

## Non Human 471

### Chapter 471 A Tosh A Day

"Are you really going to cry? In front of her?" Flarish asked, sounding as offended as he looked as he turned the boy's arm a bit.

The young lad had scales all over him, covered head to toe by them. They were so thick only a little bit of hair was on his head, peaking out between little sections in little tufts of red. Though he looked... a little outlandish, the pain and fear on his face was unmistakable. He glanced to our left, at the young girl peering at him from behind a door frame, then he hurriedly looked back at Flarish and shook his head.

"Then be a man already! Also it's done. You can go now," Flarish said, letting the boy's arm go.

The boy startled, expecting a jolt of pain to come from his arm falling to his lap... but obviously none came. He hurriedly glanced up and down, lifting his arm and shaking his hand in awe as he stared at it.

"See? Makes you feel really stupid now, doesn't it? Whining like a baby all that time," Flarish said, mocking the lad as he stood from his little rolling chair and stepped away from the bed.

"I... um...!" the boy wasn't sure what to say, or do, as he grabbed his elbow. He looked mystified on how he no longer hurt anymore.

"Next time catch your fall more gracefully," I said gently to the boy, who sniffed and nodded as I patted his back, as to get him off the table. Now that he was fine, his elbow set back into its socket, it was time he left. We had other tasks to address that were a tad more important than a young boy's roughhousing mishap.

Or at least, that was what I knew Flarish would say. Even though we didn't have anything else to really do. Maybe some paperwork, or to clean the office and check the stocks of inventory... but it wasn't as if we had anything pressing to attend to.

"Thanks doctors...!" the boy said happily as he hurried out of the room.

"Is it fixed!? Let me see!" the young girl's voice sounded a little too teasing as the two kids ran out of the office, laughing and talking as they did.

"Owch! Don't!" the boy shouted, his voice almost so shrill I had mistaken him for the girl at first. I frowned at the shriek, since it told me the girl had likely grabbed his arm. Probably roughly.

"Idiots," Flarish mumbled as he picked up a clipboard, likely to write down the information of our most recent patient. Others would have been shocked that he was doing it, and not making me his apprentice do such a troublesome task... but that was because they didn't really know the man. He was foul mouthed, and rude, but he was actually a very good doctor. A hard worker, who was by the book and would rather die than make even the smallest mistake. Even his setting of that boy's dislocated elbow had been so smooth it was humbling. The lad had been in a lot of pain, on the brink of weeping, yet he had set it without the lad even flinching. I could set a bone rather well, but could I do it so smoothly that even a young child on edge wouldn't notice the act as I did? I wasn't sure.

"Would you have done anything differently, Tosh?" Flarish asked as he kept writing on the little pad he was focused on.

I shifted a little, since I had been expecting such a question. Unlike Vim who taught by showing and doing, Flarish taught by making one compare their own thoughts and actions to those they'd seen and done. It felt more reactive than Vim's passive teaching, but honestly I liked it more. Vim kind of just... taught and taught, and sometimes you had difficulty keeping up and retaining what he was teaching because of how smoothly he did so. It felt like you didn't actually learn the knowledge, but was handed it on a golden platter. It was hard to explain, but that was how it felt.

Vim gave you the perfect answer.

Flarish made you find it yourself. And it was his method that made me actually feel confident I was learning correctly... though I'd always want to learn from Vim, if given a chance. Especially when you considered it was Vim who taught Flarish too.

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"A part of me wants to say that I would have done the annual check-up here and now, thanks to having the opportunity. But if we did that for every patient who visited us, we'd be overrun and lose track of it quickly," I said.

"And get incorrect data thanks to their conditions. His temperature, his reactions and bodily functions would have been altered thanks to his pain and stress. Giving you false information," Flarish noted.

Frowning at that, I nodded. He wasn't wrong... but wouldn't that be the case for any patient we saw? Even the ones who visited only for their annual check-up had issues, even if they didn't realize it. Everyone had something wrong with them, no matter how small or insignificant. It was why we were always busy, even though we really only had actual patients once every so often. Most of the time we dealt with little things, like that lad's broken... or rather dislocated, joint. The rest of the time we dealt

with the elderly who were having weird feelings and pains, and mostly just wanted assurance they weren't about to pass out when standing up from their bed and keel over.

Although this was not the biggest location, it wasn't the smallest either. This village had almost five hundred members, each a different species and bloodline with their own unique traits and needs. So we spent more time just... examining people, than we did actually tending them. In a way that was a good thing, but in others it made me feel like I was spinning my wheels.

Thus why I had said what I had. It hadn't just been a way to take an opportunity presented, but to also simply have something to do. Something that wasn't making bandages, cleaning the building of dust and such trifling things.

I didn't voice such a thing though, since I figured he was speaking from experience. I wonder what Vim would have said here and now? Something told me Vim would have smirked, but said nothing.

Flarish sighed as he finished writing and put the clipboard down onto the desk. He turned to look at me, and I felt his knowing eyes study me in a way that made me feel a little self-conscious. Just what was he looking for when he looked at me like that, I wonder? Uncertainty? Confusion? Confidence, maybe?

"How long have you been here now, Tosh?" Flarish asked.

My eyes narrowed as I nodded. "This will be my seventh month, sir," I said. I knew he knew. So why was he asking such a thing?

Flarish nodded slowly as he crossed his arms. The taller and thin man suddenly looked a little imposing. As if he had suddenly gained fifty pounds of muscle, though he obviously hadn't.

Wonder what he was. His wife was some kind of bird. She was a pretty, lovely, thing... him though? He was a grouch, and always seemed angry at something. He had a permanent scowl on his face, even when he was flirting with his pretty wife. Maybe he was just old. Though maybe that was a bad reason to use. Since that didn't explain Vim. Vim was always easy going, almost too much so. And if the protector's old age wasn't enough to make one grouchy, how could any of our normal members have right to such a claim?

"Is uh... am I not learning well enough?" I dared to ask, since he didn't seem to be willing to continue the conversation himself.

"I did not say that, did I...? I'm just debating if it's time I allow you to start performing first aid without supervision. Vim had me doing it about a month in, and my wife in two. Seven should be enough for even a slow learner like you, but... well..." Flarish hummed as he pondered it, and I wanted to groan.

Either compliment me or insult me, but don't do it like that! If anything wasn't that a tell more of his teaching methods than it was my learning ability?

"Flari, honey, if you keep being so mean to the boy Vim won't ever bring you an apprentice again."

We both turned to greet his wife. The shorter woman smirked at me as she nodded, confident in what she'd just said, and then turned and walked away... heading deeper into the building.

Flarish huffed. "Such softness is what's poisoning our society. Soft boys who weep from a fall. Soft women not knowing calluses are what make strong men! Soft men who take too long to learn...! Hmph.

Now soft husbands who can't argue with their wives! What is the world coming to, you think?" Flarish asked me.

I blinked and bit back a smile. "Vim once said the world was going to hell in a picnic basket. I don't know where hell is, or what a picnic is, but odds are it's as you say," I said.

"You've never had a picnic...?" Flarish asked, a little shocked.

It was my turn to be shocked too. Uh-oh. What was it? He was looking at me as if I was something weird. Not just stupid, slow learning or annoying... but actually weird! "Um... no?" I answered honestly. Just great. I just gave him something else to complain about! Not like he didn't already have a long list...!

The doctor sighed at me, shook his head, and then left the room... heading down the hall towards his wife. I hesitated at first, but decided to follow him... even if it meant a lecture. "Chloe! Pack a picnic basket!" he shouted.

Oh gods. Either I was about to be cast out and sent to this hell place or I was about to endure a ten hour learning session that would be full of choice words and disappointed huffs...

Honestly wasn't sure which was worse.

Chapter 472 To Doctor Oneself

"Feh. No thanks, I have enough headaches as it is!" Flarish said, his loud voice carrying through the building as I slowed a bit. Rounding the corner, I tried not to stand out as I walked into the room and joined the doctors and Vim in the living room behind our offices. They were in the middle of an important discussion, about a new location in the Society, and I didn't want to impose.

Vim glanced at me, but only for a moment. He was sitting at the table we all ate at, with Flarish and his wife. Like always the protector looked... tired. Though he showed no obvious exhaustion, at least physically, he did seem a tad sluggish compared to how I remembered him. He was leaning back in his chair, arm hanging over the back of it as if he was uncomfortable.

It was no surprise to see him so. The Society had not only grown tremendously lately... it was starting to get involved in the inner workings of the world. Politics and wars were starting to knock on our doors, and Vim was the one everyone expected to do the answering. There were of course people who acted as protectors, like him. Most larger locations had at least one person who was strong, typically a predator... a few even had monarchs. But when it came time for actual action, it was Vim they expected to do the deed. I felt exhausted being one of three doctors here, a town of less than five hundred, and he was the only protector for every location in the Society... not just one. I wasn't sure how he did it, honestly.

"Nerve and his family will be moving there, so they'll have plenty of doctors," Vim said simply.

That was news to me. I wonder if that meant one of his children would remain where they are now, or if the village they were all living in was going to be dismantled.

"How is Nerve? Is his wife still not speaking to him?" Chloe asked.

I smirked at that, since I knew that question hadn't just been genuine but on purpose. She and Flarish were having a small fight right now, since she wanted to have children. Or rather, another one. I hadn't known until recently that they already had several children, though I had no idea where they were. Probably elsewhere in the Society, being doctors and surgeons for other locations.

"They seemed fine? If they were fighting I didn't notice," Vim said with a shrug.

Who was dumb enough to fight in front of the protector anyway? Even Lilly the owl of discord was meek around him.

"Still, it's good to hear the Society is doing so well! To hear so many families are expanding, doing so much is so good to hear... really, it is!" Chloe said as she cupped her cheek, as if relieved.

I tried not to let my thoughts show on my face as Vim frowned at her, then glanced at me. I didn't move a muscle as Flarish sighed and stood from his seat. "I'll go introduce myself to the new members, at least. Will you need anything from us, Vim, before you leave?" he asked.

Vim's frown shifted a little, since he obviously noticed the odd tension between him and his wife. Vim didn't let it show past that though, as he shook his head. "Nope. There's a couple of them who had gotten hurt before I arrived, I've checked them but you might want to keep an eye on them as they heal up," he said.

"As I said. Enough headaches already," Flarish said with a huff as he stepped away, leaving the room... and eventually the building itself.

Chloe sighed at her husband as she leaned forward a bit, to rest on the table. "He's being prickly Vim, don't mind him."

"Flarish isn't prickly, he's just tired of idiots," Vim said.

"Oh? Calling me an idiot are you?" Chloe asked, a tiny smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Vim didn't miss a beat. "I was speaking about him, Chloe. I saw him looking in the mirror earlier, shaking his head and sighing," he said.

I couldn't help it, I laughed at that. "I don't think he's ever looked in a mirror!" I said, unable to contain myself.

Chloe too giggled as she nodded. "You're as gentle as ever, Vim. No... I've been trying to convince him to have another child. He's not too keen on the idea," she told him the truth.

