

Non Human 481

Chapter 481 Vexli's Fate

Lilly's wings shuffled a little next to me. I paid them no mind though as I stared at the building.

It was a shoddy log cabin looking thing. Maybe a barn. But there was no denying the stink that came from it.

They were here. We had found them. Finally.

Gritting my teeth, enough to almost crack them, I glanced around me. Lilly was to my right. Not far from her was Sally and the four other warriors of the Society. Two men and two women, each as strong and deadly as Lilly.

Or well, maybe not. I had heard once that Lilly had single handedly defeated all of them once, but I wasn't sure if that was a real rumor or not.

The final member of our little group, a short and thin man who looked like he would break from a gust of wind, came into view. He crossed a small section of the forest in front of us, ducked into some foliage and rounded the bushes as he hurried over towards us. It didn't take long for the small man to crawl through the thick briars we all sat behind, and he directly addressed Lilly.

"They're here. At least thirty of them," he told her.

My heart missed a beat as my body went cold.

Finally.

"And our people...?" Sally asked with a harsh whisper.

The man didn't say a word. He simply held Lilly's eyes as he nodded.

Thank goodness...! Sally and I had found Vexli's village burnt down, but not enough bodies. The obvious conclusion was they had been taken. Kidnapped. So...!

I started to stand. To head forward. To rescue Vexli and her people, but before I could I was grabbed.

Before I could even comprehend what happened, I was on the ground again. Kneeling, but not out of my own desire. A very strong hand had grabbed me by the back of my clothes, near my neck, and had pushed me down. I turned to glare at the owl who held me in place, and wondered what the hell was her problem.

"Stay back, Tosh," Lilly said.

I bit back a growl. "I can help," I said. I may not be as strong as her, or the others here, but I was still strong. Still a non-human.

"You will. By tending to those of us who need your skills, once it's all said and done. Stay here. Until it's over. That's an order," Lilly said, her large eyes narrowing at me.

Wanting to complain... I knew I couldn't. If I did, even a peep, Lilly would just smack me. She'd hit me just once, and I'd be out like a candle in a storm. I'd seen her do it enough times to know.

So... I just remained quiet. Even as she let me go and she stood.

The four other warriors stood as well. Swords were drawn. Spears readied. One of them had a bow, but he didn't draw it as they all stepped out of our hidden area and towards the building.

Feeling sick to my stomach, I watched Lilly open her large wings and then take to the sky. She didn't make a single sound as she did so, akin to an impossibility, and she left my view in just two wingbeats.

"Stay here. Be wise. There will be injured," the scrawny man whispered to me, and then he too stepped away. Unlike the others he had hurried deeper into the forest... almost as if he was running away. I knew he wasn't though. He was the lookout, and although small and weak he wasn't scared at all. He hadn't hesitated to scout the place out first for everyone.

Glancing over to Sally, I found her tight-lipped as she studied the scene before us. She looked... tired. Sad. Worried.

I looked away from my friend, who I knew shouldn't be here. She was only here because I was. She was here for me. To help me save my wife.

Vim should be here too. Had he been here I wouldn't have needed any of them. Not a one.

Then there was a scream. A loud shrill of pain, which was quickly followed by the sounds of battle.

I heard metal hit metal. I heard people die. I saw Lilly swoop into view from the sky, straight into the building. Wood chunks flew out as she fell onto the roof, breaking into it. I heard shouts and screams from within the building, and when I heard even a woman's shrill shriek I stood up.

"Tosh...!" Sally was next to me before I could step forward. Although her grip wasn't anywhere near as strong as Lilly's, it somehow still kept me in place as I stared at the building.

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The thing didn't have any windows, but it had a couple doors. One broke open as a man fell out of the building. He rolled on the ground, and I watched as a pair of large wings rushed out in pursuit. Lilly was quicker than the eye could follow. The man fell, rolled, and then he was stuck to the ground with a very sharp sword sticking out of his throat.

She wasted no time. Lilly turned and headed back into the house. One of the other members, a man named George, followed her into the building. He had blood on his left arm, though from here I couldn't tell if it was his or someone else's.

My heart thumped wildly as the sounds continued... until they didn't anymore.

For a few moments of silence, I waited... then I saw Lilly walk out of the building, and do so in a way that told me it was over. She glanced around, huffed a little, and then swiped her sword through the air as to clean it.

I stepped forward, but Sally still held me back. "Wait. Tosh," she warned.

I grit my teeth but obeyed. Yes. I knew. Lilly hadn't waved us over yet. I understood... but...

For what felt like an eternity I watched Lilly and the other members walk around a bit. They checked behind the building, the tree line across from it, and then went back into the building... and then finally, right about where I couldn't take it anymore, Lilly finally waved us over.

I ran through the sharp briars, and out into the open. Before I could even comprehend what I was doing, I was walking up and past Lilly as to enter the building.

Before I could though she stopped me. With an outstretched wing.

"Lilly...!" I groaned at her. What now!? What if Vexli was in there? Or someone else? Someone who could lead me to her and...!

"Lilly...?" Sally whispered her name, and I realized she was here with me. I hadn't even noticed her running with me.

The owl's eyes were gentle, but cold. The kind of cold that would usually make me shiver. She then she slowly shook her head. "No one's here, Tosh."

I didn't want to hear that! "Then let me see!" I said as I stepped forward.

Lilly didn't move. I walked right into her wing, and didn't like how it felt like walking into a wall. How was a bunch of feathers so sturdy!?

"Lilly, come on!" I shouted as I tried to step around her. I nearly walked right into the corner of the building as I did, since she had simply extended her wing to stop me.

"Tosh!" Sally shouted at me, but I didn't care. I didn't listen. I ducked under her wing, barely got past, and then hurried into the building.

I found two of the other members. They were standing near the other side of the building... and...

I grimaced at the carnage. There were dozens of bodies lying on the ground, scattered all over. Some were in pieces. The scene would not have normally bothered me too much, but right now I was not intentionally keeping my mind clear and empty. I felt a strange rush of emotions as I stepped deeper into the building, looking all around.

There were cots and beds. Shelves... on the other side of the building was a giant cross made of metal. The Epoch cross was somehow a little terrifying, but a little relieving too. It confirmed what we had all expected. What we had all known based on the way the village had been destroyed.

They hadn't burnt it like the humans would, as if trying to expel demons or burn evil away. They had burnt it with another purpose. One more disgusting and...

"Tosh..." one of the warriors whispered my name, but I ignored her. I came to a stop in front of the back of the room, and the giant circle of blood painted on the floor before the cross.

I'd read about such things before, but had never seen one myself. I'd been involved in some of the chaos the Epoch church had committed, but usually always from a distance. I helped treat and heal those who had been targeted by them. Who had suffered at their hands, or been attacked by them. But I myself had never seen their altars or their pyres. Not until now.

And now I knew why no one could properly explain it.

My stomach twisted as I tried to make sense of what I already did.

That was a torso. Those were arms and legs. That was a tail of some kind. All stacked neatly in a circle, with purpose and precision. Were... were those sutures...? To tie the pieces of flesh together...?

They were.

My eyes blurred as I stepped back, and felt weak all of a sudden... as my mind made sense of what my heart already knew.

This is what they did. Epoch did this. They sacrificed our people in grueling ways to anger the gods. On purpose. That was their faith. It was how they showed it. Where those like Sally and Celine did it with kindness and soft prayer, the Epoch cult did it with blood and death. Pain and sorrow.

And...

Falling to the ground, I blinked and wondered why the world was spinning... and why was Sally yelling at me? I heard her, but didn't understand her. She looked distraught.

Before I could make sense of anything, her yelling or my own thoughts, I felt myself get pulled. I glanced up and found Lilly was dragging me out of the building. I couldn't see her face, thanks to her wings being in the way, but I could feel by her grip on my shoulders that she was being gentle. A little too gentle.

Which only made this worse. Because it meant...

Flinching as the sun blinded me, I reached up to cover my face... as I realized I'd never find her.

She hadn't been kidnapped. She hadn't been taken alive.

None of them had.

At least... that was all I could hope for, now. My only hope was she had not been taken alive, because the alternative was... so, so, worse.

My Vexli was gone.

Taken from me before we could be wed.

Taken before her child could be born.

Falling backward, I realized I had been released. I landed harshly on my back, and flinched in pain as if I'd been dropped from a great height. Although I knew in the back of my mind that Lilly had simply released me, and probably had even done so gently, I still passed out... as to hide from the terrible reality around me.

Chapter 482 Epoch's Stains

The Epoch cultist always tried to hide themselves.

Yet at the same time, they always had a mark. Either their unique cross sewn somewhere in their clothes, or a brand burnt into their skin. Sometimes it was also a smell. Their priests had a certain... stink to them.

I've grown used to tracking such people. A little too good at it, in fact.

So good that I had noticed the tiny sewn crosses on the inside of a cloak from my peripheral as I ate with a friend.

Once I confirmed what I had seen, was indeed what I thought I had, I quickly wrote a letter to Vim. Once it was done, and the cloaked cultists stood from their own table, I handed it off to Oplar and nodded.

"Make sure he gets it," I said to Oplar as I stood from the table.

"Mhm... careful out there, Tosh..." the bear gently said as I stepped away, to follow the hooded figures I had my eyes set upon.

I knew it was a little rude to leave Oplar alone, especially with potential cultists nearby, but I didn't care. We weren't far from Lumen. And Vim was waiting there for her. And I had something far more important to do than watch over a young bear.

It was hard to find them anymore. These two were the first I'd found in five years.

I wasn't going to waste this opportunity.

Though I wanted to just... walk up to them and end their lives, I knew better. These cultist did not sprout from nothing. Most today were humans. And those humans didn't live long. These two looked early twenties at the oldest, though it was odd they were both women. Lately most of them had been men.

Their debauch ways weren't really appealing to women anymore, not the kind that existed today at least in this era. Thank goodness.

Rounding a corner, I pulled my own hood up as the rain began to fall. We weren't at a port city, but we were near one. A large river was nearby, one that kind of stunk. That river led to the inland sea not far from here, up north.

Was that where they were headed? We seemed to be heading out of the city. They had just checked out of their inn after they had seemingly eaten their last meal, right in front of me and Oplar, and were now...

I slowed as they entered another inn. One that was not as nice as the one we'd just left. I bit the inside of my mouth as I realized they were either meeting up with their fellows, or simply moving inns. Maybe they didn't like to linger in one place too long, or realized it was too expensive or something...?

No matter. I knew where they were.

Now I just needed to wait. To be patient.

Clear my mind. Ease it. Don't focus too much, yet pay attention to everything.

These cultist had a source. Someone had taught them their faith. They hadn't been born to it. That meant there were others around. They always traveled alone, or in tiny groups, but never for long. They had sermons and went to their church as much as any other faith member did. They just did it in secret. Away from the eyes of the normal people.

So if I waited... if I followed them, and stayed patient, they would lead me to their church. Where they heard the words of their priests. Where they performed their terrible acts and rituals.

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I wanted, and would, kill them. I'd remove them from this world, as I would remove a tumor from a diseased man. But I knew I had to get them all at once. Else the tumors would just come back.

Stepping into an alley... I leaned against a wet wall and waited.

Hours passed. The world became dark. Then darker. The rain picked up, eased, and then came back with a vengeance... and then finally, right before dawn... the cultists emerged again. This time with another.

The three hooded figures turned and hurried down the street. I followed them, keeping back enough to not be seen, and was glad that I didn't smell any non-human scents in the air as I did. Although I'd not shy away anymore from a real threat, I still knew better than to outright target a strong predator.

But that was also why I had left Oplar with that letter. To ask for Vim's help.

If I failed here, and died, Vim would be able to track them down from here. He was that good. If I didn't fail, and ended up needing his help, he'd show up soon to offer it as well. And if nothing happened... if this went well, as the other times had, and I was able to handle these cultists on my own...? Well... he'd just pat me on the shoulder and nod and then leave, as he had before.

Such was my life these last few decades.

At first I had thought they were gathering more members, having stopped at another inn. But they had simply had breakfast. They left the inn, still only three, and then headed for the river. I ended up panicking when I watched them hire a boatman and board his small boat... but luckily the boat was a slow one. I was able to follow the boat on foot as it sailed south, not north towards the sea. I kept to the road near the river, keeping the boat in sight from distance.

I knew I was risking them catching me, but I relied on the distance and the angle to keep hidden. A few times the river had twisted and turned, so I had to sneak off the road and hide behind a hill or between trees as to ensure I stayed out of their sight but I made it work.

Eventually the boat stopped for the night, docking up on a random bank. They did so on the other side of the river than the one I was on, but luckily they didn't leave the area. They simply set up camp on the side of the river.

I was a little surprised to see them happily include the boatman in their camp. They sounded cheerful from a distance, though I dared not get too close. The river wasn't a small one, but it wasn't so big it was noisy. It'd be hard for me to swim across it without making any noise, unless I stripped naked. And I didn't want to do that. I wasn't strong like Lilly or Vim. I relied on... different tactics, to say the least...

The night passed slowly for me, but it passed. The group got up in the morning, returned to the boat and once again set sail.

This continued for several days, and even though we passed through a couple more towns... neither a fourth cultist joined them, nor did they seem to be doing anything too untoward the normal. They traveled. They ate. They slept. They laughed at whatever topics they spoke of, and seemed to be in general... just normal people.

Normal if but for the cloaks they wore, with the Epoch crosses sewn into them out of sight that is.

"Damned bastards," I whispered as I watched them dock the boat again. It was getting late once more, so I figured they were just going to camp again. This time, luckily, they had chosen to do so on the same side of the river I was. So I didn't need to worry about...

Then I realized they had other plans. As a tiny yelp of pain shot out into the air.

I went still as I watched one of the cultists stab the boatman. He stabbed again, and again, in quick succession... and the boatman fell backward off the bank and into the river. He landed with a loud splash, loud enough to block out the words the cultists all said to each other after the deed was done.

The sight of them killing the boatman only confirmed my decision to follow them all this time, and to kill them. They were definitely cultists, and not just some weird humans who didn't realize what they were wearing.

The three cultists spoke for a bit, and then pushed the boat out into the river. It floated away, and they gathered themselves and headed towards a nearby forest.

I gulped at the realization it was time. Their church must be nearby.

Good. Very good...

Staying back as far as possible... I followed the hooded figures into the forest, all the while thinking of Vexli's frown.

"I know," I whispered to her memory. I knew she'd not be happy with me. She'd not want me to do this.

But I didn't care.

Because it was all that made me feel purpose anymore.

Chapter 483 Tosh's Break

Hurling all over the stump, I groaned as I realized I now had nothing to sit on.

Why'd I throw up on that stump...? Gods I was dumb sometimes...

Wiping my face, I sighed with a little bit of relief. Although I still felt... sick, having thrown up finally made me feel better.

Coughing a bit, I glanced around for the bucket of water I had drawn earlier. Where had I left it...? Ah. There it was. Near my bag.

I walked over to it, and was about to cup my hand into it as to fetch some water to drink... but saw the gore upon it.

"Right..." I mumbled as I looked around for something to use as a bowl or spoon. There was a larger table nearby, one that the cultists had been using for their meals, and it did indeed have food and drink aplenty on it... but I knew better than to eat any of that stuff.

But I didn't need to eat the food or drink from their cups, did I?

Walking over to the table, I tried not to look too closely at the meat on the plates. It looked... a little too fresh. A little too normal. Why did human meat look so similar to a cow's or a deer's?

No matter. I picked up an empty cup, made sure nothing had been in it, and went to take it back to my bucket of fresh water.

In the back of my mind I knew drinking from it, even if dry, wasn't safe. It was likely contaminated. But I didn't care right now. I was thirsty. Terribly so.

I carefully dipped the cup into the water, and took a drink. The cold water felt good going down my hot throat.

Taking just another drink, I placed the now empty cup down... and headed back into the church.

Chains rattled as I walked in, and it took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. They didn't like building their churches with windows, for whatever reason. Made them dark and gloomy... and made it hard to air out the stink.

"You will burn... burn and burn..." the man groaned, sounding slightly absentminded. Odds are he hadn't even realized I had left for a moment.

"That's just the acid. Nitric acid, to be exact. A rather strong batch of it too. A gift from Vim... one that I've perfected thanks to you and your ilk," I said as I glanced at the chains connected to his wrists. They held him up, and in place... but wouldn't for much longer. Parts of his shoulders were so melted; it'd not be long until they simply tore apart. In fact if he just... stood and twisted a bit, they'd likely tear right here and now.

He didn't though. And wouldn't try. I knew the man was practically dead already, at least in his mind. He was broken. They always broke.

They could deal pain, but couldn't take it. Couldn't comprehend it.

They thought themselves masters of pain. The best at it.

How little they knew.

"Technically you're not burning, though. It's more of a melting, really," I said as I watched the acid drip down from the cloth I had rigged above him. Judging by the way it was dripping, there wasn't much left.

No matter. He was done. Even if he somehow survived the next few hours, he'd not survive the axe I would bury into his head once I decided to stop.

The man tilted his head... and I frowned as he actually looked up at me. For the first time in hours he had focus in his gaze, and it made me shift a little.

What's this...? Was he about to die, and this his last moments or something?

"The deep one will come for you. He will not spare you," the man said... speaking with a voice unbothered and strong.

I glanced to the nearby table, where some of their tools of their trade laid. I debated grabbing the axe... just in case.

How did he sound so healthy? So strong? He shouldn't even be able to draw enough breath to speak so strongly...

"You and your ilk have tortured and slaughtered thousands, for hundreds of years. Not once has any god noticed. What makes you think they will now? You think you're more special than those you tortured...?" I asked as I walked over and grabbed the axe.

The man smirked at me. "For beings so close to the gods, you sure are blind to them. Wallow in your ignorance, child of pain," the man said.

Wanting to scoff at him... I hesitated a moment as I heard something bubble.

