

Non Human 461

Chapter 461 Vim – A Busy, But Fine, Lumen

Studying the way Renn and Merit were holding each other, I wondered what it was like to be so tiny. Renn hadn't crouched or kneeled down upon wrapping her arms around Merit, and instead had lifted her. Merit was basically clinging to Renn, her arms wrapped around her neck, as if she was a child. A typical Merit would have shouted angrily, and resorted to shocking if not promptly released, had anyone else grabbed her in such a way. Even Nasba would have only been given a few moments of such physical contact.

The two hadn't said anything since embracing, other than their names, but oddly it seemed neither was crying. Or at least not doing so too strongly. Though something told me the tears would come later, once they got their fill of each other. At least, in Renn's case.

I was kind of jealous, really. Renn and I did hug, and show affection and all that, but there was something... special in the way she was holding Merit. Maybe it was because of how small she was? Like a mother desperately clinging to a child she's not seen in years? Did it look as good to be held like that as it looked? I bet it did. It was made even better by the way Merit seemed to be trying so desperately to return the same level of emotion in her hug too.

Seriously. Why were they still holding each other like this? Would they do this all night long? What about me?

My eyes narrowed as I realized I was simply being possessive again.

Still...

Sighing softly, I decided to just let the two be. Knowing them they'd be at this for hours. Even once they finally stopped hugging and being emotional they'd just go on to exchange all the stuff they wanted to share. Plus it was their moment. Theirs to share, cherish, and keep to themselves.

I'd just be in the way.

Turning away, I went to the end of the hallway. Renn and I had been heading for the room she had used last time she was here, and Merit had rounded a corner and ended that plan. I carried most of our bags, having taken them from Renn before we even entered the building, because I had expected her to encounter those like Merit and rush forward to hug them.

Though, maybe because we had arrived so late, Merit was the only one we had ran into so far. We entered the building from the banking area, right before they had went to shut and lock the doors, and came straight to the Society's housing area as to drop off our stuff before doing anything else. Along the way we hadn't seen anyone else, other than Merit, so far but I didn't smell or hear anything to make me worry about it.

The company was large, the building many floors. It wasn't too surprising we had been able to come this far in before running into anyone else.

My biggest concern, since the company seemed relatively fine... was that I didn't sense any saint here.

If Light was here, she was either deep under the building, or not currently in the building. I neither sensed her or smelled her.

I found the room Renn had stayed in last time not too different than I remembered. It looked like the bed had different blankets and sheets, but it was empty and unused so I went ahead and deposited the stuff I carried in it. I knew Renn still had a few things, but she could do so later once she and Merit were done.

Leaving the room, I went back down the hallway and found them still standing in the center of it. Merit was no longer being held up by Renn though; her feet were back on the ground. They were still firmly locked in a deep hug, squeezing each other hard enough to make noises as they did, to the point that neither even recognized me as I neared.

I walked past them, with only Renn's ear fluttering lightly in acknowledgement as I did so.

Shaking my head at them, I left the Society's housing area and returned to the Animalia Guild proper. I headed for Gerald's office, to let him know we were here. Before I could though, I ran into Wynn.

"Vim!" the man who no longer had horns happily smiled at the sight of me, which oddly made me feel a little relieved. That smile was not one of desperation or relief, but just gentle happiness at seeing a friend.

Seemed nothing too awry was going on here at least, based off that smile.

"Wynn. How've you been?" I asked as he and I approached. We paused in the middle of the fancier hallway, the one with the rug that led to the main offices.

"Busy! Like you wouldn't believe!" he said happily, not sounding upset over it at all.

"I bet."

He grinned and gestured down, I followed his point and found him pointing at his pants. "See these? Like them?" he asked.

Shifting a little, I tried to comprehend what he was trying to say... or even point out. "Um... the pants? Or the shoes?" I asked. Neither looked odd, or different than anything the people in this city and region wore all the time.

"The pants! I made them myself! I took up thatching!" Wynn said, rather proudly.

Thatching...? "Thatching is a part of roofing. I'm assuming you mean tailoring...?" I asked.

"Oh! Right, yes. That one," he said happily, not seemingly really caring what the proper term for it was.

I smiled back and nodded all the same. "They look good. I'd ask for a pair myself, but since I travel so much all my clothes just get torn and ripped so quickly that I'd hate to insult you in such a way," I said.

Wynn immediately brightened up. "Oh please Vim! I'd happily make you a pair! Though I'll need to measure you... the others can make them fit snug with just a glance, but I'm not able to do that yet," he said.

Others...? "Some kind of community thing?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh, no. The human workers have all recently started making groups, for hobbies and part-time jobs. I joined one of them, they make clothes," he said.

I frowned at that. "Groups...?"

He nodded. "Brandy's idea. Started a few months ago. The workers absolutely love them, last I heard eighty-percent of them all have joined at least one," he said.

Huh... "That's neat," I said, honestly a little surprised and genuinely impressed.

"I thought it was stupid, but look at me now...!" Wynn said with a laugh.

I smirked at that and nodded. "Nothing wrong with having fun, plus you're learning a new skill while you're at it? Nothing wrong with that at all," I said.

"That's what I'm telling myself, at least! Anyway, when we got a moment I'll measure you! I assume you're heading to Gerald to let him know you're here, right?" he asked as he started to step away.

"Yeah. I'll probably be here for a time, so we'll figure it out," I said as I too stepped away.

"Got it! Later Vim!" Wynn and I separated, and I noted the man hadn't asked if Renn was here too.

But was that intentional or just something normal for that man...? He was a type of deer; they were all a little... aloof. Plus he had been distracted in telling me of his recent hobby.

Rounding a corner, I found Gerald's office door open and he sitting at his desk. He was reading what looked like the daily report, and jumped a little at the sight of me as I stepped into the room.

"Vim!"

He stood quickly, putting the report down as he reached across the table to shake my hand.

Greeting Gerald, I was not too surprised to find him looking the same... and so too his office. His desk had a stack of reports and folders on one corner, but that was normal. And the rest of the office looked relatively the same too.

"Gerald. How've you been?" I asked as our hands separated.

"Rather well, actually!" he said happily, and I noted again the tone.

Was everyone here just happy-go-lucky or something? Or maybe they simply didn't care for the drama?

"I was told you'd show up soon! I uh... don't know if you know yet, but Light is alive. She's in town, though not here," Gerald said, his happy tone finally showing a hint of worry.

"She is. Are she and the rest of them staying elsewhere then? Not here?" I asked.

"They're building a new cathedral, or something. They show up often, for one reason or another, but seem to be keeping to themselves. As far as I can tell, Light and the rest don't want anything to do with the guild, so..." Gerald shrugged as he gently gestured to one of the nearby chairs.

I debating closing the door, since I'd left it open, but chose not to as I sat down. I'd just listen to make sure no one got near enough to hear anything too special, if we did speak of such things.

"Don't want nothing to do with you, do they?" I asked lightly, keeping my true thoughts inside.

Gerald smirked lightly at me as he too sat back down. "Funny, isn't it? I've been waiting for them to come ask for funds or something, but so far they haven't even asked for anything. Makes me nervous," he said.

Hm... "Not like the church really needs money in the first place," I said.

"Yet they inevitably will ask for more than we can give, I just know it," Gerald said.

Shrugging lightly, I glanced at my knee and noticed a slight tear in my pants. Nothing too surprising, since we'd been traveling and had just passed over a mountain during a blizzard, but it made me wonder if I should actually take Wynn up on his offer.

"So... uh, Vim," Gerald then cleared his throat and I glanced at him. I kept a smile from creeping onto my face, as I nodded and waited for him to continue. Was he finally going to ask about Renn? "There's a vote. Concerning you," he said.

The smile that had been growing inside me died a little. "Yes. It's to be held next winter... in Telmik," I said.

"Not worried about it?" he asked, speaking a little slowly.

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"To be honest, no. Because no matter the outcome, I plan to officially step down as protector."

Gerald sat up a little straighter. "What...? Step down?"

I nodded. "Yes. I don't plan to leave the Society proper, unless it's asked of me during the vote or something. But I do plan to step down from my current role. I'll do so at the vote, and depending on how the vote goes and the responses will dictate how I step down," I said.

"How you step down...?" Gerald whispered.

"Well, do I just... stop abruptly? Or should I slowly step away, over years? Stuff like that," I said. Honestly I'd not put too much thought into it yet, mostly because I didn't want Renn getting upset with me over it... at least, no more than she already were.

Gerald groaned as he reached up and rubbed his temple. "Vim..."

I nodded. "That's been pretty much everyone's reaction so far," I said.

"Because it's ridiculous! The vote isn't even that serious!" Gerald said, a little loudly.

I frowned and nodded. "I've come to realize that, after speaking with the Chronicler, but I have my reasons."

"Let me guess, Rennalee? Vim, I'm happy that you've found a companion and whatnot, but that isn't fair to the rest of us..." Gerald said lowly.

"She's not the reason," I told a small lie. "In fact she shares your sentiment. She's rather furious at my decision and vocal about it too," I said.

"Is she here?" he asked.

I nodded. "Unless you want her gone?"

"No? She's not banished from Lumen, Vim. Another vote was held, her banishment has been rescinded," he said with a sigh.

"Why?" I asked. I was a little surprised to hear so, but at the same time not. Brandy had hinted at something similar before, when I had ran into her on the roads between the Bell Church and the northern port cities with Fly.

"Isn't it obvious, Vim? She's your wife. We can't banish the wife of the protector..." he then went quiet, and frowned at me. "You really plan to step down?" he asked, losing his train of thought.

A little disturbed they had chosen to change their opinion on Renn, solely because she was my wife and not because they had realized they'd been wrong in the first place, I tried not to let it bother me too much. Since all it'd do is make me angry at them. "Yes. Unless something drastic happens, yes."

"Yet... you'll stay a member?"

"Of course? Unless the Society votes to banish and exile me," I said.

"Then... why not move here? You and Renn?" Gerald then asked.

Oddly shocked at the offer, I did my best to not let it show on my face. "Well... I suppose that's an idea. I'll bring it up with Renn. Right now we've got a growing list of things we need to handle, for other members, after I step down," I said.

"Such as?"

I gestured lightly at the ceiling. "Randle has gone and gotten himself banished from both Telmik and his church. He and a few others involved in the orphanages he's ran all this time want to set up another one up north. For the children. And those at the smithy might be potentially losing their home too, so they might need help migrating. I've promised to help them do so," I said.

"Losing their home?" Gerald asked, frowning as he did.

Ah. He must have heard about Randle's actions, and the subsequent results from them, already. Likely from the source. He'd have focused on him instead had he not.

I nodded. "The forest they live in is diseased. Possibly dying. To the point that they might need to move elsewhere. We'll know more in the next year or two," I explained.

Gerald hummed a bit as he leaned back in his chair. "That's not good... would they like to come here? I'd happily welcome Nebl and his family. Or rather their skills," he said, honestly.

"I'll let them know. You can write them a letter if you'd like and I'll drop it off on my way back that way. Unless something drastic happens I plan to head back that way after spending some time here and... well," I shrugged lightly.

"Dealing with Light. Yes. I figured. I'm actually a little surprised you've not rushed off to do so already... or are you planning to do so after this conversation here?" he asked carefully.

I shrugged. "That's the plan. We'll see. I might wait until morning, it's getting late," I said.

"Late. Yes. Just a few hours after sundown. Quite late, too late for the protector... for you, to do anything. Surely."

I ignored his obvious attempt at sarcasm and tried to change the topic a bit. "Before we get too off track... anything I need to be aware of? Any issues lately? How is everyone?" I asked.

"Vim you were just here a few months ago," he said with a soft smile, as if he genuinely thought I had forgotten.

"Yeah...? That's a long time, a lot can happen during it," I said.

He sighed but nodded. "We're all fine. No one's had any complaints. We're all too busy really to have such problems. If we do have a problem, it's simply the nobles. They're becoming... a tad too greedy. But that's humans for you. And nothing we can't handle and circumvent. Brandy is here, though I don't know what she's currently focused on at the moment. Kevin is scheduled to be here within the next week with a large shipment of precious metals. The guild itself is fine too, as are all the human members. Which by the way your wife will likely want to spend some time with while here. Several have had children, or

have passed away. Typical for humans, but I know how Renn is about them, so make sure she checks on those she favors," he said.

Glad to hear a real report for once, I nodded. "How's the boy? The pirate? Or pirates, I guess, since now you have multiple," I said, as I thought of the female ones we'd sent here during our trip down south last time.

"Fine? He's taken over his own ship. The others have taken over the port authority, opting to stay on land instead of sailing. A few have joined the fleet, either under your human pirate or Kevin, but most are here living with us. Either in the guild itself or in their own homes a few blocks away," he said.

Good. Very good. "You said the nobles are getting greedy?" I asked.

Gerald sighed as he nodded. "Yes. Thraxton is surprisingly the least of my worries lately, which is saying something. They're all just simply making too much money, Vim. To the point I worry, as do many others, that it will cause issues later. One of them, the noble who owns the limestone mine, recently imposed a new fee... a type of tax or levy, on any who use his rocks. It was approved since he supplied all the stones for the repair of Lumen after the event, and this is his way of paying for it all. Yet it's likely made his family more money in these last few months than they've made in decades," Gerald said.

"So he's become obscenely wealthy and imposed a new tax. Let the humans get angry at him and depose him, why is that an issue for us?" I asked.

"Because we paid for those stones. They hadn't been free. Thraxton is upset because some of the funds had been his as well. Basically they humans in charge are all fighting over it, about who should share in the wealth... and also now they all want to impose similar new taxes themselves, basically being envious and seeing how well his is doing," Gerald said.

I rolled my eyes. "Typical human drama. Just stay out of it, that's my advice," I said.

"Precisely why we deal with it and you don't. I do wonder how you used to do handle it back in the day, especially since you actually did. Or did you just use force, Vim?" Gerald asked, smiling a little as he did.

I scoffed at him.

He chuckled, and although I had no desire to hear any more of his and the guild's... issues, at the same time I was glad to know they were so petty and simple.

If that was all they were really having issues with, then Lumen would be fine. And is fine. At least for now.

Eventually this little city-state would likely fail. Or get attacked or annexed by a neighboring nation, and be unable to properly defend itself. But until it did... such issues would be all they'd have to deal with. And such things were, although headaches, not impossible for those like Gerald and Brandy. If anything they were both fully capable of handling such economic issues.

What he was likely not saying was they had already formulated a plan, and maybe even are acting it out as we speak, to either deal with or circumvent the issue he spoke about. In fact it'd not surprise me if they were involved in the whole thing from the get-go, just as they had been involved with the little scheme from before... what had it been about...?

The mines. Something to do with the mines nearby. Maybe it was something they were involved with then, if this limestone company was involved too in this one.

No matter.

"Other than that Vim, I have no requests for you. Others might though. I'll make sure everyone knows you're here, and to come to you with their issues. Though knowing your wife it won't be long until they all know you're here, even before I can tell them," he said.

"Hm... What's the general census on Light? Several of your members are... a little antagonistic with the church, aren't they?" I asked.

Gerald shrugged. "A few are, yes... but they've not made a big deal of it. No fuss, yet at least. But that's mostly thanks to Light and the rest not really interfering with us. they come to visit, and whatnot, but as I said they don't even want any real help with their little cathedral yet. So we've not needed to deal with such drama, though I do expect it to come. It always does," he said.

"I wonder how Brandy's taking it," I said lightly.

"Honestly I think she's trying to ignore it. She was upset at first, rather deeply, that they weren't letting her be involved... but now she seems to not care. I think she simply accepted the fact they don't want her involved, or she's just waiting for them to need her help and get involved that way."

Right. So people were bothered. Gerald just, like always, didn't see the full picture. He had too many things on his plate, on his desk, to notice the little things anymore.

Guess I'll just have to spend time with everyone. To find out if all was well or not myself.

What a headache. But, visiting this place always gave me one. So that was no surprise.

And he wanted me to live here? Full-time?

Feh.

Hopefully Renn wouldn't like the idea. I'd rather live up north in that quasi-church orphanage than here.

Maybe.

Standing, I nodded as I decided all was fine here. At least, from first glance. "I'll take a look around then. As I said, I'll likely be here awhile... though I do plan on speaking with Light in the morning. So..." I shrugged lightly, not wanting to really say it aloud.

"Hm... I'd say I would see you later at the feast, but we're all really busy. I'm not sure if we'll be able to hold a proper one so abruptly. Maybe tomorrow or the next day," he said as he frowned.

"That's fine," I said as I went to leave.

I honestly wasn't in the mood for their silly little feasts. Even if they meant well and it was actually a good thing they'd do such little gestures every time I visited.

Right now I'd likely be bad company. Since I knew not far from here was a foe I must confront.

Though if she was a physical foe, or an emotional one, I still wasn't sure yet.

"Oh, Vim!"

Pausing at the door, I turned to look at Gerald. He had lifted a letter.

Stepping back into the office, I took the letter he offered. "Sorry. Completely forgot," he apologized as I turned it over and studied the little wax seal upon it.

Berri's.

"When'd you get this?" I asked. As far as I was aware Oplar hadn't been back that way since we'd been there. She'd been going around Telmik, and was now heading south. She had been too busy to go that far out again since the vote had been called. And no humans went there, so it couldn't have been them who had gotten it.

"About a month ago. Kevin gave it to me. I guess he got it at home, from a member. Whose is it? I don't recognize the seal," Gerald asked.

Glancing at the dove, I wondered why he looked so interested. "You don't know?" I asked, a little surprised to hear so. He was older than he looked, and had been in his position for some time. Surely he knew of Berri's crest?

Gerald though frowned and shook his head. "Nope? Kevin hadn't either, actually. Guess he never met the one who gave it to him before, someone with a horn?" Gerald asked with a point to his forehead.

Huh... has it really been that long since Berri had been involved with the Society...? It's been a hundred and odd years, sure, but...

Shrugging lightly, I simply gestured lightly with the letter. "It's fine. They're isolated members who live to the far east. They must need something from me," I said gently.

"Hm. Hopefully it's not too dire, as I said I got it a month ago... and Kevin had gotten it at his home, so who knows how long it's been waiting for you!" Gerald said worriedly.

Right...

I went to opening it as I stepped away. "Later," I said goodbye, not wanting to linger so he could ask of its contents.

"Sure," Gerald answered a little meekly, likely having noticed my abrupt and forceful end of the conversation.

Stepping out of Gerald's office, I found myself slightly worrying as I pulled a single piece of paper out of the letter. I relaxed a little upon seeing Berri's unique handwriting, written in a language I'd not seen in some time. For a moment it all looked like a jumbled mess... until I remembered this language was read from bottom up, not top down.

Walking down the hall, I slowed a little as I read my friend's message.

Narli was sick. The type of sick they didn't understand.

Sighing softly, I folded up her simple request of urgent help and put it away.

As always, chaos never arrived alone. It had many friends.

Heading for the houses, as to find Renn, I decided to go and confront Light tonight. Since I might have to leave at first light for a different reason.

Chapter 462 Renn – Merit's Heart and Her Anger

Anxiously packing my bag... again, I wondered what to even say.

"I'm surprised she's still alive... I'm glad to hear she is, though sad to learn this way," Merit said.

Glancing at my friend, I watched her again read Berri's letter. It was a little... humbling, to learn that there were so many different languages in this world... and that so many people I knew could speak and read most of them. It made me feel less-than-adequate since I could barely understand fully the ones I did know.

"Why do you think she didn't go into detail?" I asked.

"Because she hadn't known who would open and read it. Likely also why she had written it in this old scrawl. I'm surprised even I remember how to read it," she said with a small smile. One that looked kind of sad.

"Did... did you know her well?" I asked as I stepped away from the bed and the bag I had been repacking upon it.

Vim had come as Merit and I were unpacking our bags and relaxing. I'd been doing it while we talked in depth, about many things, just as a way to keep my hands busy. He'd left to go confront Light, without me, but had said and promised to not do anything too drastic.

He was worried it seemed, about Narli. Enough so to justify leaving in the morning at first light, as long as his meeting with Light didn't go too awry.

"Berri was one of the prominent figures in the Society. Back before I even joined. Properly, at least. She too tried to make something of a home, for those like her. She and I weren't ever really close... but I've never had a problem with her. She had always seemed very level-headed and reliable. A few of my

friends spoke very highly of her, always had. I honestly had thought she had died years ago with her husband, that dullard," Merit said.

"Dullard...?" I asked. Horn was a... simple man, but was he really someone worth calling such a thing?

Merit ignored that as she lowered the letter and placed it down on the desk near her chair. She wasn't really sitting at it, just near it. She had to stretch herself, almost to the point of falling off the chair, to put the letter upon it. "I'm not happy you might be leaving again so quickly, Renn. Why not stay here?" Merit asked me.

I shifted a little, suddenly feeling bad.

Yes. It was rude. Terrible even, of me to leave so quickly... I had so much to do here. So many people to see and talk to. The other members. I needed to spend more time with Merit. I needed to check on Lamp and her people. Roslyn and her group, and I also really wanted to meet Light and the rest of them too!

But...

"Narli's a friend..." I said softly.

Merit's face scrunched up a bit, and then she smiled at me. "That was lovely, Renn. And justifies it quite well. Hm..." Merit frowned a bit as she crossed her arms, going into thought.

Oh...? "Thinking of joining us?" I asked, somehow recognizing that look.

"Maybe... it'd be a good excuse to go visit Nasba. She's near there," she said honestly.

I kept myself from leaping forward in excitement, but my tail and ears fluttered and twitched wildly all the same. "I'd love to have you come, Merit! We can come right back after, too, since we have so much to do here," I said, trying to reason it.

"Right..." Merit hummed softly as she sighed. "I guess I could...? Your humans have all adapted. Most of those eastern girls, the ones who joined, can all speak the language well enough now... Roslyn and the rest are happily adjusted too, not that they had much to adjust to..." Merit mumbled.

I wanted to groan at their names. "They're really all doing so well?" I asked.

She nodded, though did so a little absentmindedly. She was still lost in thought, pondering if she should join me eastward or not.

Although I wanted to hear more about my friends, I knew better than to pry. We'd already spoken of them, and I had utterly enjoyed every moment of it. But every word spoken of them just made me want to run out of the room and go hunt them down, as to wrap them in hugs and speak to them myself.

Especially Lamp. Who was no longer pregnant because her child had been born already. A young boy.

It was too late, per Merit's words, to bother them. It was now the middle of the night, and she said the humans went to bed early here. Since they all had to be up before sunrise to work.

Honestly I was glad to hear that everyone here was doing relatively fine. Other than Herra who had passed away from that sickness that had been running rampant in the south last year, no one else had any issues or troubles. Tosh was still fine; he'd not relapsed into his mind... Merit and the rest were now very busy, thanks to the city of Lumen declaring independence, but otherwise were all healthy and fine. Happy, even. Merit's only real complaints, that I've heard so far, were that she was going to start charging me for every human I sent her way to be dealt with. I wasn't sure yet what she planned on charging me, since I got the feeling it wasn't in coins or money, but knew it had been said partly with a serious tone.