Vim only nodded. "Children are scary, so I don't blame him. I was sent to find Celine's daughter not too long ago, without being told who she was. Imagine how that went," he said.

Now that was interesting! "Celine has a daughter?" I asked. I didn't even realize saints could have children! I thought they had to remain pure...

"Not her actual daughter, Tosh. Her adopted one," Chloe explained, likely knowing exactly what I had found so odd about it.

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Vim nodded. "A handful that one. How has this one been treating you?" he asked with a point to me.

"Tosh has been lovely. Flarish won't shut up about how good he is at listening, and obeying orders. Though that might be why it's time for him to go," Chloe said, speaking as if I wasn't even in the room.

"Wait what?" I asked as I stepped closer to the table.

Chloe didn't even look at me as she gestured lightly my way. "I think he sees Tosh as a young lad. I mean, Tosh is young still, but he's not a boy anymore. Half the time when not working he's sneaking off and mingling with the young ladies all day," she teased me.

Although a tad embarrassed for my activities to be so blatantly called out like that, I didn't blush when Vim glanced at me with a smirk. I did however feel a tad hotter after he teased me about it. "So your reason for wanting to become a doctor worked out as you planned, huh?"

"Vim!" I groaned.

Chloe laughed at me. "So please, Vim. If there's another location that could use someone like him, consider whisking him away there for me. Maybe with Tosh gone Flarish will get in the mood. And don't bring back an apprentice for awhile, just in case too," Chloe said.

Gosh! I was being tossed aside for such a stupid reason!

Vim frowned as he tilted his head and pondered a moment. "Doctors are always needed, in a way. But as it stands right this moment I can't think of any singular location that needs one post haste..." he said.

"Are we even sure I'm capable enough yet...?" I asked, still trying to comprehend how my entire future was being debated all of a sudden. Weren't we just talking about another location? The saint and her daughter? Chloe and Flarish's personal matters? Now we were talking about sending me to a new place? Talk about whiplash!

"Oh please, Tosh is more than capable. Flarish won't shut up about how well the lad is doing, he'd be fine on his own now," Chloe said.

Chloe was a kind person, usually saying such things often, but hearing her say so here and now to the protector of all people was... very humbling.

"Hm... and you Tosh? What're your thoughts on the matter?" Vim asked with a glance at me.

I stood up a little straighter. "If... If they think I'm ready, then sure, I guess...? I don't know if I really am or not but..."

"Of leaving, I meant. Would you be okay with that? You've been here for some time now, haven't you?" Vim asked, specifying.

"Oh. Right..." I frowned at that and wondered if I would be. I'd been here a little over ten years now... would I be comfortable with leaving? For a small moment I thought of the friends I'd made, particularly a couple of the women...

"He's thinking of his little trysts, look at that face," Chloe teased.

Unable to say anything in defense, I simply grumbled and shrugged. "I'd be okay with it. I've not settled down, if that's what you're asking Vim. Though if I lingered here much longer I might end up doing so," I said. Whether I wanted to or not, considering circumstances...

"Hm... Well I can swing back this way and take you with me to Telmik, if you want. They'd know where you could go, or give you options at least. Say in a few months?" Vim suggested.

I nodded, feeling a little... lightheaded, as I realized I'd just changed my fate.

In a few months I'd leave here. To head elsewhere, and set forth on a new path. A new life.

It was understandable, and expected I suppose. It always had been. I had been raised and taught to be a surgeon. That meant I didn't just help people, it also meant I was supposed to look at the world in a certain perspective. The same way that made Flarish grouchy, and Chloe a little flippant. I was supposed to assess the world, and my place in it, as I would a patient's injury.

And doing so meant it was time for me to go.

Three doctors for such a village wasn't outright overkill... but it was too much. Especially when you considered Flarish and Chloe should both have new apprentices, which would inflate that number further soon. Or well, their children in this case.

That meant it was time I moved on. My skills and knowledge weren't honestly needed here, not with Flarish and Chloe here. So to be better put to use, it was time I moved elsewhere... maybe even took an apprentice myself.

It was a daunting realization, one I'd not even considered before now, but it was something that had always been known in the back of my mind. I knew coming here that such a future was to come, even if eventually. But for it to happen here and now...?

Wonder where I'll end up...?

"Good. Now that is settled, I'd like to make you lunch before you leave, unless you're going to turn me down again," Chloe said as she stood from her seat.

Vim sighed, in a way that told me he did indeed plan and want to turn her down... but Chloe left the room in a hurry, before he could actually say so.

The protector stood from his chair as well, a little slowly... as if he had stiff legs. I tried not to stare, since I wasn't sure if the exhaustion and wear I was seeing was real or not. Did he even feel pain...? I once saw him tear off one of his own arms, one that had been dangling by just a few strands of flesh, and he hadn't even winced. It was hard to believe a little muscle strain was something he even registered...

"Well done, Tosh. Not many can earn that old grouch's approval, you're one of few now," Vim said as he patted me on the shoulder.

I smiled a little sheepishly. "Hard to believe, I've not heard it from him yet myself."

He smirked a bit. "Never will. Just the kind of man he is. I'm uh... going to try and go get out of lunch, wish me luck," he said gently as he left the room as well, likely as to head to the kitchen and attempt the impossible.

"Good luck, Protector."

Chapter 473 Tosh's Questions

Following Vim up the mountainside, I tried to keep my breathing relaxed... and knew I wasn't doing a very good job of it.

The worst part was I only had a small bag on my back. Probably twenty odd pounds at most. Nothing compared to the large packs Vim was carrying. Each pack he had on was nearly twice his size, and he had three of them... plus a bunch of smaller bags and pouches all tied to them. I wasn't even sure how the leather was even holding together on those things.

As far as I was aware we were still several hours from the village near the top of the mountain. The dense woods kept our surroundings quiet and cool, even though the summer sun was beating down on us, but I was starting to question if I'd made the right call or not.

It felt good to be needed... but by the gods dead and alive this was tiring. At least I'll not need to do this again anytime soon, for now.

"Take a moment, Tosh."

I glanced up and found Vim staring at me. He had stepped back a bit on the game trail, nearly bumping into a nearby tree with the huge packs as he did so. I nodded, thankful for the moment of reprieve as I went to stand near him... and simply stood there.

My legs were burning. My lungs hurt, and I felt slightly dizzy. I knew it was a combination of factors. I was exhausted, since I'd not been so physical in years. I also knew we were very high up, far higher than I'd ever been. Air was different up here. The kind that made one... weaker. Vim would be able to tell me the science of it, but I wasn't in the mood to hear it. Right now I just wanted to hate it.

Then of course, probably the biggest factor, were my old injuries. Although they were long since healed, I could feel the slight tug of tightness around the scars and throughout the rest of my body. Maybe I should have rested for a few more months, and not have relied on bravado...

"You doing okay?" the protector asked.

I nodded even though I knew he saw the truth. "I feel... exhausted. But I'll be okay, I think," I said.

"It's the elevation. It's been a slow incline, all things considered, but we're still pretty high. If you were a normal human you'd be on the ground, unable to breathe right now," he said.

Sure felt like it.

"Are we going much higher?" I asked. The trail we were on kept going, for some distance, and it looked like a massive hill to me. One I was doomed to climb.

"A bit, but then we'll head back down for a few hours as we round the mountain. We're actually above the village right now, but it's the only path there," he said. "Well... other than clambering over sharp rocks, at least," he added after a moment.

Right. He could do that, even with his great luggage, but I couldn't.

Taking some deep breaths, I sighed them out as I tried to get the tension in my lungs to relax a little. They felt... itchy, almost. As if I'd just swam underwater for a long period, and had strained them. I was going to sleep good tonight, as long as I didn't catch any weird illnesses or anything. Hopefully I don't start coughing, because it felt almost like I wanted and needed to... Wouldn't do well for my reputation if I showed up sick to my new home. Doctors weren't supposed to get sick, at least so said Flarish.

"Do you ever get sick, Vim?" I asked, both to know and to fill the air as I caught my breath.

"Sure I do," he said.

"Really?" I asked. I'd never seen him so, or heard such a thing happening before.

"Indeed. By the way, Sally told me you've recently found a penchant for nuns?" Vim asked.

I stuttered a bit, shocked at both his outrageous attempt at changing topics and the wild accusation he did so with! "Sally wouldn't lie like that!" I said.

He smirked at me. "No, which makes it all the more serious. What's up with you, hm?"

Groaning at the protector, I took a deep breath since I felt a little hot all of a sudden. I was going to give her a piece of my mind next time I saw her! "It was just a small fling...! It's your fault for leaving me in Telmik so long!" I said, defending myself.

"It was only two months, Tosh."

"That's a long time!"

"I suppose," Vim said with a grin.

Gosh! I knew that rumors and gossip were powerful in the Society, but this was terrible. "How'd she even know...? We were so secretive about it..." I groaned. Hopefully nothing bad happened to her, then. She was a part of Celine's little sisterhood... I wasn't outright sure if remaining chaste and pure was a requirement, but it'd not surprise me if it was... if she got banished or excommunicated because of me...

"You're fine, Tosh. You mistakenly thought those like her are so secretive and pure about it. They're as bad as the rest, if not worse, in some cases," Vim said.

"Kaley didn't want anyone else to know!" I argued.

"Because she's weird like that...? I don't think there's a man in the Society she's not sunk her teeth into... Hm..." Vim frowned as he thought about it.

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"What, you too...?" I asked. I'd been traveling with Vim for a few years now, on and off, and I had genuinely thought he avoided indulging in members. He made a point to not get too close to anyone, on purpose.

"No. I'm not her type. Not that I would anyway, I've never cared much for fish," he said.

"It's not like she actually tastes like fish, you know," I said, though I knew he was just making a silly joke. Vim wasn't the kind to ever judge or make comments about one of our traits or bloodlines, he was above such things.

"Still you're turning into quite a playboy aren't you? What happened to that innocent young man who blushed at even a glance from the girls?" Vim asked, teasing me.

I wasn't going to mention I had just felt my face grow hot a few moments prior, maybe Vim hadn't noticed. "Turns out being a doctor is quite a perk," I said.

He laughed at that. "Right?"

Smiling at him, I realized something important. He had been teasing me this whole time, of course, but I had heard the way he had spoken of Kaley earlier. He had, like always, teased with a pinch of truth. He had mentioned I had grown to have a penchant for nuns.

Once again he, even if indirectly and offhandedly, had brought up his distaste for religion. So it wasn't just a rumor.

"Not to uh... change the topic, Vim, but can I ask something? Before we get to the village?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"I've been meaning to ask... you don't care much for faith, do you?"

The Protector of the Society visibly calmed a little, his grin turning into a soft smile, as he nodded. "I don't mind faith, Tosh. I mind those who abuse it. Just as I mind monarchs who abuse their rule, politicians who scheme, warlords who spark wars on purpose and so on and so forth," he said.

"So it's part of your view of freedom. You simply hate anything that tries to influence someone," I said, understanding.

"If you wish to sum it up in such a way, yes. Basically," he said with a nod.

