... Crown had said she had found her in the orphanage... I found myself smiling at that. I glanced around, realizing we were outside. Although no one was nearby, and listening, I knew how well sound carried.

Still... busy? The ones who delivered mail, or well everyone in the Society, did seem busy often. But not so badly as that... maybe something was happening? Was that why I'd not seen Vim lately?

"Um... are you alone?" I asked, trying to not sound too odd as I did.

"Nope. I travel with a friend. We're staying at an inn, the one near the center? Near that fountain?" she said with a point down the street.

Right. The main inn. One that cost more than I could afford.

Damn. Even the humans got to enjoy such things, thanks to being a part of the Society. Really, why didn't I just indulge in it too?

Still... a friend? Of course. That's too bad. She was cute.

"Want to have dinner with us? I got a letter for you, from Windle," she said as she went to digging at her bag at her waist.

Oh...? Neat. "Sure. I'll have dinner," I said as I took the letter she gave me. Even if she wasn't available, it'd be fun to hang out with her. If even just over dinner.

"Cool! I've been trying to meet all of you, so after you I only need to meet Seed. I met Trunk once, but he had been alone so I never got the chance to meet her," she said with a laugh.

Oh...? "You've met Sap...?" I asked. That was crazy.

"Yeah...? Just recently. She didn't really talk to me though," Sierra said with a small smile.

I nodded at that as I opened father's letter. Sap didn't like humans. At all. Like mother. So that was no surprise. At least, not as surprising as the fact she had met her in the first place.

Glancing at my father's, somehow shorter than normal letter, I paused before reading it.

Looking back at the mail girl, I found her happily staring at me. As if glad to see me read the letter she had brought all the way here, protecting and cherishing it as she did. She looked adorable with that smile.

"You married?" I asked.

Sierra shifted, and then grinned at me. "No? Wait... are you asking for real...?"

I nodded.

Sierra's smile turned into an odd one as she blushed. "Thank you... really. But I joined the convent. I'm basically a nun, I um... we're not allowed to get married, or have relations. Not like that. Sorry."

Although saddened by the response, I wasn't hurt or surprised. I had expected her to turn me down, after all. Everyone did.

The only reason I had asked was because she could smell us. It was why she had realized I was who I am. A non-human.

That meant she had our blood in her veins... even if it was very thin. I could have been okay with that though. Plus she was cute, and I kind of liked the idea of traveling around with her and delivering letters. That might have been a fun life.

Plus... I mean... well...

My sister had chosen her. Picked her out of hundreds of children, in that orphanage. To join the Society. That meant she was a good person. A worthy person.

Oh well.

"I see. That's too bad," I said simply.

"Mhm..." she didn't say anything as I went to read my father's letter.

Reading father's letter in full... I frowned as I read it again.

Did I just read what I thought I did...?

As I read again, I confirmed it.

"Time to come home, son. A vote has been called, denouncing Vim, and your mother has possibly found you a wife. The parliament has been summoned."

The knowledge of a vote to denounce Vim was startling, for many reasons, but my eyes couldn't help but read the last bit again. And again.

A wife...?

Mother has?

Strangely giddy, I decided to turn down the invitation for dinner as to go pack my bags.

Time to go home.

Chapter 427 Vim – A Spear for a Tear

Walking through the dark, I wondered how long it had been since I'd visited Celine's grave.

For some reason I couldn't remember the last time I had done so.

But I had to have, right?

"Probably not," I whispered admittedly.

I honestly was not a very emotional person. At least, not in that way. Even the gravestone I had made for my parents, at the Crypt, was something I only visited out of a strange sense of duty. I visited it because a part of me knew a child should do so. A son should revere his parents, especially one such as me. I had spent so many years helping carve and tend for all those graves of strangers, of members of the Society, that I had begun to feel guilty.

"You'd visit the graves of a bunch of animals but not us? Makes us less than chopped spleens don't you think?" Is exactly what my father would have said in that cocky tone of his.

Although I knew he would have said it purely as a joke, without any true intentions behind it, the thought of it had hurt. So I had gathered up that stone, the last brick from our home that still existed, and used it as a quasi-grave for them and made sure to visit when I could.

But graves of others...?

I could think of a few people, like Celine, who I respected enough to honor in such a way. My old vassal. Miss Beak. Lawrence's brother. Maybe Koff, if I could ever remember where I had buried him.

But sentimentality was not something I indulged in. It made me feel like shit. It reminded me how powerless I actually was, and always would be. Though, maybe instead of being callous I was instead just a coward. Maybe it wasn't that I didn't feel enough for the memories of those I loved, but instead that I didn't like spending time thinking about them. Since it hurt to do so.

I didn't like it when life hurt. It was odd of me to even realize in the first place that I was doing things that weren't normal.

Yet lately I'd been doing a lot of things that I'd consider strange or out of character.

It was very out of character of me to be acting so odd lately. Visiting Celine's tomb. Gathering up the stuff I've hidden and stashed over the years. Showing Renn that safe house I'd made in the crystal caves. Even my recent openness with so many members, talking and speaking about things I'd not done so in centuries, was odd.

Shifting the spear, I sighed as it rolled along my clavicle as I pondered my recent changes. Like always, even though I'd not held it in hundreds of years... it felt as if I'd never abandoned it. As if I'd been carrying it this whole time.

As the spear rolled along my shoulder, as I shifted it along my hand and arm, I wondered if I'd visit Renn's grave.

Where would I bury her...? How would I do it? Would I make a beautiful tomb for her, a proper crypt, or would I just put down a simple headstone, as I had for my parents...?

For a small moment I thought of a few locations that would fit her grave-site. Places deep in forests. Littered with flowers, and adorned by sunlight yet also all the other elements. Places that got as much sun as snow, and as much rain as wind. Since such places are where she seemed to feel most at peace. She has gotten a lot better at handling the hustle and bustle of cities, but no matter how much she smiled and hid the truth I always noticed it. She hated crowds. Hated loud noises, and especially so the stink and clutter of large cities. She didn't like open prairies or fields either, she always was a little stiffer in the tail while we traveled through places one could see for miles and miles with ease.

She liked the dense woods. But strangely didn't like the ones always covered in snow, where she had been born. And she seemed to like the rain. So a nice little resting place, hidden away in such nature would fit her. Plus it'd let me visit without being bothered.

But then I thought of actually standing before such a thing... staring down at the place I'd buried her, and then the darkness rumbled.

Going still, I took a deep breath and pulled my thoughts as far away from that dark place as I could. I focused ahead of me, to the distant light at the end of the hallway, and clung to it.

"Don't," I warned myself.

Staying absolutely still, I didn't even roll or shift my spear as I just... stood still.

Calm.

Don't break anything.

Not only is this Celine's tomb, I was dead center under the Cathedral.

Hundreds, if not thousands of people, would die if I didn't be careful. Renn included.

"Don't send her to that grave so soon. And don't make this her grave, of all places too," I whispered at myself.

The world, if it heard me, didn't respond... and after a few long heartbeats... I calmed down a little and dared a single step forward.

Although I felt a little tense, my step didn't make the world cry out. No bricks broke. No roofs or walls collapsed. No cracks emerged to eat the world.

Breathing evenly, I continued walking through the remainder of the darkness... and silently praised myself for keeping the world in one piece.

"Well done, Vim," I told myself as I exited the darkness and emerged into a small hallway.

I glanced around, glad to see no one was here, and then walked over to the end of the hall. I pushed the hidden doorway open, sliding the giant fake wall of bricks along the rails it rested upon. I stepped out into the real hallway, and then turned to shut the hidden door behind me.

It slid close without a sound, not even a piece of gravel or dirt made noise as it shut. Once finished I brushed my hand off, since the wall itself had been dirty, and glanced at my spear.

The thing didn't gleam or glisten. Although it felt as smooth and polished as anything could be, not a bit of light wanted to reflect off it. It looked like silver, felt cold like steel, but I knew no material within it could be found on this world. Even I didn't have a name for it.

"How've you been?" I asked my old friend. The raggedy red cloth tied right under its sharp point dangled lifelessly as it gave me no response. Smirking at myself, I shook my head.

Walking through the underground of the Cathedral, I headed for the main exit. The one that led to the second floor, to the hallway that Randle's office was situated in.

He had asked me to speak with him before dinner. I wasn't sure exactly what time it was, since I'd been busy going around and talking to everyone and had spent the last half hour or so down here in these tunnels... but I figured it couldn't be too far from him wondering where I was.

Plus I wanted to talk to him quickly so I could then go find Renn.

I had a wonderful present to give her, after all.

"You better be nice to her," I said as I tapped the butt end of the spear against the stone floor. It didn't release a note, and only thumped dully.

Honestly I should have got this last time we were here. Her sword had broken back then, during her trip here with Oplar and Angie. While fighting some bandits, who had been trying to take advantage of misplaced townsfolk from the same fires that had taken Angie's family from this world.

She's been without a weapon this whole time because of it. She had a couple little knives, which in her hands could be deadly weapons, but they were not tools of war. This was.

But back then I'd been planning to teach her more hand-to-hand than anything else, and had known she'd be with me and Lilly for a time. Plus... well...

"I don't like carrying you," I told the spear.

When I carried this thing, calamities ended. Which in a sense was a good thing, until one realized that the only reason it ended those calamities was because I had needed it to do so.

"Honestly I've not needed you lately," I said as I thought about it. None of the monarchs, or enemies, in the last few decades had needed such a weapon. Though one could argue if I had this thing back during some of those moments, they would have ended quicker. Thus possibly saving a few more lives, possibly.

Frowning as I rounded another corner, I wondered if this was one of the reasons I was seen as a failure to so many.

I didn't carry this thing because of many reasons. But most of those reasons were personal. Which meant, because others suffered since I didn't carry this on me at all times, that I was allowing my own personal feelings and desires to impact and harm the innocents around me.

And now the only reason I had finally retaken this thing after all these centuries was because I feared Light or someone else finding it. After all if anyone knew where Celine's tomb was and how to properly get into it... it'd be her daughter. Plus it was the same daughter that wouldn't have hesitated at actually opening the coffin and ransacking its contents.