She seemed to enjoy having people to take care of. Even if she didn't want to admit it aloud, not even to me.

"Well... let's see what Vim says first. Don't be too shocked if he decides to leave you here, Renn. He might need to hurry there," Merit then said, deciding something internally.

I nodded softly. "I know," I said. Vim hadn't outright said I'd be joining him, after all. I had simply begun packing just in case.

"That might be for the best too. It'd let him go there, help Berri out, and come back swiftly. And while you're here you can spend time with me and the rest of us," Merit said, nodding as if it was the best idea she's thought of in years.

Although I did like the idea... I also didn't.

I hadn't been lying when I had said earlier that Narli was a friend. I saw her as someone special. I'd hate to not help her if I could.

Though how I could help her, where her own family and Vim, couldn't... was to be debated. But still.

Merit then sighed, rather heavily. "Oh well... I uh... well..." Merit then glanced past me, to the bed.

I turned, to see what was wrong, and found nothing amiss. The bag was still open, waiting to be finished packed... "Merit?" I asked as I looked back at her.

"You two uh... share rooms now?" Merit asked, her eyes not leaving the bags.

Oh. She was staring at the bags lining the wall near the bed.

Vim's and mine. Together.

I nodded gently. "Yeah," I answered softly.

She and I had already talked, while crying a bit, about my relationship with Vim.

Merit was happy for me. Really, she was. But it was rather obvious that it was still... well...

I gulped gently and gestured at the bed. "If it's any consolation Merit... we share a bed, but that's all we do," I said, trying to lighten her heavy heart a little.

Her face immediately scrunched up. "What...?"

My ears went stiff as I nodded. "We've not uh... well... The Chronicler calls it consummated...? I guess? Yet?" I said.

My tiny white-haired friend got a little red in the face as she hopped off her chair. "Renn!" she shouted at me.

Oh no! I should have tried a different way! "I know, that was terrible...!" I groaned, going red in the face as well.

"Why the hell not! I was going to ask all about it! What's the point in you being married to that idiot if I don't get to at least hear the details!?" Merit shouted.

A little stunned, I watched Merit groan as she sat back down. She covered her face with her hands, groaning as if in pain as she did.

Smiling at her, I realized she hadn't been angry at my bringing up such a sensitive topic... but was instead angry for the exact opposite reason.

She had wanted to hear the details. Of our trysts. And was now upset that she'd not get to hear them.

"Um... sorry..." I whispered, feeling a strange mix of cringing pain and odd joy. She was acting adorably, but at the same time it seemed I had actually upset her.

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"You should be! Gosh, Renn! You can't be serious, are you? Really? You two haven't done anything yet?" Merit asked, once again sliding off the chair. This time she had done so with such a brisk movement it had wobbled a bit as she stepped over to me.

I nodded quickly. "We haven't... I uh... well..." I felt the blood rush back to my face as I gently lifted my hands as if to gesture an explanation with them. "Well, you see...!"

"Don't mumble nothings! Renn, you got to be kidding me! Now I'm starting to worry something actually is wrong!" Merit said.

"Me too...! But, well..." I took a deep breath, since both of our voices had started to grow loud. The kind of loud that would be heard if we weren't careful. And I didn't want to say the next bit of stuff to anyone but her. I glanced at the door, confirmed it was still shut... and I didn't hear anyone beyond it, and then gestured for Merit to get closer.

"What...? I'm upset with you, I'm not going to whisper about..." Merit complained but got closer. She leaned upward, on her tip-toes, as I bent a little to whisper into her ear.

"There's a prophecy," I whispered.

Merit immediately went still. She then glanced at me, then the door, and then back at me. "About...?" she whispered back.

I gulped. "Me. Or well, my daughter."

Merit's eyes, the beautifully tiny ones, narrowed and became even smaller. "One you are to have, you mean," she said, understanding.

I nodded.

"And thus why you've not been able to get Vim in the mood. He knows of it, and won't indulge it," Merit then said, rather quickly. As if she had already known. But she hadn't. I could tell by the look of pure rage on her face that this was all news to her.

"Well... I uh... maybe. I don't know. I've not wanted to admit it nor say that aloud yet, to be honest Merit... do you really think he would do such a thing?" I asked, glad someone else had finally brought it up. We'd hinted at it, back at the smithy. About Vim trying to break the prophecy, as he called it. He had denied on the spot that he'd do so, or try to do so in that way, but he had been... a little odd about it... and...

"Vim? Hell yes he would. I've seen him do insane things because of prophecies, Renn, and half the time he does them to stop those said prophecies... not to stop the disasters they foretell or anything, but to simply stop them from coming true. He's killed monarchs, brought low kingdoms, even killed a god once over one," Merit said.

"A god...?" I asked as I shifted.

She nodded... then hesitated. "I uh... I'll be honest Renn, I'm not sure if I should talk to you about that stuff. I want to; really I do, but..."

"He's asked you to keep it secret," I said knowingly.

Merit's angry face morphed into one of sorrow. "No... not outright, at least," she said softly.

Ah... so she was doing so out of respect to him. Likely further empowered thanks to her love.

"You met a god, Merit?" I asked softly.

She shifted and slightly shrugged. "Not really... I simply saw him from a distance, once. I was too scared to get any closer. He had settled down not far from my home, back then, my oasis. Vim dealt with him," she said.

A little shocked to hear further confirmation of what I already knew, I nodded. "I'm... surprised. I had thought all that was long ago. Long before the Society," I said.

"Yeah... well..." she shrugged. The two of us were silent for a moment, and Merit finally sighed and gave in. "Basically Renn, Vim's... weird when it comes to gods and everything about them. Their creations, their prophecies, and so forth. So I could see him being... really weird about this. How much does he know?" she asked.

"He doesn't know the whole prophecy. And he doesn't know there are multiple ones. He only knows Light had one about me, that my daughter would eventually become someone important in the Society... and that she'd be a saint," I said.

Merit immediately groaned as she reached up to cover her face again. This time not in anger, but something else. Maybe disgust...?

"And the others...?" she whispered, as if exhausted.

"Uh... well... Celine left me a few. She left a letter, before she died, for me. I got it a few months ago..." I said, a little embarrassed.

"Please tell me Vim hadn't seen it," she said, revealing a serious face as she lowered her hands.

I nodded. "He knows about it. But he hadn't read it, and he doesn't know the contents. I burnt it at his request," I said.

"Yet you remember it clearly, thanks to your mind," she said, understandingly.

I nodded.

"What was the one? I'll want to hear all of them, but for now just tell me the one about your daughter," she said.

"Well..." I shifted a little, and glanced at the door. I focused on it, and the hallway behind it, and once I made sure we were still alone I glanced back at Merit and bent down a bit, as to whisper again. "She warned me to not let my daughter touch the moon."

Merit frowned. "Touch the moon...?"

"Right...? What do you think that means?"

"I'm... not sure... I'll have to think about that. But that's not too terrible, Renn. That just sounds like a typical warning. Celine gave such things out all the time. It was one of the reasons I never wanted to meet her face to face, because I hated hearing them. I liked to hear them, since it gave me warning, but it always scared me to know of upcoming danger," Merit said as she pondered it.

Darn. Merit was the first I had told about that prophecy, and I had been kind of hoping she would have known its real meaning.

"Do... you think it's literal, Merit? As in actually touching the moon?" I asked.

"I... don't see how, Renn. But who am I to know...? It's too bad Vim's such a jerk about this stuff, he'd be perfect to ask..." Merit mumbled.

Right. And it was too bad Miss Beak was dead, because she would have been the second best to ask.

Merit sighed. "So... you're going to have a daughter. She's going to be a saint, and very important to the Society. I'm guessing the saint part is why Light and the rest would be so fixated on you then," she said.

"Hm?"

Merit gestured around us, though didn't seem to do so with any real intention. "They came here. I spoke to Light and Less, I saw Martin's son too but I didn't like his father so I didn't talk to him. Less tried to tease me about my best friend stealing the love of my life, I threatened to cook her alive. She's a jerk, I can't believe she's so holier than thou yet worse than her sister!" Merit complained, a little angrily.

I too now was upset, alongside her, but tried not to let it get too deep under my skin. "Martin?" I asked.

"Celine's knight. Or at least, one of them. Anyway, while here Light approached me. She smiled all knowingly, like her mother always did, and said she was glad I had latched onto you before getting too lost in the mud. Gah! Their whole bloodline is poison, I swear!" Merit complained loudly, seemingly

growing even more upset now than she had been over my telling her Vim and I hadn't consummated our relationship yet.

Smilingly gently at her, I waited until she calmed down a bit before asking, "What was that supposed to mean though?"

Merit sighed, rather heavily. "She meant you saved me, somehow, or something. That I would have been doomed had I ignored you. She then said she looks forward to the day I sit with her at their table, the one they're building or will be built in the future or whatever... typical saint speaking in riddles," Merit said, a little grumpily.

I shifted a bit, and wished we'd been sitting. I felt oddly light-headed all of a sudden.

Merit was saying that Light had implied... we'd all be together. In the future. On the same side.

Working together.

Because of... my daughter...?

"If Vim hears all this, he'll just further entrench himself in his stupid plan," I groaned as I realized it was likely hopeless.

"What plan...?"

Oh. Right.

"Vim plans to step down. As protector. During, or after, the vote in Telmik. He feels he's causing too much stress and conflict, and believes stepping down will stop the Society from fracturing even more than it has," I said.

Merit was surprisingly not very surprised. She simply frowned. "Not a bad idea, really."

"Merit!"

"What!? It's true!" Merit defended herself, and Vim.

"Don't agree with him just because you love him!" I said.

"Says you!" Merit said with a red face.

"Gah!" I too felt myself grow red, but I couldn't help but smile anyway.

The two of us glared at each other, and then we both laughed. It felt good, to be so open and to shout with someone like this. I missed this! A lot!

Sighing softly, I studied my friend... and wondered how I was so blessed.

Lately I've had a lot of wonderful conversations. I've met so many wonderful people, and gotten close to quite a few. There were only a couple, like Lilly and Merit, that I was close enough to that I'd be so open with... but...

Each one was so precious. So valuable.

How I hoped and prayed, to Vim's parents, that somehow this all ended well. I so desperately wanted to keep this. The Society was special, but it was they... these members, that I truly treasured. I wasn't sure what I'd do if I lost them.

"What...? Don't look at me like that. You look like Nasba does when she's about to sneak away to her stupid husband," Merit then said.

I blinked. "Oh...?"

Merit grinned a little. "Sorry. A bad joke. Basically you looked like a mischievous cat."

"I had just been thinking how much I cherish everything, and everyone. Especially you," I said honestly.

Merit opened her mouth, to say something... but she hesitated for some reason. She glanced down, made a funny noise as she tried to not smile too greatly, and then took a deep breath.

She let out a deep sigh, then calmed down and looked back up at me.

"Honestly Renn... the fact Vim's still with you is proof of his love. The Vim I know would have separated from you the moment he learned of such a prophecy. Or even heard a hint of it. Yet he's still with you? And willing to talk openly about it? Even with all this drama and all that stuff happening...?" Merit shook her head gently. "Then... you have nothing to fear. Not really."

My face scrunched up as I started to cry. Before I could even contain it, Merit let out a tiny noise as I hurriedly bent down and wrapped her in another hug.

"Sheesh..." Merit groaned, but I felt her arms wiggle around me as to return the hug without hesitation.

"I love you, Merit," I whispered as I held her close.

"Mhm... good. You better. After all these years without his love, it's only fair I get something finally," she said happily.

Smiling at her, I nodded. "Yeah. I'll do my best to make up for it... though that'll be hard..." I admitted.

"Not really. You're doing just fine," she whispered in my ear.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded... and squeezed her just a tiny bit tighter.

My tiny friend had a bigger heart than anyone else I knew.

Hopefully someday I could earn the space she'd given to me inside of it. Though huge, I knew how precious such space was. How rare it was, and how hard it was to come by.

I'd earn it. Somehow. Someway.

Someday.

Chapter 463 Vim – Celine's Daughter

I stood in front of new motifs. Ones that nearly covered the whole wall, at least ten feet high and thrice as wide. And by new I didn't mean newly painted.

Maybe. It was hard to tell anymore. I'd seen so many walls of religious motifs of all types and styles that they all kind of just... blended together in my mind, now.

I should have brought Renn with me. She would have enjoyed looking at this, and I would have liked to hear her interpretation of it.

To me, the scene of heavenly light beaming down onto foreboding darkness implied some kind of forgiveness. Maybe a rapture or end of times thing. There was no gruesome display in the scene, but it was definitely more on the somber side.

I kind of liked how the artist had painted the way the beams of holy light pierced the veils of darkness below, though. It was done in a way that didn't really destroy and disperse the darkness, but instead conform it. The light was not eliminating the darkness, but instead absorbing it. Changing it. Making it bright too.

Thus my own interpretation of forgiveness.

I wonder who had painted it? One of our own members? One of Light's people...? It was not just a scene I didn't recognize, but it was obviously newly made too. Probably only painted a few months ago, based off the colors. Such paints didn't really settle for years, and it was usually a sign of differentiating a good painter and a true artist. One who was a master of the craft painted not just for the now, but for the future. I'd seen some that took the alterations of time into account so well, the scenes themselves changed over the years. As if becoming different paintings entirely, as the paint became thinner and the tones duller thanks to time.

The door opened, and I glanced at it. Less walked in, still wearing her loose robe. Her nightgown, not her proper attire.

"She's about ready, Vim," Less said after she got close enough. Unlike her loud sister, Less was more proper. She had not spoken until close enough to do so comfortably, without shouting. Landi would have shouted at me from the door.

"Thank you, Less," I said.

Less nodded, and then yawned. "She understands. I think she knew you'd be in a hurry. Wish she would have told me though, now my sleeping schedule is going to be all weird for a while," she complained.

I smiled at that. "A nice nap does sound nice," I said.

"Right...?" Less agreed.

For a tiny moment I studied Landi's sister. She looked... pretty good, actually. She still had that stripe of white in her hair, her birthmark, but looked as young and healthy as my memories remembered her as. Like her sister she was thick in the blood, like Renn, so it really shouldn't have been too surprising. Yet it was, somehow. Probably because I had thought her dead.

"How've you been Less?" I asked.

"Busy, lately. Honestly I'm glad to back to the homeland, but a part of me longs for the quiet forests on the other side. Most of those here hadn't cared much for the other lands, but there had been true peace there," Less said honestly.

I nodded at that as I looked back to the motif before me. "I know what you mean," I said.

"I bet you do, especially lately. Congratulations, by the way, on getting married. I had kind of hoped to meet her finally, why'd you not bring her?" Less asked... and I noticed she did so a little stiffly.

Was that because she was unsure of what to say, or ask, concerning Renn...? Or because she was searching for information? Or was it something more?

Though I might just be hearing her trying to not yawn. Being tired and all, since I had just woke her up.

"You'll get to meet her. She's at the guild right now, catching up with some of the members there," I said.

"Ah... Merit, right? I heard they got close," she said.

I nodded.

Less yawned again, and did so with an odd noise. I glanced at her, and found her trying to cover her mouth as she yawned and doing so rather haphazardly. I could see all her sharp teeth. It had hit her without warning, it seemed.

Looking away from the yawning badger, I glanced around the room. This was a smaller waiting room, with plain tables and chairs all over. Likely where they all had their meals, based off the smell of the place. It was clean, but I could smell the food that had been in here recently. Some kind of stew.

If all these tables and chairs were not just for show, then I had severely underestimated how many of them were here. There had to be enough seating area for well over a hundred people, with room to spare.

"This isn't our new cathedral, by the way. That's still being built," Less said, noting my studying.

Although that was a little surprising... it shouldn't have been. I had been told by Gerald they hadn't even really started yet on the building, hadn't I? "I see," I said simply.

"We're building it between the noble's district and the business one," Less said, likely just talking to talk. To fill the silence.

I nodded. That made sense. It was how Telmik had been built too. With the Cathedral in the center, and all the different zones built around it. So that it could be seen as the heart of commerce, politics, and the city itself. And...

I blinked a few times, as I realized where she was talking about.

"Wait... The hole?" I asked as I turned to look at her.

Less grinned and nodded. "Yeah. Thanks for making that, by the way. Made it super easy for the lower floors to be built, most of them are done already," she said.

I sighed and shook my head. They were building on top of that giant hole which had been left behind by that flower-like creature! The audacity! "Be very careful with that... the whole area had been shifted, and then there's the huge cavity and city beneath it all..." I said as I tried to think of the work needed to properly build the foundation for a giant cathedral on that hole, or anywhere near it.

You were talking a momentous task. One I wasn't sure the people of this era, even ones guided by the Society and Light, could accomplish.

"Right... Light did mention something about the city underneath..." Less then said.

Great. "I should check it then. I can help set up the proper foundation, and..." I started to say, as my mind already began to lay out a plan for it. But I immediately caught myself, and flinched.

"We were hoping you'd help, Light had even planned to ask you..." Less started to speak, but then went quiet. She had noticed my flinch. "Uh... Vim?"

I glanced at her, and did my best to contain my thoughts and emotions. "I'm okay."

"You sure...? You suddenly looked a little angry..." Less shifted, a little worriedly.

I noted the way she looked hesitant. The way her eyes were narrowed and how her shoulders were now a little stiff.

Less was now fully awake.

Although her response, her reaction to my anger, was not surprising... the way she was so startled by it was.

It calmed me a little, to realize that Less had not expected me to get angry at all. It was rather telling, actually. About a lot of things.

"Vim...?" Less asked again, sounding even more worried than before.

"It's fine. I'm fine. I just realized something I should have earlier," I said, already much calmer. I felt rather good now, actually.

Less had not been expecting me to get angry. And in fact, by the sounds and looks of it, had been expecting me and Renn to be here under friendly conditions. They had planned to ask me for help. To build their Cathedral.

We weren't enemies.

At least, not in their eyes.

But... were we in mine?

I wanted to be. Yet did I? Really?

"You sure, Vim...? You were definitely upset just now. Are you angry at me...? Something I said? Did?"
Less asked, still a little worried.

"I had been, but not at you. Honestly I'm not sure who to be mad at right now, or who to direct it towards," I said.

Less groaned and her robe shifted a tad, reminding me she was likely naked beneath it. I tried not to glance away from her eyes as she worriedly smiled at me. "Just uh... remember I'm strong, but not that strong, okay?" she reminded me.

I smiled and nodded. "Yes. Like your sister. By the way I saw her recently, she's doing fine," I said.

Less's expression softened a little. "I've... heard of what's she's doing. Built her own kingdom, down south," Less said.

I nodded. "A nation of stone. She's actually calmed down a little, you know?" I said.

Less gently smiled at that. "I doubt that, Vim... I've heard of what she's going to try and do, and..." Less started to say, but went quiet as Light walked into the room.

The badger startled, turned and saw Light, and then hurriedly looked back at me and nodded.

"See you later Less," I said as she bowed a bit more. I of course had heard what she had been about to say, but knew better than to let my mind dwell on it. Such knowledge was undoubtedly from a prophecy, so I wanted nothing to do with it.

"Mhm...!" Less only made a noise, nothing more, as she then hurried to step away. She bowed lightly to Light as they passed each other, and then Less hurriedly left the room. She shut the door behind her, and I noticed her lack of footsteps afterward.

She was standing guard at the door. To make sure no one came in.

Sighing softly, I studied Light as she approached. Unlike Less, this saint at least wore a more proper robe. One that didn't let me know on mere glance if she was naked underneath it or not. It was though, reminiscent of those like Abel, rather demure and a little raggedy. It was something she's likely owned and worn for years. But I didn't linger on her robe, but instead looked to her eye. The only one she had, and how deeply it glowed.

She hadn't put on an eye patch to cover her other scarred eye, but it was clear she'd just gotten ready. Likely hurriedly. Her hair even looked a tad wet, for some reason, maybe she had dunked her head in cold water to wake up better?

Her single eye glowed far stronger than Narli's, the Chronicler's, or even the human saint Renn had befriended. That Elaine.

This was a real saint. A powerful one. The type that should scare me, or at least would, if I had been a normal man.

Light smiled as she drew closer... then she slowed and paused a few feet away. "Are we being friendly enough that I can give you a hug, Vim?" she then asked in greeting.

Hesitating a moment... I felt a little stupid as I slowly nodded. "For your mother. Yes."

Light's smile melted, turning into one that made me feel like an ass. She looked as if about to cry as she stepped forward, and then gave me a hug.

I returned it, being gentle, and noticed that she felt... healthy, but cold. She was even trembling a little.

Was that from the emotions, or was she scared...?

Probably both. Since I knew she knew what I really wanted to do. Even if I wouldn't do it. Not without reason.

Light took a very deep breath, one that seemed to calm her down a bit, and for a tiny moment... I waited.

For the pain. The feeling of organs exploding. The feeling of utter agony as divine power tore through flesh and bone.

But then a few heartbeats passed... and with another breath, not as deep this time, Light finally released me.

Grabbing her shoulders, I studied her a bit... and the glowing eye that was squinting at me.

"It's been a long time..." she whispered as she stared up at me.

"Hm... what, a couple hundred years?" I asked.

Her shoulders felt like Renn's. Tiny, trembling, but holding great emotion.

"At the very least, Vim."

"I'd make a joke about how you're even prettier or something, but like me you look exactly the same. So that joke is boring," I said.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

Light chuckled a bit as I released her shoulders. She took a single step back, as to glance me up and down again, and she nodded. "Right...! Though your clothes are different, you're usually not dressed so nicely. Why is that? Did you dress up to come meet me?" she asked, sounding a little too happy about what should have been a slight joke.

"No... my new companion finds it strangely amusing to keep tabs on my attire. Or rather, I think she's just picky about what I wear when it concerns her ability to hold and hug me. She hates to touch me when I wear the prickly stuff, so..." I said, explaining it a bit as I tugged a bit at my shirt.

Light's eye grew a tad bit brighter, and clasped her hands as if in prayer. "How utterly lovely. I'm jealous."

I frowned at that. "What's that...? You telling me you haven't found anyone in all this time?" I asked.

"Do you know what I was doing just now...?" she asked back.

My frown deepened. "Waking up...?"

"Taking a purity bath," she said with smirk.

Oh.

"Really...?" I felt a little bad for her. So she wasn't a saint in name and ability only. How interesting.

Light though smiled, rather proudly, as she nodded. "Really."

"You're kidding. Don't give me the spiel that you saints need to be virgins for your powers to work, so what for?" I asked, rather interested in knowing her reason for it.

Light chuckled at me. "Are you... actually interested? Really?"

Shifting a bit, I felt ridiculous as I hesitated. "Maybe... I'm trying my best here, Light. I really am," I said, honestly.

She smiled at me and nodded. "Then I shall do so too," she decided.

Good.

At least, hopefully that was good.

She then turned a bit and gestured at one of the nearby tables. I nodded, and went to pull back a chair for her.

Feeling a little odd about it, I watched her sit down in the chair... and then pushed her into proper position as I then took a chair myself. Sitting across from her, I noted the feel of the table. It was one that was used readily. It had lots of little knicks and divots in it, from years of use.