"Hm... but do you deny the gods?" I asked.

"You're asking the man who has killed gods if he denies them...?" he asked, and I could see the smirk tugging behind his placid frown. He was teasing me again!

"You know what I mean! The real gods!" I said.

"Real gods...?" he asked.

"The ones who made us! Obviously the ones you killed weren't actually gods, right? They were like the monarchs, creations and whatnot," I said, gesturing lightly behind us. Not that there was a monarch behind us, but we had recently met one. We passed through one of the Society locations that was guarded by a monarch a few days ago.

Vim sighed gently at me. "Where's this coming from? You ask of my stance on faith... are you trying to understand it, or do you want to just poke holes in it?" he asked.

Shrugging lightly, I decided to just say it. "I guess I've always thought you to be very scientific... being so knowledgeable. So..."

"So...?" vim asked, since I'd gone quiet.

Taking a small breath, I nodded. "So why deny the gods their right to their claim? It's not scientific."

"How so?" Vim asked.

"They were real? We have proof. We," I pointed at us. "are proof! The monarchs, the saints, their magic and powers... How can you deny the gods their decree when such obvious signs of proof are all around us?" I asked.

"Right. Very scientific," Vim said lightly.

"Vim..." I groaned, this wasn't a time for him to tease me! I wanted to hear his actual reasoning!

He nodded, obviously hearing my discontent in my voice. "I get what you're saying. And for the record I never claimed gods weren't real, or that their powers weren't real either. I just disagree with... everyone's interpretation of them, is all."

"So..."

"So what? Are you asking if I believe the gods existed?" Vim asked.

"I'm asking why you don't subscribe to any of their faiths, when out of anyone you should be the first to do so," I said.

"Kaley wouldn't have filled your head with this. Where's this coming from?" he asked.

"Don't change topics!"

He smirked and nodded. "Fine. Caught me. So you're now a believer and you're asking why I'm not?" Vim asked.

"Well... no. I'm not either, but..." I hesitated, since now I felt like I should be the one wanting to change topics.

"What...? You're not either? Then why are you grilling me like this?"

Grilling...? What a term. "Because in my perspective you should be either the leader of such faiths or a staunch supporter of them at least. Being who and what you are," I said.

"Thanks," he said with a scoff.

"You know what I mean, Vim!"

"No. I don't. How do you reason your own lack of faith yet don't excuse mine?"

"Because it makes no sense...! You've walked amongst them! You yourself don't deny they existed, or exist, yet at the same time don't worship them? It makes me... question," I said.

Vim sighed as he stepped forward, forcing me to join him. I didn't feel as winded as before, but as I followed him I realized he had likely returned us to walking as to avoid us from talking about this much longer. He knew I'd eventually start to wheeze after a bit of walking, and thus be less inclined to speak.

I didn't say anything about it as I simply followed him.

"So? What is it you actually want to ask, Tosh?" Vim asked after a moment.

I took a deep breath and sighed it out. "I've learned so much. About the world. People. How our bodies work..."

"How a woman's body works, maybe," Vim teased.

I ignored him and continued. "Yet I can't help but feel like I'm neglecting another part of life. If gods made us all, and for a purpose, how am I doing it? Should I be doing it? Is there even a purpose...?" I wondered.

"Maybe I did leave you in Telmik too long..." Vim mumbled.

I smirked at that. "I'm just trying to understand my place in the world Vim, that's all."

"Hm... and that's a lovely thing indeed. The entire point of the Society, to let those like you do such a thing. But if come back and find you in a clergy robe, bald head and humming hymns I'm going to throw you off a cliff," he said.

"Lucky for you I can't see myself going that far. I'd throw myself off a cliff if I had to vow off women, I think," I said.

"Careful now. You think doctors get attention? You'd be shocked the kind a priest gets," Vim said.

Although I knew he was teasing, I also knew like always he had done so with truth.

And as such I couldn't help but frown and ponder such a fact the rest of the way to my new home.

Chapter 474 A Doctor's Priority

Okay. That was enough cut off. Time to staunch the bleeding and start cleaning the wound.

I worked swiftly as I packed the deeper part of the wound, and then went to picking out the little bits of wood inside of her. She'd been pierced by a sharp chunk of wood, one unluckily too big to have left inside of her. They had pulled her off the spike of wood and brought her to me, and hadn't been too gentle while doing so.

It was hard to blame people though. Especially considering what was going on.

The whole room vibrated as a distant roar pierced the world. My whole body shivered as I tried to focus through the monarch's roar, it was so loud and so... strong that I could almost my bones ache from the sound alone.

The roar wasn't the only thing screaming. The girl cried out as I pulled out a tiny piece of a splinter, one that looked insignificant... but must have gotten lodged into a nerve or something like it. She started to thrash as I pulled it out of her wound and tossed it aside.

Luckily the girl's brother, or whoever he was, was holding her down. I had given her something for pain, but didn't have the time to wait for her to become fully numb. That was still many minutes away from happening.

I had no time to spare. I knew, thanks to the loud roars of the monarch nearby and the cries of pain and fear from everyone around the tent that she was not going to be my last patient. It was a shock she was even the first one, to be honest.

As the monarch roared, and the ground shook, I began to debate if I should close the wound or not. Although she had been punctured rather deeply, it was more of a giant gash than anything else. She was lucky enough for it to have not really damaged or impacted any of her intestines or other major organs. The piece of wood that had hit her had been somewhat blunt, so it had pushed aside most of the stuff as it punctured her. Odds are she would have... complications, as she healed. But for now she was in no immediate danger of dying. At least, as long as I hadn't missed anything obvious...

"Tosh!"

I ignored the speaker for a moment as I studied the girl's wound. I pulled back some of the linen I'd packed in already, to check where it had been bleeding the worst and found it to be looking rather good. There were still little blotches of fresh blood, seeping from the flesh walls, but nothing spurted and none of it was a deep black.

"Tosh!" the woman shouted again, and I finally turned to look at her. I found Sally, which was odd. Why hadn't I recognized her voice? She looked fine, though covered in mud. Had she fallen somewhere...? This tent was set up on grass, the thick kind. I wasn't sure where such mud was nearby...

"What?" I asked. She should know better than to distract me while operating. She usually did...

Sally simply pointed. I followed her point and found one of the beds a few sections over had a person in it.

One missing their lower half.

Taking a deep breath I nodded and turned my attention back to the girl. I decided to leave the wound open for now, to let it drain a bit, so I quickly packed it and then looked to the man who had been holding her down. He didn't need to do so as fiercely as before, she was now lying on her back though white in the face.

"She'll be fine. Keep her here, don't let her touch the wound. If it starts bleeding again let me know," I said, and then turned and hurried over to the man missing his bottom half.

"Doctor!" A woman was clinging to the man's arm. Or rather, he was clinging to her. He was breathing quickly, but awake and aware of his surroundings... and...

"You're going to die," I said to the man, confirming what he already knew.

"No!" the woman screamed at me, but I ignored her as the man held my gaze. I didn't look away from his eyes since I'd already verified it. The man wasn't just missing his legs... but half his torso, and although whoever had brought him in here had scooped up some of his organs as they did they hadn't done it properly.

There was no chance I could save him. The man wasn't even bleeding anymore, half the bed was marred with blood and organs but it wasn't soaked. He'd already bled out before being brought into here.

"Tosh, please!" Sally grabbed my arm, reminding me she was here. I glanced at her, noted her look of utter sorrow beneath her mud-caked face, and then looked back to the man.

With a nod I stepped closer, and went to better examine his injuries... but every moment that went by that I did, only further confirmed what I'd already assessed.

This wasn't triage. I wasn't being cruel. I was simply stating a fact.

I don't think even Vim could save this man. I wasn't sure if a saint could even do it either. That was how...

Then the man went still. The bed creaked a bit as he fell back a bit, going limp. The woman who he had been clinging to shrieked at the sight and began shouting his name, grabbing at his face and head as she did.

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Her screams broke my heart, but I didn't let it affect me. Because someone else was being brought into the tent.

I turned to watch two men carry a third into the tent. The injured man had a huge grin on his face as I pointed them to one of the empty beds. "Lost my leg'doc!" the man said, proclaiming loudly as if it was a great feat he'd just accomplished.

"Yes you did," I said as I pulled out my scissors and went to cutting at his pants. His leg was missing from above his knee, but the pant leg still remained under it. It was tattered and torn, and soaked in blood, but I quickly got it off and found...

"Crazy isn't it? The monarch's tail did it," one of the men who had carried the injured man said as I studied the almost impossible wound.

It looked like his leg had been cut off by the sharpest blade known to man. It was so perfect it almost made me woozy, because I couldn't outright comprehend it. Even the sharpest axe cut couldn't do this...

As I went to tie a tourniquet, since they hadn't done so, I clicked my tongue and shook my head. "You're a lucky man," I said.

"So they sayin'," the injured man said.

"Does anyone know where his leg is?" I asked. If the cut was this clean... then if we preserved it, and tendered his wound well enough, then when one of the saints showed up they'd be able to attach it and heal him. I'd seen it done before.

There was no answer, so I looked up from the wound I was examining to find the two men who had carried him in to be distracted. I turned to follow their gaze, and realized they were staring at the bed I'd just walked away from.

The woman was weeping uncontrollably as she held the dead man who was missing half his body. And Sally was standing there before them, glaring at me.

She must have said something.

No matter. Deal with it later. If I dallied not only was there no chance this man would ever walk again, there was a chance he'd die. Although the cut was as flawless as it were, it didn't make his injury any less real.

Returning my attention to the man's leg, I thanked the dead gods for creating such a dangerous beast. The wound being so clean and flawless made it easy to address and handle, so I was able to finish with him in time to address the next wounded individual.

She wasn't carried in. She ran into the tent, falling to her knees. Sally was next to her before I was, and we both got her to her feet and to a bed.

I recognized this woman. I knew her name. I remembered saying it as I amputated her destroyed arm, talking to her and calming her down as Sally and I tended to her... but somehow forgot everything about her the moment the next patient arrived.

Then another.

And another.

Some I was able to save. Some, like the man who had lost half his body, I wasn't able to do anything for. A few of them, I was able to at least make their last moments painless. For others, I tried everything and yet accomplished nothing.

A few I allowed Sally or others to tend to, since their wounds weren't drastic enough to prioritize over others. While others got to my tent too late. I tried not to keep count of the ones who were brought in already dead, but in the back of my mind the six of them lingered even as I focused on surgeries.

Then... as I realized there was no new patients, and I had been lately checking on and working on people I'd already administered aid to... like the very first patient of the day, who had been pierced by sharp wood, I also realized the world had gone quiet.

The tent was still noisy. There were dozens of people in here, and not just the patients. There were family and friends, tending the people I'd operated on. There were those like Sally, doing all they could to help in any way they could. There were people bringing in fresh supplies, such as boiled water and linen, and then...

Frowning up at Vim, I wondered what he was doing standing in front of me.

"Vim? Why aren't you killing that monarch?" I asked, a little upset with him. The longer he took the more work I had! Usually he wasn't so rude!

