

## Non Human 571

### Chapter 571 Renn – A Prophecy A Day

I was going to throw up.

Putting the white book away, I quickly stepped over to the corner of the room and... held my breath.

"Renn...?" Merit's concerned voice rang in my ear, since the room was so small. But I ignored her for a moment as I fought back the sickness, the bile that wanted to...

Ah. It went away. I breathed a sigh of relief, and felt sweaty all of a sudden. "I'm okay... I just... felt sick for a moment," I said as I reached up to touch my forehead.

It felt hot. And clammy, as Vim would call it.

Yet I knew I wasn't sick. Nor was it this room that was affecting me so. It stunk and the air was stale, even with the recently lit candles we'd brought down here for light, but it wasn't so bad to make me nauseous like this.

Instead what was so deeply affecting me was simply what we'd found within it. What had been hiding in it for hundreds of years...

"You sure...? Why don't we go upstairs? We can take them out of the room and read them in the open air," Merit suggested.

I shook my head. These were hidden for a reason. Had been for hundreds of years. I was not going to be the one to break that streak.

We were still in the archive. Merit had known about a stairwell, one that led to a secret room, but it had taken her a whole day to find it. She had excitedly woken me up a few hours ago, informing me she had finally found it behind one of the shelves... but honestly...

I wish she hadn't.

These damned prophecies had not been hidden well enough.

"Renn...?" Merit worriedly asked again as she stepped closer. I felt the stale air shift thanks to her approach and nodded.

"I'm okay... and no... last thing we need is for them to be stolen or seen by the wrong people," I said.

"Honestly Renn, the people who would get upset over us having found them likely already know all about them, like the Chronicler or Light," Merit said.

I groaned as I realized she was right. Odds are they knew full well what these prophecies concerned...

Sighing as I started to feel sick again, I looked again at the couple of shelves in this small room. There were only a hundred or so books and a small stack of scrolls, in here... but I felt more overwhelmed by them than I did the thousands up the stairwell nearby and in the archive above.

I'd only read three so far. The first had not been about me at all, but instead the end of the world. That had been startling, verily so, but it hadn't made me sick. Just like all things, all life, I knew everything had an end. It was inevitable. So although daunting, it at least was normal to me.

The second had upset me, since it had been not a book of prophecies but instead a journal. Celine's journal. A private one. One that she had written things in that made me feel a little uncomfortable, and even a tad angry. She spoke ill of me in it, since in her eyes thanks to my late arrival she had wasted her chance. She felt she could have enjoyed a relationship with Vim, even if for a short while, and had missed out on it because she had been trying to be patient and kind to me. She had written it not for me to read, of course, or anyone for that matter... but as I read it, she had made me feel like I was the one who had stolen her husband. That I had been the home wrecker, somehow. As if her lack of experiencing love and such companionship was all my fault, because I had not showed up when I had been supposed to.

That journal had upset me, but it wasn't until I had opened the third one that I'd actually felt sick... the one I'd just hastily put back on the shelf in its improper spot. Upside down, too.

Stepping back over to the shelf I grabbed it again. I quickly opened it to the same page I'd just read, and with a heavy heart read it again.

This time aloud. "He'll not join until she's here. He'll come and go, sporadically helping here and there, but we will not gain his true worth until she arrives to shackle him to us. Where is she? I've sent so many out to find her, and yet still she's not arrived. How can someone so important be so late...?" I read Celine's words.

Merit shifted next to me, and thanks to the sounds her feet made as she did I knew this place hadn't been visited in a very long time. There were tiny pebbles and even dirt all over the floor. It's not been cleaned in a very long time. "Vim had joined though...? He's been the protector for hundreds of years," Merit said softly.

I nodded. He had and has been. "Maybe to her his agreement, his duties, weren't enough? Maybe to her all this time he's not been doing what he's meant to?" I wondered. It was hard to interpret her words as anything else. She was basically saying that Vim would only help the Society in part until I showed up to... what? Force him to dedicate more of himself to the Society?

Was this possibly concerning his rules...? Was I supposed to convince him to break them, possibly...? But if I did that...

"What's the rest say?"

I gulped, dreading the rest, but read it anyway. "Nonetheless, another prophecy missed. Another group lost to us because she's not here. Maybe she's dead. Maybe this is all for nothing and..." I stopped reading again as I closed my eyes and tried to squeeze back the tears that wanted to leak from them.

"If you're going to weep let me finish reading it," Merit said.

I sniffed and shook my head. No. I needed to do this. Or rather, I decided to do this. This was all my fault. I had been hardheaded and had wanted to know, and here I was... about to break and...

Gulping again, I ignored the tears sliding down my face as I continued reading the next part of the prophecy. Or rather, her notes at the bottom of it, where she'd written her thoughts on it. "The longer she takes to show up the greater the losses. The greater the decay and the harder it will be to rebuild. Vim is capable of great feats, but even he is only able to do so much. The foundation she was meant to build, the one to last us until the great upheaval, is not here and even if it's built now it'll be too little too late. Maybe..." I hesitated as something hard and heavy caught in my throat. I gulped it down again and finished reading the page. "Maybe this is all my fault. Maybe by panicking I sent us down a road unforgivable. One destined for failure."

The next page had a new prophecy, but I didn't want to read it yet. Especially since the one I'd just read had nearly broke me.

A thousand dead. Because I had not been there.

A thousand people. A whole bloodline. And...

"The great upheaval...? I feel like I've heard that before..." Merit though had focused on something else, mumbling as she spoke.

"Their religious text has it. It's a time where the world sets afire, then a long period of winters destroys everything. Supposedly only the faithful will find salvation amongst the desolation and survive," I said, glad to think of something else for a moment. I searched deep into my memories, scouring all the conversations I've heard and had... and couldn't remember anyone ever mentioning it. Not even in passing. I don't think even Vim's said it.

"If they modeled their faith after her prophecies... then that might be what she means. It'd not surprise me, knowing Celine and the rest, to do that," Merit said simply.

I took a deep breath, hated it for the moment I held it in since the air in this room tasted bad, and then breathed it out.

"Rennalee will head east. To build a port city, upon the old Capital of Provinces. While there she will settle the influence of our church and Vim will slay a monarch. One whose children will conform and apostatize into our cloth..." I read another prophecy, while I felt still able to do so.

"Why does she keep calling you Rennalee? Not Renn? Would be easier to write," Merit asked.

I slowly shook my head. "I don't know... I hadn't even realized they knew my name, Celine's letter had only called me his heart," I said. And Capital of Provinces...? Wasn't that where Lumen was now built...?

"So you were meant to found Lumen. And in doing so make a new Telmik. You hadn't, of course, Brandy, Gerald and Vim had. And now Light's there to finish the job," Merit then added, confirming I'd been right. Celine had indeed been talking about Lumen.

I groaned at that. "... I don't know if I want to do this anymore..." I said as I closed the book again. Like the one before, Celine had wrote notes beneath the prophecy, likely again detailing how I had failed everyone or something, but I didn't want to read it. I closed my eyes, and although still felt sick I wasn't worried about throwing up just yet. I just felt... dizzy. Exhausted.

Hurt.

I put the book back in its spot, if anything just to give me a chance to focus on something else for a moment. It didn't work as I closed my eyes again, doing my best to not start weeping or throwing up.

Merit didn't say anything as I heard her grab something off the shelf. I didn't open my eyes as I heard her open a book and go about reading it.

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Thankfully she didn't do so aloud.

Vim had been right. Was right.

I shouldn't have pried into this. I should have let it all be. I should have just lived in ignorance.

It was one thing to have shown up late. Since that meant my love, my relationship with Vim, had been postponed. Which meant in turn my children were late to be born. That knowledge had been hurting for a long time. As it had to know that I could have been here, helping and supporting the Society for a lot longer. Even just being here for Merit as her kingdom fell, or Lilly when she lost her wings, was something I'd always regret I'd not done.

But... to know my lack of being here had basically brought low the whole of the Society...?

I'd only read a few prophecies so far, but it was very clear. Celine blamed many of the Society's failures, particularly Vim's, on me. Or rather, my lack of being here to prevent them.

I honestly didn't understand how my mere presence could have saved so many lives... but I knew better than to think I was misreading her words. They were rather clear. Written in plain ink.

Vim was meant to be something more. To do more. Be better. Not just a protector, but something greater. A leader. A king, maybe. And he wasn't those things... because I wasn't here, or hadn't been here, to force him to be so. And Celine was very confident in that fact.

So it wasn't that I myself would have made a difference, not in the great grand scheme at least, but rather... I'd have influenced Vim. Into being just a tad more... well...

"Before you keep crying, Renn, know that blaming others for her failures had been Celine's greatest fault. It was never her fault, or her church's fault, that they failed... it was Vim's. Or ours. Or yours, I guess. She never took accountability. It was why I and so many others had not wanted to associate ourselves with her or her church after enough time had passed. We had all realized what she was really like," Merit said as she kept reading.

I sniffed before responding. "Is she wrong though...?"

Merit shifted again and I finally opened my eyes to glance at her. My friend had a sad look on her face as she shrugged. "I don't know, Renn. Most of their prophecies are wrong in certain ways. Little discrepancies and such... but..."

"But even when wrong they hold a sliver of truth," I whispered, quoting Vim.

She nodded softly as she lowered the book she'd been reading. It looked large in her hands, though in reality most of them were rather small. "I'll not deny it, Renn. It's... possible. Your presence has already been shown to change Vim. So far it hasn't been too deeply... but you've only been together for what? Two years? Three? A blink of an eye. And you've not even had children yet. I don't want to agree with what Celine claims, but I won't deny the possibility... After all, who is to say what Vim will be like in a decade? In fifty years? A hundred? He might be completely different by then; at the rate you're changing him. Different enough even, yes... to have possibly saved far more than he had," Merit spoke calmly, but her face looked distraught. As if she too wanted to cry. Yet not a single tear gleamed in her eyes which held my own.

"How'd I screw up this bad...?" I groaned as I knelt down. I didn't sit down, but I crouched and hugged my knees. I felt like sobbing, but feared if I did I'd throw up. My stomach was feeling weird again.

"It is fate, Renn. And it's not something we can change. I know reading all these makes you feel like you failed, somehow, but... in all honesty Renn, who is to say that's the truth? How are we to know something worse wouldn't have happened if you had shown up earlier? Yes you might have saved a few more of us back then, either directly or not doesn't matter, but what if in by doing so something even worse occurred...? Maybe the way it is happening, and had happened, is the better way," Merit reasoned.

"You sound like you're trying to convince me of something even you don't believe," I said.

Merit sighed at me. "Really, Renn, you're the one who wanted to know. What did you think you were going to find...? What did you expect?" Merit asked.

To find out I was meant to show up years ago. Not that I was responsible for thousands and thousands of deaths.

What would Vim think...? By his parents what would he think if he knew the terrible truth?

I began to cry, and it hurt to do so. I pushed my face into my knees, groaning as I tried not to fall backward onto my butt. I'd not crouched down like this in a long time, and it seemed I almost wasn't able to do so. Probably because I was unstable, internally, and...

A tiny hand patted against my back, making me hesitate. I glanced up, finding Merit close by as she gently rubbed my back. "Deep breaths, Renn. This hurts, but now we've done it. We must endure and face it; else all we'll have is shame."

"I don't want to read the rest..." I whispered.

"I know. Neither do I, to be honest..." she said softly as she glanced at the book she still held. I dared a glance at it, since she held it open and it was angled my way. Although I had only looked at it for a brief moment, I had recognized a few words written upon it. Notably names. Ones I knew.

My eyes welled up again. "Lellip's family...?"

Merit's face hardened a little, confirming I had not misread. This time I fell to the ground, spreading my legs apart as I grabbed at my face and hair. I clung to it as I let out a deep groan of pain and sorrow. The sound echoed loudly in the little room, making my own ears flutter, and I hated not just how miserable I sounded but how animalistic I did too.

That had not been a woman's groan but a beast's. A large one. I knew the small room had likely made it sound so, but for a moment there I had not heard my own wails but instead my ancestor's. My uncle's, the monarch's.

"Renn..." Merit whispered my name as I tried to control my own emotions. It was hard, nearly impossible, but I knew I had to do it.

I now needed to read that one, at least... or... "What's it say...?" I asked between sobs.

"The prophecy...?" Merit asked quietly.

I nodded.

She at first didn't answer... but then I heard her look back to the book. She seemed to read it for a moment, and then she cleared her throat and spoke. "The Smithy will collapse in the years of the long sun. If Rennalee is there during the plague that follows, Vim will arrive with a cure. If she is not..." Merit's voice drifted as she stopped speaking, going quiet.

"I killed her family...?" I couldn't believe it...! They had been dozens strong! Able to fill that whole smithy, and...!

"In this instance I'd argue Vim is the cause, Renn. If he had known a cure why had he not shown up with it back then? He had been there. Spent months trying to help them," Merit said.

Blinking blurry eyes I looked up at my friend and sniffed. "Huh...?"

Merit nodded with a frown as she turned the page and kept reading. "A strange sickness took most of them. After a church attack. Vim had showed up and saved quite a few, but they all ended up dying from the disease. He had been there already, Renn... And although Vim will sometimes keep things secret for one reason or another, he's never kept something like that a secret. He's shared such cures before, and he sees Nebl as a good friend. He would not have allowed Nebl's family to die like that if he had a way to prevent it, rules be damned," Merit said.

Right...!

He wouldn't have. Vim would have definitely saved them...!

In fact he would have done anything and everything in his power to do so. It was why he had been so angry and upset with Nebl's family back then, when Nebl had gotten stuck in the collapsed mine... he had felt no one had done enough. He'd been so upset he had brought it up with Nebl and even in front of me, even back when we hadn't been as close as we were now. And Vim would have been even stricter on himself...

"So it's wrong...!" I said, hopeful.

"Rather... again, a saint has simply misinterpreted what she saw. Really, Renn, you should know better than anyone by now how true that statement is."

I should. But...

Sniffing some more I went to wipe my face. I didn't like how wet it was, I had to resort to wiping it with my shirt. "What's the rest say?" I asked.

"It ended and went to another prophecy. One about, who I assume, is Berri and her family."

"Berri...?" I felt my gut twist, why another one so close to home!!

"Rather her people. They too had suffered disease, killing them all off. Celine claims most would have been saved had you been here, because half would have left their inlet and lived with you and Vim," Merit said as she continued reading.

"Gosh...!" I squeezed up again as I kept wiping my face. More tears were replacing the ones I'd clean off.

That one hurt a lot! Because it was so very believable! If I had shown up earlier, I definitely would have a home by now. Especially if I had children. And as such, just as we were now, people I considered friends would also join me... join us there... and...

"Before you start weeping again, consider this..." Merit patted my head, making me look up at her again. "We're basically doing that, aren't we? Making your home? And those like myself are gravitating towards it, yes?"

I sniffed and nodded. Wasn't that just verification that what Celine said should have happened, would have?

"Then in theory we're still on track. Even if late," she finished with a shrug.

"That's... supposed to make me feel better...?" I asked.

"Yeah? Makes me feel better at least."

Sometimes I forgot that Merit was still Merit.

"Also, Renn... you're forgetting something else," Merit then added.

"What...? That I'd still have allowed half of Berri's family to die?" I asked, feeling a little pessimistic.

"Rather... could one not argue then that they'd still be alive if they would have just... left themselves? If going to your home would have saved them, likely by getting them away from whatever had caused the sickness, then you could argue they could have gone anywhere. Telmik, Lumen, hell even the other continent like the rest had. In which case they didn't die because you showed up late, but simply because they're stupid," Merit argued.

"How would I tell Berri and her family that...!?" I asked.

"With a smile, or a scowl, I'd prefer a scowl."

"Merit...!"

She chuckled at me and closed the book. There had still been a few more prophecies left, but she seemed no longer interested in reading them. "What? It's true, Renn. Just like all prophecies, if you step back and look at them they always have that fatal flaw. There's always a what-if? And that what-if falls apart quick because half the time the prophecies don't even come true in the first place, and when they do? It's usually by mere fluke or they end so differently one has to do mental gymnastics to reason the connection between them in the first place!"

"Gym what?" I asked.

"A sport. One I'd think you'd do great at. But you hear what I'm saying, right? My meaning?" Merit asked, not caring to explain further.

Taking a deep breath I nodded. "Yes... you're saying even if Celine was right, is right, I shouldn't dwell too much upon it. Because just as I was a possible solution, so too were there many others. And they all failed too," I said.

"Yeah...! Wait... why'd you explain that better than I just had?" Merit asked.

I sniffed as I smiled at her. She looked, and sounded, genuinely upset over that. "Fine... I'll not blame myself. Not completely, and not yet, but..." I stood up again, feeling a tad better if anything because of how Merit was acting. She felt for me but I could tell she was on the verge of just telling me to stop

crying and to grow a spine. Her hardheaded view of the world and its intricacies made me feel a little less... stressed.

"But what?" Merit asked since I'd not finished.

"But only if you promise to hold me later tonight as I cry in bed," I said as I went to pick up another white book.

"I'll be the one crying, then," Merit said with a sigh.

Chapter 572 Vim – A Tired Turtle

Was she dead...?

No. I felt her heart. It was pulsing, just... very slowly.

I glanced upward, to the far distant gleam of sunlight on the ocean's surface. Some bubbles leaked from my mouth as I did, and I watched the way they floated upward.

For the amount of air I'd just released, the bubbles were far too tiny. And the way they danced and circled each other was telling too.

The water pressure here was unnatural. Heavy. Strong. As if I was far deeper than I actually was.

Not too surprising when considering who was here though.

Looking back down to my friend's face, I studied the massive eye nearby. It was shut firmly, blending into the rest of her face in a way that almost hid it completely. From certain angles she almost looked like a part of the reef she was sleeping near. From other angles she looked like a craggy cliff face, what with the way her shell was so rough. But no matter how you viewed her, what she was became very apparent after some time. Anyone with eyes to see, even down here in this darkness, could see the outline of her shape. It was unmistakable. It was a good thing humans weren't able to really explore the ocean yet. Otherwise she'd have been found rather easily. Only a few miles away was a port city, one much larger than I had remembered it.

Not that I feared for her life, of course. She was like Miss Beak. Something that would only die once her age finally reached a point that not even her divinity could handle it. And... judging by the way her heart was slowly thumping, that point of time was likely not far at all. It had that same odd rhythm that Miss Beak's once had. One that was likely more noticeable thanks to being in water.

I wanted to sigh, but I had just allowed the last bit of my air to leak out. If given enough time my body would fully adapt to its surroundings, and thus enable me to breathe water, but I didn't plan to stay down here that long.

After saying goodbye to Oplar and Celine, sending them on their way to Telmik, I had come straight here. She wasn't always off this coast, but I'd found her here more often than not so hadn't been surprised to do so. Her being so huge, and also a firstborn like Miss Beak, made it easy to find her just by running up and down the coast line. I had felt her from miles away.

Still... how long was she going to sleep?

Shifting a little, I lifted a foot. With a little more force than necessary I stomped down, causing a rush of bubbles to explode and rush all around. They bubbled upward, up and through my pants as they did.

The mighty tortoise shifted, causing massive swaths of underwater clouds of sand and other particles to spread all around as she did. I kept my footing as her head shifted and a mighty eye slowly peered open, focusing on me. It glowed only ever so faintly, but here in the deep darkness it looked as bright as a sun. The green glow fit her appearance, and I smiled at her since I wasn't able to speak.

A deep, deep, guttural groan told me she had just woken up and was annoyed over having been forced to. I felt her take in a deep breath, sucking in so much water around us as she did that I had to firm my footing lest I got pulled down towards her nostrils. Then I was lifted as her mighty beak stiffly opened as she yawned.

For a small moment I just focused on staying upright as the water all around me swirled, both with bubbles and currents. The dense pressure increased a little, making me feel heavier than I had in a long time, but still I remained in place.

After she yawned she slowly started to get up. I had to again firm my footing as she raised her head towards the surface, and in doing so nearly sent me to my knees from the momentum and pressure of it.

The huge monarch pushed off from the bottom of the sea, and in doing so made some of my internal organs stress from the change in pressure. Thankfully my body had already adapted to it, else I might have had some organs rupture. A few might have torn and broke anyway, even with my adapted body, as she started to slow near the surface.

She lifted her head out of the ocean, and thus me too. It was the middle of the day, and no storm in sight, so it took half a second for my eyes to adjust to the brightness. I'd just been in nearly perpetual darkness down below, so it was a sudden shift.

Massive waves splashed wildly all over thanks to her sudden emergence, having displaced untold tons of water in doing so, and she released a great sigh as she settled on the ocean's surface. The world was noisy for a moment as the ocean settled around us, and then I heard my eardrums pop as they healed from the quick ascent we'd just done. I knew I'd likely soon start to leak some blood, from organs and whatnot having been affected too. But I didn't feel too bad all the same.

"Why waken me, Vim...? I'd been comfortable," the tortoise asked, her voice deep but muddled. Half her face was still submerged, so she had basically just spoken to me from underwater. It made her sound funny. Funny and tired.

"I had seen that. You had crushed half a reef, you know?"

Huge eyes slowly closed in front of me, shutting as if about to fall back asleep. She didn't though. "Come to nitpick have you?"

I smiled at that. Yes, to this massive creature something like destroying a whole ecosystem was just something to be picky about. "Rather I've come with a request," I said.

My old friend hummed at me, and it kind of sounded similar to a whale's call. It reverberated in the ocean around us, and likely went out for untold miles. I felt for any nearby sea-life, I knew what such loud noises did under the water. If it didn't outright kill you it at least hurt and made you dizzy.