"Well... it's an odd place to start, but I'm okay with it," Light then said as she crossed her arms on the table. She leaned forward a bit, suddenly looking more like a common town-girl than a pure saint. "I've not had a single inclination of a dream or prophecy about who my partner will be. To the point I've started to believe I simply will never have one," she told me.

Tapping the table with a thumb, I frowned at her. "You know... sometimes the best partners are the ones you find on accident. Not from prophecies and destinies," I told her.

She grinned at me. "I had a feeling you'd say something like that. And I know. I've kept my eye out, you know? I really have. But no one's really seemed... hm... You know, now that we're talking about it, I'm not even sure what kind of person I even want," Light said.

Wanting to groan, I lifted a hand to shush her. "If you want to have that kind of discussion, go have it with Renn. Not me," I said. Really, what was with everyone lately? It was as if love was a sickness, spreading all around me.

"Can I?"

My hand clenched up, and I had to calm myself as I glanced at the woman sitting across from me.

Light smiled at me, in a way that reminded me of her mother. "It's okay. I know you won't let me meet her. For some time... but it's okay. For now, at least," she said.

I kept my hand clenched, and my mouth shut, as I studied the saint... who seemed to be talking rather seriously.

She glanced down at her hands, and began to twiddle her fingers. In a way that made her seem much younger than should be possible. "That had been terribly rude of me. I apologize, Vim. I'll be honest I've been so looking forward to this moment, and I'm really nervous and..." Light began to ramble a little, and I once again relaxed a bit.

By my parents, it was going like this wasn't it?

I had somewhat hoped it would have all gone differently. To have them sneer and taunt me. Or laugh and scheme. Or lie.

So I could do what I wanted to. What I thought I needed to.

Yet here I was... watching and listening to a saint that was obviously as pure and honest as I remembered her, speaking in a way that made me lower all walls I'd planned to put up before walking in here.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed softly at her... who then paused and nodded.

"Usually by now you'd warn me. About sticking my tongue where it doesn't belong," she said, a little happily.

"I'm in one of those moods."

"Mood...?" she asked.

"The kind where I pity a woman blinded by things beyond her comprehension," I said.

Light blinked... and then sit up a little straighter. "Oh my... I had known you'd have been... a little prickly, concerning her, but I had not thought it this dire! Should I be worried?"

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

"At least you're still honest with me. Did you know there are many who think you're some kind of diabolical schemer? Puppeteering us for hundreds of years? I've told them how silly the notion is, that you're simply too honest for that, but I don't think they believe me."

"People think I'm doing such a thing...?" I asked. I wonder who? And why? About what?

"Some of us do, yes. Though whenever I ask them to specify, the whole why and how, they can't actually lay out any proof or ideas of what you're supposedly doing. I always have to remind them that you genuinely need no schemes at all. I don't think most of them comprehend who and what you are, after all," Light said lightly.

I sighed at her. "I had been hoping to kill you on sight. You're making this difficult for me," I said.

Light chuckled at me. "Please, Vim! If you did that you'd not sleep for at least a few months from the regret and shame! Don't do that!" she said happily.

By my parents she was just like her mother. Insufferable.

Renn would like her, though.

"From where I sit, you're the one scheming," I said.

"Of course I am...? The gods designed me to do so," she said simply.

"Then they designed you poorly," I said.

Light giggled. "Still the same...! I've been wondering how much she'd change you, and I'm glad to a point to learn how she's not done so in certain ways... but I'm also glad to see she has in fact done so in others," she said as she studied me.

I wonder what she was speaking of...? I figured it was more, something more serious, than something as simple as the clothes I wore.

For a long moment... we just stared at each other. She blinked lightly, while smiling at me, and I knew that my hope for actual confrontation... was now just a former dream.

"Are we enemies?" I asked her, though I already knew the answer.

"Heavens no, Vim. I can't tell you, since you'd just get angry at me, but I have a lot of proof that says why."

Crossing my arms, I debated leaving. I no longer wanted to be here.

Light sighed a little, probably because she noticed my feelings. "Your wife is important, Vim."

"Important enough to earn my wrath?" I asked. Didn't she just say herself that I'd get angry if she said certain things?

"Actually? Yes. She is."

"I find that hard to believe," I said.

"Yet, it's the truth."

Glaring at the saint, who was speaking with utter confidence, I wondered how far I'd be able to take this before I broke. Either her or myself.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to not test it. "I plan to step down as protector."

"Yes."

I noted the way she had answered. "You knew."

"At the risk of your anger... yes. I've known for a long time. In fact, mother knew too. Though, like usual, we got the time... a little..." Light lifted a hand to cusp it, as if to display something tiny. "...bit off," she finished.

My eyes narrowed as I understood. "You mean I should have met Renn a long time ago, don't you?" I asked.

She blinked. "I can answer that, if you'd really like me to."

Shifting in my chair, I was surprised it didn't even creak. I was doing well at keeping calm. A little too well.

"Almost makes me want to not step down, just to not play your games," I said.

"Then don't?" she said simply.

"Did you mother teach you nothing? I'll burn this whole world down before I play at the whims of your misguided dreams," I warned her.

"In which case that too might be what we expect to happen," Light said with a small gesture at me.
"Really, Vim. You claim I didn't learn anything from my mother yet I would argue I learned from her a little too well, which you should know by now," she said.

Right... Celine too had manipulated me, knowing full-well how to use my own rules and aversions to her advantage.

"Your body might be pure, but I'm having doubts of your soul," I said.

Light blinked, a rather hard one, and her eye got dim. "Why, Vim... that was mean," she said softly.

Yes. It had been.

But I had meant it.

Feeling like I should apologize, I shifted again and glanced away. "Why Renn...?" I asked.

"To answer that would be to reveal the prophecies. Which... as I said, I'm willing to do if you're willing to actually sit and listen. But I don't believe you to be ready for that yet," she said.

"Will I be?"

She smiled at me, but didn't answer.

Just great.

Taking a small breath I gestured at her. "What of the Society, Light? What are you doing to it? You destroyed Randle's arm," I said.

"An accident, Vim. He had grabbed me by my throat, at just the right angle... if I had not forced him to release me, I would have died. And no one else had been around to help me. He had not been in his right mind, he would have killed me had I not defended myself," Light said softly.

She sounded actually remorseful of it. That kind of pissed me off.

"Why'd you banish him...? You took his arm. You could have given him time to calm down and understand, to listen and reason," I said.

She softly sighed. "I hadn't planned to, originally. But later that night I had a dream. A prophecy. One that forced the decision," she answered. Like her mother, she told me all I needed to know but nothing more.

"I find it funny you people always have just the right dream at just the right time to suit your needs."

Light smiled a little gently at that. "Some might see it that way, particularly you. I understand why you'd think so, at least."

"Yet still you won't admit it, will you," I said.

"No. Because if that was true I'd have seen his attack before it happened. You always seem to neglect that," she said.

I scoffed at her. "You sound like your mother."

Light actually blushed. "Thank you," she said abashedly.

Reaching up, I scratched at the back of my head as Light shifted and tried to contain her sudden emotions. She looked utterly gushing over what I had said, what she had interpreted as a compliment.

It hadn't been, but I didn't correct her on the misunderstanding.

"If you... wish to step down, for a while, Vim. Feel free to do so. Go ahead; spend time with Renn... as she goes through her motions. While you two are handling your own private affairs, we will be fine. Consider it a sabbatical, if you want. You've been the protector for almost five hundred years, Vim, never without a day off. There's absolutely nothing wrong with you finally taking a well earned, and deserved, break. Plus I could hardly think of a better reason than for your first child's birth!" Light said with a happy grin, growing excited as she spoke.

Glaring at the saint who was being far too serious, and far too joyful... I tried my best to not panic.

She was being serious.

Genuine, even.

And not in some weird, sarcastic saint, way either.

Plus she had once again confirmed, rather bluntly, that Renn was supposed to be pregnant. Not just supposed to be, but she actually believed it to be a fact.

And that terrified me. Somehow more than the idea of her being a true enemy, an actual conspirator and fiend...

Remembering the whole reason I had suspected her, and the rest, I shook my head a little and gestured at her. "Lomi's village. The fox village to the north. Did you destroy it?" I asked.

Light startled, and then hurriedly shook her head. "No! I arrived too late. I had a prophecy of its destruction; of it burning down, but had not reached land soon enough to warn anyone. To alert you, or the rest. All we could do was verify it, after it was done," she said quickly.

Although I didn't want to, I believed her.

"Did... did you think we did? That I did...? Vim..." Light actually sounded hurt, the heart-broken kind of hurt. Her glowing eye shimmered a bit, growing brighter and then dimming in rapid succession.

I had hurt her. Genuinely.

"I had to consider the possibility, Light. Your mother had done odd things before, too," I said.

Light's face contorted into shame as she nodded. "Yes... mother had indeed done... things that should not have been done. But the world back then had been different. A different time. We don't need to resort to such things anymore, today. No more," she said.

Keep telling yourself that.

"Really, Vim! Do you really think I'd come back just to do such things as that? I'm not stupid. You'd just kill me if I did such things, even if I was willing to do something as despicable as that! I have duties, Vim, responsibilities and things I must do... important things. I can't afford to die, not now anyway," Light said, speaking proudly.

Again she sounded like Celine.

I knew to others she spoke with utter confidence. Others heard pride, confidence and surety, but I heard hope. Pure hope. They wanted, hoped, their prophecies they saw were real. That they could either fulfill them, or stop them, depending on the type and results of them.

Although Celine's death had caused chaos, and fractured the Society... I had honestly been a little relieved with her passing.

Because it had ended this. This terrible feeling of standing too close to a hot fire. As if I was about to make a terrible mistake.

I didn't want to get involved in this. With her. These people. Any of this.

But I had to. For as long as I was involved in the Society, it was my duty... my responsibility, to protect them.

Even from themselves.

But...

This time it wasn't just me they were forcing involvement with.

Now they were getting Renn wrapped up in it too.

That woman didn't deserve such a life. She should just... stay by my side. Traveling around. Meeting her friends, and helping them occasionally. Having fun. Simple, but blissful, fun.

Tapping my foot, I felt... a little thin. As if tired. Which was too bad, since I had been feeling rather good these last few days.

"Vim...?" Light tilted her head at me, likely wondering why I hadn't responded to her previous ramble about why she'd never have even considered burning down Lomi's village.

"I need to go east for a bit," I told her.

She frowned but nodded. "Yeah? To help someone who is sick. Though I don't know who or where, I do know you'll be back soon enough."

Wonderful. At least she didn't seem to know whom it was that I needed to help.

I knew Light didn't lie. At least, not outright. Not knowingly, or willingly. It was why she, like her mother, sometimes spoke in odd riddles. It was their way of hiding the truth. They obfuscated, not lied.

"So no bloodshed?" I asked.

Light giggled. "I'd hope not! Please Vim, I'm really not stupid enough to make you an enemy. Even if it was needed," she said lightly.

I sighed, but nodded. "Fine. I'll leave tomorrow... but I'll bring Renn over before we leave, so you can meet her," I said as I stood from my chair.

Light perked up, nearly knocking over her chair as she did. "Really...!?"

I noted her utter shock, and how real it was.

She hadn't expected to meet Renn. At all. At least, not here and now.

Which was why I was willing to let it happen.

I nodded. "Not long after sunrise. Don't make me wait for you, even if you're in the middle of one of your stupid baths," I said.

She grinned and nodded. "I won't! I promise! Thank you, Vim! Really!"

Light then giddily ran around the table, to once again wrap me in a hug.

This time it was a full on hug, without any trembling or slight anxiety. I sighed at her, returned her hug, and patted her back.

"It's good to see you well, Light. Your mother would have been proud of you," I said gently.

She sniffed and started to cry, which made me regret not killing her even more since it made my departure take longer than it should have.

Chapter 464 Renn's Heart

"Goodnight!" I shouted again, doing my best to turn away before someone came over. I didn't want them to see me full on bawl my eyes out, even though I knew they had likely seen me do it enough times already that it shouldn't matter if they did or not.

"Aye! Night it is!" Tosh shouted back, barely able to sit up straight thanks to how drunk he was.

Laughing at him, and the rest, I turned away and left the room.

I wasn't the first to have left. In fact, I was leaving now because I didn't want to be the last. Only Tosh, Lawrence, Sofia and Merit had been left. The rest had all headed to their rooms, to rest and sleep as to prepare for the day. I had overheard Lawrence and Sofia planning to leave after their cups were empty, so I'd promptly left before they could.

Taking deep, but quick, breaths as I headed down the hallway... my eyes began to quiver as the world got blurry.

Reaching up, I grabbed at my shirt and winced at the strange tightness in my chest.

I knew this feeling. It was one I'd not felt in a long time. I felt as if I needed, and wanted, to run away. To hide. But at the same time knew I couldn't do so even if I tried to.

Heaving a little, I bit back the soul-wrenching sobs that wanted to escape. I didn't let them live, I kept them back even as I cried a little and gasped for air... all the while walking up some stairs.

I wasn't paying much attention to where I was going, since I was so focused on keeping myself simply upright. I felt the cold wall on my right, my hand was on it, but I had no idea how much I was relying on it to stay standing. Probably more than I wanted to admit.

Come on Renn. Keep it together. Somehow. Please.

Don't let Merit, or any of them, find or hear you weep. Not like this. And not for this reason.

After all I had no reason to actually break down. None at all.

That little party had been absolutely wonderful. Pure joy. Bliss itself.

Everyone had been so happy. So welcoming. So... pure. We had eaten and drank together as if life-long friends, without a bad word to even consider between us all. It had been such a lovely few hours that I was now feeling as if on the precipice of a huge cliff.

The little drinking party had only included non-human members. And a few had only come to say hello, to mingle and speak with me for a few minutes before leaving, but it had been so utterly lovely that it made me unable to contain myself.

I was happy. Too happy. And somehow that was making me fall apart.

It made absolutely no sense, but it was happening. My gasps for air, the quick thumping of my heart, and the squirm of my tail were proof of it.

"Come on, Renn," I said through clenched teeth as I rounded a corner.

Where was I...? The world was too blurry, thanks to my tear filled eyes, to really make out. Was I near my bedroom? For some reason I didn't think I was.

Not good. Not good at all. Even if most members were likely dead asleep, having gotten so drunk, I knew I shouldn't be spending too long in these halls. Even while utterly drunk, many of our members were too non-human to not notice someone weeping just outside their door.

I needed to get to safety. Now. Before I started to weep beyond control.

Where was Vim? I needed him... I...

Taking a deep breath, it stuttered a bit and nearly made me cough. Blinking wildly, I realized I was in a stairwell again. One that was a tad different than the rest.

A tiny bit confused, I calmed down as I realized where I was. Through teary eyes I saw the door I was approaching, and relaxed even more as I opened it and was greeted by a very chilly night's breeze.

The roof.

Stepping out onto the roof, I began to breathe even quicker as I cried some more. I felt myself calming down, enough so that my heart was no longer thumping like mad... and...

"Rennalee."

Pausing, I turned a bit and found I was being supported. I glared up at Vim, a little upset to find him looking at me as if I was something to be worried over.

"Well what'd you think!" I shouted at him.

Vim frowned in a way that told me he had no idea what to think, about anything, but like always was willing to try anyway.

Then... before I could say more, such as ask why his stupid smile looked so foolishly adorable... I found myself staring up at the night sky.

Blinking a few times, I winced at an odd pain in my head. Reaching up, I cupped my left ear, as if somehow keeping it from hearing the light breeze that felt really good helped keep the headache at bay.

"Vim...?" I groaned, and my throat felt dry and parched. As if I'd not drank in days. Which made no sense... I'd just drank a lot of cups of...

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief as I understood what just had happened.

"Well, Renn. It seems we've finally confirmed that you can indeed get drunk," Vim said. His voice, the typical deep and soothing one, made me wince again. He sounded almost as if he was shouting, though I knew he hadn't.

"You're kidding... is that... is this, what it feels like? This sucks, why would anyone want this?" I asked, wanting to whine a little at the feeling. My head didn't just hurt, it felt woozy. I was lying down, on what felt like Vim's lap, but I felt like I needed to sit up. As if I'd throw up otherwise.

Yet at the same time I didn't want to move at all. To the point I'd almost just let myself vomit, just to not have to move.

Ridiculous.

Groaning a little, I peered out through half-closed eyes up at Vim. He was smiling down at me in a way that made me feel a little better. "How long...?" I asked, but couldn't finish my question since my dry throat made me cough.

"A few hours. I have some water, and a treat to make you feel better once you're up for it," he said.

"Treat...?" I wonder what kind...? I didn't, couldn't, smell anything.

In fact the only thing I could smell was the ocean air and....

Closing my eyes, from the pain and so I could focus, I tried to pinpoint the odd scent. One I couldn't recognize. One I'd never smelled before.

Through a cloudy head, one that was buzzing in pain, I searched and searched for the smell. To put a name to it. A title, or even a descriptor. I not only didn't know what it belonged to... I also didn't even know how to describe it.

Was it smelly...? Did it smell good? Did it relieve me, or stress me out...? I honestly couldn't tell yet.

Taking a deep breath, I held it in a for a moment... and then had to release it since I got light-headed. I repeated the process a few times, as to focus on the scent and really understand it.

"You okay Renn?" Vim asked, likely wondering what I was doing.

"I am... I'm just..." I hesitated, since I had been about to admit it.

Opening my eyes, I quickly pushed aside the itchy throat and throbbing head as I looked up at him.

Vim tilted his head at me, smiling gently in a way that made me forget all about the world for a moment. I focused on him, and his smell, and wondered what to say.

Should I tell him?

I should.

But...

"Renn...?"

Sitting up, I found that we were sitting not far from the small roof-top garden. We were alone, thankfully, and although the sky was still dark it was starting to lighten off in the distance. We were on the ground, but there was an odd blanket beneath us. It was thin, not really very comfortable, but Vim's heat and presence made up for it and more.

And...

He didn't ask what was wrong again, even as I leaned closer to him. I put my face up against his chest, and took a deep breath.

Yes.

I could smell him.

This wasn't the nearby garden, or anything in it. This wasn't the ocean, or some weird scent that had stuck to me during our little drinking party.

This wasn't something found in Lumen. No weird food or animal.

This was Vim.

For a few long moments... heartbeats came and went, as my headache subsided... and I dedicated his smell forever to memory.

After more minutes than I was willing to admit passed, I finally leaned back again. I glanced up at Vim, and found him rather relaxed... and with a look that told me he understood fully what had and was happening.

Unsure of what to say, or how to say it, I was a little glad he broke the odd silence first. He smiled at me, reached over and grabbed my knee, since my hands were being used to keep myself propped. "Well...? Do I stink, or am I at least bearable?" he asked gently.

A huge smirk planted itself on my face, so quickly that it made me wince. Ok. Headache was still there, noted.

Nodding, after I blinked the pain away, I reached out to pat his chest. "I like it. I... can't really describe it, I've never smelled anything like you before... but it doesn't bother me at all. In fact it's... kind of relieving, somehow..." I said, telling him the honest truth. Like always.

"Hm... I'm not sure what to think, really. Either you getting drunk made your nose somehow work better, or something happened and I don't know how or what. You really can smell me?" he asked.

I nodded. "I think I can even smell your clothes a bit too," I said, now that I thought about it and wasn't as focused on his singular scent itself.

"Great, now I'll need to bathe more," he said with a small laugh.

Giggling at that, I lightly thumped his chest. "With me, I hope!"

He nodded, and then sighed at me. Or maybe us both. "Well... congratulations, Renn. Honestly not sure how that happened, but good job," he said.

"Hm!" I leaned forward again, to take in his smell once more. It was noticeable, something I'd now notice anywhere no matter the situation, but at the same time it was light enough that the ocean breeze would carry it away if I wasn't close enough.

Actually... how was it he didn't smell much at all? Now that I was able to smell him, you'd think his scent would be rather strong. Since he honestly didn't bathe and clean up as often as he should, thanks to his strange traits which made him not need to as often as usual.

Yet he really didn't smell bad. I smelled no real stink. It wasn't a bad smell, even his clothes didn't smell bad. I simply could smell them now, I could smell the cloth. The stuff it was all made of, such as his shirt and the cotton it was weaved from.

My ears fluttered against his face as I pulled his shirt a little, to smell it more than him.

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Yes. I could smell it. It was a different smell than him. But it wasn't a bad smell. Definitely didn't smell like sweat, or wear. Even a freshly cleaned shirt didn't smell like this, sometimes.

Vim silently let me mess around with him, even as I went to smell the rest of him. The rest of his clothes. His hands. His hair.

He didn't stink. His clothes didn't stink. Yet he, and the clothes, had smells all the same.

As if his ability now didn't eliminate their smells completely, but instead just eliminated their stink. That I now could, and only could, smell him and the objects themselves. Nothing else.

It'd be like being able to smell the wood a cup was made of, but not the liquor within it. That was the best way I could think to explain it.

Obviously it had something to do with his traits. His abilities. But...

"Sure you're not a dog?" Vim asked after a moment, as I paused a bit to really smell his forearm.

Glaring at him a moment, I went ahead and licked his arm. Vim frowned at me as I did, but seemed to understand as I went to smell it again.

I couldn't smell myself at all upon him. Even though my breath should be tainted with all that alcohol I'd just drank.

"I can smell you, and your clothes, but nothing else on you. It's weird," I said as I let him take his arm back.

He smirked at me. "You tested that rather well."

I shrugged. "You're able to smell me, right Vim?" I asked.

He nodded, and I was a tad upset he hadn't leaned over to take a whiff. He instead just gestured at me. "I can smell everything about you. Even the booze on your breath."

Ah! So he can smell it. "Maybe I will too in time. I'll just have to be happy with this, for now," I said.

"You can do what no one else has ever done, and you're upset? That it's not enough? Don't be greedy now," he teased.

"Shush... though, do you know what you smell like? What is it? How would you describe it? I don't have anything to compare it to," I asked.

Vim frowned as he lifted his arm, the same one I'd licked, and he smelled himself. "I smell like home," he said simply.

Home...!

I nodded quickly, understanding well what he meant. I supposedly smelled like a wet forest, per everyone else's explanation of my scent. To me that meant I smelled of my home. Where I had been born and raised.

That meant this smell was his...? Where he was from...? Or at least, where he had been raised?

It was odd. I'd been a lot of places now, thanks to Vim, but none we'd been to were anywhere near his scent.

No ocean. No desert. No forest. No mountain... no prairies or fields, of grass or grains...

"Where were you born, Vim...?" I asked, since we were on the topic. Maybe if he described it to me, I'd know how to describe his smell too.

Vim relaxed a little, his shoulders slumping a bit as if in relief. "Far away. If you and I traveled to where I was born, by the time we returned here from there... at least a decade would have passed. And that's with us hurrying, and not lingering at my homeland," he said.

A decade...! I tried to envision the distance, since I had a rough idea. It had taken Vim and I half a year to travel southward, to Landi's home and where Miss Beak lived, and then back up the western mountains and forests. A mighty distance to me, but when you looked at it from maps it didn't seem to be as far as it felt.