I'd only taken it to keep others from having it. And I was going to give it to my wife, because I liked the idea of her having a weapon not even the divine were safe from. Not because I planned to actually save anyone with it.

"I really am a bastard..." I mumbled.

Honestly I was having difficulties with favoritism at the moment. I had agreed, not just with Celine but with my very own mother, to always try and treat everyone equally. To never ignore the plights of those I barely knew, or didn't like, in favor of those I cherished.

Yet lately there was no denying that I've been failing terribly at that task. Not only concerning Renn, either.

In a sense this spear was further proof of that fact.

Grumbling at myself, I rounded another corner... and slowed a bit as I found the exit.

And the very person my mind's been on this whole time.

Renn and Angie were sitting on the stairs that led to the upper hallway, the one that led to Randle's office. They were talking lightly, and looked to have food and drinks that they were currently enjoying.

Although... a strange sight to see, it somehow also wasn't.

Renn was odd like this.

"Oh!" Renn perked up at the sight of me as I approached... but her face quickly furrowed as she realized what I was carrying.

"What's that?" Angie asked as Renn put aside a plate of what looked to be some kind of meat filled bread.

Renn stood and stepped down the last couple steps to my level, and smirked at me as I held the spear out to her.

She hesitated a moment, but took it. I noticed the way she had to quickly adjust a bit, since the spear had shot upward about an inch the moment she took it from me. She had misjudged its weight, likely having expected it to be as heavy as the spears we'd carried before.

"I promise this one won't break on you, ever," I told her.

Renn's ears shifted under her hat, and she grabbed the spear with both hands as to study it.

"Vim...?" she whispered my name as I watched her slowly understand what was happening.

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Angie finally stood, dropping a small piece of food in the process. She didn't even look at the thing as it fell down a few steps as she hurried over. She frowned at the spear, then looked at me and frowned even deeper. "Did it take you this long to get her a new weapon? It's been months since her sword broke," the young bison said with a faint hint of disgust in her voice.

Renn noticed and smirked at me as I nodded down at the young girl. "I know. But this one was worth the wait," I said.

"Is it...?" Angie didn't seem to believe me as I reached over and gently tapped Renn's knuckles. To get her attention.

She looked at me as I nodded gently at her.

"Keep it near you. Always," I said.

Renn's pupils contracted a little more than usual. Becoming elongated, showing off how cat-like they could become. I enjoyed the sight since it wasn't often they got so.

"I'll keep it safe. Forever," Renn then said, speaking with a rather lovely voice as she did.

"Hm...? It's to keep you safe, not the other way around," I said with a smile. How did she sound so adorable so spontaneously like that?

She shook her head as she tightened her grip on the shaft enough to be audible. "It's important. So I'll keep it safe, I promise."

I sighed at her. "That's not what I meant, Renn..."

Renn actually went and hugged the damn thing, which made even Angie sigh. "She had wept like crazy when her sword broke. Is it a cat thing? All I get is angry and annoyed when my stuff breaks," Angie asked.

"Usually no. Cats being possessive is usually a bad sign, since it means they're depressed or anxious," I said.

Renn giggled softly. "I can be possessive," she said.

Angie furrowed her brow. "If you two start flirting I'm going to throw up."

Smiling at her I nodded. "So. I'm glad to find you so quickly, since I still have things to do and I had wanted to give that to you before I trounced around the church with it, but why were you two sitting here having lunch? It's kind of dark and musky here," I said as I glanced up the stairwell. I could see the large wooden door that led to the exit. Some light was peering through it, since it was so old and worn.

"Tronss?" Angie whispered as Renn turned and stepped back over to the stairs. She bent down, picked up the plate that had been on her lap, and then turned and held it out to me.

I stared at the little snacks, realizing she was offering me one.

There were only a few left, at least on this plate. "You sure?" I asked gently.

"Yeah? I saved some for you," she said happily.

Hm.

Reaching over I took one of the breaded-wrapped meat things and put it in my mouth. It was a little cold, but it didn't taste too bad. Though I knew now I'd want a drink for the next little while, since it was a little dry. Renn happily smiled and nodded at me as I quickly ate the thing.

"Still... I'd been wondering when you'd show me it," Renn said happily.

"Show you what?" I asked as I swallowed. Had I ever told her of the spear before...? I couldn't remember doing so, but I might have. She sometimes connived details from me without me realizing it...

"You said you had put something here your mother had made. I figured since you hadn't shown it off, or pointed it out, amongst all those other trinkets we got earlier that you simply hadn't gotten it yet. Though I'll admit... I hadn't expected this, at all," Renn said as she tapped the spear with a fingernail.

Unlike the steel ones I'd made for us a few years ago, this one didn't ring out when she did it.

Renn noticed and frowned, and tapped it again. This time a little harder.

She...

Wait...

She realized that the spear was one my mother had made...?

How? Had I actually told her about it? In what way?

My mind whirled a little as I tried to connect the dots. Just how had she concluded it so readily...? Was that why she had smiled so strangely earlier? Why she had hugged the damn thing, as if it was a wedding gift? It was because she had recognized its history instantly?

A little disturbed, since I was once again forced to accept the fact that Renn's mind was a work of wonder and that I was going to need to be far more careful in the future, I did my best to not reach out and take the thing back from her.

All that would do is hurt her, and then that would just hurt me. Even if I now wanted to chuck that thing into space.

"Do I get a present?"

I blinked, as did Renn.... As we both turned and looked down at Angie.

Who was staring up at me with a rather serious look.

"Hm... what would you like?" I asked.

"Presents are supposed to be surprises," Angie said.

"They are," Renn agreed.

Well... they weren't wrong.

"Okay. But don't grumble at me if what I get you is dumb then," I said.

"I won't grumble. Not in front of you anyway," Angie said simply.

Renn giggled as I frowned at the young bison. "You're much more like your mother than your father," I said.

Angie smiled at that.

Sighing at the two, I nodded. "Okay. I need to go then. I got a few things I need to take care of, and..." I started to say but Renn hurriedly stood up straighter and gestured at me.

"Hold on! We were waiting for you!" she said quickly as she turned to put down the plate of food. Before she turned back around though she had quickly stuffed one of the last remaining snacks into her mouth. She turned back to me, covering her mouth a little as she mumbled through her chewing. "Angie has something to say."

Glancing at the young bison as Renn noisily chewed, the girl nodded up at me.

"I want your help."

Blinking softly, I relaxed a little and nodded. "I'm all yours."

Angie frowned at that, but nodded all the same. "I hope so. I want to save the children. Or... at least, protect them," she said.

The children...? "Do you mean the orphans...?" I asked, since they were the only children I could imagine she had any relation to at the moment.

She nodded stiffly. "Yeah! So you know about it already?" she asked excitedly.

"You do? Really?" Renn too said, no longer eating, as she brushed her mouth of crumbs.

"Huh...? No. I just assumed. What's wrong then? Why do they need saving?" I asked.

Angie calmed a little and nodded. "I overheard one of the church ladies, one of us, talking. They mentioned the end of the era of humans. And after that, Randle got in trouble and then he," Angie began to rattle off quickly but I had to raise a hand and hush her.

"End of the era of humans?" I asked stiffly.

Angie went silent with a tiny noise as she hurriedly nodded.

"Right! Isn't it such a weird thing to say!" Renn agreed with a strange voice of urgency.

Calming down a little, I frowned and held Angie's eyes. She was definitely thick in the blood. She was not looking at me as a child would, at all.

"Who said that?" I asked her.

"A woman with a white line in her hair," she said.

My eyes narrowed as I reached up and ran my finger through the spot Less had her birthmark.

Angie nodded with wide eyes "You know her!" she said.

"I do. That is Less. Landi's sister. She returned here with Light, and as far as I'm aware went with Light to Lumen," I said.

Angie didn't seem to care. "She said it! In a weird way too! And now Randle's getting banished, and the old ladies who run the orphanage are whispering about it shutting down and having to send the kids elsewhere!" Angie said, stepping forward as she shook her hands in front of her. They were tiny balled fists, as if she was getting ready to punch me.

She was rather worked up over this. An oddity. Bisons, at least her bloodline, were usually very stoic people. And in fact this might be the most emotion I've ever seen on the girl.

Though granted, I'd really only ever spoken to her a few handful of times. And never really about anything too emotional. Just the once I had asked about her dead family, from the fire, and although she had shed tears she had not actually cried or wept. Not aloud anyway. And not in front of me.

So...

"So, Angie, the kids aren't in immediate danger, right? No one's dying or being hunted at this very moment?" I asked, to be sure.

"Huh...? Oh... yeah? I guess so... but..." Angie calmed a little as she frowned up at me. I could see the poor girl's thoughts clear as day on her expression.

She was now worried I wasn't going to take her worry seriously.

I smiled gently at the girl, as to ease her worry. "I just wanted to make sure. It's one of my protocols, to triage. Basically I needed to know how immediate the situation is," I explained.

"Oh... okay," Angie nodded, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed Renn reach up to her hat to scratch under it. Her nail scratched at her head, and by the sounds of it her ears. She was anxious.

But she shouldn't be. Neither should Angie.

"That said you're right to worry. I'll need to verify some stuff, and be careful in how I do it, but it'd not surprise me if they are messing with the orphanages," I said.

"You'd be willing to help...?" Angie asked softly.

"Of course?"

"But...! They're not members!" Angie said quickly, as if to remind me of the fact. As if I'd not known in the first place.

Ah. So that was what was wrong.

I nodded. "They're not, yes."

"Then!" Angie shouted, gesturing at me as if I was crazy.

I smirked and chuckled. "I know. So odd, isn't it? The Society's Protector protecting humans, oh the terror and shame!" I said.

Angie's shocked expression quickly turned into one of doubt and unsurity as she tried to comprehend my words.

Wanting to reach over and gently pat her head, I decided not to. Angie seemed to be the type that would have been offended by it.

"Technically they're not members. That's correct. Though one could argue they all have the possibility, the qualities and criteria, to become members... that's also not enough to justify it. But, let's change the perspective a bit," I said as I raised a finger to the young bison. She nodded stiffly as I pointed at her, which made her eyes focus and narrow at my fingertip. "Let's say you asked me to protect your home. Or your farm. What would you think I'd say to that?" I asked.