Vim though simply smiled as he reached over and patted my shoulder. As he did, I realized how... weak I felt. Before I realized it, I was sitting down... in a chair, and Sally was standing next to me.

"Well done Tosh. Go ahead and rest a bit. Take care of him Sally," Vim said as he squeezed my shoulder, enough so to make me flinch.

"What? Vim! I still need to!" I started to stand up, to complain. There were still things I needed to do! I needed to check that man again, the one with the cut off leg! They had found his leg, supposedly, and I wanted to see if it was... But I couldn't stand up. Someone else was holding me down, on my other shoulder.

"Hush Tosh. Relax. Vim and the rest can handle it from here," Sally said, her hand the one keeping me seated.

I wanted to growl at her, since she was usually not one to tell me to stop trying to help people. In fact she usually got angry with me when I didn't try hard enough... yet...

As I studied her face, I realized she wasn't muddy anymore... in fact she looked a tad too clean. Where were the bloodstains? A few of the people we had helped had been rather hurt. She and I had been drenched in blood a few times as we operated and saved them... yet Sally looked... clean... almost too clean. As if she'd just recently bathed and put on a new set of clothes.

The sight of Sally, looking rested and cleaned up, forced my mind to understand.

"Huh...?" I mumbled as I realized what happened, or was happening.

I was out of it. I had been so focused, that I had not been aware of the passing of time... or even the world around me. It was likely long over. Vim had slain the monarch, and had likely done it a long time ago. The chaos was over.

I suddenly felt how dry my mouth was, and how I had a slight tremor... particularly in my hands. That wasn't from cold. This shaking was rather obvious. It was from a lack of rest and overexertion... possibly even from dehydration...

"It's okay. Well done," Sally whispered as she patted my shoulder. She did so much gentler than Vim had done, for which I was thankful. My other shoulder still stung a little.

I glanced around... and found that she was right.

Vim wasn't the only one here now. The familiar gray robes of the church folk were scattered in the room, and off in the distance I saw the glow of a saint's eyes. She was kneeling in front of the man whose leg had been cut off. He was in a chair, and smiling like mad. Was she healing him? Connecting his leg with her divine powers...?

Good... very good...

Blinking heavy eyes, I took a small breath and nodded.

Right. Time to rest.

I could go back to helping once I did.

Chapter 475 A Village's Vote to Run

"And what will you do when they come for ores? For their weapons? Wood for their furnaces? When their hunters scour the forests for food and game, finding our fields? What will you say and do then?" the old woman asked the crowd.

For a small moment no one answered, not even her opposition... though it was rather clear that said opposition was losing both their position and their numbers.

This morning most of the room, most of the village, had been on the side of staying here. To wait the nearby war out. To risk their lives, even though the two human nations were waging in brutal scorched earth tactics only a few dozen miles away.

Now though, not long before dusk, the room was now somber. And few if any voices spoke in favor of staying here anymore. Now most were like her, stating the obvious reasons to leave.

I myself believed in leaving... since, the entire reason this village was holding a vote, was because of a prophecy. To me that prophecy alone was good enough reason to abandon this village and move elsewhere. Why risk such a thing? Why risk going against the powers left behind by the gods...?

Anyone who thought they could go against the gods was stupid. Only Vim could do that. At least, only he could do it and survive. It was still up to debate if he actually did it in a way that was a victory, and not just him simply surviving the wrath that followed such sacrilegious actions...

"I do not wish to abandon our home... I was born here. Just as all of you... but does that mean we should die here too? What of our children? Their children? If we stay here and perish, we rob the world of all the lives that we could be leaving behind. I can think of no greater sin than that!" the old woman finished her speech, and then with a firm nod and huff she sat back down. A few of the people near her nodded and clapped, though quietly, in agreement.

Although I agreed with her, in spirit at least, I didn't clap. It was not my place to. I'd only been here for about a year, but I wasn't an official member of this village. I was just a visitor, and although I had a right to vote in anything concerning the Society I didn't have the right to vote on this here and now.

This was their vote. For their own futures. I had no say in it.

A chair made noise as someone stood. The whole room turned to look at the new speaker, a younger man. One with white horns on the top of his head. I recognized the horns, though not him. His wife had visited me recently concerning, what she was hoping, was her new pregnancy. She had wept in joy when I had told her it was highly likely she had indeed conceived.

"I remember when this village was but a few families. Back when we had simple little wood huts, and argued over who got to milk the cow every day," the man said, making me frown.

He wasn't a young man at all! Did that mean his wife had been much older too...? But she had said it was her first...!

Gosh our people were so odd sometimes...!

The whole room was silent, hanging onto the horned man's words. I rubbed my temple as he turned a bit, to point at his wife. She was sitting a few seats behind him, for some reason. "After all this time... I've finally been blessed with a child," he said, a little somberly. He sounded a tad sad over it, instead of happy, for some reason. A few people clapped, making small noises as they congratulated him. He ignored them though as he shook his head. "I would give anything for the child to be welcomed here. This wonderful home we have built. This place of quiet, but gentle, peace. But just as I am old enough to remember settling here, I am also old enough to remember the chaos before those days. The long days of traveling through wilderness, doing all I can to avoid the humans and monarchs who hunted me. Well... I fear those days have come again. I will not stay here. Most of my kin have their horns adorning walls; I'll not allow my child's horns to join them."

The man then sat back down, and although it took a few moments... people clapped rather strongly in agreement.

I gulped a little as people whispered, mostly about agreeing with the man's statements.

Many here were those like him. Although thick in the blood, they were not warriors. Not strong, at all. They were all simple people, who spent their days farming and fishing. So I knew his words had

resonated deeply with everyone here, even the few hotheads who had been so vocal about staying a few hours ago.

In fact where were those people...? I glanced to the other side of the room, to one of the older men. The man with the large beard of white sat in silence, his face lowered and sunken a bit... and not just from age.

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Was that remorse on his face...? About his earlier statements, I wonder, or something else? Or would he stand to argue again that the village should not flee, and try to fight and protect their homes?

"I too would give anything to keep our home."

I turned my head, to see the new speaker. A pretty woman in a thin dress. She had fur running up and down her arms, which is probably why her shirt had no sleeves, and she had fluffy ears on the top of her head. She was likely some kind of forest animal.

The fur covered woman nodded as she gestured towards me, or rather in my direction. She was angled where the man with white horns sat between us, and it was he she was actually gesturing towards. "But as Grovo says, if we linger here... if we risk it, and stay here, all that will happen is our doom. We are not warriors. We do not outnumber the humans. Even if we defeated the ones who found us, culling them before they could do any harm, all it will do is draw attention to our forests. And before long, the human nations will send their armies. To track us down, and hunt us, as they have done to so many more. We all know what humans do. They will abandon their war against their own kind, and ally with one another, just to hunt us down!" she quickly shook her head, and shivered. "No. I do not think it wise to risk it. I say we leave. We can make a new home elsewhere. Find new forests, and new rivers and lakes. We can till new farmland, raise new cattle. We need not die for soil, dirt is dirt. Let us find it elsewhere."

"Well said," a woman a few seats from me said as the fur covered woman sat back down, and people clapped for her.

Crossing my arms, I leaned back a bit in my chair and wondered if this was the typical way such votes were going all throughout the Society. I myself had been involved in many votes, of course, and have seen plenty in my life... but this was the first one I'd ever sat in on that involved such a momentous decision.

Choosing to allow someone to join the location, or banishing a problem? Sure. Deciding on if to build a new building, such as a new well or warehouse? Of course. But deciding to abandon the whole location, to essentially uproot their lives and flee for their lives...?

This was a first for me. And it was unsettling. In ways I couldn't understand.

It should be simple for me. I was used to triage and making hard decisions. Sometimes you had to... cut your losses. Sometimes a limb couldn't be saved. Sometimes a child's innocent mistake couldn't be fixed. Sometimes you had to just... look a person in the eyes and tell them the truth. One that they might not want to hear.

So I shouldn't be bothered over this. Since that was all this was. They were making a decision. A hard one, but still a necessary one. If they wanted to survive, to see another day, they needed to abandon their home.

The human wars were too close. Too dangerous. Too volatile. They had no choice.

It was either stay here and die, or flee and survive.

Yet why did I almost feel as if voting to survive was the wrong choice...?

It was a weird feeling, since I wasn't even allowed to vote. Although I was here, and had been here for a year, I wasn't a member of their village. Not a proper one. I was simply here to help them prepare. Vim had brought me here, with the warning from Celine, that the fires of war would reach their doorsteps. I had joined Vim so that I could tend to the inhabitants here, as a doctor, to ready them for a long journey. One that might be slightly difficult, since they'd have to head north into the cold during winter.

So I had no right to vote. Even if they'd let me do so. But... I couldn't help but wonder how I'd vote, if given the chance.

I was a doctor. Every move I made, every decision, was supposed to help save lives. And as such, it was clear to me that I should... if I could, vote to leave. To survive another day. To not try and risk the ire of the human's wars.

Yet I felt sick thinking such a thing. Enough so that... well...

Maybe I was not as wise as I thought. Maybe I was emotional. Maybe my long years of training, and forcing myself to put emotion aside, has made me a little more reactive and touchy about certain things, such as abandoning a home...

Though it wasn't as if I had a home to act so over. Although there were many places I've spent a long time at, such as the village where I learned how to be a doctor or Telmik where I always spent time in-between my tasks and duties, I honestly haven't ever seen any of them as a home, have I?

"All those in favor of leaving?"

I blinked and sat up straighter as I watched hands quietly rise all around me. I had drifted off in my thoughts and hadn't noticed they had begun their vote.

One didn't even need to glance around to know the vote to leave had won. I couldn't even see a single person around me who didn't have their hand raised, it seemed. Even the people who had voiced the opposite had their hands raised, like the old man with the white beard.

After a few heavy heartbeats, the old man with the beard stood. He suddenly looked decades younger as he took a deep breath and puffed out his chest, suddenly looking strong and firm. He nodded as everyone lowered their hands, and they all awaited his words.

"Then so it is. We shall summon Vim and begin the process... let us begin to pack and say our goodbyes, with our heads held high."

I nodded as everyone else did, but for a different reason.

That meant it was time I left. To let Vim know it was time to come back here, as to help these people.

Doctor's were overworked, I swear.

Chapter 476 A Doctor in an Oasis

"Okay Nasba, I have to know, do they twitch and squirm or...?"

"Gosh! You're not half as handsome enough to say such a thing, Tosh!" Nasba huffed at me, and she spun around as she did. Her feathers smacked me, rather harshly, and then she stormed off... though before she rounded the corner and left my sight she paused a bit to glance at me. She gave me a red faced smirk, winked at me, and then her tail of feathers danced a bit before she left my view.

"Ha," I smirked at that, and realized I had a shot after all.

Reaching up to rub my arm, where her feathers had hit me, I wondered how far those feathers went up her back. They were oddly soft, considering how hard they had hit me.