"You're talking thousands of your miles," I whispered.

He smiled at me. "Many thousands, yes."

Taking a deep breath, I sighed it out.

That was too far. Too far for me to go safely.

If I went on such a trip, such a journey... I'd come back to find the world different.

People I loved and cherished would be gone. Or different. The young children, like Root or Copper, would be grown enough to not even recognize or remember me. And possibly I them. Plus I'd have missed all the other births too! Not to mention the humans I loved, like Lamp, Roslyn, Cat and Elaine, would be that much older. Maybe even dead. I'd not want that. I didn't want that.

"Maybe someday," I whispered regretfully.

"Hm... maybe," Vim accepted.

Reaching up, I rubbed my eyes. And upon doing so, realized they were both a little wet... and also burned and hurt.

"Here."

Opening my eyes, I found a cup. One that wasn't water.

"What is it?" I asked. Was this the treat he had spoken of?

Smelling the contents, I was glad to recognize the smell of honey. I smiled at it, and then took a tiny sip.

The slightly thick drink felt a little odd as it went down my throat, but after the initial oddness... I felt relief. The stuff made my scratchy throat feel normal, almost, and even my headache felt like a thing of the past as I licked my lips. "That's good," I said.

"I bet. Drink it slowly."

I nodded and took another tiny sip.

"I regret leaving so early, now. Would have liked to have seen you slowly descend into your stupor," Vim teased.

"You got to see the end of it. And... I don't know if you'll get another chance anytime soon. I hadn't liked that," I said.

"Hm... seems you're an emotional drunk, Renn."

"Emotional...?" I asked, but knew the answer already.

He was right.

He nodded. "You'd been weeping when I found you. While also smiling and giggling. At first I thought you were having a panic attack or something," he said.

"Felt like it." I then giggled a little, happily remembering the feeling and thoughts I had before falling asleep. "I had been happy. So stupidly happy I wanted to weep and bawl my eyes out. It's why I left before the rest... to not let them see me do so," I said.

"I know. Merit came to check on you not long after I found you and you passed out," he said.

Flinching, I groaned as my tail squirmed wildly behind me. "At least it had been her, I guess..." I admitted.

He chuckled at me. "She said you looked adorable while drunkenly asleep," he teased me even more.

Sighing at him, and myself, I lightly thumped on his knee. The one nearest me. "I hope I drooled all over your lap," I said.

He smiled in a way that told me he'd not find that a problem at all, even if I had. And I knew I hadn't done so, too badly. I had checked while smelling him.

Thinking such a thing made me smell him on the breeze again. The faint smell, his smell, made me smile.

"I can smell you, Vim," I said, as if I'd just now realized it for the first time.

"Hm... not sure yet what to think of that, but yes. It seems you can. I think it's how you found me, while drunk," he said.

"Found you?" I asked.

"I'd been up here, hiding. You stumbled over towards me... in that state? Yeah, led by your nose I think," he said.

"You said you found me," I said.

"Had I?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Well... I turned and found you that way, I guess? Yes?"

I sighed at him. "So in my drunken stupor... while weeping and giggling away, I followed my nose to you. Without even realizing it," I said.

He nodded.

That made me feel like wiggling in happiness. I only allowed my tail to do so, as I grinned at him. "Which means I've been smelling you for a while now. I just hadn't realized it," I said. Would have had to, for me to have been able to track his scent so well under that condition.

"Very likely, yes."

"I wonder when it started...?" I wondered.

"Who knows? Could have even been back when you first lost your scent. Just took you this long to realize it," he said.

I hope not. And I doubted it. Even with it being a rather faint smell, and not the type of smell to bother me since it wasn't a bad smell, it was too unique that I'd not have noticed. Especially not after a bit of time, and even more so not when you took into account how often we slept together. There were nights I was lying with my face right up against him, either his chest or back or arm, so there was no way I'd not have noticed. Especially not during the more recent nights when it had been cold enough that I had done so while deep under the covers.

"Am I the first person to ever be able to smell you? That you know of?" I asked.

"Honestly... maybe? Though the gods, and certain monarchs, should have been able to. If they could or not though..." Vim shrugged a little, as if to imply he didn't care if they had or not.

A little happy to hear I might be the very first person to have ever known his scent... I held out my arms, as to ask for a hug.

Vim smiled and leaned forward, and gave me the embrace I had asked for. I squeezed him tightly, all the while breathing in his scent.

This was mine. All mine. Many people had many parts of him, things that even if I claimed for myself now... were things others once had. But this?

This was all mine.

"I love you, Vim," I said.

"Hm... I love you too. Weird smells and all."

I laughed at that. "Says you!"

"Right?"

For a long moment we sat there, holding each other... and then I remembered something important.

"Wait!" I pulled back a bit, but wasn't able to get far. Vim hadn't released me from his hug.

I groaned at him, since I knew he had only kept on hugging me because he knew I had realized, and remembered, that I had yet to ask him how his meeting with Light went.

"Vim!" I complained, patting his shoulders and back. I tried to wiggle free, but there was no point. Not unless I really wanted to put a lot of effort into it, but I didn't wish to do so. As much as I wanted to see his face, when I asked about Light as to see his expression and his thoughts, I also didn't want to be freed from his grip.

This felt great. It wasn't often he held me so tightly like this.

"You're going to ask how it went, aren't you? With Light?" he asked.

I nodded as I stopped trying to free myself. I returned to hugging him, and gently sighed a bit since it felt great.

I hope this became a more common thing. Why didn't we hug more often...?

Vim grumbled for a moment, making my ear twitch since I felt the deep sound through his throat that it rested against. "She's like her mother. Insufferable. But not to the point I could kill her or smack her around," he admitted.

Now even more glad we were still hugging, I grinned happily. "So...?" I asked, wanting him to go into more detail.

He took a deep breath, which made my whole body shift and move alongside it, and he nodded. "So for now, there are no plans to wage war with them. Or even argue with them. I have a lot to say, and do, but at the same time... I don't. Everything I want to complain about is stuff I know I can't do anything about, not until it becomes a real issue. And not without breaking your heart," he said.

My grip on him tightened. Thank goodness!

"You mean the prophecies," I said.

He nodded again. "Yes. By the way you'll be meeting her tomorrow morning. First light. When you meet her, keep up the appearance that you're pregnant for me. It might not go well, since she's a real saint, but if we can get away with it for now I'd be thankful," he said.

My ears fluttered. "And how am I going to do that, exactly?" I asked. From what I'd been told, by Elaine, saints could tell when someone has given birth before. That meant I'd not be able to trick her at all! It was one thing to trick the Chronicler, since she wasn't a real saint. At least, not in the way Light supposedly was. I'd not really ever been explained how or why they were so different, but it was the reason I explained away her misunderstanding.

"I have a plan. One that involves this."

Leaning back, since Vim had finally released me... I found him holding up a tiny little rock.

One that was just barely glowing. And upon closer inspection had that familiar little swirl of light inside it.

Glaring at the small heart... I realized whose it was. "The little one's? From the Cathedral?" I asked.

He nodded.

My eyes narrowed a bit as I glared at him. "If you plan on sticking that where I think you are, Vim, I'm going to be absolutely furious with you," I said seriously.

He blinked, and then quickly shook his head. "What...? No! Jeez! You're going to swallow it. Just eat it, like a piece of candy," he said hurriedly.

Although glad to hear it... I also wasn't. I shifted a little, and frowned at the thing in his hand. "You... want me to absorb a heart? Really?" I asked. Sure it was tiny, and barely glowing... but it was still a heart, wasn't it?

"Why not? You've already absorbed one, so a tiny one with only a little divine power like this one won't even be noticed, I think," he said.

"Right... wait what?" I startled at that.

He smirked and pointed at my chest. As if pointing at my own heart, which had started to beat rather quickly again. "In theory you've absorbed two. Your ancestor's and mine, though of course mine's more figurative than literal..." he said with a strange tone in his voice.

My eyes narrowed as my tail thumped the ground, sounding odd thanks to the blanket beneath us. "What do you mean, Vim?" I asked seriously.

He slowly nodded, lowering the heart as he did. "We hadn't left that heart at my cave, Renn. It had been gone. From your bag. You had absorbed it, without realizing it. All this time. I think that might also be... well... why you can smell me now. And a few other things, too," he said softly.

My eyes went wide as my mind whirled.

My ancestor's heart! That black one!

I tried to remember seeing it. At that cave. Where Vim had tried to finally take our relationship to the next level, and I had ruined it by not liking the smell of the place. It had smelled like that pit which my family used to throw me into...

We had left a few things there. Not just my heart... but...

My eyes twitched as I replayed those moments. Again and again. Even though they hurt, since it was a shameful moment for me. It was when I had impeded our progress. Because I had not been strong enough to ignore the smells. I was why the prophecies weren't already fulfilled.

But... right now I didn't want to, and couldn't focus on that fact. Instead I just remembered the events. When we got there. The bath in that pretty crystal cave. The boxes full of stuff. Rugs. Clothes. Hearts.

I had given Vim my bags. I had gone through a couple of them, but not too deeply. All I'd did was pull out the stuff I wanted to keep. I hadn't sorted my possessions by what to leave behind, but instead what to take forward.

So I had not actually really looked for the heart... I had simply assumed it was still in that bag. The one I had handed to him, to empty and put into one of those crates...

In fact the last time I remember actually seeing it was when I showed it off to Meriah. Not long before we had gone our separate ways.

"Vim..." I whispered his name as I realized what he was saying.

He nodded. "Sorry, Renn. I'd kept it a secret, since I wasn't sure yet what to think of it... but it's true. You not only have your heart inside you, it's fully absorbed. To the point you can take another now if you wish to," he said.

Taking a deep breath, I felt my lips tremble. "Really...?"

He nodded.

"Really, really?"

He nodded again.

Half standing, I basically fell into him. I wrapped him again in a hug, and clung to him... as I tried to decide if I should weep from joy or fear.

I'd absorbed my ancestor's heart.

Without even realizing it.

For better or worse... I was now like Landi. Like Sap.

And I honestly had no real idea what that meant.

Which was somehow scarier than the realization itself.

Chapter 465 Vim – To Vacate

I had to admit I was apprehensive.

And as if to balance me, Renn was anything but.

Renn was happily humming in excitement, a few feet from me. She was sitting at the table and peeling a fruit as to munch on. She wore a rather comely dress, and didn't even have a single weapon upon her. She had left the spear back at the guild, on purpose. I didn't want Light to recognize what it was.

We had arrived only a little bit ago, and even though I had told Light to be ready and prompt... we were once again waiting for her to show up. At least this time Less had been kind enough to bring snacks for us, or well, for Renn...

Glancing at Renn, and her happy smile as she stuffed her face with a huge piece of fruit, I wondered if they had somehow known her penchant for tasty fruits.

Probably had. But because others had told them of her fondness for snacks, or had they known because of prophecies, I wonder?

My eye twitched, since I'd just thought something ridiculous.

Knowing that Renn liked snacks. From prophecies. And that simple little fact annoyed me, as if it was some great secret that shouldn't have been shared or known by anyone.

Really... I was letting this all bother me far too deeply.

"This is tasty, Vim," Renn said between bites.

I didn't respond, since there was no point. She'd just offer me some, and I'd turn her down, and then she'd smile happily at me as she took another bite.

Usually I'd bask in such adorable conversation, but right now I was in no mood for it.

No mood at all.

There was just too much happening at once. Too many issues. Usually I wasn't too bothered by such a thing, but all the problems felt... personal. Too personal.

Light. Her people and her schemes. The Society, always needing help. My friend Berri and her daughter, needing help. And now there was something very concerning happening, right next to me.

I could now sense Renn. And not just in the way I did people, and others. I sensed her like I would any other monarch or god-touched being or object. She felt like a monarch to me now, and not subtly either. She now had divinity within her... and in no small sum.

Though noticeable, I didn't feel her as strongly as I felt Light, who was nearing us. Likely walking down the hallway, heading our way. But I did feel Renn in a way that was far too familiar. Far too real.

The fact it had taken me this long to notice her change was rather concerning. I had noticed the other day when she had clambered up onto my back, when I had scaled Lumen's walls. And then confirmed it with her when she had realized she could smell me, and get drunk. Oddly, the reason she had been able to get drunk in the first place was likely because of the heart she had absorbed. A byproduct of it affecting her, and her body being in the process of forming her own within her. Once it solidified, odds are she'd not get drunk again the rest of her life.

It was the same for her being able to smell me now. Though... that was still up to debate. After all, she had lost her own scent long before she had attained her ancestor's heart.

Frowning deeply, as Renn sniffed and smelled a new fruit before tasting it, I wondered if it was all related or not. A part of me wanted to say it had to be... but... maybe not? Maybe the weirdness about our scents, and the stuff involved in them, were related to me and not her...?

Glaring at her side, since I wasn't angled properly enough to see much else, I tossed my thoughts aside a moment and wondered if she felt odd with a heart in her stomach. She didn't seem to be acting so, based off the way she was eating. Usually when people swallowed a heart, even a small and weak one... they got sick. They became nauseous and threw up and whatnot. Renn hadn't done that at all.

I knew the reason was because she was already absorbing it. Already adapted. The heart she had absorbed already, her ancestor's heart, had been a very powerful one. Maybe not as strong as Miss Beak's, but closer to hers in divinity than most others we'd encountered lately. Even Tor's ancestor's heart, the one in my rear bag, wasn't much stronger than the one Renn had absorbed.

But that didn't mean the heart Renn would end up with would be as strong, however. We'd not know that not only until after her heart had formed properly, and it was given time to solidify. That could be decades from now.

Renn herself didn't have an actual heart yet. Well, other than the tiny one she had swallowed last night. But that heart was small and weak. Nothing compared to the one she had absorbed over the last few months. And nothing compared to the one that was forming within her. As it stood right now, I couldn't even tell where it'd form yet. But a part of that was because of just how much divine power was inside of her. She had so much it made it kind of hard to sense specific details in that way.

It was a tad risky to let her absorb another heart so quickly before her own core formed, but I knew a saint... especially one as powerful as Light, would find it odd otherwise. The tiny heart in Renn's stomach, which would slowly be absorbed by the real heart forming within her, would do several things. First it'd trick Light into not being able to tell if Renn has had children yet or not. Because to Light, in any saint's eyes, Renn would glow oddly in unnatural ways. Secondly, and more importantly, it would

confirm their suspicions and prophecies. Enough to keep Renn safe, and give us time to properly handle the situation.

Plus rejection usually happened in the first few hours of swallowing a heart. If taking in that small heart would have hurt her, or caused problems, it'd already be doing so.

Though... that was only one of the many worries concerning her condition.

"Mhm..." Renn made a small noise as she bit into another fruit. Her ears fluttered a little; in joy at eating something she found delectable. Under normal circumstances, I'd be falling in love with her again. She was that adorable. Right now though...?

Right now I just felt sick. Because the warmth I felt from her, a warmth no one else felt not even saints, told me just how well she had absorbed her ancestor's heart.

It'd not take long. A few more months maybe, and her core would form. Her own heart. Though it'd still be dyed in the colors and powers of the one she had originally absorbed. And although it'd take centuries to fully grow and solidify, I knew what kind of changes it'd put her through... even if over such a long period.

She'd grow stronger. Heal better. Become more resilient to diseases, the cold and heat. She'd slow in her aging, which was already slow as it were, and many of her old scars would fade and heal as if she'd never had them before. And, even kind of like Landi, it'd help her in other ways too. Even if only in small amounts.

All of those things were good. I was happy that she'd become stronger, healthier, and have a longer and more fuller life... but...

There was now a risk. One that I'd need to be on guard for. The main reason I had not just allowed her to absorb Miss Beak's heart, the one I'd originally planned to have given her.

Many who absorb hearts like she's done eventually become corrupted. They become... broken. Kind of like Landi's madness, though she had already been mad before taking in a heart there was no doubting that the act had made her insanity considerably worse. Back during the wars, when monarchs had been far more common, there had been many who had absorbed hearts. Out of the small percentage that had succeeded... I'd say more than half had gone insane because of them. For most it had happened almost instantly.

Was Renn going to be able to handle it...? Could she endure? Was her soul strong enough? Her mind? I honestly didn't know, and wouldn't, until it happened... but it terrified me so all the same.

It was forming. Slowly, but surely.

A fault of mine. I had allowed her to hold onto her ancestor's heart for too long. I should have known better.

It was rare for someone to absorb a heart without actually taking it physically into their own body... but it wasn't something I'd never heard or seen before. And the worst part is I had thought of it before, and had been why I had occasionally taken Miss Beak's heart from her as we traveled with it. I had not allowed her to hold onto it for too many days in a row, just in case.

Why had I not done the same for her heart...? Why had I been so oblivious?

It was almost as if I'd done it on purpose. But I hadn't. I genuinely hadn't. Why would I endanger the woman I loved in such a way...? It wasn't as if I knew how to cure the insanity that came with absorbing a monarch's heart, after all... if Renn did indeed end up becoming... different, because of it, there'd be nothing I could do. Nothing but hold her hand as she descended into madness, becoming someone I didn't know.

Closing my eyes, I tried to not think too deeply on the momentous thing... that Renn didn't seem to even care about, for some reason. Upon being told that she had absorbed her ancestor's heart, she was only surprised for a few hours. After that she had seemingly stopped caring about it, as if it was no big deal at all.

It was though. Bigger than she knew.

Absorbing a heart was not impossible... obviously, and it wasn't like it was that rare either. Even in the Society right now there were others like her. Sap. Landi. Corvo to the east, and another here. I wasn't sure who it was, but I sensed them the other day. If Martin was still alive, as Lilly assumed, it was likely him.

But this wasn't just someone absorbing a heart... this was Renn.

My wife. One destined to give birth to a saint.

What was fate playing at now...?

The door finally opened again, freeing me from the terrible thoughts, and I watched Renn who turned to glance at it. She put another piece of fruit into her mouth, quickly chewing it, as she stood to greet Light who entered.

Light didn't enter alone. Less followed, and I noticed the people who closed the door behind them were unfamiliar faces.

I'd heard a few familiar names recently, names of people who were supposedly here with Light... but I'd not met any of them yet. Wasn't really sure if I wanted to, to be honest.

"Hello, Rennalee... I'm ever so glad to finally meet you!" Light greeted Renn with a huge smile, one that made me grow even more apprehensive.

That smile wasn't forced or fake at all. By my parents, she looked absolutely delighted...!

Renn shifted a bit and her ears fluttered as she studied Light who drew closer. She looked like she had been about to say something, but Light interrupted her with a glance to me.

"Can I hug her, Vim, or will that cost me my life?" she asked.

About to answer, it was my turn to be interrupted as Renn laughed and stepped forward. "Just for that you're getting a hug!" she said.

My eyes twitched as I watched the two happily embrace; doing so a little flamboyantly... as if they both knew and intended to make me as annoyed as possible.

Half tempted to walk over and wrap them both in a hug they'd never forget, I decided to look away... and found something almost as annoying. On Less's face.

Pure utter jealousy covered Less's face as she watched Light and Renn hug. It made me sick to my stomach as I looked away, and decided to sit down.

Sitting down at the table that Renn had just been sitting at, I took her chair and sighed.

I heard some giggles behind me as I reached out to grab one of the fruits Renn had been eating. I picked up the half peeled one, and stuck the whole thing in my mouth. Stem and all.

If my soul didn't hang on the scales concerning the results of this little meeting I wouldn't have come. I almost felt sick.

"Let me look at you...!" Light spoke happily as I heard them move around. She must have made Renn do a little twirl, as to look her up and down, based off the sounds I heard. I kept my eyes on the platter of fruit and bread, though I had to admit my ears were fully focused on them behind me.

I wasn't an idiot. Although I had expected us to clash... after meeting Light yesterday, I knew we weren't enemies. Not really. Not in the sense I wanted us to be. So I knew Renn was not in danger with them, and was likely the farthest thing from it.

Their prophecies had grand designs in mind for her. So in their eyes, she was someone to be cherished and protected... at least until she fulfilled those prophecies. The minute she did however, things would change. But until then...? She was safe.

Was I though?

"You're a little taller than I expected!" Light said happily.

"Hm... and you smell like Witch. Which honestly I shouldn't be surprised over, since you're a saint," Renn said.

Hm...?

I turned, glancing at them as Light frowned and raised an eyebrow. "I smell like your saint friend? Really?"

Renn nodded, rather seriously. "Nearly identical," she said.

Well that was utterly fascinating. "Ha," I scoffed a laugh, which got me some glances but nothing more.

"Well... I mean... it is possible, I guess...? I never knew my parents, after all," Light said as she crossed her arms in thought over it.

"Huh...? I didn't mean that! I uh... wait..." Renn stood up a little straighter, stepping back a bit as to get a good look at the saint before her.

"I'll genuinely cringe so hard I'll break something if you actually try and say they're related," I said. The time didn't add up. Even with Renn being far older than we had all assumed, Light was still just as old if not older. There was no way...

Renn hummed as Light happily smirked and waited for Renn's words. Less glanced between the two, seemed to hesitate a moment, and then looked over at me. "Vim...?" she asked, since Light and Renn had gone quiet.

I ignored Less's look of worry as Renn seemed to calm down a little. "I'm... not sure. You smell just like her... almost to the point it worries me. And you kind of look like her, to a point, but... maybe not? Your hair is different, and you're smaller in frame," Renn said with a gesture at her.

"I could be related to her, Renn. Even if only distantly. I'm told your witch friend had been human, though?" Light asked.

Renn nodded. "Yes. She'd been rather sure of that."

"Though a sign it's unlikely... it also isn't. Being saints, odd things happen sometimes. She could be some distant relative of mine for sure, it's not like there are many saintly blood-lines anymore after all," Light said.

"You're welcome," I stated.

I got more looks.

Light sighed. "Shall we sit, Renn?" she asked as she gestured at the table, not me.

"Sure! I'd say ignore him, but you seem to know full well what he's like," Renn said happily as she stepped over by me. She pulled the chair next to me back, and sat in it without even a glance at me.

"I do... I'm proud to say I'm one of the few who do anymore. Or at least, that's what I'd like to say... but to be honest the Vim before me now is not the Vim I knew before," Light said as she sat down across from us.

Less didn't sit down; she instead went to standing behind Light... seemingly eyeballing the platter of fruit on the table as she did. Either she was hungry, or she was trying to distract herself from what was happening. Like me.

"He's not...? I assume you don't mean appearance wise, so you mean to say he's acting oddly to you?" Renn asked with a glance at me.

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Light nodded, rather seriously. "Very much so. The Vim I knew had been somewhat affable, but distant. There, but not. Reliable, but not someone to sit and have a simple conversation with. Though that might have simply been because of how chaotic the world had been back then," Light said.

Renn hummed at that as she reached out to grab another fruit. Light and Less watched her as she went to rolling it in her hands a bit, as if it was some toy.

"Vim has changed a bit, in my perspective... but only in certain ways. To me he's not much different than he had been in the beginning. He's even still prickly and rude about some things, such as right now," Renn said with a light nod to me.

Light chuckled lightly. "Well that is no surprise Renn... he's your mate, after all."