Angie's eyebrows met as Renn made a tiny noise, but she thankfully stayed quiet.

"You'd... help me, of course?" Angie said slowly, and I knew she had already understood my meaning... but being young, she still was hesitant to say so.

I nodded. "I would. Just as I'd help you save or protect your animals, a nearby river, crops, or... well anything you wanted me to. My protection is not just of one's self, it extends to one's being. And a person is not just their flesh and bone, but the things they hold dear. Their homes, their family, their friends and their livelihoods. You, my dear bison, cherish and wish to protect those humans. To the point you're willing to risk your own self, your own being, for them. Why then would I not assist you? After all, not doing so would and could potentially get you hurt or even killed. Then I'd not be fulfilling my duties as a protector, now would I?" I asked.

Angie quickly nodded. "I see...!"

"I think he'd help even without that winded loophole," Renn said happily.

"Ignore her. She's crazy," I said.

"Wha!" Renn's ears fluttered enough to make her hat fall off as Angie grinned and laughed.

As the young bison laughed, Renn and I glanced at each other... because we had both noticed it.

Angie had tears in her eyes.

"Thank you...!" Angie said as her laughs started to... change. It didn't take long until the happy boisterous sounds turned into ones that tugged at heartstrings.

Renn startled at the sudden fountain of tears. She finally released the spear, handing it off to me, as she went to hug the girl. The young bison didn't hesitate to accept Renn's embrace, and I suddenly felt a little awkward as even Renn started to whimper and sniff as she held Angie while she cried.

Shifting a little, I frowned as I watched Renn and Angie cry together. As if something truly emotional had just happened.

Here I was just teaching her why it was okay to ask me for help, in any form. Maybe I should have handled that differently. I had genuinely thought the young bison more mature. More like her parents.

My fault.

I wasn't entirely sure if Renn had hugged her so quickly because she had panicked at the sight of Angie's emotions, or if she too had actually worried I'd have turned her down. Surely Renn wouldn't have thought so, would she have?

She's known me to help out in odd ways before. So I had doubted it. Odds are Renn had just... leapt into the emotional moment without hesitation.

Which was scary itself, in its own way.

Stepping aside a bit, I bent down to pick up Renn's hat. I studied it for a moment, to make sure it was still in good condition. It was. The thing had a few little smudges, and a couple places where the seams and sewing were starting to undo and tear, but it would likely last her a good many months still yet. Even with our hard travels and the elements during them.

The two girls quickly calmed themselves, mostly since they hadn't really been weeping too hard anyway. Yet even though they stopped crying, they remained hugging... looking strangely like a mother and daughter, or maybe a pair of sisters.

I studied the way Renn had rested her head on Angie's. Since she was tall enough to do so. I was a little jealous. Renn wasn't tall enough to hold me in such a way.

Though... maybe if I crouched first? Or if I was sitting? She's hugged me like that once. Back at the Crypt. When we had been talking about letters, and stuff.

I had been a little stunned in that moment, but I could still distinctly remember it.

Wonder how I could get a similar hug again. That time it had happened because she had been so emotional. But I didn't want to make her emotional in that way just to get a hug...

Snapping out of it as the two turned to look at me, while wiping their faces and smiling, I nodded to them now that I had their attention again.

"Still... this might all be a needless worry, you know," I said.

"Huh...?" Angie made an odd noise, thanks to a now stuffy nose.

"Randle may be banished... but that doesn't mean he's been defeated. I suggest we go meet him. He wanted me to see him before dinner anyway, may as well handle this while we're at it. For all we know he's already got a solution to this, or at least has contingencies in place," I said as they slowly stood.

"What...? Why didn't you say so earlier! Look, you made us cry!" Renn said as she and Angie glared at me.

"You did that to yourselves," I said as I went to gather up the mess. There were bowls and bags to gather.

"See Angie? This is why you need to find someone simple. So they don't do stuff like this to you," Renn said as she and Angie both stepped forward to join me... while still holding each other.

"What?" I paused at that, as Angie giggled.

"I'll take that warning to heart."

Chapter 428 Renn – Vim’s Suggestions to Those Lost

Studying the tip of the spear as it laid on my lap, I dedicated its sharp edges to memory.

This was not like the spear Vim had made for me last time. Or well, made for Brom and Reatti that I had carried for some time.

It was real. Sharp. Deadly.

I'll need to be very careful and observant with it. I'd not even tried to touch the edge of the spear's blade, or point, because I knew it was foolish. I could tell just by looking at it that it was likely one of the sharpest and thinnest edges I've ever seen. To the point it made me wonder how it wouldn't chip and break when used.

Most importantly though...

Reaching over, I gently twirled the strange feeling red cloth between my fingers. It was not just wrapped around the spear, right below the point, but also somehow meshed into the spear itself. Maybe it had been attached somehow where the point connected, though I couldn't see any signs of a lock, or crevice to imply where two different sections had been attached.

Any doubt of the spear's origin ended with this red cloth.

It was the same as the spear Vim held in that painting. In Hands' office. The one Vim had said was of the past and not the future like those here believed.

Vim's mother had made this. He had said she had made something he had left here, and I couldn't imagine it being anything else. He had gathered up a good dozen items earlier, but none had seemed important enough to be the one his mother had made. They had all been odd, but more normal objects. Books. A heart, the one for Tor. A few small trinkets, similar to the little wooden box he had retrieved at Lilly's forest.

I sincerely doubted any of them had been of his mother's design. Since he had not really pointed them out to me, or seemingly even bothered to care for them. Since handing them to me and putting them into my bag, Vim had utterly ignored them since. So I had no choice but to assume this spear was the true one. And he hadn't disputed it earlier, though that might have just been his way to avoid the topic since Angie had been there.

Plus...

Rolling the spear along my lap, and watching the way it barely bothered my thighs or pants, I thought of that mural made into the cliff at the Summit.

The one they had made to depict Vim's brutal act of slaying their god.

He had been wielding a spear in that motif too. Though that one had lacked any cloth clinging to it.

Yet... something told me it was the same spear.

A spear he used to slay gods, made by his mother.

And... he had given it to me...

Taking a small breath, I stopped rolling the spear and wondered if he'd tell me about it later on once we had a chance to be alone.

"How fascinating... Forgive me Vim, but was Less the type to say such a thing? Landi, sure, but Less? That's the entire reason for their discord, was it not? Their difference in views?" Randle asked as he leaned forward a little. He did so by resting his elbow on his knee, and looked a little wobbly and unsteady as he did. He had leaned forward like one would, while putting both elbows on both knees for support. But he of course now had only one, and I don't think he's really registered that yet.

Though odds are it might be something he'd not really acknowledge, at least innately, for a long time. It had to be difficult to change hundreds of years of habits so quickly, out of pure need.

"I had not thought so. Even recently Mapple had mentioned offhandedly to me that Less had been griping on her about her lack of faith. Or rather, her misplaced faith. So it's fair to assume Less still has the same beliefs and personality traits as she had back then," Vim said as he studied the map on Randle's desk.

It was the same map I had been given by Hands. Or well, the same map in essence. My map, just like the rest of my personal items such as my ancestor's heart, were back at that crystal cave. Securely and safely hidden away for now.

Randle's map however, as detailed and perfect as mine, had more to it. It had Randle's own notes and markings. Over the years he's added to it, and it seemed he'd recently started really cataloguing and fixing the errors upon it. Though I wasn't sure entirely as to why. He had warned Vim not to move or touch it, since there were spots with still drying ink.

The door to Randle's office opened, making my ears shift a little as I turned to watch Angie walk in. She carried a plate with a small stack of food upon it, some kind of meat with a bunch of different greens piled upon it haphazardly. She didn't say anything as she walked over to the only table that had any room to eat at. Angie made a small noise as she climbed up onto the large chair before it, sighing as she did so since the chair was a tad too big for her, and she went to cutting up the slice of meat she had brought in to eat.

Although she was involved, and had personally asked Vim for help, it hadn't taken long for Angie to seemingly... calm down and become a little indifferent to the whole situation.

I couldn't blame her really. Although it was a big deal, not just to her but to me too, Vim and Randle had made it clear that it was not something to panic over just yet.

The orphanage would be fine for at least the next few years, per Randle's explanation.

Vim and Randle had been talking for the better part of an hour now, though it had taken a bit for the topic of the orphans to come up. Vim and Randle had at first instead discussed the matter of Oplar's most recent letter. One she had handed off to Randle before departing for the south this morning.

Tapping my spear, I turned my head just enough to see the crumpled up letter in the nearby fireplace. Vim had squished it and tossed it into the fire, but halfway through its burn it had rolled off the fire proper. It was now stuck between the little metal stands the logs sat upon and the side of the brick fireplace. It was smoking, and still burning, just not as quickly as it should be. The paper must be unique.

The topic of the letter had been simple. She had sent a letter to some village, one in the east near the coast, and got back a response of what she had called a non-return request. Basically whoever had got her letter, sent one back saying don't send any more from now on. It wasn't that the location was lost to us, or that someone had died, but rather that the location no longer wanted to be connected to the Society via Oplar's mail system.

Which meant, to Vim and the rest, they had interpreted it as that location siding with Light. Blatantly. And it had concerned Randle and Oplar a lot it seemed, since whoever had been there had been someone Randle had utterly trusted. Someone like himself, a long standing member of the cloth.

Personally I didn't see why they were so shocked that people of the church could side against them. After all, to most who belonged to the Church of Songs, Light was the daughter of the founder. The original saint. The one who had pioneered their religion. And she was in fact a saint herself, too?

It was no wonder so many were taking her side. Especially those like Less, older and stronger non-human members.

"Either way, Less is not a direct worry. Her faith will make her a devout soldier for Light, but that same faith will keep her in check. She'll not do anything too drastic," Vim said.

"I find that difficult to believe, Vim. In my experience the stronger one's faith, the crueler than can become," Randle countered said.

Frowning at that, I glanced at Angie. She noticed my look and shrugged at me.