Not that she had done it on purpose of course... she was simply that big. That momentous.

"Have you been sleeping there long?" I asked her as she closed her eyes and I felt her swim a little. I felt as if I was on a ship that had just made a very stark turn, as I had to shift my weight to stay upright. She seemed to be heading for the nearby shore.

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"I think so... I was down south, but got tired of the current there so returned here. I don't know when I'd done so though," she said.

"Have you been well, though, all things considered?" I asked.

She huffed at me, spraying massive amounts of ocean spray in the process. A lot of it hit me, since she was now swimming at a decent pace. Likely faster than even the Society ship I'd just been on. "I'm well, Vim. My shell is heavy, as is my sleep. Pray tell me your request so I can return to it."

Right... Even when younger she had always complained about my bothering her. She slept more than any other creature I knew, but I was fine with it. She was too massive, and her ability too dangerous, for her to really live any other lifestyle. "I recently encountered a god. One who had summoned a monarch here in the sea, not far from here," I said with a point in the direction where I'd faced them, north.

Huge eyes slowly blinked at me. "And?"

I smirked at her. She really was a creature from a bygone age wasn't she? Who left today would have responded to my words in such a way? Miss Beak might have, to a fault, but... "I've come to ask if you've felt or encountered anything similar. I've recently encountered two gods in a very short time. I fear something is happening, or that they're conspiring something again," I said. Strangely it was comforting to be talking to someone who not just knew all about the past and all it held, but was indifferent to it.

"I've not felt or seen a creator or even their creations in... a long time, Vim. I think I've encountered a few monarchs over the years but I always eat them. And never have any been of note worth," she said.

That was the problem, though. To her they wouldn't have been, but... "Any recently? Say in the last few years?"

"I've been asleep the last few years Vim, easily. Maybe even decades."

Great.

"How about the undersea volcano near the horn?" I asked.

She hummed for a moment, and then blinked. "It is active. It rumbles deep in the earth, and stacks of smoke and other things leak all around in that region. Makes the waters warm, but thick," she said.

Just great... "So it could be soon," I said.

"Likely... in a manner of speaking, to us, at least," she said.

Yes. To those like her and I, even if it happened in a century that was still soon.

"So, Vim. Why have you woken me?" the monarch asked, sounding tired.

"I just asked it of you. I wanted to confirm what you knew, and find out if you'd sensed any gods or powerful monarchs lately."

The huge turtle's eyes focused on me, and I smiled at my own reflection within them. They were bigger than I was. "Such a trifling matter," she said.

"It is, but isn't. I'm glad to hear you've not had any issues, other than my disturbing your slumber of course," I said.

Some birds showed up, squawking as they started to circle her huge shell. A large flock of what looked like pelicans and seagulls started to land upon her shell, noisily cawing at each other as they did. I couldn't see her whole shell, of course, thanks to the shape and size of it. Her shell was likely half a mile wide if not larger and it raised upward quite a distance. It was dark in color, and thanks to the pointed carapace it looked like a large craggily collection of rocks. They looked like little pyramids upon her back, with the way they were actually symmetrical. It was a unique trait, since typically only tortoises grown in captivity had such a shell pattern. It was considered a deformity. But she'd not been grown in captivity, at all; she had simply been made that way on purpose by her creator.

Honestly, other than her head sticking out of the water, she looked like a outcropping island or something, one found on a rocky coastline. A perfect place for creatures to rest upon.

For now. Soon she'll submerge, and maybe even do so while activating her ability. To help her sink, she sometimes used her ability which made the whole area around her become heavier. She was able to increase the strength of gravity around her, to the point when at her strongest efforts the tug of gravity could rip flesh off bones.

She was a tortoise, though her appearance didn't outright imply a singular species. She had the shell of a river turtle, snout of a pond dweller, and feet and legs of a sea-dwelling one.

And she was more monarch than Miss Beak ever pretended to be. She was indifferent to nearly all things, and saw the world through the eyes of what she was. A creature of near semi-omnipotent power. She herself really only had to fear one thing, other than me, in this world. And that was the gods. It made her very... well...

"Are your questions over then...? Nothing else to request of me? No hearts to sizzle in my belly?" she asked lazily.

I turned, and now on the horizon saw land. She was indeed swimming to the shore, likely to drop me off.

"For now... no. Is there anything I can do for you? It might be some time before we see one another again," I asked. I should have brought a few hearts with me to give to her, foolish of me but what can you do?

"Nothing, Vim. I only wish to sleep."

I nodded slowly at that. That was one of the main reasons I had let her be all this time. Like Miss Beak she was willing to live her life without interfering with the world. She might kill animals occasionally, hard not to being a monarch of her size and power, but she did not do so maliciously. She swam around, slept where she felt comfortable, and then swam around some more until she found the next place to rest. She herself didn't even eat anything as far as I was aware.

Her biggest threat was just being seen and as such creating rumors and whatnot of her existence.

"Well, then I apologize for waking you. I had feared... or rather, I am fearing, the worst. I believe gods have become active again. Odds are you might encounter one in the future, or at least their spawn," I said.

"And deal with them I will. I promise you, as I've vowed, I'll defeat them or die trying. It is of no matter to concern yourself with," she said.

"I know... but I'd ask you to survive all the same. I have someone I'd like you to meet, if eventually," I said.

She hummed lightly at me, but didn't inquire further. I knew she wouldn't have though. Unlike Miss Beak she had no real desire to know much about anything or anyone. To her all that mattered was the ocean's depths, and where she could get the nicest nap upon them.

"Then shall I take you to land?" she asked, as if she wasn't already doing so.

"If you don't mind can you drop me off elsewhere?" I asked.

"Hm...?"

"Farther north. At least a hundred miles or so," I said.

The monarch's eyes lazily studied me, and then she slowly turned in the sea. Once again I had to shift my weight as to stay upright as she did so. Without a word she changed course, directing us due north along the shoreline.

"Thank you. In return I'll tell you of what I've been doing these last few years," I said.

"I care not."

"Ah! But you will! You see, I've found a mate!" I said happily.

The lazy eyes shifted a little, focusing a tad more seriously. "Hm...?" she deeply rumbled.

I nodded, smirking proudly as I went to tell her in full detail of my recent marriage. About my finding Renn, and the way she had wormed herself into my heart without me realizing it.

If she had no bad news for me... then it was only fair I gave her good news in return.

At least, that was what I told myself as she ferried me north to Nevi.

Chapter 573 Renn – Renka

I was antsy, as Vim would call it, but I knew better than to let it show. Especially here in Angie's, nearly empty, room.

"Can't believe you're leaving, Ang!" Fizz complained.

"You've known for months," Angie said with a sigh.

"Yeah but I didn't believe it...!" Fizz said.

Smiling at the two, I wondered who was older. Fizz of course didn't act it, but she was a full head taller than Angie was, even with Angie's thick puffy hair that made her seem a tad taller than she were. It also didn't help that Fizz was clinging to Angie, holding her from behind and swaying wildly just like a young child who was having a small fit since they weren't getting their way. Angie had a deadpan face, even though her whole body was being shifted around by Fizz, and as such it made Angie seem the older of the two.

"You can send letters you know, or visit even! I expect there to be quite a few people who go back and forth, especially Vim, so it'd not be too hard to visit one another if you wanted," I said as I watched Angie step away from her dresser. She was packing the last of her few bags, since we'd be leaving in a couple days.

Angie paused mid fold of a dress and glanced at me with a glare, and Fizz who clung to her sighed. "Mother would never let me leave Telmik... and Ang is such a jerk she'd never come visit me!"

"I'll be busy," Angie said as she went back to packing the box near her bed.

Something told me even if Angie hadn't been she still wouldn't have even considered it. Also... Ang? It was such a neat little nickname, but honestly I wasn't sure if it fit her or not. Angie alone was quick and easy to say as it was... plus it was cute...

Was it as cute as Nory though?

"Who's going to go with me to the balls from now on? Or sneak snacks? Steal the shoes of the nuns and bishops? Tease that blind guy? Or peak on the baths?" Fizz asked, sounding forlorn.

"Wha...! We never peaked on the baths!" Angie immediately got defensive as she turned to look at me, as if desperate for me to believe her.

I couldn't help it, I laughed at her. She suddenly looked her age. "Yet you did all the rest, did you?" I asked.

"Well...!" Angie let out a yelp of a word, and Fizz chuckled happily as she gave Angie a deeper hug.

"You should have seen her, Renn! She got a lot of compliments at the ball, other girls even asked her to dance!"

Angie groaned as she went to hiding her face with her hands.

"Too bad I missed it. I'd have danced with you too," I said.

Fizz frowned at that. "Nah, she sucks. Steps on feet and it hurts when she does," Fizz said.

Angie groaned some more.

How neat. If Angie really was going around and doing such things with Fizz that meant the two really were good friends. Angie kind of reminded me of Merit and Sharp, what with her stoic personality, but honestly she wasn't as bad. She just... was a little different. And that was what made her cute. Fizz on the other hand was just a bundle of energy, and to be honest sometimes it was a bit too much. It was obvious the two had grown very close these last few months, and not just because of Fizz's overbearing personality.

Yet Angie still wasn't hesitating in leaving this place.

Hopefully she knew what she was doing. Such friendship, such camaraderie, was precious. So rare that it was almost terrifying to think the two might now drift apart because of her leaving Telmik. But how did I explain that to her? How did I properly convey to her how special their friendship was? And even more importantly, should I even try...?

Angie wanted to go north to set up a new orphanage. Because she now no longer believed the one here could be ran properly. Ever since she had overheard who I assumed was Less speaking about the new era of non-humans, and interpreted what she had overheard the way she had, she's firmly believed it was her duty to make a new safe place for children. That the children were in danger, if even only to a certain point. I wasn't entirely sure if I agreed with her reasoning anymore, what with having spent time with Light and learning more of what they plan to do and how they're going to do it, but...

Like many of our people, us non-humans, once one got an idea in their head they stuck with it. Even if it no longer made sense.

"She's lost in thought again," Fizz said.

"She's got a lot on her plate, unlike you," Angie said.

I blinked at that and looked back down, focusing on the two once more. "If you two keep talking about me behind my ears I'm going to make you both sleep with me tonight," I threatened.

Fizz laughed at me and finally released Angie, dropping to the floor as to bounce toward me with excitement. "Sure!" she shouted, which just made Angie groan again.

"I'd tease you about having to sleep with me all the time once we're up north, Angie, but odds are my bed will be too full to do so," I said.

Angie gave me a weird look. "Was that a dirty joke?" she asked, her voice thick with disgust.

I blinked at her, and Fizz went back to laughing again. "Um... no? I just meant Merit and stuff... might sleep with me occasionally..." I said, feeling a little silly all of a sudden. I genuinely had not meant that to be interpreted in such a way, but now that I heard my own words again in my head as I recounted it I could see very well how she had come to such a conclusion.

"Merit?" Angie asked, ignoring Fizz's laughter.

"A good friend. She was living in Lumen, but she's decided to join us up north. I think she just wanted a change in scenery," I said.

"Gosh you're all going to have so much fun without me...!" Fizz's laughing came to a stop as she sighed and walked over to Angie's bed. She plopped down onto it, face first, and groaned into it as if hating her life.

I felt for the poor dog, but wasn't really sure what to say to her. It wasn't as if I could invite her, she had family here. Family that had long placed down roots, and were doing important things to boot. Though she was younger, and a lively person in general, I knew better than to think most of this was just her playing around. She genuinely was upset and sad over Angie leaving; you could see it in her eyes. They were watery. They'd been gleaming this whole time as if she was on the verge of tears.

It made me wonder how Fizz had gotten along with Tundra and the rest. They had stayed here for a short while before heading to Lumen, a few months... but I was afraid to ask what they had thought of them. Last thing I needed was for Fizz to grow more emotional over having been reminded of friends who had just left, just as Angie was doing, or even just potential friends.

Though... seeing the two made me consider something I hadn't before.

I wanted my children to have friends. Just as these two were. Just as I was with Lilly and Merit and so many more. Or rather, more-so, I wanted my children to grow up with friends. Not find them later in life like I had. I wanted Nory to be like how Merit and Lilly were. How they had known each other for hundreds of years. Which meant I'd need to live amongst them or well... amongst those who had children themselves. I didn't want my children to go without such experiences, especially since I hadn't had them myself...

And though I knew Lilly and Merit would of course be family to my own children, that wasn't entirely what I meant. They'd be family, but older family. Like aunts or older sisters, maybe. Instead what I wanted for my children was... well...

For a small moment I thought of Root and Copper, and the other possible pairs who were... hopefully, going to have more children here in the short future. Lellip and Branches might have some... But would we all live near one another? In my viewpoint, we would be living near Lilly... but in reality she'll be days away from us. For a child that might be too big a distance to constantly see one another. Close enough to build friendships, sure, but...

"Again?"

I blinked and looked down at Fizz. She was staring up at me as if I was being weird.

When'd she get off the bed? "Sorry..." I apologized.

"Everything okay? Is it Vim you're worried about?" Fizz asked worriedly.

I smiled at the dog who suddenly looked willing to sit and listen to all of my worries and grievances. She really was a good person, wasn't she? No wonder Angie put up with her overflowing energy. "Everything's fine, yes. I'm just thinking about the future," I said.

"Future...? You mean the one where you steal my best friend!?" Fizz said, no longer looking gentle as she groaned and stomped back over to the bed and once again face planted onto it.

Chuckling at her, I gestured lightly in her direction as Angie walked past me while carrying what looked to be one of the robes the church folk here wore. "I'll leave you two be then, since you seem almost done. Make sure you stay up all night talking... which in that case maybe I don't want to sleep with you two," I said, teasing the bison.

Angie didn't seem amused as she glared at me. "She can't stay up late, that's one of her good points."

"She can't...?"

"I can't! After midnight I pass out!" Fizz shouted angrily, her whine of a voice sounding funny since she had yelled into the bed.

Huh... "A dog thing maybe?" I wondered.

"Whatever it is I'm thankful for it," Angie said with a huff.

How neat. "All the same... I'll go finish up my own tasks. I suggest taking a bath together, Fizz, I myself enjoy doing such with friends," I suggested as I headed for the door.

"She won't bathe with me!" Fizz yelled some more.

"That's gross!" Angie shouted back.

Ah... right. Angie and her dislike of... indecent things...?

Was a bath indecent?

Frowning as I left their room, as the two started to argue about baths, I wondered if I was the weird one. Weren't children usually not one to see baths as something indecent? Was I the strange one for not seeing anything wrong with bathing with a friend?

I've bathed with quite a few people since joining the Society... but now that I thought about it; no one else really did bathe with others did they? Merit and Lilly didn't bathe together, though I bathed with them when given the chance... and as far as I was aware, no one else really did either. Even partners, such as married couples, didn't do so. Had Lilly and Windle bathed together...?

Was it really that weird...? Some people, like Merit, didn't like being seen naked because of personal reasons... but others weren't as bothered by it. So maybe it was something more than just one's sense of personal space or decency...

"What's on your mind?"

I paused and turned, and found Sillti. The guinea pig we'd brought here from the Summit. She had the same robes on as everyone here, but I wasn't sure yet if it was because she just wanted to blend in or because she'd joined their faith or not.

Again I had been so lost in thought I hadn't even noticed someone approach me. I knew it was because I was trying my best to not think of the prophecies, but still...!

"Do you bathe with Link, Sillti?" I asked.

Sillti gave me a wry smirk as she chuckled at me. "What a thought indeed...! Um... no? Never have. I mean, I've watched him get in and out of the bath and he me... but together at the same time...?" her wry smirk shifted a little, as she blushed ever so slightly. "I don't think we'd fit, Renn," she then added.

Oh...! Right! "He is that big, huh..." I said as I thought about it. Link was a massive man, and I could indeed imagine him having difficulty fitting into a normal sized bath on his own let alone with another.

"Though that is an interesting thought... is it fun to do it in the bath? I'd think that'd just make it weird..." Sillti wondered as she crossed her arms in thought.

I sighed at her. "I didn't mean it that way, I just meant in general," I said. Really, why was it always, that, everyone assumed first?

"Ah... then why bathe together at all...?" Sillti asked.

Gosh maybe I really was the weird one...

"How've you been Sillti?" I asked, changing topics. Sillti was an odd one herself, more like Kaley than I had originally assumed, so maybe I shouldn't assume her the normal opinion on this. I'd ask others later.

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"Hm...? Fine? Busy, though. I guess they're now expecting more people to show up? Early? So we're all readying the rooms and stuff," Sillti said with a shrug.

I nodded slowly at that. Right. No one was sure if Vim would succeed in saving the ship, but it seemed the Chronicler and the rest were operating on the assumption he would. I'd do the same in their shoes. "Looking forward to seeing new people?" I asked.

"I guess... Honestly the last batch kind of stuck to themselves. A few had known Link's parents, so acted somewhat friendly, but otherwise kept to themselves and didn't really leave their little sections. It almost felt like they didn't want to associate with us," Sillti said with a shrug.

"Weird huh?" I agreed. I had felt similar in Lumen, to a point. A lot of people had not ignored me, but had felt... distant. I had assumed it was because they all were wary of saying the wrong thing about me, what with Light's prophecies concerning me, but maybe it wasn't just me.

Sillti shrugged. "My people had been similar. Outside of family and such we didn't really mingle much," she said.

Right... Vim had mentioned they even had a form of arranged marriages hadn't he? I wonder if that factored into how their relationships worked...?

"Speaking of weird, can I ask something that might be a tad weird?" Sillti then asked.

I nodded.

She glanced around, made sure we were alone, and then leaned forward a bit to whisper. "That little girl. The one with white hair. She's your friend?"

"Merit...? Yes?" Couldn't think of anyone else she was speaking of.

"Is she old?" Sillti asked.

I smirked at that. "I suppose so...?" I said. It was weird to hear so, when I considered I was likely the same age or near it, but I knew to many Merit was indeed old since she was hundreds of years old... though the reason people likely found it weird was because of her appearance. She looked younger than Fizz and Angie did.

"Link says to be careful around her. That she's a ghost from the previous era," she said, still whispering.

Ghost...? "She's not a ghost. She's real. Unless he means in a non-literal way..." I said.

Sillti shrugged. "Not sure. Just was told to stay away from her."

That was sad to hear, but expected from Link. The man was a coward... even if the biggest and likely one of the strongest men to exist. "She's actually very gentle. I suggest saying hi to her before we leave, you'll see she's not scary," I said.

"Hm... maybe. He said similar things about some of the others who are coming back from the beyond the sea. Said it's better if we just keep a distance from them," she said with a sigh. The kind of sigh that wasn't of disgust or annoyance, but... acceptance. She had just convinced herself not to talk to Merit, and by extension anyone else like her.

I shifted a little and wondered what to say to that. Sillti was basically saying she was going to, like so many other members, just outright keep herself from associating with many of our members... just because someone told her not to. Just because someone told her they were, or could be, dangerous. Even if that person was her partner, her mate, was that really fair? Was that really the right thing to do? It was so sad and...

"Ah well. Part of being in the Society, right? Gotta take the good with the bad," Sillti said with a shrug. She then gave me a smile and waved. "I'll leave you be, you seem busy. See you later, Renn."

I nodded softly as I watched her walk away. "Later..."

For a moment I groaned and hated myself. I felt like I'd just screwed up... I should have said something, anything, to get Sillti to change her mind. Maybe I still could...? I could bring Merit with me and go talk to her, and once she saw how calm Merit was she'd maybe then not be so quick to trust Link's words...

But did it matter...? Even if I did, she'd just be friendly with Merit. She'd still keep her distance from the others...

"Is it just a person thing, or are our people worse?" I wondered as I returned to walking.

A part of me wanted to say we were worse than humans. But maybe we weren't. Maybe I just felt that way because I wanted us to not be, and as such so readily noticed it when we weren't. Sillti wasn't outright saying she hated Merit and the rest; after all, she was just... not willing to really interact with them. Out of fear, or some weird prejudice that made no sense.

But she wasn't alone. Many of our members were just like her... and it wasn't as if it was only the prey and more simple people acting that way, either. Lilly and Merit both didn't even try to interact with people who excluded them, or avoided them. In their eyes there was no point in even attempting to do so.

In a way that was just as bad. It might not be for the same reason, but it was the same indifference that caused such a separation in the first place.

Someone had to make the first move. Someone had to break the ice, to step outside of their comfort zone... but one side was too scared to do so, and the other either too angry or too defeated to care.

Then you had those like Vim, who would look at me funny for trying to change people's desires.

"Why force someone to be uncomfortable...?" I whispered the obvious response Vim would give me if I brought this up to him.

Because it made me uncomfortable. And it annoyed me.

So many complained over a lack of friends, or lovers and comrades, yet then they go ahead and ignore a huge portion of the Society? They refuse to even try to interact with them...? For what reason? It's not as if Sillti was saying Merit would kill her if she got too close, just that she was supposedly dangerous.

Dangerous how...? Merit wouldn't harm anyone if they weren't...

I slowed a little as I realized that likely wasn't true.

Merit had shocked Mono. Just because the saint had been hugging her.

Although that shock had not killed her, or likely hurt too badly, it had still been an attack. The same as if I bit someone, or clawed at them.

Hurting someone just because they hugged you was wrong... Though one could argue that Merit had made it very clear to not do such a thing, and even I and others had warned Mono against it as well...

Where did I draw the line I wonder? I knew Merit's actions had been wrong, but at the same time had not really chastised her for it. Had stood back and simply sighed, instead of grown upset or angry. Yet it was actions such as that, that violence, which made so many keep their distance from her.

I knew it was wrong yet saw nothing wrong with it all the same.

Maybe I was as bad as them, and I just didn't realize it...