Renn smiled at that, as if proud to hear such a thing said aloud. "He is," she agreed.

Light smiled gently at her, and I did my best to not notice the weird look on Less's face. She looked sick all of a sudden, as if from worry.

"You know... I see you as a sister, Renn," Light then said.

It was my turn to feel sick.

"Sister...? Do you mean of the cloth, or...?" Renn asked.

"No. Or well, maybe... I'm supposed to look at everyone as siblings of my faith. But no, when I see you... I see a sister. As if we were born from the same mother. And not just because we might be related, even if distantly," Light said with a smile.

Renn's left ear fluttered a little, and I knew it was because of what Light had said at the end there. About being related.

I knew it was not because of their earlier hypothesis that Light was related to Witch, since Renn hadn't been related to that human saint. It was likely because Light was thinking of Renn's future daughter. The saint she'd give birth to.

All saints believed themselves family with each other. Even the ones who killed each other saw their fellows as siblings. As sisters. And not just in sympathies or association.

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

Light nodded and then pointed at me with a gentle finger. "Because of him. I've always seen Vim as something of an older brother, or maybe an uncle. So you, being his wife, thus in my eyes become family," Light said.

I wanted to scoff at that, but Renn leaned closer to the table. "Not as a father-figure?" she asked.

Light blinked at that, and Less shifted on a heel. "That had been a possibility, at one time... but sadly Vim hadn't allowed that future to become," she said.

Renn's ears fluttered again as she glanced at me, but only for a moment. "I'll not apologize," Renn said.

I smirked at that, and then smirked even more as Less shifted and groaned.

Renn glanced at the badger, obviously noticing and hearing her distress. "You're Less, aren't you?" Renn asked.

Light remained calm, smiling gently even as Less blinked and suddenly looked scared. "Yes...?"

"I had wanted to meet you. You're my friend's sister, and I had been interesting in meeting someone who had taken such a different path than their sibling..." Renn said, going quiet as she studied Less.

Less looked like she had started to sweat as she glanced at Light, then at me... and upon realizing neither of us were going to speak up and save her, she gulped and looked back at Renn. "Um... and now...?" Less asked, obviously knowing where Renn was going with her statement.

Renn sighed softly as she nodded. "I'm trying hard to not be upset with you. You were rude to Mapple, and Merit too... but I'm not sure if you had been so rude as to justify hating you just for that."

Less's pupils got tiny as she reached out and grabbed the top of one of the empty chairs. She looked like she was about to fall to her knees, as if Renn's judgment had been the same from a god.

"You'd be upset with her for that, yet not her antagonism with her sister?" Light asked, not even looking at Less as she did.

Renn's tail shifted under her chair, swaying near me. "I myself had a similar relationship with my own sisters. I had fought them often, nearly to the death. So I'd not judge her for such a thing. In fact, I'd almost say it's to be expected, I think," Renn said.

Light smiled softly and sighed. "Saying that right after I just tried to claim you as a sister is quite a blow," Light said.

I smiled at that. "I know, isn't she lovely?" I said.

Less made a whine of a noise as Light glared at me.

Renn gave me a look, but she softly smiled as she did so. "I'm... unsure of what to think of you, Light. A part of me wants to be furious with you. For causing me, and others, so much drama and stress. But another part of me wants to understand you. To find a common ground... and yes, if able, even become your sister in truth. I'd hate to be your enemy, or even just at odds with each other, to tell you the truth. I think you're an important person to the Society, to the world, and so us not being friends would be... bad I think," Renn said, speaking her real thoughts on the subject.

Light's smile grew, rather strongly. As it did Less visibly relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief, glad to no longer be the focus of their conversation. "How beautifully said. I too wish to be close to you, Renn. I know that many of the things I do... and believe in, disturb Vim greatly. I am no fool. But I can't change who and what I am. Would you be willing, together, to find a way to co-exist? To live side-by-side, without incurring his wrath... or even worse, his disdain?" Light asked.

Her words, to me, felt like they were laced with poisonous honey. But I kept my mouth shut as I glanced at Renn... and sadly wasn't too surprised to see her look of utter hope and excitement.

Renn nodded quickly. "Yes...! I'm sure we can all figure something out!" she said.

Light had been about to say something, but I shifted just enough to make my chair squeak. They all glanced at me as I leaned forward, putting my arms on the table and clasping them.

"If this was only about my own personal... issues, this would not be a problem. But it's not. You conveniently left out the fact that your actions are causing problems for far more than just me," I said to her.

"I assume you to be speaking of Randle," Light said simply.

I nodded. "For starters."

"And what about the vote! Because of the vote so many have spurned Vim's help," Renn added.

Light nodded. "Yes. But those who would use the vote as an excuse to push aside Vim's assistance are those who would have done so at any opportunity," Light said.

Renn's ears fluttered as she squeezed the fruit in her hand so tightly it made noise. I glanced at it, finding she had dug her nails into a little. "That sounds like an excuse someone would make to a child," Renn argued.

"Because it feels like one, to be honest," Light said softly.

Renn furrowed her brow. "Then... why do it? Why support the vote? Why let it happen at all?"

"Because it needs to happen. If it doesn't happen now, something much worse will happen instead. It's... one of those lesser evils we must endure, regrettably," Light said.

Renn huffed and leaned back, as if suddenly exhausted. She softly shook her head at the woman and then glanced at me. "Is this how it felt talking to Celine?" she asked.

I smirked at that. "It had been worse, actually."

Light smirked too. "Yes. Even I had sometimes gotten frustrated with mother. She liked riddles, and was particularly bad at them," she added.

Renn must have found the idea of such a person cute, for she smiled happily and then went to take a bite of the fruit she'd been squeezing this whole time. Thanks to her rough handling of it, she made a small mess upon biting into it.

Light seemed to find Renn's messy eating interesting for she patiently waited until Renn had taken a few bites and swallowed before leaning forward, as if to mimic me she clasped her hands before her just as I had.

"I have a proposition for you, Rennalee," Light then said.

I tried not to stand up and end the conversation, and mentally praised myself for not doing so as Renn finished her fruit and nodded. "I'm ready to hear it," she said.

Light happily smiled, as if overjoyed to hear Renn say such a thing. She lifted her hands a bit, as if to display something... but her hands were empty. "I want you to take Vim away from us. All of us. The Society. To give him time to calm down. To give us time to re-solidify the Society, and restructure and rebuild. I would like to ask you for five years, at least, if possible."

Now that was not what I had expected to hear at all.

Renn shifted a little, and reached up to wipe her mouth. Likely because it was still covered in some of that fruit's juice. "What...? You want us to leave? Really?" she asked.

Light nodded, and gestured lightly at me. "Vim is upset. In a way that won't be reconciled with mere words or actions. Plus, I'm not asking for you to leave the Society or even go too far. You can visit,

communicate with us and whatnot... in fact I'd hope you would, just in case we need Vim for something dire," Light said, explaining further.

"What...? So you want us to leave, yet not...? I don't understand. And I also don't understand the reason. Vim's upset, yes, but I feel he is both justified in being so... and also not that badly, honestly. Look at him! He's calmly letting us talk," Renn said with a wave at me.

Calm? Sure. In a way.

Wasn't like I was about to jump into the nearby sea and swim until I hit the wall of ice up north. Then I'd climb it. Then I'd run across it. Then who knows where I'd go next.

"His feelings aren't the only reason I ask this of you. As I said, I want the Society to rebuild. To re-structure itself. I also want the... drama, as I call it, to shift focus. Away from the current issues, and to ones more manageable," Light said.

"What...? You're phrasing it as if us leaving for a few years would make everyone calm down. To stop blaming Vim for their issues, or something," Renn said, shaking her head in a way that told me she didn't understand.

"That's exactly what she's saying. I'm not the only cause and issue, but she's using me as the main vector for it," I said.

"Huh...? Vect-what Vim?" Renn asked. Light and Less also glanced at me.

"I meant it in the sense of like a disease. She's saying my presence, and the drama it causes, is the way the disease and poison of disillusion and resentment is given life. That if I left, even if for only a short time, the members who are anxious and upset will calm down and or switch their targets for their disdain," I explained.

Renn frowned at me and then looked back at Light with a small smile. "Here I thought you were trying to allude that we should go have some time alone, as so I could give birth," Renn said.

Less's eyes went wide, and Light's single eye began to grow far brighter as I groaned and reached up to cover my own face. As to stop looking at everyone around me.

They were all fools! And I the worst one, since I too had such thoughts!

But that was my fault. I had asked Renn to play along with their misconception. So that was all she was doing... but still!

"I have no reason to hide that such a thing too had been a reason. But that's not all, Renn," Light said as she turned a little to gesture at Less. My head felt like it wanted to hurt as Less went stiff again. She didn't know why she was being pointed at, nor did it look like she wanted to be. "You see, I want the Society to realize something. And it can't happen without the two of you stepping away for a moment," Light said.

Less glanced at Light, then back at us... and I could tell she herself didn't understand at all what Light was trying to say.

"And what is that?" Renn asked.

Light looked back at us, at me, and softly smiled. "That they can survive without Vim's help," she said.

I scoffed at that. "Not only do most of them know such a thing, they also believe in it. You don't need me to leave for them to realize that," I said.

"That is true, to a point, Vim. Just as there are members who do not want your help, for one reason or another, there are those who feel like they can't do anything without you. That they can't move to a new home, unless you both escort them there and help them build it. Or even something simple as building a dock, or repair a roof," Light said.

Renn's ears fluttered. "Why would it be a bad thing for someone to rely on Vim? What's wrong with them wanting him to do those things, or feeling like they need him to do so?" Renn asked.

I didn't comment on the fact that Renn herself had gotten frustrated with the people who asked me for such help and just recently too, such as with the quails.

"Because then, after they try to do it themselves... and fail, they'll realize how important he actually is," Light said.

My eyes narrowed at her. "How very Celine of you," I said lowly.

Light's smile softened even more, and it was clear I had just hurt her. But I didn't care, since it had been the truth.

"Wait... you're saying you want us to step away, you want Vim to, so that our members can suffer without him...? So that they will realize how valuable he is to them?" Renn asked.

Light only nodded.

Renn quickly shook her head. "I don't like that. At all. That means you're fully willing to sacrifice members just to make a point! A point that doesn't even need to be made! One that most don't even agree with in the first place!" Renn said, her voice getting louder as she became more emotional.

"I did mention that I didn't want you to go too far. To stay nearby, so we can reach you when the need is greatest," Light said softly.

"That's not...!" Renn sat forward, grabbing the edge of the table as she did. I knew I wasn't the only one who noticed the way her tail and ears twitched.

She was rather upset.

I didn't tell her to calm down, since I didn't just agree with her anger over such a stupid idea... I also knew the reason behind it.

As Renn had pointed out earlier, with her comment about giving birth... I knew that was the real reason for this strange plan.

They wanted Renn to give birth to their supposed saint. And well... thanks to the little heart Renn had eaten last night, there was no doubt that Light was not just under the impression that Renn was pregnant, but rather that she was sure of it.

I didn't outright know what a saint felt, or saw, concerning those who had given birth or not. But I knew it was akin to a small heart, at least in those like themselves. In a normal person, a normal human or non-human who had no divinity at all, they likely only saw and felt a slight disturbance. But when it came to their fellow saints, or those with hearts inside them, it was likely not as black and white. They were too bright, too noisy, in their eyes to really tell one way or another.

So Renn having absorbed one heart already, and now having eaten that smaller one just recently, I had no doubt in Light's eye's Renn was pregnant. Since she likely saw or felt two divine auras within her.

Honestly I had not thought it would have worked, but I'd noticed Light kept glancing down at Renn's stomach. A little too much for it to be normal.

But... that didn't answer why they'd want me to take Renn away from them.

If Renn's daughter was supposed to be so important and special... why give me an opportunity to keep her hidden away...?

Or did they so firmly believe in their prophecies that they had no qualms with testing my patience and limits?

"I should have better worded it... but basically Renn, I want you and Vim to step aside for a moment. Not entirely, not forever, just a moment. To give me and the others time to calm the Society, restructure it, and properly prepare it for what is to happen," Light said.

"Restructure it how?" I asked, before Renn could say anything. She glanced at me, almost with a snarl, but allowed my question to be addressed first.

Light shrugged ever so lightly. "Do you know how many people I've brought back with me, Vim?" she asked.

I blinked. "No."

"Five hundred and thirteen. Regretfully... twenty-six died on the way here, and two others perished from the stress of the journey," she said.

Renn squeezed the table and leaned forward a bit more. "That many...? Are they all here?" she asked, no longer sounding angry.

"Most are. But they're not all who will come. Once we have prepared a proper place for them, another thousand will return as well," Light said.

I wanted to sigh, but didn't. Because in all honesty... this news was anything but bad.

"So most of your survived," I said. I had helped a little over three thousand cross the oceans back then. So that was about half, and I assumed a good portion didn't want to return and so would stay there.

Light smiled happily and nodded. "We did!"

"Wait... you're saying all of you who left are coming back?" Renn asked.

Light and Less nodded, both of them looking a little proud as they did so.

Renn's ears twitched a bit as she glanced at me, and I saw the look of awe on her face.

"That'd be like doubling the Society!" Renn said happily.

"Not quite, but nearly yes," I said. They were short a thousand, but who was counting?

Light nodded. "By restructuring, the only thing I mean is preparing the Society for the return of so many at once. We will need to house them, feed them, and... well... you know Vim," Light said with a smile.

I did. I knew well how difficult it was to transplant a thousand people. Particularly the non-human variety.

"So... why come back now, then?" Renn then asked the question that I had been avoiding.

Less startled, but Light remained un-phased as she smiled and tilted her head at Renn. "You should know, I think," she said gently.

Renn at first didn't seem to know what she meant, but then she blinked and her ears went stiff as she side-glanced me. "Oh."

Ignoring them, I gestured lightly at myself. "I plan to step down," I told her.

"Yes. Thus another reason for my plan. I'm hoping the five years will give you time to think, and relax a little. Honestly Vim, how long has it been since you've had a break? A real one? And it's as I said, it's not like I'm asking you to cut all contact or anything. Just... pick somewhere, and stay there. No traveling. No drama. It'd be utterly delightful if you chose here," she said, her voice becoming a tad bit higher in pitch as if she was suddenly very happy at the idea. Probably was.

Renn made an odd noise, one that told me she wanted to be angry but wasn't. "I don't like that plan. Or idea. At all," Renn then finally said.

"His five year vacation or his plan to step down?" Light asked.

"Both...?"

Light grinned and nodded, as if agreeing with Renn. Even though one of those was her plan.

I sighed at the two. "Either way I have duties. I'm leaving in a few hours to head east," I said.

"Yes...? And I do hope you're not taking Renn with you. That's quite a trek!" Light said with a gentle point at me, as if I some child to be scolded.

"Trek...?" Renn whispered the word, and I wondered if it was because she remembered the duck who died recently or if she didn't understand why Light would say such a thing.

"She will be staying here. I'll only be a few weeks anyway," I said. Especially now that I've concluded Renn was in no danger here.

Light would sacrifice her whole parish to keep Renn safe, by the looks of it. And back at the guild, with Merit, she was safe too.

Plus...

"Oh my! How lovely! Maybe I should move to the company too, then?" Light wondered as she glanced at Less.

Less grimaced at that. "Stay there...?" she groaned at the idea.

Renn shifted too, her left ear fluttering in the way that told me she too wasn't really keen on the idea. Though I wasn't sure why.

Taking a deep breath, I stood from my seat. My body felt stiff, as if I was sick or exhausted.

"Oh my. I do believe he's done," Light said as she watched me step away. I reached out to pat Renn on the shoulder, while glaring at the one-eyed saint.

"Seems so..." Renn said as she too stood.

"At least consider it, Renn. It is but one many of possibilities, but it would be one that would lead us all to great joy," Light said as I turned to go.

"I... need to think about it all. But I will. I promise," Renn said.

I heard Light shift a bit, but she didn't stand. She remained seated even as I neared the door. I paused at it, grabbing its handle, and glanced back at them.

Renn still stood there, at the table. Her tail was hung low, and I could tell she wasn't ready to leave.

But I needed to. And I wanted to talk to her before I departed.

"Renn," I said gently.

Her ear fluttered as she glanced at me and nodded. "Can I come back? Later?" she asked Light.

"Rennalee... you never need knock on my door. Simply open it," Light answered.

I felt nauseous as Renn brightened up with a huge smile and nodded. Then she waved at Light and Less and turned away, hurrying to me.

Glaring at the saint still sitting at the table... who was grinning like a master chess-player who just won their hundredth title, I shook my head and left the church.

Chapter 466 Renn – To Rest In Port

Watching Vim check the bag at his side, ensuring it was firmly strapped in place, I felt oddly apprehensive.

He was leaving again. My side.

This time it was for good reason. Narli was sick and needed his help. So I wasn't upset with it, and in fact wanted him to hurry up and leave already... but...

"Lilly will find it. You'll need to find her a place to stay, I'm not sure how you will explain it... maybe a human friend or something. Maybe one of the eastern girls, or pirates, will be willing to help you out," Vim said, continuing his little lecture.

I nodded. "Why can't she just stay with them?" I asked. He wanted me to get Lilly her own house. Her own room, somewhere where she could stay without living with another member or a human.

"Because she's not supposed to be in the city. If one of the humans accidentally tells someone, even unintentionally, it'll cause issues. Plus Lilly has a distinct smell, and several here know it. So she won't be able to mingle with them, even for short times," Vim said.

Oh. Right. And I'd be able to, since like him no one could smell me anymore.

"I'll make sure to handle it. I promise," I said.

On the way back to the Animalia Guild building we had stopped and bought some cloth. Some red cloth. It turns out Vim and Lilly had a little system in place to exchange letters without anyone knowing. He was going to place it somewhere outside the city on his way to Narli, like a little flag of distress. Lilly would find it, read the note he'd leave attached to it, and then she'd sneak into the city as to meet me.

He wanted Lilly in the city. Near me. Keeping an eye on me, in-case things became... weird.

I had no problem with it at all, to be honest. I'd even let Lilly stay in this room with me, if I could, but I knew no one would allow it.

"Will you be long, Vim?" I asked as he finished messing with the bag at his side. It was a new one, full of stuff we'd gotten this morning. There was a bunch of different herbs, and other medicine style stuff. He wasn't sure what was wrong with Narli, so had grabbed a bunch of assorted things just in case.

"I can't say, Renn. I'll come back the moment I'm sure Narli is fine. It could be days, could be weeks," he said.

"How long will it take you to reach them?" I asked. I wasn't really sure how long it'd take me to reach them, since we had gone out of our way after leaving there and heading to the Summit. Then of course those fires...

"Just a few days at my pace. Since I'll not stop to check on anyone."

Right... "If um... if something bad happens, what do I do?" I asked.

"You mean where do you go? Just leave with Lilly. Go back to her home," he said.

Right...

Shifting a little, I felt like crying as I watched him smile down at me. I knew I probably looked like a mess, since my heart was being torn every which way.

My meeting with Light had not gone the way I had thought it would have, at all! And now Vim was leaving, and I had so much to say and do...

I wanted to talk more about the heart I'd absorbed. To find out what it meant, actually meant. I wanted to talk in depth about Light and her schemes... I still needed to go see Lamp and RosyIn, and so much more!

"It'll be okay Renn... no matter what, no matter what we do or how we do... we do it together," Vim then said.

I gulped and nodded. Yes. "I like that," I said.

He nodded back. "Me too. I'd take you with me Renn, usually... but I must hurry. Berri would not have sent such a request without damned good reason," he said.

"I know. It's okay. I um... I'll just see this as a vacation," I said, smirking a little as I did.

He groaned at me. "If I come back and find you've joined their cloth, and are happily dancing to their schemes I'll kidnap you," he threatened.

I giggled at him. "That's hardly a threat, Vim!" I said.

"I know. I need to get better at that. Now come here. Kiss me so I can think about it the whole way there," he said.

About to leap up at him, overjoyed he'd bring it up first, I was stopped when the door to my room made a loud bang.

Turning to look at it, I frowned as I heard a groan outside... and then I smiled sadly as I realized who had made the noise.

"Come on in, Merit," I invited.

For a small moment there was no movement. No noise. Or confirmation... and then the door slowly opened, revealing Merit.

Her head was hung low, with her trying to hide her face with her thick hair. I could see the shame, and the pure red face, beneath them.

"Wait... is that why you said that? You knew she was there? You're so mean!" I turned, a little angrily, as I slapped Vim's arm.

He chuckled at me as he stepped around me, gesturing for Merit to enter the room as he did.

She entered... slowly, and he glanced around the door's frame to make sure no one else was out there. Once he did, he shut the door.

"Merit, I'm leaving. Berri's got a problem. I'll be leaving Renn here while I handle it," Vim told her the situation.

"Yes, yes, I heard already," Merit finally looked up, and although her face was still a little red it wasn't as bad as it had been.

I nodded. "He needs to hurry," I said, before he could get distracted by teasing the two of us some more.

Merit happily nodded. "Yes he does! Get the hell out of here already. Shoo!" she waved him off, as if a bug.

Vim smiled and nodded... and then right before grabbing the door again he glanced at me.

I instantly recognized that look, and felt my heart swell a little.

He just thought of kissing me. And he was now regretting not doing so.

But...

Glancing at Merit, who sighed at Vim... I decided not to do it. Not in front of her. Not right now.

"Stand tall, Vim," I said in goodbye.

"Hm... If you keep her safe Merit I'll let you sleep with her while I'm gone," Vim said as he opened the door.

"I'd have done so anyway! I don't need your permission!" Merit shouted.

He laughed as he left the room... slowly closing the door behind him. Our eyes met one last time as the door shut, and I felt my tail squirm behind me because of it.

Maybe I should have kissed him anyway.

Merit sighed again. "You should have kissed him, Renn."

Gah! "I was trying to be nice!"

"Don't! I mean... please do, yes, but...! Ah!" Merit squirmed a bit as she shouted, as if unsure of what she herself wanted.

Laughing at her, and myself, I decided to just let it be. I knew Vim would already be down the hallway by now, so there was no point in trying to catch him.

"Good morning Merit," I said, greeting her for the first time today. Although Vim and I had been up for many hours already, it wasn't even midday yet. It made me feel a little tired, considering all that had happened already this morning.

"Mhm..." she calmed down a bit and sighed again. "How'd it go?" she asked.

"Meeting Light? Honestly I don't know... a part of me wants to say it went way better than I thought it would have, but at the same time I feel more confused and worried than before somehow," I said honestly.

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"Yeah. That's what saints do," she said as she nodded.

It did seem so, yes.

"Will you sit with me? Or do we need to do something?" I asked with a gesture to my bed.

"Hm? We can sit. I came to invite you to breakfast, and hear what happened, but we can sit for a bit too... in fact I'd like to. Does your bed smell?" Merit asked as she hurried over to check.

Watching her plant her face onto the bed and take a deep breath, my ears squirmed as I tried not to laugh.

"Dumb. Maybe it hasn't been long enough...?" Merit wondered as she stopped, having realized we hadn't left any smells on the bed at all.