I, like Angie, had been relatively quiet for the last few minutes. I didn't know this Less, so I had no input on her to give. And although I'd not really been participating in their conversation, I'd also not really been speaking to Angie either. Angie had offered to bring me food too, I had declined. I was a little hungry still, and with the smell of her food my hunger was made more obvious, but I wanted to hold back a little. I wanted to have dinner with Vim. He had promised me, before we got here, that we'd go eat at that one restaurant we'd visited before during our first trip. The Walking Pig. And by the sounds of it he intended to have us leave for Lumen here soon, maybe even tomorrow or the next day, so I needed to make sure to get him to take me before I missed out on it.

So I needed to make sure I had enough room for said pig. Just in case he obliged me.

There was an awkward silence for awhile as Angie ate, and Randle studied Vim who was studying his map. I glanced around at everyone for a bit, smiling gently at them all.

Vim the protector, frowning as he studied a map of people he wasn't sure what to do with. Hate them? Pity them? Abandon them or save them? He had so many choices.

Randle, the now excommunicated priest... who was doing all he could to help and leave behind everything he could to aid those he was leaving behind. His orphanages, his people, his companions. He was writing letters, bequeathing items and resources he's gained over the long years, and telling certain people certain secrets that needed to be shared. All the while trying to figure out what he was going to do, and where he was going to go.

And then there was Angie. A young bison who was now acting her age as she munched on a mouthful of leafy greens. She looked bored, and I could see the small stains of tears from her earlier emotions even over here from an angle. I could tell she would likely have a wonderful night's sleep once she finally settled down, since I knew the feeling well.

Honestly she was doing better than I had figured. She seemed to really care for the children at the orphanage, and even more so was already very protective of them. Though it really worried me that she had not originally intended to ask Vim for I for help on the matter, since she had assumed no one in the Society would help her even if she asked.

"What are you planning, Randle?" Vim then asked.

I glanced away from the young bison, who seemingly was now ignoring us, and to Vim. He had turned away from the map for the first time in a while as to address Randle.

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The priest, or maybe former priest, sat up a little. "I only decided it this morning and you can already tell?" he asked.

"You're looking for something. A location? A person?" Vim asked as he gestured to the map.

Oh...?

I stood up, carefully holding the spear as I stepped over to Vim. He glanced at me but didn't say anything as I went to examine the map.

I'd already looked at it, so honestly I hadn't needed to do so again, but I couldn't see what he meant. There were little notes everywhere, but they all mostly seemed to be about our numbers. How many people were at which location, and whatnot. Nothing... too drastic.

In fact the map in Windle's Office had been far more detailed, really. So...

"I'm a man of the cloth, Vim," Randle said.

"You are. A banished one, but you are," Vim said.

Although I could tell he had said it as a slight joke, I still flinched upon hearing it. He could be slightly mean sometimes, couldn't he?

"I'm looking for a place where I can still fulfill my holy duties. A place not covered by the Church of Songs, or any of its branches. I'm... having difficulty in doing so, honestly, but I'm sure I'll find it somewhere," Randle said, sounding as if he wasn't bothered at all by Vim's bluntness.

"Hmph." Vim didn't seem impressed.

I frowned though as I tried to comprehend how Vim had realized such a thing from this map.

Even the locations with information listed upon them, such as names or numbers, had no implications of their meaning. It wasn't as if there was any mark or note to tell if each location had a church already, or someone there preaching their faith...

"I've been the man I am for almost a thousand years. I'll not be able to change who I am, Vim," Randle said, as if he had to defend himself against Vim's perspective on the matter.

Shifting, I placed the end of the spear down onto the rug gently as I turned and smiled at the one-armed priest. "I think that's a lovely thing, Randle," I said. I really did. He had been abandoned, basically, by those here. By the ones leading this faith, the very one he wanted to preach and support. Yet he still wanted to believe in it and share it. It told me that although disgusted and at odds with Light and the rest, the current leaders of this faith, he himself still fully believed in the faith itself. Its rules and morals. He wasn't going to allow what had happened here, and was happening, to stop his duty, or at least the duty he believed himself to have.

"Thank you, Renn. But in reality it's just me being too scared to do anything else. I'm lost, and I'm clinging to what I find normal and expected as to avoid the terrifying truth of my future," Randle said with a small smile.

Squeezing the spear, I felt bad as I stared at his smile. It was one of defeat.

Vim though didn't seem to care. He turned back, to look at the map. I took a very small step back, as to step aside and let him see it clearly since I had kind of put myself between him and it.

I watched the way Vim studied the map... and then I noticed the way his eyes narrowed an almost unnoticeable amount.

He had just decided something.

"Angie," Vim then addressed the person I had not expected him to. She didn't respond immediately, with a mouthful of food, but she eventually turned to look at him. She chewed lazily, waiting for him to continue. "The orphans. They're your calling?" he asked.

Angie swallowed. "Yes."

A little humbled by the young girl's immediate declaration, I saw out of the corner of my eye Randle softly smile in awe as well.

Vim though simply nodded. "Then why don't we plan for the inevitable," he said.

"Inevitable?" I asked.

He glanced at me and nodded. "Randle's actions have likely protected the orphans for a short time... and I do plan to confront Light in Lumen, so I may handle all of this there and then too. But just in case nothing goes well... as history has taught me usually does, I have a suggestion," he said.

"What is it?" Angie asked, suddenly ignoring her food.

Vim studied me for a moment, and then glanced at Randle. "To the northwest of the Owl's Nest. Not far from Twin Hills, is a newly founded city. One not even on most maps yet," Vim told him.

I perked up at that. There was...? Which one, I wonder? I glanced at the map, and compared my knowledge to it. I remembered going through the towns on the way there recently, and being told of the towns around there by Lilly when we had talked about her children... but... I couldn't place the town he spoke of. I had no doubt there were villages between the Owl's Nest and Twin Hills, since they were several days apart, but actual towns? Not just farmsteads or river villages?

Vim stepped closer, leaning a little around me as he pointed at a spot on the map. It was in fact farther north of Twin Hills, though not as west as it from the Owl's Nest. I judged it to be a few days farther from Twin Hills than Twin Hills was to the Owl's Nest.

He was right. There was nothing on the map to imply any settlement was there. Not even a small one. And Hands's maps were detailed enough to even list single family homesteads in some locations, even ones not belonging to the Society.

"When'd you hear of it?" I asked.

"From Windle. It's located at the base of a mountain, near a lake and some rivers. It's good land, though cold in the winter being so north. It's being funded and operated by some nobles in the area. They've found minerals, and are making a proper mining location. Even the nobles in Twin Hills are involved, I guess," Vim said.

"And you suggest I go there...?" Randle asked as he sat up straighter, and sounding a little more serious all of a sudden.

"It's already grown into a bustling city, I guess. I think they've found gold, or silver. The rumors Windle heard is they're planning on using it to fund their own army. I think his son is there, Branches, who is likely the reason for his knowledge of it. He interpreted the rumor as them using the minerals to build weapons and armor, but odds are it's just wealth. They want to build a proper army and capital to protect the riches, I assume," Vim explained.

"Places like that don't appreciate the church forcing their way in," Randle said plainly.

"They don't, but we have ways to deal with that. More importantly though, a newly built capital doesn't arise overnight. There will be chaos. Strife. Money. And what always follows all of that?" he asked.

"Death?" I said.

"Food," Angie answered.

Randle smirked a little, likely at our answers. "Orphans," he said.

Oh!

Vim nodded. "You can go in not as a proper church, but an orphanage. Expanding it for sermons as you settle and become well respected in the community. Which you will be. Luckily for you, nobles, mercenaries and merchants alike all let their guard down around priests. Particularly the one-armed variety," Vim said with a small gesture at him.

Randle shifted, and did something a little odd... which I couldn't understand at first, until I realized he was actually just crossing his arm. It just looked funny since he only had one. "And it's many leagues beyond the influence of the Nation of the Blind, or the Church of Songs," he said.

"Is it? Isn't there a church in Bordu now?" I asked.

"Just a small abbey. And it's the one farthest north. A branch of the Church of Songs too, not even a real one," Vim said.

I nodded, though I wasn't sure what difference it made to be a branch or not. Did that mean they weren't as powerful or something? Not as important? Places of worship were equal, weren't they...? Likely not, I suppose, based off the way Vim had said that.

"How cold does it get up there?" Angie asked from her chair.

"The kind of cold that will make you wish you had inherited your father's fur," Vim said.

Angie's face told me what she thought of that, but she sighed and nodded. "I'm fine with it. Even if this place stays safe, I can't trust the ones around me anymore, so I'd be willing to go there as long as you help me set it up," she said, speaking as if she was far older and more experienced than she was.

"But Vim... without the Church of Songs, with what resources could we accomplish this with? Setting up a proper orphanage, one that won't be lambasted by the community at least, requires wealth beyond reason. And hands. Now that I lack one, I would need many more to compensate for what I can't do. I

cannot build a wall anymore, Vim, let alone a whole building," Randle said as he lifted his left stub of an arm, to display its hanging sleeve. He had tied it rather well, so it didn't dangle fully as it had the other day, but it still did so.

"I'll handle that. Even if the Society won't give us access to anything for it, I can provide all we'll need. And for people... well... are you sure you can't take any here? What of those who support you here?" Vim asked.

Randle frowned as he pondered that. "A few are too old for such a journey and effort, Vim. Far too old. But... I could probably gather up half a dozen. Six, maybe, if we don't include myself or Angie," Randle said.

Angie nodded briskly, happily dedicating herself to the cause.

"I'd help too, if I can," I said happily.

Vim glanced at me but said nothing.

"And if you can handle the funds, we'd not need too many then. That would be enough, since we can compensate for our lack of manpower and numbers with coins and favors," Randle said plainly.

"Then start preparing for it. You and Angie," Vim said with a gesture at the young girl.

She perked up, smiling a little as she glanced at Randle, as if ready for her first task to be given already.

"We'll also need to factor in the children we'll be taking with us. And if this is to be done... I have only a couple months to handle it," Randle said as he looked away from the excited eyes of the young bison, as to look down at his desk in thought.