Turning my head, I frowned at the sight of the iron bucket. One hanging over a long dead fireplace.

Why was it bubbling...? That fire hadn't...

Walking over to it, I carefully approached it. There were a few other bodies nearby, his fellows, but none in my direct path.

The bubbling inside the bucket grew louder as I got near, and I found myself staring into a molten pot.

Was that metal...? It sure looked like it. It was glowing very brightly, and bubbling as if boiling... how was it doing that? There was no flame. No fire. No heat. I couldn't even feel heat from it and I was standing right in front of it!

Some kind of illusion... maybe? A hallucination...? Maybe the acid had interacted oddly with the flesh of the man and created some kind of unseen fog of poison? It was the only thing I could...

"See...? He's here."

Turning, to glare at the man who sounded so cocky... I went still when I instead found only darkness.

My heart thumped up into my throat as I spun back around, to see the boiling pot of metal... and found nothing.

"What...?" I spun around, searching all around me... and found myself in utter darkness.

I was no longer in the church. No longer surrounded by the dead cultist. No longer did I smell their filth, their sickness, or the man's flesh being melted by acid.

Just what was going on...!?

"I thank you."

Going absolutely still, I gripped the axe in my hand... and closed my eyes. There was no wind. The air was stagnant, as if I was in some cave. Yet even as loud as the voice had been... it had not echoed. It had boomed. As if spoken by a giant, yet had not echoed in this unending darkness.

Opening my eyes, I found myself still in the darkness. I stepped forward a few steps, expecting to bump into a table or dead body. I knew there were a few nearby.

Yet as I kept walking... I found myself not hitting anything. In fact, I don't think I was even walking on wooden floorboards anymore. Was that grass beneath my feet, or sand...? I was almost too scared to look down and verify it.

"What is going on?" I dared to ask.

For a few steps there was silence. Then the air shook again, as a loud voice spoke. "Your brutality has freed me from their minds. For that I thank you. Though... it shall not change your fate, regrettably..."

My shoulders became tense as I looked up, as to search for the source of the loud voice... but all I saw was darkness. "What are you...?" I whispered.

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"The creations call me the Deep One."

My tense shoulders slumped and I dropped the axe. It didn't make a sound as it fell next to me.

A god.

A real god.

Their god.

"Fear not. I am not a god."

"Could've fooled me..." I whispered as I looked around. How did the voice sound like it was coming from right above me...? Yet at the same time, it seemed to be coming from everywhere else too.

The voice chuckled, which made me shiver. "Well... tis' no surprise. Though not a god, I had been made by one."

That didn't make me feel any better. That meant it was a monarch. A real one. A powerful one.

But... did that mean the Epoch's deity was just a monarch...? Not even one of the actual gods...? "You're the god the Epoch worship. The Deep One," I said, hoping to confirm it. If it was, maybe I could get it to answer for all the evil it's allowed. For the terrible... the... For her...

"A faulty mistake. My creator dubbed me Dream Eater. A better moniker, but you tiny creations can't see the truth of the world and simply do your best instead. And your best is to not understand, and not comprehend that you don't either," The Deep One said.

Dream Eater...? I felt like I recognized that title. Nothing came straight to mind, though.

Taking a small breath, I turned around. "What do you want...?" I asked it.

"Justice."

I frowned at that. "I have given it. I was in the middle of giving it! You stopped me!" I shouted.

The Deep One, or the Dream Eater, didn't respond. The darkness all around me was silent... as if judging me.

I shook my head and stepped forward, pointing up at the darkness around me. Hopefully at the god, or whatever it was. "I was getting vengeance! Your cultists... these people, your servants, are evil people! They slaughter innocents, and debase them in terrible ways! They even eat them alive!" I shouted.

Although I was getting heated, in anger... I stopped walking as I realized the darkness around me got a tad warmer. As if I was now standing out under the sun.

Was I maybe not actually somewhere else then...? Maybe I was still there, by that church, and I just couldn't tell or see it...

"I believe you, son of Amber's whims. I truly believe you," the god said gently.

"Then...?"

"Then why have I brought your mind here...? Because of you, Tosh. You did this. To yourself."

Hearing the god say my name stunned me a little. It was such a silly little detail, but it shook me. I had not told anyone my name. none of those cultists I had poisoned, none of the ones I had killed or tortured... I never said my name to them. Which meant... somehow, it had known all along.

And that scared me for some reason.

"I... I don't understand," I said, barely able to think.

"You will. In time."

Then, out of the corner of my eye... something changed.

I spun, expecting to find the god himself... or maybe some other terrible monstrosity... and instead simply found light.

A very small speck of it. Impossibly far away. Like a small lamp hanging in the middle of nowhere, was a tiny cone of light far off in the darkness.

"What...?" I whispered, trying to make heads or tails of it. What did that light mean? What was happening?

"Go on then. You killed sixty-five of my creator's toys. So... sixty-five ticks will do."

What...? Sixty-five...? "There were only sixteen here..." I whispered. And one of them had still been alive!

"Sixty-five. You can lie to me, but not yourself. Not your soul. I see it all. Go. Sixty-five ticks."

"Ticks...?" I asked. What the heck did that mean!?

"Ticks. Steps. Trials. Tribulations. As I said, I seek justice. And so, I take from you sixty-five ticks. They are your punishment. A tick for every soul you reaped. Finish them or don't. I care not. My justice has been served. My duty fulfilled. Glad too... since now I can hide from he who hunts. Finally I have freedom... but now that means..." the voice started to become quiet. Distant. Fading away, as if going down a long tunnel. "He can find me too..." the whispers faded, even though I knew the thing was still talking.

"Wait...! Wait!" I shouted, as I felt the world get colder again.

No answer came. And somehow, impossibly... I knew the thing was gone. God, monarch, or some weird apparition... it wasn't here anymore. I had no way to explain it, but...

"Are you still there? Dream Eater?" I asked worriedly.

Silence was my answer.

Breathing quickly, I began to panic as my mind tried to make sense of what was happening.

I was stuck in darkness. Pure darkness. In a world I didn't understand. Sent here by some... powerful creature, maybe even a god.

To be served justice. For those I have killed. I knew better than to try and deny the number. Because I knew it. I knew it well.

Sixty-five people. that was indeed how many cultists I've killed in my life. By my own hands, and not those I had led to their deaths by sending to their doom via Lilly or Vim or anyone else. Sixty-five was how many I had ended with my own hands.

How had it known...? Has it been watching me all this time...? Maybe it had. Maybe it had watched me through the eyes of its servants. Through the eyes of the cultists... maybe that was why it was gone now. Maybe that man had finally succumbed to his wounds, and now I was alone... wherever I was.

Looking around, I wanted to shout and scream. To defy what was happening... but I knew I couldn't.

Vim told me the gods were real. He told me they had powers uncanny.

I just... didn't expect it to be like this...

Gulping, I shook my head and looked again to the light. In the distance.

He called it a tick. To me a tick was a bug. Or maybe the sound a clock made, such as Hands the raccoon's inventions. But...

Stepping forward, I hurried to the light. I wasn't sure what this Dream Eater expected from me... but I knew better than to think I had any other choice. Or well, I probably did, but I didn't know if I wanted to take the only other option I had just yet.

Vexli would never hold me again if I killed myself. She had seen such a thing as the ultimate sin. It was the only reason I had never done it and...

Slowing a little, I huffed as I wondered why the light was still so far away.

How long had I been running? I was covered in sweat. This made no sense.

Picking up my pace, I nearly stumbled... and slowed a little once I realized I had almost hurt myself. My muscles felt strained. Aching. In turmoil, as if I was running for my life and had been for... for...

Slowing a little, I huffed and huffed as I studied the far off light. It was bigger now. Closer. But still so, so far away. Like a mirage in the distance, never to be actually got to.

"Wait..." I gasped as I realized it.

The meaning.

Tick.

A tick.

The god had said it. It had said I would understand.

In time.

Pushing all thoughts aside I rushed forward... and ran for what felt like forever. Forever and ever... and finally, after an eternity... I reached the light.

Walking into a large area of... white, I frowned at the ground. That was sand, wasn't it? Yet it was firm. The kind of firm that felt like dirt. But it wasn't. it was countless tiny beads of...

Then the light disappeared.

I went still, and started to panic. No!

Then I heard it. Off in the distance... impossibly far, a sound I had no word to describe... as another light appeared.

Far off in the distance, a tiny light loomed. The same I had seen an eternity ago, back when I had first arrived here in this world of eternity.

Falling to my knees, I groaned as I grabbed at the sand. It was smooth, and cold to the touch. And somehow, impossibly, heavy. So heavy I couldn't even throw it in anger.

"Why are you doing this...!? Just... just kill me..."

The Dream Eater didn't respond. Like all the other times I had shouted at him in this prison of eternity, I had received no answers.

Sixty-five. Sixty-five ticks.

And I had just completed one.

Standing up, I aimed for the far off light and stepped forward. Unlike before, where I had ran with all my might... instead this time I took it slow. I counted each step.

"Two." I whispered.

"Three."

My plan was to count every one. To see just how far, and how long, each tick would take me... yet I ran into a problem.

Eventually each step took too long. Because it took too long to say its corresponding number.

So I simply... stopped counting... and eventually reached the light once more.

Reaching the light, I stared up at it... wondering if it was a sun, or something else. It was impossibly high, as if in a distant sky. Yet it didn't blind me. It didn't burn the eyes, or hurt to look at... almost as if it was fake...

Then before I could study it further, it disappeared... and that sound echoed throughout the darkness, and another far off light appeared.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded.

Okay.

Sixty-three to go.

Each one took what felt like an eternity... but it was fine.

I didn't feel hunger. Or thirst. I didn't even feel the aches and pains in my body anymore. All I felt was the sand beneath my feet... and heard my breath as I huffed and ran towards the next light.

As I ran, I thought of Vexli. That village. Vim. The Society.

Sally.

I thought of them all... until I ran out of things to think about... and then I simply ran some more.

Chapter 484 Vim – His Friend, Again

"Oh, Tosh..." I whispered as I stared down at the curled up man.

He was a few feet from the door to the church. It looked as if he had run out and tripped, maybe hit his head...? But...

Kneeling down, I pulled his head back a little to stare into his eyes. They were open, his pupils not fully focused... but not fully broken either.

"Tosh... my poor friend, what happened...?" I asked the man who was broken. Inside and out.

I recognized those eyes well. Though it had been years since I'd last seen them on anyone. Tosh's mind had shattered. The kind of broken that... well... no one usually returned from.

Shaking my head, I stood back up and glanced around. The place was a mess. It looked as if the cultists had been gathered for a meal, and had been in the middle of it... and then chaos had broken out. Judging by the scattered bodies, and the puke on most of them, it was safe to assume Tosh had used his normal methods.

He wasn't strong. Not a warrior. Not in the ways most understood. He used other methods, some considered them underhanded. I considered them tactical.

He had poisoned their food. Their drink. What he had done so with, I had no idea... but it had obviously been very effective.

It was obvious, by the smell and sight, that it had been several days since the event. A few of the bodies even showed signs of being eaten by the forest animals, and birds. Odds are a few had already been dragged off by bears or something, too.

Glancing down at my friend, who was still motionless, I bit back my worries and looked away.

He was alive. For now. That was all that mattered.

Walking into the church, I frowned and paused a moment.

Hm...?

Had a monarch been here...?

My eyes narrowed as I glanced around, in search for whatever it was I was feeling. I didn't sense a heart, but...

Yes. There had definitely been some kind of divinity here... but it was distant. Old. Faded. Probably too old to have been the cause of Tosh's mental break.

Plus why would it do that...? It would have just killed Tosh. Eaten him, maybe. There was no need to break him in that manner... was there...?

Walking deeper into the church, I scanned the bodies lining the floor. Most of the ones in here had not died from poison. They had wounds. Head wounds, mostly. From an axe, or something like it.

Odds are some of these people had survived the poisoning, but had been weak. Infirm. Unable to defend themselves... so Tosh had simply walked in and finished the job.

"Well... you took down another cult at least, Tosh," I said as I counted nine bodies. There was probably a dozen or so outside, so... he had likely got them all. Most Epoch church's didn't have much more than that. They weren't able to grow too large. They always succumbed to infighting and betrayals once they did.

So... what was this? His thirteenth church? Fourteenth? He should get a medal.

The others didn't like that he was doing this. They found his methods, and the general idea of it, utterly disgusting. But I didn't fault the man.

They had taken the love of his life. And had brutally tortured her, in some vain attempt to call out to a god that no longer listened. In my perspective Tosh had every right to do what he was doing.

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I didn't fault Tosh at all for his actions... though I did wish he had waited for me, and...

Pausing at the end of the church, I frowned at a man who had at one time been chained up. He was a mess now, and judging by the way his body and arms were all melted and gooey, Tosh had been... rather cruel. I wonder why. Tosh killed, but usually not so harshly. This man must have been doing something to rile up Tosh's anger. Either assaulting a woman, or...

I glanced around, to see if said woman was around. I didn't hear or sense any life, other than Tosh's, but... I needed to make sure.

I didn't find any, so I left the church and picked my friend up.

Sitting him up a bit, I waved a little in front of his face. His eyes followed my hand, and he even blinked... but that was it.

"If you're there Tosh... know it's me. Vim. I'm here. Just... take your time, okay? I'm going to take you somewhere safe for now," I said gently.

Tosh didn't look at me, or respond, but I figured he wouldn't have.

The people who got like this sometimes never regained their sanity. Though they usually did get a little better, for a short while at least.

Sighing at my friend, I hefted him up as to put him down elsewhere. I needed to burn this place before leaving it.

I placed him down next to a tree, in the sunlight. He didn't say a word... just stared blankly out into the distance. I gave him a gentle smile, and a pat on the shoulder, before stepping away.

He also usually had a bag. One full of supplies... I should probably find it too. Just in case something in it was important to him. Maybe a memento or something from his girl. What had been her name...? Vex something. Gosh, I need to start paying more attention...

Sally would know. I should take him to her. Where was she...? Lumen?

Finding his bag, I quickly set the church on fire. I made sure to gather up all the corpses first, since they were poisonous. Didn't need the whole forest to die just because Tosh had poisoned them for his revenge.

Once the church, and the cultists, were burning and burning well... I nodded and went back to my friend.

He was still sitting against the tree... looking completely empty inside. I thought of all the laughs and conversations we'd had over the years, and it hurt a little to see him so... empty. But this was honestly not the worst he's looked lately.

Ever since his wife had been killed, Tosh has been... hurt. The kind of hurt that made him angry. Angry and distant.

He hadn't been my friend lately. Not that he'd ever been rude to me or really anyone... but since her death Tosh has been a different man. He didn't talk with me, to learn or debate or tease and joke... When we talked nowadays it was only about one thing.

The cultists. And how to kill them. What had been the last thing he had asked me to teach him...? How to make a fancy crossbow or something...

Maybe I should have taught him more. Maybe by doing so we could have avoided this...

"I warned you, Tosh," I said to him gently, as a loud pop came from the burning church. I heard a beam snap and break, and part of the roof collapse inward into the flames. I ignored it all though as I stared at the dead eyes of my friend.

"But it's okay. I know how it feels. I've been there too," I said softly as I reached out to grab him. I picked him up, putting him on my back as I stood back up. I shifted him a little and nodded. "Let's go see Sally, Tosh. You okay with that?" I asked.

I got no answer. Not even a single finger twitched.

I nodded. "Sally it is. She's actually really angry at you, you know? You better prepare yourself. She's such a gentle hearted woman, I don't know why you keep breaking her heart like this," I said.

Although I wanted to tease him, and to bring up the fact that Sally all this time had been waiting for him to notice her feelings... I bit my tongue and didn't do it.

Because Sally wasn't waiting for him anymore. Though who could blame her...? Tosh was broken. And I didn't just mean mentally, here and now. He had been broken even before this. And as good of a

woman Sally was, she wasn't willing to love a man who wasn't the same anymore. And no one could blame her. I didn't blame her.

"Honestly I always figured I'd just find you dead," I said as I left the church of Epoch.

Hopefully that wasn't what this was. Hopefully he wouldn't just... pass away on my back, or in the middle of his sleep in the coming days. Hopefully he regained his senses. Returned to himself. Somehow.

It might take time. A lot of time... but Tosh might one day wake up. He might return to us.

I just hope when he does... well...

"Take your time Tosh. Take all the time you need. If anyone ever has a problem with that... well... I'll let them know what's what," I said. Tosh didn't answer as I kept talking to him. I made small talk with my friend, who likely didn't hear me at all, as I carried him out of the forest... and took him home.

Chapter 485 Vim – A Revelation, Foretold

Berri lifted the spoon carefully and Narli ate from it just as carefully.

She was awake, but weak. As if recovering from a terrible sickness, she was barely able to keep upright and awake. She still laid in her bed, but her parents had stacked pillows and blankets behind her so she could sit up, since unable to do so herself.

I didn't think it was actually because she had been sick, but rather mere mental and physical exhaustion. She had been asleep in a certain sense during her prophecy, but like all prophecies her mind and body had been active. It wasn't as if she had actually been asleep. So what she was feeling now, her exhaustion, was in theory because of a lack of sleep. In a way.

Narli didn't look outright sick, but she did look... disheveled. She had terrible dark circles under her eyes, and she even looked a little gaunt in the face. Not too much of a surprise, since not only had she not really gotten sleep during her prophecy she'd not eaten much either. Her parents hadn't been able to get any food down her, since she had clenched her jaw the whole time as if under duress.

Although not sick at the moment, it'd not surprise me at all if she did get sick as she recovered. Even for a non-human, a saintly one, she looked that terrible.

But she was alive. Intact. And her mind as strong as before. And that was all that mattered.

Narli breathed a small sigh of relief after swallowing some of the stew her mother was feeding her. She'd nearly eaten all of her bowl, her second one, already. A good sign.

