

Non Human 441

Chapter 441 An Otter in a River

This is what I get for relying on a family that barely talked or knew each other.

Groaning as I swam towards the dock, I was glad now that I had not filled my bag too much. My first, original, plan was to bring as much as I could with me. Thinking that we would be traveling in a cart or wagon, maybe even in a caravan. One large enough for all my books, and clothes and whatnot.

Instead all I had left the castle with was a small sack. One that was so worn and thin that even the most desperate thief would pass over, thanks to its appearance.

That and a chain around my ankle.

It had snapped and broken only a few links from the clasp around my ankle, so it wasn't very long or attached to anything heavy like it had been... but it was still heavy enough to make it difficult to swim.

Barely able to keep my head above water, I gasped a bit as I sunk and swam with all my might a bit. After a few moments I swam upward, barely breaching the surface and gasping for more air.

Why was this so hard! I was a phenomenal swimmer! Able to hold my breath for a long time, usually!

Maybe I was hurt. Or sick. I had to be. This didn't make sense.

As I neared the dock that I'd been swimming towards, I sunk a bit. As I swam in what was basically darkness, both thanks to the dark of the night and my closed eyes, I let out a loud scream while underwater.

It was a foolish thing to do, both since I wasn't swimming well enough to justify risking the lack of air, but also because my scream might get heard by my pursuers. But I couldn't help it. I screamed loud and long, so much that not only did I run out of breath I also felt my feet hit the bottom of the river. It was grimy and mushy.

Trying to kick off the bottom, but failing since it was so slick and mushy, I panicked as I realized how far I was beneath the surface now. I could just barely make out one of the dock's support pillars nearby, so I aimed for it and swam with all my might.

Thanks to my reckless screaming, my chest became tight and painful as I both ran out of air and began to desperately need some. A weird buzzing filled my ears as I reached the pillar, and tried to grab onto it. I pushed and kicked off it, hoping to propel me faster up towards the surface, but I felt oddly weak. I felt my own arms and legs slow in their kicking and swimming, and felt the current of the river grow stronger... even though it hadn't.

Oh no!

A new burst of energy filled me as I put even more effort into reaching the surface. I bit down hard on my cheeks and tongue, stopping my own body from trying to gasp for air and thus drown me as I swam.

There! The surface! And...!

Then, right before I breached the surface... something grabbed me.

I gasped for air, desperately, as I was lifted out of the water.

My shoulder hit something hard as I was lifted, and between the terrible pain and light-headedness I knew it had been the dock. I felt my clothes go tight around me, clinging and pinching me, as I was hefted and carried out of the water.

"Oh my gosh!" I heard a woman's voice through ringing ears, and then I felt the ground. Whoever had pulled me from the river had just placed me down, and I curled up and heaved as I grabbed at what felt like dirt and grass.

Land! Which meant I had been carried off the dock, which was a surprise. The dock had been rather large...

"Is she okay?" another voice. This time a man. A deeper one.

I listened for a moment to ruckus around me, and realized there were several people around me. I was facing downward, since I was still heaving and coughing up what little water I had swallowed. I hadn't almost drowned, but I had almost passed out from a lack of air. And I felt it still. My head was throbbing terribly, I felt weak and my stomach wanted to climb up out of me as if I'd eaten something terribly poisonous.

"By the dead gods, Vim, it's the princess."

My jaw clenched as my mind whirled.

They knew who I was!

My heart began to thump wildly as I tried to stay calm. My calm lasted for maybe half a moment, as I then shot up to my feet.

I was surrounded by people. There were at least half a dozen of them, and one of the men had kneeled down right next to me. I almost bumped into him as I ran forward, darting for the nearby tree-line.

Yet after a couple steps, I tumbled and fell. And not because one of them had grabbed at me, or tripped me.

Rolling on the ground, I eventually ended up on my back. Heaving desperately, I kept blinking blurry eyes as I tried to stop the world from spinning around me.

"I do believe she hit her head," someone said a little gently.

"No. She's just light-headed, she almost drowned," another corrected.

Wanting to groan at them, I bit back a sob... and tasted blood. Likely from either my fall, or my desperate attempts at not drowning earlier.

Someone sighed, and a new conversation started as some of the people around me stepped away. The idea of them just... leaving me alone was such an amazing thought I knew it was nothing but a dream.

Why would anyone leave me alone? Especially now.

Whether they were citizens of my family's kingdom, or members of the invaders, it didn't matter. Either would be more than happy to capture me. Or do who knows what else terrible things.

The chain on my ankle was proof of that.

About to weep, I was glad I was already heaving from my earlier struggle for air. Maybe they'd not realize I was crying, and instead think I was still trying to gasp for air.

I didn't want to cry. I was tired of crying.

My kingdom had fallen.

I had escaped with some other family members, but it ended up being a plot. We had been captured, and had been about to be executed.

And now, after having miraculously escaped, I was lying in the mud barely able to breathe and surrounded by who knows who and what and...!

"Been a hard day, huh?"

After a few blinks the world came back into focus. I glanced up a little, at the man who was staring down at me.

It was the same man from before. Crouching next to me.

I didn't recognize him. And although he didn't look like the citizens of my kingdom, his hair a tad too dark and skin a little too light in shade, he wasn't unique enough for me to confidently say he wasn't a citizen. Plus he had no discernible accent that I could tell. Many of the invaders, such as the ones who had captured us, had spoken with a noticeable tonal difference in certain words.

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"Did you lose your tongue in the river? I'm rather surprised at how close you came to drowning, what with being an otter and all," the man said with a smirk.

My eyes narrowed at the man as my brain suddenly started thinking differently.

I no longer thought of the pain and discomfort I was feeling. I didn't notice the cold, which was quickly seeping into my bones. I didn't even think of the chain and ankle bracelet, or the implications behind them... instead I only thought of one thing.

Otter.

"Who are you?" I asked, and hated how weak my voice sounded. I sounded like a little girl who had just went through something horrible, and was about to cry. And I hated that it was so close to the truth.

"My name is Vim. Luckily for you one of our members has a keen eye and noticed you flailing in the river," he said with a small gesture to our left.

I didn't glance at the person he pointed at, even though they had stepped closer. "You're welcome!" a younger woman's voice said.

Taking a small breath, I slowly rolled over and got my left arm under me. With more focus than it should have taken, I got myself to sit up.

The man remained crouched next to me as I sat up and looked around. I found quite a few people, and even some horses a bit ways away. There was a packed road not far from the tree-line I had just moments ago tried to run towards. There were half a dozen horses, all fully packed and loaded, with a few people around them. They were talking lightly while staring over at us. At me.

"Deserters?" I whispered as I tried to understand.

"Not really. Tosh, would you check on her please?" the man who had somehow known what I was stood away from me. I watched him for a moment as he turned, heading for the group near the horses. As he left a few of the others nearby left with him, while a few others came closer.

I tried not to let my worry show as another man knelt down next to me. One with very short hair, and something sticking out of his mouth. Was that a stick? It was really thin and tiny, why was he chewing on it?

"My name is Tosh. You look exhausted and cold, but I don't really see any wounds or injuries..." he introduced himself as he glanced me up and down. Thanks to how thin my clothes were, and how some of them were rolled upward thanks to the turmoil in the river, it likely wasn't too hard for him to check most of me.

"I'm... not hurt, I don't think..." I said softly.

The people who had caught me and my family, and the few others who had been with us, had beaten me a little but nothing too severe. A single backhand to the face was all it had taken for me to not really act out or struggle, and so they had focused on others.

"And this?" Tosh asked as he reached down to grab the thing on my ankle.

"A lock and chain, of course?" I said stiffly as he tugged it a little, which hurt. It was so tight on my leg that it didn't even have the room to budge or spin.

"As far as I'm aware the soldiers had been given strict orders of not capturing or pillaging anything or anyone. So... is this because of what you are?" Tosh asked as he glanced at me.

Frowning at him, I wondered how to answer that.

Did he mean that I was an otter, a non-human, or the fact I was... or had been, the princess of his nation?

"That was kind of on the nose, wasn't it? What if Vim's wrong?"

Turning my head, I found the woman from earlier. The one who had supposedly heard and seen me in the river, drowning. She had a rather heavy jacket on, which made me jealous. I shivered a little at the sight of it.

"Vim's never wrong about this kind of stuff. Plus, look," the man then reached over and brushed aside some of my clumped up hair. Likely to reveal the back of my neck.

"Ah... I see," the woman nodded and smiled in a way that told me she fully understood what the bit of hair running down my neck and back meant.

Sniffing, I shifted away from the man's touch as I slowly got to my feet. The small chain left attached to my ankle clanked as I did. "Who are you people?" I asked.

"We're sufferers of your father's hubris," the woman said.

My heart thumped at the confirmation they knew who I was... not just what I was. Yet even though it had been said aloud, no one seemed to care. The rest of the group were now heading back towards the road, to the horses and others, talking quietly amongst themselves.

Only this man and woman seemed to have any interest in me.

The woman smiled at me, and then reached over to pat me on the shoulder. I stiffly stood still, even as she tried to lightly guide me away from where I was standing. Towards the group, with the rest.

"Come on. Let's get you dried off and into something warm. And get that thing off you," she said.

"Yes. That's much too tight, it will impact blood flow before long," Tosh added as he too stepped over to join us.

Although a part of me knew there was no chance I could argue, since I had not the strength or even the willpower anymore to fight or run... the rest of me felt nothing but relief as I allowed them to guide me away from the dock and river I had almost drowned in.

"So... which princess were you? Eleven of you, hadn't there been?" the woman asked.

"The fifth. Brandy," I said softly.

"Ah! I missed something as interesting as this! You have to be joking!" a new voice entered the group, one that was loud... and young.

Watching someone more my size run towards us, I went still as I watched the girl run past the group and horses and head straight towards me.

I wrecked my mind for any memories of the girl, since she was smiling and approaching me as if we were long lost friends or something, but couldn't remember her. At all.

"Oplar..." Tosh greeted the girl, who ignored him completely, as she stepped right up to me and reached out to grab my hands.

I let her take them, since she was moving so quickly that I didn't know if I could stop her even if I wanted to, and she shook them happily.

"Princess! Of a fallen kingdom! Abandoned by a tyrant of a father, oh the story! And look at you! Found in a river to boot! Without boots!" Oplar shouted, beginning to ramble wildly as she looked me up and down as if I was some kind of fascinating toy or something.

"Come on, she needs to get out of her soaked clothes. Talk to her while we do so, Oplar," Tosh said with a sigh, pushing me a bit on my back as to force my feet into motion.

I barely got a few feet away before Oplar dropped my hands and then grabbed my arm as she looked down at my feet.

"A lock and chain! Aha! So you had been captured! The rest of your family is being beheaded as we speak, oh...!" Oplar stopped talking, flinching as she realized what she had said, and others groaned and sighed at her.

Although it hurt to hear the truth, I knew better than to blame her or expect anything different. I too had been about to be taken to that execution stand, after all.

"I... got lucky," I said simply. There was no point in telling her, or any of them, that the only reason I had escaped was because I had broken the chain and ran off when no one was looking. I not only didn't want to admit that I was strong enough to do such a thing, as to keep it a secret in case I needed to do the same thing again, but also because it'd mean I'd have to admit that I could have done the same for others.

I had left brothers and sisters. Uncles and aunts. Servants and close friends of the family. I had not saved any of them.

Though if I would have actually been able to or not was an entirely different topic...

"Lucky! Luck is half the story! Oh, she can have my clothes we look about the same size," Oplar happily said as we neared the group of horses.

Feeling a little... stunned, I blankly watched as the girl went to a horse. As to dig out some clothes for me. As she did, Tosh and the woman gestured for the man from earlier, Vim, to come over and take the thing off my ankle.

Watching him as he bent down, I frowned at him as he went ahead and grabbed it gently with both hands.

What...? Where was the tool he'd use? Surely you'd need some kind of clamp or saw, or...

Then the man simple twisted his wrists a bit, and the piece snapped in two. I jumped a bit, half-expecting to feel some kind of shock of pain or something, but instead felt nothing but relief over the thing being removed from my leg.

I shifted my foot and leg a bit as the man tossed the bits of metal away, over to the nearby forest.

"Did I hurt you?" Vim asked as I moved my foot a bit.

"No... I don't think so. Thank you," I said.