I opened my mouth, to tell her of my recent revelation... of Vim's scent... but decided against it.

For now that'd be my own little secret. Something just for me. I'd tell her another day.

Walking over to the bed, I went ahead and took my shoes off as to clamber up onto it without getting it dirty. Merit climbed up onto it too, doing so in a way that made her look like a little child as she did.

"So?" Merit asked as we both sat in front of each other.

I nodded. "Light wants me and Vim to take a vacation," I said.

Merit frowned. "A what...? Why?"

I shrugged. "She said she plans on restructuring the Society. She wants us to step away, for five years, to give us time alone... for Vim to calm down, and for the Society to work its way through the drama," I said.

Merit shook her head. "She's scheming something else. That makes no sense. Five years isn't even long enough to squash rumors, let alone restructure the whole thing," she said.

Oh? "You don't think it could be done in five years?" I asked.

"No? Not at all? It takes longer than that to build a castle, Renn. How could you reform a whole organization such as ours in such a short amount of time? Even as small and disorganized we've become, we're still a society with over a thousand members scattered throughout the world at hundreds of locations," she said.

"I didn't realize it took that long to build a castle," I said.

"Well... it doesn't always. But it does. Does she still think you're pregnant?" Merit asked.

I nodded. "Vim thinks that's the main reason. She's hoping I'll step back, give birth and focus on the baby," I said.

"So weird..." Merit mumbled.

It was!

"Oh... they also have a lot more people than we thought. There's already more than five hundred of them here, with over a thousand to follow soon," I said.

Merit startled. "What...?"

I nodded. "That's part of the five year plan, or whatever. To prepare the Society for them, or something."

Merit frowned, rather deeply. "I'm... surprised. Not just that there's still that many of them, but that they all now want to come back..."

"Right...? Even Vim isn't really sure why they all had a sudden change in heart. He thinks something happened over there, to make them have to leave," I said. I omitted that he also thought their prophecies, the ones concerning me and my supposed future saintly daughter, were the main cause.

"Possibly. So they came back here where Vim and more support is, maybe. How did he act? With her?" Merit asked.

"Rather nicely, actually. He spoke to her, and even when he got obviously frustrated and upset he didn't lash out. Though he did end the conversation rather abruptly, making us leave before I wanted to," I said. Not that I blamed him, he had needed to leave. To go to Narli.

"Hm... he's being gentle. He had always been gentle with Celine too, even when she did things so stupid it made him want to kill her."

"Did that happen often?" I asked. Vim did speak of Celine, but I tried not to really talk much about her. I didn't like the look he got on his face when he spoke of her and remembered her, it made my heart hurt.

"A lot. All the time. There's a reason I kept trying to seduce him all those years, Renn, it's because even though there were plenty of rumors concerning them being together, or him with others, I always saw the opposite when they were together. I saw I had a chance, because he hadn't taken any of the ones she or the others gave him. I'd not have done so otherwise," Merit said.

Something told me she would have still done it anyway. "Makes me wonder why he puts up with them," I said.

"Because he's inept? He doesn't like how they operate, or their methods, but he's not willing to put a stop to them. Because he believes everyone has a right to be a failure if they want to be, or whatever," Merit said with a slight shrug.

I tried not to notice the way she spoke a little scornfully. She was including herself in that statement, and it was rather obvious too.

Brushing the bed beneath me with a hand, I smiled at how soft it felt.

It was too bad Vim hadn't slept in it. Now that I could smell him, that meant I could have likely smelled him even long after he had left.

Glancing at the nearby wall, where our bags were resting, I wondered if any of the clothes and cloths in them had his smell or not. If one did, maybe I could...

"What'd you think of Light, Renn?" Merit then asked.

Looking away from the bags, deciding to check later, I nodded. "She's... well, kind of like the saints I know, or knew. She smiles and speaks so confidently, even when squirming and unsure of herself. How'd she lose her eye, by the way?" I asked with a point to my face.

"Hm...? She's missing an eye?"

I nodded.

Merit frowned. "She hadn't. When she left she had both. I think?"

Oh...? But Vim hadn't mentioned that, or seemed surprised. "Vim had acted normally upon seeing her," I said.

"Vim's Vim. Knowing him he didn't even notice, or did and simply assumed he had forgotten she was missing an eye this whole time."

Right... that was a possibility, with Vim at least.

"She's got a scar around it. So it was obviously from a wound," I said.

"Good. Maybe we'll get lucky and she'll lose the other too," Merit said with a huff.

Smiling at her, I resisted the urge to lean over and pounce on her. I wanted to hug her, she looked adorable with the way she was crossing her arms and acting all angsty!

"Vim thinks I should play along. To keep the peace, at least until he gets back," I told her of his plan.

"Well duh...? I wouldn't pick a fight with them without him either, Renn. Less alone would be trouble, and they have saints. That's dangerous."

"I've never really considered saints to be dangerous," I said lightly. I had always seen Witch as someone frail. Weak. Someone who always needed help. Especially since her very powers ate away at her own body and lifespan.

"Don't think that. They're as dangerous as monarchs, if not more so in certain ways. Plus who knows who else they have with them, if they really brought that many back. Five hundred...? Are they all here? Seems like so many..." Merit mumbled.

I shrugged. "Vim didn't seem too concerned over them."

"Vim isn't even afraid of gods, Renn. Don't use him as a standard."

Nodding gently, I kept the fact I hadn't meant it in that way to myself. I had simply meant that Vim had seemed neither worried or happy that they were here. He had acted indifferent. He had been startled, surprised, but it had not seemed like he had cared much of them. Though one could argue that was part of the problem so many had with him... he had become, or was, indifferent when he shouldn't be.

Merit sighed a bit and slouched down some. She suddenly looked even tinier as she blew one of her thick locks out of her face.

She looked tired. But I knew it wasn't because she actually were. Unlike me she hadn't gotten too drunk last night.

Odds are she was just... like me. Overwhelmed. Or frustrated.

Should I tell her about Lilly...?

Deciding not to, for now, I relaxed a little and grabbed my tail. A part of it felt slightly itchy, so I checked it to see as to why.

It didn't take long to figure it there was nothing wrong with my tail, but I decided to brush it later anyway.

If I was going to be here for a while, resting, may as well make the most of it I guess.

"Well... can't say I'm sure what I expected, but I suppose a lack of bloodshed is the best option. Even if annoying," Merit mumbled.

"Mhm...! I'll be honest I feel almost like something should have happened too! But... now, after speaking with her... I think I'd be sad now if Vim had to do something drastic," I said.

"Possibly. The sad reality is Renn, if Vim did actually kill or banish Light it'd just split the Society right then and there. There are far more members who fully support her than you'd think. Some here even are glad she's back," Merit said.

"Like who?" I asked. None I'd talked to so far had even hinted at anything like that!

"Lawrence for one. His brother had been the one to go against Celine and Light, not him. And then of course Sofia, and I think Jasna and Liina too," Merit said.

"Sofia...? Really? She's your friend isn't she?" I asked.

"Sofia is. But she's also Brandy's friend. They're all members of that sister thing," she said.

Oh... I hadn't known that.

Which wasn't too surprising, really. It's not like I really knew everything about the Society and its members. In fact I really knew only a little, and only a few members rather well like Merit and Lilly... and even them I didn't know everything about.

"Don't look sad. Who knows... maybe this will all just blow over and be not a big deal or something. It happens," Merit said with a shrug.

"Vim said something similar... but he did it with that look," I said, as I remembered his expression as we talked about it and shopped.

"What look?"

I reached up, to furrow my brow and frown angrily. "The one he gets when he's being sarcastic."

"Ah... right!" Merit chuckled at me, though if she was laughing at Vim or me I couldn't tell.

Sighing softly, I smiled and nodded. "For now I've been told to stay out of trouble and rest. So I plan to do so," I said.

"Right... you still need to see Lamp and the rest, don't you?"

I nodded. "Let's do that today!"

Merit sighed too, but nodded with a smile. "Sure. We can also go to the port to check on the pirates."

"Yeah!"

Growing excited, I decided it was maybe a good thing I had stayed. I might need these few weeks of downtime just to properly spend time with everyone!

"So uh..."

"Hm?"

Merit glanced around, looking a little odd as she did.

She then coughed. "So... I'm a bad sleeper you know? I roll around a lot, and uh..." Merit started to twiddle her fingers, as if suddenly talking about something utterly embarrassing.

Smiling at her, I nodded. "This bed is more than big enough, Merit! Or we could sleep in yours, is yours bigger?" I asked.

"No... it's tinier..." she mumbled.

"Mine it is!"

Merit's gentle smile as she nodded almost made me forget about Vim having left. Almost.

Chapter 467 Vim – His Running Thoughts

The waves were rather fierce, telling me the dark clouds overhead were indeed a storm. One approaching quickly.

I was running along the edge of a cliff overlooking the inland sea. I was keeping a good pace, having recently run past the port town where Kevin and his family called home.

Usually I'd check on the geese, but I could do so on the way back.

Time was short. And not just for Narli who needed help, either.

If able I wanted to make quick work of this. As to return to Renn and Lumen as fast as possible, before something... dreadful happened.

It wasn't just her safety I worried over, either. In fact what really concerned me was something... deeper. Something beyond flesh and pain.

Something more like her falling in love with Light and her people, and happily joining their little convent cult thing and suddenly getting involved in their schemes and plans and...

Shaking my head a bit, I stopped myself from imagining such a terrible scenario. Even if it involved Renn with a happy grin on her face.

The sound of the waves calmed me as I kept pace. I wasn't tired, of course, but I felt like I should be. My mind was heavier than my body, even though I carried a lot of weight. I had not felt that exhaustion in months, so whatever had been bugging me had faded finally. Though it had been replaced with new worries.

Light. The Society. Renn, the prophecies concerning her and the heart she had unknowingly absorbed.

I felt like I was losing grip on everything again. As if I was once again fighting gods.

Slowing a little, I tried not to think of the prophecy that Renn's witch friend had told me about. The one concerning the birth of a monarch.

"Could be a sign," I begrudgingly admitted as I kept running.

Was... were Light's prophecies somehow connected...?

But then why would she want me to keep a distance for five years?

Made no sense. At all. I'd understand them wanting me to... focus on Renn, and whatnot, as to ensure their prophecy of their supposed saint being born... but why do it in that way?

Although it'd annoy me beyond reason for Renn to speak in more depth with Light, maybe I'll get lucky and she'll hear all the prophecies while I'm gone.

"She could be my buffer," I said as I angled myself away from the cliff. A part of it became too rocky, with huge boulders, to easily traverse. I ran down the cliff a bit, to a section of grass instead.

Renn could handle such things for me. She could hear the prophecies, speak with them about the details... and then retell them to me in a more simple and non-intrusive way. So that I'd not get annoyed over them. As if she was a translator or something.

It was a silly idea, but it would probably work. Since it's been proven now that my love for her overrode my disdain for the gods and their remnants.

Usually by now I'd have acted out, rashly even. Hell, by now I'd have done a lot more than that.

When was the last time those around me had tried to scheme in such a way...? My first instinct was to say Celine, but even she knew better than to...

Slowing again, I flinched as I realized the reason that Celine had never actually tried anything too strange.

"Because she had been waiting for Renn," I groaned as I realized.

So much made sense now...! On many, many, occasions when I had returned to Telmik, or met Celine somewhere randomly... she'd always happily glance around... as if looking for someone else.

I'd always just thought it was her checking to see if I had found and brought any new members, or something, but that hadn't been it at all... she had been looking for Renn.

Not to mention on many occasions Celine had made little odd comments, too. I distinctly remember her one time saying in the beginning that when I returned, to make sure the one I brought with me stayed warm.

That hadn't been her teasing me, or trying to infer to me a prophecy without breaking my rules... that had been her simply hinting that I should keep Renn safe.

If so... then...

As I ran and ran, I tried to remember. I replayed memories. Remembered conversations. Thought of things people had done and said over the years.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that Celine and the rest had likely known about Renn's arrival for a long time. Maybe even from the beginning. In fact, that was likely why Crane and Lughes had been so willing to let a predator into their home back in the beginning. They hadn't been as bad as some others, such as at the Summit or Bell Church, but they hadn't been much better either. Yet they had been willing to let Renn in without hesitation.

That also explained the way Celine had turned me down the few times I'd hinted at getting closer to her.

Slowing a bit, as I neared an actual road. One that forked, to lead back where I came from and then the other way around the beaches and cliffs... I felt like kicking myself.

"That's why she always said she would be there, if my heart allowed it," I groaned.

That hadn't been Celine telling me that she was willing to be someone special to me, for me, if I simply overlooked the things that bothered me about her... like her being a saint and such... That had been Celine saying she was willing if for some reason I had not chosen someone else. She had been saying she'd be okay with it if my heart wasn't already full of someone else.

Reaching up, I rubbed my forehead... expecting to feel sweat, but obviously found none.

"Gosh Celine..." I mumbled as I thought about that woman. All the times I'd teased her, or insulted her. The times she had hesitantly invited me to her bed, then at the same time had turned around to tell me she'd never let me near her.

I had always wondered why she had kept her distance. Even though a saint, like I had said to Light, one wouldn't lose their powers just because they became a little more promiscuous than they were. I'd met many saints that were just like Kaley, and unashamed of it too. They had not been any less a saint than their peers who remained pure, by any means.

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Sighing, I decided it was for the best. I wouldn't have been able to give Celine my heart as I had Renn, not in the same way... but it was a sad thought to have. That poor woman had given her life for the Society, in not just a literal sense either. She never had fun. Never took breaks, or did anything for herself.

She and I would not have been like how Renn and I were... but I could have at least eased her burden a little, and allowed her to experience a bit of a normal life. Celine had always seemed like she had wanted the same thing. In fact she'd always hinted that she had wanted that and more. But... If she had known, or at least believed, that Renn had been about to show up at any moment all that time...

Then of course she'd keep herself distant from me. Reserved. Controlled.

Because she knew she would have not been able to compete with Renn for my heart. And even more so, if they all so firmly believed that Renn's children were so important as they acted, that too would have

kept her from doing anything too dramatic. To her risking my relationship with Renn was more than just a simple emotional problem, but a matter of life and death. For the Society. For everyone involved.

"Makes me feel like an ass," I said as I stepped down the road, as to head around the sea a little more. I'd follow it until a river, and then follow that river to the forests that would eventually lead me to the Keep.

A lot of this wouldn't even be an issue if I was just willing to let them speak of prophecies.

As I picked up the pace, running along the dirt road, I wondered if I could even do such a thing.

I had learned to not kill monarchs on sight.

Miss Beak had taught me how to do that.

If I could do that... why couldn't I do the same for prophecies...?

"Because you know the truth behind them," I whispered to myself.

For a good many miles, I ran in silence. Not just vocally, but mentally too. I kept my mind clear. I didn't think of anything. At least, I tried to.

I thought of Renn instead. Her smile. The smell of her hair and tail. The way she held my spear while walking, as if she'd held it her whole life.

It didn't take long for me to remember the way she had drunkenly smirked at me the other night, lying on my lap half-drunk.

That had been a rare face. A rare expression. One that would become even rarer as she further absorbed and adapted to the hearts within her. Becoming more than she already was.

What was I going to do about that, anyway...?

I can't believe it had taken me that long to notice. I had realized when I opened her bag, to put her heart away at that crystalline cave and found it missing... but I hadn't believed it. A part of me had simply thought she had lost it or something, but when we had left not too long after I had touched her skin. I had held her hand and helped her out of the cave when we had left, since it had required a little bit of effort.

Upon our hands touching I had felt it. The energy. The heart within her, even if small and distant.

Since then I'd kept a good eye on her, and made sure to keep other hearts away from her such as Tor's heart and that little monarch's heart, but...

"Didn't think she'd notice my scent," I mumbled as I rounded a huge tree. I left the dirt road, heading for the river in the distance. It gleamed a little, even as the sun started to set.

As I neared the river, the sky got bright... and then the roar of thunder followed. The storm had arrived.

It was moving slowly, but it was keeping pace with me. It was a little upsetting to think that soon there'd be a downpour, and I'd have to run the rest of the way in such a squall.

Reaching the river, I went to running alongside it. I knew not far from here was a small river village, which I'd have to round, but until then I could just follow the river. It had hills and bends, but nothing bad enough to slow me at all.

Since I had left the beach and ocean behind, the sound of waves was gone. Replaced instead by the quiet sound of the fast running river next to me. It wasn't as calming, but at least I could still smell the ocean on the breeze.

All in all it was a peaceful moment. A part of me was glad for this moment of peace. It felt good to just... run. Even if it was for a bad reason.

Hopefully whatever was wrong with Narli could be dealt with not just swiftly, but with surety. It'd be terrible if the poor girl suffered or died, especially after all this time.

Though it was hard to imagine a saint just... getting sick without cause. Even the weaker ones, like Narli, were usually immune to such simple afflictions.

No matter. I'll find out what was going on, and deal with it, soon enough. Before the sun falls tomorrow I'll be there.

By now Lilly should have found the note I'd left her. Maybe. If not by now, then soon. Within a day or two.

Hopefully her sneaking into the town wouldn't cause too many problems for them. But I wanted them to risk it. It was my contingency.

I trusted Merit. I really did. But I wasn't sure if Merit would be willing to fight Light and her people to the death for Renn. Not yet, anyway.

Lilly however wouldn't even hesitate. And not just because she wanted to do it, and would have done it without a just reason if given the opportunity.

Lilly did not take kindly to anyone who threatened herself or her family. Never had. Never will.

I was sure between the two of them, and possibly Merit as well, they would all be able to figure something out. Or at the very least, keep themselves safe enough until I returned.

Though I doubted anything would actually happen. Light was probably just as likely to rush to Renn's defense as Lilly and Merit were which was... odd to believe, but it was the truth.

Seeing some distant buildings and the smoke rising from their chimneys, I started to angle myself away from the river. I opted to run towards a large bunch of trees, the beginnings of a small forest. I'd run through them, to keep out of sight, as I ran around the village.

Entering the forest, I had to slow a bit as I gave the village a large berth. It was growing dark enough, and stormy enough, that I didn't see or run into anyone but I wasn't going to take the risk.

I was in no mood to have to deal with people, for any reason.

Not that I worried to be seen running, even at this pace. Rather I knew if I gave fate a chance, she'd distract me with some weird event.

A monarch. Or a non-human needing saving. Or a bunch of humans holding signs, asking for autographs or something.

The ideas were fantastical and stupid, but not far from the truth. I couldn't count how many times I'd been running like this... trying to hurry to a location for a great purpose, only to get sidetracked or distracted in the oddest of ways imaginable.

One time I had fallen into a hole, down into a deep underground cavern system. One that had a whole civilization of weird non-humans, that had tried to claim I was a god since I had fallen from their sky.

Ever since things like that, I've grown to be wary of giving fate any chance to try such a thing again.

Narli didn't have time for me to waste on such ridiculous ventures. And Renn didn't have time for it either.

Plus she'd be upset if I encountered something like that without her.

Smiling at the thought, I went ahead and allowed my mind to wander as I ran. I left the forest, and the village, behind and headed for the even thicker forests in the distance. The ones that led to mountains and valleys.

I thought of the five years. The so called vocation Light wanted us to go on.

Although I had found it utterly ridiculous, and stupid... I had to admit it the idea was growing on me.

Five years wasn't a long time. But it was, in a way. In that much time I could take Renn to see some neat things. To those islands, maybe?

If not somewhere distant, then maybe something simpler. Maybe we could spend that time building those orphanages for Randle and Angie. Or go visit a few of the members who lived distantly, who I never saw anymore. Or we could just... find some quiet little forest to call home for a bit...

By my parents I'd even be fine with just staying at that human town. The one where her saintly friend lived. It'd be annoying, but with her it'd be pleasant.

I amused myself as I ran, thinking of all the places I could take her... and the things we could do.

There was no harm in at least imagining it, for now.

At least, that's what I told myself.

Chapter 468 Renn – A Lamp's Son

Lamp's son was a quiet boy. He was already bigger than the other babies I'd met recently, such as Root and Copper, but that was because he had been born almost a year ago.

He had the same blond hair his mother had, but he had his father's eyes... and his nose also turned slightly to the left like his father's did too.

"How are the others, Lamp?" I asked the boy's mother as she sat back down next to me.

My human friend looked a little different. She had gained weight, likely the weight she had lost during her terrible venture here when a slave. She had also grown her hair out so long it now needed to be braided several times over. She actually looked really good, really healthy, and her huge smile only further proved how good she herself felt.

"Happy. Safe. A few we have lost, most to running away. For one reason or another, is fine," Lamp said, speaking slowly but surely. She still had a heavy accent, and obviously had a few hiccups in certain words she spoke but there was no trouble communicating with her at all.

"I'm... very happy to hear that. I've heard Merit's been keeping an eye on all of you, too," I said.

Lamp nodded, grinning a little as she did. "Little Merit is very kind. Even if sharp of tongue, warm of heart," she said.

Yes. She was. It was why she had left, even though she hadn't needed to. She had wanted to give us some time alone, as to catch up. I'll never understand why so many claimed Merit was heartless or cruel. She was far from such a thing.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded as I glanced back at the boy sitting between us. He was busy messing with a little stuffed animal, some kind of dog or something. He kept turning it around, looking for the best place to bite at it from.

He was too big to just hold easily, and was able to walk around... though more of a waddle than not. But he was also still young enough one had to be careful. A couple times I had needed to gently grab him, as to keep him from trying to roll off the couch we sat on.

"Quiet boy. Worries me," Lamp said softly as we both watched him go to gnawing on the stuffed animal dog's ears.

"Hm... he seems healthy and strong. You did well," I said.

Lamp smiled proudly, happily accepting the compliment in stride.

A part of me was very happy she had settle down with someone. It meant I'd not need to worry about her trying to catch Vim's eye, somehow. But another part of me... was a little sad, too. Though I wasn't sure how or why.

Maybe it was because it was validation of what she really was.

A human.

They lived so quickly. And died just as fast...

"Does Mark like his job?" I asked. He had been here when we had arrived, when Merit had dropped me off, but had left shortly after saying hello. He worked at the warehouse under Wynn.

"Very. Parents passed few months ago, so he's still grieves. But will be okay," Lamp said.

I didn't fault her for her strange way of talking, since I understood what she meant.

Mark's parents had died. He was sad over it still.

"How'd they die?" I asked.

"Father in the night. Old. Mother did not last long after, going to follow him," Lamp explained.

I nodded. That made sense. It happened often, supposedly. That when one passed... the other's heart couldn't take it and followed soon after.

I wonder if I would do the same for Vim?

Smiling softly at the thought, I bit back a tiny laugh. I had thought of the opposite. Me dying and Vim following me into the afterlife because he got lonely without me.

It was a ridiculous thought, yet still made me tear up.

The boy dropped the stuffed toy, and he frowned at it as it rolled along the floor away from us. At first I expected him to start crying or make a sound, but instead he just... sat there. Staring at it, with eyes full of sorrow.

"See...? Normal baby would cry. Or at least point and grow noisy," Lamp said as she stood and stepped over to the toy, picking it back up.