"You've handle worse. I plan to leave for Lumen tomorrow, and I doubt I'll be gone long. I can also handle the funding issue," Vim said.

Oh...? Did he plan to rob the guild or something? If so I looked forward to it, I'd been wondering if anyone would notice a few crates of coins missing from that full vault.

"Yes... this is a far cry from our beginnings, isn't it? I'm sure we can figure it out," Randle said as he nodded, as if deciding it wasn't just a viable plan... but one he enjoyed the thought of.

"I suggest not telling anyone. Particularly not the location, either," Vim suggested.

"Quite. Just in case," Randle agreed.

I didn't ask what would happen if this new orphanage location wouldn't be needed. Because I knew the truth.

This wasn't just Vim trying to fulfill Angie's request... even though I knew he was taking it seriously, like he always did for any request of our members. It was also Vim's way of taking care of Randle. A man who had just been banished from not just his long-time home... but his meaning in life.

This location was as much for Randle as it was for Angie.

Smiling gently at the man who was proving, again with ease, why he was our protector... I reached out to gently take his hand. He allowed me to take it, though I only grabbed a few fingers, as he glanced at me for a small moment and then looked away.

Neither Angie or Randle had noticed my affectionate hold of his hand as Angie hopped off her chair and hurried over to Randle's desk. "This time a pool," she said quickly.

Randle frowned at the girl. "A pool?" he asked.

She nodded quickly. "For the kids. Swimming is good for children," she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Smiling at her, I wondered if maybe Randle was in for more than he could chew. Or at least, hold, now what with his single arm. He had a smile on his face, but I could see the utter exhaustion hidden behind it. He too was likely thinking the same I just had.

While Randle patiently listened to Angie's suggestions, most interesting but slightly childish such as the idea of a pool, I noticed Vim's stare.

Turning a little, I smiled at the man who looked like he was hungry. Though he might just look so because I was.

He gently nodded at me, and I nodded back.

I wasn't entirely sure yet what to think of any of this. The schemes. The prophecies. Vim's decisions...

But at least he wasn't abandoning everyone. If he still desired to help those like Randle, a man he didn't actually like and had recently just been banished in such a wild way, then maybe I didn't need to worry too much.

Maybe even if he stepped down nothing would change. Maybe all would be well.

If only.

Chapter 429 Vim – Heavy Burdens

Walking amongst the ticking clocks, I followed Hands deeper into his back office.

He was walking rather calmly, oddly. He wasn't fidgeting, or glancing every which way. He seemed to be doing well, considering so many others here weren't.

"She is a rat," Hands then said.

I frowned at him. "Who?" I asked carefully.

"Hm...? Wait..." Hands paused, looking up at the sky as if to ask one of the random clocks hanging on the wall a question. He of course got no answer, and then frowned as he turned to look at me. "I have not introduced you! I am so, so sorry!" Hands then declared worriedly.

Introduced me...? "To whom?" I asked.

"Why the love of my life, of course!" Hands said as if it was obvious.

Oh...?

Wait...

"So you mean literally. She is of a rat bloodline," I said as I understood. I couldn't imagine him saying the woman he loved was a rat in the other sense.

"Yes! She has a tail! Though only half a one, having lost it years ago to a wolf!" Hands said with a huge smile.

Huh... Hopefully it wasn't actually a rat. Hands was so weird it'd not shock me if he suddenly pulled an actual rat from out of his pocket, or some cage somewhere, as to display her.

"I'm happy for you. What's her name?" I asked.

"Fittle!" he said.

Fittle...?

"I... don't know a Fittle..." I said as I hurriedly searched my memories. There were a couple dozen rodents left in the Society, and a couple rats I think, but...

"She came with the rest. Light brought her from the lands beyond. She went to Lumen, I actually would like you to take her a gift if you would be so kind, Vim!" Hands said happily, sounding like a fool in love.

Sighing softly I nodded. "Of course Hands. Make sure you give it to me before I leave, I plan to do so tomorrow morning," I said. That was only a few hours away.

"I'll get it after this, yes," Hands nodded quickly as he turned and picked up the pace.

He was no longer walking calmly as he led me to the deepest room in the office.

Hands fidgeted with the door, unlocking it with two keys not just one, and then pushed the heavy wooden thing open. It didn't make a noise as it opened, but it took him a moment to do so thanks to how heavy it was.

Following him into the room, I had to duck a little since not far from the entrance were a bunch of hanging lanterns. Unlit ones, of course, but they were low enough and many enough that I had to be careful.

"You two fell in love quickly then, did you?" I asked, making small talk as I followed Hands deeper into the storeroom.

"At first sight! She nearly tore my clothes off, and..." Hands paused, turned and blushed at me, and then coughed as he looked back ahead. "She was rather forceful," he summed it up simply.

Smirking at that, I couldn't wait to see what she looked like. His father, Eyes, had been married to a comely woman... but had somehow always been the focus of the attention of many who visited. I had never understood it, even though I knew it was simply because he had been a good man. But he had been even worse than Hands when it came to his idiosyncrasies.

Still... I was happy for the man all the same. It was time he found someone, and for it to have been a non-human only made it that much better. It had felt lately so many of our kind were finding human partners, which although I was still happy and okay with... it was also sad. Since it meant they'd not only likely give birth to human children, but would likely not live more than a century or two at best.

I was glad they were happy, but it hurt to know their candle's of life had been cut short.

"If you would, Vim," Hands stepped aside as we neared a table. A circular one made of stone.

I grabbed the table, being careful of the stuff upon it and around it, and lifted it just enough to move it. I put it a few feet away, revealing the rug that had been underneath it.

"Hm. Time for a new rug," Hands said as he bent down to pull it aside. It was so flat and ruined it had barely been needed to, as it was moved to reveal a hatch.

Hands went ahead and pulled the hatch open, revealing a subfloor. One deep enough that Hands had to get on his hands and knees to reach into, but not so deep one could justify getting down into.

He lifted a box and handed it to me. I took it, placing it on the nearby table I'd just moved, and repeated the process with the next few boxes.

Once five boxes had been retrieved Hands huffed and glanced around in the hole. "Just five, Vim?" he asked, verifying.

"For now."

He nodded as he went to close the latch. He replaced the rug, and I once again put the heavy table upon it. I made sure to place it exactly where it had been, since the rug was so worn that its position was obvious. Didn't need anyone realizing where that hatch was just because they noticed the rug had been shifted a little, revealing its spot.

"Hm... I'll have you know Vim, even if they banish you from these halls you are not and never will be banished from mine," Hands then said as he brushed his hands off.

Frowning a little, I nodded. "Thank you Hands. But I don't believe I'm to be banished... and like I told you, I plan to simply step down as protector. I'll still be a member, I'll still be here to help any and all who need me," I said.

"Please Vim! You need not baby me, I am now almost as old as my father had been you know? Just two years, one month, and sixteen days away!" Hands told me.

Shifting a little, I placed a hand on one of the boxes and nodded at the odd man. "Are you really?" I asked.

I believed him. Utterly. But it was still fascinating to hear so.

"Yes! Yes, yes! So you need not hide the truth from me as so many others are! I know Randle would not have done what he did for no good reason! I... can't imagine the real reason, but it has to be one much dire! In fact, I've even begun to sort and shift things away just in case and..." Hands glanced around, as if suddenly worried someone else was here to hear him. There wasn't, it was just us... and we were deep in his section of the Cathedral.

"Shift things where?" I asked as I glanced around. This, like most probably most storerooms of his, was cluttered and full of junk. If anything had been, or was missing, I couldn't notice.

"Underground! To a half-way point between here and the nearby lake escape we made with my father!"
Hands said happily.

I blinked, and shifted a little.

Escape...?

"Hands... what do you think is going to happen...?" I asked softly, now suddenly very worried.

"Hm...? If you and Light argue, you will not harm her. She is Celine's daughter, and the rightful ruler of the Society. You, being the man you are, will let her be. You'll step aside, thanks to your honor and rules. Even if wrong to do so. That's why you're stepping down as the protector, isn't it? If so, then I'll not want to be here. My knowledge of science and math alone will make them wary of me, and whose to know what they'd do if they saw any of the prophetic paintings or maps!" Hands said quickly, his voice increasing as he began to panic.

I flinched.

Right.

Damn.

Damn it. I've been neglecting others here because I've been so busy and bothered. I've allowed Randle and Renn to distract me.

Of course Hands was smart enough to fully realize what was going on. Even beyond Renn, it seemed. His mind worked in that way, like his father's. They were so damned annoyingly astute where it counted...

Plus he was right of course. They'd likely not actually harm him, or banish him, since he was so useful. Especially if I stepped down and wasn't able to be used for certain things, such as building temples and stuff. But there was no denying if Light saw some of the stuff he hid from them all, even me, there would be undoubtedly an issue. To what length and how dramatic, I couldn't tell, but something told me it would be bad.

"Wait... what of your love, then, Hands? Fittle?" I asked, doing my best to not feel too much like a piece of shit.

Hands went still.

"Oh no!" He immediately went bug-eyed as he panicked.

Shoot.

Reaching out for the man who fell to his knees, I watched as he grabbed at his head and began to mumble incoherently to himself.

Damned! He and his father both! Insanity came in so many flavors and the type they had was the one I hated to deal with the most!

"Hands!" I shouted the man's name as I grabbed him by the shoulder. He startled, blinking wildly at me as he did... and once I saw clarity behind the blinks, I nodded. "Calm. Calm yourself. Your father stole his wife from a monarch's cult, remember? You need not panic so, you are simply following his footsteps," I said gently.

Hands made one last, heavy, blink... and then slowly nodded. "Right...! Right!" he smiled as he quickly stood up, nodding quickly as he realized I was right indeed.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I praised myself for my quick footed thoughts there. Otherwise he may have been broken for weeks.

The raccoon breathed deeply for a moment as he visibly relaxed, shoulders slumping as if now needing a drink. A heavy one.

Me too.

"You're quite right, Vim... I had not thought of that. What to do... I wonder?" Hands whispered as he reached up to rub his eyes.

Hm. I nodded carefully and chose my next words carefully.

