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Will

Before he learned the truth, Ailas wanted nothing more than to be Ophiel's most dedicated disciple. Ever since he showed affinity to Ophiel's Will, the shining auric substance that powered the whole world, he dreamed of a future in which he would serve as the Distributor—the single person who controlled the flow of Ophiel's Will—only then would he be as close as he wanted to be to the Goddess. Well, as close as was humanly possible. No one knew how Ophiel's Will was created, but the Grand Cardinal, leader of the Church of Ophiel, often alluded it was a liquid blessed by Ophiel herself through a series of clandestine rituals.

Regardless, it made modern civilization possible, and the Church tested every child before their tenth birthday to see if they had an affinity for controlling Ophiel's Will. Those who showed they could manipulate Ophiel's Will, instead of passing out or having a seizure, could perform all types of miracles. They could create light where there was darkness, power complex machinery, heal the infirm. Ophiel's Will ran through the world like its lifeblood, yet only 5% could actually control it.

When he was an orphan on the streets, sniveling and miserable, the Church dragged Ailas to his Affinity Test. At nine years old, the thought of being tested shook him to his core. As a rat scurrying around the city, he had seen the aftermath of negative tests first-hand. With luck like his, he was confident he would up and die.

Back then, the shining golden liquid had run down his chin as he refused to drink. Brow furrowing and face red, the nearest church member held his nose until he consumed the liquid. That day, everything changed. The Church of Ophiel took him off the street, fed him, clothed

him, and shared with him the tales of the Goddess's compassion and love. In him, they found a faithful follower.

Fifteen years later, he underwent weeks of grueling interviews and trials to prove his unwavering love for Ophiel. There was none more dedicated to the Goddess than he. Ailas lived her, *breathed* her, even. She was always at the forefront of his mind. Seeing this in him, the Church selected Ailas as the new Distributor. Some said this position was even more important than the Grand Cardinal himself.

Today, Ailas would finally be allowed into the Chamber of Distribution, a place known only to the Distributor. Starting at the very bottom of the long staircase leading to the High Cathedral, the most important holy site in the world, he began to climb.

Every movement was confident and efficient. His strides were long and purposeful as he took two stairs at a time, back straight and aqua eyes immovable from his goal. Golden hair spilled onto pearly ceremonial robes, the silken threads shining like gossamer in the morning sun. The Cathedral towered before him, gleaming marble coaxed into gentle curves, the same tenderness those inside would preach.

The building bathed in the light, and a certain warmth glowed within Ailas's chest. Not soon enough, he reached the top of the staircase, looking up at the magnificent structure before him. It was not the first time he had been inside, but every time he arrived at this point, his every thought would disappear like doves into the turquoise sky. The only one remaining was love and reverence for his Goddess.

After a few moments and a silent prayer, he entered through a massive stone arch. The calming sound of water flowing down a fountain in the center of the foyer soothed his spirit.

Whatever nerves chewed at the frays of his mind like vermin and twisted his stomach were gently washed away, soaked in the multicolor light of stain-glass windows.

A statue of Ophiel stood above the glassy waters, eyes closed with a tender smile curving her lips. She held a bottle of her Will, a halo of auric light glowing onto her cupped hands. The artists always portrayed her as young and beautiful. He stood for a moment, observing. This was his paradise.

Some of his fellow disciples in the Church would joke about how he never found romantic love because he was infatuated with their Goddess. He would smile or perhaps chuckle at those comments, knowing they would never understand.

Ailas loved her. In every sense of the word, he loved her. Every morning, he would wake up to think of her. Every night, he'd fall asleep with her on his mind. His every action was to get closer to her. He would gaze at statues of her likeness with the greedy eyes of a lover, tracing every curve as if they were his hands. He would endlessly ponder over stories of her kindness and compassion, how she would always strive to do the right thing.

The other priests would never understand— how could he have eyes for anyone else when he could have eyes for *her*?

As he stood near the statue, he heard footsteps echoing down the halls of the Cathedral. Someone had come to interrupt his longing gazes, his time with her. With a sigh, he gave the statue one last glance before looking down the hallway to his right. In the middle of a hallway stood a man of the Church he had never seen before— an elderly figure with frown-shaped wrinkles and sunken eyes with dark circles underneath. He looked terminally tired, as if he had never known joy, or that joy had somehow been taken away from him. The ceremonial robes of the Distributor hung from his skeleton frame, and a stone carving weighed down his neck.

Ailas could tell from one glance that the man was exhausted, depressed, and ancient, which made the fact that the Church needed to replace him make sense. Most members were bright and energetic, and even the older ones seemed to have a youthful glow to them. Wanting to get whatever interaction he would have with this solemn man over with, Ailas immediately stepped forward and bowed.

“I am Ailas, and I am your successor as Distributor. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The elderly man stood before the younger one, looking him over before his bony chest heaved out a sigh. In his eyes, Ailas detected something akin to pity, but knew he must be mistaken.

“Yes, I have been made aware of you and your zealous devotion to the Church. My name is Vicen. Funnily enough, I used to be just like you.” He said, then paused, shaking his head.