Such members were becoming rare, those with such traits. Ears? Sure. Horns? Aplenty. But large tails or wings? Rare indeed. There were a few ducks here at the Oasis, but only half of them had such tails like Nasba did.

Turning and walking down the hall, back to the section where many of our members lived, I decided my visit here will be fun. Nasba's always been a slight flirt, but I'd never gotten more than a wink from her. It was at a point now where I kind of felt like I needed to get at least a kiss or something, else I'd not be able to hold my head high anymore.

Though that was if no one else nibbled me up first. I'd already noticed a few gazes since showing up, the type of looks that told me I needed to be careful. Many of the members here in Merit's kingdom were... well...

I didn't want to say the more primitive types, but I wasn't sure how else to describe them. Those who lived this far away from the rest of the Society usually did so for a good reason. And that reason was normally because they didn't fit in with the rest of us. There were a lot of predators here, or people who had been banished from other locations for one reason or another.

I'd not experienced it myself the few times I'd been here, but I'd been told such as by Azlo that there were several women here who would outright try to force themselves on you if you weren't careful. Some men found that enjoyable, others not so much. Azlo was big and strong enough that he didn't need to worry, but I on the other hand wasn't so lucky... I knew for a fact that there were several members here who could manhandle me if they really wanted to.

"Would I be unhappy with that or not, though?" I mumbled in thought as I rounded a corner.

"Ah! There you are!"

I glanced up from my thoughts and found Pierre. The young rat had a huge grin on his face as he hurried up to me. "Welcome back Tosh!" he greeted.

"Aye, thank you. I'll be here for a few months, so let me know if you or your family need anything," I said. There were a few doctors here, such as Yina, but they weren't as adept in certain ways. Particularly when it came to surgeries and stuff.

"Hm... we do, but I fear there's nothing anyone can do, sadly," Pierre said with a sad smile.

"Oh? What's wrong?" I asked. The poor lad looked heartbroken all of a sudden. I didn't like seeing such a look on those like him. He was regrettably very human, unlike his parents, and so I always worried for him and those like him. We usually lost such human looking members rather quickly, either to simple old age or the harsh world. Sometimes even to depression.

"It is my mother, I'm afraid. She is... old. The kind of old that hurts," Pierre said softly.

Ah... "I see... Well, all the same I'll give her a check-up, yeah?" I said. Maybe she was sick...? A lot of our older members were stubborn, and attributed simple diseases and ailments to their old age even though it wasn't true.

Pierre frowned but nodded. "I'd be ever so thankful. But I'll have to convince her to come from the nest, she's been sleeping a lot," he said.

Nest...? "She's somewhere I can't go?" I asked, trying to understand.

Pierre nodded. "Hidden away, with father. I'll go talk to them! If I can get her to come out, I'll let you know!" Pierre said, and then before I could say anything he ran off in a hurry.

Watching him go, I sighed a little. See? Such odd ones here.

Yet as odd as they were, they were still members. People I had a duty to help.

"Ah, so it's the young doctor! Was wondering who I heard!"

I turned and found a new face. One I didn't immediately recognize, not even by features. The man had some fur on his cheeks, and a very fluffy head of hair. He waved at me, beckoning me to join him into the room he was leaning out of.

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I walked over, and found a small room with a couple chairs. Judging by the book that was laid on the armrest of the chair, open and laid facing down, he had been reading just now.

"My name's Paul. It's nice to meet you, doctor! I've heard of you!" Paul introduced himself, a little loudly as he held his hand out.

I took it, dedicating his name to memory... for now at least. "Paul, I'm Tosh. Hopefully you've heard good things," I said.

Paul grinned at me as our hands separated. "I hear you were trained by Vim, helped him during some of the wars, and now go around healing the sick and warming the beds of lonely daughters!"

I flinched. "Yeah... that's me..." I groaned as I realized how bad the rumors had gotten. Was I really that bad...? It wasn't like I was pushy about it, I just... liked company, is all... and what was that about daughters?

He chuckled a bit as he sat back down in his chair. His book almost slid off, but he caught it before it did. "Whoops. If I ruined this Nasba would skin me alive," he said as he picked it up, closed it and placed it down in-between him and the chair's armrest, into the cushion.

"She can be a little harsh," I said.

"She gets it from Merit. Which is funny, since our little queen's been so kind and gentle lately!" Paul said with a laugh.

I smiled at the man who seemed rather jubilant. Either he was just a happy-go-lucky man, or something had put him in a good mood. Maybe the book he had been reading?

"I've actually not seen the queen yet, I probably should go let her know I'm here," I said.

"What's that? So you really are a womanizer, don't want to spend any time with men do you?" he asked.

"Please. More like I don't want to get on Vim's bad side, he likes her," I said.

The man frowned as he nodded. "That is the truth isn't it...? Hadn't thought of it that way..." he admitted.

Well I had. I once made the mistake of insulting Merit in front of him. Vim had made sure to make me regret it; I still remember the few sentences he had said as if it was yesterday I heard them. He had basically crushed my faith in but a few words, offhandedly as if talking about the weather. It had been rather unsettling, almost as if he had somehow been reading my mind and knew my deepest and darkest worries and fears...

"Well, I know you have Yina here, but if you want to talk about any health concerns just let me know," I said, deciding it was indeed time that I went and found Merit. I wasn't near any windows, but I knew it was likely drawing near dinner time. It was one thing to not go say hello right away, it was another to do it days later. I was, as Paul said, known to be free-spirited and a little odd but I wasn't rude. At least, I didn't believe myself to be.

"I appreciate it. I'm perfectly healthy, at least I think so, but there are a few who might benefit from a gander by your eyes," Paul said.

I nodded. "Anyone or anything noteworthy?" I asked. I had asked Nasba too but she hadn't mentioned anyone by name, specifically.

Paul frowned and then shook his head. Then he raised an eyebrow at me. "Did you come here on your own, by the way?" Paul asked.

"No. I came with Vim a part of the way, separated with him near the lands of stone and came the rest of the way with some human members."

"Ah. We do have a lot more of those lately. Something to do with the north being so chaotic, I guess. Wars, right?" he asked.

Didn't he just mention said wars a moment ago? I nodded though, since I wasn't sure if I had simply misunderstood or something. "Yes. It's rather bad up there right now."

"Funny. Usually we're the ones seen as not having a good time. Oh well," he said with a shrug.

"Hm... alright then. It was nice to meet you Paul," I said, stepping back out of the room. He bid me farewell with a wave as I headed for the main section of the castle. I wasn't sure where Merit would be, but I figured if I found Nasba or one of her other advisors I'd be able to track her down from there.

Sighing gently as I walked down the hall, I wondered what to think of the man. I knew I had just thought that most of the people here were... odd, I couldn't help but think something had been off about him. I'll ask Nasba about him later.

"Tosh!"

I stopped walking and turned, to watch Nasba hurry on over to me. I bit back a grin, since I liked how she hurried over. She was always energetic, but it almost looked like she was excited to see me. As if we'd not just parted ways a little bit ago.

"I knew your feathers couldn't resist me," I said once she got close enough.

Nasba scowled at me. "Gosh you're as bad the humans! Merit wants you."

Oh. Right.

I nodded, and did my best to not feel too insulted. As bad as the humans? Really? I mean, maybe...

Nasba turned, as to lead me to the Queen of the Oasis, and I went to join her.

"How is the little queen anyway?"

"She's happy. She recently sent a request for Vim, so she's excited that he'll be here soon," Nasba said.

"Oh...? I was just with him. We separated not far north," I said.

"Hm...? I wonder if he knows then or not. Vim usually hurries over whenever she asks for his help," Nasba said with a frown.

I nodded. He did. I mean... Vim hurried for anyone really, but there was no denying that he liked Merit. She was like Lilly, or Celine, to him. A tad more important than the rest of us.

"He called me his friend the other day, you know," I said as I remembered it.

Nasba sighed at me. "Flirt or boast, don't do both!"

"It hadn't been a boast!"

"Forget about Vim and Merit, what are we eating tonight?" Nasba asked as we rounded a corner.

Glancing at the duck and the calm smile on her face as she waited for my answer... I realized I'd just been invited to dinner.

Chapter 477 To Fail Is To Live

I've lost many patients in my life.

I used to count them. To remember each and every name. I didn't do that anymore, since it hurt. It hurt too much, and distracted me.

But every so often... well...

The soft rainfall on the metal roof above drowned out my heartbeat, and the cold from the open windows nearby was quickly cooling my bloodstained hands and arms.

Taking a deep breath, I gulped down my emotions and thoughts for a moment as I re-assessed what was in front of me.

A woman was lying on a cot in front of me. A pretty blonde girl, who had striking red eyes. They were staring at me with a look of utter worry... and weren't focused or moving. She had a very light gown on, but it was now soiled and stained. By blood and much more.

She and I weren't alone in the room. Another life, another failure of my own, rested in my arms. The small baby wasn't breathing either, like her mother.

Two souls. I hadn't been able to save either of them.

"I'm so sorry..." I whispered as I reached over to brush off some of the blood from the babies face. I wasn't sure whose blood it was, the mother's or hers, but it didn't really matter.

Unlike her mother, the baby didn't have red eyes. She also didn't have the tiny little scales all over her body either.

The doctor in me, the scientist, knew that was the probable cause of death. The child had been a half-breed. It was becoming ever more common with pairings between vastly different bloodlines, and even humans, for children to be born stillborn or worse. There was no... outright obvious reason for the child's demise. Nothing outwardly told me what had been wrong with her, but there had been something terribly wrong.

At first I had thought the child had gotten stuck, or maybe was being strangled by its own cord... or maybe the mother had certain traits which caused complications, as some of our people had. For instance Nasba's people were sometimes born with broken tails, since they popped out with them

already formed. The child was a half-breed, so there was no telling how the traits of the parents would form and manifest. Though obviously now it was clear none of that had been the case.

This child hadn't seemed to have had such problems. Once the mother's life had become in danger, truly in peril, I had went into motion. I had cut the baby out of her, in a way I've done many times. I knew how to do it. I knew how to do it in the way that kept both the child and the mother safe.

Yet it hadn't worked this time. The baby had been dead before I had even pulled her out.

Gulping a heavy heart, I looked up away from the baby and at the empty room around me. It wasn't a large room, but I felt as if it was a massive cavern. I felt cold. Freezing, almost.

These people had customs. One of those customs was no one was allowed to see the baby before the mother and father. It was considered sacrilegious. It had something to do with their culture, and how they perceived souls and stuff. Basically they believed a child's soul would be stolen if it was seen by someone other than their parents first. They were so serious about it that it had taken almost a full day before they had allowed me in here to try and help the woman.

They had been willing to overlook that very real rule in the mere hope I could save her or the child.

And I hadn't been able to do it.

This was my fault. I should have forced myself in here sooner. I didn't just allow the child to die, I killed the mother too.

Because I had obeyed their rules. Because I had just stood aside and allowed it to happen.

A harsh wind blew into the room, and I shivered. I blinked a few times, and realized I couldn't stand here forever. It was disrespectful to the dead.