"Maybe he's just a stoic man. Like Vim," I said as I watched Lamp give her baby back his toy.

"Hmph. I could be no lucky, more like him I'd like Mark to be too," Lamp said.

No lucky...? She must mean so lucky, since she just said she'd wished Mark was like Vim as well.

I had walked in as Mark had been about to leave for work. So I had only gotten to see them interact for a short time... but they had seemed loving and happy. Mark had not just kissed Lamp goodbye, but had kissed his son and said goodbye to him too.

Yet I knew there was always something hidden behind the happy smiles. So maybe something was wrong...?

I didn't know this Mark. Not beyond the little I knew of him, since helping him join the Society after those events in the sewers. He had helped Vim and thus earned his place amongst us. Him and his family. But that didn't mean he wasn't, or couldn't be, a bad husband...

If he was mean or cruel to Lamp I'd do far worse than sic Vim on him.

"You seem happy, and he loves you," I said carefully as Lamp sat back down.

Lamp sighed and nodded. "Yes. Very love, lots of it. But... where I am from, men do not cry," Lamp said.

Huh...? Oh... I slowly nodded as I understood what she meant, or was likely hinting at.

His parents had just died. And he had likely wept over their deaths.

"Bothers you? Him crying?" I asked gently.

Lamp nodded, rather fiercely. "So much so! Why, Renn, does he weep? Still he does, at night in sleep. As if we are not happy. Yet we are happy!" Lamp asked with a gesture around us.

I nodded back as I glanced around at her home. It was one of those apartment styled ones, here in the Animalia Company building. Outside the housing area for us non-humans. But even though for humans... it was a far cry from lesser.

Her home looked wonderful. It had many rooms, and even a second floor. She had her own kitchen, a huge bath similar to the one I had in my own room, and her house was full of items. Furniture, rugs, paintings even!

She was no doubt equating her happiness to how lovely her home was... and lovely it was indeed.

But I knew better than to think just stuff alone and clean home was enough to bring happiness.

However... Lamp was right.

He had her. And now their son.

He shouldn't be crying. Not even in his sleep.

"Talk to him about it?" I asked.

"Hard to. Although like baby, very prideful," Lamp said with a huff.

I smirked at that. I see.

"Give him time...? Sometimes it takes time to heal from wounds, especially those that hurt the heart," I said.

Love this novel? Read it on Royal Road to ensure the author gets credit.

"Feh... I slave. Lost. No home. Torture. Rape. No crying day after," Lamp said stiffly.

"Right..." I wanted to groan at that.

At least she had spoken of her past without any hint of pain or depression. Lamp really was a strong woman, wasn't she?

The boy then paused in his playing with the toy, and glanced over at this mother.

Lamp noticed, frowned... and then smiled. "Ah. Time to eat. Hungry he gets, more than me I think sometimes," Lamp said. She picked him up and went to undoing her clothes, as to reveal a breast.

Oh...? He still was breastfed? Even still? He was older than a year wasn't he? Plus he was big... Although a little surprised, it didn't stop Lamp from breastfeeding the boy. The sight of them sitting next to me as he ate reminded me of Pram and Copper. It was kind of neat to see such a sight again so soon, and that Lamp had the same tired and annoyed face that Pram had worn while doing so. Though Pram had smiled a little more warmly after a few moments, and Copper had still been small enough to not look as... odd...

Actually... I didn't know when you were meant to switch a child to normal foods... especially not so a human one, let alone a non-human one.

Lamp finally smiled at the boy as he ate, in a way only a mother could... and it made me a little jealous.

Shifting a little, I ignored my tail that squirmed along my knee and down my leg. It was out, since I didn't need to hide it with Lamp... but right now I wish it hadn't been.

It wanted to wiggle something fierce, since I was envious of what I was looking at.

"Almost time to stop this. Looking forward to it," Lamp said with a sigh.

I nodded; glad to hear that I hadn't been too wrong about my earlier assumption.

Lamp glanced at me, and gave me a small smile. One that curled a bit thanks to her scar. "How about you, Renn? Does it take long time? For your kind to have baby?" she asked.

"I... I don't know. Maybe. I think it does, yes," I said, deciding to just say that. I didn't want to admit to her that Vim and I hadn't even had the opportunity to have a child yet... especially since I was supposed to be pretending that I was pregnant right now.

"Hm... too bad. Hopefully I see before I die, yes? Please let me meet and see, if able, I bet very cute. Past reasoning!" Lamp asked.

I nodded. "Of course...! They can be friends..." I said with a smile to the boy.

"Aye!"

For a few moments I just... sat there. Basking in Lamp's happiness. She had a home. A husband, a family. A secure job where she was safe, and where the rest of her kindred could be happy alongside her. Compared to her... previous predicament this was genuinely a night and day difference.

Yet even with all that happiness it was clear she still had her own problems. Her own drama and worries. Like her husband's... issues, as she saw them. She worked, as he did, and was still struggling a bit with our language... and she worried over her boy's strange silence.

She had many problems. Just as we all did. As everyone did. Just in her own way.

But... I'd give anything for my problems to be like hers.

To be more... simpler. Not as traumatic. Not as terrible.

Plus...

Watching the way Lamp held her boy as he ate, and the way she lazily smiled at him... I wondered if one day my little pretending would become reality.

I'd not gotten a chance to really confront Vim about it. We... danced around it, since he was so terrified of prophecies. So bothered by them.

But...

Honestly... a part of me just wanted to fulfill it already.

Really... what was wrong with having children? Why couldn't I have a daughter? So what if she was going to be saint?

By Vim's parents, I'd be fine even with her becoming the leader of the Society and getting involved in all the chaos and drama! After all, it's not like she'd be alone. She'd not do it alone. I'd be there. As would Vim. We could help her. Protect her.

Cherish her...

"He will finish. Not even a burp. Then will sleep. Strange boy," Lamp said as the boy started to slow in his eating.

"I... I see," I said. I honestly wasn't sure if that was strange or not, as she said.

I'd realized it before, when holding the other children I'd met recently. That I sadly... have very little experience in such things.

To the point it worried me a little. What if the prophecy did come true? Before I was ready? Hopefully Vim had more experience in such things, and would be able to help me...

"See? Sleep already," Lamp then stood, carrying her boy away. I was a little surprised to watch her take him across the room, to lay him into a crib. One that was a tad too small for him.

He was indeed already asleep. I hadn't even noticed he had done so.

"Least he doesn't cry often like some do?" I suggested.

Lamp though sighed as she shook her head. "Worry me. A lot. Baby should cry! Not like man," Lamp said as she shrugged.

I smirked at that. Had she just made a joke, or had she been utterly serious? It was hard to tell, since her speech was... kind of odd. She really had come a long way, but I wonder if she'd ever really fully adapt to this place and this language.

It made me wonder if I'd be any better. Even though many liked to claim I was smart, and able to remember things far better than most... had I not been speaking this language for hundreds of years? I bet it'd be hard to learn another. To actually learn it too, not just the words.

"How'd you meet him, anyway? Mark?" I asked, since I still didn't know.

Lamp tilted her head at me... and then gave me a rather bashful smile. The kind that told me she was now very embarrassed.

"Um... well..." she grabbed her own hand, and then went to twirling one of her long braids.

Oh my! There was the Lamp I remembered! One very adorable, almost to the point it was criminal!

"What? Don't tell me it was love at first sight, or something!" I said, happy to have love talk.

Lamp groaned and covered her face a bit. "No... I was just jealous."

"Hm...?"

She gestured at me, while still blushing.

Wait... "What?" I asked, what'd she mean? Of me? Jealous?

She nodded. "Of you and Vim. Lovely. So lovely. So I just... wanted the same," she mumbled as she shrugged.

Oh my...

Stunned at her declaration, I wasn't sure what to say.

She had fallen for Mark because she had been jealous...? Of me and Vim? Of our relationship? She went and got into one herself, because of that...?

I wasn't sure if I should be humbled or saddened.

"I see..." I whispered, since I felt lost and didn't know what else to say.

"Going great! Lovely! I am happy, very! If he'd just stop crying!" Lamp said, now sounding upset again.

Smirking at her, I wondered just how bad his so called crying was to make her so frustrated over it. She had basically said he did it in his sleep, so you'd think it'd be quiet. Where he just leaked tears or something. Yet she was acting as if he wept his heart out every night.

Maybe he did...?

"A man who cries and a baby who don't! Such is life," Lamp said with a sigh as she stepped back over to the couch, as to sit back down next to me. This time she sat rather close, enough so we were touching.

Giggling at her, I wondered what she'd do or say if I told her that Vim cried too.

I wonder why it was such a big deal to her? It seemed to be a cultural thing, I wonder why?

"I cry all the time, Lamp," I told her.

"We okay! Plus you cute, so it fine!" Lamp said.

Yet she herself had just recently said she didn't cry, as if to set the standard. Maybe it wasn't that big a deal and she was just... venting a little, since it was me she was talking to.

"You're cute too, Lamp. I like what you've done with your hair," I said with a small gesture at it.

Lamp blushed again and nodded. "Pact. With rest," she said as she lifted the longest braid, one that had almost been resting on her lap.

"Pact?" I asked. What'd she mean?

"With others. Family. To not cut hair, ever. Not again."

I blinked at that and slowly nodded. I see...

She and the rest of them. All of those that Vim had found on that slave ship, and rescued... they had agreed to not cut their hair ever again.

I wasn't really sure I understood the reason for it, since they were free now. Happy. Free to do whatever they wanted... but if that gave them strength, then...

"That's lovely, Lamp," I said softly.

"Mhm... you too! Look how long!" Lamp said as she reached out to grab my own flocks of hair.

Yes. They were... but well...

It was now my turn to blush again. "I want to cut it... but Vim likes it when it's longer," I said.

Lamp paused a moment... and then erupted in laughter.

Feeling silly, I sighed a little as I watched her giggle her butt off at me.

Yes, yes, I know. I was just as foolish as everyone else. Plus my reason had been hardly as lovely as hers...!

"Ah! See! Jealous again! Gosh!" Lamp's laughing died a little, but she kept giggling as she stood.

Wondering what she was doing, I glanced at the crib. The boy was still asleep, so she hadn't woken him with her outburst...

"I go get others! To come say hi!" Lamp said happily.

Oh...! I nodded quickly as I stood. "Yeah!"

I did want to see the rest. Though Lamp was the one I was truly friends with, I still felt like I had a bond with all of them. I wonder how many others were able to speak this language already?

"I be right back!" Lamp said as she hurried to the door, not waiting for me to follow.

Although I wanted to join her, I knew better than to do so. I glanced at the crib, and sighed as I walked over to it.

While Lamp left, to get the other eastern girls... I smiled down at the young lad.

"You're lucky, to have such a wonderful mother," I whispered to him.

The boy slept through my comment... and likely would never know I'd said it, but I meant it. Every word.

Hopefully one day someone else would say the same for me.

Chapter 469 Vim – Narli's Rest

Narli's room had been cleaned a little, compared to how I remembered it. The windows were not open, but the drapes were as to let what little sun that could peer through the dark clouds into the room. And in the large bed, where I'd once seen Renn sleep soundly with the young saint, was that same saint who looked like she was having a terrible nightmare.

"She's been like this for almost two months, Vim," Berri whispered, as if afraid to speak too loud, lest to wake her.

Which was funny, since we did in fact want to wake her.

"Cries out yet don't wake! Fever won't break, yet isn't getting worse either!" Horn added. The usually calm and simple man sounded far outside his comfort zone. Panicky and scared.

Studying the young narwhal, I noted the way her eyes were shut. They were strained, as if she was forcing her own eyes closed as to block a bright light. But of course there was no such light. The room was barely lit enough as it was, thanks to how dark the world was outside since a storm was right above us.

Beneath those tightly shut eyelids were eyes that were rapidly moving. And every so often her lips quivered or a muscle had a spasm, as if they'd just been pricked by a needle.

She looked like anyone would right before waking thanks to a terrible dream. Renn hadn't done such a thing in a long time, but she used to look like this every few nights. I had always laid there watching her, debating to let her sleep through them or wake her from them. Back then I had hesitated, but today I'd not do so.

Yet it seemed no matter how long we would wait for she stayed asleep. Not just any sleep either. She was dead asleep. And although breathing oddly, and slightly twitching here and there, she wasn't squirming around in pain and agony either... as if she was simply just having a bad dream, or something.

I ignored the worried parents as I bit back a small sigh of relief. When I had arrived a few moments ago, Berri had screamed at the sight of me. She had been so happy, so relieved, that I'd shown up she had yelped and nearly passed out in relief. The sight of her falling to her knees, weak at the mere sight of me, made me fear the worst had happened.

Though this wasn't the best result, she was at least still alive. Still breathing.

Taking a small breath myself, I noted the lack of smell.

"Does she sweat a lot?" I asked as I stepped even closer to the girl's bed, bending down a little as to study her face closer.

"Not really... We wipe her and clean her bed every few days, but only in hopes it speeds up her healing, not because it gets nasty or anything," Berri said from behind. I could hear her voice better; she had not only spoken a little louder but had drawn closer... as if to keep watch on what I was doing.

I grabbed the soft blanket laid over her and pulled it back. The saint was wearing a very thin nightgown, one so light I could see through it. But as thin as it was...

Gently grabbing a piece near her waist, I lifted it a bit and noted that it was dry as can be.

Not a piece of it was sticking to her from sweat.

Yet...

Reaching out, I cupped her forehead. Her horn stuck out between my fingers, and I frowned at how hot she was.

Not only was she burning up, so was her horn. A horn that should be as cold as ice instead was hot enough it almost felt as if it could burn at the mere touch of it.

"What do you think is wrong with her, Vim?" Horn asked worriedly.

I frowned as shook my head. "She's been like this for how long?" I asked.

"Two months," Horn answered.

"The day before it got this bad she came to me and said she didn't feel good. She was worried she was about to have a terrible prophecy, and so wanted me to keep an eye on her. I sat with her as she fell asleep and... well... she became like this not long after, and now won't wake up," Berri explained further.

"Is it her bloodline? A sickness from the past?" Horn asked worriedly. I knew the reason he focused on that was because of who and what they are.

Their kind, these narwhals, used to be numerous. Now they were all that were left. A disease had wiped them out centuries ago, one that had seemingly only affected them and no one else. Not even the humans. He likely feared it was the same thing that had wiped his race out that now threatened his daughter's life.

"No. This isn't natural, Horn," I said, as I took my hand off the girl's brow.

"Not natural?" Horn asked as I wondered what to do next.

"She's not sweating. At all. Even though burning so hot she should be covered in a thick layer of it, to the point you should be forced to change her clothes and bedding daily. And she's very active mentally, based off the way her eyes are squeezed shut and she's twitching, yet she's not moving around as if in pain," I said.

"You think it's a prophecy Vim? But why is taking so long?" Berri asked as she grabbed my arm. She too had already come to the same conclusion I had, since it was all that could make sense.

"It... could be. Saints do sometimes get odd during their dreams, but..." I hesitated as I wrenched my mind in search for any proof of it.

I never really associated with saints. Even back in my youth, during the wars, even when I had used them against their creators... I had others do it for me. I spent as little time with them as possible, on purpose. So I had very little experience with such things, at least in this context. And...

I sighed as I realized I didn't remember seeing, or ever hearing a hint, of a saint going through this.

Getting sick? Sure. Their powers failing them, or going out of control? Also something I knew could happen. But this...?

It was as if she was stuck in a prophecy. Either one unending or maybe looping it over and over again.

But that made no sense. A saint could see a prophecy that lasted hours, yet only a few seconds actually passed during it. I'd met many who laid down to sleep, only to shoot up to their feet minutes later and babble about a dream that in their perspective had lasted damn near a lifetime. Which meant their prophecies did not operate on a normal scale. They operated just as they had them, as dreams.

This though...?

"Vim...!" Berri squeezed my arm, drawing closer as she tugged on me.

"I'm thinking Berri. This is... different. New. But it's got to have something to do with her powers. To me she looks like she's in the middle of a prophecy," I said with a gesture at her.

"But...! After all this time?" Berri asked worriedly.

Right... a few days, maybe even a week or two I'd understand... Since sometimes even normal people fell into a strange and deep slumber, spurned by ailments or sickness... but months...?

I tried to think where I'd been a few months ago. Before Telmik, but where...? Had I noticed anything odd at the time? Had the world done anything strange? Was what she was experiencing something related to something else, or was she simply going through something internal and personal?

If she had done this five or six months ago, I'd say it was because of the birth of that monarch... The one Renn's human friend had foreseen... but now...?

Glancing the girl up and down, I looked for anything odd. Any weird wounds or cuts or bites. It wasn't too hard to do since the nightgown she wore was so thin, but of course I couldn't see the backside of her since she was lying on her back.

"Help me turn her over," I asked Berri to help, not because I actually needed it but so that I could be proper and respectful.

I turned over her legs and Berri helped the girl over onto her stomach. Berri then quickly went to make sure the girl's face was angled, as to let her breathe comfortably as I studied her other side.

"What are you looking for, Vim?" Horn asked as he drew closer too.

"Anything. Anything at all," I said as I checked her again, since I hadn't found anything.

She had an odd birthmark on her butt, but that was it. In fact... she looked almost too healthy. Why didn't she have any scars at all? Not even little ones? She lived out here in the dense wilderness for crying out loud, she should have a few scrapes at least...

But the lack of them wasn't too surprising. She was a saint, even if a weak one. Maybe one of the abilities she had gained from her divinity was that of a healing nature. If that was true it was likely something she was unaware of. Which meant I really should help her figure out how to use it, since she'd be able to heal her mother. Even if only a little bit would...

I shouldn't think of any of that right now, I needed to focus on the problem before me. The here and now.

"Can turn her back over," I said gently as I decided there was nothing visibly wrong with the girl. Other than her appearance of being stuck in a nightmare at least.

I sighed a bit as Berri went to straighten and fix the girl's nightgown; it had gotten wrinkly and shifted during the movement.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

What to do...? How to do it?

I could of course fix up some medicine for her... but what type and how much of it? And what would it even do for her?

My first instinct was to say it was some kind of infection, viral or otherwise, but...

Saints usually didn't react this way. Plus wouldn't there then be other signs? Runny nose? Sweat? Sores or something? Some kind of ailment affecting her so strongly it interfered with her divine powers would usually show itself in many other forms. And it wasn't as if it could be stress, right...? Surely not... Narli might have worries, like all people did, but I couldn't imagine them being so heavy upon her psyche it reduced her to this state. She had seemed very happy and healthy when we'd last been here.

"What do we do Vim...? My poor baby...!" Berri whimpered as she reached over to brush some of Narli's hair out of her face.

Hearing Berri speak in such a way made my chest hurt. I'd heard that tone before, long ago. Before and after she had gotten half her body burnt and marred.

"I..." I was about to tell her that I'd make some medicine, and do some tests, but right before I spoke... Narli moved.

The room went still as Narli turned her head. Ever so slightly but enough that all of us who had been staring at her had noticed without missing a beat.

"Narli...!" Horn and Berri both shouted her name, with Horn hurrying over next to Berri and joining her in reaching out to touch her.

Watching closely, as Berri and Horn both gently touched the girl's face and shoulder... as if to help hasten her waking, I almost didn't notice the girl's hand.

Glancing down, I frowned at the small and thin fingers that had just grabbed my pinky.

"Honey! Honey wake up...!" Berri said, a little loudly through her fear and tears.

Yes. Please do. I had ideas but by my parents I was lost here, and...

"Vim..." The room went quiet as Narli's eyes opened. Glowing brighter than I'd ever seen them do before.

"I'm here," I said as I grabbed her hand and leaned forward. I had to angle myself a bit since Berri and Horn were in the way.

"It's cold, Vim," Narli whispered.

"Narli...!" Horn placed his hand on the top of the girl's head.

She didn't seem to even register his touch, or her mother's. In fact...

Studying the way her eyes glowed, I noticed how they were angled. And how she had moved her head earlier.

She was looking straight at me. Through her mother, nearly, thanks to the angle.

Narli was not here. Not really.

"Narli? Honey!" Berri tried to get her attention, but it seemed it was pointless.

Taking a small breath, I steeled myself and put aside my hate and rules... to do what I had to.

"Where are you, Narli?" I asked gently.

Berri glanced at me, her face a wreck of tears and worry... but it didn't take but a moment for cold understanding to wash over it all. She turned a little, right as Narli's eyes narrowed a bit.

"Cold.... And dark..." Narli whispered an answer to me.

"Narli...? Baby...?" Horn whispered, still not realizing what was happening.

"Horn...!" Berri grabbed her husband's arm; rather stiffly as she tugged him back a bit... so I could step even closer to her.

The two gave me a bit of room as I bent down a little, to speak to the girl face to face.

She still held my hand, but I felt it growing hotter. Too hot. Hot enough that it shouldn't even be possible. She was a creature of water. Of cold and ice. Whatever was wrong with her needed to be fixed, and fast, because this internal temperature would kill her if it remained like this for much longer.

"I'm here Narli. Right here," I said, speaking calmly and evenly. As if to beckon her towards my voice.

Narli's glowing eyes were still locked onto me, but it was obvious she wasn't actually seeing me. Her face scrunched up a bit, as if about to cry. "Vim...?" she asked again.

"I'm here. Right here," I said again and grabbed her shoulder with my other hand. As if to steady her.

Narli began to breathe harder. Faster. I heard and felt her heartbeat increase in pace thanks to our clasped hands. Her grip on my hand tightened, and I heard other parts of her shift. Toes clenched, her other hand and arm shifted, muscles tightened. I ignored it all though and kept my eyes on hers.

"Vim...!" Berri couldn't help herself and stepped closer. She grabbed my shoulder, digging her nails into it as if to keep her from rushing forward and grabbing her daughter.

"Vim..." Narli said my name again, as if remembering I existed for the first time in a while. Likely thanks to Berri's outburst.

"I'm here, Narli. Where are you? What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm lost..." she whispered.

Lost. "Where?" I asked alongside her mother.

Narli's eyes narrowed further, and my stomach turned as if I'd just fell off a huge cliff. Or rather, as if I'd just watched her or Renn fall off a huge cliff.

She was about to fall back into slumber. I couldn't let that happen!

"Narli!" I squeezed her hand, not too strongly but enough so to make her blink.

"Vim! I'm lost!" Narli shouted, as if in pain from my squeeze.

"What do you see, Narli? What are you seeing?" I asked further.

Narli's breathing became a little strained, and she clenched her jaw a bit. Then she tugged on my hand, as if to draw me closer.

I leaned closer, enough so that I could now feel her hot breath.

Berri began to whimper and cry, but I ignored her as I focused on the girl's face. Her expression. And most particularly, the way her eyes glowed.

They were glowing not too unlike Celine's and Light's. As if she was as strong a saint as them, all of a sudden.

Which shouldn't be possible. Saints could be strong and weak, and have a myriad of different powers... but never had I known one to become more than they had been born as. Ever.

"Narli... tell me what you see," I said, speaking lowly enough to be comforting but firmly enough to be heard.

The narwhal shifted a bit, gulped and nodded... though not at me.