Slowing, I glanced to a nearby window. The world outside was sunny, for once, but the window had streak marks upon it. It needed to be cleaned.

"The worst part is you're just ignoring the real troubles in your mind," I whispered at myself.

Not that our people's flaws and faults weren't important... nor wasn't Angie and her readying to leave with us... but I had greater concerns.

Ones that I wasn't sure if I wanted to confront or not.

Maybe I should take a page out of Vim's book and just... ignore them? Or at least, pretend to...?

But how did he do it? I wasn't able to, obviously. My tail kept twitching beneath my pant leg. I kept getting lost in thought, to the point people were sneaking up on me and showing concern as they snapped me out of my mind. I felt anxious, as if there was some terrible disaster heading my way.

Merit and I had spent a few hours reading those prophecies in that hidden room. I had lasted longer than I had thought able, and even after many hours still felt... woozy. I felt like I needed to go lay down and sleep, but my mind was too much of a mess to even consider trying. There was no way I'd be able to fall asleep right now.

Reaching out, I gently touched the windowpane. It was cold, though the sun beating down on it was warm.

I should have been here. Seeing this window get built.

This hallway.

I turned to look down it, and studied the stone architecture. There were more windows down this hall, and a few doors opposing them. The hallway merged with another, one that had benches lining its walls. People could be heard within it, though I'd not seen anyone walk past or through it in a few minutes.

This whole place. I should have been here from the beginning. Per Celine's prophecies, I had been meant to show up not long after Vim had. Back in the beginning.

In fact... Celine had not believed Vim would have joined at all, until I had shown up.

He was not meant to be the protector until I joined. Because it was supposed to have been me, my existence, that made him attached to us.

Such knowledge hurt... but I wasn't sure if I wanted to let it.

I was meant to be here earlier. Hundreds of years ago. To be involved from the beginning, even before the wars. That hurt me, deeply, because it meant I had screwed up. I had failed somewhere... somehow. Was I not supposed to have gotten involved with Lujic and Ginny...? Nory...? Was I supposed to not have spent so much time with Witch and her family? Just when and where had I made the mistake? Was I maybe supposed to have found the Society not long after leaving my family...? Or maybe I was supposed to have run away from home long before that snake monarch had attacked, killing them all... I had considered it back then, enough times that it could have happened.

But then that'd mean I'd not have enjoyed their company. That would be the same as saying my years with them were wasted. Not as valuable.

Although a part of me agreed the Society was more important than they, or myself and my happiness... I didn't want to believe that. My time with them was what made me who I was. Without them... what would I have been like?

"More like them, probably..." I whispered as I thought of those all around me. I'd be more like Celine had been. Sillti. Merit. Lilly. I'd be more like them than I was myself now.

Maybe even worse. Would I have ignored people, as Sillti does? Would I have looked down on others, as Lilly? Or would I have been more calculating, like Celine had been, like how Light is?

Would I even have been friends with those like Merit and Lilly in that case? Or would I have been less open-minded? Would my circle of friends be completely different? And with such a thing, would I myself have been different too? If I'd been so different that I'd have not associated with those like Lilly and Merit, would I then not be... someone else?

And... if I had been like that... would Vim still have loved me? The way he does now?

Celine had seemed to think so, what with the way she claimed in her prophecies how I controlled him. How I made him help the Society, in ways beyond what he did now and has been.

But was that true...?

Part of the reason he loves me was because I don't discriminate. I try to befriend everyone. He complained when I ignored him, when we stayed somewhere in the Society, but the truth was he absolutely adored the fact I was so enthralled with our people. To him my want and desire to be everyone's friend, to be family with so many people, was one of my strong points.

I knew it was likely a foolish thought, but I couldn't help but think if I had grown up in the Society... at least, within reason, then I would have been influenced by it too. Even if I wouldn't have been as bad as many, I still would have likely been more alike them than not.

What if I'd have joined the Society's religious faith instead, opting to wear their robes and spread their faith? I could have seen myself doing so, since even now I felt a small desire to learn more about it. Even

with all I knew of it, and how it was manipulated and even originally made to control humans and non-humans alike... I still found myself interested in it. Because I enjoyed many of the things it preached and instilled in people.

Celine's prophecies foretelling of my early arrival made me think about more than just my relationships though. What if my late arrival had been for the worse? What if, if I had arrived when I had meant to, more people would still be alive today...?

I wasn't foolish enough to think that my presence alone could have stopped the wars, or the Society from splitting as it had, but...

The entire premise of the prophecy, the entire idea of my showing up earlier than I had... was to connect Vim to the Society. And in doing so, make him more...

More what...?

Just what had Celine expected of him? In the few prophecies I had read, since they had made me sick to my stomach, there was really only one constant... that even when they ended well, avoiding whatever doom they had foreseen, they still ended subpar and not as good as they could have. Because I had not been there. And since I had not been there, Vim had not done what he had been supposed to.

I just couldn't wrap my head around it. My heart already had, sure, and thus it hurt. But my mind was struggling to do so.

Even if it was true that my presence might have softened Vim's rules, or he himself, how could one actually argue that my presence alone could have saved thousands of people from such fates...? Especially when Vim had been involved in said events anyway, without me.

Take Nebl and his family for instance. Celine had claimed in her prophecy, or rather her notes of it, that my lack of being there was why so many of them had died. That if I had been there more would have been saved.

But... how? Vim had still been there. He had still been involved. And I just couldn't imagine Vim not doing all he could to save them. What would my presence alone have actually done? It's not like I was a great warrior, or scholar, I didn't know things Vim didn't know. I wasn't capable of things Vim wasn't. So... what? Just what was the difference...?

"Renn...?"

I blinked and found my reflection in the dirty glass, and someone standing behind me.

Turning around, I smiled gently at the person I had just ignored... and then found myself looking down.

"Hello...?" I greeted a young girl. I didn't recognize her. She was wearing the typical robes one found here within these halls and was maybe Fizz's height. She was actually rather cute; she had a small nose and a bunch of freckles upon her face. More than I'd seen on anyone before.

"Are you lost?" she then asked.

Hm...? Hadn't she just said my name? Or had I misheard, since I'd been lost in thought? Maybe I had...

"I'd think many here would say they are, even if not," I said gently... as I realized her freckles weren't the only thing unique about her.

She had an odd face. Her eyes were slightly slanted, and her ears were oddly pointed for human-shaped ones. I wasn't sure if I'd ever seen someone who looked like her before, neither in the south or the east. But that very uniqueness made her cuter.

"Sounds like what someone who is scared to answer for real would say," she said.

I smirked at that, a little wildly. "Caught me. My name is Renn... what's yours?" I asked.

For a long moment the cute girl just stared at me, and then she frowned and nodded. "My mother named me something similar. Let's use that one. Renka. You can call me Renka," she said, as if she had spent a moment choosing between different options.

Maybe she had...? I knew many of the children here were orphans, and as such maybe did indeed have multiple names for one reason or another.

Still... "Renka...? It is pretty similar huh! That's neat," I said.

"Hm..." Renka glanced down, and I made my tail go stiff and still as I hoped she hadn't seen it shift. She though didn't seem to focus on my legs, but instead... maybe my stomach? I glanced down, wondering if maybe I had a stain or something on my shirt.

"Renn!"

I blinked and turned, and found Merit down the hallway. She was waving at me.

"Oh... sorry Renka, we're getting ready to leave. Did you need anything?" I asked as I looked back to the girl.

"No. Not yet. See you later, Renn."

Slowly nodding, I stepped away and waved goodbye to the cute, but odd, girl. She was still staring at my stomach.

It was almost as if she was a saint, and was staring at me the way the Chronicler or Light did. But her eyes weren't glowing...

Leaving her behind, I felt strangely uncomfortable as I hurried over to Merit. She sighed at me as I approached. "Help me carry some stuff to the inn, would you?" she asked.

I nodded, and as we turned to head away I spared a glance behind me. The girl was still there, down the hall... staring at me still.

Something was odd about her, and not just her appearance. Maybe she hadn't been human at all...?

"Do we have a member named Renka, Merit?" I asked as we headed for the mansio.

"Hm...? No. I don't think so."

Right... she hadn't outright smelled like one of us either. Though honestly I wasn't sure if I had even noticed her scent at all. Odds are it had just been one of the kids who had noticed me acting odd, and had reached out to ask if I needed any help. Hopefully the girl hadn't wanted anything too serious. I had a strange feeling all of a sudden, one that made me worried. Maybe I was supposed to have spent more time with her, or something...?

Maybe later I'll search her out again. Renka? Angie might know her; since it was obvious the girl was one of the kids that lived here. She wore the simple robes they all did. Plus her appearance, so different than most others, would make her easy to notice too.

Although bothered, I was kind of glad for it. My mind was finally off the prophecies, at least for now, so I indulged in the odd feeling as Merit and I went back to readying to leave.

Chapter 574 Vim – Nevi's Modesty

Stepping into Rapti's home, I was pleased to find she wasn't alone but at the same time was a tad saddened upon finding out who was visiting her.

Or rather, who it wasn't.

"Hey Vim!" Kaley grinned at me as I peeked into the living room. She was sitting on the couch, wearing only a thin shirt and nothing else.

"Kaley. Do I even want to know how much trouble you've been getting into?" I asked.

She giggled and waved me off. "I've not even started yet! I just got here this morning!"

Rapti huffed at me as she walked past me who still stood in the hallway, but not as to enter the room. She instead headed deeper into her home, to the kitchen it seemed. "The one getting in trouble is you, Vim, from what I hear," she said as she did so.

"Me?" What'd I do now? Or rather, likely, what did I not do?

Kaley giggled again. "We were just gossiping about you! Where's your adorable wife? I'd rather hear the story from her than you, she'll at least blush," Kaley asked.

"She's heading north, to help Randle and the rest build a new church and orphanage," I said simply.

Rapti re-appeared, holding a large bowl which she was in the middle of stirring. "What's this?" she asked, now fully interested.

I nodded. "Randle had some issues with Light, and got himself banished from Telmik, rather from the Cathedral. He decided to open a new abbey or something in the north, in a region where there are none at a new mining town that's growing popular. Somehow or another my wife got involved," I said.

"Oh my...!" Rapti paused in her stirring as she frowned and went into thought.

"They could use the help, I'm sure, if you're up for a change of pace Rapti," I said, knowing full well that look on her face.

"Possibly..." Rapti mumbled quietly as she stepped back into the kitchen.

Stepping into the living room, I went to put down the few bags I carried near one of the shelves. Kaley hummed at me as she pulled her legs up under her, sitting cross-legged on the couch as she watched me. "Did you save the ship Vim?" Kaley asked.

"Yes. It'll be here..." I paused a moment to calculate their distance. I had passed it a few hours ago, while being ferried here by my friend. "Maybe tomorrow afternoon?" I said.

"You say that as if you just saw it... why aren't you with them then?" Kaley asked, frowning at me as I took off my cloak too. It was hot here today, if I wore it outside I'd draw stares. It might be time to abandon it.

"Because I had. I dealt with the monarch then left to the south to handle a few things, and then hurried back here. I saw them sailing off the coast on the horizon as I did," I explained.

Kaley hummed again as she tilted her head at me, and I wondered why she found such a thing so strange. Maybe it was the fact I had in essence left them to their own devices, maybe she was wondering why I wasn't continuously protecting them.

Well... I was wondering that too so I couldn't fault her for it. "Did I hear you saved them, Vim?" Rapti asked as she entered the room. She no longer held the large bowl, but was wiping her hands with a towel.

I nodded. "Yes. Almost six hundred members reached the shore a few days ago. Most headed for Telmik, but a group are headed here... how'd you two know about it already? I was sent post-haste only a week ago, from a fresh prophecy," I asked.

Rapti didn't answer right away; instead she lowered her head and offered a prayer. Once done she looked back at me, as if she'd not just done anything. "Karma arrived yesterday. He's here with a few others to prepare for the ship to arrive... you should probably go let them know. They're staying at the church's inn, the one next to it with the blue roof," Rapti said.

"I will. I've come to ask you, or well if either of you have seen or heard from Meriah?" I asked.

The two blinked and glanced at each other, then back at me. They both shook their head in unison. "Not since you were last here, Vim," Kaley said... and Rapti nodded again, confirming it was the same for her.

Great. I'd already checked the graveyard spot where we left letters for one another, and she hadn't left any new ones.

Neither had she for anyone else, or anywhere else. Not even Oplar had heard hide or tail of her in months...

Where had she gone? Meriah was a loner, but her going months without being heard from wasn't a good sign... especially what with what was happening lately. She had promised Renn to meet her too, and hadn't...

"Is she okay?" Rapti asked.

"I don't know. No one's heard or seen her since we separated, not long after we left your home Kaley," I said, explaining why I was worried.

"Not too unusual for her, though, right? This is Meriah we're talking about... I've probably only seen her a handful of times in decades," Rapti said.

"She had a reason to make contact with me and Renn. It's not like her to break a promise to do so."

"Ah... No Meriah would not do that," Kaley agreed with a nod. As she did she scratched at her side, making her already barely functioning shirt even more worthless thanks to how pulled it aside to do so.

It was too bad Renn wasn't here. She'd likely enjoy watching Kaley the way she was now.

She'd have hugged them, and then either joined Rapti in cooking or would have sat across from Kaley. Not beside her. So she could watch her in full, even though she loved being close with those like Kaley there was no doubt she would have wanted to indulge in her in that way. Renn was weird like that and...

Thinking of Renn made me want to think of other things, so I stopped doing so.

"Well, if you do hear or see her please let her know Renn is worried about her... and thus so too am I," I said.

Kaley snickered at that, but Rapti didn't. "Of course. But there's another issue, Vim, one I fear I must bring up before I get side-tracked by the noisy world," Rapti then said.

Hm...?

"Do you remember the little incident you caused last time you were here? It's what we were just gossiping about you over!" Kaley said happily.

Shifting a little, I worriedly looked at Rapti. "The destruction I caused?" I asked.

She nodded. "The family whose house you destroyed is doing fine. We've made sure of it. But the owner of the ship you sunk is another story, and... I think you should meet her," Kaley said.

"Of the two I had expected the ship to be the least of my worries. Why?" I asked. I had given Rapti well more than that ship had been worth as compensation, hadn't I?

"Well... I know you don't want to hear it, Vim, but this is fate once more proving you wrong," Rapti said as she folded up the small towel she'd been using to clean her hands with. She delicately held it with both hands after doing so, as if to busy her hands and mind. But I knew that wasn't it. Like most birds Rapti was just fussy about cleanliness and such things.

"Not sure I like the sound of that... what happened?" I asked.

"She wants to meet you. And I fear she's doing so because of something I can't confirm, something I only suspect... so I'm afraid to speak of it."

"Your gods won't punish you for speculating, Rapti dear. It's not lying to speak of something you assume but have no proof of!" Kaley said.

"Yes it is. To speak falsehoods is..." Rapti immediately spoke, as if to admonish Kaley, but stopped herself and sighed. She then looked at me and nodded ever so gently. "I believe she either knows a saint, or has spoken to one. She had known her ship would sink, that I would offer her payment, and that it was you who sunk it. It's... the only explanation," Rapti said quickly, with a small voice as if in fear her gods really were listening. If I told her that I'd just killed her god, literally, I wonder what she'd say. Havoc had been the one to make those peacock monarchs if I remember correctly.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"Her name is Flora. She's the owner of the company, or rather the commerce guild as they call themselves. She rules five different families worth of enterprises, the ship you sunk had been hers but technically it had also been all of theirs," Rapti said.

"Then I'll meet her. If anything to keep her from causing you undue stress... Thought you said it was a daughter or something, back when it happened?" Hadn't it been?

"You remember...? Well I did. The one I had initiated contact with is one who is heavily involved in the church. Flora's her aunt. She's not as religious as the rest of the family, but... I've come to learn she should be, or at least has a good reason for trying not to be," Rapti said, again speaking slightly in a riddle as to avoid lying or speculating.

I glanced at Kaley, who noticed and gave me a gentle smile. "Was abused. Guess she was kidnapped and enslaved for a while, and now in Rapti's perspective the woman has a heart full of hate," Kaley explained.

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"I'm not saying it isn't justified...! I'm just saying she'd sleep easier if she just at least considered the idea of opening a single book, if even once," Rapti said with a huff.

Huh. Kaley said she showed up this morning, which had likely only been a few hours ago, but it seemed they already had long conversations about this. Though that might just be because it seemed to be bothering Rapti... "Is she a problem, Rapti? Want me to deal with her my way?" I asked.

"What...? No. She's fine, other than her showing up every few days asking if I've heard from you yet."

"And you think she's operating under a saint's wisdom of some kind," I said.

Rapti nodded and unfolded the towel, only to go about folding it back up again. "Yes. She has to be. She even knew your name without being told it."

"I'd say that's proof, but couldn't she have just overheard it? He and Renn are rather noisy when together," Kaley pointed out.

Were we?

"It's... possible. But from the little she's told me, something is definitely amiss. I'd feel a lot better if you just met her and confirmed whatever it is for me, Vim," Rapti asked.

"Done. Want me to go see her now? Where's she live?" I asked.

Rapti shifted a little, her eyebrows nearly meeting as she furrowed her brow. "Today's the day of rest, Vim."

By my parents, either be worried about it or don't be! "All the better, she'll not be busy," I said gently.

Kaley snickered as Rapti glanced away and slowly nodded. "Right..." she whispered as she stepped out of the room. "I'll escort you there, one moment let me finish and get ready."

I was going to stop her, since I wasn't sure if I wanted her to do such a thing... just in case I had to do something drastic, but knew better than to argue with her. Rapti had a lot of rules, kind of like me, and I knew better than to try and make her step beyond them.

"Staying long Vim?" Kaley asked as Rapti left.

"No. I'll handle this, visit Karma and then head west," I said. At least I hoped to. I wanted to make a stop at my cave first before heading back to Renn, if I could, too.

"Always so busy."

"How about you? Is all well?" I asked.

"Yeah? Just decided to visit her..." Kaley then went quiet as she glanced at the door, and then looked back at me. "Don't tell anyone, but it's your wife's fault," Kaley then whispered.

"Hm...?"

"I've been bored!" Kaley said, loudly. The kind of loud that Rapti had surely heard, even from her room.

I smirked at her. "I'll make sure to let her know, and I'll even punish her for you too."

She smirked back and waved me off. "Please, Vim! I plan to stick around for a bit here, if Rapti will let me," she said.

Rapti, denying the sister of one of her dearest friends respite? Never going to happen. "Staying here the whole time...?" I asked gently.

Kaley shifted a little, grabbing her ankles as she glanced up into my eyes... and then nodded. Without saying a word, I understood.

Or at least, had an idea.

So she was taking a sabbatical from men was she...? Rapti, for as religious she was, was actually a very understanding person. But even she would not be amused if Kaley brought men back every night to enjoy, especially different men each time. "Well if after your visit here and you find yourself still bored, head northwest to Renn. Her little world will be very busy and eventful for a while I think," I suggested.

Kaley blinked at me, and then nodded again. "... might just do that, Vim."

"Hm," I nodded back and glanced at the nearby chair. The only one unoccupied. The other couch had room, but I could tell that was where Rapti had been sitting based off the way the cushions were deformed and the position of a small pillow. And the other chairs had stuff on them, one had a bag and another had clothes neatly folded upon it. I saw no laundry basket or anything so it was likely that Rapti had brought out several sets, for the woman who was nearly naked. Though if Kaley would put any of them on was something I'd not bet on personally.

Wonder if she had at least arrived properly dressed. It was amusing though, since there were tea cups on the small table between the couches. I wonder what Rapti had offered her visitor first, the clothes or the tea?

Sitting down, I sighed softly as I glanced at the nearby shelf. The one my bags were resting up against. The chessboard was there, patiently waiting for its next play session.

The fact I noticed it enough to even acknowledge it made me upset.

Why wasn't Renn here...?

"How's Renn doing?" Kaley asked as she leaned forward to grab a little tea-cup on the table before her couch.

"She's doing well. She's really excited over this home she's going to build," I said.

"Hm... is she going to live there too?"

"She plans to for a while, at least. Maybe a decade or two?"

I was still trying not to acknowledge that it was likely her instinctual attempt at keeping me involved in the Society, even after I planned to step down. Hard not to be involved if I was living amongst a bunch of the members, after all.

"How's that make you feel?" Kaley teased, obviously reading between the lines.

I shrugged. "She's happy, that's all that matters."

Kaley sighed at me. "You're as boring a husband as you are a protector."

"Thanks."

She shook her head at me as she took a drink from her cup. Unlike Rapti who would drink modestly and unlike Renn who would happily gulp it down if it was tasty, she simply took a single gulp and put it back down. I knew better than to think it was alcohol, considering where we were, but I knew Kaley would have downed it just as easily even if it had been the strongest of spirits. She wasn't a fish in name and blood alone.

Thinking of alcohol reminded me of the night Renn had gotten drunk, and had found me on the roof of the Animalia Guild in Lumen.

I enjoyed thinking of her smirk, and her slightly slurring speech as she laid on my lap... at least until Kaley took off her shirt.

Watching the fish strip what little cloth she wore, I once again wished Renn was here. She would have enjoyed this.

She stood from the couch and walked over to the chair with clothes on it. She sighed as she picked one of the pants up, shaking her head at it. "And I thought my clothes were worn," she said softly.

"Surprised you're getting dressed as it is," I said.

"I'll go with you. While you're dealing with the human I'll have Rapti take me to lunch or something," Kaley said with a smirk.