"Hm." He nodded, and looked like he had been about to say something but the other young girl returned. She had a bundle of clothes in her arms as she pushed aside Vim to step up to me.

"Hurry up! And nobody look!" she shouted with her loud voice. It made me flinch a bit, since my head still hurt.

She and the woman whose name I still didn't know helped me get out of my soaked clothes, and after a quick wipe-down I got re-dressed.

Oplar had been right. Her clothes fit me rather well.

"Looking good!" Oplar happily said as she confirmed it too with a glance.

"Yes... thank you," I said softly, feeling strangely humbled.

They knew who I was. What I was. And yet...

Now that I was dried off, the group readied to leave. People re-packed what few bags they had messed with during the commotion, horses that had been allowed to graze or drink from the river had been gathered up, and everyone started to walk down the path.

At first I almost expected them to just... leave me here. While another part of me expected to be forced along, as if some kind of captured slave or something that they had only tendered to so they could profit from me later...

Yet, oddly, another part of me didn't end up surprised at all when they allowed me to accompany them... as if I'd been a member of their group from the very beginning.

Chapter 442 Captain's Orders

Following Sentha, I shifted the bag on my shoulder since the strap was a little prickly.

It was summer now, in full. It was too hot to wear anything too baggy, and so my shirt wasn't really thick enough or covering enough skin in my opinion. Since it was too hot otherwise. But keeping it thin, which kept me cooler, made it harder to carry this blasted bag that was so prickly and itchy.

I needed some kind of towel or cloth, to put under the strap and on my shoulder... would I start bleeding? It felt almost as if it was about to bleed. As if it was scragging that badly.

At least we weren't traveling to another city or something. Just going from here to the nearby dock. An hour or so at most. I could endure that.

Maybe.

"Sweating quite a bit there Brandy," Sentha said without even glancing at me. In fact as far as I was aware she'd not looked at me in quite a few blocks.

Which meant she was either just teasing me, or could hear my strain from my breaths alone. Probably was doing both.

"I'm not used to this heat... it never got this hot back home," I said, defending myself.

"Aye... and you an otter? Yes? I guess I can understand that," Senthia said, a little too happily. As if amused at my own dis-comfortable predicament.

"What are you, Senthia?" I asked as we turned into an alley. One that had a bunch of boxes lined up against one of the walls. They looked... empty.

"Me? A much better suited creature for the heat and hard labor! But worry not about it. All you need to worry about is your new friend," she said as she finally turned to look at me.

Although Senthia had a smile on her face, and sounded happy, I could hear the undertone of discomfort. One that was... similar, but not the same, as mine.

She wasn't struggling because of the bag on her back though, loaded with spices. She had another issue. One that I was starting to realize was... rather common, for some reason, amongst those in the Society.

Not everyone liked to share what they were. Or are. As if it was some important secret that you only shared with your closest friends and allies.

Some, like Oplar or the others who I had traveled with down south here, didn't seem to mind sharing such things at all. But maybe it was more a personal thing, not something to do with what they actually were.

Non-humans were rare nowadays, but not so rare that one needed to hide it completely. Not yet, anyway.

"Why would I need to worry about a friend, Senthath?" I asked as we left the alley and walked out onto a new road. One that had fancy stones and even lampposts. They weren't lit, of course, since it was midday... but I hated the idea of them being lit even at night. I bet they made it hotter.

"She's a shark. A predator! And you an otter? A river fish? Haha!" Senthath laughed, rather loudly, and did so in a way that told me exactly what she meant.

I smirked a little at her, and decided to not correct her on her misunderstanding.

I was a river creature, but I wasn't a fish.

Or... well...

Maybe I was...?

For a tiny moment I doubted my whole existence as I followed Senthath to the docks. I tried to remember all the books I'd read, and the teachings of my teachers. Quite a few times I'd been told, and read about, otters. Hard not to, since it was what we were. Of course we'd be taught what we are.

The drawings had always made us look like some kind of weasels or something. River rats, one book had called us.

Surely not a fish... right?

Pushing the thoughts away, I decided to focus on something else. Namely the pretty woman I was about to part ways with.

"How long have you been a member, Senthia?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh most my life. I joined with my older sister, not long after my parents died. They were eaten by another one of us, some big jerk with huge teeth. The protector hunted him down and we met him while he did, and we joined that way," Senthia said, speaking rather happily as she did. Although she spoke of something obviously painful, it was also something she found she could speak about with pride.

I envied that, since I hated telling people where I was from and how I had joined.

Senthia hadn't asked for mine in return, though I expected she already knew. Oplar and her family had been the ones to bring me here, and handed me off to her. They had likely told her everything, every little bitty detail. Especially since I had taken a small nap upon arriving, since traveling in this heat even in a wagon had been torture.

In the future I'll need to figure out how to answer such a question without being odd about it. Especially since it was in all honesty, an innocent and gentle question.

But I hated the idea of telling people how helpless I was. Or had been.

My joining the Society had been a pure fluke. Happenstance. And my story before that was even worse. I had been the princess of a foolish kingdom, one brought low by its own hubris and pride.

I hadn't joined on purpose. I had simply been found, saved by members who happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Though... maybe Senthra's story was the same?

"I was saved by Vim too. Do most join through him?" I asked.

"No. Not really."

Hm...

Before I could ask another question I was led through another alley. This one though led us to the docks. Ones that were so busy and noisy, I had no chance to say a word to Senthra or get a word in response as she led me to a ship.

The boat was huge, with several big sails that were currently all folded up. I almost couldn't comprehend how big it was; even as we rounded it and walked down the pier it was attached to.

It was so big, the shadow it cast over the pier cooled me off. By a noticeable degree.

We eventually reached a large bridge looking thing that connected to the boat. Though not to the boat's top area, where one worked the sails and guided the ship. It instead led straight into the ship, as if into a window.

"Come on," Senthia didn't hesitate to step onto the bridge and head up it. There were two men standing near it, both with swords. They both stared at us, but must have recognized Senthia since they hadn't stopped her... or me as I followed her onto the bridge.

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It luckily had little rope guide-rails, which was more than most of the larger ships around us had. But the bridge ended up being not much more than a fancy plank of wood by the time we reached the ship itself. Plus it was angled in a way that made me feel unsteady, since I had to crouch a little as to enter the ship and pass through the entrance.

Inside the ship was hot. Hot enough to make me almost regret joining this merchant vessel.

"Senthia! How've you been lass?" a man noticed us entering. As I stepped down the small stairs that led to the floor, I glanced behind me at the hole we'd just passed through.

It was indeed just a window. And it looked like we were in a small storeroom. There were barrels and boxes everywhere, with people coming and going and picking them up to take them elsewhere.

Was this how larger ships were loaded? Seemed... stupid. Why not use a crane, or make a latch that opens farther below?

While Senta spoke to an older man with a colorful rag wrapped around his head, likely thanks to the hot stuffy ship, I studied the boxes around us.

I could smell food in them. Grains. A lot of it. The sight of all the boxes made me try to calculate how much food it took to sustain a ship such as this.

A lot, likely. Which meant this massive ship, which looked like it could hold countless boxes of goods... most likely had half or more of its hull full of supplies. Supplies it'd not be able to sell.

Made me wonder how such a ship made profit. I looked forward to learning more, and...

"Oi!"

I jumped, bumping into one of the boxes I'd just been studying as I looked up and found someone new.

A woman. A very dark skinned woman, who looked as if she'd been burnt thrice over on a pan, was glaring down at me with a look of utter disappointment.

"This? This thing? Really Senthath?" the woman asked loudly as she continued to glare at me.

I gulped and wondered if this was the supposed captain. The one I'd be working for, for the foreseeable future.

Did her skin hurt...? She had lots of little bumps and stuff all over. As if her darker skin was actually because of burns.

"If you want to complain do so later. I have to go spend the night with the Sisters and I have zero plans to give them a letter. If I do that they'll make me carry more elsewhere," Senthath said, not sounding too bothered by the loud woman's voice.

"Bunch of...!" the woman was about to curse, but stopped herself as she glanced me up and down.

Why were so many of our members so loud? Oplath and her family had been too.

"My name is Brandy..." I introduced myself, but didn't hold my hand out. The woman's hands, like the rest of her, looked like they had been recently burnt. Badly. I worried if I touched her it'd hurt her, they looked that bad.

"Hmph. Come on then. You get off my ship then, if you're job's done, Senthia! Or else I'll toss you over myself!" the woman shouted at Senthia as she turned and walked away.

Hurrying to follow her, I waved lightly at Senthia as I passed her. "Thanks, Senthia," I whispered lightly, since I knew it could be many years before I see her again.

"Safe sails, Brandy," Senthia said simply, then turned her attention back to the man she had been talking to earlier. As I left the room, following the burnt woman, I glanced back again... and noticed how Senthia stepped a little closer to the man as she spoke. The way she smiled up at him, and fluttered her eyelashes at him, told me all I needed to know.

Had he been a member too then...?

Was everyone on this ship members of the Society...?

It was daunting to realize that the Society was so... affluent. So massive and powerful.

This ship alone was likely worth more than the whole fleet my family had owned, and we had been a legitimate kingdom! And supposedly this was but one of many? Of many fleets? And there were entire nations, and regions, under the Society's banner too?

Maybe my plan to earn my place in the Society was... a bit more of a dream than an actual plan after all.

"I'm told you're an otter. Pure-blooded."

Blinking, I nodded... then realized she wasn't able to see me nod. "Yes Ma'am," I answered, as I would my teachers.

"I'm no ma'am. Call me Captain."

"Yes Captain. Though I'm not sure what you mean by pure-blooded," I said.

"Your parents. Both O'them otters too?" she asked with a glance over her shoulder.

I nodded.

"Then you're of pure blood. Simple."

Was it...?

We rounded a corner, entering a larger hallway. One that had people in it, a few of them were carrying the same boxes I'd just been studying earlier.

Passing the men carrying the boxes, who were walking slowly because of their heavy load, I wondered why they didn't just... unload them. Carry the stuff in smaller pieces, maybe. Or maybe make some kind of rail system. The hallway was big enough for one.

"Up we go," the captain said as we reached some stairs.

Or at least, I hoped they were stairs. The tiny stairwell was so thin, so tight a squeeze, the woman barely fit. And she wasn't fat at all. I had to turn a little, since the bag I carried wouldn't fit otherwise.

We rounded a corner, ascending to another level, and then out into another hallway. This one was almost empty, with the only other person in it, way down the way... looking almost all the way down the other side of the ship. I didn't get to figure out if this hallway actually went along the whole ship though, since we eventually stopped before some doors.

The captain pointed at one of the doors. "That there's mine. This one's you's," she said.

I noted her speech, and wondered if that was an accent I didn't recognize... or if her slight slurring of words was from her disfigurement. Her lips, like the rest of her body, were blotchy and scaly as if from bad burns.

She opened the door to my room, and I found it really couldn't be called a room much at all. It was made in a similar way to that stairwell we'd just used. Thin and tiny.

A few feet into the room was a bed, with an empty shelf right up above it. There was enough room next to the bed to reach a window, which was barely bigger than my head, and right below the window a bucket.

"You toss that out over there, Ne're the deck-rail," the captain said with a new point down the hallway. In the direction of the distant man, who was now turning down a different hallway.

"Deck-rail...?" I asked as I stepped past her as to put my bag down onto the bed. I'd empty and sort it later.

The captain sighed at me. "That much you need to learn'ah?" she asked.

I nodded a little gently at her.

She didn't seem too bothered, even though she had sighed at me. "You're my mate. From this day forward you' takin' care of me," she said as she pointed at me.

"Mate...?" I asked. Please tell me she didn't mean it the way I was interpreting it.

"Aye. Wake me. You'll deliver my orders. Prepare my food, and such. You sent to learn, you will learn by doin'ya?" she said with a smile. One that was wobbly and revealed perfectly white teeth.

At least that part of her seemed fine. "Alright... I can do that," I said, agreeing.

So I was to be her steward. Her servant.

Yes. That would work.

In fact it was far better than I could have asked for! I had expected me to be some kind of laborer, or maybe working in the kitchens or something. But to work right under the captain? In such an administrative way?

This was great! I'd learn so much, so quickly this way!

"Good. Now go clean my room. When you're done find me up on deck," Captain said as she nodded, contently, and then turned and left.

I nodded, and hurriedly shut the door to my room... then went to open hers...

And suddenly regretted, slightly, my decision and position.