"I'm in darkness. Sitting by a pool of glowing water," she whispered, as if afraid to be heard.

"Narli...?" Horn said his daughter's name as I frowned.

Darkness. By a pool of water... that glowed...?

I could actually think of several places that she was speaking of. Which wasn't a good sign. It meant both that she was likely seeing a genuine prophecy, and also it could one I'd have no idea how to verify without great effort and expense.

"Are you alone, Narli?" I asked.

"Yes...!" Narli whimpered, her fear very thick in her voice.

Berri whimpered again and pushed me aside a bit, as to grab at her daughter. She released my shoulder as to firmly grab onto Narl's arm and head, as if to puller her into an embrace. I didn't stop her; though I knew Berri's attempts to comfort her daughter were meaningless.

Narli wasn't here with us. Not really. Not in the way we understood.

"Where are you Vim...?" Narli asked, her voice still thick of fear. She sounded like she was about to cry. It was eerily similar to the sounds Berri was making. If I turned away I'd almost not be able to tell them apart.

Those whimpers reminded me of harsher times. I tried not to pay attention to them. I wasn't able to.

"He's here, Narli! Honey, he's right here," Horn said, speaking loudly.

I ignored Horn's outburst. "Do you see anything in the darkness, Narli?" I asked her.

She blinked a few times, and I knew in her own head she was looking around. "No... It's just dark," she answered meekly.

"Then why are you scared?" I asked.

Narli began to breathe a little quicker again. "I hear noises. Out there," she said.

"Explain them to me, Narli. Tell me what you hear," I said.

She didn't seem to want to. Her face scrunched up a bit, as if disgusted at the idea... but she seemingly gathered her resolve all the same. "They almost sound like voices. Whispers. Terrible whispers."

"What are they saying, dear?" Berri asked gently.

Narli sniffed, and for a tiny moment I expected her to answer her mother. Instead though she grabbed my hand even tighter. "Vim... I'm scared!"

"It's okay to be scared, Narli. It's okay. You'll be okay. You're safe, I'm here," I said gently.

"They..." Narli was about to say something more, but then the bright glow of her eyes dimmed. Within moments she relaxed, as if collapsing from exhaustion, and her head fell back to her pillow. Her eyes shut, the glow disappeared completely, and...

"Honey...? Dear?" Horn asked worriedly.

"She fell back asleep..." Berri whispered as we watched the young girl. She was already breathing normally... calmly...

"True sleep. Look, she's no longer struggling," I said. In fact, thanks to my still holding her hand I could feel that she was also already cooling down.

Berri let out a groan of relief as she leaned forward and wrapped her daughter in a hug. Such a strong one, I was a little surprised Narli hadn't woken.

"She's already cooling off...! Horn!" Berri cried out in relief, and her husband quickly went to kneel down next to his wife beside the bed.

I released Narli's hand and stepped away, trying not to stare too deeply at the family. The sleeping girl looked... peaceful. She was completely unaware of the simple father bawling his eyes out and the mother now praying to her gods in thanks and relief.

I wasn't going to ruin their moment of relief by warning them that it might not be over. She had relaxed, and she did indeed look... normal now, but...

That had been odd. Very odd.

Especially since... if it had really been some kind of divine power acting out, why did it feel worthless? Senseless?

I had learned nothing from Narli's words. She had been somewhere dark, kneeling next to a puddle of glowing water. Though I had no idea if she had started there, or went to that location after running around in the dark. Likely the only place she felt safe at in the darkness. She heard sounds, which she claimed sounded like voices and whispers...

Nothing about that had been too weird. The dark place. The glowing puddle. The strange whispers, that she wasn't even sure were whispers... none of that made any alarms go off. Not for me, anyway.

For crying out loud that could have just been a normal dream, not a prophecy at all...

Though maybe once Narli woke, truly woke, she'd be able to give me more details. Maybe in her panic, over seeing the prophecy before her as it happened, she had not been capable of telling me what really needed to be said.

"Vim...!" Berri looked up and over at me. Her face was a mess. "What... why?" she was barely able to get her question out between her sobs.

"I don't know, Berri. For now let her rest. Maybe the worst is over and she'll wake soon, for real," I said gently.

Berri nodded harshly, as if glad to hear it.

"Damn those gods...!" Horn cursed as he gently ran his hand along Narli's head, brushing her hair as if she was dead.

She wasn't. But I understood why he'd act so. Had she remained asleep, she may as well have been.

"Gods forgive him...!" Berri whispered as she went back to prayer, this time with even more vigor. As if afraid her husband's outburst would send Narli back into that strange fit of sleep.

Horn looked hurt, as if slightly offended his wife would react so to his statement. He glanced at me, and I met his fury and rage... and nodded in silent agreement with him.

He was right after all. Had every reason to be.

Especially since it was likely their fault she was like this. There was genuinely no other thing on this planet that could cause a saint to act so... odd. Especially when during a prophecy.

But that... shouldn't be possible...

Right?

Chapter 470 Renn – Rosyln's Home

Following Rosyln up the stairs, I smiled at the patterns on her dress.

There were little ships sailing on flower petals all over it. Whoever had made it had spent a lot of time on it. It was adorable, and made me wish I could wear similar things without having to worry about my tail being seen, or it tearing and ripping while traveling.

"I wish I was strong as you, Renn," Rosyln said as we reached the top of the stairwell and she stepped aside, to let me carry the trunk past her and down the hallway.

"Hm... I'll be honest I've never felt very strong," I said as I headed for the room at the end. We passed her daughter's, Rosie's, and although it was open it was quiet inside.

Little Rosie wasn't here. It seemed she had not only grown up a little, and had gotten a little chunky as she did, but she had also gotten to a point in her life that her friends from school were more important than me.

I had at least gotten to say hello to her, but it had hurt a little to realize she had basically not remembered me at all. She had been polite, gave me a small hug but then had asked her mother for permission to go play with her friends outside.

To be honest I was used to such a thing. I had returned to Lujic's home many times to find new children or grandchildren, and only a few of them ever remembered me on sight alone... but... Had it really been that long already...? Roslyn says it's been over a year since they arrived here in Lumen, but honestly I couldn't imagine how that was possible.

I mean, it was. This winter was already almost over, and last time Vim and I had gotten here not long after winter had ended... but... My heart hurt to know that it only took a year or so for a child to forget me. Was I that forgettable? Didn't my ears and tail make me interesting anymore?

Entering Roslyn's room, I walked over to the corner where she wanted the trunk. I lowered it carefully, as to not damage it or the floor or wall, and got it situated up against the wall enough to be situated. I left a bit of room so she could open the lid and it'd be able to rest against the wall, and not fall back down from its own weight and angle.

"Thank you, Renn," Roslyn sighed in relief at the sight of it, and I smiled and nodded.

"It's all good! You know you could have asked Merit too, she's tiny but strong," I said.

"I know she is... but we all already ask so much of her. Makes me feel bad," Roslyn said as she went to start filling the trunk up.

She had wanted it up here for two reasons. One, because it was one of the few mementos left from her life as a pirate, and secondly thanks to its size and weight.

It was too heavy to be lifted normally. She said it had taken two strong men to carry it into the house off the wagon, and they had barely gotten it inside. I wasn't entirely sure how that was possible since I had not felt like it had been that heavy, since it had been empty originally, but I wasn't going to call her a liar over it.

I knew I was strong. But sometimes it was shocking to learn just how much so compared to a human.

Especially since I was so much smaller in frame to most of them. Even Roslyn, who was now healthy and no longer lacking a steady supply of good food, had more weight to her than I did. I was glad to see it since she, like most of her pirate crew, had been gangly and scrawny back when we had met them. Though unlike Lamp and her people who had been skinny from abuse, Roslyn and the others had been so thanks to a lack of food.

In fact she almost looked like a different person, as had little Rosie, thanks to how healthy and normal they now looked.

It was amazing what a year of living in good conditions could do for people. I wonder if I had changed a lot too, back in my youth? Back when Witch had found me, and I had started traveling and living with her. She had mentioned often back then that I'd looked like a feral cat in the beginning.

"I never got to ask, Renn, where do you live?" Roslyn asked as I noticed her place a leather pouch which undoubtedly had coins within it into the chest. She buried it under the clothes she was putting in there.

"Technically no-where. Vim and I travel all around, going from one location to the next. We're always on the move," I said.

"Hm... I used to not feel like anything was wrong living like that, but today I hate the idea. And I even had a home that came with me everywhere!" Roslyn said with a happy little laugh.

I smirked at that too and nodded. "Right? I've actually thought about having us get some kind of wagon or something that could be used as at least a bed, and stuff. But we travel too fast, or through places without roads, too often. So it'd just get left behind and forgotten," I said as I glanced around her room. It was clean, and she had several shelves and storage things like for clothes and stuff... but it was kind of plain. Plus I noticed something a little odd.

It smelled like her. But only her.

If Roslyn had a mate, or something like it, they've never stepped foot into this room.

Such knowledge was a little disheartening. I wanted this woman to be happy. I had invited her, and the rest of her crew, into the Society so they could have security in life. The kind of security that allowed them to not worry about food or shelter, and instead other things.

"Right..." Roslyn paused in her loading of the trunk for a moment and turned to look at me. I noticed the way she glanced me up and down, as if really looking at me for the first time. "You look... really good,

you know? Last time I saw you, you were covered in bruises and had a slight limp as you walked. I'm glad to see you're all fine now," she said.

Oh my! So she remembered even all that! "I heal quickly. And haven't gotten hurt lately," I said.

"I've heard about you two, you know? We all work at the port, so it's only occasionally one of your people visit us. Usually it's Pierre or Liina, but sometimes others visit to and we get to hear them gossip with each other. Normally it's just stuff concerning the guild, like whatever recent drama is happening or what have you, but sometimes they talk about you two," Roslyn said as she slowly shut the trunk. It hadn't been completely filled yet, but maybe she planned to finish later.

"Well we're a topic, I guess? He's the protector and I'm... well..."

"From what I hear you're a trouble maker!" Roslyn said happily.

My tail twitched as I frowned at her. Me? "Really?"

"Yeah? Us for example. Or Lamp and her people. Us humans being invited must be rare considering how some of them talk about it," Roslyn said lightly.

Huh... "Merit complains but she doesn't mean it. That's just her personality," I said.

"Hm? Oh... No, not Merit! Merit's been lovely. I like her, she reminds me of my grandmother even though so tiny. No, the others make comments sometimes. Never anything rude or anything, not like that, just... you can tell they don't care for humans much. Or rather, instead of not caring they just don't understand us? If that makes sense?" Roslyn wondered as she turned to leave the room.

Joining her, I nodded. "Several here don't hate humans, but they don't comprehend why we'd go out of our way to help them either. They're just... like that. Many have good reason for being such ways though, a lot of them have lost family and friends to humans," I said.

"Oh, I don't doubt it! When we got here I had to smack a few of us around, because they had spoken out of line in ways I didn't like! It's just how people are," Roslyn said as we went back downstairs.

When we passed little Rosie's room, I paused a small moment to study it. Like her mother's it was relatively clean, but hers too had a bunch of furniture. Hers also had a bunch of little homely items too, such as plants on a windowsill and books on a shelf.

I was glad to see that they were fine.

Walking down the stairs, I smiled a little. Lamp and her people were doing great. Many had settled down, like Lamp finding people to form families with. Others had found religion or careers, such as in the Animalia Guild. Roslyn and her people seemed to be doing the same. They all lived outside of the guild proper, unlike Lamp and her people, but all lived on the same street in these multi-storied housing buildings. Some of them didn't work the port though, and instead worked in the small shops below their homes. A few worked at a small sit-down pub styled diner a few buildings down, which I was hoping to soon get invited to.

"So... You're doing well, Roslyn?" I asked gently as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

Roslyn perked up a bit and turned to nod at me. "Yeah! We are all doing great, Renn. Really. My one and only complaint would be my own people. They're all becoming fat and lazy!" she said happily.

I smirked and nodded. Yes, I had noticed. Rosie hadn't been the only one to have gained more weight than just a healthy lifestyle provided.

But was there anything wrong with that...? It meant they really were able to enjoy life and its finer pleasures. Humans that were scrawny were usually those who had to work too hard, or too long, and not able to afford proper meals.

"I'm really glad to hear it," I said.

"You should be! I um... I'll be honest Renn, I'm not really sure what to say or do..." Roslyn's voice then got a little soft, which was unlike her. Although it was obvious her speech and mannerisms had softened a bit, she was still a louder woman as if trying to still speak over the wind and waves as to be heard.

"Do about what?" I asked.

Roslyn glanced around us, who stood in the hallway near the stairs, and then she gestured at herself.

Hm...?

"How can I repay you, Renn...?" she then asked.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

Oh.

I smiled at her. Lamp had asked something similar the other night. "You don't owe me anything Roslyn."

"Yes I do! We all do! No one's said it, though I admit it's been because I'm not sure who to ask... It's hard to tell who is who in your little society thing, so I figured I'd just wait to ask you when I saw you but..." Roslyn started to shift around a bit, as if suddenly worried.

"Really Roslyn, it's fine. You all work don't you? For the Society?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yeah...? We all do."

"Then that's all that you need to do. Don't worry about it," I said.

"But we get paid, Renn! Really well too! Plus you all provide the houses and..." Roslyn's voice had cracked a bit as she spoke, as if about to cry. It made me feel a little awkward and embarrassed, since I really didn't feel like I deserved to be thanked or worried about in such a way.

It wasn't as if I had earned the money that supported them. Nor had I been the one to build and prepare the jobs either. That had all been done by those here in Lumen... I... I had done nothing. Nothing more than then sent them on their way here. They and those here had done the rest.

"I'm just happy you and the rest are doing well, Roslyn. Really."

The former pirate sighed at me, in a way that told me she was bothered but not sure how to properly express it. "Well... at least let me try? Is there anything I can do for you?"

For me? I frowned and shook my head. "I just want you and your daughter to be happy. Keep yourselves safe and all... actually, why aren't you married yet?" I asked, hoping to change topics a little.

"Married!?" Roslyn stood up a little straighter, as if shocked I'd bring it up.

"Well, I guess you don't have to get married... but at least get a partner, right? Have you got one?" I asked with a smirk. My plan to switch topics seemed to have worked. She looked absolutely flustered. I really liked how she was blushing, it felt nice to not be the only one who got so red like that!

"No! No... am I supposed to? Is that a requirement? To have kids or something...?" Roslyn asked, suddenly worried.

"Huh? No?" I said. Did others think that...?

Roslyn sighed at me. "You and the rest of them. Really!"

"Rest of them?" I asked. From what she had said before, she spoke very little with other Society members. Especially the non-human ones. She normally only associated with Merit, or those who worked at the port alongside her. So... was she saying they bugged her about getting into a relationship or something?

Roslyn crossed her arms. "My crew. They keep trying to make me go on dates and stuff too," she said.

Oh. She meant her own people.

"Well why don't you?" I asked.

"How could I, Renn...? People here are too happy. Too nice," she said as she turned to head back to the front of the house.

I followed her while frowning. "Too nice...? Isn't that a good thing? Shouldn't you want your partner to be nice and happy?" I asked.

"I guess. But what I mean is... well..." Roslyn seemed to struggle with explaining as she and I entered her kitchen area. She didn't have a full kitchen like Lamp and others did, but instead more of a pantry with a large sink and storage for water. She didn't have the kind of plumbing the guild did, and she didn't have a stove or furnace. Those were outside, behind the house, where she and the other houses around here shared a larger cooking area. In fact I could smell in the air that someone was using it right now.

Roslyn rummaged in a cabinet for a moment, and then pulled out a couple wooden cups. She sighed as she put them down onto a table, and turned to look at me. "You and Vim. You've been through a lot, right?" she asked.

I perked up a bit, and then nodded. "Yeah?" I felt we had at least.

"You trust him. Because he's proven himself," she furthered.

I slowly nodded as I kind of understood what she was hinting at. "Yes...?"

"How can I do that with anyone here, Renn...? Most of the men here grew up here! They've never starved! Or have had to kill just to survive! Even the soldiers and sailors! They may have thick skin from hard work but you can tell their hearts would rip with the lightest breeze!" Roslyn said loudly as she walked away from the table and opened a latch in the ground. It was likely her cold storage, since a bit of frosty haze came out of it as she reached in to grab something. She pulled out a large pitcher and closed the latch, returning to the table as to pour its contents into the cups.

Once she filled the cups she went and handed me one, which I took gratefully. I gave it a small sniff before taking a drink and I was glad it didn't seem to be alcohol or anything like it. It was just some kind of thick juice, some kind of apple.

"You're... saying the men here are weak? Weak willed I guess?" I asked, trying to fully understand.

"No... I'm saying a hardened man, who had endured real hardship, still broke down and was about to sell my daughter just for food. If I can't trust a man born and raised in such hardship, how could I trust any of the ones here? Raised in soft beds and coins in their pocket before their first day of work?" Roslyn asked me.

My gosh! What an interesting way of looking at it!

So she wasn't really bothered by the men here, or finding them ugly or something, but instead she was worried that the men here in this city would... what... Betray her? Down the line? As her former husband had?

"In theory such a problem wouldn't arise, since this place is too nice for such a scenario to even come into existence," I said softly as I watched her take a drink.

"Says who!? Before we got here huge monsters attacked the city, Renn! Anything can happen!" Roslyn said.

I flinched, since she was right. Anything could, and did, happen.

"So you'd want someone that you could trust, and know for a fact, that wouldn't betray you in such a way... no matter what," I said as I understood.

"Duh...? And how will I find someone like that here, Renn? Really. So it's fine. It's not like I actually need anyone, I've experienced it, plus I have Rosie, so I'm fine," Roslyn said.

It hurt a little to hear her say so, especially since she sounded so serious. That hadn't been someone just... giving up, or abandoning a dream or idea, that had been utter finality. She truly didn't seem to care if she ever had a relationship again or not, by the way she had spoken.

A little unsure if I should push the matter or not then, I decided to just let it be for now.

I wanted her, like Lamp and the rest, to have many children. So they could have children. So that over the years I could keep coming back and visit them... as I'd not done with Lujic. Or at least, not done enough or as often.

I wanted to never make that mistake again. I planned to visit everyone often, even if only once every few years. I wanted to watch Rosie grow up. To see her fall in love, and if able have children too. And then their children, and so forth.

It was too bad Roslyn's daughter was so old already, else I'd try to set her up with Lamp's son. But that was one of the reasons I had hoped for Roslyn to have already been in a relationship too.

Yet I understood her reasons for not wanting to, I guess...

She had loved someone. Trusted them. Utterly. And then found him conniving and scheming to do something utterly despicable.

Yes... I had absolutely no reason to not agree with her decision... even if it kind of hurt to do so.

"You're lucky you know, Renn," Roslyn then said.

I looked up from my cup, frowning at her. "Hm?"

"Vim. The Protector. I've heard the others speak of him too, though not lately. Heard most about him while we all lived in the guild building. They all have stories and stuff about him, how he's so loyal and protective... I'm jealous," Roslyn said gently as she ran her thumb across her cup's lip.

Gosh! "I am lucky," I admitted gently.

It was interesting to hear that even Roslyn, a human who was kept somewhat distant from our non-human members, had heard such gossip and rumors. Why was it that even someone like her had heard of and knew of Vim's loyalty yet they still found doubt in it?

Roslyn nodded, and then sighed. "If there's someone like him you can find me, I'd take that I guess."

I giggled at that. "You know he's pretty rare! Even in the Society! Which is really sad when I think about it," I said.

Even the men in the Society who were good men, like Windle, were... not like Vim.

"Of that I no doubt. I've met a few of your males, Renn, and I must say I'm a little disappointed. I met Gerald, Wynn and of course Pierre... honestly I was kind of hoping they'd all be like Vim. Not that I thought I could catch any of their eyes, or anything, but it would have been fun to have a few nights with one of them if they had been!" Roslyn said happily.

I groaned at her. "Roslyn..."

It was too bad Brom was gone. He had supposedly been rather... prolific, from what I had heard. But he had liked them older, hadn't he? Roslyn wasn't young, but she wasn't necessarily old either. Not yet, anyway.

"What? I'm just saying!" Roslyn teased me a bit as I took a drink.

Before I could say anything else, someone knocked on the front door.

I put the drink down and hurried out of the little pantry-like kitchen and went to the room opposing it. I grabbed my hat, as to put it back on, and went to hide my tail too.

As I did Roslyn slowly opened the door, and I heard her happy greeting at whoever she had found.

Smiling a little as I finished hiding my traits, I walked out to also greet the newcomer.

"Hey Merit," I greeted my small friend who walked into the house without even looking at either of us.

Merit waited until Roslyn closed the door behind her, and then glanced around a bit... likely to make sure we were alone in the house. I noticed she wasn't really looking, but instead smelling and listening instead.

Once she was sure we were, she glanced at me and nodded. "Sorry Renn, but we need to go back," she said.

Oh? "Okay," I said. If Merit actually came and got me, it had to be for good reason. She had let me spend nearly all night with Lamp the other night without bothering me, so I knew she'd not do so otherwise.

"Hmph. I knew you were busier than you were putting on!" Roslyn said happily.

Feeling a little rude, I tried not to get too bothered. "I'll come see you again before I leave, promise. We still need to eat at your little restaurant down the way," I said as Merit headed for the door.

"Right! I'll make sure Rosie comes with us, the little snot she is," Roslyn said with a smile.

I gave her a hug as Merit opened the door. "Let her live her life, Roslyn. It's what this all is for, after all," I whispered gently to the pirate.

"Mhm... true words, Renn," Roslyn whispered back.

Leaving Roslyn's home, I waved gently in goodbye as I followed Merit out of the house. It didn't take long for us to walk a few houses away, leaving the area.

"What's wrong?" I asked Merit.

"Light showed up. She wants to see you," Merit said.

I groaned and slowed down a bit. "That's not enough reason for me to leave, then," I said, a little upset. I'd only gotten to spend a few hours with Roslyn!

Merit snickered at me. "I warned you about her! And you're right, I'd agree, but if I didn't come get you they rest would just become all annoying and stuff. This is what you get for not biting her throat when you had the chance," Merit said.

"I'm worried that I'm starting to agree with you..." I groaned as we headed back to the Animalia building.

I wasn't sure what Light wanted, but it had better be important.

There was a chance the moment Vim got back that we'd leave. For one reason or another. So I had wanted to spend as much time with those I rarely got to see and although Light was interesting and of course a focus point of my worries lately...

I weighed those like Lamp, Roslyn and Merit over her. It was just how I was.

"Also Reatti wants to have dinner with you tonight," Merit said.

Oh! "That's great!" I said excitedly. I'd only gotten to spend a few moments with her on returning, so I was glad to hear she wanted to spend time with me. I had been so worried she was going to try and keep a distance from me.

"For you maybe..." Merit said with a sigh.

"What? You eat with everyone all the time, Merit."

"Not happily! Reatti's fine, though. We work together usually. But that's just it; I spend more time with her than most so I want to spend even less!" Merit complained.

I laughed at that, and her silly train of thought, as we headed back home.

At least... my temporary one.