I nodded at that, and again longed for Renn's presence. Not so that she and I could go have a lunch date, but so that she could enjoy one with them instead. She'd be upset to miss out on such a thing. Rapti and Kaley were an odd pair, an interesting dynamic to say the least.

Though right now she was likely having plenty of fun, so maybe that was a useless worry...

"Hm... I'll need to wrap them, won't I?" Kaley asked as she turned to me. She had put the shirt on, and had a pair of problems thanks to Rapti's lack of them. Though it was more so because of the thin and simple style of the shirt. It was made for a nun, one who was scrawny and humble... not what Kaley was.

"Especially here, with everyone like Rapti," I said. Nearly all of the residents here in Nevi were like those in Telmik, they'd not burn her at a stake for walking around like that but they'd definitely whisper and glare at her... and thus would Rapti get in trouble by associating with her, as rumors spread.

Kaley sighed. "Humans are so weird about it," she said as she went to put on the rest of the basic attire.

I smirked as her comment made me remember something. About the god I'd just killed. Rather Havoc's enemy way back before the wars... or at least one of them.

"There had been a god who had modified their body extravagantly. Think multiple breasts, big ones. You can say humans are weird, but so too is everyone else in their own way," I said.

For a long moment the room was quiet, and I frowned as I realized I didn't even hear the ruffling of clothes anymore. I glanced again at Kaley, half expecting her to be naked again... and instead found her staring at me in an odd position. She was in the middle of putting her pants on, with one leg kind of awkwardly angled with it half way through the pant leg. She had gone still... for some reason.

"You okay?" I asked.

Kaley startled, and then quickly nodded as she hurriedly put the clothes on. "Yeah..."

I kept a sigh from escaping as I again thought of Renn.

She too would have paused over my comment. Startled in much the same way, likely.

But the difference would have come immediately after. Instead of going meek and pretending to not have noticed, Renn would have smirked and said something. Either to continue the conversation, or change it completely out of kindness. In this instance she likely would have asked for details on what I meant by multiple breasts.

"Do you think Renn is pretty, Kaley?" I asked, changing topics a little and to clear the stiff air.

Kaley made an odd noise as she half giggled and half huffed at me. "She is, yes. I don't care for women as you know, but Renn is definitely pretty. Too pretty for you to be honest," she said as she went to tying her pants. They had a little cloth rope on them, to act as something of a belt. Common for a nun's attire.

"Hm..."

"Why? You must think so if you love her, right? Or are you one of those weird ones that fell in love with someone you're not attracted to?" Kaley asked.

"I do think she's adorable... pretty, yes," I corrected myself. I knew many thought those two things weren't the same, even though to me they were. "And I've been told by many others she is too, but everyone who has said so would either do so anyway no matter what she looked like or are people I don't respect. So I just wanted to hear your opinion," I said.

"Why mine...?"

"I respect you?" I said simply.

She blinked at me, going slightly still again... and then she laughed. "What...? Really?"

"Yeah...? Why wouldn't I?"

"I mean... look at me...! I'm a mess!" she said as she extended her arms, as if to show off her new attire. It was a typical worn down look found in most poor human settlements, but of course on her it looked fabulous.

"You remind me of an old friend... by the way did you know Tosh is back to normal?" I said, changing topics again.

She sighed at me as she put her hands on her hips. The way she did so would have been seductive, or at least appeared so, to any other man. "I don't like him, Vim, he toyed with my sister."

"I distinctly remember him the one being toyed with, I think," I said.

"Well... yeah? But that's our thing. He toyed with her as she toyed with him! That's not fair!" Kaley said.

"Thus my respect," I said with a small nod of acknowledgement. Not many could have such pride, let alone be so firmly serious in it.

"Can we please not talk about such things in my house...?" Rapti returned, sighing at us as she did. She was dressed to leave the house, with her hair hidden under her little cloth. It wasn't a full habit, just the under piece of one. She also carried in her hands what was undoubtedly going to be used to wrap Kaley's chest, as to make her modestly able to venture out into the city and not draw eyes.

"What, sexual beauty, breasts, or my sister's promiscuity?" Kaley asked seriously.

"Yes." Rapti simply said.

I chuckled at the two as I started to stand from my seat. "Let's help Kaley become proper enough to leave, and get this over with," I said.

"Ah, wait!" Kaley stopped me as she interrupted. I paused, but didn't sit back down. Kaley grinned wildly at me as she fought back a laugh. "So? Did Renn use any of the tricks I taught her yet? Did they work on you? And did you..." Kaley asked, and had seemed to want to say more but a giggling fit attacked her before she could. She made funny noises as she tried to talk through her laughs, but didn't succeed in doing so.

"Kaley...!" Rapti admonished her for me, but I just sighed and stepped away.

Like Renn needed any so-called tricks.

## Chapter 575 Renn – Twins

Using the metal poker to shuffle the embers and fire around, I wondered if I was breaking a rule.

"Many, maybe..." I whispered as I pushed the scroll deeper into the fire. I was kneeling in front of the fireplace inside the mansio, with a box of scrolls and books next to me waiting their turn to feed the flames. The scroll I'd just placed into the fire was one of the bigger ones, having to be put in at an angle into the fireplace thanks to its size. I also kept having to adjust it, as to keep it or its smoldering pieces from rolling out.

It, like the dozens I'd burnt before it, gave off an odd colored flame as it burnt. It sizzled and glowed a bit blue as it turned into white ash, and that ash was growing into such a large pile that I knew soon I'd have to put the fire out and scoop them out before I'd be able to burn more. Which was a tad concerning, since I still had two whole boxes to destroy.

At least they didn't make an odd smell or anything, and the smoke they gave off was the pretty normal too... I wonder what gave it the odd colored flame, though? The ink? The paper? Vim would know, but even if he was here to ask I'd be afraid to.

"Hey Vim, why do Celine's prophecies burn a weird color?" I asked myself, feeling ridiculous as I did. I could only imagine the look on his face!

Not that he'd be ashamed or angry at me, no. At least, not immediately. He'd likely grin like a fool upon hearing, or seeing, me do this... but then after a few moments, after his initial joy ran its course he'd realize why I was burning them... and then he'd likely give me a look that broke my heart.

I sighed as the end wooden piece of the scroll became visible. The piece that the scroll itself got wrapped around. It crackled a bit as it started to split from the heat, growing hot and red inside.

Odds are I was burning things that were as old, if not older, than me. I really didn't like doing such things, even if it was needed, but I knew better than to risk the alternative.

Merit had found the hidden stairwell, one that had likely been hidden for centuries, but I knew better than to think it'd remain so forever. Especially now that Merit had opened it and we'd gone in and out of it so many times. There was little doubt if I left the prophecies there in that room, someone would eventually happen upon it. Either someone would notice the shuffling of air and dust, stuff that had long since settled being disturbed thanks to the shelf itself having been moved, or even just by finding it thanks to a remnant of Merit's smell or something.

I couldn't risk it. I had no doubt that those like Light and the Chronicler knew the details of them, maybe even more than I wanted to admit, but they weren't the only people here in the Cathedral.

The scroll's wooden piece popped, becoming a splintered remnant of what it once was. I moved it around a bit with the metal poker, getting it better situated in the fire.

Yes, I'd just be able to burn a couple more then I'll need to put the fire out and gather up the ashes. They were starting to stop airflow they were stacked so high.

Not too big a deal. Our departure had been pushed back a day, so I had time to do this... I just hope I didn't get caught while doing so.

I had thought of taking them out of the Cathedral, or maybe burning them underground in the tombs, but I didn't want to risk either. Taking boxes of books and scrolls out of the Cathedral would draw attention, the kind that would just cause problems. And starting fires, even a contained one, down below worried me. The air down there was strange, still and thick. Something told me if I lit a fire down there I'd quickly be caught, drawing people by the smell and smoke.

Here though? The mansio leaking strong smoke from its chimney was not odd at all. Plus my bringing boxes in and out of here wasn't odd either, since I was helping Randle and the rest ready to move.

As long as no one walked in, at least...

I glanced behind me, past the table and entry and to the entry door. It was shut, as was the gate that laid behind it, but I knew better than to think it would be for long. The Cathedral has always been slightly busy, and it was even more so right now. The Chronicler and the rest were very active, all of them expecting hundreds of new members showing up at any time with Vim succeeding in saving the ship. Then there were those like Fizz who would show up just to spend time with me...

Glancing at the two boxes left that were openly sitting in the middle of the room, I decided to take precautions. The scroll was burnt enough now that it didn't need to be tended, so I abandoned the fire and went ahead and carried the boxes upstairs to my room. I'd let the fire die out and clean it, so I could burn the rest without interruption later tonight.

I placed them beside the dresser in my room, and placed my large overcoat cloak upon it. It had been warming up lately, and I didn't plan on going out of the Cathedral until we left Telmik so it worked great.

Smiling gently down at the boxes half hidden by the coat, I found my eyes drifting to the mirror standing in the corner. I'd already spent several hours staring at it, so had no plans to do so again, but...

Yes. I looked tired. Exhausted. I didn't have dark circles under my eyes, but I almost looked like I should have them from the way the rest of me looked. My shoulders were slumped, my eyes heavy, my tail a tad too stiff in the way it hung in the air... Even my ears were drooping a little.

I wasn't outright tired. Although I'd been busy lately, I wasn't exhausted or anything. So I knew why I looked, and felt, so disheveled.

It was a combination of things. First and foremost the obvious, the prophecies Merit and I had found and read concerning me. But the other part of it was... something likely only I knew in the whole world. Odds are not even Vim knew how I felt during moments like this.

I missed Vim and wished he was here.

I always did, of course, when we were separated. Even when we were together, when I was off doing something else or he was busy, I always found myself wishing he wasn't. Even when only separated for a few hours I always felt a part of me wish we weren't. But lately these feelings have been getting worse. I felt... like I was longing for something. I wasn't really lonely, most likely thanks to my being surrounded by friends and family, but at the same time I was. When I had first got here I had wanted a night alone, to sleep alone, and now I didn't even want to consider it. I had even convinced Angie to sleep with me the other night, even though she herself didn't care much for such skinship. I didn't want to be alone.

The obvious reason was right next to me. In the boxes I'd just hid. In the fire down below, in the pile of ashes... but I wasn't able to fully blame Celine's written words on my strange longing. After all I'd started to notice this feeling long before I'd known of them. Even before life had gotten too hectic, back before I'd even known of Light or any of this stuff, I had felt weird when Vim and I had spent time apart. And every time since it's gotten worse.

Recently I'd come to see him as my home. Where I belonged. Because that was how I felt when he wasn't near me, I felt as if I was somewhere I shouldn't be.

Without him I was missing a piece of me. And it felt terrible to think so, because I knew his reasons for being apart were just and sound.

Vim was saving lives. Hundreds of them. Righting wrongs, and stopping terrible futures. I shouldn't be so possessive. I shouldn't act like this. It was an insult to all that we were... and was against our agreement, too.

He had made it very clear, and has all this time, that he'd put the Society over me. Even if he didn't want to. He had told me I'd have to accept that fact.

Yet here I was. Wishing he was here instead of saving hundreds of souls. And the worst part was it wasn't as if my life was in danger, or I was having great difficulty. My heart was simply in disarray.

It wasn't even like I wanted, or needed, to talk to him about what was happening. I probably could and would never talk to him about the prophecies, ever, but I'd still like to talk to him. I bet just a few minutes with him would have calmed me down, even if all we talked about was the weather or something silly and simple.

And that fact was bothering me more right now than the prophecies were.

I actually felt, at this moment, that a handful of minutes with Vim... talking about insignificant things, was worth more than saving that ship.

Who was I to think six hundred souls were less important than my comfort...? The fact I felt this way made me want to throw up again.

Of course I didn't actually think my comfort was more important than their lives... but I couldn't deny what my heart felt. I desired Vim's presence. I wanted to hear his voice, to see his smile and to smell his scent in the air. And I couldn't have those things with him away from me.

I didn't want to be selfish. I loved it when Vim helped people. But at the same time... I couldn't deny what my heart wanted. And it wanted him.

Was it the heart, maybe...? Vim had said it'd change me. Make me like Landi. Colder. Less compassionate. But had I not had these feelings long before absorbing it? Though maybe, like Vim said it would, it had simply amplified them. Making them stronger and more potent...

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They worried me, but at least I was able to recognize them and chastise my own self still. Would I get worse though? Maybe I should start paying more attention to even the smallest of feelings and thoughts...? Even the subconscious ones? As to keep check on my own self, on my morals and ethics as to ensure I didn't stray too far from who I was...?

Possibly. But right now I had to bottle up the feeling gnawing at my tail. Before I started to cry.

"I should have gone with him..." I whispered at myself in the mirror, and then I heard metal clang.

Stepping to the window, I smiled softly as I watched Mapple walk into the small courtyard. My smile died a bit as I watched two people follow her through the metal gate, and then Mapple shut it behind them.

I didn't recognize them. They both had hats on, so I couldn't see their faces from this angle on the second floor, but I could tell by their builds and strides I'd never met them before. Were they human...? They weren't wearing the robes commonly found here in the Cathedral but instead were wearing stuff not too unlike what Vim and I wore. Leather bounded cotton, made not just for comfort but for use.

A little glad for the distraction and for my choice in hiding the prophecies away as I had, I went ahead and left my room. By the time I made it downstairs Mapple had already opened the front door, letting herself in.

"Hey Renn!" Mapple greeted me with a smile, one that was becoming very common to see upon her. I was still a tad unsure of the woman myself, but I was glad all the same to see her so relaxed around me finally. Though that might just be because Vim wasn't here.

"Mapple..." I greeted her back, and turned to smile at the two who joined her inside. They were a man and a woman, and as the man shut the door behind them I... was... A little stunned as I stared at two people who may as well be the same person, I couldn't help but grin. "And you two must be the twins I've heard about," I said to the two.

They were splitting images of one another...! I wonder if this was what the whisker babies will grow into one day?

"Weird aren't they?" Mapple teased.

The woman stepped forward first, extending a hand as she did. "I'm the better half. My name is Coin, I'm glad to finally meet you Renn," Coin said as I took her hand to shake it.

"I'm Ledger. The better, better half," Ledger then introduced himself and extended his hand as well, nearly pushing his sister's arm and hand out of the way as to grab mine in the process.

"Coin, Ledger, it's nice to meet you two. I've heard we've been missing one another for years lately, always a few weeks off from seeing one another," I said as I shook the brother's hand.

They both had firm and hard hands. Hands that told me they either worked hard, laboriously, or it was related to their bloodline. I didn't see anything obvious upon them, at least visibly, to tell me what they were... but they did both smell kind of like mud. It was a faint scent, enough to make me think that maybe they'd walked through mud recently but both of their boots were spotless. That muddy smell was from they themselves.

"So we have! But it's common with Vim being taken into consideration... which speaking of, congratulations on reeling him in! Thanks to you I won quite a nice bet with my idiot brother!" Coin said as she pushed Ledger back a bit as our hands separated, as if to keep him from speaking directly with me. She even made Mapple take a few steps back, as to not get bumped into by her brother who huffed and fought with her for a moment as she did. The front area of the house was a tad too small for them to be roughhousing the way they were, Ledger had almost bumped into the small table that had the book of visitor's names on it.

My name by itself, again, made me sad so I tried not to look at it.

"Bet...?" I asked as I watched the two push against one another. They both had smiles, but it sounded and looked like they were actually pushing with a lot of force. Enough to hurt if not careful.

"We had a bet on when you'd show up, he now has to handle all ledger work for five years for me, so thanks for that!" Coin said with a huge grin.

Oh my... I wasn't sure what to be bothered over more, the five years they'd bet on me or the fact she had so blatantly spoken of what I was in the process of burning out of existence... The fact I had meant to be here a long time ago. Plus how funny they'd bet his namesake!

Glancing at Mapple, I found her gently smiling at us. She looked like she was amused, but didn't want to be involved. A typical look on her.

"Well... I'm sorry, Ledger," I said.

"I'll ask Vim for compensation later," he said.

I couldn't help it, I laughed and nodded. He sounded serious...!

Coin again pushed her brother away, and this time he didn't fight back much. He was pushed back a bit, towards the door behind her, as she stepped forward again. I stood up a bit straighter, since she was a bit taller than me and now real close.

"We have to leave again in a bit, but I've come to ask for permission to visit you up north!" Coin said quickly, as if afraid her brother would interrupt her or something.

"Hm...? Of course you can," I said. Why were so many people asking for permission for such a thing? It was going to be a full-fledged Society location, so...

Coin smiled at that and nodded. "Sweet...! I'll bring gifts, better ones than that idiot for sure!"

"Hey!" Ledger complained.

Gifts...? "You don't need to bring anything, just yourselves. I'd enjoy getting to know the both of you, not many in our Society travel around like you do so I'd love to hear your stories," I said.

"Hers is stupid, ignore hers!" Ledger said as he grabbed his sister by the back of her shirt and pulled her backward. She made a noise as they swapped places, with the brother now standing before me and the sister groaning from behind him.

Gosh they were adorable! Though they seemed at odds with one another, there was no denying it was done with good vibes and graces. There was no way they'd have stuck together for so many years otherwise!

It was nothing compared to the kind of relationship I once had with my own siblings... or from what I'd heard and been told, Lilly's children. They too had strife, to the point they even occasionally came to blows.

Wonder where such differences came from. Was it the upbringing? The home itself? Had my siblings hated me because my own parents had, or had it been something deeper? And if it was something that could be influenced... could I ensure my own kids didn't end up like me?

I hoped my children would have a good relationship with one another too.

"You two have to leave, hurry up," Mapple then said, sounding annoyed.

The brother perked up, realizing she was right, and then nodded. "Sorry. We've been so busy thanks to all the new members showing up..." Ledger apologized as Coin rounded him, but didn't push him aside or he her as they went to stand beside one another.

She too nodded and smiled at me. "In a month or so I should be able to come visit you up north, Renn. We'll get to know each other then!" she said.

"Yeah...! I'm looking forward to it," I agreed.

The two then glanced at each other, then looked to Mapple. "Thanks for helping us find her, Mapple," they both then said in unison.

My tail squirmed at the sound of both of their voices perfectly syncing together. Not only had their words been the same, they had spoken so fluidly and similarly it had almost sounded as if a single person had spoken. It made me doubt my own ears.

"Hm. Travel safe," Mapple said simply.

The two nodded then looked back at me. "Later, Renn!" they said together.

"Bye... Safe travels..." I waved them goodbye as they both turned and left. Once they were out the door, and Ledger had shut it behind him, I heard them whispering happily as they left the courtyard and went to the metal gate. They spoke about how I was pretty, far prettier than they had expected.

Although a little embarrassing to hear them say so, and do so in such a serious way, I was kind of used to it.

"They seem nice," I said to Mapple as I heard the gate open and then shut.

"They're idiots. But they are kind, yes," Mapple said.

Idiots...? Maybe playful and a little childish, but I'd not go so far as to say that... after all didn't they operate a large trading route for the Society? Like, one that involved many ships and stuff? They were basically a Brandy then weren't they?

"Did they just arrive?" I asked. Not even Vim came and went that fast.

Mapple nodded. "Few hours ago. They need to head to Nevi real quick, then to Lumen. They're always busy."

"Makes me feel lazy, since I've been feeling overwhelmed and busy but at least I get to spend a few days in the same bed," I said.

"Hm... by the way were you burning something? The house smells kind of funny," Mapple asked as she glanced around, likely to the fireplace. It was out now, though the remnants of all the ashes were rather visible.

"I was just burning some stuff that I don't want to carry around anymore. We have several wagons ready, but they're all stuffed full... so," I said with a shrug, playing it off as something not that important.

"Should have told me, I'd have done it for you," Mapple said.

A little stunned by her quick, and simple offer, I smiled and nodded. "Thanks... Would you like to have something to drink or eat?" I asked. It was about lunch time.

Mapple frowned at that, but after a moment of pondering she shook her head. "I have to go prepare Aunt's lunch... maybe next time."

Hm... "Are you going to have lunch with her?" I asked.

"Auntie...? I guess so?"

"Will you two be alone?"

Mapple's frown shifted a little. "Yes... want to join us?"

I nodded slowly. "Would that be okay...?"

"Why wouldn't it?" Mapple asked.

"You just seemed a tad off just now, and the way you asked made me feel like I shouldn't do it," I said.

Mapple flinched. "Sorry... I just know you don't care much for her or the rest, so was just..." Mapple went quiet as she shrugged.

Ah. Right... "I don't dislike her, Mapple... Chronicler has never been anything but kind to me. I just don't like it when people try to manipulate me, or withhold secrets from me," I said as I stepped away. I headed for the stairwell and pointed upward. "I'll get ready and join you, one moment."

She nodded gently at me, but right before I reached the stairs I paused and glanced back at her.

"By the way... did you decide?" I asked.

She stood up straighter and blinked at me. "Decide...?"

"When do you plan to join us up north?"

She blinked again. "I... can't. Not until I retire."

"When will that be?" I asked.

"Once my replacement comes. I think they're supposed to be on the third ship...? But I don't know."

Oh... someone from the other continent. So she was waiting for someone else to take her position, whatever her position was... I wonder what she actually did, anyway? Half the time she seemed like she was just some kind of maid or servant, yet sometimes was sent off on important duties... "Well, maybe that won't be too long from now, since they're showing up earlier!" I said as I then went upstairs.

As I climbed the stairs, I heard Mapple whisper something under her breath. Something I knew she had not meant for me to hear.

"I can only hope."

Chapter 576 Vim – Flora

Studying the bookshelf, I did my best to not just... act out.

I was in the mansion of the family who I had harmed. The owners of the ship I'd sunk.

