

## Non Human 561

### Chapter 561 Vim – To Find Fault Within

Placing the box of flux down on the table, I wondered if I should let Lellip be the one to make this batch.

She of course already knew how to make steel, having been taught by Nebl, but me making sure she knew the proper way was likely something I should verify. I'd vowed to not teach such methods so liberally anymore, but I still made it a point to make sure a few people here and there knew such things. Just in case they or the Society needed the benefits the knowledge brought and I wasn't around to provide it. Pram knew, having grown up during the height of this place, but she didn't care much for the forge. So I needed to make sure Lellip knew what she needed... After all, with her grandfather gone...

She was the last smith. The last real one, at least.

"It always happens eventually, doesn't it...?" I mumbled.

Nebl and his family have been around a long time. So long that even I must have assumed that they'd... just always be so.

Yet time was not forgiving. It didn't care. It was ruthless.

With Nebl's death, this bloodline would die out. Pram was pregnant, so of course the family was still growing... and also there was Lellip, but that was a far cry from this smithing family's old status.

There used to be dozens of them. So many that this had basically been a small village. There used to be dozens of buildings all around this smithy, buildings that had always been lively and full of people and visitors. For every monkey smith there had been a handful of apprentices and helpers, here to learn and aid the Society. Now there was barely enough to fill a single house anymore. Renn and I both had our own rooms in the main house to stay in during our visit, and that fact alone was ridiculous. There'd been times I'd shown up and people had been sleeping in the workshops or smithy, waiting for a new house to be built for them since they'd ran out of room. Those days were long gone...

And even with the birth of the new monkey, and even if Lellip and her new sibling produced more heirs... it'd not be long until their bloodline thinned to the point it became nonexistent in the first place. Lellip herself already showed signs of degradation. She was simply not as thick in the blood as her parents, and probably not even half as thick as Nebl was... or had been...

This place was simply a tell of the times. It wasn't just the Society that was deteriorating it was our people. The non-humans as a whole...

A metal crunching sound pulled my focus to the world around me. Glancing at the table, I found I had been holding the edge of the box still. I released it, and sighed at the metal edge of the box that now was rolled and crumpled.

"Darn it." Now I'll have to make a new box. This wasn't a simple wooden box but one of metal, as to properly contain the limestone flux within. It needed to be sealed air-tight.

Well, what was one more thing? Always was and always will be, so it didn't change anything did it?

Still I found myself annoyed. I shook my head and stepped away from the table as to turn and look around at the forge. The huge furnace, and the many smaller ones connected to it... were cold. Quiet.

Lonely.

Off in the distance I could hear voices. Lellip and her mother were talking not far from here, by the sounds of it they were walking back to the house. I wasn't sure what they had been doing, but I knew the new head of the family Drandle was out in the fields. He was a man who kept to himself, though I didn't fault him for it. He didn't agree with my, Nebl's, or most of the Society's methods. If not for the fact his wife and family belonged to the Society Drandle would undoubtedly had never joined. Although many found fault with that, I kind of respected it.

To not only have his own views and beliefs, but to be able to set them aside for his love and his family was... respectable. It was harder than people knew to do such things. Especially for non-humans. To put aside firmly held beliefs out of love and loyalty was difficult for them, in ways most people didn't understand. So although the man himself was not someone I really cared for, nor had Nebl, I couldn't help but praise him all the same.

"Too bad that's all there is to respect..." I mumbled.

Walking away from the furnaces I went to the front entrance. The door was slightly ajar, but not opened enough to just walk through, so I had to push it a bit before I could get out. Once outside I found Lellip heading my way, and her mother out of sight. She had likely gone inside the main house.

"Vim!" Lellip hurried over upon seeing me, smiling happily as she did.

"What's up?" I asked. I was a little glad for the distraction. I honestly wasn't sure what I had even been doing, to be honest. I was going to make a few things, and as such was going to heat the furnace up as to smelt, but I'd gotten distracted. I was distracted. My breaking that box earlier proved it, and the last

thing I needed was for me to break the blast furnace with my wandering mind. Make a new metal box? Easy, can be done in an hour or two. But a whole new blast furnace...?

Little Lellip gave me a sad smile as she pointed at the house. "She's asleep," she said, now speaking softly... as if worried she could be heard.

She...? Oh. "Renn, you mean," I realized.

Lellip nodded a little happily. "She's snoring softly, even!" she added.

For a small moment I studied the young monkey, and wondered why she found such a thing so fascinating... but I knew why.

Renn was a predator. A real one. And although these monkeys were thick in the blood, and not as wimpy or cowardly as many others in the Society, that fact was still a big deal. Renn was... unique. And it wasn't hard to imagine why someone like Lellip, someone young who hasn't met many full-blooded predators, would find her so fascinating.

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"Well, you've been working her hard," I said simply. Renn has spent nearly every moment with the young monkey since our arrival. And that included when Lellip was doing her chores, or working around the farm or smithy. And Lellip, like her grandfather, worked hard and swift. Renn had the physical capabilities to keep up, but it seemed it had still tired her out if she's still asleep. It wasn't the afternoon yet, but it was late morning.

"Mom thinks she'll wake up once she starts making breakfast," Lellip said.

"Likely. She's a glutton," I said.

Lellip giggled at that. "Grandpa was too...! Must be a thing for you stronger types!" she said.

"For some, I suppose," I said as I crossed my arms and wondered if I should eat breakfast with them. I wasn't hungry, at all, but... sometimes something as simple as having a small meal with everyone was just as important as saving their lives. Especially after a great loss.

"You said you'd be staying here until the passes clear, right?" Lellip asked as she glanced to the western horizon. The distant peak was closer than it looked, and it was covered in white.

"Yes. She's a hardy creature, but we're not in a real rush nor do I want to risk it," I said. I had told her it was mainly so we didn't get seen as odd, since no human would try to cross it when it was so covered in snow, but in reality that was just a minor worry. My true concern was for her health. I was still not entirely sure what Renn was capable of, or at least capable of enduring. She was in no doubt thick in the blood, but that didn't always mean hardy and strong.

"Mom was worried about it, but isn't anymore. She likes Renn," Lellip said with a sad smile, one that made me realize that even though in a good mood... Lellip was still forlorn.

The reason was obvious. As obvious as the cold furnaces behind me. But I knew only time could cure such a thing. The only thing I, or anyone, could do for her... was to just be here. To not make her loss any worse.

Maybe Renn sticking around for a month or two was just what this family needed.

"I've been traveling with her for some time now. She's... odd in her own ways, but she's also very gentle. To the point it's actually weird, even to me," I said.

Lellip frowned up at me as she tilted her head. "Weird...? What do you mean?"

I uncrossed my arms as to gently gesture at her. "Usually older predators, ones thick in the blood, are blunt and gruff. People who, even when kind and morally even-natured, are still a little rude in their own ways. Renn's not. Her biggest problem is she's a tad too nice. A few of our members have been happy when we left, not because they had been worried or offended but simply because Renn was just a tad too much for them. She'll spend all day with you, nonstop, if you'll let her," I warned.

The young monkey gave me a wry smirk. "You mean those like dad, who like to be left alone," she knowingly understood.

I nodded. "If there's any predator trait actually left in her, it's the fact she seemingly clings onto people. But it's not because she's a cat, but instead because of the life she's led until now. I don't know her whole story, of course, but what I do know is she's been alone most of her life. And it's been a long one," I said.

"Hm... I'd not be bothered by that. It'd be like having a sister or something," she said.

"Then let her visit be your training session," I said.

Lellip laughed at that. "Right!"

"All the same, you need not worry. I'd not have brought her here otherwise. If anything I'd be more worried about your liking her too much."

"Too much...? Why? Then she'd just stay here, which I'd be fine with! We got plenty of room!"

I wasn't going to agree with that statement nor mention the fact that they now had even more room, since it hurt to admit. "If you want to keep her, go ahead," I simply said.

"Maybe I will! I'm going to go help mom with breakfast, and see if she actually wakes up at eat smell of it or not!" Lellip then said as she turned and ran off. She did so with a smile, but at the same time had a bit of a heavy step as she ran. Had my words offended her somehow? Maybe she had interpreted my words as an insult to Renn or something, as if I was saying I didn't think she belonged her...?

Of course I'd not think such a thing. If Renn did want to stay here, and the monkeys were happy with it, I'd be more than happy to leave her here as well. This place was safe, distant from humans and secluded. Plus it'd put her to use. Not only would she be able to help out around here, she'd be able to also protect them if something happened. What with Nebl gone they now were lacking someone with a spine...

I blinked as I realized this place was now defenseless. At least, within reason.

Drandle and Lellip were not weak. Even young Lellip, barely as tall as Renn, was stronger than any human. But strength wasn't everything. It was far from everything. If a group of humans, of any kind, attempted to they could easily overtake this place now... with him gone...

Watching the young monkey run into the house, disappearing from view, I sighed softly as my chest felt heavy.

"One death is always just the beginning, isn't it Nebl?" I whispered.

Maybe it was time I started to consider the end. Even though I'd been trying to avoid thinking about it, there was no denying its inevitability. The end was nearer than anyone likely knew, or at least was willing to admit. Maybe it was time I considered... consolidation. Maybe it was time I gathered the few remaining survivors, the ones capable and willing, and just set up a single location. One I could focus my whole time to, not just a few scattered days once every so many years. It'd cause friction, of course, but I'd be able to protect such individuals better. At least in the longer term...

But if I started that process... that meant I'd have to confront the reasons for the end which begun it.

And did I want to do that? Honestly...?

After all, look at this place here. These people. Nebl's family.

He was dead. Gone. Forever... and why? To save some humans? Some random miners?

And did anyone even try to save him? I'd not inquired too deeply into what had happened yet, out of fear of hearing their answers, but honestly I didn't need to. I already knew. It was obvious.

The mine had collapsed. Nebl got stuck inside it. The humans... and these monkeys, all gave up.

Abandoning him without a struggle.

They hadn't even sent for me. To alert me. Not a letter, or a cry for help... they had just...

A loud creak drew my attention to my left. I frowned as I watched the massive, heavy, re-enforced door to the smithy slowly open outward a bit more. Without being touched, or moved. The thing creaked on its hinges as it did, and I huffed at it. There was no wind. I had not bumped into it, nor had anything else. And it was so heavy, so well-built, that the idea of it just randomly moving was near impossible. It was so heavy that many people have complained about it throughout the years. But I didn't need to ponder for more than half a heartbeat to know why it had moved.

Sighing softly, I decided to join the monkeys for breakfast. At the very least it'd distract me from my own thoughts... since they had been treading far too close to dangerous territory.

My friend was dead.

And it felt like, and seemed, no one had really tried to save him.

I couldn't blame them. Shouldn't.

Yet I did.

And that made me a terrible protector... and an even worse friend.

Chapter 562 Renn – To Be Thanked

I witnessed it.

All of it.

Yet I still didn't believe it.

Leaning against the wall, since I felt light-headed, I watched with awe as Nebl was tended to.

He had been placed in his bed. Vim was currently working on his leg, with a pair of metal pronged tweezers and a knife. I wasn't really sure what Vim was cutting and removing from Nebl's leg, but every so often I heard a clink sound as Vim dropped pieces of whatever he was taking from Nebl's leg into a metal pot.

Drandle wasn't in the room at the moment, but I heard him downstairs. He was preparing some kind of oil solvent for Vim. Lellip was standing behind Vim, grabbing lightly at his shoulder and shirt apprehensively as she watched him work on her grandfather. Her mother, Pram, was curled up on a chair nearby. She had fallen asleep, or rather in my opinion straight up passed out, a little after everything calmed down. Vim had asked us to take her to her room, but she had woken and complained when Drandle and I had tried to carry her out of here. So it was decided to just let her be.

The tension from the moment was gone, mostly. My heart was no longer fluttering, my skin wasn't covered in a layer of sweat anymore and... well...

Glancing down at my hand, I gulped at the sight of my clean palm.

It being clean wasn't weird, of course. But it was when I considered how dirty it had been moments ago. I had been forced to take a bath, to clean up, a short time ago after everything had calmed down. They had worried my dirtiness, from working in the mine with Vim, could have risked Nebl's health. I wasn't entirely sure what my dirtiness, my layer of dirt from the mine, could do to a man who had been stuck in that same mine for weeks but I hadn't argued.

Plus if I could help aid in his recovery by simply taking a bath... then of course I'd do it. Without question.

"It's bleeding again, Vim," Lellip whispered. Her voice drew my attention away from my hand and I looked back over at them. Vim simply nodded in response, but it didn't seem to cause him to change his method. He simply kept on picking at Nebl's leg with the metal tweezers.

Were they rock pieces maybe...? Bone shards? I was afraid to ask, to distract him, and also afraid to draw near.

Not because I felt my presence itself would be a distraction... Vim was a calm man. Stoic. Even during moments of great tension he didn't flinch or hesitate. At least, not once I'd ever seen. But... well...

Gulping again as I watched Lellip flinch as Vim plucked another piece from Nebl's leg, then promptly drop it in the pot nearby, I couldn't help but smile.

How absolutely adorable. How lovely. How fantastically amazing.

I had no words to describe this scene. This moment. This... event.

How could I? We had gone to the mine. Vim had gone to see how his friend died... and then... what? What did I call this...?

Was this a miracle...? Was this what that book, that bible, I'd read back at the Cathedral meant...? Was this what faith was? Or was this more than that? Something different...? What could one call this if not a miracle? What were the odds...? And even more so, what were the chances it'd happen in this way here and now?

Considering most of my experiences with such emotional moments were... dreadful, like finding Nory on the floor of our house passed out. Or Amber covered in blood. Or the Sleepy Artist quiet and cold... This was a stark difference. A night and day kind of difference, that almost made me feel as if I was asleep. As if I was dreaming. As if none of this was real.

My eyes began to water, again, and I quietly went to rub them clean. I didn't feel any real shame in crying, but I didn't wish to. The crying part was over. Pram had cried. Lellip had wept. I'd joined them... and now that they were done being so emotional, I felt like I shouldn't return to it. After all, how could I cry more than they? He was their family, not mine. Their sorrow, their joy, was so much greater than mine could possibly be... so my being still so affected by it was... strange, wasn't it?

Not that anyone had said anything, or seemed offended, but I couldn't help but feel conscious of it. To them I was basically just an acquaintance. Maybe a friend, at best. Yet I was more emotional over Nebl's survival than they...? That made no sense, did it?

Though maybe it was better to be emotional than not. Vim hadn't even flinched, after all.

But no one had complained over that either, had they?

I turned a little to watch Drandle walk into the room. He did so quietly, without a glance to me, as he walked over to the bed and his daughter. He handed Lellip a glass jar, one that had a brown looking liquid in it, and then turned to watch Vim and his work.

"Looks good," Drandle simply said.

Vim nodded as he plucked another piece. "Yes. He'll not need long to walk again. As long as it heals well," Vim said.

