

## 272: Shocks

The latest shock rattled through Nem's mind as he digested the words of the man sitting across from him. A man who was practically a child. A man who'd just stated, with no deception, that he was housing a memory construct of the former Warden in his skull despite the woman having been dead for too long to make such a thing remotely possible.

With a flick of his domain, he overrode the tactile control sequence of the privacy array surrounding the pavilion, pushing the enchantment up to its highest setting.

The Custodian's eyes went wide, not just at the sudden blurring of their surroundings. He'd seen what Nem had done. Seen it, understood it, and with what skill he'd already shown, would likely be able to replicate it.

"How?" Nem asked, letting the single word carry that question and more.

The Custodian thought. His paling stilled, showing a measure of control beyond that of any silver as he prepared himself for a lie. But then, that control was released, and when he answered, it was with no deception. "After we spoke, Vatrece left a construct in my head. Such things can't last forever, as I'm sure you know, but I managed to fix that by pulling it into my soul and anchoring it to a construct of rank-twenty-nine essence. That and the memories she stole from me have changed her a bit. She calls herself Reece now, and she seems to be stable. For some definition of stable, anyway."

The shock of those words against those before was as a hurricane to a breeze. Keeping his face steady by habit, more than anything, he did not attempt to mask his reaction from the Custodian's sight. This was not a game of dice where duplicity was preabided. That the Custodian would be able to pick anything of substance from the rapidity of Nem's thoughts

was inconceivable, and yet...

There the man sat, a silver, soul swollen and strained like an overripe melon after too-rapid growth, claiming to have achieved the impossible built upon a framework those twice his level could only hope to claim.

There was no lie.

"I see," Nem finally said, steepling his fingers on the table before him.

Tanergal was less reserved.

"Preposterous!" the man practically spluttered. "A silver claiming rank-twenty-nine essence? Saying he's breached the barrier of soul and mind? He should not even know of such things!"

"Read it for yourself," Nem said flatly, glancing at the Guardian with annoyance. "His statements ring true and answer more questions than they breed." He turned back to Rain.

"How did you achieve this?"

"I was uniquely motivated," Rain answered. "The construct's task was to ensure the safety of the knowledge I hold by any means necessary, whether that meant teaching me or killing me. It would have shredded my mind with the last of its power if I had failed to meet its deadline."

*The knowledge he holds?*

"And despite that, you chose to save it?" Nem asked, focusing on the more important point. The man across from him was dangerous. Not because of the power he held, which was laughable compared to Nem's own, but because of the manner in which he'd achieved it. The

speed. The Custodian said they were allied. He meant it, and his actions at Fel Sadanis and elsewhere stood behind the truth dripping from those words.

And yet...

"Yes," Rain said, either missing or misinterpreting Nem's reservations. "I've got my issues with her, to be sure, but she did save me from Barstone. I wouldn't be standing here without her. Plus, reciprocity aside, Reece knows things. The information she holds is worth the headache."

Now that he was looking for it, Nem saw the ripple. The construct was hidden from him, but he saw the impact of its communication on the Custodian's thoughts. He was no mind reader, but he could tell the sudden spike of annoyance had come from within. Unlike his own annoyance, which had an easily identifiable external source.

"Information such as how to refine essence as a silver?" Tanergal asked, his words dripping with disbelief.

Nem shook his head ever so slightly. The young Guardian was showing himself to be even more a child than the Custodian, untrusting of his senses and also common sense. The other man's suspicion was plain—that the Custodian was an agent of Olicia or some other adversary, skilled enough to fool even their honed craft—but such a prospect would bear not even the slightest scrutiny.

And should it be true, they were finished anyway.

"Amongst other things," Rain said, focused on Tanergal enough to miss anything he might have gleaned from Nem's reaction. When his attention returned, however, it came with the repeat of a shock past—deliberate manipulation of the paling to instill added meaning to his

words. "Such as the location of lairs, details of rare classes, dispositions of important people, and so on and so forth. My company is in a precarious position, and we need every advantage. Do you think we're hiding in a swamp for fun?"

The Custodian wished for Nem to move the conversation along. He thought—rightly—that they were moving toward information that even a Guardian was not allowed to know.

"It was wise of you to share this with me up front," Nem said, cutting off Tanergal's angry response. The man was far too proud for his own good.

The Custodian nodded. "A good relationship is built on trust."

Again, the ripple.

"What did she say?" Nem asked.

Rain sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his gauntleted fingers. "She said...that we should just kiss already."

Despite himself, Nem smiled. "It is her, then. A headache, indeed."

Tanergal seemed like he was going to explode.

Nem cleared his throat. "I would speak with her if you would allow it, but we cannot let this matter distract us indefinitely. You have a means of contacting your people?"

"I...do," Rain said haltingly.

"Then use it," Nem said. "I am satisfied that our purposes align, and the matters we have to discuss involve more than just ourselves. If you could summon those of your high council not away on your vessel at the moment, it would expedite matters greatly. And Tanergal, if you could gather the senior Sentinels and secure a trusted scribe, that would be of great help."

"Sir," Tanergal said, his mouth twisting as he recognized the dismissal. Swallowing that anger, he turned to depart, proving his quality. The man was very young, especially for a Guardian, but he was loyal and devoted to the cause. In times such as these, that was more than most. He would learn to trust in time.