Right now I was alone, in an office, waiting for the woman named Flora to show up. Rapti had wanted to join me in this meeting, but I had not allowed it. Thankfully she had understood. Especially since now the odds of it going badly were rather high.

Slowly glancing up the bookshelf, I glared at the ceiling above me. It, like most of this mansion, was old but built nicely and kept clean. But I cared not for its craftsmanship or its age. Instead I cared about the being a floor above me. One that was unmistakable.

A saint was in the room above me. A weaker one, but a saint all the same.

Sighing as I looked back down to the shelf, I tried again to find something to distract me. It was proving difficult, especially since all of the books and objects on the shelf were simple ledgers and accounts mixed with the odd knickknack. There was nothing in this office, though well made and full of pricier items, worth my attention.

The door to the room was open, but it was still odd I had been left alone. I had been brought her by a servant, one who had seemed annoyed I had bothered them. It was time to prepare for lunch, and I had

interrupted it. But I had not felt that should have justified my being abandoned in what was obviously an important room.

Though, odds are I had been left alone for the same reason I had so readily been invited in.

The moment I had mentioned my name I had been given permission to enter. That the master of the house, this Flora, had been waiting for me.

Had she been doing so because of Rapti mentioning me, or the saint though, I wonder?

Guess I'll find out soon enough...

I sighed as I stepped away from the bookshelf and went to grab one of the chairs before the lone desk in the room. The desk was completely clean, not even a pen was upon it, but I could tell that was not because it wasn't seeing use. The desk had countless little marks and nicks from age and wear, from writing upon it and stuff being placed down onto it a tad too roughly. Odds are this desk was as old as this mansion, and likely older too than most of the humans in it if it not all of them.

Sitting carefully into the chair, I wondered if I'd not ever walked down this street before. We weren't near the docks, but we also weren't in some hidden corner community either. There was little doubt in my mind I had not at least a few times in the last few decades walked this way while examining Nevi... yet not once had I ever sensed a saint here. Even as weak as she was, it was noticeable. I had noticed before Rapti had even pointed out which house we had been heading to, nearly a block away.

Which meant this saint was either new here... or I had somehow miraculously missed her every time I was in town. Hard to imagine, but not impossible...

Really. I was upset, but not surprised... though I felt I should be.

Saints were indicators of godly activity. The more divine power being thrown around in the world, the more saints were born. So I should not be surprised at all to have so suddenly been encountering more and more of them... but by my parents it was infuriating to accept it.

It was of course my job to protect the Society and its members. That obviously included moments like this, where outsiders either learned of our existence or caught wind of it. Contacting with those individuals, determining if they were a threat or not and then acting on such information was one of my main tasks as protector. One I was usually very good at.

But I was far from in the mood to be dealing with such things. Let alone another saint.

If anything I was more upset over the fact I was being side-tracked again.

My foes had just threatened to kill Renn, and here I was twiddling my thumbs over something as mundane as a saint! By my parents I was about to...

"Lord Vim."

I turned, but stayed seated as I watched an older woman walk into the room. She entered alone, but another person was outside of the room and walking away. Another older woman who looked like she was hurrying away. Likely sent on some task. Sent for guards maybe?

"Flora?" I asked as the woman approached.

She nodded a little unsurely, likely because she wasn't sure why I had not gotten up to greet her. "Yes... Flora Nevilla. I'm glad to finally meet you..." She went quiet, staring at me in a way that I was rather used to.

Slowly standing, as to mask my sigh, I nodded and held out a hand. "I don't look like much, no. But it's easier to be like this than not," I said, knowing what she was thinking. Many of my own people had such a look on their faces when they first met me, having usually expected something more than I was.

Renn had looked at me rather similarly when we had first met, though I don't think she remembers doing so. Which was funny since she remembered everything else.

"I... I'm sorry. That was terribly rude of me. But yes... I had expected someone a tad different, though to be honest I'm not sure what I expected," Flora said as she took my hand and shook it. I noted as she did that her hand was rough, not anything like one would expect from a woman who had been born into wealth and lived behind a desk. Rapti and Kaley had mentioned she had suffered in her youth. Terribly so. If they had spoken truth, then I now knew several things about this woman. She knew pain and hardship. She was wise and cunning, able to run enterprises beyond just a mere shop or two... and now I also knew she had experienced hard labor, and knew it well, based off her hard hands.

"My own people expect me to be a monster of a man, or at least to have a horn or two. Sorry to disappoint," I said.

Flora laughed softly as she nodded. "Yes...! I had expected something like that, I think," she admitted as our hands separated.

I nodded gently and gestured to the door. "May I close that?"

"Hm? Oh. Forgive me. Yes," she herself took charge and did so as she spoke, answering me vocally and by closing the door herself.

"Thank you," I said as I went to sit back down.

Flora didn't join me immediately, choosing instead to stare at me for a moment... and when she finally did, she did not sit behind her desk but instead in the other chair beside me. She turned a little, to face me directly.

I sat up a bit, realizing she was taking this rather seriously... and then waited to hear what she had to say.

Was she going to blackmail me? Threaten? Speak of prophecies? Maybe beg for my assistance, or something? To ask for more money for the damage I'd done to her and hers, or something else entirely...?

It was too bad Renn wasn't here. She likely would have enjoyed this. At least more than I was. A lot more.

"You sunk my boat," Flora then said.

"It's nice to meet you too," I said back.

She blinked in shock, and then laughed at me. "How stoic!"

I let her laugh for a moment, and once she calmed down enough I went ahead and spoke some more. "I believe I've already apologized for destroying your ship. I did so with money, a lot of it," I said.

Flora slowly nodded at me. "Yes. You had, hadn't you...?" she said with a smirk, and a small twinkle in her eye.

I didn't like the way she was looking at me. It was the kind of look Renn gave me when I had a snack she wanted to pilfer. But in this woman's case it wasn't outright hunger, or lust, it was... maybe desire? But it didn't seem to be a basic desire. Maybe she really did just want something from me, or from the Society, maybe I could end this without having to kill her and all who she's associated with...

"I don't know what you are... what any of you are, but I know you're not human," Flora then said. She sat up a bit straighter, her smirk disappearing as she put on a business expression of calmness and surety. "I know there are many of you, and you're as powerful as you are wealthy. To the point of tossing around a few golden coins is as simple a matter as it would be for me a bag of flour," she said.

Bag of flour...? Her business must deal mostly in food or something. "I care not for flattery," I said simply.

Flora blinked again in shock, but didn't laugh this time... instead she reached behind her waist. I wasn't too worried of her drawing a weapon, for obvious reasons, but I had to admit I was a little surprised when she revealed a small envelope.

It was one made with thick paper, and it looked to have many papers inside of it. She hesitated a moment, staring deeply at it as if it was precious... and then held it out to me.

I didn't take it.

"Please," she begged.

Studying her for a small moment, and the look of strange desperation on her face... I decided to go ahead and take it. Before I could flip it around and open it though, she told me what it was.

"That is the deed to everything I own."

I paused, my fingers going still as they stopped opening it. "Excuse me...?"

Stolen content alert: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

"I know to you, to your kind, material objects may very well be worthless. A means to an end, maybe. But it is all I have. All I possess, all we can possess. That or our very blood and our lives, is all I can offer to you... all that I can think of, at least," Flora said softly, suddenly sounding unsure of herself.

Before, during our meeting, I had seen the woman who had ran a business empire. Now I just saw a typical human. A human woman, suddenly unsure of herself and... scared, maybe?

"And why are you giving me anything?" I asked her as I put the letter down on my lap.

"I want you to take my daughter."

My eye twitched as the feeling of the saint above me became ever more apparent. "I don't have the time or patience for this..." I started to say, shaking my head as I did.

"Please...! She's... different. Like you," Flora said quickly.

"Excuse me?" I asked again.

The woman gulped and grabbed at the end of her shirt. Strongly enough to give me a glance of her figure and stomach, one that told me she wasn't as old as I had thought she was. She was in rather good shape. "Her eyes glow," she whispered.

My calf twitched.

"She whispers about dreams... One's I've... been trying to ignore. But do you know what she dreamt but a week before you sunk my ship...?" Flora asked as her eyes dug into my own.

"That I sunk it," I said simply.

Flora perked up; making her shirt stretch so much it made noises in complaint as she did. "You know!?"

I sighed at her and glanced at the door. It was still shut, of course. "How long have you known?" I asked.

"That my daughter was special...? Since her birth, I mean her eyes have been glowing since..."

I waved her words away, with the hand that still held her letter. It flopped with a funny sound thanks to its thick paper as I waved it at her. "About us," I clarified.

"Oh... well, in theory my whole life. My grandmother had spoken of your kind since I was born, telling us stories and legends and stuff... but I was only sure once my daughter was born, and started telling me of her dreams. She spoke of people with animal parts, like cat ears and," Flora started to speak, rather quickly, and I felt my gut wrench and coil as I again waved her down.

"And so you think your daughter is one of us," I said swiftly, to stop her from saying something I didn't want to hear. Of all traits to pick out she chose that!?! Damn saints! Damn them!

Flora blinked wildly at me for a moment, and then briskly nodded. "Um... yes? Isn't she...? How could she not be a spirit, what with her powers and...?"

"Why is this the first time I've heard of her or from you then? Me and my people have been frequenting this city since its inception, why not until now have you shown yourself to us?" I asked, discarding her misunderstanding. It made sense for her to think so, obviously. To her we were likely like her daughter, or she like us. Of course this girl was most undoubtedly just a human, but she was a saint... and that did in a way make her kin to a degree, but not entirely.

"Because it wasn't until recently she started to speak of you, and then she had that dream that you sunk the ship... and that I'd be visited by a nun carrying gold, and..."

My head went numb as Flora mumbled for a few moments, speaking of how she met Rapti... or rather how Rapti met her niece, who then involved Flora. She spoke highly of Rapti, but I didn't care much for her opinion on Rapti's personality or kindness. Rapti was spoken highly by everyone, at least in terms of her personality, so that wasn't a shock to hear.

But everything else...?

So the saint upstairs was her daughter. One who of course has had prophetic dreams. And this was why she, why they, knew of our existence and why she had wanted to meet me. The saint has had prophecies of us, of me and... maybe Renn... So...

I had to close my eyes and focus, as to not break the chair I was in or the whole house around me... no, even the whole city. I focused deeply, breathing slowly and evenly as I contained my wrath.

I hated saints. I hated their dreams. I hated the powers that gave birth to them, and granted them vision. Damn them all and forevermore. May the day come I can finally rid the world of all divinity and...

Stop, Vim.

Not only would mother never have allowed me to indulge in such wrath, I have vowed against it. And... and if this saint really has dreamed of Renn... then it was not my place to rob my lovely wife of a friend, or whatever experience she was meant to have with her.

Even if I hated this, despised it, the reality was here and now before me. And it was my job, as protector and son of my parents, to do what I had sworn to.

A saint had been born to a human family. One that was smart enough to know their child was special, and needed more than they could give. And it just so happened it was I who was sitting before her, getting involved, in this moment. I and my damned wife who seemed to draw the world's attention every time I looked away...!

"We've kept her in the house... keeping her safe, but it's become so difficult... People are starting to ask questions, and even family members are starting to question! Just last month my cousin requested my daughter, to meet her, because he has a business partner who's son needs a wife! I'll not be able to hide her forever, let alone keep her happy, and I know fate has so much more planned for her than to live here, trapped in a small building hiding from the world...!" Flora continued rambling, and I realized I had missed quite a bit. She'd gone from talking about Rapti to her own daughter, and how she had been... protecting her?

Yes. Flora was on the verge of tears. She was shifting and twitching, half a moment from losing her collective cool, and looked every bit a stressed out mother. As if talking about an unruly or sickly child she had no idea how to properly care for, or something like it.

This woman was not a threat to me or the Society. Not in a real way. She was a threat to a certain degree, housing a saint and knowing of our existence... but...

In reality she was more a threat to herself, and her daughter, than anything else.

And she was basically begging me for help, wasn't she? Begging us, the Society, for help. Because she believed that her daughter was one of us. A non-human. A spirit, as she had called us.

This wasn't the first time I'd experienced this, but it's been a long time since it last happened. A very long time, especially for a saint.

I needed to stay calm. To be rational, but also compassionate.

After all... even though I hated this scenario, all it meant, and saints and divinity... I had no right to outright hate a poor soul who was obviously in need.

Not only would the Society not permit me to ignore her, neither would Renn. Nor too would my own ethos.

"How many know of her?" I asked, doing my best to focus on the task at hand.

Flora focused on me, gulped and nodded. "Me and two others. My sister and my chamberlain, one who has served my family her whole life," she said.

The woman she'd just been with, likely. "Her father?"

She shook her head, rather quickly. "I was raped down south on one of my first outings," she said, and kept it at that.

"Aren't you married...?" I asked. Even in the Nation of the Blind or its outcroppings, such as here, a woman in charge of such industry was rare. Too rare, usually such women masked their influence with a husband or something like it.

"Legally, yes I am. But not really. The man I'm married to, Harvy, may not even exist anymore. My father reached out to a family friend who lives in Telmik years ago, I formally married one of his sons but only met him during the ceremony way back then. I've not seen or corresponded with him since," Flora answered honestly, and swiftly.

I didn't like hearing of such a detailed life, since it told me a lot. A lot about her and her circumstances... and how most of it was centered on her daughter, the saint. A saint born from assault.

This poor woman's been struggling, by the sounds of it nearly alone, for a long time.

When Renn did hear of this she's undoubtedly going to ask me, again, why so many of us suffered such fates. And per usual I'll not have an answer for her. Not a real one at least.

"You did that all to hide her existence, to protect her," I said knowingly after Flora went quiet.

She nodded softly. "Yes."

Taking in a deep breath, I sighed it out and silently praised myself. I'd not broken a thing, by the look and sounds of it. Not a floorboard had cracked, not a window or brick... I was getting good at this. "How old is she?" I asked.

"She'll be twelve in three days."

Twelve...!? I almost wanted to flinch. How young! But that made a lot of sense, since any older would have made it weird. In fact, the simple fact it had taken twelve years for her to have brought attention to either herself or us was a miracle on its own in a way...

"Do you know what you're asking of me...? Really?" I asked the mother of a broken home.

Flora didn't hesitate to nod. "I do."

"You'll never see her again," I threatened.

The woman blinked watery eyes but nodded again. "I know."

Sitting forward a bit, I held her gaze and lowered my voice. "And if it comes to pass that her life ever ends up being in danger because of you, your family or associates... I'll obliterate you. I will cull all of you, this whole town if need be, to protect her. With a fury you simply cannot comprehend," I warned some more.

She grabbed her shirt even harder, but nodded once again. "All that does is prove my decision correct. Take her. Protect her. Please."

Damn. She was serious. And real. This was not a mother looking to offset a burden... but one struggling to do the right thing. She knew she couldn't properly raise or support her daughter and as such is giving her to those she believed capable of doing so.

Glancing down to my lap, I shifted the letter. "All your wealth," I stated.

"For her."

"You'll be left with...?"

She gave me a sad smile. "I'll make do. I always have. Always will."

Hm. I'd think she was hinting that she left herself some, but odds are she hadn't. Even this house was likely included in this envelope. She was genuinely giving it all away, what was likely generations of wealth and power... all for her daughter.

I couldn't hate that.

Tapping the envelope against my thigh, I wondered what Renn would say. I knew what she'd do, of course. I knew exactly what she'd do, and even what she'd have already done.

My wife would not take just the girl.

But the Society had rules. I had rules.

A woman who was willing to sacrifice such wealth for her child... a child she knew she cannot properly care or protect... Especially one born from a moment of pure distress to boot? Yes. Renn would take her too. In a heartbeat. This was exactly the type of person Renn loved, and did so dearly.

I wonder if Rapti had known this would happen. Probably had. She hadn't outright lied to me about not knowing what she wanted, but...

"Please... please, Lord Vim, I..." Flora began to speak, but as she did so she finally broke. Tears began to flow as she coughed, she seemed to be trying to stop herself from crying but wasn't doing too good a job at it.

Likely had just thought I was about to say no, so had started to panic.

But I couldn't say no.

But that didn't mean I could just outright agree so readily, either...

Standing up, I went ahead and slipped her envelope into my pocket. I did so in a way that I was sure she had seen it, even through her fit of tears, and then nodded down at her.

"Show me the girl. Before either of us get too worked up we should first see if I'm really who she foresaw, don't you think?" I suggested.

Flora sniffed as she smirked and stood, though a bit unsteadily. "Yes! Right! You got to make sure, right?" she said hurriedly as she grew excited.

"Clean up a bit before we go. Don't let her see you like this," I said gently.

She hesitated a moment, but then nodded. "Right... you're right. She's a spunky little thing, but is still a little girl..." Flora then gave me an odd smile, one that made my heart hurt a little. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Many times," I said softly.

She sniffed as she stepped towards the door. "I bet... I'm glad to hear it, to be honest. We'll stop at the lavatory first then head upstairs."

"Lead the way."

Chapter 577 Renn – Final Moments Within Hallowed Halls

There were tiny things on her scales.

Standing on the podium that Vim's mother's statue stood upon, I studied the small objects detailed into the marble stone. At first I had thought they were stacks of coins, but upon further inspection it seemed each one was its own thing. They were just shaped into coins in form, in shape, but they had little intricate designs etched into them to tell one what they actually represented.

One stack, on the left side, seemed to be the representation of emotions. At least, that was the best way I could explain it. One coin had a smiling face, detailed and very expressive. Too expressive, actually... almost as if it might not be happiness but something else. Glee maybe? It was slightly hard to tell, since it was half covered by the coin stacked upon it.

The next coin stacked upon that one, it too half hidden by another upon it, had the image of a ship with torn sails. It looked like someone was in the ship, but they were alone and slouched. Sunken into themselves, as if defeated. They weren't rowing, and the ship itself looked battered and torn. Since the coins seemed to be themed, I assumed it was the feeling of defeat. Loss, or depression maybe.

The coin atop it, the top of the pile, had a man holding a spear high above his head in a stance of victory. There were bodies piled beneath him, and he held a decapitated head in his other hand. A scene of

victory and pride, maybe... but there was a hidden truth in it. Behind the man, lurking as if emerging from the pile of bodies beneath the victor was a shadow. One with a knife, aimed and poised, mid-strike. The meaning of conceit, or dangerous pride, was rather obvious. Especially when I looked at another coin, one that had been etched away from the pile. Looking nearly as if it was about to fall off the scale it was on, as if it had wobbled off the pile somehow.

That coin was envy. The scene was of three people, two who were happily kissing and a third who was hidden behind the trees in the scene behind them. The woman peering at the happy couple had a very obvious expression of jealousy, with the way she was glaring and crying. It was actually very fascinating at how detailed the coins were, since they were only a tad bigger than real ones.

Vim had made them almost too well. Almost as if they were more finely made than his mother even was. Had that been on purpose, I wonder?

Shifting the lantern, I went to study again the other side of the scale. This one didn't have coins upon it, but tiny figures. They reminded me somewhat of the little game board pieces I played with on occasion. They were small, finger sized, people... though I didn't recognize any of them. There were a dozen of them all stacked and piled in the center of the scale, each with an expression finely detailed into their little faces.

I couldn't tell if the pieces of people also represented emotions, but it didn't seem so to me. Especially since they all had similar expressions of grief and fear... if they were to represent things on a more figurative scale, why would he have made them all so similar?

Maybe they were gods...? Or people he had known? Or people his mother had known...?

And if so what did it represent? The scales were balanced, perfectly, so did that mean the people were equal to the coins of emotions? What if the coins weren't emotions at all, but something else I didn't understand...? Whatever they were, they balanced each other out.

Vim had said once that she had taught him in a unique way. That she had made him argue against his own beliefs, as to teach him how to see things in other's perspectives. Maybe this had something to do with it? That the scales were meant to showcase how she weighed things, if even just to teach him something...?

Or had his mother judged people, maybe? Supposedly some gods did such a thing, didn't they? Weighed the souls of us lesser creatures...? Based off their actions or emotions in their lives? Maybe their sins...? Was it all related... Or was I reading too much into it?

Would Vim tell me the importance if I asked him, or would he just smile softly and shake his head at me?

"Hm..." I lowered the lantern a little and leaned away from the scale she held, as to look at her once more.

I was glad now that I had come back to look at her. My last two visits I'd not checked the scale itself, not as closely as I should have. I had not noticed anything on them the last time I'd seen the statue, thanks to my having looked at it from below. Although the items on the scales weren't very tiny, thanks to the angle of where she held them they were not visible from underneath the statue. I was simply too short to have seen them.

My first time seeing her, with Vim, had been somewhat cut short. He had tempted me into the nearby baths, drawing me away from her. But my second time seeing her, a few days ago, I had come alone and had time... but I had also cut my visit short since I had been so utterly devastated by the revelation that those prophecies Merit and I had found had brought.

Now though, my heart was a tad more settled. I had read enough of Celine's prophecies, and others, to know more about what they had expected of me. I knew now why so many have acted the way they have around me, and kind of why they were so angry at Vim. Although still bothered by it all, deeply, I wasn't so disturbed by the new information that I wasn't capable of focusing.

Plus burning all of those books and scrolls about me and Vim had been rather... relaxing. Therapeutic, as Vim would call it.

"Still, you really were beautiful..." I whispered as I stared at her face.

Vim's mother had looked a tad older than me, but still had that youthful aspect to her. Plus I liked how her hair looked braided, even though it really wasn't. Vim had mentioned she wasn't finished, that he had planned to put bows and stuff in her hair, and I could see where and how he would have put them had he finished it.

Should I do my hair up like that...? Could I even do it? I didn't think my hair was long enough, at least not with the way it was now. But maybe Vim would like it if I did...