It was hard to believe that he had anything in common with this miserable old man, even when he was young, but Ailas determined that he should give him the benefit of the doubt—like Ophiel would have.

“We should get started. I’ll tell you all there is to know about being the Distributor. Let’s head to the Distribution Chamber.” Vicen motioned Ailas to follow him down the hall, and the young man followed, an impatient jump in his step.

“If I can ask— how long have you worked as Distributor?” Ailas asked.

“Nearly 60 long years. Each has crawled by at a painfully slow pace. You will come to understand. I am looking forward to finally resting, finally being away from her.” Vicen answered, sudden emotion causing his throat to close.

Ailas's eyes widened. Did this elderly man truly hate being Distributor that much? And what did he mean by saying he'd come to understand? Most curious of all, who was "her"? The Goddess?

"I'm sorry to hear that, Distributor. I suppose I feel a bit embarrassed to be as excited as I am about starting the job when you have such negative feelings about it." Ailas admitted, then asked, "Why has the job been hard for you? I'd appreciate any tips you could give me to avoid any potential shortcomings or hardships."

Vicen said nothing. An uncomfortable silence filled the marble hall like the Church's spiced incense.

"When you see, you will understand." He said finally.

The cryptic response confused Ailas, but it was clear Vicen didn't want to talk about it. Both continued down the hall without further discussion, bowing to other senior members of the Church as they passed by until they reached a set of stone doors.

"Goddess, these look heavy. How do we move them?" Ailas asked, watching as the old man held his finger to a needle-like point on the side of the door.

"Blood. These doors will only open to me, and now to you." Vicen didn't flinch as a drop of blood ran down the needle-like stone, prompting the weighty doors to slide open. Inside, a staircase lit dimly by Will-powered lights led down underground. The older man let out another deep sigh.

"It's time."

Ailas gave the other man a questioning look as they began to descend, hearing the doors slide shut behind them. In time, they reached an arched doorway lined with intricate carvings and runes Ailas had never seen before. Stepping through the arch, an expansive marble room with

lofty ceilings unveiled itself before them. The younger man's thin lips opened in wonder as he scanned the room, filled with runes and glowing objects. He had no idea a cavernous space of this size existed under the Cathedral.

In the center sat a fountain of Ophiel's Will, shining bright in the dimly lit room. Never had he seen this amount of Ophiel's Will. It was customarily distributed in tiny glass vials like those in a crate next to a filling station on the side of the fountain. Beyond that, a thin stream of Ophiel's Will snaked through the darkness, leading to a large rectangular glass box. From this angle, he couldn't see what was inside.

"It's beautiful...." Ailas said, breathless, "This is a place blessed by Ophiel herself."

"Come, see the true nature of what it means to be Distributor," Vicen said, some mixture of sorrow and regret in his voice.

Unaware, the younger man followed as he walked over to the glass box. It was a slow trudge, as if he was walking to the gallows.

As the box became clearer, Ailas could make out fresh lilies riming the sides around a stone pedestal. From here, it looked almost like a coffin. Who was this?

Ailas didn't notice that Vicen had stopped, leaving the younger man to approach the box alone. Once he was close enough, Ailas realized it was a woman.

His throat closed. His heart stopped.

He knew her. He had always known her. He would recognize her anywhere.

On the pedestal lay none other than Ophiel herself, tubes planted deep beneath her skin. Her eyes were closed as if sleeping, and her chest rose and fell in a natural rhythm. His body trembled. His mind buzzed. Shock and confusion overtook him.

"N-...No..."

The word tumbled from his quivering lips.

“This is what it means to be Distributor,” Vicen said.

Ailas turned to him, face scarlet, and dashed over to wrap his hands around shoulders of bone and shake them violently.

“Why?”

Tears of rage blurred his vision. How could they do this to Ophiel? Their Goddess, their moral compass, their world’s heart and soul.

Most of all, he loved her.

He *loved* her.

“Do you think I have not suffered as well?” the old man asked, tears forming in his eyes, “I love her as you do, yet all I can do is stand here each day, watching over her as she sleeps. For the world’s sake, I insert chemicals into her bloodstream to keep her in this state.”

Ailas shook his head, unforgiving. “How could you do something so vile to someone you claim to love?”

Vicen stared deep into Ailas’s eyes, their aqua hue shining with tears. Then, he removed the large stone necklace that weighed him down for far too long and handed it to Ailas.

“If you think you can, free her. Do what I could not.” He pointed to a slot next to the box shaped precisely like the necklace.

“I will!”

Without hesitation, Ailas grabbed the necklace and placed it in the slot, causing the box to slide open.

And there she was. A living god, her head resting on a silk pillow while her onyx hair fell on either side of her porcelain face. Every feature perfect, just like the statues he would stare at for hours.

“If you take those tubes from her body, she will wake up. No one can predict what will become of the world. She may smite us all in fury for keeping her like this.” Vicen’s voice came from over his shoulder, and he wished the old man would just shut up.

He rested his hands on the tubes but didn’t pull them out yet. Of course he wanted to, but he couldn’t help the doubts gnawing at his mind.

What would happen in a world without Ophiel’s Will?