

## **Non Human 321**

### Chapter 321 Roots Within The Owl's Nest

Slowly walking towards the bright opening, a field of light and life surrounded by gloomy darkness of a dense forest, I glanced around again as if feeling I was forgetting something.

The Owl's Nest was as I remembered it. Within the bright field I saw the huge tree in the distance. And parts of their home, amongst other smaller buildings. I was approaching it this time from a different angle than the last but it seemed fine from here at a distance.

I was walking alone through the dark section of the forest, and was indeed walking calmly.

Vim had told me I'd not need to worry over the bear, the Shadow Bear, as he called it... and it seemed he was right.

My lack of smell made it either unable to notice my presence, or made it wary of me. Either way, I wasn't going to complain. I had worried a little about having to run away from it again, even if I felt a little more comfortable with running for long distances than before.

I had left Cat with the horses at a small stream nearby. One secluded in a dense forest, away from any nearby villages. She had not wanted to stay at the human village nearby, the one that Vim had mentioned. It seemed Cat, being a member of a secluded village, just simply didn't feel very comfortable amongst others. Especially when alone.

Reaching the edge of the darkness, where the dark forest met with the brighter meadow surrounding the huge tree, I spent a tiny moment standing on the boundary.

Lifting an arm, I reached out and slipped my arm into the lit up area. I felt the warmth of the sun's rays, and stared at the spot on my arm where it had entered the light.

I could actually see the spot where the darkness ended and the sunlight began. As if I was in a deep dark shadow, yet it was too dark to be natural. It was more than just the thick treetops above. It was as if I was standing in the middle of a cloudy night, and holding an arm out into normal sunlight.

Somehow it felt... wrong.

They called this place the Owl's Nest. What if...

Gulping as I realized that name was likely more than just Lilly and her families descriptor, I wondered how long it had taken me to realize that this had likely been a monarch's nest. A monarch that was an owl.

Stepping through the boundary, I enjoyed the feeling of the warmth the sunlight brought. The world had begun to grow cold, and damp, and I was strangely susceptible to it at the moment. I blamed the long year Vim and I had spent in the south, during the summer on top of it.

Taking a small breath, I glanced around again and was a little surprised to find no one nearby. Last time I had come here, Lilly had been waiting for me. But that time I had been getting chased by that bear, so maybe that was why.

Walking slowly towards the tree, and the large home next to it, I glanced around at the meadow I was now in. There were flowers and scattered small bushes mixed into the healthy grass, but none of it was very tall. The tallest things in this whole meadow were small trees in the distance. Ones that looked like they had things growing upon them.

"Weren't there other trees...?" I wondered as I tried to remember. Yes. There had been. Maybe they're on the other side of the huge tree in the center, and I simply couldn't see them from here. There should have been a small row of smaller trees, ones that had been planted not too long ago. Saplings of the huge tree this meadow was centered around.

I glanced up the huge tree and wondered if the monarch had lived within it in the past. I scanned the huge thing for any sign of a hole, or nest, but couldn't see any.

"I wonder if Lilly would grow upset if I asked about it," I mumbled softly.

A sound drew my attention from the huge tree, and I smiled at the figure in the distance. Someone had opened a window, and before I had been able to see if it had been Windle or Lilly they had retreated into the home.

They knew I was here. They had likely heard me mumble.

By the time I made it to the house, the front door opened... and Lilly stood there waiting for me.

"Rennalee," Lilly greeted me with a small smile as she stepped back, gesturing for me to enter.

My heart filled with warmth at the very gentle gesture, and its meaning.

She had just invited me into her home without question.

"Lilly. I hope I'm not intruding," I said as I waited a moment before entering her home.

Although very humbled and happy to have her so readily remember me and invite me into her home in such a way, I wanted to be as proper as I could.

"Hm...?" Lilly noticed my odd action and tilted her head at me, and I gulped at the way her eyes hardened just a little bit. She was now studying me more intently.

"Vim sent me. He... well, we, would like to ask for your help," I said.

Lilly then smiled at me. "You look so desperate all of a sudden! Please, come in. Vim never needs to ask for my help, Renn, so you don't need to either. You're family, Renn."

My tail went stiff and my head went a little numb as she tilted her head in a nod, to gesture for me to enter her home already.

Unable to say anything to that, I stepped forward with a strangely blank mind. I felt as if I should weep and hug her, yet all I could accomplish was step into her home.

Walking past Lilly and deeper into the house, I felt a strange sense of ease all of a sudden. As if I had been here many times before, enough to call it home myself. It was likely thanks to what she had said earlier. She had called me family. Though she had likely said such a thing because to her, anyone in the Society was family, it still made me feel proud and somehow comfy. I felt kind of like how Vim made me feel when he returned my hugs once in a blue moon.

Glancing down one of the nearby hallways, like before I immediately noticed how clean the place was... though now it... had a strange smell that I hadn't remembered being here before. Was someone else here? Not an owl? No, this was...

I paused a moment, and realized I recognized the odd smell. One that hadn't been here before.

A baby.