"Take it one step at a time. Talk with her about it. Your mother gave up her people for your father, it might be you who has to do it this time," I said gently.

"Quite so... why had I not realized it sooner, Vim? She's of their cloth. Going against them would be to go against her... and siding with her would be to go against my own blood and..."

"Careful Hands. Your father knew better than to delve too deep into those kinds of thoughts, and he was wise to do so," I said, warning him.

Hands nodded. "Right... is that how you do it Vim? By ignoring it, at least in part?" he asked.

"Something like that," I admitted.

He sighed and wiped his brow, though I saw no sweat upon it. "This will take some getting used to."

"Love always does."

He smiled at that. "Then... I should write a letter, too. Not just send a gift. Would you give me an hour or two to write it, Vim?" he asked.

"Of course I would, Hands. I'll take these and handle them then, while you do so. Just bring it to the mansio... or will you need help with the gift?" I asked.

"Ah, no. It is a small thing. I'll bring them both once I'm finished. A few hours, at most," Hands said as he stepped away, leaving me behind as he quickly left the storeroom.

Frowning a little, I sighed as I went to gather up the boxes. They weren't that big, and flat topped, so easy for me to stack the five with ease and carry them.

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

Closing the door to the storeroom, since Hands had ran off already, I hoped he remembered to come back and lock it. I'll remind him to do so when he came to bring me the letter and gift for his newfound love.

Walking through the hallway of clocks, I eventually passed one of the first doors in the hallway. It was open, and Hands was sitting at a desk hurriedly moving papers and gathering up his writing pen. He, like usual when fixated, didn't notice or even acknowledge me as I stepped away and left his office.

I didn't walk quickly through the church as I headed for the mansio, but I wished I had. Mapple noticed me and hurried over before I could reach it.

"Mapple," I greeted her as she skidded to a stop in front of me.

"Vim!" she shouted at me, and flinched as she then looked around us. Once she realized we were alone, thankfully, she calmed a little and nodded back at me. "I'm glad I caught you before you left," she said with a hushed voice.

"Hm. Want to talk in private? I was heading to the mansio," I offered.

"Oh... um... will anyone else be there?" she asked.

"Renn could be. She went to say goodbye to those she could since we leave in the morning, but it's been a few hours since I've seen her," I said.

"Ah. She'd be okay, I guess... wait no!" Mapple flinched again and shook her head, making me frown at her.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I honestly had expected her, or someone like her, to approach and be weird before I left. Since telling the Chronicler that I'd decided to step down I hadn't talked to her, or any of her flock really. So I had been expecting this, in a way.

"You're going to Lumen?" she asked quickly.

I nodded. "Yes."

Mapple worriedly frowned up at me, and I wondered what was wrong. "Out with it Mapple," I said with a sigh. The boxes I held were heavy, not to me, but I wanted to pretend like they were. It was too bad she was one of the members that I'd not be able to fool in such a way.

"Geh...! I can't just say it Vim, you'll yell at me!" Mapple said with a strained voice.

Oh.

"Then yeah... don't say it," I said.

I was in no mood for prophecies.

"But!" she shook her hands at me, as if she wanted to grab at me. But the stack of boxes I held kind of impeded such a thing. She wasn't sure what to do.

"No buts. Per my agreement with Celine the only time prophecies are allowed to be spoken of to me are when they dictate immediate death to one of our members. Such as in the next few moments. Is it one of those?" I asked.

Mapple made a weird groan as she winced up at me.

"Let me guess... you made the Chronicler tell you about whatever it was that made Light come back," I said.

Her eyes widened as she nodded, but said nothing.

Knew it.

I sighed and wondered if I should...

No. I'll let Renn do it later. With Light. The source.

No point her getting second-hand information.

"Vim..." Mapple got my attention, since I had looked away. I looked back at her, over the boxes, and noted the utter worry and stress upon her.

"Don't worry Mapple. I'm... angry. Upset. Bothered. But I don't expect this to end too badly," I said.

"That's not what I'm worried about!" she then said.

Oh?

That wasn't good.

Maybe I should have her talk to Renn then. "Why not talk to Renn, Mapple and," I started to say but Mapple startled. She stepped back, stepping onto her church robe in the process. She stumbled backward, nearly falling onto her ass, and then quickly stood back up as to shake her head violently at me.

"Definitely not!" she screamed.

Glad that I was holding the boxes underneath, with open palms, I shifted ever so gently as I kept my cool.

Breathe. Calmly.

"I mean... Vim... I can't and... well... oh no, oh..." Mapple began to panic again, but I barely registered her muttering worries and quick breathing.

Instead I just focused on a nearby chair. A wooden chair with stone feet. It was old. Worn. Likely older than most humans, if not all of them.

It looked like it'd break if I even thought about sitting in it.

I imagined how I'd fix it. How I'd replace half the parts, and then question myself once finished if it was the same chair or not. No matter how much I made it to look like the original, if all the parts were different... then...

Blinking, I coughed and nodded, pleased with myself.

I'd not broken anything. Not the boxes I carried. Not the church around me. Not the fake nun having half a panic attack in front of me.

"Mapple," I got her attention. She stood up straight, as if a soldier being greeted by a superior officer.

"Vim?"

"Does it concern lives?" I asked calmly.

Mapple gulped. "Maybe. I don't know. I'm not smart enough to know."

That meant they hadn't told her everything. Or at least, the Chronicler hadn't.

"Does it concern the Society, or the world?"

"Both...?"

"And you can't tell Renn," I specified.

She nodded.

Great.

Just outstanding.

"If it's that momentous that it's bothering you, why didn't any of them say anything? Why didn't they warn me? Why have they kept it secret all this time?" I asked, trying not to grow upset.

Mapple shivered. "I don't know, Vim," she whispered.

For a tiny moment I thought about going back up to that fake saint's office. To lay down the law. But the sight of the head lowered, shoulder slouched, Mapple with gloomy eyes of worry made such a thought die as quickly as it had come.

These people pissed me off. But they were not my enemies. Not honestly.

They were more harm to themselves than anyone else.

This was why I hated saints. This is all they ever did. Made people panic, and act rashly. Their warnings never came on time, and most of the time were missing vital information. Half the time their stupid prophecies did more harm than good, if not most of the time.

Non-humans and humans alike were stupid sometimes. Being so terribly blinded by their emotions and faith. And they wondered why they had all been so easily enslaved.

Like Randle. The stupid fool got himself banished when he had been needed here. Especially now with the chaos, him being a pillar of normalcy and decency would have been a saving grace for us. Yet he went and did something stupid. How had he not realized that with them moving themselves to Lumen would have left Telmik open for him to take over? To make this place his own? Though one could argue he only acted out of line thanks to those who were doing the same thanks to the prophecies...

All of the threads of discord went back to the damned gods. Again. Like always.

Stop, Vim.

I took a small breath as I forcefully stopped thinking about certain things, as to prevent me from doing something stupid myself.

You have no right to judge and criticize when you didn't do anything to even hint or help such a thing to not happen. You stood back and allowed it to happen. You were as bad as the agitators.

That was what my mother would have said. One who stands back and just watches a sin happen was worse than the sinner themselves.

Yet whenever I intervened it just got worse. One sin became thousands. I stand back; one or two people die or get hurt. I step in, nations disappear.

What should I do here...? Now? Should I ask to hear the prophecy? Even though it'll likely make me do terrible things? What if it causes me to destroy the very society I've been protecting all this time?

What if it risked my relationship with Rennalee...?

"What do you think, Mapple?" I asked, unable to confront anything in my mind and so instead asking someone so much weaker than me.

"Of...?"

"Everything," I whispered.

She stopped shivering, and then smiled at me. "That's been my life since mother died, Vim. I've been obeying them all this time, hating every order. I hadn't realized all this time you'd been the same," she said warmly, blushing even at me.

Uh oh. Was this where her strange fascination came from, then? Somehow that made a lot of sense.

Just another thing to feel like shit about.

"But...!" Mapple spoke up before I could, and her smile softened a little. "I'm... not you, Vim. I only have myself. I have no family. No husband. No children. I... don't even have friends," Mapple said as she gestured around us. As if to imply the empty hallway we stood in represented her own persona.

I see.

She was telling me why she had to side with them.

Against me.

Because she had nothing else. No one else. Without them, she felt empty. Useless. Devoid.

I knew that feeling. Better than she, likely.

"I'm your friend, Mapple," I said gently.

She hesitated, but then smiled and nodded. "Thanks, Vim. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. You have indeed always been kind with me, even understandingly too," she said.

Hm... "Renn would be your friend too, if you gave her the chance," I added.

Mapple hesitated again. "I... bet she would, yes," she said softly.

Uh oh. That hesitation was not because she didn't believe me, or think it impossible, but for another reason.

Something told her such a thing would never happen. No matter what.

Another hint. One I didn't want to see or know. Let alone acknowledge.

"What can I do for you, Mapple?" I asked softly.

She blinked, glanced around a moment... and then slowly looked back at me. "If I asked for a child would you give one to me?"

"No. I can't give you that," I whispered.

Luckily Mapple's heartbreak didn't make her fall to her knees, or weep. She instead just smiled... and nodded as if understandingly. "I figured. You're not a man to betray, Vim... so I figured you'd not betray her," she said softly.

Although that wasn't quite the reason, I still nodded anyway. Better she think so because of that than anything else.

How pitiable. She was just like so many others in the Society. She was in fact the epitome of what Renn wanted to save, to help. She was, at least felt, alone... and was serving masters she didn't like or feel love towards nor from in return. She was basically a slave. To debts. To the past. To a parental love that hadn't been real at all in the first place.

But... how did I save her from it...? And... did she even want to be saved from it in the first place? It seemed likely not based off what she had just said.

"Instead... hm... I've been told you're going to make a village. Or something like it. How about you let me have a home there too?" she then asked.

I blinked and stood up a little straighter. "I'm going to make a village?" I asked.

There was no way anyone should have heard of such a thing. Plus... a village? That was not the plan at all. An orphanage, at best a church, not a whole village. And it wasn't going to be mine. It was Randle's. Angie's too, I guess.