Bending down a little, I adjusted the lantern I carried so I could try and see between her thighs. She wore an odd dress, weirdly thick pants with a lot of pockets and buttons and stuff, and they parted in a way that slightly revealed her legs.

Of course I saw only plain stone between the little slit opening of her pants, which made me sigh. "Not sure why I'd think Vim would have detailed her that much," I said as I stood back up.

She was taller than me, even with me standing on the pedestal with her, but not by much. If I took my ears into account I was likely the taller... but she had no shoes on. She was barefooted, while I wore my boots for traveling.

I wonder how tall his father had been?

Reaching out, with as much care as I could muster, I gently touched her chest. The stone she was made of was cold, and smooth. My fingers ran along her strange clothes, barely making a sound as they did.

Just how had he carved this...? With his spear, maybe? I couldn't imagine anything else cutting something so well. It almost felt like the stones you'd find in a river, smooth as can be.

I coughed a little as I stopped touching her, since it felt silly and rude, and I stepped backward. I stepped off the small platform, and again noticed how from off the little pedestal I couldn't see the stuff on the scales.

So weird. The pedestal wasn't that high off the ground, it reached a little above my ankles, but it seemed it was enough. It made me feel short.

"My name is Rennalee... Vim and others call me Renn most of the time," I said softly to her.

I smiled a little as I shrugged. "Vim... denies what you are, but I think I know. I think you were as much a god as the ones he kills, at least... if not a real one in truth," I continued. My voice echoed quietly in the

halls of the catacombs around me, making my ears flutter as I listened to my own voice come and go as it did so. I sounded silly sometimes.

"I wish we could have met. I really do. I... would have liked to have known you. I don't think I know any other mother as good as you had been, and... I'd have liked to have talked to you about so many things..." I spoke gently as I stared into her stone eyes. They weren't looking my way, of course, but instead out over my head. As if at something in the distance.

"Not to mention I'd have thanked you... for bringing Vim to life. I'm..." I felt my face grow hot, as if I was actually speaking to someone, and smiled happily at the silliness of it. "I'm so utterly thankful for him I can't even explain it. So, thank you, really," I finished.

Of course she didn't respond, but I wished she had. She had to have been a god, right...? Why couldn't a god take over a statue with such perfect likeness of themselves, I wonder?

In the scriptures I've read, from the one taught here in the Cathedral and the few others I've seen over and heard of over my life, gods were said to be beings outside the realm of normalcy. Even when they died, they didn't. They came back to life, and whatnot.

I wonder why these ones didn't...? Had Vim ever said the gods he killed came back to life...? Surely not, right?

Humming as I pondered, my left ear twitched as it heard something. I turned my head, and lifted the lantern a little... and sure enough saw the silhouette of someone approach.

At first I was on guard, expecting something weird. I'd just been thinking of gods, and their supposed ability to survive death and whatnot, so it had been a little uncomfortable to so suddenly have someone show up down here in these catacombs at this time of day. Yet as they got closer, lit up by their white robes, I relaxed and lowered the lantern.

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"Randle... is everything alright?" I asked as he approached. We were to leave in the morning, shouldn't he be busy?

"Yes, all is well..." Randle nodded with a frown as he stepped over to me, and then once close enough he turned to look at and study the statue I stood in front of.

Uh oh. Woops.

I should have moved.

Shifting a little, I gulped as I realized I'd just kind of spoiled it. Randle was studying the statue of Vim's mother as if... As if...

"She doesn't seem to be related to you in any form... so Vim is it?" he asked carefully, studying her deeply.

Gosh! "I..."

"Hm, likely something he doesn't want to share. It's fine, then," Randle said simply, as if it really wasn't that big a deal.

Grumbling softly, I bit my lower lip for a moment as I shifted and glanced at her. "You don't know about this statue?" I asked carefully.

"No. But I don't know of many of them down here. Most were made by people I had little to do with, my own focus too beholden to things that had been more important back then. I cared not for one's past time down here when I had people starving and dying up top," he said simply.

Great. "Sorry..." I whispered as I looked away from him, and the statue.

I had just burnt a small library of such stories. Stories about me. About how I'd been late.

To hear it spoken of so plainly by a man such as him... hurt. As if I'd just gotten stabbed in the heart.

"For...?" Randle turned to look at me, and out of the corner of my eye I saw him frown.

"Well... I'm just sorry..." I whispered, unable to say it.

Randle had to know. Of course he did. Though now he was no longer a part of the inner-circle of those who ran the Society, he had been back then. He had been a part of Celine's most trusted supporters. There was no way he hadn't known of the prophecies, of how I had been meant to show up early and change everything. To change Vim.

"I see... you know now, don't you?" Randle asked.

My ears fluttered as I glanced over at him, and flinched. He had a small smile on his face, a knowing one.

"Maybe... I think so? Yes?" I said, unsure of what else to say.

"Hm... Quite a heavy burden... isn't it?" he asked.

"No. Because I'm not carrying it. The me who should have been didn't arrive in time," I said.

My tail squirmed as I heard my own voice, thanks to the stone hallway we stood in it had been rather audible. I sounded like a scorned child being sassy to her mother.

"Quite so, in a way. Yet now you must carry one all the same. In a certain sense... you now carry one more special. Less souls, but thrice as heavy," Randle said.

"I don't like how you sound so indifferent," I said stiffly. He sounded like he was talking about the weather or something else mundane.

He chuckled at me. "Sorry. I'm currently wearing my confessor cap," he said.

Cap...? "Cap?" I asked.

"Hat. I was saying that I was playing a character, or at least channeling one."

Huh... "That's a neat way to call it," I said. I'd use that myself later.

"Surprised you'd not heard of it before. Vim uses such a saying often... or at least he had, at one time."

"Vim's been... busy," I said.

"Indeed he has. But for good reason. So, can I ask how you found out...? Does Vim know?" Randle then asked.

"I found Celine's journals. Ones hidden in the archive... or well, Merit found them. But I had a suspicion before then, based on things I'd heard on whispers and stuff," I said.

"And... Vim?"

I shook my head. "If he has an idea or knows, he's not shown it. I... don't talk much about such stuff with him. You know how he is with such things," I said.

"Yes. A pain in the rear he is. To be honest that was how I had always interpreted your presence changing him. To be the one he'd listen to concerning such things, and not just listen but accept them willfully too," he said.

I blinked as I stood up a tad straighter, so promptly that the lantern in my hand made clanking noises thanks to my movement. "Huh...?"

"Hm? It was just a thought. Celine and the rest had always said you'd make him more suited for his position... and I've always just assumed and..." Randle's voice faded a little as the world around me blurred a little.

My mind felt weird as I stopped breathing for a moment as my thoughts seemed to go still and quiet, and then it all came rushing back with a loud uproar. Like a heavy lid slamming shut on a trunk or chest, it all just... clicked and made sense.

Of course! By Vim's parents it was so obvious!

"That's it exactly, isn't it!" I groaned as I reached up to cup my face.

"Hm..." Randle shifted next to me, obviously bothered by my outburst but he said nothing more as I groaned and hated myself.

Of course it was that simple! That obvious! How else could I change him, realistically? Yes he'd change, naturally, with my presence... my love and stuff, but to such a degree that the fate of the Society would change so drastically...?

"Gods..." I groaned as I rubbed my face and then turned to look at the excommunicated priest. "That's it, isn't it? I'm supposed to be the one who gets him to listen to prophecies. For real. In full," I said.

Randle frowned at me, and then his missing arm's sleeve fluttered a little as it moved. He glanced at his missing arm, scowled at it, then with his remaining arm reached out to gently grab me by the shoulder. "I cannot say, Renn. I had simply assumed that would be it, but I had never heard or been told what it really would be. It just... made sense to me," he said gently.

I noted he had just put on his confessor hat again. I smirked gently at the thought, since it was such a cute one. "It has to be it. Do you know what Vim's been calling me? Concerning this stuff?" I asked.

He frowned and shook his head.

"Buffer."

Randle blinked. A single, heavy, blink. "Oh. Yes... and he does so on his own? Did so on his own...?"

I nodded. "Yes. He thought of it before I had. Long before."

Randle's hand squeezed my shoulder as he slowly nodded. "Then... yes. That has to be it. Or at least, a part of it. I mean, do you not agree that'd be important? Momentous, even? For Vim, for us all, it'd be a huge change. A massive boon. I can't even count how many prophecies had failed thanks to Vim's antagonistic views of them, and that's just the ones I know of," he said.

I gulped and nodded. "Yes... I can see it. If I'd been around back then, and capable of explaining the prophecies to Vim in greater detail... even just a little bit would have possibly changed their outcomes. To say the least of him hearing them in full from me, or thanks to me," I said. Even just the few I'd read with Merit were good examples of this. For instance Nebl's family... they who had suffered from a disease of some sort. If I'd been there back then, and had relayed that prophecy to Vim years before it had happened... he might have been able to have come up with a cure in time to save them all.

The thought made me want to weep again, to break, but I didn't. Instead I focused on the future... and the possible lives I could save in it.

"Is it possible, you think? Do you think you can get to that point with him?" Randle asked me.

"Yes. It might take time, maybe even years, but I think I can. He's already getting to a point where he's willing to hear more than ever before. The ship prophecy, the one that Light sent him to the coast for, I had nearly retold it in full to him and he hadn't even blinked. His eye had twitched, but that had been all," I said with a point to my left eye. I omitted the fact he had been more focused on flirting and kissing me than the prophecy at the time.

Randle may be a man who kept secrets, but I wasn't going to confess to something like that so readily. Even if I wanted to kind of brag about it.

He finally released my shoulder, so he could cup his chin in thought. "Does anyone else know of this?" he asked.

"Light does. She even..." I groaned as I remembered and then nodded with a flinch. "Light had even mentioned she was hoping I'd become his in-between. To dampen his hatred and vehemence as she put it towards prophecies," I added.

"Which means that's exactly what it is. She'd foreseen it all, or at least her mother had. Huh... well, Renn, I'm sorry it's kind of simple but don't feel too bad over it. It's actually quite a feat... I myself have bore witness to Vim's utter wrath to such things. He'll even kill others to keep to his rules, as wild as it is to think so," Randle said.

"I know. And I don't feel bad over it in that sense, Randle... I'm just upset it took me this long to realize it. It's so obvious!"

Randle chuckled at that. "Is it though? It's as they say, the closer you are to something the harder it is to see it."

"So they do," I mumbled. Vim has said that before too.

Actually, Randle said a lot of things that Vim did. At least, the sayings and little quips and stuff. I wonder if he learned them from Vim over time, or if Vim and religion were just... more in-tune than Vim would ever admit?

"Still, I'm glad you seem to be taking it well. Honestly I'd be a little overwhelmed if I ever found out my life had some greater meaning, such as yours has," Randle said.

"Gosh, don't even make me start..."

He chuckled at that. "We'll have plenty of time for you to do so, I'm sure. Not to change the subject too drastically, but are you ready to leave Renn? I think it's time."

I nodded. "Yes. I had been hoping to see Oplar before we left, and spend more time with everyone else, but I just gone done with lunch with the Chronicler and Mapple, and to be honest I'm glad to get going now. I almost got roped into some scheme concerning a new cardinal? Someone being sent south?" I said. The Chronicler had gone on a long and windy rant about how much safer it'd be for the group heading south would be if they had someone strong with them. It had honestly been kind of unnerving; since she had made it rather clear they hadn't had any prophecies about them or anything. She had just... wanted someone like me to go with the man and his group. And I just so happened to be there, and as such available, in her eyes.

I don't think she had actually been trying to convince me to go with them, but at the same time I felt like she would have been happy to hear me agree to do so. It almost felt as if she was hoping I'd abandon my quest up north... which was weird since she seemed to think I'd be up there for a few years...

Randle frowned at that. "I'm no longer involved in such workings... so I can't help you there. But honestly I'd say it's better to not get involved in such things, if anything to keep Vim's attitude in check. He'd not take kindly to you getting wrapped up in the church's inner workings," he warned.

"You're telling me. I offhandedly suggested to Vim I might spend time while we're up north learning more of your religion and he broke the fork he'd been holding at the time in shock. You should have seen his face," I said with a smirk, thinking of the moment made me happy.

For a small moment Randle didn't say anything, but then he sighed at me. "I'd be more than happy to help you discover more of faith, Renn, but please... don't do it too drastically. Vim's destroyed more religions than he has the gods which spawned them, and he's brought low an untold number of them. Please don't add mine to that list just yet," he said, sounding rather serious as he did.

Gently reaching over, I patted the now troubled priest on his back. "Worry not, I actually kind of like your religion! I'd not let him break it so easily!"

Randle didn't seem to find that humorous at all. In fact it seemed to bother him so much he had dropped the conversation entirely.

Chapter 578 Vim – Liora

Where was Renn when I needed her?

"Sounds gross," Liora said as she helped Kaley set the table for dinner.

Kaley smuggled laughed. "It can be sometimes, to be honest," she said.

As I went to filling everyone's bowls with stew from the pot, I wondered what I was going to do with the girl. Not only was she young, what with her birthday being tomorrow when she'll turn twelve, she was also a saint. A human one.

"Okay, Rapti's coming, find a new conversation," I said as I distributed lunch. I placed the three bowls of stew onto the table and went to grab the other platters of food, such as some bread and fruit.

Kaley giggled as she finished helping set the table. Young Liora paused as she looked up at me, with her glowing eyes. "Can we talk about it later...? Mother never spoke with me about it, she didn't like such things," Liora asked, sounding a tad too innocent for the topic she was interested in. But I was not surprised. It was not hard to guess as to why her mother had not spoken of romance and its accompanied parts of life, what with her personal issues with it. Liora herself was a victim of such a thing, though if the saint knew that or not I didn't know.

"We can! I'll tell you all about it later!" Kaley said happily.

I nodded slowly as I heard Rapti's footsteps. She was done praying and was coming to join us. "Of course, Liora. Just be mindful of your company. Many are like your mother," I said gently.

The young saint nodded quickly, understanding my meaning as Rapti entered the room. "Yes please. It is dutiful for one to teach such things, but I'd rather much not have to hear it," she said simply.

Kaley hummed at that. "Dutiful. Doesn't it bug you that you're so similar to Vim just from a different perspective?" she asked as she went to sit down at the table.

"What'd you mean by that?" Liora asked as she too went to join Kaley and Rapti as they all sat down.

"She means my belief that such things should be taught. Vim too believes in sharing knowledge, even the kind that he doesn't agree with. She's basically teasing me, saying we're alike even though we shouldn't be," Rapti explained.

"You're a nun, aren't you Rapti?" Liora asked.

"I'm a sister of the church, yes. Not officially a nun, I can't join such an order," Rapti answered smoothly.

Liora's young face scrunched up in a way that told me she wanted to ask a dozen more questions, but I interfered as I placed a cup of milk down in front of the girl. "Eat. Before it gets cold," I said.

She perked up and nodded as she hurriedly went to eat.

"Not going to join us, Vim?" Kaley asked as Rapti bowed her head and clasped her hands, as to offer a small prayer for the food.

"I plan to go see Karma."

"Karma?" Liora asked while covering her mouth with a hand, she still had food in her mouth and was chewing as she spoke. It seemed that even though she's not interacted much in public or with anyone beyond her mother and a few servants she had a lot of manners. Not too surprising, since technically she was a noble. They were big on rules and such customs.

"A fellow member. He's useless though," Kaley said as she took another bite, not as caring for proper etiquette.

Liora glanced at Rapti who finally finished praying. "Kaley judges a man's usefulness in only one way, and it is improper. And a fatal flaw of her soul. But we love her anyway," Rapti said.

"Please! What use do they have other than to warm a bed? If we could have children without them, we'd not want or need them would we?" Kaley asked.

Liora's glowing eyes went wide as she slowly nodded, though I could tell it wasn't because she agreed with Kaley. She was just shocked someone would say something so drastic with such a serious tone and looked like she wasn't sure what else to do but agree.

"So she says, yet she'd not survive without them herself. So if such a world without men ever arrived she'd only be devastated," Rapti said.

Kaley snickered. "In such a world I'd buy and sell men like toys!"

Liora's face squirmed as she tried to decide if she should smile and laugh or frown in confusion. I decided to sigh and shake my head at them. "I'll have you know there have been plenty of societies like that. They never last long," I said.

"Oh?" Kaley perked up at that.

I nodded. "The all female one's usually last longer, but not by much."

"How would they last at all, Vim? Without children?" Rapti asked.

"Most still had children, by kidnapping men or using them like objects and not people as Kaley mentioned. But there was a nation of peoples who were able to give birth without men. They were non-humans like us, frogs capable of self-replicating. It was weird; they were all the same people basically. There were tens of thousands of them, if not hundreds, yet only a couple dozen different appearances and stuff. Was like a fever dream," I said as I remembered that weird place.

"What happened to them?" Liora asked, and I realized all three of them were now fully focused on me. They were even neglecting their food.

"Well... like all things they eventually died off," I said, not wanting to go into detail.

Why'd I bring them up? They had been another one of my mistakes back then... I'd killed the monarch they had all served and in doing so had destroyed their birthing pools. Thus dooming them to extinction.

"Self replicating...? You mean like making another of yourself, don't you?" Kaley asked.

"Yes. Like I said, they all looked the same... they were different people, yet not. It had been weird," I said.

"Now that would be boring! What's the point if I can't taste all the different flavors? I'd get bored," Kaley said.

"Kaley!" Rapti groaned and sighed as she shook her head.

Liora smiled happily as she glanced between the two, enjoying herself as Kaley giggled and Rapti huffed. Ever since bringing her here the girl's seemed very happy. I had worried slightly over taking her from her home and mother, since she was so young, but it seemed not only had the saint foreseen it happen... she had been looking forward to it.

I had spent an afternoon with her, and her mother, just talking and getting to know her. Back at her family's mansion. I'd of course avoided talking about any of the prophecies she had, but a few hints of them had been brought up in general conversation. She has had many prophecies concerning her time in the Society, even ones far in her future where she is older and even has children. Also, to her the idea of joining the Society was not something scary or worrisome... but instead something great and amazing. To her it was something momentous, something important.

Yet I had still worried. It was a good thing Kaley and Rapti were here, and also willing to associate with a human saint. Their upbeat, and in Rapti's case grounded, personalities made this transition easy. For Liora and myself.

But how long would her joy last, I wonder...? The girl was still just that, a young girl. Saint or no. And...

"Vim!"

I blinked and turned back to the table. I'd gone to clean up the remnants of the mess I'd made cooking lunch while getting lost in my thoughts. "Hm?"

Kaley gestured at the young girl with her head, and Liora sat up a bit straighter as I focused on her. "Um... Where's your wife?" she asked.

What...? Why were they talking about Renn all of a sudden? They'd just been laughing and joking around, hadn't they? Had I drifted into my thoughts for that long? "Renn is up north. Setting up a new abbey and orphanage," I answered.

Liora hummed at that as she frowned, which told me she had expected a different answer.

A... prophecy, maybe...?

I sighed and gestured lightly at the girl. "I was trying to avoid this... but obviously I need to say it. There's a small rule I'd like you to obey, Liora, at least concerning me," I said.

She perked up again and nodded expectantly as she waited for me to continue. Before I could though, Rapti interjected. "Was wondering how long it'd take for this conversation to happen," she said.

"Right?" Kaley snickered.

Ignoring them, I went ahead and continued. "I'd like to ask you not to bring up your dreams, your prophecies, around me. Unless you foresee something that is very concerning, such as the death of someone, I kindly ask you to not speak of such things around me. It's fine if you wish to talk to others about them, if they're willing to hear them, but please don't do so around me," I said.

Liora frowned at me as she took a few moments to consider my request, and then she tilted her head. "Why?"

"Because of my own rules. I've made vows that stop me from freely knowing of the future in any shape or form. Basically, I do not want to know what will or can happen. To me it is..." I took a small moment to consider what to use as reference, and realized the obvious answer. I gestured gently at Rapti. "Like how some people don't wish to speak of certain topics, such as your mother and romance. Prophecies are to me what intimacy is to her," I explained.

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The young saint seemed to understand that very well, and instantly, for she nodded with a serious frown. "Okay...! So... just don't speak of them. Unless it's a matter of life or death," she said, understanding.

"Please."

"If you foresee something concerning, but not so drastic that you think Vim should know, just tell one of us," Rapti told her.

Liora slowly nodded at Rapti's words and then glanced back at me. "I'm sorry, I didn't know," she said.

Oh? She looked sad all of a sudden. As if I'd just scolded her or something. "Of course you didn't, I hadn't told you. You're not at fault, Liora. Your dreams are a part of you. My inability to conform to your standard is no fault of yours but my own. It is I who should apologize. As my wife, Renn, would say I'm more trouble than I'm worth."

Kaley chuckled at that. "She does say that."

"Right..." Liora mumbled as she glanced down to her bowl, which was still too full. They'd been yapping so much she wasn't focused on eating.

"As long as you can overlook his oddness, Vim's a good man," Rapti said gently.

"Um...!" Liora looked up at me, and now had a worried expression. One that made Rapti and Kaley pause in their eating. I waited, as did the others, for Liora to say whatever was on her mind... but she didn't. Instead she glanced at the two sitting with her, frowned worriedly, and then looked back at me. "Um... Vim..." she said softly.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Uh... um..." she shifted in her seat, and I wondered where the confident girl had just gone. She suddenly looked her age.

"Gotta poop?" Kaley asked.

Liora jolted as if she'd just been flicked, and then smirked and laughed at Kaley. "No! I uh... well..." she glanced back at me, now with a slightly red face thanks to Kaley's comment, and then ever so softly shrugged. "Can we talk? Alone?" she asked softly.