Taking a breath, I gulped my shame and sorrow down and coughed a bit. "Marrow?" I spoke up, my voice cracking.

No answer came, and I knew it was not because they hadn't heard me.

Like me they were likely stunned. They knew what had happened. Anyone would.

The mother had been screaming in pain, after all. And now not only was she silent... so too was there a distinct lack of a babies cries.

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Even a fool would know what had happened.

"Marrow...? Would you please come in, Marrow?" I asked again, speaking a tad louder as I did.

The door, which hadn't even been closed all the way, opened. An older woman walked in, rather briskly, and then shut the door behind her.

I held the older woman's gaze, and gulped again as I stepped around the cot... and gestured lightly to the nearby table nearby. The one that had fresh cloth and linens, originally intended to cover and warm a freshly born babe.

The woman didn't say a word. She understood. She walked over, picked up the cloth and went to bundle up the child. She took it from me, as gently as if the baby was alive, and then she nodded. "Thank you for trying, Tosh," she whispered as she glanced up at me.

I clenched my jaw and nodded. "I'm so sorry. She... the baby was dead already. While inside," I said simply.

The woman nodded, obviously understanding.

"I... I don't know your customs, Marrow," I whispered as I glanced at the cot. The woman's face wasn't facing us, but I could still see the look on her face.

"None you need worry over, doctor. Let... let us handle it from here, please," Marrow said gently.

I nodded, and did my best to not let my relief be noticed as I stepped around the older woman.

Opening the door was easy. Enduring the looks of half the village as I stepped out, into the crowd... and past them wasn't.

Walking stiffly, I headed away from the house and headed for the small cottage they'd been letting me use since I got here. I wanted to wash away the blood, it was starting to harden... and I hated the feel of it. The drying blood was a terrible reminder of my failures.

I knew from memory that my cottage was on the other side of the village. A larger distance, actually, since they spaced their homes so far apart. Yet it felt as if only a few moments had passed from leaving the stares of the crowd and finding the door handle of my front door. I opened the door to the house, entered it... and quietly closed the door behind me.

The house was small. Like most here. But it was warm. Someone had lit the fireplace, and by the smell of the freshly cooked food had left me a warm meal as well.

"Wouldn't have done that for me if they knew how it would have ended," I mumbled as I headed for the backroom. Where a tub was located. I was going to just... sit in it. Cold water. Maybe I'd just drown myself while I was at it.

"Yes I would have."

I frowned and paused. I turned my head and found a girl I didn't recognize.

No.

I did.

I knew those red eyes. The light scales that glimmered a tad and were scattered all over her. That blonde hair. That look.

Either her sister or her daughter. Of the one I had failed.

I gulped, and suddenly was very aware of her. She was young in my eyes, but I knew better than to assume she was. These people here were thick in the blood, like me. Or well, most of them were. A few, like that woman's husband, hadn't been... but this girl was for sure like me. She could be my elder for all I knew.

"I..." I started to speak, but couldn't. My voice caught in my throat, and I immediately hardened myself. I coughed, just once, and then buried away my thoughts and emotions. Suddenly I was once again ready to operate, to perform surgery. Just, this time, on my heart and not on flesh. "I'm sorry. They're dead," I said softly.

The girl didn't even blink as she nodded. "I know."

My fingers twitched, and I assumed she knew because it's been longer than I thought it has been. I had been out of it while walking here. Probably had been more than long enough for this girl to learn of what happened, and then run here.

Was she here for vengeance...? I couldn't fault her if she was. Hopefully she was far older than she looked, then; otherwise I'll have to endure a lot of pain before she achieved it. She was small and scrawny, the small gown she wore hung off her as if it was many sizes too big.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, failing once again as I gave a weak and pointless apology.

"Mhm... I can see you are," she said with a nod.

Was that sarcasm...? If so that was cruel. I felt like my heart was about to stop. Even with me trying to keep my mind blank and empty... I still couldn't help but think of the woman's look on her face. Or the coldness of the baby in my hands.

"Come on. Let's get you cleaned up, then you can eat something and get some rest," the girl then said as she stepped forward, grabbing my hand.

"What...?" I shifted, and suddenly felt on guard. Why would she say such a thing? And why was she grabbing my blood-stained hand so gently like that?

She ignored me as she tugged me towards the backroom, the one I'd been heading for. The door was already open, and judging by the steam coming off the water inside the tub it was not only full but full of hot water.

Had she done this...? When? Why?

Maybe it was a part of their customs. They were an odd people... yet for as odd as they were, like so many in the Society, they were also so kind and gentle... to the point they even seemed willing to forgive me...

"Come on. Don't cry, a man shouldn't cry," the girl said as she started to help me undress.

"And a young girl should know better than to intrude in a man's privacy so boldly," I grumbled as I went to get my own clothes off before she could do it herself. I usually didn't mind it when a woman did such a thing, but right now all it did was make me feel even more like a loser than I already was.

"Hmph. And to think Vim spoke so highly of you. Come on! I worked very hard on that meal and I refuse to let you dawdle and let it get cold!"

Gosh she was worse than Sally or Nasba. Who was this girl? What was she doing?

Although I wanted to complain, I didn't. I got undressed, got into the tub... and before I knew it I was scrubbed clean, fed wonderful food, and then tucked into bed.

Chapter 478 A Doctor's Purpose, A Man's Desires

Washing my hands, I watched through the window above the sink as Vexli walked towards my cottage.

The sight of her, carrying a large basket, made me pause. She was wearing the same dress as always, and she had that typical upset frown on her face. The one that made me relax, since it told me she was actually happy. She only wore that frown when she was content.

It was that sight, that woman, for my being here. I hadn't been summoned back to this village. I simply... returned for her. The same girl who I had failed all those years ago, the same one who had thumped me over the head because I had grown depressed over failing her and her family.

Out of everywhere in the Society, the hundreds of locations spread all over the world... it was here in this little mountain village I felt truly at home. But it wasn't the location. I knew it was just her. Vexli and only Vexli made me feel this way. And I couldn't help but feel happy over that fact. As if it made everything right in the world to know so.

Wiping my hands dry, I sighed a bit as she left my sight. I knew in a few moments she'd be pushing the front door open with her butt, all the while letting me know how humbled I should be for having multiple pairs of clothes.

The door opened a bit roughly, and she strode in with her head held high. "Tosh! You really should be thankful!" she said as she entered the cottage.

"That you'd wash my clothes for me? Yes. I am," I said.

"Huh? No. That you have so many! Most don't even have any holes in them!" Vexli said as she went to put the basket down on the table in the center of the house.

Smiling at her, I nodded. Typical. She didn't care at all about the fact she was so helpful to me, like usual. "Well... clothes shouldn't have holes in them, Vexli," I said.

"That's impossible. Then you'd not be able to put them on," she said as she grabbed the clothes from the basket and went to putting them away. There was a small dresser near the bed, on the opposite side

of the room. I watched her make quick work of putting the stuff away, and noted the way she neatly folded each piece as she did so.

For a people that were... not as keen about clothes as most of us, she sure was proper with mine. Like most of her people here, she only had a few sets of clothes. Most were just simple dresses, things that honestly weren't as thick or as well made as they should be for living here in the cold mountains. It rained and snowed here, a lot, making it unusually cold compared to other places. So you'd think they, being some kind of lizards, would want to bundle up in warmer outfits.

It didn't take her long to finish putting them away, since even though she always made it a point to note how many sets I had, I honestly didn't have many. In all honesty it was time I got some new clothes, since everything I had was getting slightly ragged.

My plan was to get her some too when I did. I wasn't any good at making clothes, though I could sew. Flarish had taught me how to tie knots and sew rather early, since he believed it was a good method to teach one the necessary dexterity for performing surgeries and whatnot... but I had little talent in actual weaving or crafting. Not enough to make a woman's set of clothes, at least.

Vexli turned to look at me, and her frown deepened. "Wait... are you cooking!?" she asked, finally noticing.

"Actually, I just finished," I said. It was why I had been washing my hands, all that was left was to set the table.

"You're kidding! A man's not supposed to do that!" Vexli complained as she hurried over to my little kitchen area. There was a small table built into the wall next to the bucket-like sink, and a small oven over the fireplace. A pot was currently simmering above it, and there was bread and other little foodstuffs sitting and waiting on plates.

Vexli groaned at it all. "And you cook so well! That's not fair!" she complained.

"I'm a doctor, Vexli. Not only should I be good with my hands, I should know all about nutrition and whatnot. So this is not wrong, it's proper for me," I said.

The woman I've grown to cherish groaned again, because she knew she couldn't argue. I'd long since understood her and her people's way of thinking. I knew how to properly win my points, and argue them when needed now. And that was the best way to do it.

Vexli and her people had odd customs. Even odder beliefs, in certain ways. Some of their ideas on how the different sexes had different duties weren't too... farfetched, I guess, compared to many others in the world but they also had some really odd things too. For instance she didn't wash my clothes because she felt that one of her duties, but rather because she found it fun to clean such odd clothing. Here the men were the ones who were supposed to typically wash clothes, though I wasn't entirely sure why they saw it as a manly task. Usually manly tasks involved hard labor, or creating something. Not here though.

Plus it wasn't as if she was upset that a man had made dinner. Instead she was upset that I hadn't allowed her to do it for me. To them, cooking meals for someone was seen as something romantic. And for whatever reason Vexli hated it when I took that from her, even though it was supposed to be a romantic gesture on my part when I did so.

"You should be happy Vexli, I think you're the only woman I've ever made food for," I said. It wasn't a true statement, of course, I've made food for plenty of people... but it was true when you interpreted it the way I meant it.

She's the only one I'd make food for, romantically, in this way.

Vexli crossed her arms and sighed at me. "How long have we known each other?" she asked.

Oh...? I had to stop and ponder that. At least a few years... right? "A couple years now?" I answered, a tad hesitantly.

It was actually hard to know. I haven't been here in her village this whole time. Occasionally I left, to either help Vim or whoever else needed my help. Sometimes I left for months at a time... yet it felt as if I'd been coming back her a lot lately, and staying for longer...?

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"Eight years," Vexli corrected me.

Eight...? "Wow. Really?" I was a tad shocked to learn so. Maybe I was getting old, or something. Has it really been that long already?

"You cook me food," she said with a gesture at the food.

"Which is going to grow cold. Why don't you help me set the table?" I asked as I went to do so myself.

Vexli joined me. "You bring me clothes," she then added as we quickly put aside the now empty basket, and then set our tiny little dinner table for ourselves. I was a little proud at how it looked, once it was all laid out before us.

"Um... I do?" I said as I watched the way she studied the food. She either was judging which to eat first, or what to throw at me. It was hard to tell.

After the table was set Vexli went ahead and sat down first. She gathered up her utensils, yet before taking the first bite she pointed her fork at me. "Do you know what you're known for? Hm?"

Known for...? "Being a doctor...?" I asked. Like always it always felt like we were having multiple conversations at once. Hadn't she just been talking about food and clothes? And what was she asking? Did she mean in general? By the villagers here? The Society as a whole?