"Now," Nem said as Tanergal melted through the distortion. "Tell me, construct, what was it that you saw in this man that led you to tether yourself to him? Custodian, convey her response as you may."

"'A fresh perspective,' she says," Rain replied. "Hold on, let me just..."

It was not a shock at this point, and so Nem was ready as the Custodian used an acceleration technique while diving into his soul. As a Dynamo, the speed of the Custodian's thought was more difficult to match than it would have otherwise been, but no true challenge for one on the cusp of platinum. Letting his body remain seated in the normal flow of time, Nem watched for changes in the man's paling as he doubtless spoke to the construct.

In less than a minute of perceived time, the Custodian was back.

"What are you doing?" Nem asked, giving the man a chance to explain.

"Puppet theater," Rain replied in a passable imitation of Vatrece's tone and inflection. He sat up rigidly in his chair, then held his arms out to the side before letting his forearms swing

marionette-like from the elbows. "Hi, Nem-Nem. Don't worry. I didn't steal control of his body or anything. He's just copying me."

Nem let himself breathe out a tired sigh. "Authenticate. Crimson Apex Tower."

"Sorrel Wagon Down," Vatrece—Reece—replied through the Custodian, now rubbing her stomach while patting her head. "Happy?"

"No," Nem said. "And don't call me Nem-Nem. You are not my mother, and I am not a child to tolerate such casual address."

"So uptight," Reece said, settling back and crossing her arms. "I watched you soil many a nappy, and don't you forget."

"I see you remain mostly yourself," Nem said. "Enough games."

"Enough games, then," Reece said, bending forward in a seated bow that risked putting Rain's forehead through the table. "I greet you, Warden Nem, and hereby recognize you as my successor."

Nem arched an eyebrow. "I was not aware I needed the blessing of the dead, but I shall receive it with honor."

"Damn right you will," Reece said with a sardonic grin. "Maybe another ten years, and you'd have been ready, but things are as they are."

"Custodian, you need not degrade yourself by mimicking her so completely," Nem said tiredly.

"It's easier if I do," Rain said after a strained pause. "The more I think about it, the harder it gets. I'm not so good at standing halfway."

"That you can do it at all is impressive enough," Nem said. "Very well. Reece who was Vatrece, I repeat my question. Why train this man? He clearly has aptitude, but that has never been enough for you before."

"Don't inflate his head," Reece said. "It's not his aptitude that caught my attention. It's what he is. He's from beyond the void, Nem, and the skill he shows comes in no small part from his utterly foreign means of upbringing."

Nem had thought he was done being shocked. Apparently, he'd been wrong.

"That...explains much," Nem said after as short a pause as he could manage. It did explain much. The mysterious, magicless inventions he'd been hearing about, for one. The Custodian's questionable relationship with the Bank, however, could wait until Tanergal returned with the others.

"That it does," Reece replied with a laugh. "He didn't come here on purpose, mind you. His people know nothing of the void, or even essence for that matter. Here, let me give you the basics."

Nem listened with rapt attention as the former Warden described a world without magic. Science. Technology. Education. Society. Systems that aped the complexity of the System itself, running within constructs of structured rock and metal empowered by tamed lightning.

Then, she turned to Ascension, describing what Rain was building and what she hoped his world's ideas could become when magic *was* on the table.

"I see why he caught your interest," Nem said when she was finally finished. He paused for a long moment. "I will speak of these things more with the Custodian at a later time."

"You see, Rain?" Reece said with a grin. "This is what it means to stay on topic. Gonna tell us why you're here, then?"

"We will come to that, Remnant Reece," Nem said flatly. "I have one last question for you. Why did you do it?"

"Ah, we're talking about that, huh?" Reece said. She gestured to herself—or to Rain, it soon became apparent. "Fecht had a lot in common with this guy if you think about it. Oh, settle down, Rain. Both unifiers. Both reformers. Both visionaries. Advocates of cooperation in the name of the greater good." She snorted. "As each sees it, mind. What Rain hopes to accomplish through enlightenment and shared responsibility, Fecht was trying to do through indoctrination and nationalism taken beyond the bounds of sanity."

"You are evading," Nem said coldly. "Answer the question."

Reece closed her eyes, tilting her head upward and crossing her arms behind her chair. "You knew I was dying, which means you already know the answer. Neither you nor anyone else in the Watch had the will to do what was needed. I chose to act. Even as the ghost of a dead woman, I accept the responsibility, though I don't even know that I failed. The threat was stopped, even if it did not go exactly to plan. Time will tell if the cost shall grow to outweigh the benefit."



"And when Lightbreaker continues Fecht's legacy?"

"It's already collapsing beneath him, mark my words," Reece said, waving a hand. "That man has no idea how to lead. He's too...absolute. Kinda like you." She pressed a hand to her chest. "I have set the Custodian on a path toward addressing the more important situation, that of the System's inevitable failure, but he cannot do it alone. I'll be direct since you like that so very much. Help us, or don't, and ruin what little chance reality has left. It's as simple as that."

"Okay, that's enough," Rain said, relaxing out of Vatrece's stiff posture and speaking toward the ground. "We're going to fix it, Reece. Reality. Society. Before any of that, though, it starts with rescuing my team." He looked up to meet Nem's gaze. "Is there anything else you want to ask her, or should we get down to business?"

"I am finished with her," Nem said, his thoughts awhirl with implications and possibilities. "For now."