Not only did I relax upon hearing such a thing, so did Lellip. She sighed in relief as she pulled the glass jar closer to herself, as if to hug it in relief.

"Has he woken since?" Drandle asked quietly.

"No. He snored a bit earlier though," Lellip answered.

I smiled and nodded at that. Yes, I had jumped at the sound as had others. It had been a rather gruff noise, like a dog's growl almost. To know it was how the man snored was rather funny, not to mention relieving.

He had passed out as Vim brought him here, after I'd run off to let everyone know beforehand. I had come back before Vim, as to let everyone know what had happened and to help them prepare for his arrival... and to all of our surprise Nebl had woken up upon being brought into the house. He had woken up, glanced around, said a few words and then passed out again. The sight of him alone had made Lellip and Pram cry, but it had been that moment of lucidity that had broken them. Pram had even fallen to her knees, nearly passing out from the emotions it had brought her.

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Glancing at Pram, still sleeping on the chair nearby, I couldn't help but smile at her. The poor woman had tear-stains on her face still. She must have cried in her sleep recently, they hadn't been there before she had sat down.

What power love had. Had I ever cried in my sleep like that? For pain, or sorrow, sure... but happiness? Joy?

I probably would tonight once I finally got some sleep.

"Okay... I think that's good, for now. Lellip can I have the sewing stuff?" Vim then asked.

"Ah!" Lellip jumped into movement. She stepped away, to a table nearby and swapped the jar of stuff her father had given her for a plate. One with needles and thread upon it. With her stepping out of the way I got a glimpse at Nebl's lower body, and the leg Vim had been working on. It looked... rather clean, surprisingly. He had a lot of hair on his legs, far more than normal people did, and although he had a huge open wound on his lower leg it didn't look too bad. I didn't see any blood or bones, at least.

Vim took the plate from her with a nod, then went to work. I stepped away from the wall, quietly, and snuck up behind Lellip. I peered over her shoulder, ignoring Drandle's glance as I did, and watched Vim ready a very sharp needle and thread.

He was... going to sew up the wound.

I'd of course seen such things before... but never to this degree. And particularly not with such skill. Within moments Vim had most of the wound sealed shut, and done in a way that it almost looked... fake, somehow. Was that really how it was sewn up? It was as if he was patching a tear in a sleeve or something...

"Here," Lellip procured the jar again and handed it to Vim once he put aside the needle and thread. Vim opened the jar and went to putting some of its contents onto the wound, where he'd just sewn up.

The stuff stunk. It was obviously some kind of ointment for the wound, but it looked... thick. Too thick, even.

It didn't take long for Vim to finish, then with a nod he handed the jar back to Lellip and went to wiping his hands on a cloth. He was done.

"Now time. Time and care," Drandle said as he patted Vim on the shoulder and then turned and left.

I watched the man leave for a moment, wondering why he seemed so... odd, but decided it was just the way he was.

Lellip sniffed as she put the lid back onto the jar. "Stuff stinks," she whispered as she went to put it on the table nearby.

As she did Vim turned towards me. I stood up a bit straighter as he handed me the plate from earlier, the one that had the needles and stuff on it. I took it from him, carefully, and went to put it next to the jar Lellip had just put down.

The plate had a bit of blood on it, which made me wonder how it had gotten there. Vim's hands, maybe? The needle didn't look bloody at all, and I had not seen any spurt or spray while he'd worked...

"I'll keep an eye on them, Vim."

I turned away from the plate and table, and found Vim and Lellip staring at each other. He was still sitting before the bed, and had a small frown on his face. "Sure?" he asked.

Lellip softly nodded with a smile. One that made it clear she had no intention of changing her mind.

Vim simply nodded and slowly stood. He gathered up a few of the rags he'd used, some stained with blood, and then grabbed the metal pot too. He gently nodded down at Lellip once done and then glanced at me. I felt my ears go stiff, wondering if he was looking at me for a real reason. Was he telling me to leave...? Asking me to do something? Does he want me to grab something, to help him carry that stuff or...?

"He should be fine. But make sure he doesn't roll over onto the leg for now, just in case," Vim said as he stepped away, leaving the room.

"Right...!" Lellip nodded dutifully as she went to sit in the stool Vim had just vacated. She sat with purpose as she did, as if taking over a heavy duty.

For a small moment I felt forgotten as Vim left and Lellip went to focusing on her grandfather. He had a small blanket covering his body, but not his legs... she reached over to adjust it a little after a moment.

Hm...

Glancing around, I wondered if maybe I should leave too. Nebl was tended to now, so he just... needed time, right? Sleep? Rest? Did he really need multiple eyes watching him do so? Felt kind of weird to do it, to be honest...

"Thanks, Renn."

I blinked and stood up straighter as I turned to face Lellip. She had not looked my way, she was still staring at her grandfather. She had a soft smile on her face, and looked... content. Happy. Not a tear in sight.

"I..." I wasn't sure what to say. After all I'd not done anything. Vim had not needed me. He could have dug Nebl out just as well without me, had he been alone. And although I had come early to forewarn them of his arrival, it wasn't as if that would have made much a difference either. It had only taken a handful of minutes for us to prepare this room for Nebl.

"Really... thank you..." Lellip whispered again, and did so this time with a small sniff. She reached up to wipe at her eyes but I didn't see any tears leak from them as she did.

Slowly nodding... I decided to just accept her heartfelt thanks.

But...

Glancing behind us, to the door... I quietly searched my memories.

I did so quickly. I only had to look back on a few hours, after all.

And as I did my emotions returned. The rush of finding Nebl alive. Seeing his arm pop out of that hole, and grabbing Vim. The look on the man's face as he realized he was saved. The peace in his eyes upon seeing his family, and the mighty sigh he had released as he fell back into sleep after being laid into bed. Pram's scream of utter relief, Lellip's cry and Drandle's soft curse to a god long forgotten in shock at the sight.

I thought of Vim's quiet assurance. How not once did he leave. How he kept everyone together, focusing on Nebl's well-being as much as Pram's or the rest of us. He had focused on Pram when she had passed out with as much seriousness, if not more, than he had upon finding Nebl.

Throughout the whole ordeal... there was one constant. And that constant was Vim.

Yet...

Stepping back, I decided to go lean against the wall again. There was another chair in here, one not occupied... but I didn't want to take it. Just in case Vim or Drandle wanted to come back in and sit again.

Instead I just leaned against the wall... watching Lellip as she watched Nebl.

She'd thanked me.

And had seemingly meant it.

Yet... wasn't there someone else to thank...?

Someone more important? More worthy of that gratitude...?

"Thank goodness..." Lellip whispered again as she lowered her head ever so gently. I couldn't tell if she had started to pray or something, but it sure looked like she was.

Feeling slightly awkward as Lellip started to cry again, I decided to leave. Even if I didn't really want to, I also didn't want to stand there and watch the poor girl weep. Even if in joy, it was... rude, I think.

Leaving the room, I found myself a tad sadder than before. Even though I shouldn't be. I should still be utterly amazed and full of uncontrollable joy and awe. Yet instead...

Heading downstairs, I tried to reason my weird thoughts and feelings. I tried to understand them... and better yet...

I tried to forgive the people who I wanted to love; even though not a one of them had thanked the man I loved the most.

Chapter 563 – Renn – After Meeting The Clothed Woman

Side-Story – Interludes: Volume Two – CH.116.5 – Renn – After Meeting The Clothed Woman

Vim was plucking weeds.

Leaning against the windowsill, I found myself oddly... calm. Happy, even. Though it was so weird to be so while watching the protector of the Society do something as silly as plucking weeds in a garden.

It's become rather obvious that most of the time Vim did only little things when visiting members and their homes. Stuff like fixing up furniture, checking the city for dangers, or even just... plucking weeds.

Did members not find it weird, I wonder? I mean... he was the protector, in more than title, wasn't he?

He was strong. Wise. Ancient, even. He was capable of so much, things beyond reason, yet... most members only saw him like this, didn't they?

Though I suppose this was better than the alternative... I'd much rather have weeds and a broken fence be the most pressing matter for our members. If Vim's real worth, his real abilities, were needed... then that was actually a bad thing. For it meant people were hurt. Or in danger of being so.

Yet all the same I found it silly. Even more so because of how calm he looked while doing such menial tasks.

I was in the kitchen of the Clothed Woman's home, leaning out the window as to watch Vim work. I'd just had breakfast with the Clothed Woman and now she was in her church praying, so I was alone. I had joined her in her prayers a few times... but honestly I felt rude doing so since I didn't have her faith. She didn't seem to mind me kneeling next to her before that weird cross, but it felt... wrong for me to do so all the same.

So instead of joining her this time I simply... was doing this. Being bored.

Usually I'd help Vim during such moments. As I had when he had prepared those smoked meats for the Clothed Woman. But right now I'd chosen to just stand aside and watch, mostly because Vim wasn't really working hard. There weren't many weeds to pluck in the first place. Vim was just... like me, likely, and was bored.

He'd fixed the fence around her main garden. He moved some fallen trees and cut some more for her, filling her little lean-to of firewood for her. He fixed a window and a door... prepared a large batch of that meat, and has done random work around her gardens and this area. He had even gone to a nearby lake for some reason, checking whatever he had needed to.

Watching him work made me wonder how he was so efficient. He didn't appear to work quickly, at least on first appearance... but there was no denying his speed. Sometimes you'd glance at him, seeing him build something, then look away for what felt like only a few moments only to find he was finished. Like the fence he had repaired... I had noticed him starting on it one morning, then before the day was even half over he was off doing something else and the fence was finished. Making a fence that quickly wasn't impossible, but it was when you had to consider he had prepared everything himself. He had chopped the trees down for wood, cut it and prepared it... then put it all together...

Maybe it was just his efficiency. It wasn't that Vim worked quickly, or just quickly, instead it was because he was proficient at it. He has likely built countless fences throughout his long life, for all our members and whatnot, and as such was just... good at it. So it felt, and seemed, as if he was working faster than possible because of it.

It made me wonder how quickly Vim could build a house. A real one, a full-blown one. Could he get it done in a single day? And if so to what extent...? Would it be empty inside, or would there be furniture too? Rugs? Shelving?

And to take it a step further... how effective would Vim be if he actually tried?

For instance... say a field of wheat. It could take dozens of humans to properly tend to and harvest a full field. And it could take them days, if not weeks, to do it properly. Could Vim do it alone...?

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In theory thanks to his strength, and strange capability to not need sleep or much rest, he could likely work for days on end without issue... and do so well, at that.

He was basically a work-horse. One of limitless energy, and capable of finer work beyond even the greatest craftsmen...

It was almost a shame he was wasted on such basic things as he was. Maybe instead of being the protector he should instead be building us all homes, or something.

"Bet he built this one, too," I whispered as I tapped the windowsill I was resting upon.

The Clothed Woman didn't seem to care for material things. At all. She kept her home tidy and clean, but it didn't really feel like a home to me. It was kind of empty... lacking, in a way. There were only the bare essentials within it. Nothing too personal. Nothing... well...

I glanced around the kitchen, frowning softly at the sight of it.

The small kitchen in my own home, the cabin Nory and I had built a long time ago, had been far different. There had been random junk everywhere, and although it had been cramped in a corner it had still felt... homey, I guess? We had made nail-like hooks to hang utensils and cooking items on the wall. And Nory had decorated them a little in her own way, by painting and carving things around them into the wooden wall. In fact most of our cabin had looked... cluttered, in a way, simply because of all the stuff Nory or I had made or done to it.

This home though reminded me of some of the inns Vim and I have stayed in during our travels. Bare rooms with just a single bed, half the time without even a rug or a chair in them.

That was how this place felt. This was not a home, but a temporary inn. A place to stay for a moment, nothing more.

But... she's been here for years.

"Want one?"

I stood up straighter, slightly startled. Turning back towards the window, I frowned at Vim who stood just beyond it. He had a soft smile on his face, telling me he had noticed I had been startled. He had his hand out, offering...

Taking the flower, I smiled softly at it and him. "You said that as if it was a snack," I said. It was a pretty yellow thing, with petals that rolled and widened outward then back inward.

"Anything can be a snack if you want it to," he said simply.

I huffed at that as I glanced him up and down. He of course didn't look dirty, even though he'd been working in the gardens for the last few hours. Which was praiseworthy for him. "Where'd you get it?" I asked. There weren't any flowers around here, as far as I could tell. Its color was bright enough that I should have seen it, especially since I'd just been watching Vim like a hawk.

He only shrugged as he glanced to the left, in the direction of the church. "She praying?" he asked.

I nodded. "Morning prayer. She's very dutiful," I said. Not even Rapti had prayed as much.

"Hm... did she kick you out or something...?" he asked.

Smelling the flower, I shook my head. "No. I just felt it was rude to bother her too much. I don't even know who her gods are; let alone how to properly pray to them... so..." I said with a shrug.

"You don't want to know those ones."

I smirked at him as I pointed the flower his way. "You say that as if you'd be okay with me knowing others or any at all," I said.

Vim frowned as he slowly nodded. "Yes. If you're to have any gods, choose ones that are kind and instill morals. At least."

Oh...? Was he saying that the Clothed Woman's gods were... evil? Or something like it? "Are there a lot of gods, Vim?" I asked.

"Many. And even more off-shoots, variations and whatnot. At least, I'm assuming your question was of the number of faiths and not the gods themselves," he said.

"Both...?" I asked. Was he saying he knew how many real gods there actually were...?

"Hm... then yes, there were thousands."

Thousands...!? "Really...?" I asked, almost not able to believe it. Such a number was...

Vim sighed at me and then pointed at the flower. "Eat that before she returns. In her religion flowers are... impure. She'll burn it in a ritual if you let her see it," he said as he went to turn away. He didn't wait to give me a chance to say anything or ask another question.

Watching him go, obviously ending our conversation on purpose, I frowned as I glanced down at the flower I held.

Burn it...? I wonder what he meant by ritual? How were flowers impure? And did he actually want me to eat it? Maybe it hadn't been a joke...

Well... considering this was the first flower he's ever given me, I might as well enjoy it, I guess.

Taking a bite, I found myself a tad upset at how tasteless it had been.

But at least it wasn't bitter.

Chapter 564 Renn – The Second Day at the Animalia Guild

Side-Story – Interludes: Volume Two – CH.122.5 – Renn – The Second Day at the Animalia Guild

This place was too perfect.

Way too perfect.

It was so perfect it was scary.

Walking down the hallway that was quickly becoming dark, I wondered if I'd be able to get any sleep tonight. Today had been such a rush, so full of new experiences and joys that I almost wanted to cry. Probably would later.

The building was quiet now. Darker. The place had been locked down, having closed its doors and shut down for the day. The bank had been the first to close, then the warehouse, then all the other departments... as the members here called them.

There was so much. The bank was its own entity, but it had sections within it that were as important and as big as a normal business. There were offices, vaults, entire groups of people just working on paperwork and so much more!