Her room was utterly filthy. Clothes were everywhere. Books stacked high. And to make matters worse, unlike my room which barely had enough room for me, hers was nearly as big as the storeroom we'd just been in.

Groaning at the sight... I realized once again that the ship was hot. Stuffy.

And now smelly.

But it was what I had decided to do. I had to earn my place in the Society... and other than being a princess, the only thing I really knew was money.

I wasn't sure yet if I actually did know money at all, or if I had been taught wrong about it all these years, but...

Digging into my pocket, I pulled out the single coin I had. The one I'd brought from home.

It was all I had to remember home by... and was the only coin I'd earned for myself. So far.

And it was the proof of something obvious. Something any merchant learned, and every person was forced to eventually.

"One has to start somewhere," I whispered as I put the coin away... and decided to start with all the scattered dirty clothes.

Chapter 443 To Bank a Port

The port we were docking into was one of the busiest I'd ever seen.

It was also one of the first places we'd been where our ship wasn't one of the biggest... and in fact, looked to be on the smaller side of the scale.

Passing by one of the ships that made us seem tiny, I gaped up at the thing. Even when half way up the standard rigging ropes, putting me high above our ship itself, I still wasn't even half way as high up as the ship we were passing.

It was not plain like our ship either. The whole ship had designs, carved and etched into its wooden hulls. The thing had huge windows, massive black cannons peaking out some of them, and had more rope and sails upon it than four of our ships combined.

I was just barely able to make out the upper decks of the ship, where I could see a few people running back and forth... and I couldn't help but wonder how many it took to sail the mighty beast before me.

It took us sixty-three men. And forty-five women, and one young girl. That one though...?

I quickly counted the visible guns on it, and realized it'd take more people just to work one side of the ship's guns than we had onboard in total.

"It could conquer a nation..." I whispered in awe at it.

Who needed wealth when you had that thing? What would even a mountain of gold coins do against it?

It could lay siege to a port. It could blockade a river or waterway... even a lake... there would be nothing anyone could do about it...!

And somehow, it still wasn't the biggest ship. Nor was it the only one of its caliber.

Turning a bit as we continued to sail past the warship, I took a deep breath of ocean air... and felt tiny. Far tinier than usual, at least.

Just how big was the world? How might the oceans? There were hundreds, if not thousands, of ships here... and this was just one port. One of hundreds.

How many people were there? And most of them were humans? How? How had humans grown to such numbers? Even my family, as big as it had been, couldn't reach this number no matter the centuries that passed! There had to be more at play... maybe the dead gods had played some kind of trick on the humans, making them able to multiply when no one was looking or something...

"Oi! Gremlen! Down!"

I glanced down, found the Captain, and quickly went to descending the rigging. It didn't take me long at all to drop to the deck, a few feet from her.

Smiling up at her, I nodded. "Sorry Captain! I just... was in awe," I said as I glanced again at the huge warship. It looked like it was anchored, so we were leaving it behind... yet it was so massive that from here on the deck at this angle it almost looked like it was sailing behind us, if not catching up to us and about to hit us.

Captain turned a bit to look at the ship. "Aye, a mighty vessel. But we not here to gawk at big guns and wide sails," she said, with a small hint of exhaustion in her voice.

I nodded. I knew we were about to be busy. We had been given an important task, from the Society. We were carrying goods that needed to be delivered, in both safety and swiftness. It was why she was exhausted, as was most of the crew. We'd been operating at half the breaks and rest, an unnatural thing for this ship, ever since picking up our charge.

Personally I was glad to be doing something for the Society. These last few years we'd just been making trades... buying goods and selling them, with the occasional delivery or escort job. So it was neat to finally have something to do that was more than just earning coins.

Captain looked back at me, crossed her burnt arms and sighed. "Did ye' take duties?" she asked.

I nodded. "Everyone's been assigned their tasks and knows their windows of leave," I said. I spent all morning delivering each and every rotation letter to everyone. For a few who hadn't been able to read I had spent some time reading and explaining it for them too.

"And the pliers?" she asked.

"The fliers are ready to be transitioned, they're already up from the hull and in the three unloading bays," I said.

I barely even noticed her little lisp anymore, nor did I smirk at how cute it was either. Even though it was, I knew now that she was actually very conscious of her... struggle to speak properly. She tried not to respond when people called her speech impediment cute, but I knew in truth it bothered her deeply. To the point she'd cry at night when alone. So I tried my best to not even be aware it existed, when I could.

Captain then nodded, pleased. "I'm a'gonna miss you, mate," she then said with a small sigh, as if she'd just lost a bet.

A little humbled, I nodded. "I'll miss you too, captain," I said softly.

"Mhm... but me knew you'd leave. Too smart for a little ol'ship as me, aye?" captain said as she reached out to pat my head. I let her pat my head as if I was still a young girl, even though I hadn't even been young enough for her to have justifiably do this even when I first joined her crew. She ruffled my hair a bit, tangling it up. "Ye' a good girl, Brandy," she said gently.

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"I love you too, captain..." I said softly, unsure of what else to say.

A part of me wanted to ask her name, since she'd never told me her real name. But I knew if she wanted me to know it, she'd have told me. If she even had one. A few of the members we'd met over these last few years, as we sailed from port to port, had been the types to not have names at all. Calling themselves by title, as captain did, instead of an actual name.

"Now, no amount of friendship overlook hard work! Get going!" captain then said as she pointed past me, to the entrance to the lower decks.

I bit back a groan as I nodded. Right. Even if I was going to stop being a member of her crew, there was no denying that as of this moment I was still her first mate.

Although watching the port as we docked was interesting, and something I really had wanted to do since it was so massive and new to me, I instead focused on my work. Captain was right. I was still a member of this crew, even if her friend.

I, alongside the rest of the crew, spent the rest of the day readying the ship for docking. Things were sorted. Places cleaned. Storerooms shifted, empty boxes readied to be unloaded as to be replaced with new ones, and so much more. It was well after sundown before the ship was finished docking, tied and moored, and I was joining the rest of the people and goods being unloaded onto the docks.

We were met by not just the port authority, where we had to pay a tax, but also by the representative of the Society's operations in this town. A taller man wearing a strange colored robe. One of the other sailors claimed it was an orange robe of tarthus, whatever that meant.

Once the real work was done, and half the crew was given leave and rest, I parted ways with the captain. I gave her a hug, even knowing it hurt her a little, and did my best to not get too emotional as we parted.

I left with the man in orange, alongside others. They had three wagons, which were carrying the boxes we had delivered here from hundreds of miles away.

While walking with the group through the city, which was still lively and noisy even at nightfall, I tried to find a suitable group to involve myself with. I honestly had no idea who amongst everyone were members, since none of them had any obvious non-human traits... but I knew quite a few were supposed to be. Captain had said this location had almost a hundred members, so...

"Young Brandy," a woman waved me over before I stepped over to a different group. Happy to be invited first, I hurried over to the rear of one of the wagons. She sat on the back of it, on a little lip of wood that stuck out behind its tailgate. "I'm told you're joining our location," she said to me as I began walking behind her... and the wagon she rode. There was room for me up next to her, but it was too high for me to risk climbing up upon. Especially since the extension she sat on was kind of small, and I carried a heavier bag.

I nodded up at her. "Yes. I'm told you have a bank here, I wanted to learn how it works," I said.

"The bank...? Of all things the bank?" she asked with a frown.

"Is it that surprising?" I asked. Surely not, right? I mean... it was a bank! Such a thing only existed in the larger towns; my own kingdom hadn't even had such a thing!

I had to slow a bit since the wagon was slowly coming to a stop. I peered around the edge of it, and saw we were nearing a busy area. We looked to be waiting for another cart to pass by. I wonder how deep into the city we were going?

The woman sighed at me, and I noticed the tip of her ears as she did so. Her hair had shifted a bit thanks to her sigh, and the wagon coming to a full-stop.

They were pointy. Very pointy.

"My name's Solia. I'm a gecko, a type of lizard," she said.

Ah... "Sorry. I didn't mean to stare," I said. She must have noticed.

She smiled gently at me. "This is where you introduce yourself, you know?"

Oh. Right. I nodded. "Brandy. I'm an otter."

"Oh? How cute! Though that only further makes your choice of occupation weird... The sea at least makes sense, water and all, so why the bank?" Solia asked as the wagon returned to rolling forward.

Stepping forward, I was about to answer but she held out her hand. At first I thought she was continuing our little, slightly weird, introduction... but then realized what she was actually doing.

Taking her hand, she helped me up next to her. As I sat down on the little outcropping of wood, she helped me take my bag and put it behind us and into the wagon proper with the boxes they'd gotten from our ship.

Or well, captain's ship. It wasn't mine anymore, was it?

Or maybe it was? What with it being the Society's and all?

"I'm trying to learn how money works," I told her honestly.

"Money...? Well I guess a bank would work then. But you don't need to come all the way here to do that, do you? Money's pretty simple, isn't it?" Solia asked.

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

Simple? Money?

Hardly. My whole family was dead, and my kingdom collapsed because of money. Something so powerful was far from simple.

Someone who said something like that had obviously never needed to worry about money. Or its power. Or what it could do.

She must have lived, and is living, a simple life. I was jealous.

"Do you not work at the bank?" I asked, instead of letting her comment bother me too much.

"Me...? No. But my sister does," she said.

Glancing at her, she smiled at me. "Her name's Sofia. Make sure you're nice to her, okay? She's not much older than you. It's not often our kind get to meet friends the same age!"

"I'm older than I look, you know," I said.

She sat up a little straighter at that, and then groaned. "Oh... you're one of those. Of course you are... my bad... um..." she suddenly seemed apologetic.

Smiling gently, I nodded. "I look forward to meeting her all the same. By the way... what's a gecko?" I asked.

"A type of lizard!" Solia said happily, it seemed she was glad I had not taken offense at her misunderstanding.

A lizard...?

Before I could ask more Solia started to point at others nearby. Those guiding the horses that pulled wagons, or walking alongside them. She went to telling me not just everyone's names, but the more recent drama surrounding them. Most of it was simple things, like who was courting who, or who had recently eaten some snack that had not been theirs.

Happy to hear all about those who lived here, the people I'll be living amongst for the foreseeable future, I sat and spoke with Solia the whole way to the Society location, a huge stone building on the north side of town... overlooking the port and the rest of the city.

Chapter 444 A Vault's Boredom

Working at the bank had not been as interesting, or as difficult, as I had expected it to be.

Not only was there no real hard manual labor involved, such as the type I'd had to do on the ship, the hours weren't bad. The bank was only open a few days a week, and also only open for a handful of hours at a time. Never during the night, and never during the early morning. Not even for appointments.

That meant most of my day was spent on my own time. Where I was free to do whatever I wanted.

Although I was more than happy to have such moments to myself, finally... especially after spending years on a ship where there basically wasn't any such moments of privacy or time to relax, it was also strangely unsettling.

It made me feel bored. Or as if I was wasting time. Precious time. Time that could be spent making money.

Not that the Society needed money...

Placing the box of coins down, I sighed at the wealth before me. Around me, even.

I was alone in the vault, though only to a point. Outside of the room, and down the hallway, were guards. One non-human and another human. Both proper members of the Society, though a tad lazy if I was allowed to judge people so.

It wasn't their fault, though. This place, this bank and half-way station was... well...

Easy going. The port city we were located in was well regulated, thanks to the local lords. They employed large numbers of guards and actually enforced the laws they imposed. They even targeted corruption, in and out of the system. It was likely one of the safest cities I'd ever lived in, and possibly ever would.

The one and only issue with this location, at least in the perspective of a non-human, was you couldn't live here if you couldn't blend in with humans. And that didn't just mean physically, either.

Leaving the vault, I slowly walked down the hallway to the metal gate at the end. I tapped lightly on it, and the human guard turned in his seat and noticed me. The man did get up, as to let me out, but did so a little slowly. Enough so that it bothered me.

If I ran this place I wouldn't let people be so lazy, I'd think. It set a bad example.

"Why the sour face, Brandy?" the human asked as he unlocked the gate, and then slid the huge bar that really locked it in place upward so the door could swing open.

Stepping out of the hallway and into the small guardroom, I reached up to touch my cheeks. "Had I looked upset?" I asked. Although I had been annoyed over his slowness to open the door, it hadn't been to such a point it should have showed on my face.

"Rather you look annoyed. Upset, maybe," the man said as he went to locking the door again.