"I was hearing a discussion, Vim," Narli told me after she licked her lips and shook her head a bit, as to let her mother know she didn't want any more at the moment.

Berri frowned a bit, glancing at me as if I was some terrible bother as she put aside the bowl. I ignored her as I nodded to her daughter.

"About?" I asked.

"I... don't really know. It's hard to explain, Vim. The voices were distant, far away, and mumbled. As if echoing from down a long tunnel. Every so often I heard a word I recognized, but never enough to comprehend what was being said."

"Many voices or just one?" I asked as I watched Berri reach over to mess with the blanket laying over Narli. As if she needed such close attention.

"You know what...? I don't know. I want to say many but... yes, it could have just been one person speaking," Narli said as she frowned and thought about it.

So whatever she had heard had sounded so jumbled it was impossible to tell. Yet her first instinct was to describe it as a discussion. Usually that word was used for something between multiple people, but in theory it could mean a single person too. Many people debated with themselves.

It could have been her own voice she was hearing too, or maybe even her parent's. She had been half-awake after all.

"The words you were able to catch... any notable ones?" I asked.

Narli frowned a bit. "Friends. Help. Find me. Weak. And I heard, where, a lot too," she said.

"Sounds to me like someone was shouting for help, or lost," Berri says.

I nodded. Friends was the outlier word there, but that might just be interpreted in a way that they could be shouting for them. Or maybe crying out to say their friends were in trouble or hurt. "And this pool, explain that," I said, choosing to focus on a different part of the prophecy. Not the one she had heard, but the one she had seen.

"It was weird. I call it a pool of water because I don't know how else to describe it. Imagine a big circle, a perfect one, which rippled and had fuzzy waves. It sounded like water, like liquid, but looked hard to the touch. It was glowing dimly, not bright enough to make me feel safe in the darkness, but bright enough to make the stuff I saw inside it blurry," she said.

"Did you touch it?"

"No. I... don't know why. I just felt like I shouldn't," she said.

"What'd you see inside it?" I asked. I didn't put too much stock into the odd pool of water. It could represent anything.

"At the time I had thought it a window. A window to another place," Narli said.

A window...?

The young saint sighed a little, sounding as tired as she looked. "I'm sorry Vim. I felt like I saw a bunch of important things in it, but it was all blurry and stuff. There were times I even thought I was seeing a

scene in the pool of water, as if another prophecy entirely, but I couldn't tell you anything about them," Narli apologized.

"It's fine dear, we're just glad you're okay," Berri said gently.

I nodded, even though it was disappointing in a way. Something had obviously happened to her, something unique and odd. For nothing to really come of it...? Made the whole thing stranger in my opinion.

"A pool of strange light, darkness all around, and echoes of strange voices all around as if from a long tunnel," I said, describing her prophecy.

She nodded. "Weird huh?"

Very. Prophecies could be many things, but usually not so... well... Broken? Muddled?

Pointless.

Odds are she simply hadn't understood it. Either being too young, or too scared to face it properly. Maybe being in the prophecy so long also caused issues...? Like how focusing too long on a small dot on a piece of paper made it disappear, or countless more appear?

"At the end... what happened?" I asked as I thought about it.

"End of the dream...? Nothing. I just woke up," Narli said with a frown.

Berri glanced at me, and I could tell she too was wondering what I was getting at... but I kept my thoughts to myself.

Odds are she had been supposed to get into that pool of water. Maybe jump into it, or stick her head in. Maybe even drink from it.

But Narli's fear of the moment had kept her from doing so. And thus her being stuck in it. The Prophecy had never gotten the chance to even begin, or do what it had meant to do.

It might not be the actual cause, but her lack of doing anything and just... sitting by the pool of water might have been why she had gotten stuck in it. Why it had taken so long to finish and play out.

Though that did not explain her waking up at the sound of my voice.

As if...

"You remember talking to me," I said. She'd already told me so. Supposedly she had heard my voice in the darkness, and not long after talking to me the prophetic dream had ended and she had drifted into actual dreams.

She nodded.

"Did the pool do anything? Or the voices? Did anything change during our conversation, or after?" I asked.

She slowly shook her head. "No? Not as far as I could tell."

"Why did she wake and hear you, though, Vim? Why not me?" Berri asked.

I was going to point out it might have just been coincidence, or simply a different voice that snapped her out of it... but knew better than to use just any old excuse. Especially with these two.

"There's been a few times that my presence has caused such a thing to happen. Usually saints have a prophecy right before I arrive and meet them, or shortly after," I said gently. I didn't want to admit it or say it aloud, but this was Narli we were talking about... plus it might be important.

"So you are special," Narli said with a small smile, as if glad to have it confirmed.

"That's not fair," Berri groaned.

It wasn't. But I ignored it anyway.

"But I'll admit I've never had a saint talk to me during their prophecy. Though usually they don't get much time to do so, to be fair," I said.

The young saint giggled at that. "Right...? Though to me it hadn't felt that long. Two months? Really mom?"

Berri nodded gravely. "Can't you feel the truth?" she asked with a light touch on Narli's leg, hidden beneath covers.

Right. She had lost weight. A lot of it, oddly.

"I guess..." Narli whispered as she glanced down at her hands and arms. She now wore a more proper nightgown, one not able to be seen-through, but it had very short sleeves. Her arms were not just thinner than Renn's, but to the point some of her bones were all pointy because of it. Too pointy.

How was it she even lost so much weight? Sure she might not have eaten, or gotten sleep, but she was still a non-human. Not even Nebl had been so affected by his stint in the mine.

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Narli then took a small breath, as if to sigh but she gave up half-way. As if she was too exhausted to even sigh.

"Why not rest. You can describe it to me again once you wake up," I suggested.

Berri nodded happily. "Yes! Get some sleep honey," she said.

"But..." Narli frowned at us as she glanced between us.

"It's fine. I'll be sticking around for a bit, no need to rush," I said as I went to help Berri. She was going to shift the blankets a bit and help Narli lay down.

"Quite right. You'll likely fall asleep the moment your head hits a pillow anyway. So go ahead," Berri said.

"I'm not that bad..." Narli said with a tiny giggle, as if enjoying her mother's doting.

We helped Narli lay down, and Berri re-adjusted some of the pillows and blankets around her as to make her more comfortable. Before Berri even finished, Narli began to snore lightly.

"See...?" Berri whispered gently as she tucked her daughter in.

I left the room, unsure if I should feel relieved or even more worried.

Narli was fine. Or at least, would be. She'd need time to recover, probably more than they realized, but she'd live.

And her prophecy, as odd as it were... didn't ring any weird alarms either.

But that was why I felt like I needed to worry.

Narli's odd prophecy, and the odd way she had lingered in it for months...

Something was wrong. But was it her, or the world?

"Vim! Is she still awake?" Horn appeared before me as I rounded a corner.

"just fell asleep," I said.

He relaxed a little. "That's great! She's going to be okay you think?"

I nodded. "I believe so. She'll need rest. Lots of it. But she'll be fine," I said.

Horn took a deep breath and nodded. He reached up to rub his face, as if to hide tears that wanted to leak. "Thank goodness."

Reaching out, I patted the man on the shoulder. "Hopefully this was all just... a terrible accident. From what I can gather her prophecy wasn't too dire either, so I think by all counts everything is well," I said.

"Honestly Vim I wouldn't care if her prophecy had been bad. I just want her to be safe," he said.

"I did not mean it that way, Horn. I meant instead that you need not worry over your daughter getting involved in anything weird either," I said.

He smirked and nodded. "Ah. Right. Why do I sometimes forget you're like me?"

"Not sure. Of all people you should know better," I said with a smirk myself.

He sighed and glanced past me, and I heard Berri slowly approach. She had finally left Narli's room.

"What are you two being so loud here for? Go elsewhere. Don't wake her," Berri said stiffly as she got close. She carried the empty bowls Narli had just emptied.

"Is she doing well?" Horn asked.

"She is. She's very exhausted. Just eating a few bowls of stew made her so tired she fell asleep," Berri said.

"Nothing time and love won't fix," I said.

"Will you stay, Vim? For a while? Just to be sure?" Horn then asked worriedly.

"Shush!" Berri chastised him, since he had spoken a little loudly. I didn't think it mattered, to be honest. She was likely already in a deep slumber.

I nodded. "I will, Horn," I said softly.

He visibly relaxed a bit, glad to hear it, and then nodded to his wife. He turned and left, heading off to... do whatever he did. He was like me. He didn't like to just sit. Always needing to do something. Was probably even worse for him right now.

Berri sighed at him. "He's scared to see her," she said quietly once he rounded a corner.

"Hm?" What'd she mean?

Berri nodded. "He's afraid. That she's dying, Vim. He doesn't want to watch her die."

I frowned at that. "She's not dying."

"You know what I mean, Vim. An emotional thing," she said as she gestured for me to follow her.

Berri led me to the front of the house, where there was a small table. She gestured for me to sit in it as she went to the nearby kitchen. Likely to put away the bowls.

I sat, even though I hadn't wanted to. Like Horn I kind of wanted to get busy. It wasn't raining right now, so I wanted to check their little greenhouse that they had been finishing. For their pumpkins.

Berri didn't take long. She returned with a few glasses and a large pitcher of something cold. I went ahead and poured it for her, filling the cups, as she sat down too.

"Smoothies...?" I asked as I watched the stuff fill up my cup.

"Renn's fault. Narli fell in love with them, now we make them all time. Almost all we drink anymore," Berri said.

I smirked at that, and wanted to make a small joke related to her name... but chose not to. Not yet anyway.

Berri sighed at me. "Don't you dare. I hear it enough from Narli and Horn," she warned.

"Figured," I said, a little worried I had been read so easily.

I raised my glass in toast to her as she picked hers up.

"To Narli's health," I said.

She hesitated a moment... and then nodded and smiled. "Yes. My poor daughter needs all the prayers she can get."

Wasn't a prayer.

"It was Vim. From you it may as well have been," she said as she then took a drink.

I sighed at her. "Stop reading my mind."

"Stop making it so easy to do so and maybe I will."

Whatever.

Drinking the berry smoothie, I suddenly felt a little rude. As if I was cheating on Renn or something.

I shouldn't though. She was in Lumen. With everyone. Odds are she was currently, and constantly, enjoying such lovely delicacies all day long.

"How is Renn?" Berri asked.

Had anyone else asked I would have scoffed and believed they had only done so as to avoid the current drama in their lives. But this was Berri. She was made of very strong stuff, and that strong stuff was kind and gentle in ways I couldn't understand.

"Doing better than me. She recently absorbed a heart," I said.

Berri paused a moment. "Really...? So it worked out?"

"Different heart. Not the one I wanted her to absorb," I said. My plan had been to return here on our next little circuit through the Society and have Renn try then. With Miss Beak's.

"Oh... still, isn't that a good thing? You wanted her to, didn't you? You even asked Narli to make sure it was okay," Berri said.

I nodded. "I'm glad. I am. But it's... started new worries. Ones that came at a moment that doesn't need them added to the rest," I said.

Berri sighed. "I know that feeling. Narli had been so excited to go to the vote, but now? Now I don't know..."

"She might not even recover in time, not fully. We'll assess when it comes," I said. We still had a year.

"And what are you doing about Light, Vim?" Berri asked.

"As I told you, I'm trying to handle it... politely. As to not cause more harm than not," I said.

"Be careful, Vim. Many back then argued your cruelty had been over the top, but being too passive can be just as bad," Berri warned.

"My cruelty?" I asked.

She sighed at me. "You know what I mean. The stuff Celine and the rest had you do."

I nodded. I had known what she meant.

Berri took a big gulp of her smoothie, and then sighed a bit as she licked the scarred part of her lip. "Horn's scared of what he doesn't comprehend. So he's afraid of addressing it," she then said.

Oh...? Here I had thought she had wanted to avoid this topic, or would have simply not brought it up again.

"Many are like that, Berri. In a certain perspective his fear and aversion could be read as love. It's too great for him to bear," I said gently as I glanced at my cup. It was still half full. The taste made me think of Renn and her kisses, so I honestly didn't want to drink it anymore.

"Don't give me that stupid spiel, Vim. I want to be upset with him right now, not forgive him," she said.

I shrugged lightly at that. "Then be upset? It's the man's job to endure the brunt of emotions from the family, so go have at it," I said as I went to take a drink.

"Easy for you to say, Vim. You're able to endure," Berri said as I drank the rest of my own smoothie down. Just to get it over with.

"I've known many who are able to endure, Berri. You're one of them," I said as I put the cup aside, enough away that Berri wouldn't get any wise ideas and fill it back up for me. Sometimes her gentle kindness was a burden.

She glanced at it, but luckily that was all she did. "He should be in there now as we speak, praying for her safety. To be there when she wakes and to tend to her every need," Berri said further.

"He's been there...? Before you brought back food he and I had been talking to her. He even moved around pillows for her," I said, defending the man who didn't seem to be doing as bad as Berri was making him out to be.

"And where is he now?" Berri asked as she glared at me.

"Where are you?" I asked back.

Her glare faltered a bit, and she looked down and sighed. "Thanks. I needed that."

"Really? It had been quite a bad way of handling it, almost made me flinch at how bad it'd been," I said with a smirk.

"Only because you find it so difficult to be cruel to me. Why is that? You're nice to everyone, but don't think I've never noticed it," she asked as she went to take another drink.

Because I find those like you, who have survived great grief and pain and came out better for it, the best of us.

"You're like Renn you know? She would have made a similar comment about Horn, if she had been in your situation," I told her.

Berri tilted her head ever so slightly. "Would she have?"

I nodded. "She points out my own faults like that all the time. And to her, like you, it's the little things like that which bug her the most."

"Hm..." Berri frowned at that as she tapped her cup with a dull nail. Unlike Renn, their nails weren't pointy and sharp even though longer than normal like hers.

"What'd you think of your daughter's prophecy, Berri?" I asked, to get her off her thoughts. I didn't want her to realize I'd basically just claimed I had found her attractive as I had and do Renn. It was the truth, but it was embarrassing.

"It's not a normal one," she said simply, and I could tell she was still pondering my earlier statement.

Damn.

"No. Not at all. I almost feel as if she had not been able to see the whole thing, or something," I said.

Berri nodded. "Right... or she had misunderstood it completely. As if seeing it from the wrong side, or something."

A very good way of putting it.

"There's a chance she will see it again, Berri," I said softly.

Berri took a deep breath and her eyes focused on me. She was no longer thinking of my earlier statement. "I know, Vim," she whispered.

"It doesn't always happen... but many saints see the same dreams many times over their lives. And do so until they're either fulfilled, or a new and more important one takes its place," I told her.

"Will it... lock her in sleep? Like that? Each time?" Berri asked worriedly.

"It shouldn't, but let's err on the side of caution and assume so." It was a sad thought, that the poor girl would have to suffer such a strain ailment... but it was the reality before them.

Berri sniffed and nodded, and I knew she was about to cry.

Reaching over across the table, I gently patted her scarred arm. It wasn't the nearest one to me, but it was the one that held her cup.

"Stand Tall, Berri. For her," I said softly.

"Always, Vim."

Chapter 486 Renn – A Light A Day

"She doesn't like me much," Light said quietly as we watched Merit walk into the roof access, as to go back downstairs.

"Were you mean to her once?" I asked Light as I turned to look at the small table and chairs we were about to sit down at.

There was a light rain falling around us, but we were on the side of the roof of the Animalia building that had these neat little areas with roofs and balconies. Merit had called them pavilions. This one was just barely big enough to cover the small table and four smaller chairs from the rain, but not much more than that.

In fact the chairs were kind of tiny... the kind of tiny that brought forth a memory. Of the last time we'd been here.

I happily moved a chair back as to study it before sitting in it, as Light sat down.

Yep. It was the same little stool-like chair that Vim had sat on that one time. In the hallway, while waiting for Fly and her people to show up again. Before the chaos.

How cute. I wonder if this was the same one...? I glanced around a bit, and was a little sad to see there were dozens of such chairs all over the roof.

Odds are not, then. Too bad.

Sitting down anyway, I went ahead and pretended it was the same one Vim had used. It made me happy to do so.

"I try not to be mean to anyone, Renn. Kind of the point of my subservience to my faith. But I will admit in my youth I had... been a tad unscrupulous with my prophecies. Enough so to earn me the ire of quite a many members. Even many amongst my own clergy," Light said.

"Unscrupa-what?" I asked.

"Unscrupulous. It means to lack morals, to be unfair and dishonest. The way I had used it though wasn't meant to imply I had lied about prophecies, but rather instead I sometimes omitted things or didn't take the individual into account when telling them of theirs. Back then I didn't understand that just telling people a prophecy, without warning, could be disastrous or even cruel and unneeded. Let alone doing so wrongly," Light said.

Ah... "You told people their fates without warning," I said as I understood.

She nodded. "One of those to suffer my youthful indiscretions was Merit. I had foretold her failure as a queen, and her kingdom's downfall. Well... sometimes some things just simply shouldn't be said," Light said.

I nodded slowly, understanding perfectly well what she meant. "My old friend, Witch, had never told me a prophecy about me. Not directly. She sometimes hinted at them, or spoke of them during moments of great duress... such as when she died. But I always knew she had seen many of me. I always figured it was because she didn't like the idea of tempting fate," I said.

"A very possible reason. There have in fact been many saints who are more like Vim than you'd think. Those who kept their dreams to themselves, even at the cost of many lives," Light said.

I smirked at that. "A saintly Vim? Or a Vimly saint?" I wondered.

"Either would be terrible, I think."

Funny. I'd have found either to be lovely.

My ears twitched a bit as I turned my head, to look at a spot where rainwater washed down the top of the roof above us. It poured out of some kind of gutter-like thing, and was sent into a tiny little crevice which I knew ran to another nearby hole which would lead the water off the roof elsewhere.