Oh boy.

Rapti obviously realized the girl's meaning, and quickly stood. "Come on Kaley," Rapti said.

"Wha...? I'm eating!" Kaley complained but joined the peacock. Kaley though took her bowl of stew with her as she left the kitchen.

Liora glanced at them, her tiny hands clenched tightly in worry. "Um...!" she seemed distressed, likely because she just realized she made them leave.

Stepping forward, I kept a sigh from escaping as I went ahead and pulled back the chair that Rapti had been in. I didn't sit in it, but instead knelt down a bit as to kneel next to Liora. She glanced at me with an odd look as she gestured at the door and the hallway it led to. We could hear Rapti and Kaley talking as they went to the front of the house, one of the front living rooms. "I didn't mean to make them leave," she said softly.

"They understand, Liora. I assume you wish to speak of a dream?" I asked.

She nodded slowly.

Great.

"And... it's one you couldn't mention in front of them?" I asked another question, since the obvious answer to it concerned me.

Liora's eyebrows nearly met as she frowned. "No... but it's... Well..."

Gently reaching out, I patted the young girl on the knee. "Go ahead. I promise to only break a few mountains."

She blinked at that, and then smiled. "What?"

"Just something I do sometimes," I said with a shrug, glad to see her a tad more relaxed. Such jokes worked usually, but only until people realized they weren't jokes at all.

Liora nodded a little unsurely, and then glanced again at the door. We could still hear the two talking, but their voices were distant. Distant enough that though they would likely hear Liora's words, they'd not be able to hear them well enough to understand them. Though to Liora, a human, she likely didn't realize that even from the other side of the house that those like Rapti and Kaley could still hear very well.

"Go ahead. That way they can come back and finish their meals," I said gently.

"Right..." Liora mumbled, then looked back at me. "You're going to kill people," she then said.

"Who?"

She frowned some more. "Not going to ask why?"

"Why?"

She then smiled. "You're an odd man, Vim."

So they say. "Ready for the where and when?" I asked with a smirk.

Liora giggled at that for a moment then nodded. "We're going to be on a road. I... don't know where. Heading north. A group of knights will attack us and you kill them," she said, speaking softly but confidently.

Staring into the young girl's glowing eyes, I wondered how much death she has seen to be able to speak about it as calmly as she was. Although saints typically matured quickly, growing thick skin and putting walls around their hearts out of necessity... Liora was still rather young. And even though a saint, I couldn't imagine she's foreseen too many prophecies such as this to have already numbed her to the violence. Saints typically only foresaw their own fates, and those of people they knew or met. Or would meet. And this girl has lived a rather sheltered life...

"Well... such a thing does happen. Are they people you know? Do you get hurt?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No... but I thought it'd happen soon, but... she's not here."

"She?"

"Rennalee. Your wife. The one with ears," she said as she lifted her hands and placed them upward, palms out, on the top of her head. Where Renn's ears were on hers.

"I see... thus you asking me where she is," I said gently.

She nodded.

"Well... As I'm sure you must know by now, sometimes your dreams are wrong. Or off in certain ways. Either it will happen before we meet Renn, or after. Either way, I promise to handle it properly. I'll not let you get hurt," I said.

"I'm not worried about me."

Hm...? "Then who?" Renn maybe...? I couldn't imagine I'd let her get hurt, or that she'd let herself get hurt. Even if we were attacked by a group of knights they'd still just be humans. Though to a young human girl like Liora, even a little bit of blood might be a big deal.

Liora pointed at me.

Me...? Oh. I must get injured in the scuffle. Maybe I get stabbed or shot with an arrow or something. "I see. Thank you for the warning. Does anything else concerning happen then?" I asked. I wasn't going to explain to her that I'd be fine. Most people, especially children, didn't understand what I meant when I explained it. Not until they saw it themselves.

Liora frowned and shook her head. "No... aren't you worried?"

"Nope. It's my job to handle such situations. I do it all the time. Thank you for telling me, though," I said.

"You don't look thankful," she said softly.

"Well, to be honest... I'm a tad bothered. As I said, I don't like hearing prophecies. Even ones like that. It bothers me... have you ever felt your hair stand on edge? Get a chill for no reason? Say... in the dark, when you're alone? As if something scary is about to happen?" I asked.

"Yeah...!" Liora nodded quickly.

"That's how they make me feel."

"You're scared of them...?" she asked.

Well, I brought that on myself. "Basically, yes."

"Huh..." Liora nodded softly at me, as if she could understand such a thing. Maybe she could.

"Still, thank you for telling me. So, since you've already said so and proved it... you meet Renn do you?" I asked as I stood.

"Yeah... she'll be my friend," she said with a happy tone as I stepped over to the door and leaned out into the hallway.

"Come on back you two," I said, beckoning them.

"Kay!" Kaley shouted, but neither sounded like they were in a hurry to do so. They were chatting about something. Had I heard Karma's name...? Maybe they were planning on going with me to see him.

Turning back to the saint, I gestured for her to finish eating. "Finish before it gets cold, Liora."

"Kay..." she mimicked Kaley with her answer, one that had been said in a way that told me she'd never said it before. Again a hint of her upbringing. She actually spoke very well, especially for a young human.

A testament to her mother's efforts, really. It is highly unlikely that this girl had received a proper education, since her mother had hid her away. So that meant her education had come from her mother, or maybe at best a trusted servant or two. To have protected Liora all this time, while giving her such an upbringing, and all the while running one of the largest merchant guilds in town was... rather amazing. Quite a feat in today's age...

"Vim, may I join you?" Kaley asked as she and Rapti re-entered.

"To see Karma and the rest? Yes."

"Thanks. I'll go get ready," she said as she put her, by the sounds of it now empty, bowl onto the table and hurried back out of the kitchen.

"Thought she didn't like this Karma," Liora said as Rapti returned to sitting next to her.

"She's got something to do, is all. Why haven't you eaten any of this yet? It's good you know," Rapti said as she went to pull one of the platters of fruit up to the girl, likely to make sure she ate some.

Nodding softly I turned to leave, or at least to ready to. I'd wait for Kaley, of course, though I too was a little unsure of what she intended to do. She had told me the other day she had planned to just... hang out here, and not really go hunting for men. Maybe she had already given that up? I had expected her to have done so, but I hadn't thought it'd have happened this fast. A single day, really?

"Mother liked these too..." Liora said as I left the kitchen. She and Rapti went to talking about the foods they liked, which it turned out Liora really liked fish. I smirked as I heard Kaley snicker down the hallway in her room... having likely heard the young girl.

They had likely heard Liora tell me of her prophecy. The one concerning the knights attacking us. But I wasn't concerned over it, and I knew they too wouldn't be. And in time, so too would Liora find that same confidence.

Such threats were not a threat. Not to me at least.

Honestly I was rather relieved. I had been slightly expecting something to have been brought up by the young saint. Since she had foreseen me breaking the ship, and Renn, I had been... worried, to say the least. For her prophecy, at least the one that had concerned her enough to bring it up to me, to have been that simple was rather... relieving.

"This good enough, Vim?"

I turned to find Kaley. She now wore a simple set of clothes, the kind you'd find any young human woman wearing in such a port town. One that made her look kind of poor, but normal. The colors bland, the quality mediocre at best. And it covered her properly. "Yes. I'm sorry you have to be uncomfortable just to walk around," I said as I went to put my own shoes on.

"Eh, it's fine," she said lightly as I finished putting my shoes on.

"We'll be going now," I said a little loudly to the two still in the kitchen. I heard Rapti say okay, and then Kaley and I left Rapti's home.

Shutting the door behind me, I glanced around a bit as we headed for the road. I made sure no one was around or watching the house, and was glad to not see anything amiss. I had brought Liora here in the early morning, when it was very dark and quiet, but one could never be sure.

"She's a cute girl, Vim. Very saint-like though. Are they really all like that?" Kaley asked me quietly as we headed down the road, heading for the inner city.

"Stoic? Yes. They have to be, usually. They see terrible things even while young, as she is, so grow calluses as to survive," I said.

"Sad. But if that's what it takes, I guess," Kaley said.

I nodded.

We walked for a bit until Kaley gestured down another road. "Want me to shop while you talk to Karma? Or can we do it afterward?" she asked.

Shop...? Oh. "For the girl," I said, understanding.

"Yeah...? She only brought a small bag with her, Vim. barely enough to travel with," Kaley said, sounding a little annoyed that I'd not noticed.

I had, but I had planned to deal with it later. "I'll join you if you wish, after, unless you'd like to avoid Karma and the rest," I offered.

"Hm... I'll keep you company. I'd like to see who else is here, anyway," Kaley decided after a moment's thought.

"Thought you were taking a sabbatical," I said as we headed for the inn where Karma and the rest were staying.

Kaley giggled at me. "I am! But just in case I change my mind, I want to know of all my options!"

Of course.

Chapter 579 Renn – A Caravan of Little Distractions

Lilly looked gloomy but she still smiled gently at me as she passed by.

She was on the first wagon in our little caravan, being followed by four more. I was standing up on the hill that they were slowly rolling by, overlooking the road we were traversing. Off in the distance I could still see the town we'd just passed by. A small farming village a few hundred strong, which now had a large cloud of gray smoke which told me they were all cooking their dinners. The sight of such a thing made me want a snack myself.

We'd been on the road for two days now, and it has been slow going. With more wagons I had kind of expected us to travel at least at the speed we'd traveled to get here, but it turned out we were even slower. We were after all only as fast as our slowest wagon... which was the first wagon in the group, the one Lilly was driving.

Watching her pass by, Merit and Lellip rolled past next. Lellip happily waved at me, to which I waved back, and I wondered why their wagon was so much better. It was the one that Lellip and her grandfather Nebl had made, so I had of course known all along it was well made... but I was a tad shocked to see just how much more so it was to all the other ones. It was almost startling the difference in not just the wagon's speed, but the quality of the ride as well. Lellip's wagon barely rocked or jolted at all as it rolled along while the other ones were so bad I almost didn't want to get on any of them because of it.

The next wagon in the line was our smallest. An older human woman, Klass, was holding the reins to the single horse which pulled it, and she simply nodded at me as she passed by. She wore traveling clothes, but was actually a member of the cloth. She was one of Randle's associates, one who was going to help us set up the new church and orphanage. She had her son with her, but he was currently sleeping in the next cart to roll by.

Nessa also waved at me, though not with as much gusto as Lellip had done, and I knew why. She was very conscious of the man sleeping in the back of the cart she rode. He wasn't much older than her, but it turned out they'd never met before... and well...

I smirked softly as they rolled by, as I wondered if Nessa's plan to join us as to find a husband would fulfill itself before we even got to our destination.

"What're you smirking at...?" Angie asked.

Glancing to my right, and down a bit, I smiled at my little friend. "Nessa. She's still red in the face even though he's fast asleep," I said with a small gesture at her and the wagon she rode. I did so with Vim's spear, which I held in my left hand as to not accidentally bump Angie with it.

Angie groaned at me, but said nothing more.

The final wagon was the biggest, being pulled by two large oxen. Randle sat on it, holding the reins with his single hand. I noted he had wrapped the reins around his wrist and forearm, as if to make sure he could hold onto them if needed.

I gave the priest a small wave, to which he nodded at. He seemed to be doing better, honestly. He had a bit of a fire in his eyes, as if he was excited to be on this adventure.

"He's glad to be gone finally," Angie said softly.

"Mhm... I am too to be honest," I admitted. Although I had enjoyed our short stay in Telmik, I was very glad to be out of there. The Chronicler, likely thinking we were all happy and friendly again, kept inviting me to dinners and meetings... even though I had not wanted to get involved in them at all. Between her strange insistence, and the prophecies Merit and I found... and which I promptly burnt afterward, had been too much at once for me. I felt as if I needed a break.

And this slow journey was perfect for it, it seemed.

The two of us watched our little group slowly roll away, until they got far enough that I decided to start walking again. I stayed on the hill, since the road stayed beside it for some distance, and Angie and I slowly made our way along it until we were ahead of the wagons.

"Do you know who we're going to meet?" Angie asked as we headed downward. The hill rolled a bit, so for a moment we walked down the hill and then headed back up it.

"No. Just someone that helps Randle out, you never met him?" I asked.

Angie shook her head.

"Huh..." I found that a little odd. Supposedly Randle had sent one of our members, a real one who was non-human; to check the city out we were heading to a few months ago. He had done so not long after being banished and after Vim had mentioned it as an idea. Which meant Angie, who has been at Telmik for almost a year now, really should have encountered and known who he was. Especially since Angie had gotten involved in the orphanage, to which Randle and this man had been involved in.

"As long as it doesn't take too long," Angie mumbled with a sigh as we reached the top of the hill again. We were now a tad behind Merit and Lellip's wagon, which just further confirmed how slow they were going. Angie and I weren't walking slowly, but we weren't rushing either.

"Can't take any longer than we are as it is," I said simply.

The plan was to meet this man in a town not far south from our actual location. I wasn't really sure why we were meeting him before and not simply at our destination, but I had no complaints. It was along our route so it didn't matter.

"Do you and Vim travel this slowly? Surely not, right?" Angie asked.

"No... I've come to realize that we actually travel rather fast. I in fact noticed it back when we had traveled together, Angie, to Telmik," I said. That trip had taken us almost three weeks, and Vim and I had just gone from Telmik to Lumen in less than two weeks and that included several stops. Ones that had been multiple days in length.

"Hm... do you two run? Or ride horses?" Angie asked.

"Nope...? We just..." I thought about it for a moment, and then started walking at the pace that I was used to. The one that kept me side-by-side with Vim.

"Ah..." Angie made a noise as I left her behind, even as she tried to hurry up as to join me. I didn't go too far ahead, as I eventually stopped and turned to smile at her.

"That fast, about," I said.

Angie huffed at me as she returned to my side. "That's nearly a run," she complained.

"Seem so, doesn't it?"

Honestly Vim and I didn't always travel that fast. When we were talking, especially about important things... we slowed down. Sometimes even coming to complete stops as to focus on the conversations we were having.

I smiled at the memory of some of them, and had to quickly stop doing so since they made my heart hurt.

I missed Vim.

"Do you not like to travel, Angie?" I asked, hoping to find an interesting topic to distract my heart.

"I don't like the food. We only eat dried stuff or at best stew," she said.

Oh. Right... "Well... it's hard to cook on the road," I said. Should I tell her we planned to have stew tonight? I had overheard Randle and the Klass talk about it this morning. They, like many of their fellow cloth members, lived simple lives. And it showed in their clothing and diets. It made me realize that if I wanted to not suffer a plain meal everyday once we got up north that I'd have to take matters into my own hands, otherwise...

"Your stomach just made noises," Angie commented.

"I know... Vim isn't here so I'm hungry more often than usual," I said with a sigh. So she had heard it! I had thought it had been quiet enough to have not been noticed, but that was silly of me. She wasn't just a pure-blood like me; she was also the perfect height to hear such a thing. Her ears were right where my waist was.

"Was... that a dirty joke?" Angie asked, sounding unsure if she should huff at me or not.

"Huh...?" Ah. I smirked as I understood her meaning. "No. I meant it. Vim often gives me snacks randomly, especially as we travel... and well..."

"Without him here, you've been without. Hm..." Angie nodded, understanding. She seemed happy that it hadn't been an innuendo.

"I think since because he doesn't need to eat, at least not nearly as much as we do, he likes to watch me do so. As if he enjoys the food through my own enjoyment of it," I said.

"Okay, you're bordering on flirting territory, let's talk about something else," Angie said with a sigh.

I giggled at her and reached over to ruffle her fluffy hair. She allowed me to do so, but groaned as I did. "I was trying to not make it sound like that just for you, you know!"

"I'm sure...! And I'm happy for you, gosh, but if I don't put my foot down you'll instantly start talking about such stuff you know?" Angie complained.

Would I...? Possibly. I actually didn't like to talk much about Vim's little love languages, since I knew for many of our members hearing such things made them sad. Even if they wanted to hear it, to tease me over it and watch it, they also didn't.

It was why Lilly sometimes didn't want to be around us when we did such things. It wasn't just the fact she found it weird or something, but also because it made her self-conscious. She and Windle were actually very close, and loved each other dearly, but the two were... well... As far as I was aware they

didn't flirt much. Kissed? Sure. Longed for one another? Definitely. But at the same time the two could go days, even when together, without touching one another or saying little things that typical partners did. Vim blamed their pure-blooded bloodlines for it, but I on the other hand blamed something else.

I wasn't sure when it had happened, but I've started to be conscious about how I act and talk around and about Vim with others. Especially certain members. I knew the feeling of exclusion, or at least the feeling of wanting what I was seeing at a distance, and knew it well. Back before joining the Society I used to watch people from afar, the families and communities of humans I saw or mingled with occasionally, and used to long to join them. I used to wish, and still do, that my own family had been like so many others.

There was little doubt that many in the Society had similar feelings. Maybe not the lack of community, since we had each other, but rather the lack of companionship and family. Many Society members were... alone, or just a single person or two away from being so. Though hopefully that will change with our numbers doubling here soon.

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Honestly it was too bad humans didn't live as long as we did. I think if humans didn't die so early the divide between us and them wouldn't be as big. If humans also lived a few hundred years on average, even if just double or triple their current lifespan, I bet a lot more members would be friendly with them. But I suppose that would just result in more members mating and paring with humans too, thus thinning the bloodlines even more... Such as Less, who recently became pregnant with a human, that pirate Vim was friends with...

"Oh... Angie," I remembered that one human girl I'd met at the Cathedral and paused a moment. Angie and I had gotten ahead of the wagons, so it was time we stopped to wait for them anyway.

We paused near the end of the current hill formation, where soon we'd have to descend the hill as to walk along the road or on the road itself since we were approaching fields of wheat. "Yeah?" the young bison asked as she tilted her head of fluffy hair at me.

"Do you know a Renka?" I asked.

Angie frowned at me, though for a moment, and then shook her head. "No...? Is that someone we're going to meet?"

"No... I met her at the Cathedral before we left, she seemed to have something to say but I'd been busy... I had thought she was one of the orphans, so figured you might have known her," I said.

"There was no one by that name in the orphanage, or involved in it. But they might have been one of the convent members, why?" Angie asked.

"She knew my name. I had intended to find her before we left but no one knew about her, not even the Chronicler or Randle," I said. I had reasoned it away that she had just been one of the kids, but if Angie didn't know her that was rather alarming. "Actually, she might go by a different name," I realized. She had introduced herself oddly, saying Renka had been what her mother had called her. "She was a little taller than you, about Fizz's height, and had a lot of freckles. She also had somewhat pointy ears, at least for a human," I said as I pointed at my own human ears. They were currently hidden by my long hair, but I knew Angie got my meaning.

"Hm... nope...? There had only been a few girls in the orphanage that height. That's about the age they start getting sent off to be apprentices, or start joining the church proper and thus become those protégé nun things," Angie said.

Protégé...? "I see. Maybe she was one of those," I said.

"Or maybe just a visitor...? A lot of humans come and go there daily," Angie suggested.

"Possibly..." I wasn't sure if I believed that. She had been wearing their robes after all...

I should have investigated better. I know I had been busy, and my mind had been very occupied with all the stuff going on, but now I'll likely never know. It could be years before I returned to the Cathedral... by then she'll likely have either completely forgotten whatever she had wanted to ask me or will have moved on in life.

Yet I'd always remember. Another memory that will occasionally just pop back up in my head at random points, reminding me I had failed somehow. I hated that. It made me feel terrible... hopefully whatever the girl had wanted had been simple, something that hadn't been important.

"Something wrong, Renn...? Did something happen?" Angie asked, likely noticing my worry.

"I don't know... if there is, there's nothing that can be done about it, at least," I said.

Angie hummed at me as I turned to watch Lilly and her wagon start to pass us by. She still had that gloomy look on her face, and this time she only glanced at us as she passed.

"Is she upset...?" Angie asked softly.

"No. Not really. She's just worried."

"Over Lellip...? The two seem to get along," Angie said.

"They do. Lilly's just worried about other things. A few of her children are being rebellious, and she's starting to worry it's progressing into something worse," I told Angie honestly.

"She should spank them then," Angie said simply.

Oh...? She had said that rather seriously. "Did you get spanked a lot?" I asked.

"Huh...? Of course not. That's my point. Children grow up better if the parent is strict. I'd have figured Lilly would have been that type, but maybe not?" Angie wondered as she crossed her arms in thought.

How amusing! I wonder if that was the reason Angie was so... mature for her age. Were bisons just that way, maybe? "So you'd discipline your own children like that?" I asked her.

"Of course? If they deserved it, at least."

Interesting... I wonder what Vim's perspective on that would be.

He was such an advocate of free-will that it was almost impossible to think he'd discipline a child, even his own, with force. Yet at the same time Vim was so... odd about certain things. And he's mentioned before, offhandedly, that his parents had punished him in odd ways... though if they had actually done so, or if that had just been him making silly little jokes, was something I was unsure of.

It was an interesting thought, and was now another thing that I needed to eventually talk to Vim about. One of many.

That list was growing rapidly... and sadly, a few of the big items upon it were things that I wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to talk to him about.

Could I ever mention to him the prophecies I had burnt...? The ones Merit and I had found? And if I did, to what depth and length...? Talking about such things with Vim was hard enough as it was when it concerned other people, let alone me... and even more so when it concerned something so serious.

Though did it matter...? It was tearing me up inside to know I should have been a part of the Society hundreds of years ago, and thus could have saved a lot of people, but to Vim would such a thing matter? For all his depth, Vim was actually very... simple when it came to certain things. Knowing him he'd just shrug and say, you're here now, and end the conversation there.