Hm... I rubbed my face a bit, wondering what he had seen. What had I just been thinking about...?

Money, of course. The box of coins I'd just taken in there, the fifth one this month so far, had been full of golden scripts. More wealth than my family's kingdom had made in ten years.

But that shouldn't have made me annoyed. Especially because now, after all these years, I knew full well how small and insignificant my family's nation had been. My decade on the ship had proved that fact in only a few ports, honestly.

So... if not the fact these two were lazy, or the obscene wealth... what was upsetting me?

Was it possibly the fact I now had free time, again? That my job for the day was finished, and I now had hours before I needed to go to sleep as to wake for tomorrow's work?

Yes. Likely.

"I think I'm just bored," I decided, and admitted.

The other guard scoffed at me. I turned a bit, to look at the non-human man who turned the page in his book.

He hadn't even bothered to get up to let me out, even though I knew he had likely heard me approach long before the human had noticed. He was a sharp man, and likely the strongest here. Thus why he was a guard, though I wasn't sure why he always spent most of his time down here protecting the vault.

"He's been prickly. Ever since Solia turned him down again," the human said gently as he walked past me, heading back to his own seat.

I smirked at him. "As she should," I said.

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His eyes narrowed at me, and I turned away. Before he could say something I left the room, heading down the hallway that led to the stairs back up top.

"She's such a..." I heard the two start to gossip about me, but paid no heed to it.

After all, I planned to leave soon.

It was time I went elsewhere. I'd learned enough here. I learned all about interest, loans, how to operate and run a bank and all the little systems involved... I even learned how to build what the Society called a credit-profile for not just an individual, but entire groups. Such as guilds, companies or even nations themselves.

A few weeks ago I had used the equation, the method, to figure out what my own nation would have been given... had it still existed, and still in its prime.

Turned out my nation would have been given a rather good rating, though not a high limit on loans. We would have been able to buy nearly anything on credit, but only once or twice and only for a few things at a time. It was nothing compared to some of the loans we, this very bank not just the Society, had for some of the nobles in this town.

Reaching the stairs, I slowly ascended. I took my time, since I knew there was really nothing else for me to do today. The bank by now was fully closed and locked down. The Society housing, the half-way house, was active... and I didn't mind helping out at it, and would likely be where my feet would eventually take me, but at the moment I simply wanted to linger in my own thoughts.

The decision to leave was a big one. Especially since I needed to be sure I really was ready.

My original goal, back when joining the Society, was to both figure out a place for myself... as to earn the right to be a member, but also to correct my own mistakes. My own family's mistakes.

I never again wanted to lose a home because I didn't understand wealth well enough. Or its purpose, or its power.

Honestly I was making great progress. At least in my opinion.

I had spent a decade on that ship, dealing with goods. The act of buying, selling, transporting and so much more. I knew market trends, how they worked, what was valuable and why they were, and even more importantly I had learned the value of people. Not as a product, but instead an investment.

On that ship I had learned what hard work was. And why it was so valuable. To the point that it was worth paying well for it.

And this last decade here in this bank, I had learned the finer forms of money and wealth. I had learned how the goods bought with money on that ship were properly transported and used, here I had learned how to both invest wealth and create it. On the ship I dealt with the products. Here I dealt with coins and ledgers, the very ones that dictated where that ship went and what it carried.

I've learned the beginning, the process... now I needed to learn the end.

I could make money. I could hold it, and comprehend it. Now I needed to know how to actually use it.

Thus my next goal was to figure out how to use it. Properly. Not to make more wealth, but instead how to use it to secure our security. As a Society. As a person.

Of course no one could outright tell me where I needed to go to learn such a thing... since although the Society was huge, and had so many locations and places of interest, there really was only one place that ran it all.

Telmik. The Cathedral.

And the only ones allowed there were members of the cloth. Or rather, the only ones allowed any power there were. At least, so I was being led to believe. But I hadn't figured out where else to go. Another ship? Another bank? One of the many businesses, maybe? Although I could do such a thing, since there were several options to choose from, I felt like I needed to go somewhere... important. Important enough to let me see and study those who made the big decisions.

My current plan right now was to speak with the protector. I had been told he should be arriving soon, within the next few weeks.

If anyone, that I could actually speak to at least, would know where I should go it'd be him.

He was one of the very few people who not only was involved with the inner-workings of the Society, but also someone who had been around from nearly the beginning. Plus I knew him personally. He had helped save me from my kingdom when it had fell, at least in a way. So I kind of hoped he'd be willing to at least hear out my request and maybe help me find my proper path...

"Brandy!"

Stopping at the top of the stairwell, I turned and smiled as Sofia ran over to me.

"Why are you covered in paint?" I asked. Her arms were all red, dried paint covered them nearly up to her elbows.

"We're painting the inner kitchen's dining area! Or well, we had been. Now we're waiting for the layer to dry," Sofia said with a huge grin.

Ah... right. I had heard about that. They all had planned to clean the place up, including giving it a new coat of paint, before the protector arrived. I wasn't really sure why, since the man I had met back then hadn't seemed the type to care about such things, but I wasn't going to voice such an opinion.

It made them happy to do so, even if it was a waste of money.

"So... if you're done, why not clean up?" I asked with a point to her arms. They looked dried enough that I doubted touching them would make me red too, but I didn't want to risk it. Sofia was a hugger, so I needed to be careful.

"I am! About to! I came to invite you to share the bath with me and my sister," she said happily.

Oh...?

My first instinct was to turn her down. But then I remembered I of course had nothing else to do. Plus...

"Sure... let me go get a set of clothes and my bath stuff, I'll meet you two there then," I said, deciding to do it. Especially since here soon I might not get to ever see her again.

"Great! We'll head there now!" Sofia happily said as she turned back around and ran off, likely to go get her sister.

Although not really in the mood for a bath, I decided it was better than walking around aimlessly.

My mind wandered when I was bored. In ways I didn't like.

Hopefully the protector showed up soon. And hopefully I could actually find a solution to my dilemma from the information I could glean from him. Otherwise who knows where I'd end up and what I'd end up doing...!

Chapter 445 Faith in Money

Following the protector into the Cathedral, I once again realized how little I understood about the world.

How had they built this place...? The towers, the massive tree-like buildings, looked so tall the very clouds were below them. And they weren't tiny little spires either, but huge circular things that looked like each floor had enough space for dozens of rooms!

No wonder people say religion was stronger than money. I don't think even all the money in the world could build this... this place had to have taken more than just money. It had taken faith. Complete and utter devotion...

"Vim!"

The protector, and I, slowed to a stop as a younger woman ran up to him. She wasn't dressed in the familiar robes of the church, but her dress was plain in color and form enough to not seem odd here. She grinned happily up at the protector, in a way that made me wonder if she was someone important to him, or he her.

"I've figured it out!" she then shouted at him, proudly and confidently.

"Figured what out?" Vim asked, his voice the same bored one he had been using this whole time with me on our trip here. If she was important to him, he definitely didn't show it.

"You forgot didn't you? That's fine. Last time you were here, remember I told you I couldn't figure out how to make mother scream? I know how to now!" the woman said excitedly.

Scream...? Mother? I got a little closer, rather interested now. Just what was she talking about?

"Light, you're a menace," Vim said with a sigh.

I blinked as I realized who she was.

Light! The leader's daughter!

I gulped as I focused on her eyes, and realized sure enough that she did indeed have glowing eyes. Enough so that I should have noticed right away, they were so obvious...

She must have felt my stare for she turned her attention to me. She grinned at the sight of me, stepped forward and leaned close to me. I felt my back go stiff and the hairs on my neck and upper back stand up a bit as she whispered quietly into my ear.

"Welcome Brandy, to Telmik. Make sure you stay here, and turn down the offer to leave tonight. Okay?" she whispered.

My whole body started to sweat as Light leaned back away, smiling gently at me as she nodded and turned around. She grabbed Vim by the arm, as if I'd never even been here in the first place, and started to tug him away. "Come on! Mother's waiting!" she said.

Although I had planned to follow him, since he had intended to take me to someone he thought I'd find to have answers for my questions and needs, I didn't step forward even as they got farther and farther away. Vim didn't seem to be very interested, but Light began to ramble and tell him all about some person she had met the other day. One that had insulted her and made her sad.

The way she acted reminded me almost as if she was his daughter. She was acting like a young girl, telling her father all about someone that had bothered her... almost as if she wanted him to correct it for her.

It made me wonder if the rumors about the protector being involved with Celine were true. And also, whether he was that girl's actual father or not, if he would in fact do something about this person she claimed had been rude to her.

Snapping out of it, right as they were about to round a corner, I hurried forward. I shifted my bag on my shoulder as I picked up my pace, as to keep them in my sights.

I didn't want to really get involved in their conversation, especially just in case they actually were related and family, but at the same time I didn't want the protector to forget about me.

This place was huge. Bigger than a hundred of my family's castles. I'd get lost here if not careful.

"It was rude though!" Light said with a huff.

"If you're rude to people it's only expected they'd be rude back," Vim said.

"I wasn't being rude! I was just telling them what would happen if they weren't careful!" Light complained.

Oh...?

Vim sighed and glanced at the girl on his arm, and then turned his head enough to look back at me. Our eyes met for a tiny moment, and he looked back ahead after doing so.

Had he just checked to make sure I was still with them...? How interesting.

"Don't ignore me!" Light complained as she tugged on his arm.

"I'm not. I wish I was though," Vim said simply as we entered a new hallway. One with other people in. The proper grey and white robe wearing kind.

"Gosh! No wonder mom burns prayers in hope you'll sneeze so hard that your you-know-what falls off!" Light said, laughing as she did.

My face got a little red, as Vim glanced at her and frowned. "My what?"

"Your nose of course. What did you think I meant? Gosh, Vim, you're so gross!" Light said, laughing again.

My face got a little hotter, but only because I had fallen for such a simple and silly joke. And it hadn't even been directed at me.

Vim shook his head, seemingly used to the girl's antics as we rounded another corner. We entered a hallway with a really fancy rug, the type that made me feel bad for walking on with my dirty boots.

Light giggled happily at his reaction, as if her joke had actually bothered him. She tugged on his arm a bit as she pointed down the hallway in front of us. "Mom's with Randle and the rest. There."

"Figured," Vim said.

Had he...? It had seemed almost as if he knew exactly where to go. Maybe Celine and the rest were always in the same area, or using the same rooms or something.

Slowing as we neared one of the doors, I felt a new panic. One I'd not felt before, even when Light had told me of a warning. A prophecy.

I was about to meet Celine. The Celine. The leader. The real saint. The Saint.

Gulping a little, I took a deep breath and followed Vim and Light into the room. The rug we were walking on didn't continue into the room, but only because a new rug took over. This one was even fluffier than the last, to the point I felt like I sunk into it a bit as I walked upon it.

"He's home, mother!" Light released Vim and ran deeper into the room. I followed her, excited to follow her to her mother... as to finally put a face to the name I've been hearing since joining.

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Yet I hadn't needed to. Like her daughter, Celine's eyes glowed. Spectacularly. She was sitting at a small round table with a few others, people I probably should have glanced at and studied since they were undoubtedly other members and most likely important... but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the glowing orbs before me.

"I'd say he is, but he doesn't see this place as home. So in theory, he's not home, Light," Celine said as she smiled to the young woman, who quickly went to stand beside her chair.

"Home is where you lay your head," Vim said simply as he too stepped up to the table and group, though he paused a few feet from it.

"Coming from anyone else that would have been something humbling, but from you it just sounds like you're trying to be rude to us," Light said.

Celine smirked at her daughter's words, and I had no choice but to admit that the two really didn't look like mother and daughter.

They didn't share much at all between them. They didn't share their hair colors, the tone of their skin or angles of their faces... in fact the only thing that they shared were the off-putting eyes that glowed. Though I suppose out of everything to inherit as proof of one's bloodline, that was good enough.

Slowly approaching as well, I did my best to not notice the eyes glancing my way. I politely looked away from the strange creatures with glowing eyes, and instead smiled and gently nodded to the others sitting at the table. There was a taller, thinner man. A portly woman and also a man with really dark circles around his eyes. Were those tattoos? Some sailors had them, but I'd never seen any around the eyes like that. Maybe it was a religious thing.

"As much as I'd love to listen to your off-handed whining, I'll instead do something productive..." the thinner man sitting at the table stood, shifting his robe a little as he did.