Then there was the warehouse, the depot as those here called it. A place where goods came and went in large scale. Hundreds of wagons, carts and so much more came and went through the depot everyday it seemed... and many of those wagons were huge. The kind of huge that made me feel strangely uneasy.

A mailroom. A charter division for ships and cargo. A department just for nobles and royals, and there was even a department just for jobs! A place that people could come to find work, even at places other than the Animalia Guild itself!

It was all so overwhelming... I felt almost as if I'd entered a whole new world. The place was packed to the brim with activity... and to make it all even more amazing it was all centered on our members. Each department was outright ran by one of the Society's members. Sofia and Herra ran the banks, Reatti ran the general workstaff, Merit ran the guards, Magda oversaw the depot...

Slowing at the end of the hallway, I reached an intersection. There were three new hallways to take, and I wasn't sure which to go down. One was completely dark, without even windows, and the other two went opposite directions from one another.

"To the rooms," I whispered as I glanced down the dark hallway. I couldn't see the metal door that led to the inner-housing area of this building, where all the non-human members lived, but I knew that was what the hallway led to. I'd been down there before, though not in this hallway in particular.

The whole building was basically a giant box. A huge square, with several floors. The place was actually rather easy to find one's way within, thanks to the hallways all being uniform, but occasionally some of them... diverted strangely. As if intentionally, some of the hallways curved and went a weird way.

I was alone, having recently left Reatti's side, and was just... walking around. Both to see more of the building and to collect myself.

Soon I'd be having dinner again. With everyone. A huge group of colorful people, and I'd get... overwhelmed again. Just like last night, I'll likely get emotional and cry. Especially now that I knew some of the members here a bit more well. Reatti had been an utter joy to spend the day with, and surprisingly everyone else had been very kind and friendly too. A few I'd not met yet, since they were busy, but it seemed of all the places I'd been to... at least within the Society, this place was the neatest.

I loved the idea of it. This whole place was basically a giant store. Members who lived here spent their days working, doing important tasks, to make the Society money. Money that was then distributed to those who needed it. And then once their hard day of work was done...? Well, they spent the night enjoying each other's company. They ate together. Sat and talked, drinking sometimes, all night long. It was... well...

I sniffed as I reached up to wipe my eyes. I didn't feel any shame in the tears I wiped away, though I did hope they would not be joined by too many more later on.

No one would likely find me crying over this experience strange or bad, at least I don't think anyone would say so if they did... but that didn't mean I wanted to weep over it either. No matter how

wonderful this experience was for me, I didn't want to just... break and cry over it. At least, not in front of others. Not because I wanted to keep up a front of someone strong or something, but instead for another reason.

This should be normal. All of it.

This life. This place. These people. It should all be... normal. I should not be shocked or emotional over the simple fact that there were non-humans living, relatively, normal lives. It should just be... expected.

For me to get so emotional over this place only further proved how rare it was. How special it was. And that fact hurt more than it did make me happy.

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All of our members should be able to live like this. Free and happy. With purpose.

Yet instead...

"Lost?"

I jumped back a bit, and ran into the man who startled me. I groaned upon bumping into him, since the feeling of his unmoving self was rather familiar.

"Vim..." I groaned at him as I turned around and stepped away from him. He had a small smirk on his face, obviously once again he was amusing himself over his ability to sneak up on me.

Really, how did he do that? Yes I'd been lost in thought, and emotional, but still... this whole area was dead quiet, the kind that should not have allowed him to have snuck up on me like that.

"You alright?" he asked, likely noticing my tear-stained eyes.

Sniffing, I nodded as I went to wipe them again. "Yes. I'm... not really crying, they're just watery," I said honestly.

"Hm..."

If he believed me or not I couldn't tell, thanks to his placid expression, but I decided to let it be. "What're you doing?" I asked him. "Other than scaring me."

He smirked again. "Going to go see a friend, and saw you standing alone in a dark hallway all weird-like. I know you cats like to prowl, but really?" he asked.

Gosh he was teasing me again. "Your pirate friend, you mean," I said, ignoring his comment on purpose.

He nodded. "What'd you do today?" he asked.

My ear under my hat twitched hard enough to make it itch. I reached up and went to scratching at it under my hat. He had just forcefully changed the topic. "Reatti introduced me to everyone, again, and showed me all the different departments. Tomorrow I'll be joining Sofia at the bank, I guess," I said.

"That's fun," he said.

It was. It had been. It will be. But...

Glaring at him, I wondered why he seemed so odd. His responses had been rather... well...

Short? Maybe. I wasn't sure, but it almost felt as if he was not really paying attention to our conversation. Yet he was obviously looking at me, focused, and the way he was smirking at me told me he at least was paying enough attention to know I was annoyed at him at the moment.

"I've not figured out anything weird yet, Vim... if that's what you're asking," I said carefully. We were alone, but I wasn't sure to what degree. I didn't hear or see anyone in the hallway, but I knew some of our people had great hearing. The kind that made even far distances useless.

He had asked me to study this place. The members here. To see if I noticed anything odd... but so far I'd not done so. If anything the only thing that was odd was how there weren't more people here. This place was awesome, more members should live here.

"Hm, I figured."

"Though uh... I do have a question," I then remembered.

"Hm?" he nodded as he shifted a little, waiting for it.

"Merit. She's old, right...? I mean, older than she looks at least," I said. I had wanted to ask others, but it had felt rude to do so.

"Yes. She's actually the oldest here," Vim said.

Wow! "She's so small," I said softly as I thought of her. She wasn't just small... she looked young. It was one thing to be short and tiny, but to still look like a kid?

Vim chuckled at me. "She's like Lilly. One of the original members from back in the day," he said.

Oh my...! "I see... so she's the leader here?" I asked.

"Hm...? No. The leaders, if you want to call them that, are Gerald and Brandy. Though Brandy's not really seen as one, per say," he said.

"Right..." I nodded softly. I'd not met her yet. Supposedly she was off doing something elsewhere, somewhere up north.

"Any other questions? I should probably get going," he asked with a small gesture behind him.

Ah. Right... I nodded softly as I quickly considered a few...

"The human members. There's a few here, right? Like Amber was?" I asked.

"Yes. In fact there are quite a few. Most live in the building, but at the apartments in the south not with us in the center, or across the street on the west. The company owns the whole block that way," he said.

"Why do you call it company? They all call it a guild," I asked.

"Just a habit. The proper term is guild, at least here and in this era," Vim answered.

So it was just another term for it. Something that the people here, today, didn't use much if at all... "And my room. It's nice, and I can tell no one's slept in it for a long time... and the bath is pretty big, too," I said.

For a moment Vim said nothing... then he frowned at me. "And...?"

Oh. Was that not good enough? "I was inviting you to it, Vim," I said.

He blinked at me, and then chuckled. "I see."

My face went hot as I groaned and glanced down to our feet. "Yeah... Wasn't too good was it?" I admitted. I had wanted to invite him to it, but had also wanted to tease him a little. To get back for him startling me earlier. Yet I'd done so badly at it that he hadn't even gotten the hint had he?

He chuckled some more, and then his hand gently patted my shoulder. I glanced up at him as he stepped away, smiling gently at me as he did. "See you later, Renn."

Nodding softly, I watched him walk away... and once he was far enough I sighed at myself.

"Idiot," I whispered, at both of us.

Chapter 565 Brandy – Tending The Spoils and The Future

Side-Story – Interludes: Volume Two – CH.130.5 – Brandy – Tending The Spoils and The Future

Well this was weird.

Prasta and Limb were helping the girls up onto the wagon. Some were so weak and malnourished they weren't even able to climb up on their own. The few who were had voluntarily stayed off the wagon, to both help their fellows and to ensure those who needed help had enough room. The wagon was simply not big enough for so many at once.

I'd only brought one, which was my fault. Vim had said a few dozen, and I had been expecting most of them to be able-bodied...

"Thanks again Brandy," Vim said, speaking lowly. I noted he spoke in this land's language, not the eastern one we'd all been using the last few hours.

"Of course, Vim. Women like them are part of the reason I do what I do," I said. My whole faith was centered around helping such girls.

Really, there was no reason for him to thank me. He wanted them to have proper care and attention, and since the ship was not registered to our guild it would have to wait a day or so before making port. I'll have to go register the duties and fees for it before he could dock, else it'd get seized and searched by the magistrate of Lumen.

He had come to the Bell Church to find help, and we had lucked into one another. Honestly I was glad I was here, because those at the Bell Church would have only given superficial aid. The bloody fools were too old and scared to do much else anymore.

The protector of the Society only nodded as he studied the wagon and the women upon it. They were all dressed, though not entirely properly. I had simply brought a few bundles of basic clothes and supplies from the Bell Church. It was honestly not enough; a few of the girls only had a shirt or a blanket on since I'd not brought enough.

They were all blonde haired, the dirty golden that one found in the far east prairies. I didn't need to hear their whole story, since I'd heard it countless times before. Odds are most of them hadn't been kidnapped or captured, but instead simply sold off by their own people. Their own families. That was how the lands were over there, a place so poor and harsh that most daughters were sold off before they even reached maturity. And the few who did get lucky enough to reach adulthood half the time ended up selling their own selves out of necessity.

It was the kind of land that I'd always wondered why our church had never seeped into. Of all places for our faith to exist, and to do its proper job, it was there. Yet for whatever reason we had never tried.

"You might get back before we do," I said as I glanced away from the wagon and to the horizon. The ship Vim had captured was out there, anchored at sea. Supposedly a young human pirate was on it, waiting for Vim to return. It was a beautiful ship, but one for war not excursions or transport. Not that it wasn't valuable... I actually knew the ship by name and sight, since it was one of only a handful its size and with such military capacity. Here in the inland sea that thing was as important as a king's crown.

It had been owned by the pirates turned brigadiers. People hired to either protect cargo or get it back from pirates.

I of course knew of Vim's pirate friends. It was thanks to them, or well... their ancestors at least, that we even had Lumen to begin with. It had been the pirate queen lord way back in the day that had given us permission to settle and open our first church and business in the city. Only because of Vim, to boot.

"Maybe. Yes, you can have the ship. But only under the condition you let the boy captain it," Vim then said.

I smirked at him. "I wasn't even thinking about that," I told him honestly.

He sighed at me in a way that told me he hadn't believed me. But it had been true, I hadn't. I'd been more concerned over the girls than much else.

Some louder voices drew my attention back to the wagon. I found Limb handing out waterskins to the group, and as the group of girls distributed them amongst each other they all raised them as to give thanks. I watched them for a moment, somewhat fascinated on how Vim always seemed to get himself involved in such things.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

I've lived a long time, and I was considered one of the more important members in the Society. I helped run pretty much all enterprises within it, ensuring the Society's coffers stayed full and healthy. As such I was typically involved in many of the finer workings, and a lot of the events and issues such as this. Yet in all my years it was not often such moments like this occurred... and when they did, most of the time if not all of the time, Vim was involved in it.

Glancing at the man in question, I found him picking at a nail. He looked bored as he messed with it.

Really... why was a man so fixated by the world still alone? Where was she, I wonder? You'd think a man who was such a vacuum for drama and chaos would have found her by now... or she him... maybe Gerald was right, maybe she died without any of us knowing. Long ago, abandoned and forgotten somewhere because we had failed or...

"Well, I'll get going then, unless you need anything Brandy," Vim then said.

I nodded. "Sure. We'll meet you back at the company," I said.

He nodded back as he glanced at the ship on the horizon. The thing again looked real nice, though he had said it had been damaged in the storm. "Ah..." he then perked up and turned to look at me. I frowned as he gave me an odd smile, one I'd not seen on his face in a long time. "When you get there make sure to introduce yourself to our new member," he said.

New member...? "Did you bring me new employees?" I asked, a little excited to hear so. In all honesty we did need help, ever since Sally's death and the few who had left because of it we'd been short-staffed.

"Well... maybe. I'm hoping she will be one, to be honest. So treat her well for me, so that she might just end up staying with you," he said.

She...? "What's this? You're voicing an opinion like that...? Who are you talking about?" I asked. Vim of course had opinions, but he so rarely shared the ones like that. To him sharing his wants and needs concerning members and what he wanted, or even hoped, they did or didn't do was almost the antithesis to his whole personality.

"She's a predator. A real one. Her names Renn, and honestly I've begun to worry she's become too reserved ever since a mishap up north, and lately she's been..." Vim started to speak, to tell me about her, but for a small moment... I heard nothing.

Not his voice. Not the sound of the distant ocean waves. Not the dozens of just recently rescued slaves...

Just my heartbeat.

Renn.

He said Renn.

She was here.

My body went cold as I quickly tried to contain my own thoughts and emotions. I locked my own heart away as I quickly reached into my pocket as to pull out my coin. I rubbed it quickly, doing my best to not let my heartbeat become too quick. Vim could hear heartbeats, even at a distance. "Well, if we can house those like Merit I'm sure we can make room for another," I said lightly, hoping I had not misheard or missed something important in his little speech. I had missed some of the tail end of his statement.

Vim huffed at me. "She's nowhere near as bad. You'll see."

Oh. I bet. And yes. I will.

"Well, I'll make sure to meet her first thing once I'm back. Is she..." I hesitated, then realized I shouldn't ask or say anything.

He was speaking about her as if she was just another member. One he was meant to find a home, and then leave her there in it.

He wasn't with her yet. They weren't together yet. Not a mated pair. Not husband and wife...

I coughed as Vim frowned at me, in a way that told me my hesitation had been obvious. "Sorry, my mind's occupied by that ship," I said with a point at it.

Vim turned to look at it, and then his frown softened. He obviously found that to be very understandable, for he simply nodded. "Yeah... like I said, it needs some repairs but once it gets them the thing will be great. Anyway, I better get back before some other pirate tries to steal it from us," he said.

Chuckling for a moment, I made sure not to actually laugh. I knew if I did he'd find it odd, because right now I'd not laugh at anything. No matter how hilarious a joke was. My heart was too shocked, my mind too stunned, for such a thing. "Then go on then. I'll have the permit ready in two days, promise."

"Thanks. See you later," Vim nodded once more and then turned to step away. He paused before he did, looking one last time to the wagon nearby... and then finally turned and left.

Watching him go, I felt relief flood through me as sweat began to drip down my neck and spine.

By the gods dead and alive she was here. Finally. And I had almost stumbled! After hundreds of years! I'd be exiled and banished if after all this time I...

Oh no. the others. Merit. She was there.

She knew. But did she know enough...? To not do something stupid...?

Panicking, I turned and hurried to the wagon. I needed to get these girls readied and back to Lumen. Fast.

I needed to go back to make sure all was well. That all would go well. No matter the cost.

They needed to fulfill their duty. Their prophecy. We've been waiting all this time...

"Might already be too late..." I whispered.

Chapter 566 Merit – After Meeting Renn, and the Feast

Side-Story – Interludes: Volume Two – CH.144.5 – Merit – After Meeting Renn, and the Feast

The world was noisy again.