I sighed softly as I realized I was once again focusing on Vim. Even when I was trying so hard not to.

Lellip was now holding the reins of the next wagon. Merit wasn't sitting with her, but from the way Lellip was talking aloud I knew that was because Merit was rummaging around in the back of the wagon. I

couldn't see her of course, since it was covered. Was she planning on sleeping again...? Hadn't she already had a nap this morning?

"Renn, can I ask something?" Angie then asked, and while doing so she grabbed gently at my sleeve. I turned to face her, a little worried over the way she was frowning. That was the same frown she had been wearing when we had left the Cathedral together. The one that had planted itself on her face once Fizz started bawling.

"Of course, Angie."

"Do you know anything about the coming disaster...?" she asked.

Disaster...? "Which one?" I asked. I had tried my best to not read any of the prophecies concerning myself, or the Society, that had yet to come to pass but I had inadvertently read a few. There had been one concerning a plague, which I wasn't sure yet if the one that had come from Landi's monarch had been, and a few others. None had seemed too immediate to worry about, at least as far as I understood them.

"The long winter," Angie said.

Long winter...? I frowned and shook my head. "Don't know anything about that," I said. None of the prophecies I'd read had spoken of that. Nor had I overheard of such a thing from anyone else either.

"I see... must be one of the things they're all keeping from you then," she said simply.

"Might be... mind telling me about it? Is it soon?" I asked.

"Happens in a few years. I overheard Randle saying if we don't settle in time it will be bad for us. Was just wondering if you knew more about it," Angie said.

"Hm... well, now I do, so I'll find out more. I promise we'll make sure to deal with it, whatever it is," I said.

A long winter...? To me winter wasn't something too dangerous. It was cold, and there would be a lot of snow, but... Maybe food would be a problem? Especially if there were a lot of us?

"Randle hadn't seemed too worried over it, but a few of the others are. They're preparing for it by storing a bunch of food and stuff under the Cathedral. Lots of it," Angie said.

"Oh...? Well... maybe we will too, then. I'll find out, I promise."

Angie nodded, returning to her typical relaxed and stoic state. If my promise had been what relieved her or not, I couldn't tell, but I had meant it.

I'd ask Randle about it once I had a chance. If anything I should do so before Vim showed up... since with him here those like Randle will become less open about such details.

Such an annoying system. He was the protector of the Society, and one of the few actually capable of dealing with such dire issues... yet at the same time was also kept in the dark about them thanks to his own rules. It was easy to see why Vim would, and could, fail when he was never even alerted to such problems in the first place. It was why so many blamed him for such failures, and thus the vote that was soon to come. Yet... who's fault was it really? The man who had those rules, or the ones who abides by them? There was a divide there, between Vim and those in the Society who needed help. Vim helped all he could, when he could, but could only help with things he knew about. And those who knew of the incoming dangers rarely, if ever, told him about them until they happened. And even when they did, they only did so sparingly and in little detail.

Like this long winter Angie speaks of... if they were already preparing for it, years in advance, that meant it was serious. And it also meant they'd not tell Vim about it until it was too late. Which was stupid. If Vim knew about it what could he do to forego any deaths or suffering from it...? Knowing Vim he might even be able to stop it or avoid it entirely! Yet he'd not be told. Not until it was too late. And in doing so they'd just blame Vim when people suffered or died from it.

Who was at fault, though...? Truly? Vim or the rest of us...?

Or was it me who was really at fault. For now showing up sooner, to act as that very bridge over that divide.

Gosh!

Sighing again, I tapped my thumb against Vim's spear... wondering what to do.

I had to get involved. I really did. Because if I didn't people would suffer. Yet at the same time...

There was a reason I had burnt those prophecies. There was a reason I had not read every single one.

It was such a fine line for me to walk. To know, yet not know... it made me feel almost like I was a hypocrite. The kind that Vim hated.

"Also, Renn, would you introduce me to Merit?" Angie then asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Hm...?" I turned to look at the young bison, a little surprised to hear such a request. Had they not already done so? I had introduced her to Lilly and the rest the other day, hadn't I?

"Well... she's like me, isn't she? Small?" Angie shifted a little, looking away as she did.

"Huh...?" Oh. Wait... "I uh... guess so...?" I couldn't help but smile a little at the topic. Was she asking if Merit was young like her or something?

Angie shifted a little, and then shrugged a little. "She um... keeps to herself, so..." Angie said softly, which made me quickly remember the last couple days. We'd been traveling of course, but we have stopped to let the horses and oxen rest a few times... had Angie and Merit not talked to one another at all...? And had Angie tried, I wonder, to initiate a conversation?

Maybe, maybe not. Most of the conversations amongst our group have been simple, really, but it was a fact that Lilly and Merit did kind of keep to themselves. As did Randle and his group.

"I'd take you to talk to her right now, but she might be getting ready to take a nap," I said gently. Merit had still not re-appeared from the covered wagon, and it seemed Lellip had gone quiet. She hadn't spoken aloud for a few minutes now.

"You can do it later... I'd just like to talk to her. You and Oplar are the only predators I've met, so I'd like to talk to one who is like me if I can," Angie said.

Like her...? Small, she means? And a bison wasn't a predator... right? I had thought Vim had told me they were a kind of cow-like creature? "You can do so whenever you want, Angie. Merit can be prickly but she's a really good person, as is Lilly."

Angie slowly nodded. "I know... but I'd still appreciate it if you were there to help, Renn."

Reaching over, I gently ruffled her fluffy hair as I smiled happily. "Of course!" I agreed, without hesitation.

Angie groaned as I messed with her, but she didn't shy away. I teased her for a moment before stopping, and then watched Klass, the older human woman, slowly roll by us on the road. She was yawning as she passed, looking tired. And not just because what she was doing was boring.

Sighing softly, I tapped Vim's spear against the ground and gestured lightly at the woman and her wagon. "I'm going to take over for Klass for a bit," I said.

"Hm...? Okay." Angie agreed, and seemed to desire to join me for she accompanied me as I headed for the wagon.

Heading together to the wagon, I gestured gently at the wagon ahead of the one I was about to take command of. The one that Merit was currently sleeping in. "Actually before I do, I'm going to go grab some snacks... want some?" I asked.

Angie sighed at me, but agreed to join me. Which was good, because it allowed me the opportunity to properly introduce her to Merit as I did so. And it went well... at least until Merit huffed at the two of us and hid herself with a blanket, as to sleep.

Chapter 580 Vim – A Little Bit of Rain

The light rain was both useful and annoying.

It was the kind of rain that was cold. Cold that I myself didn't notice. But others did. Even Renn, as strong as she was and empowered by a monarch's heart noticed such a thing. But there were many who were far more bothered by such cold. One of such people was walking beside me.

Walking along a dirty stone road with Liora, heading northward, I wondered how long it'd rain for. It had started last night with a storm and although had lessened in severity it showed no signs of letting up. I was thankful for it, since it allowed Liora to wear the kind of heavy coat that hid her head and face, and thus her eyes, but it also made our traveling speed lower than it already was in the first place.

Liora was not used to such physical activity. Even just walking at a comfortable pace for her was difficult past a certain point. We'd been walking for several days now and she already had large blisters on her feet, and I had to occasionally have us stop so she could rest.

It was not surprising for the young human saint to have such difficulties. Even with her body empowered by divinity, as all saints were, she was still just a young human girl... one who also had basically never left the house her whole life.

Glancing at my small traveling companion, who was focused on the side of the road where little streams of water were flowing in a small divot next to the road, I wondered if I should have us rest soon. It has been several hours since we'd stopped last, and although she wasn't breathing heavily or showing signs of pain or exhaustion I knew she was likely reaching her limit.

I really should just get a horse. My carrying her constantly would work, of course, but it would draw attention. The kind neither of us could afford. But a horse would solve a lot of those issues. I should have foreseen this and done it before we had left Nevi... why hadn't I...?

Because I was trying to ignore her existence, that's why.

Sighing at myself, I glanced up at the dark sky overhead. The rain hit my face, wetting it. As to match her I too was wearing gear for such weather, so I too had a heavy over cloak on. I reached up to remove the hood, to let the rain cool me off a little.

"Mr. Vim?"

Looking back down I nodded to the small saint. Her glowing eyes were faintly visible behind the small veil she wore. I had made her a veil of black cloth, the kind that she could see through but lightly blocked her glow. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing. "Yeah...?"

When'd she start calling me mister, I wonder? She hadn't done that before we left, had she? Wonder why she had started doing it.

"I got to go to the bathroom," she said.

Ah. I nodded and glanced to the left, in the direction that led to the ocean in the distance. There was a nice thick patch of trees and bushes. I gestured at it and the two of us walked off the road and over to it.

We were alone, thanks to the rain the road has been rather empty, but I still glanced around to make sure it was fine. Once I confirmed it was clear I nodded to the saint as she walked a few dozen feet into the patch of trees and disappeared from sight.

I turned away, out of courtesy, and sighed again.

The next village was... at our pace, maybe a day away? But it's a smaller one, if I remembered correctly. Hopefully I can find a horse there.

Maybe I should just carry her and run through the nearby forest. The one that connected to the northern one, the one that Elk and his family lived in. It was a tad out of our way but it'd allow me to hurry...

"Um..."

I turned, finding Liora behind me. She was still tying her belt back together. "Everything okay?" I asked. I had not heard anything alerting.

"Uh! Yes... thank you. I was just wondering why you don't ever have to... you know?" Liora asked as she stepped out from the trees.

"I do, just not as often," I said. Renn had asked such things before too.

"I'm jealous," she said with a sigh.

"Don't be. You want to take a break?" I asked.

Liora stared up at me for a moment, and then had to reach up to adjust the veil under her hood. She grumbled a bit at it, but eventually got it under control. "No... I'm cold I want to get wherever we're going as soon as possible as to get out of the rain," she said.

"You sure...? I can also carry you if you'd like," I offered.

The young saint paused a moment as she tilted her head at me. "Carry me?"

"On my back, for example," I offered.

She hummed a bit, considering it, and then nodded. "Maybe later... when my legs start to really hurt," she decided.

"Do they hurt now?" I asked.

"Yes, but not too badly," she said with a glance down at herself, as if to look at wounds.

"You sure?"

She nodded. "Yeah... also you're getting soaked, Mr. Vim," she pointed up at me, at my head.

Right... I went ahead and put my own hood back on. "Let's continue then. Just let me know once you'd like me to carry you," I said as we returned to the road.

As we returned to the road, off in the distance I heard thunder. It sounded like it was coming from the direction of the ocean, but I knew such storms would eventually reach us. Hopefully by the time it did the storm would dissipate and lessen. Though it'd mean this rain would likely continue for some time, at least it'd keep it from getting too bad.

Last thing I needed was for this young saint to get sick. Saints were hardier than normal people, but only to a point. And if she got sick it'd make traveling near impossible.

Honestly, I was in a rather precarious situation... I wanted to get to Renn, to make sure she was okay, but like always the world was putting up roadblocks to stop me from doing what I actually wanted.

And also, I still was unsure of what to do with this saint.

"Why don't you like prophecies, Mr. Vim?" Liora asked, breaking my focus.

Glancing at the young girl, who was now walking rather close to me, I bit back a sharp retort... since I knew she held no ill-will in her statement.

Liora was young, but was not foolish. Her mother had raised her well, and from what I'd seen of her so far what with the few days she'd spent with Kaley and Rapti, she was also well grounded and genuinely a good person. I had a part of me that didn't want to outright associate with her, but that was just my aversion to saints in general... and...

Well... I kind of pitied her. As I did most saints. She just left her family, her mother, to join me into the wild world because of her condition. To survive. And would always have to live carefully because of who and what she was. Like many of our members, she was someone my mother would tell me to protect and cherish. For she was burdened needlessly by beings without remorse.

Try to be kinder, Vim. Mother and Renn would want me to.

"I don't like the idea of them. They go against the natural order," I answered her question with honesty.

"Why?"

"Because I don't like tempting fate. If our futures are written in stone no matter our choices, then we are not truly free. Prophecies test that by their mere existence, it disturbs me," I continued.

"Why...?"

"Honestly I'm not really sure. I was born and raised to believe in free will. Over time I've simply... become very adamant about it. Too deeply, some would say. To the point that I sometimes do the wrong thing over it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a hypocrite. One who breaks fate on purpose, even," I said.

"Why?"

My eye twitched. "Because sometimes a man doesn't understand his own actions."

Liora was quiet for a moment, and I wondered if I'd finally reached the end of her questioning... but after a bit she reached over and grabbed my hand with hers. At first I thought she was doing so to get my attention, but instead we just kept walking. She had simply grabbed my hand the way any child would their parent or guardian as they walked together.

This text was taken from Royal Road. Help the author by reading the original version there.

"Why?" she then asked again.

I chuckled at her. "Have you had many prophecies?" I asked.

She nodded. "Mother made me write them in a journal once she figured out what they are. The last one I had, a few weeks before you showed up, I had written my seventy-third dream in it," she said.

Oh boy. That's a lot for her age... especially so for her divinity level too. Not to mention the fact she's been isolated most her life. This poor girl was likely going to have many in her life. Which meant she'd be burdened more than most.

"You had your mother reach out to us, to me, because of them... correct?" I further questioned.

Liora's hand tightened on mine as she nodded up at me, transfixed on our conversation.

"So you've changed your fate because of them. And thus too, the fates of others. Of mine, of Kaley's and Rapti's. Of your mother's... and so on and so forth. Now you could argue it was for the better... that by doing so you'll be able to survive, or your mother would or something, but in my perspective that is something dangerous. I myself don't believe that someone should base their life on something they dreamt, no matter how real it is," I said.

"But... why? If it saves lives, why isn't that a good thing?" she asked.

"It's just the way I am. It's a flaw of mine. And... this might sound rude, but... do you know how you were born?" I asked.

She only nodded.

"What if your mother had received a prophecy of that incident? And thus she stopped it? And didn't suffer her tragedy...?" I asked.

Liora stopped walking.

I too joined her, pausing in the puddle we'd stopped in. Liora's face beneath her veil contorted in worry as she pondered my words. "I'd not have been born..." she whispered.

"Hm... I'm not arguing that would have been for the better, Liora... I am simply showing you my perspective. Whether we like it or not, sometimes tragedy can result in a net positive. For instance during wartime, typically, many things become better. Economies grow stronger. Populations boom and grow. Technology and understanding deepen and become more efficient... If the world did not have any struggle at all there would be no growth," I explained.

I knew my words were likely difficult for one so young, but I also knew better than to think she wouldn't at least partly understand. And I knew, from experience, that if I didn't at least give her my perspective

she'd likely never truly comprehend my rules. I've had to personally hurt saints before because they had not realized how serious my rules were, and as such I've learned if I described them a little and how I came to them sometimes it worked out better.

"You're... saying by interfering based off my dreams I can cause more harm than good, if not careful," she whispered as she pondered my words.

"Yes. But that is simply my own opinion and perspective. You are free to reach your own, Liora. And in fact I'd even argue you shouldn't agree with me, to be honest," I said.

"Why? It... makes sense. A few of my dreams had caused more harm than good, since mother had acted on them and bad things happened afterward," she said.

I didn't want to find out what she meant, so I simply gestured lightly at her. "If you'd not have acted on the one that led your joining of the Society and meeting us, we'd not be here now. And that means you'd never get to meet Renn, and I think my wife would be sad over that fact. I'd rather you meet her, and thus make her happy, than the alternative," I said.

Liora shifted in the puddle, giving me a look as she did. "You don't agree with my dreams or acting on them... but would do so to make your wife happy...?"

"Of course...?"

"Which is why you call yourself hypocritical," she said.

"Amongst other things, yes."

Liora hummed at me and she finally turned so we could return to walking. We stepped out of the puddle, heading for more down the path. The old stone road was full of holes.

"Are all husbands like you, Vim?"

Ah. She had dropped the mister again. "No. But I'd hope not. I'm honestly not very good at it, I'm still trying to figure out how to be one," I said.

Her small hand gripped mine tighter. "You seem like a good one to me," she said.

"Thanks."

She nodded gently. "My mom told me to find a good one too. I never told her but I've dreamt of him," she said.

"Remember my rule, Liora...?" I asked carefully.

She nodded again. "Yeah... wait; I can't even just say that? I didn't even tell you who he is or anything!" she said, a little shocked.

I flinched. The way she had said that told me more than she realized. "I'd prefer you not to... as I said, unless it's a matter of life and death please refrain from speaking of such things. Just now, what you said, is technically fine... but any more than that will bother me," I said.

"I see... sorry," she apologized.

"It's fine. I'm the one who's annoying when it concerns such things," I admitted.

"Hm... I can forgive you. Can I talk to your wife about them, though? Is she like you?" Liora asked.

"Renn...? Renn seems to not mind, I think. Just ask her first, if you would," I said.

"She's a cat, right?"

"Yes. A very cute one."

Liora giggled at that. "Aren't all cats cute?"

No. "So some say."

"You're not very cute... are you a cat too?" she asked.

I smirked at that. "No. I'm not a cat. I'm more like you than anything else."

"Like... me?"

Woops. "By the way, I know we've talked about it, but make sure no one realizes who and what you are. I'll have to kill anyone who does, so..." I reminded her.

She nodded, and I knew she was likely tired of me saying such a thing but I wanted to grind it into her head. If someone saw her, and realized what she was, I would have no choice but to cull them. And although I could, and would, do so without hesitation I really didn't want to just slaughter people for no good reason.

"Maybe that's why you kill those knights," she reminded me.

I nodded with a frown. "It's possible..." I said. She had mentioned her prophecy concerning a group of knights that attack us on the road. Her concern was that Renn was with us during that prophecy, but I knew that was likely just a possibility that hadn't come to pass. In another time, Renn traveling with me here and now would have been very normal and expected. I could have seen how such a thing came to be rather easily. Of course it might also happen many years from now too.

"Is it hard to kill someone?" she asked. Although children did sometimes ask such questions, I could hear in her tone something a tad more deeper than simple curiosity.

She must have foreseen herself having to do such a thing in one of her prophecies. Not too surprising, considering what she was.

"Yes. Not only is it difficult physically, many can't do it even when they try and are capable to do so. Taking a life is... life changing. For me though, no," I answered.

"Why's it not hard for you?"

"Physically? Because I'm strong. The rest is because of how many times I've done it. I'm very old, I've killed a lot of things in my long life," I said.

Liora was quiet for a moment, and a small gust of wind blew past. Once it left, Liora tugged on my hand a little as she shivered and went to adjusting her coat. "How old are you, Mr. Vim?" she then asked.

"You don't need to call me mister, Liora. And I'm very old. So old it's silly," I said.

She glanced up at me in a way that only a young child could. "How old is that?" she asked.

"More than I know. I stopped counting a long time ago," I said.

"What was your age when you stopped counting...?"

"Uh..." I picked a random number. "Hundred something," I said.

She giggled at me. "You don't know, do you?"

"No..." I admitted.

"Will I live a long time too? Since I'm a spirit too?" Liora asked.

I gently shrugged. "As a saint you will indeed likely live longer than normal, but to what degree I can't say."

"What's the difference between a saint and a spirit?" she asked.

Oh...? Maybe she noticed the fact I never called her a spirit. "Technically none of us are spirits. It's simply what some humans call us, a term they use inappropriately. You're a saint because you have a connection to divinity. The power that grants you foresight and other things," I said.

"Other things...?"

Hm... "Some saints can do more than just have prophetic dreams. Some can read minds, for example," I said.

"Ah... like how I can stop the rain."

I slowed a bit, and then came to a full stop.

"What?"

Liora nodded as she pointed up at the sky. "I can make it stop raining," she said.

"You can...?"

Without answering Liora looked upward... and her eyes hidden by her veil grew a bit brighter. I felt her divinity increase, it thumped in my hand which held hers, and then... sure enough, the rain stopped.

I sighed as I looked up at the sky, which was still dark and full of clouds. To many it might have been something of a mere coincidence, but I knew better. "Why'd you let it rain all this time then?" I asked.

"I like the rain?" she said innocently.

Of course.

"Can you make the rain return...?" I asked. Knowing divine power she hadn't actually stopped the rain, just shifted it. Odds are it was raining harder now in the areas around us, though to what distance her power worked was something I couldn't tell. Knowing past saints and their abilities, her ability could have a range between anything from a few hundred feet to many miles.

"No. And it won't stop forever. It'll come back in an hour or so," she said.

"I see... how'd you figure out you could do that?" I asked as we returned to walking. Now without the rain falling upon us.

"I sit a lot."

"You... sit a lot...?" I asked. What kind of answer was that? That was even more cryptic than the ones I gave half the time, which was saying something.

"By the window. Watching the sea. And the rain," she said, speaking gently as she did.

Nodding slowly, I understood what she meant. She had figured it out thanks to long hours of boredom. A sad hint to her life until now.

"Neat ability. Though a tad dramatic. Can you do anything else?" I asked.

"Not sure...? What else should I be able to do?"

"I can help you test for other abilities if you'd like... but I suggest we do so later, when we can do it in a place where we'll be safe to do so. Last thing we need is for you to draw attention out here," I said. We were still alone on the road but that could change at any moment.

"Right...!" Liora nodded excitedly.

"Renn will like it, though. She really likes the rain and stuff," I said.

"Again with your devotion!" she said happily.

Was it that weird...? And why was someone so young so amused by it? "Yes, yes," I said.

She giggled at me and then slowed a bit. I slowed my pace as well, wondering what was wrong... then I realized what it is.

"Vim..." Liora said my name softly while tugging gently on my hand.

"Hm?"

"My legs hurt now," she said.