This place was built far better than nearly any human building I'd seen. It was really weird how simple some of the ideas in its design seemed so... fancy, yet weren't. That's just a path for water to flow, wasn't it? Angled properly, to keep it from flooding the rest of the roof? Why couldn't anyone else do that? Or have thought of it?

"You're a little upset with me, aren't you?" Light then asked.

"Ah... I'd not been ignoring you. I was just fascinated with the building's little designs and quirks," I said with a point to the gutter.

"Hm. Yet?"

My ears fluttered again. "A little," I said honestly.

"May I ask why?"

Of course you can. "You summoned me, while I was visiting a friend for the first time in a long time. And you just want to talk...? It's not important? Couldn't it have waited?" I asked.

Light blinked, her glowing eye fading a little as she did. "I see. I apologize... I honestly had thought you'd have been here. I didn't realize you had friends outside the Society," she said.

Friends outside the Society...? What a statement. Told me a lot about how she saw me, and what she knew about me, at least. "She's a member. She's one of the humans," I said.

"Ah... now I understand. You value her time over ours, what with hers being so short. That's lovely, Renn," Light said as she understood.

I shifted a little on the tiny chair, not really liking how she had said it. That was the reason, of course, the real one. But I didn't want to have said it aloud.

"And I'm not... too upset over it. Not really," I added.

Light smiled and nodded. "It's okay. I'll make sure to not arrive without warning from now on... though that won't be a problem, here in a few days!" she said.

"Hm? Why?"

"I plan to move in. Here," she said with a point down at the table, though I knew what she meant.

I frowned at that. "What for...?" I asked. From what I had known and understood, she and the rest of her little group were heavily focused on the building of their new church. The one being built over the hole from that creature.

"To spend time with you, of course?" she said as if it was obvious.

"Aren't... you busy?" I asked, trying to understand.

"I am? I'll still spend most my day elsewhere, but this just confirms it. Me visiting without warning, as I would most of the time thanks to my schedule, won't work. So my living here, and being able to spend time with you without causing discord is the best method," she said as if it was already said and done.

"Um..." I wanted to ask what everyone else thought of that, but knew better than to do so.

After all she was not just a member of the Society... she was the daughter of the former leader. The one who had founded it.

By all rights she was free to live anywhere she wanted, as far as I could tell. Even if she hadn't been important, or a saint, she should still have the right to live here, too.

What anyone else thought didn't matter.

"I'll not bug you too much, I promise," Light said gently with a smile.

That's what worried me!

"Will the others be staying here too?" I asked. Less wasn't on the roof, but I knew she wasn't far. She was likely down the stairs; the one Merit had just gone down.

"Just a couple others. To help me in certain matters. But the rest will stay where they are," Light said.

Well... that was good, I guess...

"Not to change topics but... can I know what prophecy you spoke of? To Merit?" I asked.

Light blinked and tilted her head. "The one concerning her kingdom?"

I nodded. I wanted to know if it was the same one Celine had given me in her letter, or at least similar to it.

"Hm..." Light pondered a moment. "I foresaw Vim and a mighty foe. A monarch, maybe. They clashed and in the chaos her kingdom was destroyed," Light said.

"Huh...? I thought her kingdom kind of just... fell. That it dried up," I said. Both Vim and Merit had told me their sides, and that was how both of them had described it. Also, that wasn't like the one Celine had given me at all! Celine's had actually referenced the oasis drying up!

"It had. My prophecy had been wrong, in that sense. It had not fallen because of that kind of disaster, but another," Light said simply.

Oh... right. "So do you think prophecies can't ever be wrong then?" I asked, wondering if she was just like the Chronicler and Elaine.

"Of course not? They're wrong all the time. Sometimes to the point it's annoying. Take the little monarch dying back at Telmik, that creature had almost a dozen prophecies concerning it. Now that it's dead, all of them are up to debate," Light said as she gestured lightly at me, as if I had been the one to kill it.

Though... maybe she was pointing at me because I had eaten its heart? Surely not, right?

Actually, Vim hadn't told me how long the little monarch's heart would last inside me. Supposedly it'd be absorbed, eventually, but how long did that take...? Would Vim be back in time before it faded and Light no longer was tricked by it?

"Can I know those ones?" I asked, trying to not let my thoughts appear on my face.

Light smirked at me. "If you'd like I can let you read the records. That'd be quicker and easier for you than listening to me tell them off memory. I'm not like you, I don't have perfect memory so I'll not remember them properly," Light said.

Oh! "You have records?" I asked.

You might be reading a pirated copy. Look for the official release to support the author.

She nodded. "We write down and keep records of them all. I'll admit there are some we... don't, for obvious reasons. But most are kept written, both in-case we need to recall certain details and also if

something happens to us. I have many scrolls and tomes of my mother's too, if you'd like to see those," she said.

"Really?" I grew excited at that.

"They're mostly at Telmik right now, but they'll be brought here once ready," she said with a nod.

Oh... they weren't here yet.

Light laughed at me. "You really are so emotive, Renn!" she said between them.

Emotive...? I felt my ears twitch a bit, as I realized what she meant. "It's my ears, isn't it?" I asked.

"They help, a lot, but your thoughts get all over your face too. I'm kind of jealous, and I really love it, honestly... it's not often I meet someone so comfortable in their own skin that they don't even try to hide their thoughts," she said as she leaned forward as to lean against the table a bit.

"Vim says similar stuff," I said lightly.

"A lot of people think Vim isn't emotional and doesn't show it, but that's just because they're blind. He's more like you than not," she said.

I nodded, a little excited to hear someone else say so. "Right!? A lot of people don't believe me when I say I can easily read him too!"

Light happily nodded. "It's too bad you can't read his next move as easily as you can his annoyed face, huh!"

"Next move?" I asked, what'd she mean by that?

Light gestured lightly at herself. "I can't see Vim. No one can, as far as I understand."

"Huh?"

"Mother hadn't been able to either. What happens is we see, or learn, of Vim or his actions through others. For instance I've had several dreams about you, Renn, and that is how I learn and see Vim's actions. Take his recent departure, to go help a friend? I foresaw us having a conversation, not much unlike this one, where you told me where he'd gone. Which means that potential future is different now, since it had been one where I'd not known about Vim's departure until you told me of it."

Fascinated, I leaned forward a bit as to grab onto the table's edge. "So you really can't see Vim? At all?"

"Nope. No, I don't know the reason or the how or why... if you do know, please tell me."

I shook my head. "Is that common? Or..."

"Not at all. Mother had access to generations of saint journals and archives, and she and I have met many as well. As far as we are all aware, Vim's the only creature we can't prophesize."

"Huh... I wonder if he found a way to ensure that, since he hates them so much," I said as I wondered.

Light giggled at me. "What a cute way of saying it! Honestly I wish I knew how, or why, because then I'd do it too," Light said.

"Hm you'd want to not be seen either?" I asked.

Light nodded. "I don't want to know my own future. I hate it when I see something about to happen to myself, or around me... so if I could replicate his strangeness, I'd do it in a heartbeat," she said softly.

My tail squirmed a bit, since I had heard beneath the soft tone the seriousness of her comment.

She had meant that. From the heart.

Which meant her own abilities, her ability to foresee herself, has either brought her great grief... or...

I blinked a bit as I realized what it was probably like, being a saint.

You knew your destiny. Or at least, had an idea of it. A general direction, per say.

Most of the saints I've met and known have all said similar things. They knew who they would marry and have children with. They knew how and where they'd die. They knew the terrible events too, such as Witch telling me of the injuries she'd endure when we left her home occasionally. There were a few times we had taken medicine or certain tools, just because she had foreseen a specific injury on her or myself.

Not only did it probably feel terrible to know the bad things coming your way... it undoubtedly felt bad to know the good too.

Hearing, and knowing, I'd likely have a child with Vim was a wonderful thing. But if I had foreseen it all...? The momentous moments...? Maybe I'd be less inclined to think so, then.

"Would you... give up your abilities if you could, then?" I asked gently.

"In entirety...? Maybe. A part of me wants to say yes, but another part of me wouldn't know how to live any other way. Without my abilities... what am I? Who am I? I'd not be able to do anything great, or help or save anyone. I'd not be able to fulfill the demands of my gods, or support the Society or carry on my mother's legacy..." Light shook her head. "I'd want to, but no. I'd never give them up."

"I see..."

"How about you, Renn? Would you?"

"Me...? What abilities do I have?" I asked, smirking a little at her question. Or was she asking if I was in her shoes, if I'd have given them up?

"Would you be human? If you could?"

Oh...? I slowly shook my head. "You know... I've never really wanted to be one. Although it'd make living in this world a tad easier, I suppose. But if I was human I'd never know the Society, or Vim... or any of my friends, or you even," I said.

"I'd rather be included in your group of friends, than just a 'you even' category," she teased.

I smirked at that and nodded. "I just meant I'd not trade any of this. For nothing."

Light sighed at me in a way that told me she hadn't liked how I had tried to avoid her teasing. But she didn't seem offended.

Though even if she had been...

Honestly did I want to become close to her...?

As much as I'd like for all the drama to end, and for there to be no chaos or issues in the Society... at the same time...

There was a line, wasn't there? One that shouldn't be crossed?

And wasn't she crossing it? With her scheming? Even if her scheming wasn't necessarily evil, in the truest sense, wasn't she trying to manipulate me and Vim? Into doing whatever it was she wanted us to do?

Vim hoped for things. He hoped certain people would do certain things. He hoped and wished, but never forced it. Never actually went out of his way to manipulate the world or its inhabitants. As to obey his rules.

Yet... that was also the problem, wasn't it? His lack of interfering has led us to this point.

Where was that line I wonder? And why did I allow, and want, him to cross it and yet got frustrated with her when she did?

Was I really that simple? That I'd simply overlook someone's cruelty or manipulation just because I loved them? If so, was I any better than her?

Probably not.

But I wanted to be.

"You said you've had many prophecies of me?" I asked.

She nodded. "There's a few I won't share with you, even if you ask. As I said, I've learned my lesson about doing such a thing. But there's also several I'd share the moment you ask for them, since it'd be better if you knew them than not," she said.

"Can I have one? As an example?" I asked.

"How about the one you know of? Want to hear it in full?" she asked.

I blinked. "The one about my daughter?"

She nodded.

I gulped a bit and hesitated.

Hadn't I just thought that knowing the full details could somehow lessen the experience...?

Did she not herself wish she couldn't see her own fate?

Was that not proof? That I shouldn't? That it was more ill than not to know?

And that wasn't to say the least of Vim's thoughts on them either.

Maybe they were right. Her and Vim. Although two very different people, they at least shared their feelings and opinions on them there in that way...

"A heavy question isn't it?" Light asked.

"It is... can I think about it?"

"Of course! I'm just glad you're not so tainted by Vim that you'll at least consider it!" she said, sounding a little happy as she did.

Right... unlike Vim I was at least considering it...

I think I'll ask a few others. Merit and such. Maybe their own experiences and insights would help me decide my own choice. Especially since several of them, like Merit, seemed to have bad experiences with prophecies.

"My friend... she foresaw her husband. Her mate. She saw children. Several children. But he died early, and only one of her children had been born because of it," I said carefully.

Light frowned and nodded. "As I said... prophecies can be wrong, and are so often."

"She was fine when speaking of it... but I can only imagine the heartbreak she had endured at the time. The realization. The loss of not just the one she loved, but the future she had with him. The one she had seen, the children she had known that would now never be. I can comprehend loss, having lost many myself... I can't comprehend losing what I've never had," I said gently.

The single-eyed saint seemed to soften a bit. Her shoulders relaxed, her smile became gentle. "You're very wise, Rennalee. I can think of only a few dozen people that I know, or have ever known, who could comprehend the emotions you just spoke of and shared. Yes. The pain of knowing what could have been, is... sometimes too much to bear. Many saints, and many others who have heard of their own fates from them, have taken their own lives or wasted them thanks to such loss. One of my aunts, one of the Singing Sisters, had taken her own life because of it. You most likely know Mapple," Light said.

I felt sad again, to hear once more of another sad piece of history about Mapple. It felt like everything I learned of her life was... painful to know. Did that poor girl not have any happy things in her past? Or did people just not share such things, and instead opting to share the trauma when speaking of others? If so how did people speak of me...? Did they speak of my family? Of my failures?

"Yet you seemed excited to tell me of them," I pointed out to her.

"Because I believe you to be stronger than that. Many people see you as frail, but that is because of who you stand next to. Anyone is frail when next to Vim. But I see the truth, and not just because of my eyes," she said as she pointed at the only one she had. Did she misspeak or did she still see from her other eye, I wonder?

"But I don't want to be sad, Light. That's... the entire reason I joined the Society. It's why I chose Vim. I was tired of being sad," I said. And alone.

"Yes... but you, like me, know that to truly appreciate the happy moments... we must first endure the sad ones," she said.

I frowned at that. That was something Vim might say. Or probably would.

I thought? I didn't agree. I knew people could be happy their whole lives without ever encountering sorrow. One did not need to know grief to appreciate joy. I knew that for a fact.

But there was no point in arguing her point, or even outright claiming she was wrong. Because in a certain way she wasn't. Because she'd just point out that one could appreciate happiness without knowing suffering... yet one who did know pain would appreciate that happiness more than the other would. And although I didn't like that idea, I did comprehend it.

It was after all why I so passionately cherished the relationships I had. My Vim, my friends, my family. Because of how cruel and terrible my own had been growing up.

"Do you know how Vim's journey goes?" I asked, choosing to change topics again.

She blinked at me. "You change topics like Vim does."

I smirked. "Learned from the best."

She chuckled a bit, and nodded. "I don't. In fact, I don't even know where he's actually gone. I only know he has gone to help someone you consider a friend," she said.

Oh...? So she really didn't know! Or was she just lying? "You really don't know?"

"I don't lie, Renn. Not outright. I'll avoid the truth, or circumvent it, but I won't tell a lie. I don't know who he's gone to see, or help, or even why or how or what."

Huh... "Part of your faith then? Because I know for a fact a saint can lie," I said.

She smiled and nodded. "Yes. My faith."

I see... "So then... do you know when he'll return?"

"Kind of. I have an idea of it, or rather... I know something that will happen right before he arrives. So until that moment happens, I can be confident he won't," she said.

"Like knowing it won't rain until a storm shows up in the distance," I said, understanding.

"Right. Until it pours without a cloud in the sky."

Ah... "I've encountered that a few times. It's unsettling, but I enjoy it."

"Do you?"

I nodded, as our conversations drifted into... more normal territory. Not about prophecies, dreams or beliefs and opinions... but instead to the simpler stuff in life.

What we liked. The weather we enjoyed most. My favorite places I'd been to so far. Her journey back here, on a strange ship that had almost sunk.

Although I was still a little bothered she had interrupted my visit with Roslyn... I decided to slightly forgive her. Because I knew, no matter how this all ended... I at least tried my best to be good enough. In more ways than one.

Chapter 487 Vim – Berri's Worries

Pulling the box back a bit more, I counted the smaller boxes within.

There were about a dozen or so, and I knew each held a set of sewing and crochet materials. The needles and hooks and such needed to make simple, but intricate, things.

I pushed the box back onto the rack and went to the next. This one wasn't as full, but it had a bunch of yarn in it. They were likely Nann's handiwork.

Putting the box of yarn back into place, I glanced up and down the nearby shelves and racks and decided this row wasn't really worth checking. Nearly every box was full of materials, or the tools needed to turn those materials into other things such as clothes.

Rounding the end of the row of shelves, I went to the next aisle. This one had larger boxes, elongated ones that were as long as I was tall and about half as wide. I grabbed a random one and pulled it off the shelf and placed it down onto the ground. It was too big to open and peer in while leaving on the shelf itself, unlike the smaller boxes.

Opening the larger box, I found it was packed full of candles. The thick and round types you'd find burning in a cloister or church.

I rolled my eyes at the sight, and smell, of them and closed the box back up. I put the box back where I'd gotten it, stepped a few dozen feet down the aisle, and grabbed a different box at random.

This time I found wax. Not candle-styled wax, but instead long thin rolls of the stuff. The kind one melted for things like securing a letter.

Closing the box, I hefted it as to put it back. Right as I put it back on the shelf, I heard the light footsteps approach.

"I'm here, Berri," I said as I finished putting the box away.

I heard her come to a stop, then turn and head down a nearby aisle. A few moments later, as I pulled another box at random off the shelf, Berri turned down the aisle I was in.

"What are you looking for, Vim?" Berri asked as she walked over to me. She carried a small lantern in her hand. It made tiny little creaking noises as it swayed on its metal loop as she walked.

"Honestly, nothing. I'm just occupying my time. Checking on stuff. Also figured if I found something neat I'd take it back to Renn, she likes odd little knick-knacks," I said.

"Knickknacks," Berri quoted me, giggling softly as she did.

This box paper. Just plain old paper. I closed the lid and sighed a bit as I glanced at Berri, and her gentle smile that she was giving me.

"How's Narli?" I asked.

"She woke up to use the restroom and drink a bit of water, but then went back to sleep," Berri said.

I nodded. "That's a good sign," I said as I went to put the box of paper back.

Berri lifted the little lantern a little as I did, as if I needed the extra light to see what I was doing. I didn't tell her such a thing wasn't needed, because I knew she knew already. Berri was just... kind in such little ways that she did such a thing without thinking half the time.

Once the box was back in place I turned back to her as she lowered the little lantern to her side again. "Thank you for staying, Vim. I know you have duties and worries, so I appreciate it. I really do," Berri said gently.

Oh? Was that why she'd come down here to find me?

"It's fine Berri. What is this, day four? Hasn't been that long. I'll stay as long as it takes," I said.

"Careful, Vim. You might need to stay forever if that's the case."

"Right?" I sighed a little, but nodded. She was right, of course.