Of course, Lumen is always noisy. Hard not to be when the commerce capital of this whole region... but this noisiness was something new. Something different.

Something...

Slowly stopping, I glanced at the nearby window in the hallway. It, like most windows here in the Animalia building, was high and on the smaller end. On purpose, so that both no one outside could easily see in and also so they could be easily boarded and secured in need of safety. But thanks to their height, I was not able to see out of them. Not properly, at least. All I could see was the bright sky, a sky covered in gray clouds.

The world around me not being made to my size was normal for me. Expected. Windows, furniture, doors, even the handrails on stairs were just... a tad off for me. But I was used to that. Always had been.

Being short was my world.

Unlike others who were like me, I did blame my height for a lot of things. I was not going to claim my small stature didn't bother me... because it did. People underestimated me because of it. I was ignored sometimes, even during moments of crisis, because of it. And to not say the least to the small grievances and annoyances such a form gave me in general life either, such as always finding it difficult to properly outfit myself or...

Or...

"So he said! Can you believe it...!"

I turned a little and watched a pair of women approach. They wore the black attire of the bank, and were deep in conversation about the man one of them had just gone a date with last night. Usually I'd either scoff at their conversation, or quietly follow as to hear more, but right now all it did was make my heart hurt.

"You need to play harder to get! Or else..." the two didn't even notice me as they spoke, passing me by as they went down another hallway. I would have been offended if not for the fact I was standing still and near a large potted plant. One that had big enough leaves that I had been somewhat hidden.

Humans weren't very observant creatures in the first place... especially not when comfortable and happy. Such as the ones here were. It was one of the reasons we paid our employees so well, and gave them so much more than any other business in existence. We bought their loyalty with their happiness.

For a moment I watched the two women. They were of course not members, and in fact I didn't even know their names. But I recognized the face of the one who had just gone a date last night. She worked under Sofia, directly. I'd seen her around several times.

Stepping away from the plant and out into the center of the hallway, I frowned as I wondered how old she was. I didn't like to admit it, but I too really struggled with telling humans apart and their general ages. Many thought it was because I hated humans, or that I simply found them uninteresting... but the truth was something a tad simpler. A tad different. Something that only Vim has really ever seemingly understood.

Tall people were weird to me.

My own kind, my family and people, were all like me. Or had been all like me. So to me I was... normal. And it was everyone else who was weird. Most people were at least twice my height, and many were even more. And sadly, though I didn't know how to properly explain it... that difference made it hard for me to really tell certain things about others. Like their ages, and sometimes even their general appearance. Not once or twice have I mistaken people, usually humans, because I had not been able to outright tell them apart.

My own kind were easier. Us non-humans didn't just have more visible traits to separate us... we had unique smells too. I didn't even need to see Sofia to know who she was, her scent alone told me all I needed to know. Humans though just outright stunk, or at best didn't smell much at all. So it was difficult sometimes for me.

Still... I knew it didn't matter.

Humans were short-lived creatures. Most of them matured in a handful of years, and then typically a few years later they were settled down and growing a family. Then another handful or two years later they began to age, only to wither away and die before their life even began.

It was a sad existence, in truth. One that made me pity them, in a way.

"Hey Merit!"

I turned again, and nodded gently at a human guard. The man gave me a kind smile as he walked past, heading down the same hallway the two women had just gone. Like they he was likely heading for the inner-employee rooms where he could change clothes and end his shift.

For a moment I studied the man. He was one of the taller, more broad-shouldered, guards. He was older though, and I could tell that thanks to the gray in his hair. Humans didn't get that color, typically, without age. Though if he was so old that he shouldn't be a guard or not I couldn't tell.

Was he married...? I didn't even know his name. I recognized him, but didn't really know much else about him. Although officially I was a member of Reatti's little group, I was in truth a guard. A protector of this place. Because of that I intentionally tried to keep tabs, and a relationship, with the guards of the place. Even if only a cordial one.

Speaking of marriage, hadn't one of the guards had a wedding a few days ago...? About a week before Vim had returned...

I should have gone to it.

"Marriage..." I whispered as I turned back around and returned to walking.

I had no destination. It was nearing the end of the business day, so soon I would need to walk around and check the doors to make sure they were all locked once we closed up... but until then I didn't have anything to do. But unlike my typical days, ones where I'd just lounge and sit somewhere while reading a book or something, I instead found myself restless. Anxious, even.

The reason was obvious, of course. But I didn't want to admit it.

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Usually I'd be happy right now. Vim was here. It was a rare thing for him to visit for more than a few days at a time anymore, and usually during those moments I did my best to enjoy them. To spend time with him before he runs off on some duty or quest, even if only a few hours.

But I'd not done so yet. In fact so far Vim and I had only exchanged a few words... short and brief... a rarity for me, though if Vim even noticed or cared I didn't know.

The reason was, as mentioned, obvious.

Vim had not returned alone.

He showing up with people was not weird. He did it all the time. With not just new members, but sometimes humans... and even too, sometimes things beyond the natural. Like saints, or monarchs, or something.

But this time he had shown up with something beyond reason. Something...

"Impossible..." I whispered as I found myself slowing to a stop once more.

Rennalee.

Renn.

The one foretold. The one said to...

"Little Merit...!"

My eyes flinched, and I bit back a sharp retort as I turned to watch one of the eastern girls run up to me. She had a huge grin on her face as she huffed a little, slowing as she approached and breathing heavily as if strained. It told me she was still healing from her trials, so I decided not to rip her tongue out of her mouth for again calling me little.

"What is it?" I asked Lamp, in her own language.

Her smile grew as she wiped at the side of her mouth. Odds are thanks to her scars; during moments of extortion she had trouble keeping her saliva in her mouth. "Are you busy?" she asked.

Did it look like I was...? I was standing in an empty hallway, alone, feeling sad for myself.

But I didn't, wouldn't, admit that aloud. "Not really. What's wrong?" I asked. I had figured she'd be readying to leave. She and the rest of her people were going to go to their embassy soon.

"I wanted to ask something... Something serious," she said as she glanced around.

"Serious...?" I asked. I wasn't in the mood for this, but I knew I was one of the few she could speak to here. Renn couldn't speak her language, Vim was... well... Vim, and Brandy and the rest were kind of ignoring them. I wasn't really sure why, since usually Brandy was very holier than thou when it came to such people and the first to offer assistance, but I assumed it was for the same reason I was trying to avoid Renn myself.

We didn't want to interfere in fate. Especially not now after so long, waiting for it to resume.

"It's about Vim and Renn," she then said with a weird smile as she stopped looking around. The oddness wasn't from her scars, either, which meant...

"What now...? What'd they do?" I asked. I'd already gotten a complaint about the party they had on the roof the other night. Was I going to have to hear more whining so soon? Several of the humans had been offended they had not been invited. They had thought it had been something we had done without them, or something.

"Well..." Lamp shifted a little, and as she did I found my eyes sliding down to her chest. They were far bigger than most pairs usually found in this region, and they annoyed me. Not because I was jealous, or anything... but because if I stood too close to her they blocked her face from my view.

"If it's serious say it now, before one of them shows up," I said, warning her a little. Not only was Renn likely looking for Lamp, as to spend time with the woman before she departed... Renn also seemed to be trying to become my friend, or something like it, so her showing up right now wouldn't shock me at all. I'd noticed the last few days her attempts to spend more time with me. And it was one of the reasons I was so... well...

"Are they really not married...? Brandy at first said they were, then she said they weren't... and then I saw them flirting the other night, only for her to scowl at him the way a woman does and..." Lamp began to ramble, and my eye twitched something fierce as I debated shocking her into silence.

Taking a small breath, I held it in for a moment as I felt my gills shift a little. They felt itchy for a moment, but they settled down as I waved the woman's words out of the air. "They're not officially married, no... but they may as well be. You've obviously seen how they look at one another," I said, choosing to say the words that were both needed... and hurt all the same.

Lamp frowned at me, in a way that made me worry. "I see... And the people here don't believe in polygamy do they?" she asked.

By the gods! "No... What are you asking, really...?" I dared to ask what I already knew.

The scarred woman gave me a wry smile, one that made me a tiny pop of static come from me as she shrugged sheepishly. "I was... just wondering. I really like them, and..."

"Lamp...!" I groaned as I raised a hand to shush her, and my other hand to cover my own face. I kept my cool, as best I could, and barely was able to do it.

Humans were so insufferable...! Who does she think she is!

She wants to share in them! To be a part of their relationship...! I know to her, to her people in the east, such a thing was very normal... but...!

"Um..." Lamp made a noise as I groaned and did my best to keep calm.

The audacity...! Especially when...!

Of all people to say this to, she chose me! It was as if the world was slapping me in the face! It made me want to cry!

"Merit...? Little one...?" Lamp sounded concerned for me, and I heard her step forward. Luckily she didn't bend down and grab me or anything, but I knew if I didn't get control over myself she would soon. She was actually, in truth, a very honest and kind person. The kind that fit our Society perfectly.

But in her concern for me, she'd get hurt. If she touched me right now, she'd likely be shocked...

Stepping back, I lowered my hands and sighed as I looked up at the woman who was looking down at me with a concerned frown. Even with my stepping back, I was still only able to see half her face. Mostly her forehead. "By the gods dead and alive, no, Lamp. Leave them be. Else we will all suffer a terrible fate," I said seriously.

Lamp blinked a few times as she stood up straighter... and then she slowly nodded. "Okay... I'm sorry," she whispered, seemingly shocked in a different way all of a sudden.

I took another deep breath and nodded. "Please. You can be their friend. As close of one as you wish. Renn especially seems to be that for you already... but please, don't intrude in their relationship. For us... for our kind..." I hesitated, since I was about to lie. But I had to, I had to say something, to make sure she understood... so I simply decided to do so. "For our people, relationships take a long time to form. They're a slow, gentle thing. It could take many years before they even realize their feelings for one another. If you tempted either of them, you might accidentally corrupt that process," I told her a form of truth mixed with a lie.

Lamp quickly nodded. "I understand...! I do! Okay... thank you, Merit, for telling me. I'm sorry... I knew from stories and stuff that such things are different here, but I also forgot that you all are... spirits too," she said as she nodded, understanding in her own way.

Spirits. Sure. That was wrong, of course, but I wasn't going to correct her. Since it helped my little lie. "Hm. If it's any consolation, you're not the only one who has to hold themselves back," I said. I mean, really! She was lucky I actually liked her a little, and that Renn found her so important or else I'd have shocked her something fierce! To think she'd actually ask me for permission to try and join their relationship...! If anyone had that right, if anyone was to be first in line that should be me! I'd been waiting for longer than her whole clan has been alive! Hundreds of years and...!

My mind went blank for a moment as Lamp blinked at me... and then her shoulders slowly drooped... and I groaned as I realized what I'd just admitted.

"Please forget you heard that..." I whimpered as I went to cover my face again, this time not in anger but shame. Utter shame.

Chapter 567 Tosh – After Meeting Renn, and the Feast

Side-Story – Interludes: Volume Two – CH.142.5 – Tosh – After Meeting Renn, and the Feast

What a weird feeling.

I didn't feel different. Not a bit... yet everyone was claiming I had been lost in my own mind for years. Decades, even!

Such absurdity... I'd think they were all mad, but Vim himself was claiming the same thing.

And Vim was not a man to joke about such a thing. He'd tease, sure, but... never about something so serious.

But... although I felt fine, normal and whatnot, I was still doubting myself.

Because of Vim.

Even though I trusted his words, more than any other... I also found myself doubting him all the same.

Because this was not the Vim I knew.

"She's fine, but the others need to be tested still Renn..." Vim said softly.

The woman he was standing next to, over in the corner and trying to have a private conversation with, was someone I didn't really know. Someone I didn't really remember... at least, not as well as I should.

She had ears on top of her head. And a long, heavy looking, tail. I was actually used to seeing such traits on our people, but it wasn't often they looked so... perfect. She genuinely looked good with them, which was saying something. Usually people with such huge ears on top of their heads looked weird, as if they were deformed or something.

They fluttered as she frowned at Vim, in a way that only an annoyed woman could do. "But..." she whispered, upset over being told no.

"No buts, not even their nice ones," Vim said, smiling softly as he did.

While Renn's frown softened, morphing into an annoyed smirk, my own face got taken over by a frown.

He was... flirting!

So openly!

Glancing around, I felt a little on edge as I took in the few other people around me. Merit was off in one corner, sitting with Sofia. Gerald and Brandy were whispering about some iron-mine they were plotting around at another table. I had been sitting with Vim, and thus was now alone since he had stepped away to speak to Renn... but...

"Fine. I'll have dinner at their homes then," Renn then said with a huff, though she didn't sound too annoyed over it.

"Please do. Like I said, Lamp is fine but until the others officially are invited and accepted it's..." Vim started to again explain why she couldn't just invite a large group of random humans into our little enclave. He didn't get too far though since Renn made an odd sound, something akin to a scoff and a

laugh. It made me flinch as I glanced back at them, even though I was trying so hard not to acknowledge or look at them.

Renn had reached over and lightly tapped Vim's chest. She did so with a smirk. "You just don't want to have to eat with us," she said, teasing him.

Vim's eyes narrowed at her, but not in a way that made sense. He looked... angry all of a sudden.

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Vim? Angry? Openly? With one of our members...?

If not for the fact that no one seemed to notice or care, and the one he was glaring actually made her smirk bigger upon receiving said glare I'd be getting up to try and save her life.

"Unlike you I can't just eat all day long. I don't have enough stomachs for it," Vim said.

"Obviously a you problem," Renn didn't hesitate to say in response.

"It is. Such a problem in fact I might need to complain," Vim agreed.

Renn began to giggle and I had to look away. I returned my attention to the cup I held, and I bit back a groan.

By the gods what was going on...?

Vim was not the emotionless man many thought him to be. He could joke around, and tease and whatnot... but he did not flirt. Not openly. Not with one of our own members.

And surely not in front of me, or anyone else.

Yet here he was...

Reaching up, I scratched at the side of my head. My recently cut hair made it feel itchy, but it wasn't the hair that itched... it was my brain. It was hurting all of a sudden.

I didn't get it. Not only was Vim acting out of character... he shouldn't be... right?

I mean, that was his wife!

Rennalee! Right!? Why did I find him flirting with his wife weird...?

It made no sense. If anything I should find it odd that I hadn't seen it, or witnessed it, more often! Of course he'd be like that with his wife, when you considered how he was with us... with his friends and comrades... Vim was actually a very gentle man, one capable of great insight and humor and...

"Don't come crying to me when she feeds me!"

I flinched as Renn shouted and ran off, making a few others glance at her as she did. She left the room in a hurry, uncaring of any who heard or saw her do so.

A predator being noisy was normal. And in fact, one like her being so... boisterously emotional, was also normal. But by the gods dead and alive I just couldn't wrap my head around who it was she was doing such things with.