"A flirt!" she said, a little angrily.

Oh. "Well... I am?" I admitted as I sat down as well. This wasn't the first time we'd talked about this, since Vim couldn't help himself whenever he was here. He always teased me about it, especially when Vexli was within earshot. He found it particularly humorous how Vexli would glare in silence at me when he mentioned the names of women I've had little trysts with.

"You are! This is all proof of it!" she said as she gestured at the food.

Right. Cooking dinner was akin to bedroom talk to these people.

It was my turn to frown, and I wondered if Vexli was trying to tell me to knock it off. "So uh... are you telling me to stop it?" I asked. Although it sadden me a little, I'd understand it. After all it wasn't as if she and I were like that. We were close, at least I believed us to be, but not that close.

I've never even seen her naked, let alone done anything such as that with her.

She bit back a quick response and instead bit into some bread. She chewed rather angrily as she glared at me, and I wondered if maybe I'd insulted her somehow.

It wasn't impossible, after all. I'd grown to understand the culture here, but it wasn't as if I'd adapted to it. I was still... well... me. Maybe I'd done something wrong, something that was likely not even related to the meal at all.

What could it be, I wonder? If she was upset at me, and calling me a flirt, I knew it wasn't because I'd done something like that. In fact I think this was the only village I'd ever been to in my long life that I'd not bedded any of the women who lived in it! In fact I only knew a few of their names, since I spent so little time with any of them!

The thought that I'd not done such a thing kind of irked me. Why was that?

"You don't even know why I'm angry, do you?" Vexli asked with a bit of food still in her mouth.

"I'm assuming I did something rude. You normally don't get too upset with me over a lack of knowing certain customs and stuff, so what's up?" I asked. Maybe it was something as simple as me not putting flowers on the table or something.

Vexli sighed at me, swallowed the rest of her food and then visibly relaxed. "Still the idiot who wept that night, aren't you?" she mumbled.

I grabbed a fork, but hesitated. That night...? She only ever brought that up when she was actually upset. She was speaking of the night I had failed to save her younger sister and her baby.

"What'd I do, Vexli...?" I asked gently, feeling as if I'd just been hit in the gut. I thought of that failure often, but hadn't in a long time. At least a few years, I think. Lately the failure I'd been thinking of was that village that Vim and I had gone to help, but found them burnt down. By the Epoch fanatics.

"It's fine. You'll figure it out one day, though if I can wait long enough who knows?" Vexli said with a shrug as she started to eat in earnest.

Great. I did do something. Just what could it have been...? I've only been back for two days, but nothing odd had happened since. The village, like always, was safe and normal. Vexli was happy and healthy. She had even hugged me upon seeing me this time, instead of just frowning and huffing at me as she had last time.

Surely it wasn't the meal. I've cooked for her before, on several occasions. She always put up a stink about it, but it never lasted... and usually by now she'd be praising me for my tasty food, and asking about my recent adventures.

Watching Vexli eat, with a different kind of frown than usual, I wondered how I could make her happy again.

This visit wasn't going to be a long one. Although the wars were ending, there was a bunch of discord in the Society. Celine had recently passed away, and so Vim had left to take a bunch of the members somewhere across the sea. Although he should be back any day, the Society was now a little on edge thanks to his absence. I knew I had to leave soon, likely within a few days, to head to Telmik and see if I was needed anywhere. So I didn't want Vexli to be upset with me. I was only going to have a few days with her, and then I'd have to leave again... likely not returning for months, once more.

We weren't married. We weren't even lovers. But I vastly enjoyed her company. I absolutely adored her, especially that upset frown she always gave me. There were only a couple people in this whole world I genuinely loved, and enjoyed spending time with and those people were Sally, Vim, and this woman sitting across from me who was stuffing her face with stew. And with Vim off on his little excursion, and Sally building Lumen with Brandy and the rest... this was the only place, the only person, where I could rest and feel at peace.

While I traveled, helping the Society and doing whatever I was tasked with doing... it was moments like these I longed for. Sitting here at this tiny table, in this small cottage, spending time with her. These moments were my refuge.

She meant a lot to me. Everything. So...

"What? If you stare so much I'll get angry," Vexli said between bites.

I gave her a gentle smile, and decided to play her favorite game with her after dinner. The people here played with little marbles, like children, but they were rather serious about it. They held tournaments and everything. Vexli, regrettably for me, also took it seriously... and she was one of the better players at

it. To the point it was difficult to play the game with her. I myself was not a very competitive person, not in that way, so it always made me feel a bit uncomfortable.

Plus she usually ran around the village telling everyone she beat me afterward, and such made others hurry over to challenge me too. And I hated that. It was one thing to play with her, making her happy, it was another entirely to entertain the rest of them.

Still... I knew it'd instantly make her happy. And for me, here and now, that was all that mattered.

"After we eat how about we have a match?" I asked.

She immediately sat up straighter. "Really!?"

I nodded, and did my best to not let my relief become visible on my face. She had brightened up as I had hoped.

"Wonderful! If I win, you have to do me a favor okay!?" Vexli asked as she grinned and pointed her fork at me, it had a piece of bread stuck on it.

Frowning at her, I nodded. "Sure...?" What'd she want, I wonder? Or rather, what did she want me to do?

Vexli's grin widened, almost to the point it made her look silly. Yet I enjoyed the sight of it... basking in it, as we finished eating and then went to play the little game.

I lost, as always, but found out by doing so I won in my own way.

Chapter 479 Diagnosis

For once in my life, I felt lost. And I wasn't lost, because I was following Vim. And Vim never got lost.

We weren't walking very fast, since we had two wagons behind us. There was a tad fewer than fifty people, forty-seven, riding and walking along said wagons. They were all wearing the colors of the Church of Saints, though most didn't have robes on. The weather was too cruel for such attire, what with the cold wind.

They were the last remnants of our members from the Kingdom of Flowers. A kingdom that no longer existed, with its royal family slaughtered and all its major cities currently ablaze.

The Kingdom of Flowers hadn't been our kingdom, we hadn't been related to it in anyway. Pretty much all of our kingdoms were gone, even Merit's Oasis was dried up and gone. But the chaos of the war that had swept across the nation had made it difficult for our people, per usual. Luckily most had evacuated and moved long before the war even got too bad, but these people hadn't. The worse the war got, the harder they worked and more they got involved.

I wasn't entirely sure why they had waited so long to leave such a destroyed country, but I assumed it was because of their faith. They had been running a wayward point for refugees fleeing the country. Helping the destitute and downtrodden. I didn't fault them for such a thing, though I did find the idea of a bunch of non-humans risking their lives and identities in such a way rather foolish. Why didn't they let the humans handle it? Didn't the Church of Saints and Songs have countless human members now? Should have just left it to them.

Wonder what Vexli would think of such a thing. She, like the rest of her village, were a tad too kindhearted in my opinion. Odds are they'd have stayed just as long as to help, if they had been in such a position... Which meant I'd have stayed too, and...

I flinched as I realized I was once again thinking of her.

What was that? The tenth time in as many minutes?

Glancing at Vim, I bit the inside of my cheek as I tried to comprehend how distracted I was.

I mean, I didn't really have to be on guard. Vim was here. And we were no longer in the collapsed kingdom of flowers, we were now in the lands of the blind. The far southern reaches of it sure, but it was still safe. Honestly Vim's presence alone made it as safe as can be.

No one was hurt. No one needed medical attention, or anything. Everyone here was competent. One of the nuns even had a heart within them, a rather strong one per Vim's earlier statement. So there was really no need to feel as if I was a failure for not being fully alert and getting lost in my mind... but still!

Lately I'd been finding myself thinking of her and her village more and more. It was what I thought about most, I think... but usually I was still able to distance myself. Still able to focus on my task at hand and not feel... so...

"What's wrong, Tosh?"

I blinked and looked up, finding Vim who had slowed a bit so he could walk beside me. He had spoken quietly, likely as to not be heard by the people behind us, but not so quietly that I could pretend to have not heard him.

"I uh... I'm distracted," I admitted.

"Can tell. About what? Or is it who?" Vim asked with a smile. The kind of smile that told me he already knew full well what was wrong with me.

Which meant he'd soon be teasing me about it... which made me wish I had not fallen prey to my weak thoughts. Lately Vim's teasing had been a tad too on the nose, and it made me want to squirm in embarrassment.

But...

Gulping a little, I nodded. "Something is wrong with me Vim..." I admitted, deciding to just take the opportunity to say so. Maybe being honest with him wouldn't just keep me from being teased, but would help me actually find an answer to the reason.

"Hm," Vim simply nodded, patiently waiting for me to explain.

The story has been illicitly taken; should you find it on Amazon, report the infringement.

So... I tried my best to. "I'm distracted. Terribly. I can't focus, and it's so bad that it worries me. What if something drastic happened? What if I had to perform surgery? It's one thing to fail someone because of not being skilled enough, or things out of your control, but what if someone died because I wasn't paying attention...? It'd just..." I knew I was rambling a little, but it was all true. I couldn't stop thinking about Vexli, to the point it was concerning.

"Tosh... you can't be serious..." Vim said.

I wanted to growl at him. "Don't sound so disappointed! I'm being serious!"

"I can tell. Want me to slap you over the head or just tell you the truth?" Hesitating a moment, I was about to ask for both but Vim didn't give me a chance. He simply reached over and thumped me on the chest, right above my heart. "You're in love with her, idiot," he told me.

About four steps later I came to a stop.

Vim did too, and I closed my eyes as my head started to hurt.

Of course.

"Can't say I'm surprised. If anything I'm surprised it took so long. So? Do you want a congratulations, or should I start to tease you now?" Vim asked.

Reaching up, I rubbed my face as I groaned.

One of the horses pulling the nearest wagon huffed behind me, telling me it was annoyed I was in its way. I stepped forward, returning to walking next to Vim as I swallowed a bunch of curses and slurs, mostly ones directed at myself.

I was in love with her! It was so obvious now, to the point I felt like a fool. I deserved to be laughed at!

"That's why she's been saying that stuff lately. She's upset that I've not said it, or admitted it," I groaned. My most recent visit, she had stood there all awkwardly as I had put shoes on as to take her home. Since it had gotten late.

She had been waiting for me to simply tell her to stay. That she didn't need to leave just because it was time to sleep.

Suddenly so much made sense, and I now didn't just feel like an idiot I felt like an absolute jerk.

Vim placed an arm around my shoulder, pulling me into him as if I was a kid and he my big brother. He squeezed me a bit as we picked up our pace, telling me I had started to slow again and allowed the horses to get too close.

"How long have you been seeing her now?" he asked.

"I... I don't know. A couple dozen years, I guess..." I groaned. Gods I was terrible! No wonder she's been so prickly lately! What kind of man took this long to notice? Especially me!

"Hm... wait. Why do you look like your life is over? What's wrong?" Vim asked, studying me.

"Because it may as well be..." I moaned.

"What...? Because you're now going to want only one woman? Are you that much of a fiend?" he asked, teasing.