"Who is whining?" Vim asked the man.

"Both of you. Welcome back Vim, Celine, Eyes," the man nodded a few times to everyone as he stepped away.

"Ah. Wait. Take her to Brail for me, would you?" Vim said before the man could leave completely.

The man frowned at me and I stood up a little straighter at his look.

"Let us go then, a far better purpose than listening to their foolish quips," the man said to me, gesturing to the door.

I gulped as I glanced away from the taller man and to Vim. He nodded at me, and then turned his attention back to the table.

"Like always you simply push trouble onto others. Really, Vim, must you?" Celine asked with a sigh.

"She's not trouble, that's what she's here for," Vim defended himself.

Although I was the one being talked about, I didn't get to join the conversation. The taller man stepped out of the room before I knew it, and I had to hurry as to follow him.

Leaving the room, I wasn't sure if I should be glad or not to have left. They had all seemed so interesting, and I had at least wanted to introduce myself to Celine the leader...! Though maybe I'll get another chance...

"My name is Randle. You look like you're hungry, are you?" Randle asked as I followed him down the hall. We headed deeper into the Cathedral, going the opposite way from whence I had come from earlier.

"Oh... a little yes... My name is Brandy. It's a pleasure to meet you," I said, wondering who he was. He must be important, since he had not only been sitting in a meeting with Celine but had also talked to her that way as he had.

"Hm... And you're here to meet Brail are you?" Randle asked as I went to walking by his side. Unlike Vim he seemed to walk a little slower, as if he was in no hurry and had no reason to be. But not because was lazy, like so many other men. Instead he just seemed...

"Yes... Vim recommended I meet her, after I told him what I wanted," I said.

Randle smiled gently as he nodded, as if he somehow knew full well what I wanted already. "Then it would be wise to trust his judgment. Would you like to eat before or after you meet her, though?" he asked kindly.

I see. Maybe he was some kind of priest or something. He was acting all fatherly all of a sudden.

"Honestly I'd rather meet Brail first, if I can. Something Light had said worries me, so..." I said, unsure if I should say it or not.

"Ah... just now? What had she said?" Randle asked as he slowed a bit.

"She told me to stay here, and to turn down the offer of leaving tonight... though didn't really explain what she meant," I said.

Randle sighed a little and glanced back down the hallway, to the room we'd just left. We could just barely make out their voices, notably Light's. "A prophecy; forewarning with a purpose. It would be wise to heed it, though do not feel obligated to. If your life had been at stake she would have said so, as is their rule. Unless she had said so, and you omitted it," Randle said.

I quickly shook my head. "No! She hadn't...!" Thankfully.

He nodded slowly. "All the same. I'd suggest taking it to heart. Her prophecies, their prophecies, are given to them by the gods. It'd not do well to ignore them. even if you came out better after by doing so, you'd only have upset gods to deal with afterward," he said as he turned and started walking again.

"Upset gods...?" I asked. What'd he mean by that?

"They're warnings from the gods. For better or worse. If the gods took the time to send you, specifically you, out of everyone in the world... I'd think that would mean they'd be rather offended if you didn't at least hear it or heed it, don't you?" Randle suggested.

Although it was a slight stretch... I did in fact see where he was coming from. He was basically saying if I ignored a prophecy, no matter its importance or purpose, it'd be the same as ignoring the gods themselves. And that would indeed be something foolish.

It was likely why my father had failed, after all.

Coming to a stop, I frowned at the realization.

Randle noticed, and came to a stop again too. He turned a bit, frowning at me as my mind whirled and hurt.

"Young Brandy... is all well?" he asked worriedly.

"No... I just realized another reason for my family's demise..." I whispered.

Randle must be far older, and far wiser, than he seemed. He didn't even flinch or blink at my words, and instead patiently waited for me to continue and tell him what I meant.

Clearing my throat a little, I stepped forward so I'd not have to speak too loudly.

"My family. We had a kingdom. Up north. It fell... thanks to my father's hubris. He got in debt to the wrong people, terrible people... but I now realize he and... well, all of us, had been without faith. We didn't even have a church or place of worship!" I said, my heartbeat starting to really thump in worry.

After all, it was true! I myself knew of the gods, of course, but had never actually worshiped them or anything!

Maybe that was why I'd felt so lost.

Maybe that was a failure on my part. Since it obviously had been a failure of my father's, too.

"Are you religious, then?" Randle then asked.

My mouth became dry all of a sudden as I stared into the eyes of a man who suddenly seemed like a mountain. Somehow I now feared this man more than I did Vim. Even though it was obvious he was frail and thin. His baggy robes barely hid how small he was in frame.

"I... don't know..." I answered honestly.

And that was the problem. What if that was an issue...?

After all... wasn't this place proof?

This giant church? The people here with glowing eyes? The prophecies? Had the Society not been built on the backs of saints and divine figures, such as Vim and monarchs? Celine and her daughter?

If they were proof of the gods, and thus the gods powers and authority... then...!

"Hm... It looks like you're going through quite a mental crisis. Would you like to sit and talk about it?" Randle then asked, gesturing to a nearby bench.

Gulping my dry mouth, I slowly nodded. "Could we...? Would you talk to me about it?" I asked.

Randle seemed to become even calmer as he gently smiled and nodded. "Of course. Come. Sit with me. Take your bag off and tell me just why a lack of a church is so important, and also why you must confront it here and now," he said.

Although his invitation somehow felt... dangerous, it was also everything I needed. I nearly started to cry as I hurriedly took a seat next to him on a small wooden bench, and went ahead and told him everything. About my family. The kingdom. How it had fallen... and what I'd been doing since.

I had thought money was the answer. To everything. It would give me a place to belong. It would give my life purpose, and my membership to the Society justification. I had also thought it the most powerful thing ever, since it had so easily laid low my family and the nation we had ruled.

Yet now...

Now...

Sitting with Randle, he kindly talked to me for hours... for so long in fact, I had not been able to meet Brail. She had left Telmik in the middle of our conversation... and although nothing ill had befallen her, I always thanked Light for sharing her prophecy with me that day.

Without it I would have never found faith.

Chapter 446 A Muddy City

Stepping off the wagon, I groaned a bit as I felt and saw the slush of mud beneath me.

Great. I just got these shoes.

"Aye, muddy and wet. Sea city after all," Gresso said, laughing at me as he too stepped off the wagon.

"I'd hardly call this a city," I complained. What were there, a hundred buildings at most? And most were made of wood. Some mere huts.

I had been told this was the fastest growing city in the whole northern region. That it was a merchant's paradise. It looked more like a typical hamlet, where pirates and downtrodden gathered more than merchants and nobles.

"Come, come. Gresso and the rest can deal with the wagons, come meet Gerald!" my friend grabbed me by the shoulder, tugging me away from the wagon and the dreary sight of the poor conditions around me.

Sighing at Sofia, I wondered if I had been led astray. I had left Telmik for this...? I mean sure, I had been given authority here for this location, but if this was all it was...

Putting the thoughts away for now I allowed Sofia to take me to one of the only nicer looking buildings here. A two storied inn-looking place.

The muddy road ended at the building's stone foundation, but even the wooden and stone foundation was caked in the stuff. We made noisy footprints all the way to the door, and I breathed a small sigh of relief upon opening the door and finding a clean wooden floor within. And then, before my relief could really wash through me, Sofia walked right on in without taking her muddy boots off.

Pausing at the door as she headed into the building, humming lightly as she did, I groaned at the muddy footprints left in her wake.

"Sofia..."

She paused, turned to look at me... and then smiled. "Come on! He's in here!"

Shaking my head at her I went ahead and took my own shoes off. There ended up being a little section for shoes and boots near the door, a small shelf that was partly full. There was even a place to hang coats and jackets.

I'll have to remind Sofia that this was, or at least going to become, a proper residence. A place where one didn't bring in mud without just cause.

At least, hopefully I could do so. She, like her older sister, were such odd people. I loved the girl, and was glad she was going to be working for me, but by the gods she was still lacking in so many ways.

Entering the building, I followed Sofia's footprints to a larger room behind a staircase. I found a younger man, who I assumed was Gerald, and a younger girl. One who was drawing on a large pad of paper near a fireplace.

"What'cha drawing Magda?" Sofia asked the girl as I stepped into the room.

"Sofia! Welcome back!" the young girl, Magda, completely abandoned her drawing upon noticing who had greeted her. I smiled as I watched the girl jump out of her seat to give Sofia a big hug, giggling happily as she did. Based off the way she happily giggled and hugged Sofia, I felt confident that she was in fact a young girl and not one of the ones who aged real slowly.

"Yes. Welcome back. I take it you're Brandy? You look like a Brandy," the man said as he too stood from his chair.

I looked like a Brandy...? "How so?" I asked as I stepped over to shake his hand.

"You took your shoes off. Sofia didn't. Plus your clothes look nice, clean, as if you're about to step into very serious meeting to negotiate something important," the man said as we shook hands.

Unable to contain the amused smile that wormed its way on my face, I wondered if I'd come to like this man after all. "Funny. You're Gerald then?" I asked, noting the feel of soft hands.

I'd think he had never worked hard in his whole life, based off how soft his hand was, but I knew the truth.

He was a bird. And his handsome face wasn't the only proof of it.

"Indeed. Regretfully so," Gerald said with a small nod.

"I'm Magdalena!" the young girl hurried over to shake my hand too. I happily took it, and as we shook hands I was a little saddened I hadn't gotten a hug too.

"It's nice to meet you, Magda," I said, using Sofia's shortening of her name.

She grinned up at me, and I noted her flat teeth. Maybe some kind of forest creature? They were far too flat and big to be any kind of predator, that was for sure. At the very least I doubted the girl was a bird, she already had calluses on her hands. Plus she didn't look much like Gerald.

"Is it really!?" Magdalena stepped closer, her eyes going wide in excitement... as I realized she had no just make some silly joke, but had been serious.

Nodding seriously, I smiled and reached out to pat her on the head. "It is! Any friend of Sofia is a friend of mine," I said.

As I patted her on the head, I noted the feel of something hard. On both sides of her head, hidden by her hair. Horns maybe?

"Oh! Sofia, come see! I got a puppy!" Magdalena then remembered, spinning on a heel and gesturing for Sofia to follow.

"Nuh-uh," Sofia teased her, but followed the girl out of the room without any hesitation.

Watching the two go, I sighed a little and turned back to face the man I'd come here to meet.

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"Was your trip easy, Brandy?" Gerald asked as he gestured for me to join him in sitting down.

I took a seat across from him, not far from where Magdalena had been sitting, and watched the way he sat down. He did so with a straight back, as if about to eat or write in a journal. But all we were doing was having a conversation.

Come to think of it, he had been sitting up all prim and proper earlier too when I had entered the room...

I liked that in a person. It told me quite a bit about him, usually those who didn't allow themselves to become slovenly or lazy also had good work ethic. Maybe we'd be able to get along after all. Especially since he had noticed something similar about me earlier, what with him commenting about my lack of shoes.

"It was long, but easy. We had to wait a few weeks for the mountain passes to clear up enough, as I'm sure you figured, but other than that nothing eventful happened," I said.

He nodded, glad to hear it. "Well we do get snow here, but it never lasts very long. What we get mostly is rain. And regrettably the cold kind, occasionally. Thus the mud," he said with a light gesture to the ground nearby, where what little remnants of mud that had fallen from Sofia's shoes remained.

"I'll... clean up for her. She doesn't mean any ill-will about it," I said gently.

"Ah, I know. She's like most of our people, simply not very aware about certain things. It makes me wonder if the stories about the huge nations and kingdoms our ancestors used to belong to had been real or not. Though maybe they had been, but had just been... dirty," Gerald said with a frown.

I smirked at that. "I've been told on good authority that some were primitive but others were even more advanced than we are today. Though to what point, who knows," I said.

"Hm... I'd like to hear more about that, someday. If you'd be willing to share," Gerald asked.

"Sure. I'm sure we'll have plenty of time, after all," I said.

He nodded as he clasped his hands on his lap, studying me as he did. "Yes... a new location. A proper one too, not just some hamlet or small home. I'm glad you've decided to join me in this venture, Brandy, since so many others had turned me down," he said.

"Brail has her own designs to worry about. And if you must know the reason I accepted was because I'll be getting authority. To be perfectly honest I might have passed on the opportunity had I not been given any," I told him honestly.