Vim sighed, rather softly, and I dared a glance over my shoulder to him. The protector looked suddenly bored, as if no longer having anything worth paying attention to, as he stepped back my way. To return to sitting with me, as to likely resume our earlier conversation. The one we'd been having before his wife had barged in to ask for permission to let some lamp have dinner with us.

What had we even been talking about...? I couldn't remember now. All I could think of was the absurdity that had just occurred, and the way my mind seemingly wasn't able to comprehend it.

Vim having a partner shouldn't be odd. Even if it was. Yet it made me question my own sanity.

Vim flirting with said partner was also something that should just... make sense. It was what you did with said people, after all. Yet it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Said partner being someone as cute as her...? Rennalee was adorable, utterly so. Enough so to make me a little jealous. So that too should be understandable... but...

"You okay, Tosh?" Vim asked as he took a seat back at my table. He sat across from me this time, instead of next to me. Maybe so he could keep an eye on the door his wife had just ran off through.

"Yeah... how about you...?" I asked carefully.

"Hm?" Vim tilted his head at me in a familiar way. One that relieved me. I'd seen that look hundreds, if not thousands, of times. That was the look of a man wondering why I'd even ask such a question. That was the look of the protector, a man basically immortal, wondering why I'd even ask for his health.

"She uh... wants to have dinner? Why don't you just eat with her?" I asked, still doing my best to navigate the oddity of my mind.

Maybe something really was wrong with me. Why'd I find his actions, his wife, so weird? It made no sense at all... haven't they been together for hundreds of years already?

"Because she can't speak their language. So I get stuck as translator, and trust me it's not fun to be stuck between them," Vim said.

I felt a smirk crawl its way onto my face. "I'd argue otherwise, typically," I said. Being the interpreter for a bunch of beautiful women? What was there to complain about?

"Then you go do it," Vim said simply.

"Maybe I will!"

Maybe doing so would get me to calm down and figure out why I found Renn, and her relationship with Vim so strange.

Chapter 568 Vim – No Bargains With Boredom

I waved goodbye as the wagons rolled away. Little Fressi looked utterly devastated as she heartily waved me goodbye alongside the rest on her wagon.

"I think she had a crush on you, Vim," Jennifer teased.

"Ducks have always been weird," I said simply. Rather than a crush I think the girl was just glad someone had been nice to her. Since her mother, Tressi, was the de-facto leader of their little group many within it were kind of distant with Fressi. Basically she was ostracized for being the daughter of the one who barked orders at everyone, since the group constantly needed yelling at for slacking or meandering and not doing their jobs. Children did such things, sadly. And not too few of the adults either.

"I'm surprised you're not going with them, though," Jennifer then said as she crossed her arms and glanced at me.

"Martin's asked me to do something else. I'll be leaving once the last group does, heading south for a bit," I said. There had actually been quite a few requests for me, but I had chosen the one that sent me back to Renn as fast as possible.

Escorting a large group of members to Telmik? That was important, big time, but it would have taken weeks if not months with how many there were.

Plus I didn't need to really worry about them. They had Martin with them, amongst a few others who had good heads on their shoulders like Tressi. Odds are they'd be more than safe, especially since in only a few days they'd reach the Nation of the Blind's borders, where it was a lot safer than typical.

There was another smaller group, of about thirty odd people, who were going to head north for some reason. I'd not really been told why or where, but I'd also not really asked. I didn't want to get involved. They were going to leave this afternoon.

"So... uh, Vim..."

I turned to look at Jennifer. Seeing her in the robes of the church was still a little odd, but it fit her somehow. "Hm?"

"Can I sew that up?" she asked with a point at my lower half.

About to ask if she was making some weird innuendo, I stopped as I realized what she meant. Yes, there was a breeze on my right leg. The pant leg had been torn apart this morning as I had helped load the wagons.

"You sure?" I asked. I had only brought a single extra pair of clothes, having expected the one I had originally worn to get ruined while fighting the monarch, so this was the only pair I had left. But I had planned to fix them up myself later.

"Yeah? Go on then, take them off for me."

"Hm..." I hesitated for a second, but with a small tug on my shirt I realized it was long enough that I'd not look... too stupid walking around without pants.

So I went ahead and took them off. She giggled at me as she took them from me, and nodded. "I'll have it done all quick like," she promised.

"Thanks..." I said, not really liking the way she was smirking at me. Jennifer then headed for the nearby building, not the church but the one she and the other women stayed in. As she did I noticed she had a happy step in her walk, as if glad to have something to do. Maybe she did.

I had never really known her well, but I did remember her liking gossip. But not just gossip, she had also liked to work. It was why she had always pretended to be a maid in human castles and stuff. For nobles and royalty. Maybe she's been bored lately. Stuck here with not much to do, just waiting around for people to show up.

I sighed at her, and myself, as I glanced back to the distant wagons. No one was waving our way anymore. I was glad they were finally on the road, since they had taken the saints with them. I had been on edge the whole time thanks to them, just waiting for them to basically cause the other shoe to drop on my head after killing Havoc.

They hadn't though. In fact they, and all the rest, had been too busy unloading the ship and readying to travel to do much else. Even little Fressi had only bugged me a little bit, having to help her mother out a lot as they prepared to leave.

And why would they bother me? In their eyes everything had gone perfect.

No one had died.

All five hundred and seventy-five people had survived. They had a few deaths on the trip here, a few people getting sick or just... being elderly, and they had one person fall overboard not long after they had set sail and hadn't been able to find them afterward. But no one had died from the prophesied monarch attack. The ship had not sunk.

It was now sailing north, to dock at Nevi. Where a few other members were waiting for it. Odds are they'd place it in the service of the twins or something, into the merchant fleet the Society ran here on the west coast.

"What're you doing, Vim?"

Turning around, I found the old fox, Kapni. He was giving me an odd look as he gestured to his own legs, or rather his pants.

"I tore them; Jennifer's fixing them for me."

He frowned and nodded. "I see. If you need a pair let me know, you're not as thin as me but you're my height and I like my pants baggy," he said.

"Thanks, I appreciate the offer."

He scoffed and waved my thanks away. "You saved our lives, again. I'd give you the clothes off my back if you just asked."

"No thanks, old foxes aren't my thing," I said.

Kapni chuckled as he nodded. "So I've heard...! A cat is it? I've no doubt she's lovely, knowing you Vim, but I must know... is she pretty?"

I nodded slowly. "I think she is, yes."

"Pretty enough to catch your eye, no doubt. Makes me wonder what she looks like. Hope I get to meet her soon."

"She should be heading north as we speak, to help settle some members in a new home. As much as it pains me to admit, as long as you stay involved in one of the major locations you'll see her sooner or later," I said.

"Hm... very active is she? Is she like you then? All strong and mysterious?" he asked.

I shifted a little as the ocean breeze reminded me I wasn't wearing pants. "She is strong... but rather than mysterious I'd say she's just a very good person. She likes to help people, to the point it's all she wants to do half the time. You remember what Berri was like?" I asked.

"Berri...? Why I've not heard that name in years... yes. If that's what she's like, then I get it completely, yes," Kapni said with a knowing frown.

There was no point in telling him she still lived, at least until he asked. "How have you been Kapni?" I asked.

"Well, Vim. My wife died not long after we settled over there, about eighty odd years after we landed. We had four children before she passed... though sadly now they're all dead and gone too. I'm left alone, and now back in the land I once abandoned with my tail between my legs. So I'm healthy, and mentally sound, but... a little lost, if you'd permit me to admit it," he said.

Although he spoke of something that broke one's heart, he did so with a steady voice. It seemed even old age hadn't made this man unsteady. "I see. I'm sorry to hear of your losses, Kapni... maybe one day you can tell me about those I never got to meet," I said gently.

He nodded a little softly and smiled. "I'd like that. Maybe one day. For now though, I think I plan to go visit my family. Either they'll welcome me with open arms, or will bite my throat in anger over my leaving. Honestly I'd be okay with both," he said with a small chuckle.

Oh.

Shoot.

"Um... Kapni..."

His chuckling ceased as he glanced at me... and then his smile died as he understood and knew what I was about to say, long before I found the courage to say it.

"A few years ago your village had been destroyed, Kapni. Burnt down by a rogue church group," I said.

Kapni blinked a single time. A heavy blink... and then he slowly looked down and nodded. "I suppose... that is my life's fate, isn't it?" he whispered as he absorbed the information.

I swallowed a heavy throat as I stepped forward and reached out. I grabbed the thin man by his shoulder and gave it a tiny squeeze. "There had been a survivor, though. A young girl named Lomi. I took her to a family not far from your village, who accepted her. Porka. You might not know her, but you may remember her grandmother, Horska."

He blinked again, this time quickly. "I do remember Horska... she had been the prettiest girl in the village," he said.

"Makes sense, considering Porka," I said.

Kapni smiled at that. "Well... amongst the bad, is the good is it? I suppose I shall take it and latch onto it. Where are they...?"

"A small town called Twin Hills. It'd be quicker to get there heading up to Nevi and heading eastward from there. Should have gone with the ship. I can draw you a map if you'll make a promise in exchange for it," I said.

Stolen novel; please report.

"Hm...? Anything. I love our Society Vim, but I've been without my own kind for almost half a century and I'm about to rip my own heart out if I have to go the rest of it without hint or smell of my own," he said, rather seriously.

I nodded, believing him. He was from the generation that was like that. Like this. They weren't really outright racist, proof being in the fact he had lived so long without his own kind, but he found comfort in his own community. Even if he wasn't related to Porka and her family, or Lomi, he would still be happier just being near them than doing anything else. He'd likely just build a small house nearby, just to be near them, and that'd be enough for him.

"You still good with a bow?" I asked.

"I should be? I'm old Vim, but not in that way, you know that."

"Then while you're there, hunt for me a few things will you? You see my wife plans to build a home, one I believe to be temporary, but still a place to stay for a few years nonetheless. And I'm busy. I'd appreciate it if I could rely on you for leather and furs, if even for just a few basic things for the house," I said.

"You're so busy you can't provide your wife with furniture?" he asked, sounding offended for Renn.

"Who's to blame, Kapni? You just brought another six hundred members back, all who have a mile long list of things they need and want, and you're ship two of... what?" I asked.

"Six..." he said with a sigh.

"Exactly. If you're out of shape or too busy, it is fine, don't worry about it. I can just buy the stuff from some humans I guess and..."

"You'll do no such thing! Pfa!" he spat at me as he slapped my forearm, sending my hand off his shoulder. "What would they know? Not the first thing about craftsmanship, for sure! Don't think of it again, I'll get you enough furs to rug a whole castle by next winter!" Kapni declared, sounding angry as he did.

I frowned and nodded. "You sure...?"

"Do I look that infirm to you, Vim? Broken? I'm offended! Half tempted to catch a big one here and now just to prove you wrong!"

"No need for that, I'm leaving shortly and so will you to head up north, no?"

Kapni calmed down a little as he nodded. "Yes... I suppose I should. A map you mentioned?"

"I'll make it shortly for you," I promised.

"Hmph... I'll go pack then," he said as he promptly turned away. As he walked away, with a bit of speed, he mumbled angrily. "Thinks I'm about to croak over, does he...? Still got more life in me than most young pups and..."

I chuckled at the man who hadn't changed at all from how I remembered him.

Good. Now he'd not only for sure settle down up north at Twin Hills, he'll have a focused goal for a few years as he fulfilled my request. By then maybe he'll find something else worth keeping himself alive.

Odds are he hadn't even noticed, but I had. Immediately. He had basically asked me for permission to go die.

To go see his relatives one last time and then end his life. Since he no longer had a reason to live. It was why he had not been too bothered over hearing of his people being gone, en mass. Because he had already given up, and had seen it as validation to do so.

Still... his reaction, and his request, made me wonder how many others were going to be just like him.

They were going to go search for their fellows. The ones they had left behind.

And they'd not find them.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I tried not to feel like an utter failure as I wondered how many of these thousands of new or returning members were to have such fates.

How many were going to be like Kapni? Returning hoping to find purpose. In any and all shapes and forms. And finding none of it.

Probably more than anyone wanted to admit.

"I've not changed at all... have I...?" I whispered as I thought of Havoc's final moments.

How many times have I allowed my rage to justify brutality? Clutching to the wrongs committed to me and mine thousands of years ago to justify outright murder? How many times have I tossed aside responsibilities, both agreed and written in blood but also moralistic oaths... just to hunt a god or monarch?

I had thought I had matured. Grown wiser. Had made enough mistakes to not so readily rush headfirst into another.

But I haven't. If anything I've likely gotten worse. By trying to so firmly abide my own rules, rules I've made to counteract my hubris and wrath, I've simply enabled the same failures just via different logic.

Just like my slaughter of Havoc.

I had not found his offer worth taking. His threat, though very real, not worth heeding.

And thus have placed Renn and everyone in the Society at risk. Over my own hubris. My vengeance.

I have possibly just condemned Renn and the rest to death. Just so I could kill another god.

The Society was right. Though none of them had any clue as to how right they were.

They felt I had been neglecting them. Not doing well enough as protector.

They weren't wrong. But they didn't have the real reason. Didn't know it. And how could they...?

Even now I was letting a large group; hundreds strong... mostly women and children, with saints even thrown in, traverse these human lands alone. With many of those members being like Tressi and her daughter, with traits that simply could not be hidden.

I should be escorting them. If anything happened to them, it would be on me.

But none of it would matter once the gods came to exact their vengeance.

They could not kill me. But they could kill those I cared for. Those I loved.

"Why haven't they all this time...?" I wondered as I thought of it.

Havoc had said they had been monitoring me for a long time. Having been able to do so thanks to my routine lifestyle, as I traveled around to help and handle any issues in the Society... so then, even before Renn being taken into account... why had they not been pestering the Society?

Even if many of them were in hiding, fearing my wrath... there had to at least be a few of them that had enough vehemence and hate in their hearts to want to hurt me in any way they can. And how better to do it than slaughter and torture the weaker souls I had vowed to protect...?

Especially since so many gods had looked down on the monarch-spawns. The non-humans.

I was having trouble settling the questions in my mind. Havoc's actions had been... not just startling, but unbelievable.

He should have known better. He should not have been so shocked for me to have grabbed him as I had.

Even as I had torn him limb from limb in the sea, he had shouted and screamed not just in pain... but utter shock.

As if there had been no way, in his mind at least, that I would have done such a thing. As if my actions had been unforeseeable.

Me...? Not kill a god...? Not grab one right in front of me, within reach...?

Of all the things in the world to believe in without any doubt, my hate for them should be at the top of the list. And yet he had been so sure...

"As if he had known an alternative truth..." I whispered... and felt a cold chill climb up my back.

There was no denying Havoc had expected me to agree to his bargain. To go so far as to un-summon a monarch of that caliber...? A true firstborn? That monarch alone could have saved his life. It would not have killed me, but it would have kept me from killing him. It had floated to the surface, near enough to be visible, after I had finished tearing Havoc apart. It had been a giant squid. And by giant, I mean bigger than the ship six hundred people had just sailed here on.