But... the way she had phrased it... That meant she hadn't heard it from Renn, Angie, or Randle, but someone else. Someone who had seen something, and not really understood what they had.

Another prophecy...?

Mapple hesitated, and then coughed. "Um! Well...!" she began to really panic, her shivering returning in full force.

Shit. That was indeed a prophecy, then.

"Fine. Please... don't say anything more," I begged as I lowered my head and tried to not look at her. It wasn't what she said that told me the truth, it was her mannerisms. So I simply needed to stop looking at them.

Mapple made a groaning noise, and I heard her nod. "Right...! Okay! Yeah! I'm so sorry, Vim... I'm just... a mess right now, and you just turned me down so I feel like I need to cry and...!" she began to ramble, and with each word she spoke I felt more and more like shit.

By my parents, let this end soon.

"Anything else, then Mapple? Before we both have to go dig holes to hide in for a century?" I asked, pleaded in fact.

She laughed at that. "Right! No. Okay. Just... let me have a place please, no matter what happens. That's all," she said quickly, confirming it.

"Always. Even if I'm on longer protector, Mapple, like I said... I'll always help those who ask it of me. Always. You need only ask," I said.

"Mhm... right. Just no kids, though."

"No kids," I said softly with a smile.

She sighed but nodded. I looked back up at her and found her already crying. Tears were sliding down her face. "Okay. Goodbye Vim. I hope... you and Renn stand tall," she said softly as she nodded again at me.

"I'd say the same, Mapple... but you've always stood tall. Though who you do so for may be questionable, I've always found your filial loyalty lovely," I said gently.

Mapple's eyes widened a little, leaking more tears, and then she sniffed and nodded... and hurriedly turned away as her face scrunched up. She ran off, hurriedly, barely not tripping over her robe as she did so.

Feeling utterly exhausted, I shook my head and turned back to my goal and destination.

What was I doing? What was going to do?

I had so many people around me who needed help. But I felt like all I was doing was making their lives worse. I was such a failure of a protector.

Randle just lost everything. His arm was the least of his losses.

Angie had just lost her family. Her home. And had clung to the orphanages, and the orphans, as her way of keeping sane and finding purpose. And now she felt it was all at risk. In danger. And she hadn't even thought I would have helped her originally, it had taken Renn to get the girl to bring it up to me.

Hands. Falling for a woman a part of the very church he might be at odds with soon. Because he, like his father and mother, had chosen my side instinctively even though they shouldn't have. Just like Oplar's parents.

Oplar in the same vein was in danger too.

Meriah was on a blood-path.

Rapti thought I was some god, and was expecting me to act like one. Crane wanted me to pay for my crimes.

Tor wanted to eat a heart that I did not believe he could survive.

Lilly and Windle were getting letters from dozens of people in the Society, calling damn near for war.

People were filing formal requests to be taken off my route. Because they didn't trust me anymore.

Even Light. That woman, as much as she infuriated me with what she was doing... was Celine's daughter. I had made a promise. To save her. To find her. To protect her, even over and above the Society itself.

Then there were the untold numbers scattered all over, who would have their own concern and tribulations during all of this. This... upheaval.

And now Mapple. Someone I've always pitied, but never worried much over.

The souls just kept piling up... and I felt too weak to even address any of them, let alone actually do what it took to save them.

I shifted the heavy burdens I carried. The coins within were my gift to Randle. More wealth than the Nation of the Blind made in a year in taxes and tithes.

A paltry apology for all my failures. But they were a start. Before I officially stepped down I planned to pay what I considered debts. And I owed Randle a heavy one, far more than his arm's weight in gold. And man should always pay his debts. One coin at a time, as they merchants say.

Approaching the gate to the mansio, I smiled in relief at the sight of smoke coming from the kitchens chimney. It had been empty and cold when I had left it earlier.

Renn and I were the only ones staying in it currently, so I knew it was her.

Thank goodness.

I felt like burying my face into her hair and ears, and just holding her.

Hopefully she'd oblige me without demanding anything too drastic in return.

Chapter 430 Renn – A Protector's Sanctuary

Vim was being odd again.

At least it was while we were alone, in the house in the center of the Cathedral.

"Why do they always ask for things I can't give them? How come they're all so simple yet so complex?" he grumbled, his muffled voice making my ears flutter a little as I tried not to giggle and squirm excitedly.

"I find it to be a rather humble compliment myself. It means they really do trust you Vim, even with their grievances they still know they can rely on you," I said.

I mean... I could understand, really. I myself would probably have asked for something similar from him, had I not had his heart. Those like Mapple, their requests which so deeply perturbed him, were actually rather sad and simple things.

They wanted companionship. And since they couldn't find it elsewhere, amongst our other members or the humans, they sought it out in a way that was almost daunting.

Asking Vim, a man they viewed as a stalwart protector, for a child made a lot of sense really. More than it should, to be honest.

Especially considering how adorable he was.

Vim was lying in my lap. He was lying down on the bed, with me sitting cross legged, and he had wrapped himself around my waist. He was acting as if he was a child, sulking in his mother's lap. It was of course, utterly adorable, and I was enjoying every moment of it... but that was the problem.

He was genuinely venting. He was complaining, about everything, and I could tell he wanted me to take him seriously. Yet I just wanted to giggle and laugh, and return his strange affection by wrapping him up in a hug myself.

I held myself back though as I turned the page of Oplar's letter. She had only written me three pages, or well two and a half, since she had used the last back of the second page to draw me a picture. It was a wonderful little letter, answering some questions I had asked from the letter I had left here on our last visit, and her telling me how deeply she valued our friendship. That she liked me more than she liked Vim, basically.

Yet as wonderful as the letter was, I was having difficulty focusing on it. Vim was just being too strangely adorable.

"What if someone asked you, Renn? How would you feel?" he asked, sighing as he did.

Shifting ever so slightly, since I had felt his hot breath on my stomach, I tried not to squirm too much.

I wasn't naked, which I had regretted a little in the beginning but now I was thankful for. I wore my light undergarments, and every so often he shifted or sighed in such a way that made me want to shiver. I almost wanted another layer or two for added protection, in a way.

"I'd turn them down, Vim. I'd understand where they're coming from, and it would be a compliment unlike any other... but to me a child is more than just a child. There's no point in having one with someone other than you," I said honestly as I studied Oplar's little drawing.

It was a drawing of her family. Her parents. I had asked for their likeness, so I could paint them. She had more than happily accepted. Her drawing was... honestly not bad, but it was still crude and done in only a single shade of ink. With charcoal, or something like it, it looked. But she did well enough that I'd be able to give them life in my own way once able.

"That's the problem isn't it? To them it's nothing. Like Frett. She didn't actually want Tim, she just wanted a child, and he had felt like the easiest option. Maybe it's not a compliment then, Renn?" Vim grumbled.

I smirked at him. "They ask you Vim, because they can trust you. They know you won't hurt them, or make weird demands. Plus many of them find you half-attractive, and I'm sure they also like the idea of your offspring inheriting your strength and abilities too," I said, giving him my own assessment of it.

"You talk as if you've thought of it yourself," he mumbled into my lap.

"I have...? I mean... of course I've thought of having children with you. We've not really talked about it, but... I mean..." I felt a little warm all of a sudden, and not because he was coiled around my lap and waist.

His arms wrapped around me tightened a little as he made his little noise. "Hmph."

Patting his back gently, I smiled at him.

He was being weird. Like that moment back at Elaine's. Where he had held me all night long.

Such oddness was... expected of Vim, yet not. He was an odd man. With odd secrets. But this was something weird, even for him. Though in a way it suited him, somehow. Vim was a stoic man. Calm. Expressionless half the time. Yet I knew deep within him were storms of emotions and thoughts, ones he barely controlled sometimes. So him acting like this actually made a lot of sense, in a way.

Honestly this time I was just relieved he was at least talking to me. Last time he had been all awkward and silent, letting me mumble and complain to myself.

"Really Vim... it's sad, in truth," I admitted as I lowered Oplar's letter. I put it aside, over near my bag. I had been in the middle of sorting my stuff when Vim had arrived and nearly tackled me like this, so our bags were scattered around on the bed with one of his also on a chair nearby, the one over by the mirror. I glanced at it, and liked the sight reflecting in it, even if not fully. I could see half of Vim, and some of my legs and tail. I liked the way he looked laying on me, for some reason.

"It is, isn't it?" he mumbled softly.

I nodded. "Her life is so sad, so lonely; her deepest desire... what to her had been a final request to her protector was to ask for just a place to live. A home. Because she doesn't know if she'll have one here soon," I said softly.

"And for a child," he reminded me.

"That too. That's sad too, Vim... It means she's utterly abandoned any hope of finding someone herself. Why is that Vim? Why are so many of our members so lonely?" I asked.

"There are not enough of us, Renn."

"But there are?" I argued.

He shifted ever so slightly, but didn't lift his head from my lap. I gently rubbed his back some more, hoping he'd not get up yet. I was actually enjoying this. "There is, in a way. There are more women than men, but most are widows or too old for such things, so eligible mates are rather even all things considered. But that's under the assumption everyone can get along. That every man and every woman is suitable for a relationship with another. That's not the case. It isn't in any society. Not even humans

are that forgiving. And non-humans are even pickier than humans, thanks to bloodlines and stuff," he said.

"Right..." I mumbled. "And since they want children the alternatives don't work," I said.

"Back in the beginning it had been easier. There had been larger locations, more that were like the Summit or Lumen where many members came and went. Made it easy for people to mingle. Plus back then a lot of them had been simpler people. They did not really desire a mate, just children. So there had been plenty of families with only single parents, and they were happy with that. Now they all are more human-like. They don't just want children; they want the family unit that accompanies it. Or community, such as what one finds in a village. Makes it hard," Vim said.

Community...

I thought about that for a moment as I ran my thumb along his shoulder blade. It, and the muscles all around it, was a little odd thanks to his angle and how he had his arms wrapped around me. "Do you want a community Vim?" I asked him after a moment of considering it.

"I have one. It's the Society."

Smiling at that, I felt silly. Of course he'd answer that way. "I meant more... personal. You have members you consider friends, actual friends, like Nebl and Berri, don't you? Don't you desire to have them nearby?" I asked.