Narli seemed to be doing fine. She was still exhausted, still weak and feeling as if sick, but she'd not relapsed into her strange dream. Honestly there really wasn't much I could do at this point. Even if she

did fall back into that weird slumber, getting stuck in a prophecy again, I wasn't really sure how I'd actually help her.

But I still wanted to stick around a bit, just to be sure. I honestly was hoping to wait until she had another prophecy, even a little insignificant one, just so I could feel confident that she really was fine.

The problem with that is one had no idea how long it'd be until she had another prophecy. Sometimes saints had them every night, and then other times they went years without one. It was one of those unreliable things.

Berri glanced around at the shelves and boxes around us, and I noted the way her eyes narrowed a bit. Was her eyesight bad...? It wasn't very bright down here, thanks to us being underground, but there were a few lights scattered throughout the ceiling. Powered by the water pressure provided by the heart in the keep. They were dim though, since they had been made to last as long as possible.

I couldn't really remember if Berri's sight had been bad this whole time or not. Though it might just be she was tired. She had gotten less sleep than her daughter, which was saying something. She spent all her time at Narli's bedside, praying and fretting over her.

Another reason I was glad Narli was doing better. It meant Berri would ease a little too, and get better herself.

She'd be fine. I knew she would. Her daughter had recovered, or at least was recovering. She'd be okay. Berri was... strong. One of the strongest people I knew.

"You okay, Berri?" I asked anyway.

Her little lantern made noises as she shifted and glanced at me. Her tired eyes relaxed a little upon looking into mine, and she took a small breath... but didn't nod. "I'm just... I've been thinking."

"Oh no, the horror," I teased.

Her brow furrowed at me. "Narli told me, not long after you all left last time you were here, that you'd be making a home. Somewhere up north where there are big trees," Berri said.

"Berri... It's one thing when your daughter's life is on the line, but..." I groaned, not happy to hear her speak of prophecies.

"This is a matter of her life, Vim!" Berri said, a little loudly as she lifted the lantern a bit. This time she did so not because she had wanted to see me better, but instead as if she wanted to smack me with it.

"How so?" I asked.

Berri groaned a bit... and lowered her lantern again. "You're stepping down. And going to focus your attention on other things," she stated.

I nodded slowly. "Within reason, Berri. I'll still be a part of the Society. I'd still come the moment you called for me," I said.

"That's exactly it, Vim," she whispered.

Was it...? Was she saying she didn't want me to, or something?

"Fine. Go ahead and say it. I promise not to get... too upset," I said, deciding to just let it be. Maybe it did concern Narli's well-being.

Berri brightened up a bit, and not just because she once again lifted the lantern. "Really?"

I nodded.

She smiled, nodding happily. "I think we should go with you. To live with you."

I blinked at that.

"What?"

"I... I worry, Vim. For her. Horn and I can't do anything for her when it comes to her powers. We don't understand them... we don't know them, like you do! And..." Berri began to ramble a bit, her lantern clinking as she waved her free hand around in the air as if to better display her meaning.

Although... worrisome, I knew exactly where she was coming from.

She just had a scare. A terrible one. In her perspective, the only reason Narli had woken from her strange slumber was because of me. I didn't believe that, not really, but I'd not voice such a thing at the moment. I didn't want them to realize that, like I did, Narli only survived out of pure luck and happenstance. My being here had nothing to do with it.

Maybe.

"You want to be near me, in case something happens to Narli again," I said as I understood everything.

"Yes...!" Berri nodded, gravely.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

Staring into my friend's eyes, I felt... tired.

She had every reason to come to such a conclusion. She really did. I could not fault her at all for thinking this way, or having such a desire.

If I was in her shoes... I'd not hesitate to do the same, I think.

After all, what she wasn't saying was obvious. If she was near me, she'd be near other saints too. Others who might be able to offer insight or help, where I'd not be able to provide it.

"I... honestly don't know what's going to happen, Berri. Not really. We have plans, as we always do, but as you know..."

"They never work out the way you want, yes. I know Vim. But Narli had been very confident that you..." Berri started, but I stopped her as I raised a finger to hush her. Her little lantern clanked as she jolted a bit, as if offended I'd nearly put my finger to her lips.

"I get the gist now. You need not expand on the prophecies for this anymore," I said softly.

She sighed, but nodded. "Fine. You do plan it though, don't you? To make a home somewhere?"

"Rather than a home..." I was about to deny it, but couldn't. And not just because of the way she was looking at me. Why did it look like she was about to cry? "I suppose it had been a plan... to a degree. But honestly I'm not sure I had meant it for me, but rather Renn..."

"Why wouldn't her home be yours too?" Berri asked.

"Because I'm trying to not admit to it, openly," I said honestly.

Berri giggled at that and nodded. "Very like you, Vim."

Yes. It was.

I crossed my arms and sighed. "Randle and his people. Nebl and his family. Lilly and the rest... now you? I'm starting to see a pattern and it makes me want to upheaval it all with violence," I said.

"Nebl as well? Why? He loves his mountain."

Ah. I'd not told her. We'd actually spoken quite a bit, since I had been trying to get her to relax a bit and not be so focused on her daughter. I sat with her often, enduring those berry smoothy drinks she made, just to give her some time where her thoughts could be elsewhere. Yet although I'd told her about many of the current things happening, the drama and whatnot, I'd forgotten to tell her about Nebl's home.

"His forest is sick. Enough so he'll need to move... at least for a few years. But the truth is his granddaughter, Lellip, plans to meet and mate with Lilly's son. The mercenary. I think he and the rest of the family just want to go with her and be with her," I said.

"Oh...! How wonderful!" Berri happily said.

I nodded. It honestly was. "I've been... staying out of it, Berri. Obviously. What I think is going to happen, much to my displeasure, is while Renn and I help Randle build his little orphanage up north, we'll be

making a new location. One where those like Nebl and his family will live as well. Or at least, all within the same area. Maybe not together, but close enough to support one another if needed," I said.

"Because the Society may not be there to support them soon," Berri said softly.

I didn't want to, but I nodded anyway.

She hummed a bit. "It'd be... sad to abandon this place... but..." Berri said as she looked around.

Right. This place was actually rather important. In its own way. And not just because it had a vault-like system for hearts.

"It's going to be a pain to lug all this stuff up north," I groaned.

She giggled at me. "I look forward to watching you do so."

"What does Horn and Narli think of doing such a thing, though?" I asked.

Berri shifted, and glanced around a bit. I didn't need to tell her we were still alone, no one else had come down here. Narli was likely still fast asleep, and even if she wasn't she was too weak to walk around on her own. And Horn was, like he has been since I've been here, keeping himself busy in the fields.

"Do you know why I chose Horn, Vim?"

I blinked at the sudden change in topics, since Berri was not usually one to do such a thing. Let alone in a way I would have done myself.

"Hm...?" I tried not to frown too deeply as I waited to hear the answer.

"As my mate," she specified.

I nodded. "I understood your question, Berri... though I don't understand why you're asking it."

She smiled gently at me, as if I some child. "Not going to answer it, are you?"

Oh. "His loyalty?" I suggested a possible answer.

"I do love his loyalty... but no. The reason I chose him, is because he's simple."

"Simple?"

"A simple man. Content to work fields. To live quietly. He has no desires for grandiose adventures, no need for money, wealth, or power. He doesn't even want to see the world beyond the tree-line of our little home," Berri said, speaking with a tone that sounded rather lovely. She gestured around us, at the many rows of racks and shelves full of supplies. "He wants none of this. Just us. A simple life, with simple happiness and chores. Basically, Vim, I fell for his simplicity," Berri finished.

I nodded slowly. "I see," I said.

"You find it odd, do you?"

Frowning, I shook my head. "No? Not at all. I see the attraction, Berri. Don't forget I too have sought such pureness. Though in my own forms. I get both the idea of it, and the attraction of it."

"What was yours?" she asked.

"Most recent one was an island. Or rather, a chain of them. Far from anything or anyone. I had lived there, for what had likely been centuries. I fished. I walked the beaches and forests. I sat and pondered. I floated in serene waters, warm and gentle, for months on end. To me that had been peace," I said, telling her what I've told only a bare few.

My friend seemed to relax a little. "Why Vim... I'd not realized you knew exactly what I love so dearly."

"Doesn't everyone?" I asked. I couldn't count how many times I'd heard people express their desires for that very same thing. The same... peace and quiet. Though maybe in different forms and whatnot, the

idea of it was always the same. Usually I heard such desires from those who were dying, or about to. Oddly enough.

"Not in my experience. Personally I had always assumed you had desired greatness."

"Greatness?" I asked. What'd she mean by that...?

She nodded, and glanced at her little lantern as she did. As to confirm it was still glowing strongly. It was. "I've always thought you desired purpose. Thus your being our protector. You are so great, so knowledgeable and powerful, you could be anything. A king. A ruler. A monarch. Yet you instead do what you do. I always assumed it was because you felt it your calling, that by being our protector you felt a sense of duty and greatness. That it was your way of being impactful on the world," Berri explained.

"I see... in truth Berri, I want nothing to do with the world. What I do here, and have been doing, is my way of penance. I owe the world a debt. This is my way of paying it," I said.

She tilted her head. "Must be some debt, Vim."

"More than you could know," I whispered.

Berri sighed as her eyes softened a bit. "I feel like a jerk now, for assuming all this time."

"Even if you had been right, there's no shame in it Berri. Many great people only existed because they wanted to be great themselves. Plus I'd never take offense to such a thing, I've never cared for what anyone has thought or believed about me," I said.

"I find that faulty. If you desire importance, you'll never be such a thing," Berri though said.

Hm... "Then why did you spend so many years trying to uplift the Society, Berri? You did more than most."

"Because I felt it was right. That I had the ability, and the wherewithal, and thus it was my duty to do what others couldn't," she answered.

I nodded, understanding that very well. "Thus you choosing Horn. You felt it was time to focus on the things that really mattered. Yourself," I said, understanding her a little better.

Berri shifted a bit, enough so to make me realize she had likely forgotten how this whole topic had started. She then smiled and nodded. "Yes. I saw the world from up high, and found it lacking, so came back down here."

I glance around. "At least it isn't damp," I said.

She giggled at me. "Please Vim. I'm trying to be serious."

"I know. I'm sorry. Back to the point, then, are you saying Horn will simply do what you wish because he's simple?" I asked.

"I'm saying the only thing that matters to us, Vim... is that little girl upstairs. With her cute little horn, and adorable dreams of one day having enough friends to act in a play. She's all that matters to us. If leaving this place, our home, and going where life is... harsh and difficult for us, then that is what we will do. Because nothing else matters," she said.

"She wants to act in a play?" I asked.

Berri's face scrunched up a bit. "Vim! Focus!"

"What? That's important. What play does she want to act?" I asked.

She sighed, rather exasperatedly. "I'm saying we'll go live up north with you, Vim, because it's what must be done! It matters not what anyone really thinks about it!"

I nodded, feeling a little bad. I had been slightly teasing, but at the same time I hadn't been. I hadn't even known that Narli had such a fascination or desire. Especially since it was so... well...

"Then come north, Berri. Give me time to set up a proper location, alongside the rest, then we'll make plans to bring you there. Narli really wants to participate in the vote come next winter, how about we just plan to have you and your family move then?" I said, making a suggestion.

Berri's lantern swung a bit as she nodded, as if nodding alongside her. "That would work perfectly. Will you be ready by then?"

"Honestly I'm going to have to be. I don't want to admit it, but... well..."

Berri nodded again. "If we're not the only family already suggesting it, there will be others. Fate is taking over, Vim."

I wanted to spit and curse, but I'd not do such a thing in front of such a wonderful woman. Instead I just sighed. "Thus Light's five year vocation plan for me. She knows this is what's going to happen," I said.

"I don't like the woman much, Vim, for having abandoned us all... but she's still a saint. They know a thing or two," Berri said.

"They only think they do, Berri," I said.

She didn't seem to like that. She scoffed at me. "Come on, then. I now feel like I need a snack. Let's talk about this while I make something for the next time Narli wakes," Berri said as she turned away, giving me orders as if I had no choice but to obey.

Although I wanted to rebel, just as I wanted to rebel against fate, I instead just... followed diligently. Shoulders slumped, tired and defeated.

"Maybe it's for the best, Vim! I've actually been kind of secretly hoping that Narli didn't just get to make more friends... but found someone special, herself. You said Lellip is going to try and court one of Lilly's sons? How many does she have again? I remember a tall skinny one, like Windle..."

"That's Bark. The other, Trunk, is shorter. He's uh... well..." I hesitated, since I basically wanted to say he wasn't good enough for Narli. But who was I to say? "He's like his father, yes. But he's chosen religion as his branch to rest on, not science and math," I said.

"Oh? You say that like it's so terrible, but maybe that's what she needs. She is a saint, Vim," Berri said, rather seriously.

I know. That was the reason I'd been about to say he wouldn't work.

Following Berri out of the storeroom, I did my best to not let my own feelings be heard on the matter... as she asked me a hundred questions about the lad, and the few other available sons amongst those in that area.

I should have brought Renn with me.

Chapter 488 Renn – An Otter's Loyalty

"Just us two?" I asked as I watched Brandy finish tying the horse to the wagon. It was one of three connected to the wagon.

Or well, it seemed more like a carriage to me. It had a large cover on it, and extra rows of seats in it as if to carry people and not products or luggage.

"Merit will meet us there," Brandy said as she patted the horse on the rear. It seemed to completely ignore her, it didn't even flick its tail or ears.

"I didn't mean to specify her, I meant anyone in general," I said.

Brandy chuckled at me. "I know! Was just teasing you. Hey! Wynn!" Brandy shouted, and I noticed this time the horses shifted and flicked their ears, annoyed at her loudness.

I found Wynn not far away. He, like most of the other people here in the depot, were preparing for the opening of the guild. It was the early hours of the morning, when the morning sun just barely started to light up the sky. He turned to look at us and waved.

"Aye!" Wynn shouted back, and then he went to walk over to one of the nearby gates.

I sighed a bit as I went to clamber up onto the wagon. Brandy was already sitting down, reins in hand.

"Now, now Renn. What would Vim say if he saw you acting so?" Brandy teased me as I took a seat next to her in the front of the wagon.

"Proud of me, likely," I said without hesitation.

Brandy laughed. "Right! Probably!"

She then slapped the reins, urging the horses forward. They didn't seem to even notice the huge wagon behind them, or us who sat upon it.

Horses really were strong, weren't they? I was supposedly strong, but I wasn't entirely sure if I could pull a wagon this big as easily as they were doing... maybe I should try later, just to see.

Brandy guided the horses out of the depot, and I waved goodbye to Wynn as we left. He immediately shut the gated door behind us, as to stop anyone from entering the depot before they were meant to. I was a little surprised to find there were already half a dozen carts waiting outside, patiently sitting in the road for the depot to open.

I studied the people on the carts, or guiding the horses pulling them. I didn't recognize anyone.

"Who you looking for?" Brandy asked as she guided our horses along the road, heading deeper into the city.

"Mark. Lamp's husband. He works here in the depot under Wynn," I said.

"Ah. He'd not be out here, then. We try to keep our more important humans in house," Brandy said.

"In house...? What then about Roslyn and the pirates?" I asked, a little worried.

"That's consider in-house, Renn. They report directly to whoever we have running the port authority at the time. Such as right now it's Pierre," Brandy said.

Ah... I see.

I nodded, and noticed it was a little chilly. I shifted a bit, and was glad Brandy had told me what we were doing. Otherwise I wouldn't have put on a jacket.

"Why are we doing this and not one of her own people?" I asked Brandy as we slowed down a bit. We came to an intersection, and there were other wagons already upon it crossing the other way.

"It's my way of sticking my nose into where it doesn't belong," Brandy said as she tugged the reins a little, as to bring the horses to a stop in full. She hadn't needed to do so it had looked like, the beasts seemed smart. They had slowed and started to come to a pause even before she had done so.

"So... you want to annoy them? Or do you have some kind of goal?" I asked as I watched one of the wagons pass before us. I liked the red designs and colors on the wagon, why weren't ours painted all fancy like? We had the Animalia Guild emblem on them, but they were rather plain otherwise.

"Actually I'm hoping to see inside the building. I want to see if I know anyone else. I've not really gotten a chance to see who is actually here or not, yet," Brandy said.

"Are you looking for someone?" I asked.

Brandy glanced at me, and I noted the way she had done so.

She was.

"Kind of... I guess I just want to know who is here or not. I'm..." Brandy went quiet as the crossroads before us became empty. She snapped the reins and guided the horses forward as we finally crossed the road.

As we did I glanced up and down both of the streets, and was a little surprised to see how empty they still were. It was early morning, of course, and cold, but I had expected it to be busier already.

I usually rarely left the company building, and when I did it was usually in the middle of the day. So this was a neat experience for me.

"You're?" I asked after we crossed the road, as to try and make sure Brandy didn't lose her train of thought and forget what she'd been about to say.

Brandy sighed. "I'm torn, Renn."

"Torn?" I asked as I glanced back at her. She looked fine. Better than fine, actually. She looked rather good at the moment, considering last time I'd seen her she had looked exhausted from overwork.

"They all left, Renn. They left us behind. They abandoned us," she then said.

Oh... She was talking about her heart.

"They did. I've been wondering why others haven't really seemed to upset over that. I wasn't around back then, but even I find it rather upsetting," I said.

Brandy nodded, rather harshly. "It's more than upsetting, Renn. It's infuriating. They leave hundreds of years ago, and now they return to take over? To profit off that which all of us have been building? Ha," Brandy scoffed, rather harshly.

Was she upset over their audacity, or the fact they were taking from the Society what she considered her own hard earned labor?

"I thought I heard they'd not taken anything yet. No money or anything," I said carefully.