A monarch of that size, and likely fully empowered as a firstborn, would have been more than enough to distract me. Especially so since it had been in the middle of the ocean. Once that tiny little rowboat had

collapsed I'd have been hard pressed to get Havoc while he flied in the sky even without the monarch, let alone with it there.

Yet he had not hesitated to kill it. Thinking our deal met and agreed upon. Hands shaken, contracts signed... checks cashed...

Had he been so confident in my love for Rennalee...? Or had there been something else to give him such hope? Such surety...?

They had not placed any faith in saints and their prophecies. Saints were just a source of mana for them. Just as monarchs had originally been, or at least intended to be. There had been plenty of experiments on saints, such as at the Summit, but as far as I was aware they had cared little for a saint's ability to foresee the future. They had their own spells and methods for such things, and even their abilities had not been reliable enough to trust. Many had died by my hand believing in the prophecies they had foreseen and trusted, and as such had been why so many had forgone heeding them. It was why I had been able to utilize saints back during the wars against them, since they themselves had abandoned them. A saint could not foresee me directly. They could see me when seeing things around me, but not me myself. I was shielded from such things.

But maybe, just like finding a method to open their gate back home, they had found an alternative method for seeing the future...? And in that new method of foreseeing the future, they had seen my actions? If so then, wouldn't it have gone the way they had foreseen it...?

Either way... there were too many inconsistencies. Too many new worries.

There was a group of gods still alive. Not one or two or even a handful, but dozens. They were split and divided, if not even at odds with one another and at war. That is, if Havoc's words were to be believed.

And they had found a way home. A method that supposedly at least one part of said group, possibly seven gods, were not okay with utilizing and thus were sabotaging its implementation.

They'd been monitoring me for years, likely to help them stay hidden from me, and were in a location that helped hide them... They were not hiding thanks to their own abilities, but by an anomaly...

There were plenty of anomalies in the world. I wonder which he spoke of...?

"Vim!"

I blinked and turned, tensing up in expectance of something terrible... and found Jennifer. She had a weird smirk on her face as she sighed at me and held out my pants. "Stop standing there all weird-like. You're scaring the normal people," she said.

She was done already...? Granted it was a seamless rip, but it had been nearly the whole leg... I grabbed the pants from her and gently nodded. "Thank you, Jennifer," I said as I went to put them on.

"Sure, sure... tell me why don't you smell at all? And why've you just been standing here all weird for the last hour?"

Last hour...? Have I really been that lost in thought this whole time? "Did you smell my pants? That's weirder than me standing here lost in thought," I said as I put them on.

She made a sound, and then scoffed loudly at me. "Don't say that, Vim! You're supposed to be a gentleman and not bring such a thing up like that!"

I smirked as I fastened my newly mended pants. They fit perfectly, and I didn't even see the line of thread that had fixed the tear. I probably shouldn't be too surprised over her skill of the thread, considering she had been a maid for so long. Odds are she's had plenty of experience with such things. "Thank you, Jennifer. Now I'll not have to kill a bunch of town guards as I travel south," I said.

She laughed at that. "Please, I know you Vim. You'd just talk your way out of it."

Yes. I would have. "Did you forget I have no smell, by the way?" I asked.

"Huh...? Hm..." Jennifer then pondered for a moment, to the point she actually crossed her arms. "Actually you know what...? Maybe I had. Was kind of hoping to better remember that night we shared by smelling your scent, yet I suppose in attempting to do so I just proved I barely remember it at all huh?" she said, speaking calmly as if to herself more than me.

My eye twitched over her having brought up that night. "I'd make fun of you, but my wife would have done something similar," I said. Both because it was true, and to gently remind this gossiping woman that I was now married, and happily so at that.

She smirked up at me, grinning ear to ear. "That just means she's my type of gal! I look forward to meeting her one day! Though probably not anytime soon, since I have to stick around here until the rest show up..." she said with a sigh.

"Five years?" I asked.

She nodded. "Or more. Though maybe not...? They hadn't been supposed to show up this earlier, maybe the rest will come quick too?"

I shrugged at that. "No idea."

"Ah well... What's a few years of boredom, eh?" Jennifer said with a sigh as she turned away.

"You'll have plenty of gossip soon enough, Jennifer," I said as she walked away.

"I better!"

Chapter 569 Renn – Renn's Investigations

Kneeling down, I studied the rows of books on the shelf.

They weren't too dusty, implying someone had cleaned them recently, but you could still see that no one had read or removed them from the shelf in a long time. Years maybe, even.

This shelf was one of the few with the white books. I randomly chose one, sliding it free from where it'd been for a long time and went ahead and opened it.

Celine's writing was familiar, and easy to read. First I read the date on the top, and then the date on the opposing side of the page.

The date it was written told me it was one of the earliest prophecies I'd seen so far, and the date which she believed it to be fulfilled was a little over a hundred years ago. There was no mark upon it, no stamp of blue or red ink or wax, to tell me it had been fulfilled or avoided. But that might simply be because she had died before its fulfillment. It seemed only some of her books had been updated by anyone, though I wasn't entirely sure why.

"During a solar eclipse, in the region of Timit, a landslide will displace a family of humans. Amongst them is a non-human in hiding, one who will die after having been found out as the family travels to a new location."

I frowned at the prophecy, since like many I've read so far seemed... well...

"Not good enough," I whispered as I turned the page. I had no idea where this Timit region was, but if it was a region and not a town or something more specific... how would one know where this supposed landslide would occur? And also, if the family is displaced enough to have to travel as to find a new home... how would one know which direction they went? I doubted even Vim would be able to reliably save the non-human who had been in hiding with this information.

The next prophecy had the stamp of red. The stamp was about as wide as my thumb, and had Celine's symbol within it. It told me the prophecy written had either failed in being prevent or that no one had been able to solve or fix whatever issue it foretold. A failure.

Its date was a few months after the previous one, and the expected fulfilled date was a few years afterward.

It spoke of a member being shot with an arrow. Here in Telmik.

So they'd not been able to save them...? If it had simply not come to pass, if they had stopped it from happening or no arrow at all, they would have stamped it blue. Though the red stamp might also mean that the individual had died, just not in the way they she foretold.

Turning a few more pages, I skipped what seemed to be several years worth of prophecies and found one with a blue stamp. This one spoke of Vim.

"In the eastern plains, where marshland meets rivers, a village of ducks will be accosted by a group of fish. A monarch lives in a nearby lake, one that Vim will slay. Send him there earlier, else the whole area will be flooded and everything will die."

Vim had told me of this. As had Merit. This was where he had met her. He and Lilly had gone there to settle a dispute and had encountered the monarch as they had done so. It was... interesting to read about something so close to me, or rather about people close to me. Especially when one considered how long ago it had been written.

I ran a few fingers along the blue wax stamp, and noted it felt a tad odd. It had likely been stamped many decades after the prophecy itself had been written.

Turning a few more pages, I found the next red stamp, near the end of the book.

It was a short prophecy. Dated a few hundred years ago.

"Vim finds a monarch beneath a bridge in the northern plateau near Oxfell. If he fights it on sight, the group alongside him dies from the chaos," I read aloud.

My eyes narrowed at the red stamp, and my tail twitched wildly as I realized what it meant.

They had not been able to subvert said prophecy. The group had died.

Why...? Was it because of Vim's rules concerning prophecies? Did they die because he had not been willing to hear it? Was the group just simply destined to die? Had Celine and the rest tried to avoid it, and in doing so inadvertently caused it to happen anyway?

If not for the occasional blue stamp, and the fact that these prophecies sometimes ended positively... I'd almost argue that they weren't worth knowing at all. It seemed as if even the very accurate one's ended terribly more often than not. This one had a date, a better possible location than most others, and had obvious inclinations. Vim should have had a very good idea where it would happen, and upon seeing any and all bridges at a distance while with a group of our members should have then taken as many precautions as possible.

It was hard to imagine Vim not doing so. If anything he should have scoured the area beforehand, alone, searching each and every bridge until he found the monarch. Vim would have done something like that without hesitation, if one just told him about it before it had happened.

So... why had it failed?

I closed the book and put it back on the shelf. Instead of grabbing another, I stood and stepped to a shelf a few paces down. This one didn't have books, but scrolls.

Randomly choosing one, I stepped over to one of the nearby raised tables and placed the scroll upon it. Throughout this library were not just chairs and tables, but ones that were angled for scrolls. So one could easily lay them down and unroll them, and...

The scroll had a drawing. A rather detailed one. I paused a moment, in awe, as I stared at what could only be a monarch.

A giant monarch was looming over a forest. The thing looked like some kind of deer, but it had weird antlers and spikes on its sides and back not just on its head. It had its head raised up, as if howling into the night sky, and although looked beautiful... also looked strangely eerie. It was unsettling, almost, and made my tail feel itchy just looking at it. Whoever had drawn this had more skill than me. They had drawn it with what looked like charcoal or something like it, but had so masterfully done it that I felt as if I was staring at a painting with a myriad of colors.

There was nothing in the drawing to tell me where it was, when it was, or if it even was a prophecy... but I knew it was one.

It also had a blue stamp on the upper left edge, on the drawing but not.

Maybe Celine had drawn it...? Or maybe it had been a prophecy from another saint, one who had been artistic...? I examined the scroll, its sides and back, and couldn't find any hint of its maker or any more information of it.

"Hm," I hummed as I rolled it back up and went to grab another. Was the whole shelf drawings like this?

They were.

The next scroll was a drawing of a ship. Done in the same black charcoal, I studied a large ship with dozens of people upon it. It looked like they were getting ready to set sail, since a part of the drawing had a dock. One littered with boxes and barrels, and people ferrying them onto what looked like some kind of pulley system as to be loaded onto the ship with a crane.

I didn't recognize anyone in the scene, but a few did have non-human traits. One had wings, similar to Sap's, and another had a huge tail. A lizard one that was as thick and long as the bundle of sails or cloth he was carrying.

There was a blue stamp on this one too, though I wasn't... really sure why.

I saw no chaos. No danger. No death. Just...a ship being loaded with goods.

I wonder what it had been about. What had been the importance? Maybe they needed to make sure the ship was properly loaded and set sail? Or maybe it needed to be kept from doing so...?

"Should have at least written a little about it..." I grumbled a complaint as I rolled it back up. There was more than enough room on the scrolls that whoever had made them could have at least given a little information about the scenes upon them.

The next scroll had a drawing that startled me.

For a small moment I stared, wide-eyed, at a drawing of two naked people. On a bed.

I didn't recognize either of them, but they were drawn with such detail I would now always remember them. They both had non-human traits, patches of fur here and there with spots. And even more startling was the blue stamp upon it.

Rolling the scroll up, I sighed and smiled. "How silly," I said. I wonder why and how such a thing had happened...! Was that a prophecy where they needed to ensure those two consummated their relationship or something...? I wonder how the saint who had the prophecy felt witnessing it, and how it had felt explaining it to everyone else afterward.

Thanks to that scroll, I now decided to check each and every one on the shelf. My curiosity couldn't help it.

Each and every one on the shelf were drawings, all done seemingly by the same person. Pretty much all of them bar a few had a red or blue stamp, and most were like the first few. Scenes of... what I had assumed was just everyday life. A quaint village scene, in the middle of a market. A raging storm on a beach devoid of people. A castle, with a winged creature climbing up the side of it...

Regrettably, or thankfully, none of the other scrolls had been as risqué as the one earlier. And oddly as far as I was aware, none had been about Vim or anyone I knew. Many had very detailed drawings of people, obviously members of the Society, but not a one had been about anyone I recognized.

Eventually I ended up sliding back the last scroll back onto the shelf, and I sighed.

Turning around, I looked at the numerous shelves and chests in the room. There were likely thousands of books and scrolls, and this was just one room of many. Mapple had shown me not just the archive that I'd seen before, back when Vim and the rest had been tracking down that little monarch's nest, but she had brought me here too. This was the second room of five, with a main room connecting all of them.

Not all of the books and scrolls were prophecies, of course. In fact only a few shelves had Celine's white books, a handful out of hundreds. But there were, like the scrolls I'd just read, prophecies from other saints throughout the years.

There were also books considered special and important. Things written that held secrets. Some were journals of powerful or important people, while others were more about imparting knowledge than anything else. One of the first books I'd opened and looked at had been about building boats. How to properly make a ship that could sail even the roughest seas.

Personally I wanted to go through all of them. Each and every one. But I knew I didn't have such luxury.

Randle wanted to leave in a few days. Four to be exact. Even though the Chronicler and the rest had offered to let him take his time, he was adamant in following the rules. His banishment began in eight days, officially, and he wanted to be gone before then.

I couldn't blame him, of course. And I also wanted to hurry north too, to a point. Lilly was here, and she wasn't supposed to be. Just like at Lumen. And she was worried for her family, for many reasons. Lellip too wanted to hurry and meet Branches, and Merit... well...

"She's just already tired of traveling," I said with a smile as I crossed my arms behind my back, grabbing my own hands as I started to walk randomly amongst the shelves.

Which to read next? Should I focus on Celine's white books...? Or should I focus on the ones that are randomly in glass cases? I'd not really checked on any of those yet. Every so often, between shelves, there were books tucked away neatly behind glass. As if on display, or something. But this place was supposed to be private. Mapple had said most members didn't even know this place existed. So just who were they on display for?

There were also too many. I bet even if I focused on them in full, spending whole days without rest reading them, it'd take me months if not years to go through them all. There was simply that many.

But... I didn't really need to read them all, did I...?

Pausing before one of the shelves with a glass compartment, I studied the three books within it. They were all big, bigger than most others, and looked old. One was even opened to a random page in the middle, and it looked like it was crumbling away even now.

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I couldn't read the open book. It was in a language I didn't know, which made me assume the others were similar. It wasn't a surprise at all to see such a thing, but it was annoying.

Where was Vim when I needed him?

Though maybe I didn't need Vim. Mapple who had brought me here had lingered for a moment, talking with me. She had seemed capable of reading many language, since she had read me the names and words on the covers of some of the books I'd not recognized.

But would she be willing to sit here and read to me...? She seemed busy, all things considered. She had wanted to talk more, but had to go handle something for the Chronicler and had seemed sad over it. I half expected her to show back up, as to continue our conversation and...

Pausing in front of a section between two random shelves, I frowned at a painting hanging on the wall.

Was that... Celine?

The woman had glowing eyes, obviously a saint. She was standing at a large table, her hands on the table as she leaned forward and read something important. There was a large window behind her, which illuminated her in a fanciful way and... Yes. She beautiful black hair, which only made her glowing eyes all the more prominent and...

"You were beautiful," I whispered at the woman I'd never met, yet felt as if was a long lost friend.

She was slim. Maybe my height. The way her face was furrowed in deep thought as she focused on whatever was on the table before her made her seem all the more adorable. Whoever had painted her had obviously done so as if to try and make her seem... well... mighty? Like a troubled queen, with glorified purpose, what with the way the sunlight adorned her. But instead all I saw was a beautiful woman who looked like she needed a snack. Not because she was scrawny, but because I knew a good snack helped one think during such times.