He was quiet for a bit, and thanks to how still he was as he thought I knew he was taking my question very seriously. I patiently waited for his response, which took quite a few minutes surprisingly.

"I don't know," he finally admitted.

Oh...? "Really? I'd think you'd like that, Vim. I don't know if you've noticed, but I can always tell when you're somewhere you feel comfortable. You relax a little more, and smile more often. Surely there's nothing wrong with desiring that is there?" I asked.

"No. There isn't. But I don't know if I'd be able to put up with them all nearby, at all times. I actually like being alone sometimes," he said.

"You do?" I asked.

He nodded, and while doing so took a deep breath and sighed again. My tail squirmed as he did so, and I wondered why he found my lap so comfortable.

Maybe I should have him return the favor, so I could feel what it was like.

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"The idea of living alongside Lilly and all the rest would just make me want to run away. They're good people, but needy," he added.

Grinning at him, it was my turn to sigh. "It's their job to be needy, Vim. Plus I don't see them wanting to eat together, or just spend time leisurely with one another as being needy. That's just normal," I said.

"To you, Renn. To you."

Maybe. But it was interesting to learn that Vim really didn't like the idea of living in one place with many others at once. It was... a little surprising, to be honest. I had always known he didn't like being too overwhelmed when it came to emotional moments, yet hadn't thought it so bad that he'd want to live away from others.

It was likely why he liked traveling around so much. It allowed him to visit people in short little bursts and then move on and give him peace of mind, alone, as he did.

"Can I ask something a little scary, Vim?" I whispered gently as I thought about it.

"Mhm."

"Mapple's mention of a village. You don't think she's just misunderstanding Randle's plan to open a new church, or orphanage?" I asked.

"She was confident it was a place to house members. It could just be a misunderstanding, but I don't believe in those at the moment," he said.

"Do... do you think there's any connection with my plans then? To build a place for members to come and stay, if even only temporarily?" I asked.

Vim was quiet for a moment, and then his leg shifted ever so gently. He pushed himself forward a bit, as to shift the way he was laying on my lap. I at first thought he was about to sit up, to ruin this happy little moment, but he simply re-positioned himself so he could lay with his head turned to the side a little more comfortably. As if he was lying down to sleep, and I his pillow.

"There might be Renn. I was trying to ignore that. Why'd you bring it up?" he asked, as if it was now all my fault.

Smirking at that, I patted his back gently. "Maybe we just should do it then? Let's pick a place up north, let Randle and Angie make their orphanage, and we can build a nice little village. You can be another Tor," I suggested.

"Is that you giving me permission to step down, then?" he asked.

My ears went stiff. "No!" I shouted, panicking a little.

He chuckled at me, and I sighed in relief. Gosh! He had said that so seriously! My tail had nearly fallen off!

"You can build your little village if you want to, Renn. I'll help you. But I'll not run it, have authority, or call it my own. I've done that before, it only ends up with me either having to conquer nations or wipe them off the map. Never ends well," he said.

Frowning at that, I tried to make sense of what he was saying. "Why does running a happy little village end up so grandiose?" I asked.

"Inevitability. Look at this place Renn, or Lumen. Or any of the kingdoms the Society has built. They fall because they grow too much. They become corrupt. Something other than what they had been originally built to be. This place, this Cathedral, used to be a tiny church. A small church in a small village with only a few thousand people. Look at it now," he said.

Right...

"But you didn't make it this way on purpose, did you? You just helped build it and protect it. You let Celine and the rest do their thing, and it became like this. Wouldn't we be able to avoid all this if you intervened and kept the village... simple?" I asked.

"Even if I was willing to force my will on people, nothing stays simple for long Renn. That's just nature."

Hmph.

Glancing over to the wall nearby, by the bed, I stared at the spear.

Right. Nothing stayed simple.

"I'd still like to try, Vim," I whispered as I studied the red cloth upon the spear. It was still, even though I knew if I simply blew a little air its way it'd flutter and sway. It was that light. Before Vim had shown up I had been messing with it a little. I had noticed it had swayed oddly, with no wind, and realized how light the cloth was. Plus it didn't smell, neither did the spear itself. They were like the rest of the stuff Vim carried around.

There was also now a rather noticeable little cut-like hole near the door on one of the house's main pillars. I had thankfully not stabbed the spear into it too hard, since it had slid into the wood without any resistance at all. Like a sharp skinning knife would into fish meat.

The blade was so sharp it hadn't even noticed the hard wood pillar. And something told me it wouldn't have noticed anything else either. Metal or stone.

It was the first real weapon Vim's ever given me. Not one for training, not one for hunting or preparing food or kindling for a fire. But an actual weapon. To use to kill.

Why had his mother made such a thing, I wonder? Had she not wanted him to be a teacher? What teacher needed a weapon for war?

"Then feel free to build your village. I'll always support you Renn, no matter what path you wish to traverse."

I nodded. I knew that. "I've asked Randle to find a suitable location. To help him and Angie. I also left a letter for Oplar, for when she returns. I asked Randle if he'd let her be involved too, since she might need a place to go if Telmik falls apart," I said.

"He told me."

Of course he did. "Why's he so open with you? And you him? All of a sudden?" I asked, a little annoyed. I was glad that Randle trusted Vim enough to talk to him, when he was basically ignoring everyone else at the moment, but it was a little frustrating to not be included in that same trust. Was I not his wife? Was I not trustworthy? Or did I just lack the centuries that they had?

"He's just a broken man. I get along with those types, Renn."

About to tease him about that, I hesitated a moment... and realized he was right.

Vim actually did get along well with such people. Those who were... broken in ways I didn't understand.

The lost. The confused. The weary.

Like Tosh.

Running my hand along Vim's back, I smiled at the protector of more than just flesh and blood.

"So Vim," I started. He shifted his head a little, telling me he was listening. "You know how Tor and Bray make their own little worlds...? Can you do that?" I asked carefully.

"No. I'm not a monarch Renn. I know none of you believe me, but I really am not one," he said simply.

"I see..."

"Hoping I could do it for your village, were you?" he asked with a chuckle. I relished the feeling of it.

"Yes. Would it be possible?" I asked.

"No. Their little worlds are fake, Renn. Illusions. Take Bray for instance. We had still been in the forest. The real one. No one else could see us there, but it was nothing more than a trick. Such tricks fail during moments when you need them most. Even the grandest of monarchs, the First Borns, capable of crafting massive illusions with ease couldn't hide a whole village for long. A god could have done it, though," he said.

Oh...? "Gods did such things?" I asked.

He nodded. "Many did. Most just molded the world to their needs, such as those monoliths in the south or the floating kingdoms that used to be in the skies, but quite a few chose to make illusionary worlds or whatnot. They were annoying to find, but once you did they were easy to break," he said.

My tail and ears danced a little as I soaked up his words, and his warmth.

So much in so little! Kingdoms in the sky. Those monoliths. Him saying they broke easily once he found them...

Before I could think of something to say, or ask, that would not cause him to get up and end my happy little moment... Vim took a small breath and sighed. "I see where you're coming from though. You want to find a place to protect and keep everyone safe. I can work with that. Give me time to think about it, and maybe I can come up with something," he said.

Oh my! "You would do that?" I asked.

"I would."

"Is it... possible?" I asked.

"I don't think so. Otherwise I would have suggested, or done such things, all this time. But there's no harm in me trying to think about it again, maybe after all this time something will come to mind," he said simply.

Oh. "Okay..." I said softly as I nodded.

Vim nodded too, and then buried his face deeper into my lap. I held back the squirms that wanted to erupt, and allowed my tail to do all the wiggling as to get it out of my system.

For a moment I was content just to sit there, but then I realized something important. I patted Vim's back, to get his attention.

"Hm?"

"Meriah! She's not here yet!" I said worriedly. And we were leaving soon! In a few hours, maybe! Once the sun rose!

"Ah. I left a letter for her with Randle. They don't like each other anymore, but he's the only one she talks to here. She'll know we're bound for Lumen, though I told her we will be making a few stops along the way so she will likely beat us there," Vim said.

Oh? We had some stops? Probably more stuff he wanted to pick up.

"I was hoping to travel with her to Lumen," I complained.

"Mhm... I figured. Sorry Renn."

I huffed as I thought of her smell. It made me smile. "I've gained a lot of friends lately, Vim," I said.

"You have. Well done."

Grinning happily, I nodded. He had sounded utterly genuine in compliment. Usually when talking of such things he'd tease me, or mumble a complaint that they were all women and trying to steal me from him... so it was nice to hear him actually say his true feelings on the matter.

Though...

I frowned at him, and wondered if I had heard what I think I had just heard.

He had just sounded half asleep, just now. His answer had been muffled, like many of them, but...

With my hand on his back, I slowly felt my eyes go wide... as sure enough he began to breathe a little more evenly.

A little deeper.

And...

"Vim...?" I whispered quietly, afraid to, but I had to confirm it. I couldn't see his face, thanks to how he had angled it.

No answer came, as he fell deeper into slumber.

"Hah..." I found myself smiling, and I even blinked blurry eyes as I felt, heard, and saw Vim fall asleep.

On my lap.

Gently running my hand along his back, I made sure to keep my happily swaying tail from bumping into him. I didn't want to wake him with any sudden or strange movements.

He was actually sleeping! For the first time in months!

And for it to be while like this...!

Granted... it might just be actual exhaustion. From all the drama and headaches. I felt exhausted, and I'd not had to deal with half of what Vim's had to lately. He's spoken personally with each member here, dealt with complaints and requests, handled gathering up the items he didn't want to risk being found, and even my own antics and woes all the while.

He was so strong, but he was in the end just one man. One set of shoulders. Even if the strongest shoulders in the world, there was still only so much they could carry.

Although he had wanted to leave in the morning... when the sun rose... I decided to let him sleep. Even if he did so through the day. Not just because I wanted to indulge in this moment, either.

"I love you Vim," I whispered, and hoped whatever dreams he found while within my lap were good ones.

He deserved them. Earned them.

Especially since I knew how hard he had to fight for them.