He chuckled at that. "If you can help me make this work, you can have all the authority you want, Brandy."

"Careful. Don't make such promises before you know what I really plan to do," I warned him.

Gerald frowned but nodded. "Yes... you're probably right... Though that being said, I'm told you're a member of the Singing Sisters?" he asked.

"And the Church of Saints, and a upper member of the Church of Songs," I told him.

His frown deepened. "I'll be honest with you, I don't know the difference in them," he said.

"Because there really isn't. They're all part of the same church, the same religion... they're just different groups within the church. One focuses on spreading the faith, the Church of Songs, another focuses on the saints and their prophecies, the one aptly named Saints, and then the Singing Sisters is just a group that follow and obey the saintly sisters," I explained.

"That just made it more confusion for me... can we instead simply confirm you're willingness to not demand faith to join this location?" Gerlad asked.

"Of course...? I'm here to create a business, Gerald, not a church. I'll not hide my faith or my duties to it, but I have no plans to spread the doctrine here. In fact I hope to be too busy to even try," I said.

He nodded, seemingly a little happy to hear such a thing. "Good. Very good. Several of the members here, and a few planning to arrive in time, would leave if this became another Telmik," he said.

"I only hope we can become large enough to have that problem, and justify that comparison," I said with a smile.

"Ah, that I don't have any doubt over, Brandy. Especially considering who runs this town," he said.

"Who?" I asked. Was it someone I knew? A member of the Society, maybe?

"A pirate lord," he said with a smirk.

My eyes narrowed at him. "Wait... what? Really?" He had to be joking!

"Not at all. It's a pirate family, a rather strong one too. They're Vim's friends," he said.

Although still utterly confused and shocked, I still found myself calming down a little. "His friends...? Really?" I asked, why hadn't anyone told me about this until now?

"Most don't know. But yes. He's known their family for generations. They basically see him as a guardian deity. And under the condition that we abide a few of their rules... they are willing to completely hand over all authority of this city to us, and help us transition into running it," Gerald said.

Oh my. "That would make things rather easy at first, wouldn't it?" I admitted. If this town really was run by pirates, particularly Vim's friends, then odds are that meant if we had them on our side... we could practically do anything.

He nodded. "Plus, I have it on good authority that this city will become monumental. A city of stone, white stone and gold coins," Gerald said as he stood. I watched him step away and over to a shelf, he opened a small lockbox upon it, and pulled out a small scroll.

One I recognized. Or well, not the scroll itself, but the parchment.

A prophecy.

He handed it to me, and I opened it carefully. I didn't make the normal prayer we sisters were normally expected to make before opening and reading the divine statement, but I did think of it in my mind.

Reading the prophecy, I felt a small smile worm its way on my face.

"Lumen shall grow and grow, and the nearby mountain will shrink because of it. Gold will flow into the sea from its streets, and even when disaster strikes all that will follow is more wealth spewing from within," I read.

"I've not read or heard many prophecies, are they all so..." Gerald asked as I finished.

"Odd? Yes. But this one is rather clear. And even better it's saying we will face disaster and overcome it for the better. Yes... this is basically the best we could ask for," I said.

I wonder who had written this prophecy. It didn't look like Light's writing, or Celine's, but I knew better than to think that meant it wasn't theirs. This could have simply been written by one of their servants or helpers. Or one of the singing sisters, such as the Chronicler.

Rolling the prophecy back up, I handed it back to Gerald. He took it, smiling happily as he went to put it back into the lockbox.

Yes... this would work just fine.

It only took me a hundred years, but I was finally on the right track, I think.

I've sailed the seas. I've worked at banks. I've climbed the ranks in faith, and learned more than I could ever comprehend. About people, religion, and the wealth we so easily create and spend.

Now it was time to make my own mark. To build my own location, not just work at one that has existed for centuries already.

"So... how should we start?" I asked Gerald, to hear his insight and his plans.

"If you're willing, we shall start at the top. Tomorrow let's go introduce ourselves to the pirate lord, shall we?" Gerald asked.

I nodded. Yes. "So we shall."

"For the Society," Gerald said as he turned to nod at me.

"For the Society."

Chapter 447 The Animalia Company

Watching the group leave... I felt my toes scrunching up in my shoes.

What to do? And how to do it?

Tapping the railing of the banister, my mind whirled as I tried to think of a way to save ourselves from missing out on the massive profit just beyond our reach.

"Brandy."

Turning, I found Gerald. He stepped over, also glancing over the balcony as to watch the group leave. They were just now walking through the doors, leaving the Animalia Company proper and heading out into the street.

"It kind of went well. Kind of," I told him.

"I can tell. You're frustrated, but not because of failure. Why?" he asked.

I sighed and gestured at the doors below us. The ones they'd left out of were propped open, since the weather was nice and we now had full-time guards. We didn't need to close and lock doors anymore, at

least not during business hours. "We don't have a ship. Not one that can do what they need or want. So as it stands we're going to miss out on the contract, unless I can come up with a six mast ship in the next three days," I said.

Gerald frowned at me. "Six...? That big? Really?" he asked.

"Really."

"Do... do they even make ships that big?" Gerald asked.

"I've only ever seen two. The Society has one, but it's on the western ocean. Unless it can fly we're not getting it here anytime soon," I said. It wasn't impossible to get to the inland sea from the western one, but it was a several month long journey. You had to sail around the land south, and then back up north through a series of channels and lakes. I wasn't even sure if a ship that size could make the journey.

"And... why not just a bunch of smaller ships?" he asked the obvious.

"They have the bones of a massive creature. Likely a monarch or something. Several of them are so long they won't fit on any smaller ship. In fact based off the numbers, I'm starting to doubt even a six-mast ship would be able to properly carry them," I said as I thought of their descriptions of the bones.

"Bones...? Of a monarch? You're kidding," Gerald said with a small whisper.

I sighed and shook my head as I watched Sofia and Magda walk out from a nearby hallway. They were talking quietly with each other, heading for another hallway. Likely to head to the bank.

Studying the two for a moment, I couldn't help but smile at the sight of them. They'd been good friends since they met all those years ago, it made me a little jealous.

Not that I wasn't friends with them too, and in fact I'd say I was closer to Sofia than Magda was... but...

Tapping the railing again, I tried to put aside the thought that I was too busy lately. When was the last time I had just... sat and had dinner with Sofia? Or tea? Or spent time with her, not because we were working but simply because I wanted to?

Years maybe.

"Brandy?"

Turning, I nodded. "We might have to pass on this. Which is too bad. They're willing to pay a fortune for the safe transport of those bones," I said.

"Where are they taking them? Here?"

"Some city up north. One I've heard of but never been to. I think one of the nobles up there wants to buy them, though why he doesn't have access to a big enough ship himself is another odd question concerning all this," I said.

Turning away from the balcony, I gestured for Gerald to follow me. We headed down the hallway, heading for his office. "And transport by land won't work?" he asked.

"I'm told they gave up on that idea. The main bones, the big ones, are too heavy to be carried by anything. They brought in over a hundred oxen and made some massive wagon-cart thing and it broke, I guess in the effort," I said.

"Sounds like they're more trouble than they're worth," Gerald decided.

I nodded. They were. But the money wasn't. That contract alone would fund our entire company for two years... that would be a great boon for us, and would give us the chance to expand sooner than planned... and...

Nearing Gerald's office, I slowed a bit as I realized the obvious solution.

"Gerald... where's Vim?" I asked.

"Hm? The protector should be in Telmik right now. Last update I got was about two weeks ago, and he was heading there," Gerald said.

Stolen novel; please report.

Which meant he could be in Telmik, but was likely also already back on the road. Heading off to wherever he was needed next.

Entering Gerald's office, I sat in one of his couches with a huff.

That meant Vim would likely not work. Even if I could get him to waste time on getting those bones, odds are I'd not be able to get him soon enough before some other group or company accepted the contract.

Unless they failed too. Those men hadn't said it, but something told me those oxen they had tried to use had not been theirs. Odds are they had reached out to another company, another guild, and their idea had failed... thus them coming here to Lumen. To search for another avenue.

Maybe I did have time. They told me I only had three days to agree to the contract, but that didn't mean another opportunity wouldn't present itself... nor did that mean I couldn't squirm my way into their coins another way.

What if I just made an agreement that I would help in say... a month's time, and if they still needed help by then I could be the one to take the contract?

By then I'd be able to at least speak with Vim. He frequented this town often enough nowadays, what with the wars and all. We were a good half-way point for him between the west and east. Plus he brought people here all the time, survivors and the displaced, since we had the resources to handle large numbers with ease and help them on their way to wherever they needed to go.

"What are you scheming, Brandy? If you plan on asking Vim for help, I don't think even he can make a boat that big in three days," Gerald said as he sat down at his desk.

"Rather than build a boat, I simply plan to ask him to carry them. I don't care how big those bones are, he can lift them. And in fact would probably know how to transport them safely too," I said.

"Well... maybe. Until he destroyed them, being monarch bones after all."

I flinched.

Woops.

Right.

Forgot all about that.

Groaning again, I reached up to rub my face. By the gods Vim was, like usual, more trouble than he was worth! How could I have forgotten his utter distaste for all things monarchs...?

Though it's not like I actually knew they were the bones of a monarch... I had simply assumed so, since I couldn't imagine anything else being big enough to leave such bones behind.

"Still, I wonder what one would do with such bones. Maybe medicine? Or some spell...?" Gerald wondered quietly as he went to rummaging through the papers on his desk. His reports were starting to pile up again.

Glancing at the dove, I wondered if it was time to find him an actual assistant. Not just some worker who came and went, but someone whose entire duties entailed helping him and only him.

Gerald was a great man. And I could ask for no better partner to run a business, since he was so good with numbers and an even better negotiator... but there was no denying that we were starting to get too big even for him.

But who could I ask...? They'd have to be a member. Undoubtedly. And in truth needed to be a non-human, so we could truly trust them and so they could understand our true ideals and purposes... but did we have anyone right now that would be able to do the job? We had nearly fifty non-human members here, but honestly most were like Sofia. They weren't stupid; they were just... not really suited for paperwork. Not this kind, at least.

"And now you look like you're hungry. What is it now?" Gerald asked.

"You haven't even looked at me. You're reading reports," I said. I'd been staring at him for some time, since I'd been pondering what to do with him.

"Fine. You sound hungry. Well?"

Smiling softly, I sighed at him. "We need more help. Your desk isn't the only one that is full of unread reports and unsigned documents," I said. My own wasn't as bad, but I wasn't so prideful as to not admit I too was noticing the extra work.

"Extra hands..." he mumbled as he went to signing a paper.

I nodded.

For a few moments we were quiet, and then after he finished with whatever document he had just signed he looked up at me and crossed his arms. "Maybe it's time we actually considered allowing humans to truly become a part of our workforce," he said.

"Not this again..." I groaned.

"What? It's true, Brandy. We hire them for the labor, and simple stuff, but maybe it's time we accept that we simply cannot keep expanding without the humans. In case you haven't noticed Brandy, but we've gone five years without a single new member. Five years. And in those five years, how much bigger have we gotten? How many more jobs? How many more revenue streams?" he asked as he gestured at the papers still littering his desk.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. He was right, of course. As always.

We'd not had any new members join us. And it wasn't because we weren't inviting, or not a good place to live.

The world was dangerous today. There were wars. Chaos. Entire locations have been lost, and then there was even the whispering rumors of people wanting to leave the Society. We had a few here that had begun to voice the desire to go somewhere else, somewhere without any humans at all.

"I'm not saying we let them make any executive decisions... but even if we just hired a few dozen auditors and inventory takers, that alone would make a huge difference," Gerald said.

"And where will we find these humans?" I asked him.

"Telmik has been using humans since its inception. How do they do it?"

I blinked at that. "They... use faith, Gerald. Faith. We don't have that here."

"Not entirely, no..." he admitted. We had many members who, like me, were members of our religious order... but most weren't. And if we did start to use that, we'd just lose the members here that didn't wish to live near such faith. We'd trade one problem for another, barely worth it.

Sighing, I stood. "Let's both draft a few ideas and bounce them off each other. You're right, regrettably," I said.

"Mhm... let me know what your plan is for those bones. If you do request Vim's help, let me know so I can ask him for a few favors too."

I nodded as I left his office.

Time to go to the Bell Church. Whatever plans Gerald or I could think of for incorporating humans into our company would need time. Time we didn't have.