It was... kind of interesting to realize there were likely more paintings and drawings of her around here. I decided to walk around later and find them all, but for now I just... stared at the one before me.

Vim had once said he had found her adorable. Enough so that he might have entertained her had she not been a saint. I could see why.

Yet for as pretty as she was... she and I were definitely different. Enough so to tell me Vim hadn't, or didn't, find me attractive for the same reasons as he had her.

She looked so prim and proper. The church robe she wore was spotless. Made her seem pure, somehow. And her flawless black hair rolled down her back and sides like water in a stream. Of course her perfection might just be the artist's rendition of her, and not how she had actually been, but...

I frowned as I thought of my own image. I had once again studied myself in front of the mirror, in the mansion, though I had not needed to. I've looked in that thing enough times to know full well what I looked like now, down to every freckle.

There was a reason people called me gentle. And it wasn't just because I was. It was because I didn't look like I would be.

My hair, even when kept and combed, was slightly unruly. My teeth were sharp and my eyes sharper. My ears, and the small tuft of fur between them, gave me a slightly rough look. My tail twitched in a way that made me seem as if I was going to pounce at any moment, and then of course I grinned and smirked more than not.

To many I looked as much like the full-blooded predator I was. A possible threat, even. And thus why my gentle nature was so noticeable. It was unexpected, and so thusly noticed when it appeared.

Celine though...? She looked like a gentle mother. Someone who wouldn't hurt a fly. Someone who would cry and weep for the smallest of creatures.

Basically she looked like she gave wonderful hugs. The kind that made you feel all warm inside, and sigh in relief upon being given one.

Whereas I looked like I'd take a nibble out of you as we hugged instead.

I wouldn't of course, not without good reason, but I knew better than to not know what I looked like. It was part of the reason so many had felt on guard around me, or did, especially back when I still had my scent. My scent, mixed with my appearance, had put people on edge.

Such a thing was silly, since once you took my traits out of the picture I looked like a typical young woman, one who looked small and scrawny enough to not be a threat in any way. But non-humans didn't see it that way. They only saw my predator traits, nothing else.

I had to earn a person's trust; this woman in this painting had it from the moment she was born.

"Rennalee."

My ears fluttered as I turned my head and frowned. "Merit...?" I asked, shocked to hear her voice here. Had I misheard...? The voice had come from the room a few away, the entrance to the archive.

Half a moment later she appeared. The white-haired fish glanced around the room as she entered, as if to make sure we were alone. "Lost in the past are you?" she asked as she walked in.

I smirked at her. "Feels like it! What're you doing here?" I asked. She had said earlier this morning she had decided to not come to the Cathedral, since Oplar wasn't here. She was still traveling around.

"Hm..." Merit hummed as she walked over to me, studying the shelves of books as she did.

Resisting the urge to give her a hug, since for some reason I felt like doing so, I waited until she stepped up next to me and looked up at what I'd been focused on. Celine's painting.

I smiled at her and gestured at it. "Is that Celine?" I asked to confirm it.

"Yes."

"Is that actually what she had looked like?"

"Yeah...? That's probably one of the better paintings of her."

Huh... "She was pretty."

"If you say so," Merit said with a huff.

Right... Merit had not liked Celine. Like her resignations with Light, Merit faulted them for having not properly helped her save her kingdom from collapsing.

"Honestly I had expected her to be different. Not sure why though," I said as I looked back to the painting. Wonder what she had smelled like? They said she was a panda, but I had no idea what that even was.

"Same could be said of you, Renn. So...? What are you doing here? Vim would throw a fit if he knew you were in here," Merit asked.

I smirked at what she'd said, both of her statements, and nodded. "I'm looking for proof."

"Proof...? Of what?"

"That I was supposed to be here a long time ago," I said.

Although I had not been looking at Merit, I heard and felt her flinch. I turned to look at her, and found her looking down with... a rather sad look.

"Merit...?" I asked. Why did she look as if I'd just said something sad?

"And why does that matter, Renn?" Merit asked gently as she looked up at me.

"Well... I suppose in a way it doesn't. Not like I can change it, or anything. But..."

"But?"

I shrugged softly as I stared into my friend's eyes. They were heavy, looking pained even, as if my words were hurting her for some reason. "I fear I've been manipulated. Or am being so, in a way. I... want to make sure I don't let such a thing happen, if so," I said.

"In what way, Renn...? I know we've spoken of such things, such as your banishment from Lumen being likely from a prophecy, but..."

"I don't mean anything too drastic...! I'd not claim my relationships, or even my actions, are because of such manipulation... But I fear if I'm not careful they could be," I said.

Merit was quiet for a moment as my tail squirmed. Did she think I was being foolish? I mean, I probably was. It's not like I'd really allow any mistakes or actions I made in the future to be blamed on so-called prophecies or anything. I'd own any action I took. But... I worried still, all the same.

Take for instance Vim's rules. Vim refused to be involved in prophecies. He had rules that in a certain perspective caused more harm than good and everyone in the Society, by extension fearing his reaction to such things, enforced those dangerous rules.

I had chosen to take up the mantle of his middle-man, his interpreter in a way, to try and lessen the brunt of that. To hear the prophecies in place of Vim, as to try and stop disasters from coming because of his strange rules. Because I believed it would be beneficial, and save lives if I did so. But... what if by doing so I just made things worse? What if Vim was the one who was correct? Lately, with learning that people had done things concerning me with prophecies in mind... I've begun to wonder if maybe I should be more like Vim than not, even though deep down I didn't want to be.

I didn't want people to suffer and die just because I didn't want to interfere in fate. Vim's method made sense, on an emotional scale, but how often has it failed? Even Vim admitted people have died because of his rules. But to him it was a price he was willing to pay.

My goal here, outside of just learning as much as I could of the prophecies concerning and around me, was to see if I could find an answer to how I'm handling Vim. Through my conversations with Light, and overhearing whispers here and there, I've learned that many of them expect me to... well... control Vim. To make him do things he either hasn't been doing, or hasn't been willing to do. And they weren't just expecting me to do such things because I was his wife, changing him the way a lover would, but instead in greater ways. In ways that made me feel uncomfortable.

"Light foresees me changing Vim's way of life," I said softly as I glanced at Celine's picture. She had foreseen it too. In her letter to me, the one I'd burnt upon Vim's request, she had mentioned that I'd change him for the better. Or at least, she hoped I did. That I'd lead him where others had not.

As much as I wanted to be that person, and as much as I wanted to believe it was the right thing to do... I also feared the fact I was just doing something expected of me. That I was nothing more than one of those little wooden pawns on a game board, being moved around and manipulated by someone or something else.

"More than you already have, you mean," she said.

I nodded. "I've been wondering if my attempts to... circumvent his rules might be more trouble than it's worth. And also if my doing so is not of my own design but another's," I said.

"Vim has his reasons for living his way, Renn..." Merit then said.

"I know... but what if people have died over," I started to argue, and Merit scoffed at me.

"Over him not listening to the ramblings of idiots? Maybe, Renn, but that argument falls apart when you consider how many have gotten hurt or died by listening to them, too. It's not a one way street."

"I agree, Merit... but what of the times Vim's been neglected?" I asked, finishing what I'd been about to say before she had interrupted me.

"Neglected...?" she asked with a shift of the heel.

I nodded. "Everyone knows his rules. And as such they try so hard to abide by them, in risk of angering him. What if those feelings, those emotions, have caused harm? What if certain prophecies have not been told to him, even though by his own rules he'd allow it? All because those who know them feared angering him?" I asked.

"You're arguing that people haven't been forthcoming with him, thanks to not understanding how far he's willing to bend his rules," she said slowly.

I nodded. "Yes. I myself have seen him listen to prophecies, full blown ones, because he thought the need dire. Yet then I see moments, like Light not telling him the details of the ship, where she acts as if it's impossible to tell him the full details! I find it concerning. I think Vim would have found six hundred lives more than enough justification to hear the full story," I said.

"And I think you're blinded by love, Renn."

"How so...?" I asked, a little bothered she seemed so readily to disagree.

Merit sighed at me. "He's changed since you've arrived, Renn. His actions today, the ones you see and witness, are not the same ones we've all been experiencing all this time. Vim today is a different man compared to the Vim of yesterday. We tease and joke about it, but it's not a joke at all. It's the truth," she argued.

My tail squirmed so much it bumped into a nearby shelf. "You're saying his willingness to bend his rules is my fault...? That I've made such a thing possible?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. And in fact, I expect it to get worse. Or better...? Depending on how you want to look at it."

I didn't want to agree with her, but at the same time I knew I had to.

I'd not deny the fact that Vim's changed because of me. But...

"Then is that not an argument that I should become more involved in such things? That if I've changed him, and will continue doing so, then should I not further push it? That I should hear all prophecies, and thus become more involved in them, to better keep Vim's focus?" I asked.

Merit didn't answer right away as her brows met together and she nodded. "I can see why you'd think so... And I can see why you'd then question it all. But is this not the life you've chosen, Renn? By choosing Vim, you've chosen this position. He's the protector. A man akin to a god, or monarch is a better term... maybe. His great powers, and knowledge, will always make him both a target and one expected to cater to those beneath him. By becoming his wife you've latched yourself to that existence, prophecies or no. So why are you here? Really?"

I took in a breath and sighed it out as I shrugged gently at my friend. "I want to do what's right, Merit. But I worry instead what I'm doing is something decided by someone else. Someone I've never even met or known. Celine had left me a letter. One that told me to guide Vim, to lead him and help him accomplish what the gods sent him forth to do. I fear those words, that message, has been instilled in many others and as such is manipulating how I'm being treated... and how Vim is too," I said.

Merit gulped as she shifted. "Can't outright say you're wrong there..." she mumbled.

I nodded, since she'd already said similar things herself before. Especially concerning Light and her schemes. "Thus me being here, instead of spending time with people I'll likely not see again for years. I want to find the rest of Celine's prophecies concerning me, to see if my worries have weight behind them or if I'm just being paranoid," I said.

"And if by seeing those prophecies you cause something worse to happen, Renn...? What if you learn something that changes everything?" she asked carefully.

"It's a risk... yes. But right now it's like I'm blind. Light herself has told me that she's foreseen many things concerning me and my future, and she's hinted at them being more than just simple things like a child being born. I want to make sure I'm not blindly following their plans, and in doing so causing harm to not just myself but Vim and all of you, too," I said.

Plus I didn't think I'd really change my lifestyle, or my beliefs, even if I did know something I wasn't supposed to.

Take my learning of my daughter, for instance. Knowing of her possible future existence has not changed my plans at all, and in fact... I think it only furthered them. Even Vim had taken that knowledge well, since in doing so he had thought of a possible name for her and whatnot.

Knowing the future was dangerous, and I understood Vim's and Merit's reasons for wanting to avoid such knowledge... but that knowledge wasn't cursed. Not outright, at least.

Merit stared up at me with narrowed eyes, and I gently nodded down at her. "I'm not really doing this to find out what will happen in the future, but instead to make sure I'm not doing exactly what they want. I want to do what is right, not what is expected of me," I told her.

Merit sighed at me. "I'd advise against this... but I hear your conviction. Fine. May as well get in trouble together then," Merit said as she nodded and stepped away.

"Huh...?" What'd she mean?

"Come on. I'll show you where they are. Just don't blame me when Vim throws a fit once he hears about this."

I smiled happily as I hurried to join her. "We'll just beg for forgiveness together!"

"Good luck with that."

Chapter 570 Vim – A Chance Encounter With Another Celine

"Who's she?" I asked Oplar as I put my bag down next to the small table. The room was small, but large for an inn in this region. Oplar having paid for an inn was surprising enough; she typically slept on the road in the wilderness when she needed to, but finding a young girl in it that I didn't recognize was even more alarming.

She was sleeping in the bed, and didn't seem to be in any hurry to wake even as Oplar shut the door, a tad loudly, then went to grab something out of a large bag resting in the corner.

"I found her for sale down south. The craziest part is not only had the one's selling her not known what she was, she didn't either," Oplar said as she handed me the letters she procured from the bag as she went to sit down at the table.

Didn't know either...? I slowly made sense of Oplar's meaning as I studied the sleeping girl. She was dead asleep, even as Oplar and I spoke a few feet from her. The room had only one bed, which told me Oplar had likely gotten the room for her. She looked relatively healthy and fine, though I could only see the upper half of her head and face. She didn't have any obvious trait, but she did have...

Was she a salt-water creature...? She smelled like the sea. Too deeply to just have been from the sea, as in born upon it and having grown and lived upon it. This smell was of a creature from the sea, not one who subsided on it. It was just a tad too strong.

She was some kind of deep-water fish. Maybe even... a shark? I'd need to see her teeth to be sure, but it seemed so.

"She didn't know she was one of us," I said as I understood. If she didn't have any very obvious traits, nothing too visible, then it made sense. She'd just look like any girl anywhere.

"Weird huh? But if you don't know your parents, and no one notices or tells you, and you don't ever see yourself in a mirror or anything... it can happen, I guess," Oplar said.

Mirror, huh? Must mean she did have a trait or two. Likely her teeth, then. Maybe. I slowly sat down in the chair across from Oplar, and was a little sad that Renn wasn't here. She'd have been perfect to entrust this girl to. "What's her name?" I asked as I glanced at the letters Oplar had just handed to me. There were four.

"You won't believe it."

Looking up from the letters, I frowned at the bear who had a huge grin on her face. "Renn?" I asked.

Oplar blinked and her smile disappeared. "Darn. That'd have been funnier, huh? No. It's Celine."

Oh. "She's not a saint," I said as I glanced at the girl. I didn't need to actually look at her to confirm it, but I did just in case I had somehow missed it.

"Nope, just a full-blooded predator. Something so rare the whole of the Society became gossip ridden for over a year thanks to Renn. Though maybe it won't be as neat anymore, what with those idiots coming back finally? I've heard there's a few amongst them like Renn and this shark."

Shark. So I'd been right.

I nodded as I went to open one of the letters. I chose Landi's first, since it was the thinnest. "There are. A wolf, for one, is now in Lumen. She's going to be a problem, but likely for my wife more than anyone else," I said.

Oplar groaned. "I've been missing out on so much...!"

She had been, but that was her job. Or rather, this was her job.

I'd lucked into her as I finished up Martin's request. Oplar was finishing her route, and then was going to head back north to Telmik, and we had just so happened to bump into one another. It's been many

years since this had happened, but it was not so rare that I found it odd anymore. After all we both basically traversed the same routes, half the time going opposite directions as we did. Running into each other like this was more of an inevitability than not.

"Odds are by the time you get back to Telmik, Renn will already be on the road again," I said. If not I'd have given her a letter for Renn, but I highly doubted it'd happen. Renn might even already be on the road north as we spoke.