Brandy glanced at me, with a slight look of annoyance. "Let me guess, from Gerald? The fool only sees his own coffers and nothing else. He sees ledgers, not realizing wealth is more than just coins," she said.

She sounded like she was about to start shouting. It made me wonder if we were going to Light as to pick a fight, not to help them move some of her luggage.

"Can I ask what you mean?" I asked.

"They've not taken anything beyond their own stipends yet. But they have taken other things. Deeds to land. Permits to rights. Titles in nobility, and ownership of precincts. Basically they've not taken liquid money, but have taken things even more valuable for themselves," Brandy said.

I frowned at that. "How come Gerald wouldn't say or notice that? Isn't he involved in all that stuff too?" I asked. I had a slight idea of the things she spoke of, but I wasn't going to pretend I fully understood it. I simply took her word that they had taken great wealth.

"He's just not one to care for anything outside of his purview. The stuff they've taken are not under our watch, but the church's," Brandy said.

Ah... which Brandy would be aware of, being the bookkeeper.

Speaking of that I never really got an explanation for what that even meant...

Before I could ask about it, Brandy scooted a bit closer to me. I sat up a little straighter as she leaned into me, as to whisper.

"I didn't get to talk to Vim before he left. What're his thoughts on all this?" she asked.

I glanced around, as if to make sure there was no one to hear what I was about to say. There wasn't, of course.

"Well... he's upset. Genuinely. But to be honest I think he's more upset with the prophecies than anything else, Brandy," I told her.

She sighed. "Of course he is. The darn man believes everyone can do whatever they want, it's obvious he's never had children!" Brandy grumbled.

"Have you...?" I asked. I had thought she hadn't.

"Hm? No. But I've raised many throughout the years. Apprentices and whatnot... So? What do you think of it then? You're smarter than Vim, so...?" Brandy asked.

"I'm trying to not get upset with them, Brandy. If I do it will just give Vim permission to step down and ruin everything. I need to be... better than that, as to keep Vim in check," I said, telling her my own true thoughts on the matter.

Brandy studied me a moment, and then sighed and nodded. "I guess that is indeed the position you should be taking right now, huh...?"

"You don't agree?"

"I just want to not feel like I'm the only one upset. Everyone else whispers about it, but they then turn and smile at the sight of them! Hugging them and acting all friendly..." Brandy shook her head, as if wanting to say things far worse than that.

I bit back my own comments, since I kind of understood where she was coming from... but also didn't.

How could you actually blame people for being happy at seeing old friends...? Many of the people who had returned with Light, like Less, were people many in the Society had known and been friends with. Even if they were at odds, even if they had abandoned the Society back then...

"Are you going to... take a stand against them, then?" I asked Brandy.

"I don't know yet. I feel like I should, if anything out of principle... but I wouldn't win. Light all on her lonesome is beyond me. Even if she wasn't a saint, she's still Celine's daughter. The golden child, and then she's obviously not alone. She's got plenty of important and powerful people all lined up behind her, like a small army, to top it off," Brandy said with a huff.

Oh? I knew many saw Light in such a way, but this was the first time I'd heard it said in such a way.

"Golden child..." I whispered the term, and found it rather funny. I got the meaning of it, rather clearly, but it still was something I'd never heard before.

"Yes, so are you. But I'm okay with you. You're not trying to take my job, or spend all the money I've spent a lifetime making!" Brandy said with a gentle elbow bump.

I smirked at that. "Actually I've been wondering about that. You're the one who keeps the records, right? Would you be able to tell me how much money I've spent? Or Vim and I?" I asked.

"Hm? Yes? I could. Why?" Brandy asked as we neared another intersection.

"Would just be interesting. Vim usually handles the money, but I'm not stupid. I know we spend a lot while traveling... to say the least. So would just be interesting to know, I guess," I said.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

She chuckled at me as we slowed again. This time though we didn't need to come to a stop, there were no other carts or wagons on the road. There were a few people walking around, but they all stayed out of the way on their side of the road as we passed by.

"Well... if you stick around long enough this time, we can go over such things," Brandy said.

I nodded. "If you're busy it's fine."

"Won't be here soon, if I don't figure something out..." Brandy groaned.

"Oh... wait... are you saying they're actually taking your job, Brandy? I thought you were just being..."

"Being what? Facetious? No! I'm serious! This is how it starts, Renn! You don't know what Celine and her people were like! They didn't trust anyone outside of their circle, so only those within it got positions of importance! Which means..." Brandy quieted a bit, having realized she had started to raise her voice far more than necessary.

"Aren't you a member of their cloth?" I asked. She was a sister wasn't she?

"I am... but I'm not important, Renn. I'm just a member. I joined to help women, because a few hundred years ago this nation had been one where we were possessions not people. Once that was no longer an issue... well..." Brandy shrugged.

"What...? Possessions?" I asked.

She nodded and sighed. "A different story for another time. Used to be a lot of nations that saw women and children even as objects, not people. Not citizens. Not so much an issue anymore, though there are places that still have a bit of misogyny. Even here in Lumen it's rare for a woman to be the head of a company or noble house, though it's not unheard of," Brandy said.

"Huh..." I nodded, finding this rather interesting. I'd not realized there had been entire civilizations where women were treated in such ways. I mean, I'd known about slavery of course, but had thought everyone had suffered under it equally.

Wait... "Are you not able to claim a more important position, though? You've done a lot for the Society, haven't you?" I asked.

She sighed. "No. If it was that easy Renn, I'd have done it already."

So... she'd have been okay with Light and the rest doing what they were doing, if she had been allowed to be a part of it...? Was I understanding her correctly?

I wanted to ask, but decided not to. Since it was possible she hadn't realized she had just admitted to it, and also... well...

Was there really anything inherently wrong with someone wanting to keep their position? Their job? Their purpose? I didn't think so, not really, at least.

"So... will they take the guild from you then?" I asked.

"Gerald owns the guild, Renn. I'm just the keeper of records. I spend most my time here because it's the focal point of all our business. And yes, in a way. They'll likely let Gerald keep control, and keep doing what he is doing, but eventually they will make him obsolete. Eventually this new Cathedral will take over all business aspects of this city, to the point even if they left the guild alone they may as well have not," Brandy said.

"Seems silly. Why ruin something already working?" I wondered.

"Exactly!" Brandy shouted.

I flinched a bit, since she had done so loudly... and was still right next to me. Although I wore my hat, it wasn't as if it blocked sounds well enough to keep me safe from such a loud outburst when so close to my ear.

Brandy didn't even seem to notice that her outburst had hurt me a little as she pointed in front of us, likely to the building we were approaching. "They're bloody leeches, Renn! They squirm back in after hiding away, leaving us all to our own devices and faults, and now they think they can tell us how to do it right? It's blood-curdling!" Brandy shouted.

Oh boy... She was furious.

I nodded as she fumed; glad her shouting wasn't as directly in my ear as before. She had sat up a bit, as if wanting to stand as to shout angrily. "It is rather rude, I agree," I said.

"It's beyond rude!"

It was. But what were we supposed to do about it...?

"So... you want to see whose here, to see who they might give your job to?" I asked, trying to understand.

"Exactly!"

I nodded, glad to finally get a direct answer... even if it seemed a little silly.

Wasn't it going to take them years and years to build the new cathedral...? I could have sworn Vim and Light both had mentioned it'd take decades to properly build it. Didn't that mean Brandy had time to figure things out...? Yet she was acting as if she was going to lose her job tomorrow, or had done so already.

Though... maybe she was worried for good reason...

Even if that reason seemed rather selfish.

"Gosh! I need to calm down a bit..." Brandy huffed as she took a few breaths as she visibly tried to relax.

Studying her a moment, I wondered if I should feel for her or not. I mean, I did. I didn't want her to lose her place in the Society, at least from her perspective... but...

Why did it feel as if she was being very selfish? Did it really matter who ran the finances of the Society? As long as it got done, and done well, did it matter? Also, it wasn't as if she was saying she'd not have any place in the Society... she was just saying she'd not be the one in complete control anymore.

In theory, shouldn't we have multiple people overlooking our finances? Not just one...?

I kept my thoughts to myself though, and decided instead to later talk about it with Merit and Vim once he got back. Maybe he'd be able to calm my worries down a bit.

I didn't want to be upset with Brandy, or find her lacking. Not over this. Yet...

"Later on let me know the names and faces you see, okay Renn?" Brandy then said.

"Hm? Okay?" I nodded, and felt a little gross because of it.

What I had just agreed to? It was as if I was being asked to spy on our own people.

I mean... sure, Light and her people were doing weird things and causing problems... but were they actually enemies?

If they were, I'd think Vim would have handled it. He would not have left so calmly, leaving me here like this, had that been the case.

Wanting to sigh, I kept it inside as we neared the building. It seemed we were expected, because Less and a few others were standing out before it on the road.

Less guided us around the building to the rear, between a back entrance gate. I was a little surprised to see children as the horses were guided into a back garden area, where Brandy had them come to a stop.

"Lo' Brandy. Rennalee," Less greeted us, but I didn't even glance at her as I stared at the children standing near the back door of the building.

There were four of them. They all wore the same gray robes most of the people here did, and... yes. They were all girls. And one even looked like she had ears kind of like me, hidden beneath her headdress.

They were staring at me in much the same way I was staring at them. In strange awe and shock.

I'd known there were many of them here. Almost a hundred. But I hadn't realized they had brought children too...

"Renn?" Brandy nudge me a little, forcing me to look away from them.

"Right... sorry," I apologized as I hopped off the wagon. I brushed myself off a little as I heard Less and Brandy go about chatting. My eyes wandered back to the kids, and found all but one had disappeared. The open door suggested they had ran inside.

Likely to alert Light we were here, I bet.

Feeling strange all of a sudden, I tried to clear my thoughts a bit as I glanced around. A few others were approaching us, those who had gone to close the back gate we'd just entered through. One of them was

a taller man, with broad shoulders. He was also not wearing the robes of the church, but instead typical clothes. He stood out amongst them all, and not just because he was walking my way.

I stood up a little straighter as he stepped up to me. "Hello, my name is Martin. I've been looking forward to meeting you, Rennalee," Martin said as he held out a hand.

Oh my! The one Lilly had mentioned!

I took his hand. "Renn... I hear you were Celine's knight," I said.

He blinked and smiled. "That's my father. He'll be here in a few years," Martin said happily, as if glad to hear someone mention his dad.

Oh! Right... Merit had mentioned Martin's son, hadn't she? "Is it rude to ask why you share your father's name?" I asked.

Martin frowned a bit, our hands separating. "Not that I am aware. The reason I share his name is simple, I had took up his name with the intention of taking his place in the world. But it turns out he had survived. We had thought him dead. By the time we all figured it out, well..." Martin shrugged a little.

"It had been too late. I see. Thank you, I'm sorry for asking something so personal," I said.

"Hardly. Most in the Society know already. I know it will take time for you to adjust," he said as he glanced to our right. I followed his gaze, and found Brandy and Less were walking towards the building. They looked like they were in a debate, though not too heated about it.

Seemed she did calm down after all.

I sighed a little at her. I saw her as a friend, and I would of course help her. She had asked me to find out as many names as possible of those here. I'd try to, at least. But a part of me felt little... icky doing so. Because it was as if I was scheming against people who likely didn't deserve it.

Oh well. Least it seemed we had her loyalty... if only for now. The enemy of our enemy was a friend, I guess. Though I hated how it felt so wrong in this scenario. She wasn't choosing our side because we were friends, but because of her love for money.

As if her loyalty only belonged to coins, nothing more.

"Will you be joining Light then?" I asked as I too turned, as to head inside as well.

"No. Less and Isabella will."

"Isabella?" I asked. The name reminded me of Elisabeth. The human mercenary we had taken to the Crypt. The one whose brother Vim had killed.

"Something of a servant, in a way. If we have such things, that is," Martin explained.

I see. Less to protect her, and this Isabella to tend to her needs.

Remembering something, I paused right before we entered the building. Brandy and Less had already headed in deep enough I couldn't hear their voices well anymore.

"Martin?" I asked, getting his attention.

He turned and frowned, nodding gently at me.

"May I ask another question? What is a knight?" I asked.

His frown deepened. "You... don't know? Hm... I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised. Vim's still Vim, even if he's acting odd lately. A knight in our context, for saints, is an individual who has both vowed their fealty and their life to the service of a saint. One who receives their blessings. Basically a knight is a saint's protector, much similar to what Vim is to the Society," he explained.

"Blessings?" I asked.

He smiled a little oddly at me. "A fancy word for their trust. Many believe it means we get some kind of power or privilege, but that's not the case. At best we get access to certain prophecies or truths that no

one else would get to hear, usually concerning the saint herself. We don't get anything else than that. Their trust, plain as be," he said.

Oh...? Here I had thought they had meant it a little differently. Though, that wasn't my fault. Those like Cat had always phrased it in a way as if they had gotten special abilities and stuff... but that was silly, wasn't it? Saints had powers, sure, but did they have the kind that would let them bless people?

"There are stories of saints capable of actually blessing their knights with great power, but as far as I am aware none have existed in any recent history. There's a running theory that Vim is one of those old knights, thus his great lifespan and power," Martin said as he lifted a hand to point at the sky, as if teaching me as a kid.

I nodded slowly. "I see. Thank you... So are you Light's knight?" I asked.

"Currently I am, but not really. Right now I simply protect everyone here. Technically you could say my father is the real one, being who he is, but he had been Celine's. And though I personally don't see the necessary reason to be so... archaic in procedures and traditions, it seems father and Light are and do," he said with a sigh.

What's this...? Was that him voicing thoughts and emotions over their religious traditions, thus his lack of wearing a robe, or was he not happy with his position?

I didn't want to assume, of course, but he had just said he had been given his father's name as to also take his position in the world. In other words, on his birth, he had been assigned a duty. To be a knight for a saint.

Maybe he resented that...?

"Are you coming in or not!?"

I startled and turned, finding the child from earlier I had noticed. The girl was standing in the door-way, hands on her hips and huffing at us.

"Meet our resident predator, Renn. Do not worry though. She is all bark and no bite," Martin said with a light gesture at the girl.

Predator...? I glanced again at her headdress, the hood, and noticed again the way it shifted and looked lumpy. She definitely had ears or horns or something.

"The only reason I haven't bit him or any of the rest yet is because they'd die if I do. So they've become complacent!" she said.

My ears fluttered a little under my hat, and I wished I could take them off. Her voice sounded... a little odd. Enough so that I wanted to hear it in full. But although we were behind the building, in a secured section, I didn't want to risk it. The walls surrounding this backyard like area weren't very tall. Anyone tall enough, or looking out the windows of the nearby buildings or riding a horse or wagon would be able to see us back here. Thus likely why no one else had revealed their traits either, like this girl.

"Do you mean to say you are the only predator here?" I asked.

Surely not, right? Wasn't Less a badger? Like Landi?

"The only true one!" she said with a bit of pride, lifting her face as she did.

I frowned at that and glanced at Martin, who smiled knowingly at me. "She's still young, Renn. She mistakes gentleness for a lack of teeth. Less is very gentle with her," he whispered.

"Hmph! That woman flinches at a loud noise!" the girl said, as if upset to be compared to her.

I see. So she was young. And not just in appearance. Interesting.

"I flinch at loud noises too you know?" I said.

The girl startled a little bit, her head shifting as well as she did, and I confirmed that she did indeed have ears or something like it. Horns wouldn't have moved so blatantly like that, I think.

Martin chuckled at us as he stepped past us and entered the building. "Ware, young wolf. You stand before an ancestor not even I or my father could stand tall against," Martin said as he walked past the girl, patting her on the shoulder as he did.

The girl's face scrunched up a bit as Martin left, and she hesitatingly glanced back at me... coughing lightly as she did. "Renn... is it? I'm Tundra. A might...y..." she bit her tongue, flinched, and then coughed again. "A wolf!" she then finished as she held her hand out.

Although her hand wasn't trembling, I noticed an odd stiffness in it as I shook it. "A pleasure, Tundra. Can I see your ears? I'll let you touch mine if I can touch yours!" I asked with a point to my hat as I stepped into the building.

Chapter 489 Vim – A Young Saint's Oddness

Narli looked too tired and weak to be out of bed, but I knew she was doing better than she looked. She had stumbled a bit on the way down here, and so I had grabbed her arm to support her, and her grip on my own arm had been far stronger than I had expected as she held onto me. Her grip strength had nearly been as firm as Renn's.

Right now she was sitting on a chair, staring up at one of the murals in the Keep. She was already getting better. The week of rest had done her wonders, and I knew her recovery would only hasten from her on forth. Especially now that she was feeling well enough to get up and walk around a bit. The little bit of exercise would do her well.

Though, why she wanted to come down here into the Keep and look at the murals and paintings was something I didn't understand. If I had been in her position I would have wanted the fresh air, or maybe to go sit at the dock at the nearby lake. Not come down here into this... well... dungeon.

Some of these paintings and statues were neat, and maybe soothing to a young saint as herself, but to me it was just a bunch of reminders. Ones I didn't want or need right now.

"I've had dreams of her, Vim."

I glanced at the nearby fresco she was studying. It was a little muddled, as if the mosaics and paints had shifted or dulled, but the scene was still clear and pretty. Although it was a momentous scene, one of a great moment in history... I did not see whom she spoke of.

"The Headless Queen?" I asked, wondering who she meant. That was the only one in this mural she could be speaking of, but that made no sense. She was long dead. I had made sure of it.

Narli giggled at me. "Renn, Vim."

Oh.

"Listen here, you're getting a lot of leeway from me thanks to your condition, but you're getting better now," I said in warning.

She nodded, knowingly. "I know. I'd have told you the details had they been important, or life threatening... as you know. I just... felt like I should say it all the same," she said.

I sighed but nodded back. "Thank you."

I heard her glance at me, since I still had my eyes on the wall of color. "I've... had many, Vim. Multiple," she said further.