While I went and got a few more members for help, to help us through until we figured it out... maybe I could figure out how to get those bones without Vim.

Somehow.

Chapter 448 Lumen's Inhabitants

Excitedly watching the new members walk through the door... I flinched at the sight of someone I recognized. And it wasn't Vim.

The young girl with white hair was dressed in black. The kind that made her hair stand out and she was looking around with a look that made me almost wish none of them had shown up... even though we so desperately needed them.

"Brandy," Vim stepped up the last steps and walked across the balcony, greeting me as he stepped up next to me and leaned against the railing. As to look down at all our members. The new ones and old.

They were all greeting each other. Some were meeting for the first time, others hugging those they'd not seen in centuries. I tried to dedicate to memory the relationships that were visible, both the old friends and the first time meetings, so I could know who to allow to work together and who to keep separate.

"How was the journey, Vim?" I asked.

"Slow. How's the company been?"

I nodded. "Well... We've not expanded for a while, but we're still making more than ever before. We already have enough to send you with a cart full to Telmik," I said. It was already packed and ready, since I knew he'd likely want to leave right away. It was likely why he had come straight to me, so he could hear if he was needed for anything or not.

"Nothing wrong with making lots of money, I guess," Vim said lightly.

"Hm..."

Staring down at the many heads, I noticed again the one covered in black and white.

She was standing alone. Off in the corner. Near a large suitcase. Hers maybe.

"So um... Vim..." I whispered, since I knew Merit's hearing was second to none. Or well, maybe second to Vim's.

"Hm?"

"How is she?" I asked softly.

"Which one?" he asked as he glanced around.

Gosh! "The queen," I whispered.

He paused a moment, and I noticed the way his eyes immediately found the one in question. "She's not a queen anymore, Brandy."

"Well..." I wanted to argue that. In my experience a monarch was a monarch even without their crown and kingdom. One didn't just... remove that lifestyle from someone. It was ingrained. Usually.

"She's fine. Or will be. She's always been prickly, you know that. Just give her space and all will be fine," he said.

"Mhm..." I wanted to groan, but knew better than to do so.

After all, I had no right to deny her entry. None of us did. Merit not only has helped many people in the Society throughout the years, but there were many in this new group who were only here because of her. If I kicked her out, the dozen others who had followed her here would follow.

Still...

She looked pissed off. She was glaring at someone, was that Tosh...? I've not seen him in years...!

"What's wrong with Tosh?" I asked. Why was he standing so oddly? Was he drunk or half asleep?

"Ah... yeah that's a problem. He's um... having trouble. They can explain it. He's not dangerous. Just... broken," Vim said softly.

Glancing at the protector, I flinched and looked away when I saw the pain on his face. He looked like he was about to cry.

Our protector should not show his emotions so blatantly like that!

Quickly switching topics, I pointed lightly at the group below. They were getting noisy as they kept introducing themselves to each other. "Everyone knows we have humans? We're outnumbered three to one, including the new members," I said.

"Most of them are from her kingdom, Brandy. They worked and lived with humans too. Shoot, some of them brought their human family members. Wives, husbands, children and whatnot," he said with a wave.

Oh...? I glanced around, looking for humans. Oddly I couldn't make them out.

Vim sighed a little. "Anything you need from me Brandy...? I don't want to seem callous, but I'm needed. Everywhere. All the time," he said.

"No... Other than the money needing to go to Telmik. If you're in a hurry though we can deal with it, I'll send it via ship," I said.

"No. I'll take them. Will only add a day to my travel time, at my pace, so it's not that big a deal," he said.

A day. Sure. He'd carry thousands of pounds of gold almost a thousand miles and it'd only take him an extra day.

Such a jerk. That means he could have helped me with those bones back then. Easily. I should have just asked him. Damn it.

"What?" Vim asked, noticing my feelings.

"I'm just upset with you. Go on then, have Sofia and Herra help you with the gold," I said.

He huffed at me. "You're an odd one Brandy."

"No more than most, I'm sure."

We both turned, and I watched as the former queen stepped up to our level. She looked as tiny as I remembered her as she glance at Vim, scoffing at him, and then stepping over to me. She held her hand out. "My name is Merit."

I took it, and smiled gently at her. "We've met before, Merit. A few times, in fact."

She blinked and frowned at me, studying me as if seeing me for the first time. "We have...?"

"Indeed. I'll be leaving then. Goodbye Merit, I'll see you when I inevitably have to come back in a few months," Vim said as he stepped away.

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"Stay gone..." she mumbled at him as he left, stepping down the stairs as to find Sofia and Herra, likely.

Smiling at the little queen, our hands separated and I gestured lightly at her. "You look good, Merit."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, rather angrily.

Oh. Right. Prickly.

"Just stating you look good. A lot of our people lately... well..." I hurriedly glanced for someone to use an example, and decided on the one standing at an odd angle. "Well... like him," I said softly.

Merit glanced to the rail banister, but not over it. She looked between the railing's supports, and her eyes narrowed a little. "Tosh is broken. Yes. I suppose I get what you mean."

"Hm... what happened?"

"I don't know. It happened years ago though, by the sounds of it. We picked him up in the desert... literally. He was lying on the road, half naked."

I groaned at that. "One of those, huh...?" I asked. So when they said broken they meant it.

"As you said. Common lately," Merit mumbled.

Nodding gently, I sent a small prayer to my gods. For not just him... but her too. I didn't like the way her eyes looked so cold.

Had they always looked like that...? I remembered her, but not well enough. We had only met at a distance, and I'd never spent much time with her. Not the way I should have.

I would have liked to have known her in her prime. I had heard she had been a feisty queen. One that had scared even the hardest of warriors.

Right now she looked like a young girl who had either just had her heart broken, or had lost her parents. Maybe both.

She looked like how I had likely felt and did back when I had been pulled from that river so long ago.

I blinked a few times, a little surprised to have thought of something such as that moment. That had been hundreds of years ago. Not just a distant past, but nearly a different life.

Merit sighed. "They'll all want to spend the night together. Can I know where I can sleep?" Merit then asked.

Oh. Right. "Sure... we do indeed have a feast planned... you sure?" I asked.

"If I wanted to suffer like that I would not have asked," she said simply.

Right.

Glancing around, I found Sofia and Herra... but both were already busy. They were leading Vim down the eastern hallway, heading for the bank.

Great... that meant I'd have to pull the others away to handle this. And that would be rude. First meetings were important.

And who knows how rude Merit would be to the others if I left it to them...

Might as well just do it myself.

"I'll take you. Is that your bag?" I asked with a point to the suitcase she had been standing next to earlier.

"Yes. I'll get it."

Merit left without a word. I waited for her up here on the second floor's balcony, and once she returned I nodded.

That suitcase was as big as she was. She had to carry it not with the handle, but by holding it on both sides. It made her look cute, but I didn't dare say such a thing aloud.

Even back when Merit had not been... like this, her temper concerning jokes about her height or appearance were well known, after all.

"This way," I said with a gesture to the nearby hallway. The one that led to Gerald's office.

Merit nodded and followed, and I went to telling her about the location. How the central location, where we were heading, was where we all lived. How there were metal doors that needed to be kept sealed, and how you could access them only from the second floor.

Merit said nothing as I led her to an upper floor. To one of the many empty rooms, that we had made sure had been cleaned and re-furnished for our new members. Our new family.

Though... considering she was a queen, or at least a former one, it was likely not like anything she once had.

It was a larger room, with a large window and second floor... but it was still simple. With simple furniture and no real decorations. Not yet, anyway.

"It's... simple. But it's home," I said as she stared at the room beyond the open door.

"Locks?" she asked as she glanced at the door.

"On each door, yes."

"Good."

She then stepped in, dropped her luggage without a care in the middle of the floor... and promptly turned around and shut the door.

The sound of it locking filled the hallway, and I flinched a little because of it.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. Alright. I can deal with this. She's not the first member I've known, or lived with, that was like this... those like her were sadly becoming very common lately. Thanks to the chaos.

Stepping away from the door, I reached up to scratch the back of my neck.

To think she was older than me to boot!

Oh well.

Heading back to the entrance, as to properly meet and greet all our new members... I hoped this ended up being the right decision.

We desperately needed more people, since we'd lost so many over these last few years... but did we really need those who caused problems?

A former queen who hated everyone and everything.

A man broken, unable to even stand up straight.

And the worst part is they were only joining us... because we were one of the few places left that was safe enough to do so. Not because they believed in our mission.

Not that there was anything wrong with that. It was our duty to help and the entire reason the Society existed... but...

Lately it's becoming rather obvious that something was wrong. I'd not received an updated census in years, and something told me it was on purpose.

They didn't want us to know the real numbers. The real losses. Because if we did we'd all panic and scatter.

Maybe those who left had been right along...? But...

"I really wish she'd just show up already..." I whispered as I left the housing area.

Where was she? They had claimed she'd be here by now. To fix everything. To fix him. To lead us to the next chapter in this world's history.

Yet instead of some savior showing up, it seemed all that's been happening lately is the opposite. People weren't finding solutions, they were simply suffering from their failures.

Like Merit.

Leaving the hallway, I stepped out onto the balcony... and was glad to see and hear happiness. Everyone was still talking to each other, though now small little groups had been formed. I scanned the group from above, and was glad to see no one was being left out. Even Tosh, the broken man, was in a small group. Though he had been given a chair and was now sitting upon it. He looked asleep, what with the way he was leaned over and resting against his knees.

Clearing my throat, I took a breath and got everyone's attention.

Greeting them all, new and old alike, I went ahead and gave my little planned speech. To welcome them, and tell them how happy we were they were. How we were excited to have new family, and how wonderful it was.

I told them of what we did. Why we did. And the feast we were already in the middle of preparing. Gerald walked up, to speak a bit too. He introduced himself, and made the crowd laugh with one of his witty jokes.

Staring down at all the faces... I was a little worried to see that most, even the ones with smiles and who had laughed at Gerald's joke, looked haunted. Troubled.

Tired.

Lost.

"For the Society...!" I said, alongside Gerald, as we both ended our little speech.

The whole crowd raised their fists. "For the Society!" they agreed.

Smiling as they all returned to talking, and people started to separate as to take their bags and luggage to their new homes... I did my best to not accept the truth.

The cold hard truth, which had been very audible in their declaration. Very visible on their faces.

The Society was on its knees.

And I wasn't sure how it had happened... nor if we'd ever get up off them.

Even if the protector's wife did show up... it was likely too late.

And that terrified me, and made me question far more than just my faith.

Chapter 449 Brandy's Day Off

The door to my office opened, without being knocked on, and I frowned gently at Vim who walked in.

"Hey Vim...! When'd you get here?" I asked.

"Just now. I'm just passing through, I'm headed east," he said as he glanced around the office... as if searching for something, or maybe someone.

I ignored his odd action, since he'd been like this lately. Ever since Celine's death he's been on edge... as if he sensed something terrible on the horizon.

I, like many others, wished he didn't so openly display his worry. Since it made all of us uneasy too. But I wasn't sure if anyone had the nerve to actually bring it up to him yet.

"Well... you were just here, Vim, so we've not got any request for you as far as I am aware. Would you like me to go around and ask for you?" I asked. His last visit had only been a few weeks ago.

"Hm... it's fine. I'll be stopping here on my way back anyway, probably sometime in the next month," he said.

I nodded gently as I watched him stand before my desk, and the way his eyes lingered on one of my nearby shelves.

Glancing at the shelf, I wondered what was on it that had caught his eye. One of the books? The few plants that Merit had placed there? Maybe the vase at the bottom...?

"Is there anything I can do for you then?" I asked carefully.

Vim's eyes left the shelf and came to my own.

My toes clenched, and I was glad they were hidden beneath my desk. I wasn't wearing shoes or socks, since I liked the feel of my rug on my bare feet. It was some kind of sheep wool, and felt good. Right now though I was pinching the soft wool with my toes, as to keep my unease off my face.

He and I held gazes for a moment, and after a few heavy heartbeats he sighed and looked away. It took all I had to not sigh as well, in relief.

"Where's Gerald?" he asked.

Oh...? Maybe he was here for him. Thank goodness. "On a trip north with Hector. He's gone to negotiate with a noble," I said.

Vim sighed again, but nodded. "Then I'll see him when I get back, I guess."

I wanted to ask what he wanted Gerald for, but kept my mouth shut.