"Then I'll just need to head that way after. I've been wondering though, with so many people showing up... I might need to employ some more help, won't I? Over five hundred came back with Light and now another six? I'm not sure if I should weep in joy or stress over the new workload," she said with a chuckle.

"I'm doing both myself," I said as I unfurled Landi's letter. It was written in the language of the south, so it took me half a second to remember what the first few words meant and...

My eye twitched as I realized this letter had been for Renn, not me.

Had Oplar done this on purpose? Probably not. Landi might have just said my name when handing it to Oplar, thinking Renn would open it for me since we were usually together. Still I read it in full, just in case, and almost regretted doing so.

"Landi's leaving the south," I said as I folded up her letter. I'd keep it and deliver it to Renn.

"She'd said she plans to, next year, yes. I uh... asked about what she plans to do with the kingdom and all, she didn't really seem to care to answer."

"Because she doesn't care. The kingdom only existed for one purpose and that purpose was fulfilled," I said. Or well, partly. She wasn't pregnant yet, made obvious by her intentions to join us all up north as to manhunt the new men that were now available. The ones who had returned from beyond the sea.

I'll need to put Renn in charge of that. Not only did I not want to get involved at all, I didn't want to deal with the aftermath either. And I'd inadvertently have to with Renn dealing with it all... But other than Renn I had no one else to ask for help concerning such a thing. Landi was banished from more places than Lilly was for crying out loud.

So... Before next summer. I had half a year basically before Landi showed up to cause chaos. Could I secure Renn and her new home by then...? Probably.

"That'll send the south into chaos, Vim," Oplar said.

"Yes, but it is her choice. Her kingdom. Unless someone wants to take it over," I said. The matters of the nation had nothing to do with the Society. Nothing beyond the typical concerning Landi, at least. Though I did hope she was going to at least attempt to leave it in proper hands, amongst other things.

"You're so callous sometimes," Oplar said lightly as she went to pour herself a drink.

"I have to be," I said simply as I went to open the next letter.

Oplar hummed at me as she took a deep drink and I read a letter from Mordo the head of the camel family. It too was a shorter letter, just expressing his and his family's support for my cause concerning the vote, but there was another couple pages. Another letter from his granddaughter, addressed to me and Renn. She was asking for permission to travel with us next time we came by, as to find a mate.

Renn would like that.

"Speaking of heading north... can I ask a favor, Vim?" Oplar then asked.

I lowered the letters from the camels and nodded with a frown. Why was she asking like that? She sounded almost hesitant.

Oplar gestured to the sleeping girl with a shrug. "She's not going to be accepted in Telmik. She's a pagan," she said.

"Most are. She's young enough they'll convert her," I said.

"Again, you're being callous. Renn's going to make that orphanage with the rest of them, right? Can I send her up there? I need to head north once I'm back anyway; I can drop her off on the way."

Oh. Right. I nodded slowly. "My first instinct is to say yes, of course... but remember, although Renn is going to be involved it is not permanent. She'll likely be there for a few years, but odds are it won't be much longer than that. So she'll have to be under Randle's purview and the rest," I said. I wasn't in the mood to go into much more detail on who was going to show up there or not, since I really didn't know yet. People might be thinking of moving north, but that didn't mean they were actually going to.

"Randle at least won't ostracize her just for her faith. So that's fine. I just don't know where else to take her," Oplar said.

I was about to ask why she'd not considered Lumen, but realized it was likely because of Light and her people. Oplar was probably now, in a way justifiably, seeing Lumen just as she did Telmik. She wasn't wrong to think so, honestly. Even if it'd take years, maybe even decades, for it to get that bad... it was an inevitability. Such a thing was part of the reason Merit had left.

Sighing softly I nodded. "Depending on what I've left to do, you may or may not beat me there. I'd offer to take her myself, but I have a stop that won't allow it," I said as I folded the camel's letters up and went to open the third.

"Right. It's fine; she's actually a quiet girl. Not an issue at all... So... Vim."

"Hm?" I slowly opened the letter from Corvo, who I'd not seen in a few years. My last few trips south had not led me through his route.

"Any gossip, Vim? You have no idea how terribly distraught I've been to hear only faint rumors so far. How'd it go with Light? Who came back? Who's Renn traveling with? Is she pregnant yet? What about..."

I smiled gently at the bear and shook my head at her, interrupting her torrent of questions. "Most of those I've met are new faces. People I've not met before, like Martin's son. But there are a few familiar people, such as Less, Jennifer, Kapni and Tressi..." I then nodded. "And concerning Light, for now we're... copacetic I suppose. A little too much, if I'm being honest. She and Renn became fast friends," I said.

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Oplar giggled at that. "I figured that'd happen!"

"Renn's heading up north to help Randle and Angie, as you just mentioned... I dealt with a prophecy, Light's, and plan to head back north once I handle one more thing down here. Light and all her people are busy building their new cathedral in Lumen, so although are being annoying aren't really causing any issues just yet," I said as I tried to give her a summarized version of recent events.

"Gah, you're omitting all the stuff I want to hear...! What about this wolf you spoke of? Have you and Renn done it yet? What about the baby she's supposed to be having? What's Brandy think of Light taking over? And..."

I shook my head and sighed at her. "One thing at a time, Oplar," I said as I went to read Corvo's letter.

It too was a short one, but it was asking me to visit him. He had a request, though he didn't say what it was.

Should I just deal with this now then? I wasn't too far from him. But he did say in the letter it wasn't pressing... which meant it was something that could go years without being addressed, since such letters sometimes took that long to reach me.

"Fine, first the wolf. What's she like?"

"Tundra is a young girl, like that one," I started with gesturing at the shark with the letter. "She reminds me of Lilly's youth... or well... actually she's a bit better. She has that predator personality, but Light has instilled in her the idea of penance. Whenever she does something wrong, and people point it out, she panics and weeps and runs off to earn forgiveness. She starves herself and stuff to apologize. Rash and extreme, but it seems to be working. She tried to move into the Animalia Guild but they voted not to allow her, she had scared some of them somehow. So now she wants to live with Renn, but Light won't let her leave until a prophecy concerning her is fulfilled," I gave her all I knew as I folded Corvo's letter, then went to open the last one. This one was likely the most important, it came from the Crypt.

Abel's letter felt a tad too thick to be normal. It worried me as I opened it.

"Hm... It's been a long time since we've had someone like that. Is she cute at least?"

"Renn thinks she is."

Oplar chuckled at that. "Renn thinks everyone is."

"And no, Renn's not pregnant yet. But we're pretending she is, to avoid drama. Light and the rest of her ilk believe she is, and I've enabled that misconception for now," I said.

Oplar was quiet a moment as I unfolded the many-page letter from Abel, and realized the reason it was thicker was because it wasn't just his letter but multiple letters from others as well. A quick glance showed one from Sharp, then one from Frett.

"You trust me enough to know that, Vim...?" Oplar then asked.

I glanced away from the letters and frowned at the bear. She was sitting up in her seat, and looked... a little odd. As if I'd just said something that had shaken her to her core.

"Why not? You're Renn's friend." Merit and Lilly had known too, told by Renn herself. I saw no reason to think Renn would not trust Oplar the same way. Oplar was one to gossip, but she was not one to share secrets. She'd die before she did. That was her ethos, as much as free-will was mine.

Oplar held my gaze for a moment, and then she slowly nodded at me. I tried not to notice the way her eyes glistened a little and went back to focus on my letters. Before I did though I made sure the shark was still asleep.

She was.

As I read Abel's letter first, I ignored Oplar as she masked a sniff with deep drink.

Abel informed me the Crypt was doing fine. As was the human, Elisabeth, who we'd left there. For most the letter I assumed it was just a typical update, but near the end he got to the point.

"A ghost...?" I whispered as I read the last bit of his letter again.

"Hm? Ah. Yes. At the crypt. They all seem very serious about it being real. They say they see it out of the corner of their eyes at night, wandering the halls," Oplar said, sounding excited to talk about it.

To her it was likely an interesting form of gossip. But to me...?

Right now the last thing I needed to hear was something like this.

Ghosts did not exist. Not in this world. But there were things that could be made to look like them. Or rather, there were things that could be mistaken as one to unknowing eyes.

Monarchs. Gods. Their creations. And with the recent events...

I sighed as I put Abel's letter aside. It seemed, whether I liked it or not, I'd be going there soon. Hopefully it was a wasted trip and they were all just hyping up something someone had seen while half asleep or something.

"Didn't see it myself, which is too bad. I stayed there a couple extra nights on purpose to do so," Oplar said with a sigh.

Hopefully that was a hint that they weren't actually being haunted. But...

"Anything else odd happening? Anywhere else?" I asked as I went to read Frett's letter next.

"Other than typical stuff? Like me finding Celine, or Landi's plan to leave her kingdom? Not really."

That was something at least.

Frett's letter also included the ghost, or spirit as she called it. She too was requesting my presence to deal with it, claiming it was giving people nightmares. The rest of her letter was just asking of Renn, and wishing us well.

I went into Sharp's letter hoping for a grounded semblance of surety, and instead found something worse.

"The ghost is real," I whispered as I read Sharp's letter.

"Is it...? How do you know?" Oplar asked.

"Sharp says so, I was just reading her words," I said as I finished reading her short letter.

A ghost that gave nightmares, could be seen in the corner of the eye at night, and made metal cold...? Sharp's comment on it making handles to doors and such cold at night was odd.

If it was a monarch, or a god's creation, what was it doing...? What purpose did it have? If it was a monarch it'd have hurt someone by now. Unless it had other orders...

What if this was their attempt to distract me? To get me to keep a distance from Renn, and to head there post-haste? But these letters were dated before I'd even killed Stance...

"I had just been near there. I should have went," I said with a sigh as I put Sharp's letter aside with the rest. She only had a few words for Renn, which I'd deliver later.

What a pain.

The world really was getting noisy again. And now each and every little thing was going to make me worry and panic, wasn't it? Every oddity will be one I need to now be on guard of, in case they're sourced from my enemies.

Nothing will be simple again.

I was now at war again, wasn't I?

And...

Before I could finish my thought, the chair I was in snapped.

Steadying myself, I stood as the chair broke beneath me. It did so rather loudly and as such it was not a surprise that the girl who had been sound asleep shot upward in shock over it. She even let loose a weird sounding yelp as she did. One that made me flinch where the breaking of my chair hadn't.

"Ah, Vim, gosh...!" Oplar groaned at me as she gestured out to the girl who was now sitting up on the bed, claspng the pillow and blanket she'd been using as if for dear life as she gaped at me. "It's okay, Celine. This is Vim, the protector. I told you about him, remember?" Oplar said quickly.

The girl, if she even heard Oplar, didn't do a thing. She simply stayed seated on the bed, staring at me with wide eyes.

"Sorry..." I apologized as I turned around to pick up some of the broken pieces of wood. I had no plans to fix it, but didn't want to leave the sharp fractures all over the floor. The girl was barefoot, and even if a full-blooded shark that didn't mean she couldn't get hurt if she stepped upon them.

Plus my cleaning up eased the tension. I knew this from experience. Sometimes the best cure to a panicked heart was the absurdity of someone just... doing something so silly as typical housework.

"He's a klutz, as you can see. Always breaking stuff," Oplar said with a sigh.

"I'd argue I'm the farthest thing from clumsy, but that's kind of hard to do when I'm picking up pieces of a chair I was just sitting on like a dork," I said as I gathered the rest up.

"Protector..."

I nodded as I stood up, slowly and confidently, and went to dump the pile of wood pieces in an empty corner. "So I am. For now, at least," I said.

Oplar scoffed at me as I dug out a few coins and placed them on the table near her, so she could pay for the damage properly and not soil her name with the innkeepers.

Turning to the shark, I gave her a gentle smile as I stepped forward and extended my hand to her. She sat up a bit straighter on my approach, but she wasn't clinging to the pillow and blanket anymore.

"My name is Vim. Sorry about waking you, but if it's any consolation you now get to hear all the stories Oplar has concerning my screw ups as you travel north," I said.

"I have a bunch!" Oplar happily added.

The girl gave me a weak smile, one that barely showed any teeth... but even with only a few being shown I was able to verify Oplar was right.

Her teeth were sharper than Renn's.

How had no one noticed...? She must be from a real backwater place.

"Celine..." the girl said as she carefully took my hand. Her hand was rough, as if full of calluses, but I knew better than to think it was from a life of hard labor. Her skin was rough not just on her palms but the back of it too. As we shook hands, I held back a small sigh of pity.

Was her whole body this rough? If so she was going to have trouble. Not only would humans find her odd, so would many of our kind.

Oplar was wrong. She should go to the Crypt. She wasn't as bad as Sharp was, but was bad enough to be an issue.

"Um..."

I tilted my head at the girl as our hands separated, and she glanced down at them as they did. I noted the way her eyes lingered on my hand.

"I know people with far rougher skin than you, it's no surprise," I said simply.

Celine shifted a little... and then gave me a small smile. "Oplar had said the same."

"Oplar is a gossip but she is not a liar, on any level," I said as I glanced around. I already knew there wouldn't be another chair in the room, but I looked again anyway.

"You can sit here, Vim," Oplar said as she stepped around me. She sat down on the bed, roughly, and went to grab at Celine and pull her close. Oplar, being a thick-blooded bear, wasn't bothered by the girl's rough skin at all. "Well? You hungry yet? You'd not believe it, Vim, what with her being what she is, but the bloody girl's never hungry! She doesn't eat a thing!"

I frowned at that as I went to sit in the chair she'd abandoned. "I find that hard to believe," I said. Celine looked troubled over Oplar grabbing her and pulling her close, but at the same time had a small smile hidden beneath the troubled expression. I could tell that she's already lowered her guard around Oplar, but was still a little wary. Though that might just be because I was here.

Any young girl would be on guard in this region upon waking to find a strange man in their room.

"Aye it's true! She's only eaten twice since I've freed her from the jaws of slavery, and both times she barely ate a fist-full! Makes me mighty self-conscious you know?" Oplar said, teasing the girl slightly as she gave her a squeeze.

Studying the girl, I took into account her size and frame. She was a tad skinny, but all peoples were down south. She honestly didn't look malnourished or sickly, let alone like someone who had just been in slavery...

"You might be some kind of planktivore," I said. She might not be a shark at all, but some kind of whale or even a manta or something.

"I'm a... what?" Celine asked.

"Planktivore. A creature that eats very tiny food and algae found in the deep sea. There's a certain shark, a whale shark, which is a filter feeder. It can go a very long time without eating under the right conditions... but that'd not really explain your sharp teeth. The bigger sharks can go a long time without feeding too," I said, and as I explained I thought of Renn. I felt as if I'd just answered one of her questions, not someone else's.

"Plank-a-what? Did you just insult her!? Just for that you're paying for a feast tonight!" Oplar said loudly with a point at me.

Of course I was. But it'll not be food that Oplar will be feasting on, but instead all the gossip I knew.