"No! Because I've screwed up!" I said, defending myself. He thought I was upset that I was now not going to get to indulge in other women? Did he not realize I'd not done such a thing in... well...

My stomach started to hurt as I realized I'd not slept with anyone since I met Vexli. Since that night her sister had died under my care.

How the hell had I not noticed, then?

"So...? Screwed up how?" Vim asked, a little gently.

I sighed and nodded. "She's been waiting. All this time. For me to just tell her. And because I've not noticed..." I gestured a little in front of me, as if I could somehow point directly at the reason I was so stupid.

"Ah. Right. Well, luckily for you she's full-blooded. Plus a lizard. They live a long time. Next time you see her just set the record straight and do what you're supposed to. Be a man," Vim said with a pat on my shoulder.

"Easy for you to say Vim."

"It is," he said with a small snicker.

Sighing at him, I nodded. "Fine... I love her. What do I do now, then?" I asked my friend and teacher, hoping for insight.

"Marry her? Settle down? Have children? Raise them to be grumpy little doctors like yourself? Really Tosh it's not that complicated," Vim said with a smirk.

Again. For you, maybe.

Vim then gave my shoulder another squeeze. "I'm happy for you. Might want to check and make sure you don't got a bunch of kids running around first though, or at least let the lizard know beforehand. Lizards are known to eat the offspring of their mates that aren't theirs, it's a territorial thing," he said.

Shaking my head at him... I couldn't help but smile.

Vexli would find that hilarious. Yet... like always, Vim spoke with a tad hint of truth.

They did indeed have a custom of monogamy. One that lasted even beyond death. Maybe Vim was trying to warn me about something she'd actually do if I wasn't careful.

Although I couldn't help but think about Vexli... for the rest of the trip north I thought long and hard of all the other women I've known, as to check and to make sure just in case... Diagnosing myself, as if to check for diseases before I asked for her hand in marriage.

Better safe than sorry, after all.

Chapter 480 Sally

"I can't wait to see her break your heart!" Sally said happily.

My eye twitched at her. "Very rude."

She snickered happily as she walked ahead of me. We were alone, heading up the mountain towards Vexli's village.

I had hoped Vim would have joined us... so he too could witness Vexli and I exchange vows, but the darn fool was off helping Light or something. I wasn't entirely sure what he was doing, or where, but I knew it was important. Too important to distract him with a simple wedding, at least.

Honestly I would have waited to have it, until he could have joined as well, but Vexli and her people had a very stupid tradition... one that kind of uh...

I sighed as I stepped over a branch. The rustled a bit as I walked over it, since it had been a recent dropping. The thing still had green leaves all over it.

"Don't think I've ever met these folks. They kind of stick to themselves out here, huh?" Sally said, likely just making small talk as we traversed the dense path.

This wasn't even really a path, honestly. I don't think it's even a game trail, what with the thick bushes and fallen trees and branches all over.

"They are content in their village. And it's safe and hidden from everyone, so they don't have to worry about much. Even when that mercenary war happened not far from here they hadn't even known about it, thanks to where it is," I said.

"Right? Hold on, I need a breath..." Sally huffed as she paused a moment, putting a foot up on a larger log as if to stretch a bit.

I stopped with her, and watched the way she arched back a little as to stretch her neck too. Sally didn't look tired, and in fact looked just as I remembered her from forever ago, but I knew it was likely her age showing. She was older than I was, though I wasn't sure by how much, and I was supposedly a few hundred years old already.

Actually...

Why wasn't she married already too? Sally was beautiful. And unlike me, was not just very well respected throughout the Society but genuinely loved. I don't think she's been banished from anywhere, ever. And she's always involved in the bigger workings and whatnot too...

Plus she was actually a lovely person. So lovely that I had never even thought about trying to bed her, because it would have felt... wrong, I guess. She was in my eyes not just a friend, but maybe even a sister. A family member.

"Have you found anyone yet, Sally?" I asked gently.

"What...? If you start boasting and teasing me just because you've found someone who finally got pregnant I'm going to thump you!" Sally said, though with a grin.

I grinned back at her. "Please don't say that when we get there. They actually have a very serious rule about it, if she has a baby out of wedlock the man gets hung since it's seen as assault," I said.

"Even though she's happy with you?" Sally asked.

I nodded.

"Huh... well I guess I can't blame them. That's a good way to keep people from doing anything stupid, I guess," Sally said with a frown as she thought about it.

"Or just makes people do even stupider things," I said.

"Probably. But who am I to say? And concerning your question... no. I've not found anyone. Unlike you I don't hop in and out of beds every chance I get," Sally said.

"I've told you that's not how it happened..." I mumbled.

She chuckled at me and then swapped the foot which was resting on the log. She stretched her other leg for a moment, and then nodded at me. "I've been looking, though, you know? I really have."

"Oh...?" I nodded gently, and wondered if I should tease her... or if this was the wrong moment to do so. She suddenly looked, and sounded, a little serious.

"I'm not sure why I'm finding it so difficult. Brandy thinks it's because I waited too long. You know, now that the Society is all... smaller and stuff," she said.

Right... We had lost a lot of members during the wars, and then several thousand had left to the other continent. "Can I uh... ask something a tad personal, Sally?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"Why'd we never do anything?" I asked.

She scowled at me, for just a tiny moment. "You're like a little brother to me. Plus I don't like how you smell."

"Smell...?" I frowned at that. Really...? That was super surprising, because usually my smell was what so many women first used as why they had wanted to taste me. Even Vexli commented often she liked it.

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Sally nodded as she frowned. "By the way have you ever noticed Vim doesn't smell?"

"Hm? Yes. Not only doesn't he have a scent, nothing he touches has a scent either for a long time after he messes with it," I said. I'd noticed it before, back during the wars. A few times he had been covered in gore and grime, and yet hadn't smelled at all. It was rather obvious.

"Makes me wonder what he actually smells like... you know?" Sally said as she frowned in thought.

Oh...? Wait...

Studying my friend, the woman who herself claimed to see me as a sibling, I suddenly felt a little stupid again.

There was no way... right? "Sally..." I groaned at her.

"What!? Wait... no! I'm not saying that!" Sally immediately realized what I was saying, and her face grew a bit redder as she hurriedly waved me away.

Oh my gosh she does! "Don't fall for him! He's a monarch!" I said.

"I know...!" Sally groaned as she hurriedly covered her face, making a terrible whine as she squirmed.

Just great! Was that why then? All this time...? It made a lot of sense, actually. Sally was always getting involved in the inner-workings of the Society... maybe it wasn't because she actually wanted to be, but rather because by doing so she had more opportunities to be near Vim!

Feeling terrible for her, I tried to think of what to say or do. She was squeezing her own face, groaning in embarrassment.

I knew that feeling. I had felt like that when I had realized my affection for Vexli. And had felt even worse when I had returned to see her, and knelt down to declare it. She had slapped me something fierce, and then had ran off without a word. I had sat there, in the middle of a field, for what had felt like hours just... wanting to crawl into a hole and die.

Unlike Sally though I had been saved. Vexli had returned, and without a word picked me up off the ground and kissed me. My friend wasn't going to be rescued anytime soon in such a way...

"I uh... I don't know what to say Sally... other than I hope you realize the end result..." I said, deciding to break the awkwardness myself first.

"I know...!" she groaned through her hands.

"How long...?" I asked.

Sally took a deep breath, huffed, and then revealed her face. It was flushed, and it made me feel a tad weird. I'd never seen her like this before... That was the kind of flush a woman got while in bed. I'd recognize it anywhere.

"Since he saved me. From that monarch," she whispered.

Oh gods...! "From the beginning!" I groaned. Well, not really. That was after I had met her, so it hadn't been. She had been in the Society for a few decades before that, but it had still basically been from the beginning. At least two hundred years ago.

"I know! I know! The worst part is I don't even actually find him attractive...! So I can't explain it!" she shouted.

Ah... I nodded. "Yeah... I get that. Vexli is beautiful, but honestly I prefer them to be a tad well... older," I said, using that term made sense to me here and now at least. Vexli didn't look like a child, like Merit or anything, but she definitely didn't look like a fully grown woman either. Vexli, appearance wise at least, was definitely not my standard either.

"You're competing with those like Celine or Merit," I said, feeling horrible for my friend. At least I only had to compete with the men in her village, and the few who visited on occasion. Though I mean... I had allowed her sister and niece to die in my hands, so I had always felt like I was fighting a losing battle, but... that hadn't been the case, I guess.

"Celine's dead. Merit's not even on his radar. The one I really have to worry about is his destined one," Sally said with a sigh. Her flushed face was finally returning to normal.

"Destined one...?" I asked. What'd that mean? Was that one of their religious things...? I didn't remember reading about that in their bibles.

"There's a bunch of prophecies concerning his mate. Some kind of giant cat. One that can hide in shadows and can eat saints and give birth to new ones," Sally said.

I flung my arms up. "Don't tell me that stuff! By the Gods Sally!" I shouted as I stepped away, shaking my head hard enough to try and shake the knowledge from my mind.

But I couldn't. wouldn't be able to, ever.

How was I going to keep that secret!

"Oh. Right..." Sally mumbled as I now took a turn in rubbing my face.

Great! Vim absolutely hated such prophecies! Particularly ones about him...! Now I was going to have to keep this a secret from him, to my grave! Was I going to be able to...?

"Sorry, Tosh..." Sally apologized.

I groaned as I took a deep breath and nodded. I let it out slowly, through clenched teeth. "It's okay... I uh... I deserve that, after revealing your secret as I did," I said.

"Kind of you."

It was!

I turned to look back at her, and found her giving me a soft smile. A sad one. The kind that made me want to give her a hug. She liked hugs.

"I'm sorry Sally. I don't even know what to say," I said softly. I couldn't imagine it. She basically loved someone she could never have. Not even touch. Vim, although everyone thought he did, actually didn't sleep with anyone in the Society. It was one of his rules. But I knew the truth. The few people who claimed he had done so, like Jennifer, hadn't actually done the deed. I had witnessed myself them sleeping in different rooms, or tents, only for the rumors to spread afterward. I never really called them out, because I knew Vim didn't care about them, but...

That meant Sally wouldn't even be able to get Vim's attention for a few nights, or anything.

I couldn't imagine that. How could I have endured if Vexli would have... never reciprocated my feelings? To not even know her touch? Her love or wrath? Her smell, even?

It almost made one feel like life wasn't worth it.

"It's okay Tosh. I've long since accepted it," Sally then said.

"Hm... is there anything I can do? Want me to help you find someone?" I asked.

"Please don't. You barely have good enough taste in women, how would you do with men?" she asked, teasing me.

I smirked at that. "Hey now, I think Vexli is flawless."

Sally gently smiled and nodded at me. "I bet she is. I'm looking forward to her breaking your heart," she said, again.

Groaning at my friend... we returned to walking. This time a tad bit slower, as we delved into some lovely conversations. We opened our hearts, spoke of things never spoken before... and...

Then when we walked into the village, and found it burnt down and destroyed...

I realized there were gods in this world. And they were as cruel as Vim claimed.