Vim then turned a bit, as if about to leave... but he paused a moment and then looked back at me. "How is everyone?" he asked.

"Fine, Vim. We've not had any issues... as I said, you were just here."

"Weeks ago," he said simply.

I nodded. I understood his meaning. Lately it felt like a disaster happened every day, so I understood his meaning well. "I know. But we're fine. Really. We're lucky, Vim... although very involved with humans, we're also safe. Insulated. Our members here are all fully capable of staying safe, and are smart enough to stay so," I said.

"How's the surrounding members? The Clothed Woman? Bell Church?" he asked.

"All fine as well. The Bell Church had a request for flour the other day, but that's hardly something to panic over," I said with a small smile.

He sighed. "Knowing them it had been," he said.

I smirked and nodded. "They had been a little pushy, but it's fine. I'm used to it."

"And how have you been?" he asked.

I blinked, sitting up a little as I met his gaze again. "Busy... but fine. I've even been taking breaks lately, you can ask Sofia and the rest if you don't believe me," I said.

He smirked at me. "Knowing you said break is just a cup of tea or something."

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"Actually, I attend a sermon, have lunch with other members, then spend the night reading or sewing. I make sure not to do a lick of work the whole day," I said, defending myself.

"Hm... and how much does that cost, this day of rest?" he asked.

A wry smirk planted itself on my face. "About forty-seven coins... give or take."

He chuckled and nodded, as if glad to hear I hadn't changed too much.

I didn't tell him that today was in fact supposed to be one of those days. I didn't want him to tease me, since I was busy working. Or well, kind of... I was actually writing a letter to someone else, another member. It was business, but not. So it didn't break my own rule.

"How about you Vim...?" I asked, daring to ask.

He tilted his head at me. "Hm?"

For a tiny moment I wondered if that was his answer. That his slight tilt of his head, and the lack of a proper answer, was his way of saying how bad he was doing... but then I realized something rather serious.

Vim hadn't realized at all what I meant.

Doing my best to not let my disturbed heart be seen, I gestured ever so lightly at him. "How're you doing...?" I asked again.

His eyes narrowed as he realized what I meant, and he lightly shrugged at me. "I'm always well, Brandy. I'm literally built to be fine, no matter the condition I'm in," he said.

I wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but I knew better than to question it. At least, here and now and in front of him.

"I see... I'm glad to hear it," I said instead.

"Hm..." he nodded, as if glad that I was glad.

Clearing my throat a bit, I tried to lean forward a little. I was sitting up rather straight, a little too straight. It made me feel, and likely look, nervous.

"So um... Vim," I started.

He raised an eyebrow at me, and I smiled at it. It wasn't often he showed such emotion on his face, like that at least.

"Can I ask something personal?" I asked.

"Sure?"

"Have you met anyone? Recently?"

He frowned at me. "I'm taking it you don't mean as in a new member or something," he said.

I shrugged. "I mean... romantically?"

Vim's eyes narrowed again. "What's with that...?" he asked.

"Just was wondering? Sofia's pregnant again, and Jasna is trying to woo Liina, so I guess it's just been on my mind lately," I said, using my fellow members as an excuse.

"Hmph. No. Even if I did I'd not tell you, I keep such things to myself," he said.

Right... "I'm not saying you have to tell me who, or whatever... was just wondering," I said.

"No. I've not. What's with you people lately...? The Chronicler asked too, and I feel like others have recently too. Is this because of Celine's death...? You do know we hadn't been like that, right? In fact I had found her insufferable," Vim said.

I smirked at him. "So I've heard, yes... but there are rumors, you know," I said, teasing him a little. But my intention wasn't really to tease him, but instead mask the real reason I was asking.

So she still wasn't here.

Maybe Merit and the rest were right.

Maybe their prophecies really could be wrong...

Vim sighed at me. "Whatever. I'm going to leave then, sure you don't need me right now?" he asked, sounding slightly annoyed.

I nodded, feeling a little bad. For many reasons. "We're fine, Vim. Thank you for checking in. Safe travels."

"Mhm." He nodded, then turned and left.

He closed the door to my office behind him, and with the shut of the door silence followed.

I didn't hear him walk down the hallway, even though I should have. There was no rug out there right now, only stone, because we were replacing the old ones for new. So everyone's footsteps in the building have been loud lately. But Vim, like usual, made no sound as he left.

Taking a deep breath, I noticed the normal smells. My own. The wool rug beneath my feet. The plants nearby.

And no Vim. As if he wasn't even real.

"I'm not sure who to pity more. Him or us," I whispered as I returned to my work.

If she wasn't real... if she'd never show up... that meant he'd never find his wife. But that also meant none of us would be saved. Supposedly.

In theory we should be the more pitiful between the two, since there were far more of us than him... but...

It was hard to imagine. Being so old. To live so long. And to never have anyone. Especially a man like him.

I myself didn't find him attractive, but there was no denying his good points. He was protective. Strong. Loyal beyond reason. I think the only reason I, and many others, didn't find him very attractive was the simple fact that he was so... well... too much.

Being so loyal was a good thing, but not when it was to so many people at once. It'd make me jealous and wonder if I wasn't good enough, or something, I think.

I wonder how she will do it. If she is real. If she really shows up. How will she snatch his heart, while also getting him to protect and save us all in ways he's not even doing now...?

"Maybe it was all just Celine's fantasy..." I mumbled softly as I dipped my pen into ink and went back to work.

Save such thoughts for my day off. They didn't earn money.

Chapter 450 Side-Story – Brandy – Epilogue – An Otter's Coin

Rolling my coin along my knuckles, I slowly walked down the hallway to the metal door.

She was here.

She was real.

The prophecies hadn't been fake, or misinterpreted.

But what to do?

Vim planned to lock her to this place. To keep her here.

He pushed those humans, those eastern girls, onto me... as to then push them onto her. As if to test her. But I saw through him. Hard not to.

He was planning on making her responsible for those humans. To make her feel as if she had a duty. As to keep her here. So that she'd be left behind, while he continued on his path.

And worst of all, from what I'd heard from the others, she too was seeing if she could live here. Judging us, just as we were judging her.

I had absolutely no doubt this Rennalee could live here amongst us. Even if her ears and tail were large and noticeable, we had other members who had to wear certain clothing as to keep hidden. It was nothing new. Plus I didn't think her being a predator meant anything either.

After all I was one. As was Merit. We were fine. The others fine around us. Over the years we've had hundreds of such people live amongst us with no issues at all.

Plus... supposedly she was nice? Cute? Adorable and gentle...?

I scoffed as I stopped rolling my coin. I slid it into the little slot on my belt, where I hid it and kept it safe, as I opened the metal door to the inner-housing area.

Shutting it behind me, I took a deep breath.

Yes. There was no doubt. Especially if she was the one from the prophecy. There was no question that she could live here with us, and be welcomed and then some.

But that was the issue.

That could not happen.

She cannot stay here.

Who knows what would happen if I allowed that to happen. How many prophecies would break if she separated from Vim...?

The mere thought of all the deaths and chaos that would ensue made me shiver something fierce.

Yes. This can't happen.

This means I'll have to act.

But how...? How did I ensure she didn't choose this place to make her new home...? And how did I do it in a way that didn't ruin everything?

Plus I had to do it while the protector himself tried to do the opposite.

Gods! I shouldn't be doing this alone. I needed help... but who could I ask?

Gerald. It'd have to be him. Maybe Merit too...

Wait, no... Merit loved Vim. And she was so weird sometimes, who knows what she'd do if she realized this was her. The one we've all been waiting for...

Reaching the first set of stairs, I climbed them slowly... as my heart began to beat rather wildly.

I was about to meet her. The one destined to marry the protector. The one said to lead us into the new world.

Celine should have been here. She should have been alive.

Or maybe her daughter... but Light was gone too. Likely dead as well.

Who then did she need to meet...? Supposedly she'd already met the Chronicler, but was she really suitable for this too? She was one of those failed saints. Not a real one.

Who did we have left that could work, then...?

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I slowed a bit, stopping at the top of the stairs as I realized we didn't have anyone at all suitable for this.

No more saints. No more great ones.

Randle maybe...? He knew of the prophecies. Knew them well. But he was so weird about certain things...

"Berri, maybe...?" I wondered. But I had no idea how to contact her. I wasn't even a hundred percent sure if she was still alive, for crying out loud...

Groaning a little, I snuck a finger into my belt to feel my coin. It didn't calm me down like it usually did.

Just great...

Did Vim know who she might be? I didn't think he did. As far as I was aware, as vowed, no one had told him of the prophecies. It was why only a few people had been told of them. Only those who had been trusted to keep it secret had been given the information. And even then, only certain ones. I myself only knew a few of them.

Staring down the hallway, where the hallway bent a little... I felt oddly sweaty.

She was here. Down that hallway. A few hundred steps away, and I'd knock on her door... and she'd open it.

And I'd meet her.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to just do my best. Somehow. I mean... I've had hundreds of years to have prepared myself, and I didn't feel as if I'd prepared at all!

She was going to be his wife. Our future leader. The solution.

I wasn't even really sure how she was those things, only that she would be them. And that was all that mattered.

What had Celine said... her actual words...?

Be her friend. Be kind to her. Watch over her, but only enough to keep her safe. Don't interfere with their relationship.

Let it grow naturally. Don't force it. Don't even think about what we know while near her, just in case she or he notices.

But at the same time... do everything I can to keep them together.

Which meant stop his schemes.

"Damn Vim..." I mumbled as I stepped forward, finding my nerve.

He must instinctively know, then. If he didn't know in full. For him to actually be trying to get her to latch onto a location, as to not latch onto him, was rather telling in itself. Vim never did that. He didn't force his will on anyone, ever, even when we needed him to. So for him to be actively trying to push her into staying here, to making this place as her home and to settle down and plant roots... was telling indeed.

That only further confirmed who she was to me, in my opinion.

He'd not do such a thing for anyone else. For anything else.

So...

Reaching the end of the hallway, I took a deep breath as I steadied myself.

I could smell her.

She smelled like the forests. In fact she kind of reminded me of the smell of home. It was strong enough to tell me she was indeed a predator, but at the same time it wasn't so startling or overpowering that it bothered me. I'd not have any trouble stepping into her room.

I tried to hear inside the room, but couldn't hear anything. No sounds. No voices, or breathing... was she asleep...? It was a little late, though not so late she should be asleep...

Reaching out, I knocked on the door. I did so gently, but firmly enough to wake her just in case.

Let's do this. For the Society.

For me. For all of us.

I heard splashing, and relaxed a little. So she had been in the bath!

How wonderful. I'll get to see her when she's almost defenseless, in a certain way... I almost felt sinful as I apprehensively waited, and then heard light footsteps.

Then the door unlocked... and slowly opened just enough to reveal a face.

An adorable one. With beautiful golden eyes, that pierced deeply... and right above them, a twitching ear that pointed directly at me.

"Yes...?"

Oh my gosh she even sounded adorable...! So this was what he liked! I couldn't blame him, at all!

Smiling gently at the woman, I did my best to not notice the dress she wore. It was soaked, clinging to her and see-through.

"Well, look at you! I must admit, you're exactly what I expected," I said, unable to deny it.

Rennalee opened the door fully as she stood up straighter. "Am I...?" she asked, a slight smirk tugging at her face. She seemed to find me interesting.

By the gods alive and dead she was cute indeed... she had a tail, a long one. It was swaying and coiling behind her as a cat's would. One that was watching a mouse with interest.

"So this is his type...? I admit, it makes sense," I said as I nodded.

"Excuse me...?" Her ears fluttered adorably as she narrowed her beautiful eyes at me.

Oh my! She didn't realize what I meant...! So neither of them had realized yet...? Surely not, right?

"Can I come in?" I asked, doing my best to not just reach out and hug our future savior.

"No."

Unable to contain myself, I exploded with laughter... and decided she was perfect.

Perfect for not just Vim, but all of us.

So I needed to be perfect too. And find a way to keep her from staying here...

I wasn't sure how I'd accomplish it, but there were ways. Surely. And I'd figure them out.

I will keep her with Vim. So that they could save us. No matter what.

We'd just met and I was already willing to bet my coin on her. Without a doubt. So I'd figure out what needed to be done, even without prophecies and saints if I had to.

Even if I had to banish her from Lumen to do it, I would.

A small price to pay to save the non-human race, after all.