My eye twitch, but I nodded anyway. "Yes. You did say dreams, as in plural. I heard you."

"Is it normal, Vim...? I've had multiple dreams of my mother and father, but they're... well... them. And they involve me mostly, in one form or another. But her? None had involved me at all. Or well, one did..."

"Narli."

She twitched a little, and glanced at me and sighed. "Sorry..."

"Having multiple prophecies about a single individual is... not normal, no. Not usually. Especially so someone who you're not very closely connected to," I said, choosing to at least answer that.

"She's my friend though? Isn't that close?"

I shifted a little. "It is. But there's a limit. What that limit is? I don't know. If you must know, you're not the only one. Light and Celine both have had prophecies about Renn... likely several, as you have," I said.

I might as well tell her. It could mean something to her, after all.

"Hm... mother had said Celine had one about her, before, but I hadn't realized Light had too. I wonder if that means many saints have?"

"If they have the reason is likely obvious... though I'll never say it aloud," I said.

"She's your wife," Narli said it for me.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm going to send you back to bed," I threatened.

She giggled at me. "Careful now! If Renn heard that she might get weird ideas!"

No. She wouldn't have. Because Renn would have cared more for your health than me possibly cheating on her with a young saint such as you.

"I know, Narli, that my aversion to prophecies seems... unbelievable to you. Being a saint and all. The idea to you is likely akin to a fish not liking water. But it's who I am, Narli. And I have good reason for it," I said.

"I'm sure you do. But... put yourself in my shoes, Vim. I have all this knowledge, of stuff that could or will happen, and I have the desire to share it all. To warn people. to give insight. To help. And you, in truth, are the best person to give such aid to. Because you could actually put it to use. You of all people on this world are most suited for such knowledge, yet you reject it from even being given room to breathe," she said.

"Smarter people than you and I have tried to reason it, and convince me otherwise. Don't even try," I warned her.

She huffed at me. "Has Renn?"

Hesitating, I shifted a little.

Renn...?

"No... not yet..." I begrudgingly answered.

Luckily, thanks to how chaotic our lives had been lately, Renn's been focused on other matters. She and I had spoken a few times on the prophecies, particularly the one concerning her supposed saintly daughter, but we'd not really gone into depth about them... nor has she actually asked me my own thoughts and opinions on the possible future either.

I knew part of it was her just being kind with me. She knew how I felt about prophecies. She knew my aversion to them, and thus kept herself in check... but... well...

"Not very manly, Vim," Narli stated simply.

Groaning, I nodded as I reached up to rub my eyes. I suddenly felt as tired as she looked. "I know."

"Would you talk about it with her? If she asked?"

Glancing at the saint in-between my fingers, I squeezed my face even harder with my hand. As if in hopes to block out her terrible questions.

"I should. You're right. It's... not good, to be like I am. I know that," I said honestly.

"Yet...?"

I took deep breath and held it in for a few moments. "Are you trying to imply I need to?" I asked, wondering why she was focusing so deeply on this topic.

"Huh!? Oh... no? I'm actually just trying to comprehend how relationships work, to be honest. You're so different from my mother and father, so..." Narli shook her head, a little too quickly. Which meant she likely wasn't telling the whole truth.

"Different? How so?" I asked.

Narli sat up a little straighter. "Father's a simple man, Vim. Mother loves him for it, but even she gets annoyed at him and has to sit him down and tell him to be... better? I guess I was just wondering if Renn does the same for you," she said, explaining a little.

I frowned at her. "Planning for your own marriage strife are you?" I asked.

Narli blushed. "No! I uh..." she looked away, groaned a bit and then looked back up at me. "I've not seen my mate, Vim. Not yet. But... I mean... how could I not be interested?"

Right... "You've not seen them yet?" I asked. That was interesting. Narli was young, but not that young. By now she should have seen whoever she was meant to be with.

Narli shook her head and frowned at me. "Not yet. Is that a bad sign, Vim?"

"Not really. Even disregarding my own belief system, take it from me that sometimes that's for the better. I've known many saints who ended up in terrible relationships because they tried to fulfill the ones they had dreamed of. Sometimes the one you see isn't the one you're meant for," I said.

The young saint nodded seriously, taking my words to heart. "Just because one sees a future, doesn't mean it's the right one. Yes," she agreed.

"Mhm... regretfully, thanks to how so many of you see such futures while young, you get kind of romanticized ideas of them. So you don't see the red flags when you should. So be glad in a way that you've not seen them yet," I said.

She huffed at me. "How come you'll so easily and smoothly give me such warnings as that, but won't take any from me?"

"I do take your warnings to heart, Narli. As I do any saint's warning. I just know better than to think your warnings are always given with true heart," I said.

"True heart...? Are you saying I'd try to lead you astray Vim?"

I shook my head, quickly. "No. Not at all. I just meant that sometimes the prophecies you all see are... not the full picture. So you sometimes make mistakes, even if unknowingly," I said.

"Ah... Right. Like seeing an arrow but not the bow from whence it flung from," she said as she nodded.

"Don't quote your scripture. Your father might hear you," I said.

She laughed at me. "More like you will!"

Well... yes.

"Oh!" Narli stood from her chair, a little quickly. I turned a bit, to make sure she was fine. She seemed to wobble a bit, steadying herself, but she didn't need me to catch her as she pointed down the hallway.

"Can we go to the hearts, Vim? I have a question about the one you brought the other day," she asked.

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

"Hm? What's wrong?" I asked. Miss Beak's heart? Was something off about it?

"Not sure... thus my question," Narli said as she stepped around me, as to head down the hallway as to go to the center of the vault. Where the hearts laid.

I followed her, leaving the chair she'd been sitting on behind. There was such furniture scattered all throughout the Keep, so it didn't really matter where we left them.

Staying close to the young saint, as to keep an eye on her, I wondered how Renn was doing. Narli wasn't too far off in size and shape of Renn, her shoulders about the same width and placement. Narli also had a bundle of hastily tied unruly hair at the moment, thanks to her condition. Reminded me a little of Renn.

"Can I know her name, Vim?" Narli asked as we entered one of the smaller hallways.

"Miss Beak," I answered.

Narli tilted her head a bit. "Miss...?"

"She had been an odd one. She had been a giant flamingo," I said. Hadn't I kind of explained who she had been last time I was here...? Maybe she was just confirming what she had heard already.

"I've never seen a flamingo."

"They're tasty things, actually."

She slowed a bit and glanced at me. "Did you eat her?"

"No. She had been a friend, I told you that."

"You seem the type to eat friends," Narli said with a small smile as we left the hallway and entered the center of the Keep. The glowing orbs on the little stands lit up the room, and the water flowing in the crevices in the ground.

Both of the hearts here, the pink and blue one, sat unmolested. Unmoved from where I'd last seen them.

"So?" I asked as we neared the pedestal that the pink heart sat upon.

Narli stepped up to the heart, frowning at it as she studied it. The pink glow it gave off, here in this darker room, made her look a little odd. She was still gaunt in the face, and looked exhausted, so the pink hue that now covered her made her look almost as if she was sickly. It did gleam off her horn a little nicely, though.

"I've only held sixteen hearts. This being the sixteenth. So I admit I'm probably not... the most versed or knowledgeable of them. But are they supposed to feel like they're leaking?" Narli asked as she reached out to grab Miss Beak's heart.

I blinked and stepped forward, taking her side as she turned Miss Beak's heart as to study it closer. I noted her hands were bigger than Renn's as she cupped it. By a noticeable amount. An odd thing considering she was roughly the same size in most other ways.

"Leaking?" I asked. What'd she mean? It looked, and felt, normal to me.

"Mhm... it's definitely leaking, Vim. I might not be explaining it properly, but I can feel it. It's as if it has a crack," Narli said as she turned to look at me, and held the heart out. As she did she pointed at the heart, though not at anywhere particular. "I feel its power leaking out, Vim. I can't explain it any other way, but that's how it feels to me."

Grabbing the heart, I focused on it as I lifted it to look closer.

Leaking...? Power?

I felt no such thing. The heart felt warm. It thumped occasionally. There was a swirling vortex within it, like a tiny pink storm forming a tornado. Yet...

Shaking my head, I frowned at her. "Explain what you're feeling, Narli. I don't feel anything odd."

Narli reached out, as if to take the heart from me. Instead of doing so though, she cupped the heart and my hand which held it... then she slightly twitched her hands away from it, as if it suddenly scalded her. "Like that. Every so often I feel like... a wave of heat coming from it."

Tilting my head at her, I went ahead and cupped the heart with my other hand. I covered it in its entirety, and waited.

A few thumps from within the heart came and went... and although I could feel the heat, and the divine power, within it... I felt nothing like what she was explaining.

In fact I didn't even feel the heat itself she spoke of. It did have heat, but it didn't expunge it. The orb itself was hot, but it didn't radiate heat. It broke the laws of physics that way.

"You don't feel it, do you? It just did it again, Vim," Narli said.

"I don't... how interesting. How long have you been noticing this?" I asked.

"Since you left it. I found it odd, because the other hearts don't? That one doesn't. And I don't remember any of the others I've held doing it either," she said.

How very interesting.

"She had been the child of First Borns. A very powerful monarch who had eaten hundreds and hundreds of hearts. Many of them powerful themselves. She had even devoured First Born hearts, at least a dozen of them. She was more powerful even than that one," I said with a nod to the heart in the center, the one leaking water.

"Oh my... you think that's the reason? That this is just the first powerful heart I've ever seen?" Narli asked.

"I'm not sure... does the power feel odd to you? Is it doing anything? You say you feel it leaking, but how so? Where's it going? What's it doing?" I asked.

"Nothing...? It just feels like it's leaking out, and then mixing with the air and fading away."

Strange. Very strange.

Made stranger by her most recent issue. Was this thing she was feeling related to her getting stuck in that prophecy...?

Maybe it wasn't the heart that was being odd, but her.

Instead of studying the heart, I decided to study Narli. I studied the way her eyes focused on the heart, and the way she was frowning cutely in thought as she likely tried to find a way to better explain what she was seeing and feeling.

She sure did look tired. And she looked way too much like her mother. Now that I thought about it, she was a splitting image of Berri back when she had been younger. Though maybe a tad shorter.

Would Renn's daughter look this much like her...? By my parents I hope so.

"Maybe I'm imagining it," Narli then whispered lightly.

"I doubt that, Narli. You're obviously feeling something. But... I'm not sure what it is you're feeling. Hearts corrupt the creatures, flesh and blood, that they touch. They don't do anything to inanimate objects. Their power, the stuff they are conduits to, only affect creatures like us. Those with souls. I could comprehend it... possibly leaking, as if overflowing, maybe... but..." I started to try and explain, if anything for myself, but then went quiet as I realized something.

"But what...?" Narli asked as she reached out to tap the heart in my hand. Her dull fingernail barely made a noise as she did so.

Shifting a little, I glanced behind us to the blue heart nearby.

"That one isn't doing it?" I asked.

"Nope?"

"You can tell from here?" I asked.

"Yeah...? If not for these stones all around us, I could probably feel it from upstairs and outside, Vim. It's that noticeable," she said.

Just wonderful.

Tapping the heart, I thought of a few possible ideas... and didn't like any of them. Each one was worse than the last.

Although I didn't want to ask it, I did anyway.

"The leak. Is it in the same spot?" I asked.

Narli tilted her head and then glanced back at the heart. "Hm... no? I don't think so. It's as if the whole thing just... poofs out," she said as she cupped her hands and then opened them quickly. As if to mimic a tiny bubble popping.

So at least the energy wasn't heading in one singular direction. That was something, at least.

"And I don't think it's getting worse, or better, either. It feels the same as it did when you first left it. It happens once ever so often, though I don't think there's any real rhythm or pattern to it. It happens randomly, as far as I can tell," Narli added.

I nodded. She had likely spent time already pondering this, so I didn't need to doubt that.

"An oddity, to be sure. For all I know it's something many hearts do, maybe the stronger ones, and I just... don't notice. Or can't," I said.

"Thus why I asked. Just wanted to make sure nothing weird was happening."

Right...

Maybe I shouldn't leave it here then. Just in case...

"Going to take it, aren't you?" Narli asked, likely noticing my thoughts on my face.

"Mhm... I don't see how the heart could really threaten you or your family, but who's to say...? I mean, maybe what happened to you is because of this thing, Narli? How do we know? It's not impossible," I said.

She nodded. "Thus why I'd not told mother or father. They'd have taken that thing miles away and flung it into the deepest cave they found if I had," she said.

"Would have worked, maybe," I said. Even though they were conduits for divine power it wasn't as if the things were that potent. A few dozen miles, and a few thousand feet of solid earth likely would have worked very well, if it had been the actual reason.

"That's sad Vim... She's your friend," Narli said though.

"My friend is dead, Narli. This is not her. This is what poisoned her," I said.

Narli shifted a bit, her glowing eyes softening as she stared up at me. She looked hurt all of a sudden.

I though didn't hesitate to nod, to confirm I had spoken the truth. "It was through these hearts the gods had been able to manipulate and control them, Narli. These hearts are shackles. Orbs of enslavement, nothing more," I said.

Her whole body shivered a bit, telling me that it was time I took her back upstairs. She was doing a lot better, but pushing herself too far would just make her bedridden again. And her mother would tear me in half if I allowed that to happen.

"Then what am I, Vim?" Narli whispered before I could say anything else.

"You're Narli. Berri's daughter. Renn's friend. And you're still sick... so it's time we went back upstairs," I said as I went to put the heart back into its little pedestal.

She laughed a little as I put Miss Beak's heart down. "You're very good at going from very serious topics to light-hearted ones! I wonder if you'd be a good actor, Vim!"

Actor...? Oh. Right. Her fascination with plays. "When'd you start liking plays anyway?" I asked as I turned and gestured for her to join me. I reached out, to gently pat her on the back and guide her.

"Forever? I never told you?"

I shook my head and frowned. "No... but that's just further clarification that I'm an indifferent bastard. When I visit here we talk, often, but it's always about other things isn't it?" I said.

She sighed at me as we stepped away from the hearts, heading for the hallway which would lead us back upstairs to her home. "Unlike you Vim I enjoy our talks. So I don't see it that way."

"It's not that I don't enjoy them... I just... don't like the topics," I said. She usually wanted to talk about prophecies, or her abilities and powers... as she had been doing this whole time, nearly.

"Right... Though you are definitely doing better! Even if you're only being gentler with me thanks to my condition!" Narli said.

"And because of your mother. She threatened me the other day, in a way that scared me," I said with a smirk.

"Huh? How so?"

As we headed back upstairs... I kept our conversations light-hearted and simple... but it only worked to a degree.

Deep down, I felt unease. Worry. Stress. And these feelings wanted to claw out of me.

Narli feeling something strange about Miss Beak's heart was worrying. I'd never heard of such leakage before. Not like that, at least.

Another oddity.

Like her getting stuck in a prophecy.

Or a monarch being born for the first time in hundreds of years.

The worst part was there were likely more oddities I wasn't seeing, or hearing of yet. Even something basic, such as that little monarch's death back at Telmik, could have been another oddity. It had been, in all honesty. We had never figured out whom or what had killed it.

There were always strange things in the world. Things not even I could explain... but rarely did they happen one after another. And rarely did I not comprehend them at all.

They were starting to really pile up. To the point it was now hard to deny the truth.

Something was happening. Even if they were all related, one causing the other, such as in Narli's case... Either the heart had caused her oddness, or vice versa. In fact, if they weren't related, it'd be even more worrying.

Still... No matter how connected they are, there had to be a source. Something had started the process. Something was causing ripples amongst the world's basin of fate, and it was those like Narli that noticed first. Saints always did.

But those ripples eventually turned into waves. And then from waves into terrible storms.

And then, after that, came the chaos. The kind that ruined worlds.

Last time I had been the cause of those ripples.

This time though...

This time I might be the one who has to deal with it, instead.

Chapter 490 Renn – Lilly's Empty Home Away From Home

Walking down the small hallway, I entered the front of the house and found Merit and Lilly.

They were both standing near the kitchen area, where a small table rested against a wall. It wasn't the only piece of furniture in the house, but it was the only one outside of the bedrooms.

"Should we really buy this place? Why not just rent her a room somewhere?" I asked as I glanced around. The front room was kind of small; it felt crowded with just the three of us and the table to be honest. There was a balcony nearby. A small kitchen area near the front door, that surprisingly had a brick oven and a large sectional tub for water. One that drained out of the house and out into a gutter outside.

The house was the second and third floors of this building, but the first floor wasn't a store like so many in this area. It instead was some kind of guard station. Such a thing had worried me at first, but Lilly and Merit had found that to be better than any other alternative.

This place was almost nicer than the home that Roslyn lived in. Though not as big. It was two floors like hers, but smaller. The hallway, stairs and bedrooms were all about half the size compared to Roslyn's. But thanks to the proper oven, the piped sinks, and the nicer bathroom it still felt far better even though half the size.

"Rent a room and let her bump into some drunk human who spills and slobbers all over her, or grabs her wrongly, and then we end up with streets once again caked in blood? Yeah, no. This is the better way of doing it," Merit said with a huff.

"I'm not that bad anymore, Merit," Lilly said, huffing back at her.

I smirked at that. "So you had been at one time?" I asked.

Lilly shifted a little uneasily, as if suddenly embarrassed.

So she had been! Geez!

"This will work. It's out of the way, in a nice quiet area, and from the balcony she can see the roof the guild, so if you leave your little red flag up there Lilly can see it," Merit said as she walked over to the balcony again, to peer out the window near it. One could indeed see the roof of the Animalia building from here...

"But it's so expensive..." I mumbled as I glanced to the leather bundle of papers on the table nearby. It was the contract to purchase this place. From one of the many other companies in town, similar to our own.

This place was not cheap. It was the equivalent of almost ten years of income for our higher paid human workers. A sum that honestly wouldn't be attainable by a normal family under normal conditions.

And we were going to buy it just so Lilly could use it for what could possibly be only a few days. Or maybe a few weeks, or a month or two, at most.

I knew the Society had a lot of money, and in the grand scheme of things money was irrelevant... but...

"What's bothering her, Merit? She looks all worried," Lilly said softly.

"She recently got Brandy to show her how much she and Vim spend in a typical year. I think she's just become conscious of how expensive she is, and is now overly conscious of spending money," Merit said calmly as she stepped away from the balcony.

"How could I not be! Do you know how long it takes to make a single gold coin? If I was working at the bank, normally, it'd take me almost a decade just to pay back the Society what Vim and I have taken from our stipends in the last year! That's not including all the other money we've spent and stuff we've done!" I said. Plus that didn't include all the money Vim had given me from unknown sources! Brandy had broken down our withdrawals from the Society's coffers, and I knew for a fact that we'd spent far more than the number she had shown me. I hadn't said anything at the time, but it made me a little sick to think of how much money we wasted compared to how hard it was for some of our members to earn it all.

Brandy and all those here in Lumen worked hard. As did everyone else. Kevin in his ship, alongside all the other traders. The twins. Those like the Armadillo's, or the Camel's, who provided raw resources. The Weaver and the Summit that turned those raw materials into sell-able products. It was a communal effort, not something just a few people did, and it took them years of hard work and effort!

Every coin I spent was earned off their sweat. It made me feel... ungrateful. Even if Vim earned what he spent, in his own way, did I? I didn't think so. Half the time I barely did anything, I just spent time with those we visited. And unlike Vim, who ate and needed so little... I was always tugging on his sleeve to give me money, so I could buy from whatever random shop we passed on our travels...

Lilly shook her head at me, as if unable to understand me. "Brandy's got into your head, Renn. It's not that big a deal."

But!

"Are you going to make Lilly sleep in the alleys, Renn? Or how about in those sewers? Want her to have to sleep down there?" Merit asked.

"What? No... I just..." I shifted a bit, wanting to groan. My tail tried to squirm a bit, but it didn't have much room to do so. It was wrapped around my left thigh a bit too tightly, under my clothes, so could only wiggle a little.

"If it really bothers you that much, just make Vim earn some money for a bit," Lilly said.

"Hm? You mean make him work?" I asked.

Merit chuckled at that. "She says, as if he doesn't work all the time."

"You know what I mean..." I mumbled.

"Most of the Society's wealth is thanks to Vim, Renn. Most of the methods we use to make money, real money, are from his ideas and his labor. He set them up, taught those who needed to be, and ensured they ran smoothly long enough for others to take over. Don't let Brandy mislead you, Renn, most of her success is only thanks to him. Even if she'll never admit it," Merit said.

Oh...? That was interesting to hear. Brandy did say that Vim had helped her a lot, but she also didn't really outright say how important his help had been. I had simply assumed it had been just Vim's... normal amount. He came every so often, helped out a bunch, then left. Like normal.

"He basically built this city. In fact the only reason the Society is even as powerful here in the first place is because he had been friends with the pirate lord who had owned it back then, if I remember correctly," Lilly said.

Merit nodded. "Yep."

"Pirate lord?" I asked. I wonder if that was the same family that Ronaldo was related to?

"Also I think you're forgetting Renn, that this place will still be owned by the Society. I'll just wait until Lilly leaves before filing the deed with Brandy," Merit said simply.

Oh.

"That's true, huh..." I calmed down a bit, forgetting almost entirely about the pirate stuff they'd just been talking about.

"She's so simple sometimes," Lilly said.

"She's just smart," Merit said.

I sighed at them, since I knew they were just teasing me.

"If this was closer to home I'd give it to one of my kids. Maybe I still should?" Lilly wondered as she headed down the hallway, as to go look at the rest of the house. She'd not done so yet.

Merit shook her head at the owl and turned to me. "Come sign, Renn," Merit said.

"Mhm..." I nodded, a little reluctantly, and walked over to the table with Merit. She had already shuffled the papers to the ones I needed to sign, but she still needed to point out the spots where it was needed. Merit had to stand on her tip-toes as to do so, since the table was a tad bit too tall for her, but I only needed to sign in one place.

"That's your mark?" Merit asked as she stared at it.

"My name, isn't it?" I asked. Had I done it weird...?

"Yes... Lumen has a trend though for people to sign with designs, or little accents on their letters. Didn't you notice them when working at the bank?" she asked.

"I had. But..." I shrugged. I'd never considered doing something similar for myself.

Vim had helped teach me how to sign such documents. More-so he had made sure I didn't use the private one I used for Society stuff, such as to withdraw from the stipends. This one was for normal stuff, such as... buying a home in one of the fanciest areas of one of the nicest cities in this whole region.

"Congratulations, you're now the proud owner of a home. Want to settle down and raise a family here?" Merit asked, teasing me as she went to bundle of the papers.

I grumbled at her, since I couldn't say anything. That was how we were masking this, after all.

In the eyes of the Society, and Light, this was just me buying a home to stay in with Vim for a while. To have our little vacation, as it were. No one other than Merit knew this was actually for Lilly.

She wasn't supposed to be here, after all.

"My room is tiny," Lilly said as she emerged from the hallway.

"The whole house is, honestly," Merit admitted.

"You just spent the last hour saying it was perfect!" I said.

"It is. For a small stay. I'd never live in such a small place, though," Merit said as she slipped the newly signed deed to the house into the little pouch hanging on her shoulder.

"You'd think someone so small would feel at home in such a place," Lilly teased.

"Great one, did you come up with that joke with your mighty bird-brain?" Merit asked.

Lilly huffed and shook her head down at Merit. "Still so thin skinned. When are your scales going to grow in? Shouldn't they be here by now?" Lilly asked back.

It was Merit's turn to huff, but she did so by puffing out her chest a bit. I couldn't help but smirk as I watched the two glare at each other, as if about to actually start arguing... but I knew already it was all a little game they played.

We'd been together for several hours already, ever since this morning. Lilly had left a note on the roof of the Animalia Guild building, one that I had found since Vim had told me to expect it. She had left it near the table where I and Light had a conversation a few days ago, which meant Lilly had been in town already at that point and had seen us from a distance. After finding out she was here, I went to Merit for help... and was glad to find out that my choice had been correct.

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It seemed Merit and Lilly were some kind of friends. Even if neither wanted to admit it.

"You'll be okay here, right Lilly?" I asked, since the two had gone a tad silent as they glared at each other.

Lilly instantly calmed down as she glanced at me and nodded. "Yes, Renn. I'd have been fine sleeping on the roofs. This is just extra comfort," she said.

"She says that, but she'll happily cook her own food and hum with joy once we leave. This birdbrain won't eat anything a human touches," Merit said with a gesture at the owl.

"At least I can cook!" Lilly said.

"I can cook too!" Merit argued, her voice rising.

"So we can have dinner tonight then? Should we go buy some supplies?" I asked, glancing at the kitchen as I did. It was nice enough to make real food.

For a few moments there was silence, so I glanced back at the while wondering why. They were usually quick to quip with one another, and noisy as they did so. Instead I found them staring at me with an odd look.

"Hm?" I wondered what was wrong. They looked like kind of weird, staring at me as if I was something strange. Like a duck that they had just heard bark like a dog.

Lilly sighed, and Merit nodded as the two looked back at each other. "She's too..." Lilly started.

"Gentle. Yes. It'd be annoying if it wasn't so adorable," Merit finished.

"What'd I say now?" I asked, kind of irritated at them. I hadn't said anything weird had I? Or were they making fun of me for thinking about food, even though it was midday?

"Before Renn gets us distracted... tell me what the plan is about Light," Lilly said.

I perked up a bit as Merit looked around, as if for a chair to sit in. There obviously weren't any, since the house was practically empty. "She's moved into the guild. With Less and some other church girl. One I never met before, but I heard from Sofia that she had been around back in the day. Elizabeth or something," Merit said.

"Isabella," I reminded her.

"Right. That."

Lilly frowned. "Don't remember that name. What do you think of her, Renn?" Lilly asked.

"Isabella? She's cute, but ditzy. I think Light and the rest trust her because she's too innocent to even think of betraying them," I said. The woman had seemed kind and gentle, but a little dull. She hadn't even wanted to talk to me when we had been unloading Light's luggage and putting it into her room. She wanted to clean, nothing more... as if a little dust was more important than anything else.

"I meant Light, Renn. Not her servants," Lilly specified.

"Oh. Well..." I wanted to sigh, since I really didn't want to have this conversation. I knew it'd just make my heart hurt, even if it needed to happen.

"Don't tease her, Lilly. Renn's a hopeful person. She's hoping this can all end peacefully, somehow. She's not like you, who doesn't have a hopeful feather on her whole body," Merit said.

Lilly sneered at Merit, but seemed to ignore her little joke. "I know. But how can it? Vim's made his decision, hasn't he?" Lilly asked.

Merit nodded as I bit my lip.

He had. I didn't want to accept it, but Vim has made his decision... even if he himself wasn't aware of it yet.

He had done so after meeting her that first time. Without me. He had decided Light was not a real threat to the Society, but that he'd not be able to play along with her schemes and games... and thus... He would step down. No matter what. I think it was certain, though I'd not say it aloud. Not yet.

There was still hope, after all.

"If it's inevitable, makes me wonder what we're doing all this for," Merit said with a sigh as she glanced around at the empty house.

"Playing the game. And hopefully earning his friendship and loyalty, so that he doesn't just disappear on us and sticks around to help us when we need him," Lilly said.

"Gosh, can we not talk like this? You're going to make me cry," I said weakly.

The two glanced at me and did so gently. "It's just reality, Renn," Lilly said.

Merit nodded. "Vim's a man of focus. It might take him forever to make a decision, but once he does he doesn't change it. Look at you, Renn. He chose you, and now won't ever change that decision, no matter what happens because of it," she said.

My tail squirmed again, since the example she had used made my heart hurt a little. Had she used that one on purpose, or had it just been the first thing to come to her mind... since... well...

"Speaking of that, how are you feeling? Need me to find you a nice muddy hole?" Lilly then asked the little fish.

Merit turned a bit, as to glare up at Lilly through her thick locks. "Only if I can drown you in it."

I smirked at them as Lilly sniffed and looked away, as if offended. But I could see the slight relief on the owl's face.

She had been worried about Merit. Her heart. And that had been how she had expressed such a concern... and Merit had responded in kind, in their own way.

Feeling a little... out of place, and not just because I was in an empty house, I watched as the two crossed their arms and sighed at each other.

I was growing to quickly be envious of their friendship. It was obvious their relationship was old. Tested. Tried and true. Even if they were snippy with one another, there was a very obvious and real level of trust between them. Merit was here, helping us buy this home, and breaking the Society's rules for Lilly. Lilly was banished from Lumen. Not meant to be here. Which meant if Merit, or I, got found out helping her circumvent such a rule... by all rights we too would and should be banished. Maybe even from the Society, not just Lumen.

Yet she was willing, without hesitation, to help. She hadn't even blinked when I had told her what was happening, and what I needed to do. The moment I had told her Lilly was here, and I needed to help her find a place to stay while so, Merit had immediately thought up a plan and acted on it. A few hours later after doing so, we were here.

Such trustworthy loyalty just further proved how wonderful Merit was, and how much I could trust her. It was starting to become very clear how much I loved such a thing, and how precious it actually was.

"Personally I just want to keep the peace until Vim gets back. If able," I said gently, since it seemed the two weren't going to resume talking.

They both nodded. "Easy to do, as long as you keep her distracted as you've been doing for us," Merit said.

"Yeah. Keep your enemies closest, as they say," Lilly agreed.

I frowned at that. "I'll have you know I get along just fine with Light... even if she's odd and I get a weird feeling sometimes while talking to her..." I said, admittedly.

"That weird feeling is gas, isn't it?" Lilly teased.

"More like hunger. I've noticed you've been snacking a lot lately, Renn, are you sure you're not actually pregnant?" Merit asked.

"Gosh!" I groaned at her. If she wasn't teasing Lilly, she was teasing me!

"Honestly I'm surprised Light is still so scrawny. She used to eat like a horse back in the day," Lilly said as she scratched at her chin.

Really...? Whenever I ate with her, or spent time with her, I always thought she didn't eat enough. She seemed to always just... pick at the food, and not actually eat any of it.

"Wait... is she a horse...? I thought she was a panda?" I asked, a little surprised. I didn't know what a panda was, of course, but I knew that was what Celine had been.

The two tilted their heads at me. "She's not a horse. Or a panda. Actually, did you ever figure out what a panda was, Lilly?" Merit asked the old owl.

"Nope. Vim told me he'd bring one home to me once, if he ever ran into one, but he's not done so. I've always wondered what they looked like. Probably stupid things, considering," Lilly said with a frown.

Merit smirked and nodded. "I bet they are. And what do you mean Vim promised to bring you one home...? He brings you home stuff? That's not fair!"

I wanted to groan as Lilly happily planted a huge smirk on her face. "Oh he does! I have a bunch of stuff all scattered throughout my branches from him!"

Merit's little hands clasped into fists, and I saw actual anger flash across her face. "What...! Renn!" she turned to me, as if for help.

"What!? I don't even have a home to bring stuff to, so don't look at me!" I said quickly, hoping to not get caught between them.

Merit's face of anger disappeared like a bubble being popped, replaced by a look of utter shame... as she hurriedly glanced at Lilly.

Lilly startled at Merit's look, and hurriedly looked between her and me... and then she too flinched and groaned.

"What...?" I asked. Why'd they both look all dejected all of a sudden?

"Whose fault is this?" Lilly whispered.

"Let's just both take the blame," Merit whispered back.

Lilly nodded, and sighed. "Can we go get something to eat? I've not eaten in days."

I blinked at that. "What? Why not? Don't starve yourself Lilly, you're so thin as it is!" I said worriedly.

"Oh shut it. I'll go to the noble's office to file the deed and contract. A few streets down is a nice sit-down restaurant. Go wait for me there," Merit said as she headed for the door.

"Wait! I don't want to eat at a human place!" Lilly complained.

"You're going to! There's nothing to cook with here!" Merit shouted as she walked right past me, ignoring Lilly who stepped forward as if to grab at the fish.

"We can just go buy the stuff!" Lilly shouted back.

"Then do so! I'm going to file this; I'll be back within the hour!" Merit said, then opened the front door and walked right out.

Thanks to her opening the front door, and leaving it open as she left, we could now hear the hustle and bustle of the city outside. It surprisingly didn't sound too noisy, considering we were near a well-used street.

"Blasted fish! I swear Renn, we should have let her god eat her!" Lilly said angrily.

I frowned at that. "You don't really mean that," I said.

"Well... no... but..." Lilly shifted a little, hesitating a bit as I went to leave the house too.

Before I could though, Lilly grabbed my arm. Unlike Merit who she had seemed to want to do so, she hadn't hesitated to grab mine.

I paused, and glanced at my friend... and found a worried look.

"Lilly?"

Lilly took a small breath and sighed. "I know you want peace, Renn... I know you want things to end well... but please, don't forget. Don't forget they abandoned us. All of them did. They left us behind, when we needed them most. And worst part of it is they took Vim with them, made him guide them to

their new home. And while he was gone? The Society broke. Dozens of locations had fallen while he was with them. Merit's Kingdom, her oasis, was one of them. I have no doubt had they not taken Vim from us back then, many of those places would still be around today. Especially Merit's Kingdom. Just... don't forget that, please," Lilly said quietly, as if begging.

I gulped. "I... didn't know that. I had known they had asked him to guide them, but I didn't realize they had taken him for so long or during such turmoil," I said softly.

Lilly gravely nodded. "Her oasis dried up and collapsed, Renn. She and other's lost their homes, many their lives, because we hadn't had Vim to help. They did that. And they knew of it all. Light had plenty of prophecies back then, many of them showing exactly what would happen if they left... and they still took Vim with them. They knew the chaos it would wrought. The deaths it'd cause. They did it anyway."

I gulped again. This time it hurt to do so.

"Right..." I barely got the whisper out, as I realized what she meant... and how serious it was.

There was no denying it, after all. If Light, like all saints, saw the future... then they'd know what their actions would have caused. If even in part. She had known her leaving, and making Vim guide them as they did, would result in all that destruction and loss... and she had done it anyway... Basically dooming all those who had needed Vim, or even they themselves.

I nodded... holding Lilly's eyes as I did. "Right," I said again, as my heart shuddered at the terrible understanding.

No wonder so many hated her. No wonder so many doubted their intent and actions here and now. Because they'd already been, in their eyes, betrayed by them.

How had I not realized this before? Vim and I had talked, as had I with a few others, about this... but why'd it take until now for this obvious thing to click in my head?

Light and the rest leaving back then had brought forth disaster. Not just to the Society... but to many of my friends, too.

No wonder Vim didn't like them.

Yet, because of his rules... he couldn't see them as outright enemies. Not just the rules of the Society either but his own personal ones too.

"I'm not... saying it's entirely their fault, Renn. But I'll be damned if anyone tries to say they don't hold some blame," Lilly then said.

I nodded again. "Yes... I agree, Lilly. Fully," I said.

"Mhm... just... I just wanted to make sure you knew is all..." Lilly whispered as she released my arm. It throbbed a bit after she did, telling me she had grabbed a bit harder than she usually would have. Likely because it had been an emotional moment for her.

Maybe seeing Merit had reminded her of what Light and the rest had done to her. Lilly was... very protective of those she considered family. And after seeing the two together, I had no doubt that Lilly saw Merit as a member of her parliament. Even if she'd never admit it aloud.

"I'll... need to think about this, Lilly. Deeply," I said gently.

"Do so, Renn. But let's do it as we go get food, shall we?"