"Lilly...?" I asked excitedly as I stepped farther into the home, and found Windle walking down a set of stairs. He had a bundle in his arms, wrapped in an obvious way.

"Welcome Renn. You look far better this time, I'm glad to see it," Windle greeted me with a gentle smile as he stepped off the stairs, and I felt my eyes go wide as I slowly approached the man.

I barely heard Lilly shut the door behind her as the tall man kindly lowered the baby, to let me see better. The small child was sleeping, with a bundle of brown hair, and...

"Wings..." I whispered as my eyes watered up at the sight. The baby had wings. Barely hidden by the blankets wrapped around what was obviously a little girl, were small nubs of half-grown feathers sticking out from behind her head.

"Well Windle? Hand her over, look at her she's about to weep at the mere sight of her. She'll not harm Root," Lilly said firmly as she stepped up to us.

Windle shifted, smiling shyly as I realized Lilly's meaning.

He hadn't wanted to hand her over to me, out of worry.

I sniffed as he gently extended his arms, and suddenly I was holding her.

"Root...?" I asked with a whisper as I carefully held the bundle of a child. She hadn't even noticed she had left her father's arms. She had a small part of her hand in her mouth, sucking on it.

"We name our children after the trees. We're running out of parts to use, so if you have any ideas let us know," Windle said.

Shifting my head a little, since I had begun to cry, I made sure none of my tears landed on the child's face. A few dripped down my chin, landing onto the blankets but not her. "That's adorable," I whispered.

And she was adorable indeed. She felt as if she weighed less than the blanket she was wrapped in. How was she so light? Fly had been light too. Maybe it was just a bird thing.

"Come. Sit," Lilly patted my shoulder, and without taking my eyes off the wonderful thing in my arms I was guided to a chair. I soaked up the sight of the young girl, and took in a deep breath and kept a shiver at bay. I didn't want to wake the small girl.

She was so, so tiny. She was smaller than Hark had been. Was it because of how old she was? Because she was a non-human? Lilly was taller than I was, though a little scrawny. And Windle was taller than her!

I was completely mystified by the child. The whole world suddenly felt innocently small, reminding me of the feeling I once had when a child. Back when my whole world had only been the few trees around my family's home.

I'll protect this child forever. Against anything. Anyone. Always.

"She's beautiful... is... uh..." I glanced around, and realized they had led me to that large table. The one we had sat at the last time I was here. It was a few rooms away from the entrance; they had guided me rather far without me realizing it. I had been mesmerized. How long had I been staring down at her?

"She's mine. Ours. I had been pregnant last time you were here, though I'd not told you. Don't feel bad though I had only told Vim, I didn't even tell Windle," Lilly said with a grin as she pulled the chair next to me out from under the table as to sit in it. She didn't sit directly next to me though, and instead pulled the chair out farther and put it at an angle. To face me, yet not sit too close.

"Congratulations. Both of you," I said warmly to Vim's friends.

Lilly's grin stayed strong as Windle actually blushed and nodded.

"And congratulations to you too, Renn. I've heard of what you've done, at least some of it," Lilly said.

I gulped. "Nothing as wondrous as this," I said as I looked back down to Root.

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Root. An odd name for a girl, maybe. But it was lovely all the same. Roots were strong. They ran deep. Held a tree firm. Plus they could help re-grow a tree even if it fell or broke. It was a splendid name, one that would keep her strong and stout. Perfect for this harsh and lonely world we lived in. Though I prayed she'd not end up a solitary tree one day even if she was strong enough to endure such a fate.

"I disagree. Marrying Vim is quite a feat, I'd say," Windle said.

I blinked, and realized that was what they were talking about. I looked up, and felt a little silly as I grinned back at the two smiling at me.

So that was what Lilly meant by family. She hadn't just meant that in the sense of the Society.

She had been serious. Genuine.

"It's not official yet, but..." I said, and felt my throat constrict a little. I suddenly felt like weeping, even though I was so happy. It was a silly feeling.

"Please. I know Vim, Renn. He is not the type of man to allow such a thing even as a rumor, so for he himself to tell us? Can't get any more official," Lilly said.

"He told you?" I asked. When?

"We've received a few letters from him over the last year or so. Plus we've been visited by Oplar, not too long ago. What... a few months, honey?" Windle asked his wife.

She nodded. "Four or so? Maybe five?" she wondered as well.

Ah. So before she had come to search us out, and finding us at the Crypt. I had thought she had gone straight there, but I guess this place wasn't too far out of the way on such a path.

"Um..." I spoke up, and then hesitated as they both looked at me.

What to say...? How to say it? I had so much I wanted to ask. To tell them.

They had just called me family. Family.

Family.

My eyes watered up again, and I had to look down and away, not in shame but to make sure I didn't shed any tears on the girl again.

"Was she this emotional during her last visit?" Windle asked.

"A little. Here, Renn," Lilly sounded amused as she leaned forward, and a small handkerchief was suddenly being held out to me.

I shifted a little, and worried for a tiny moment. I could easily grab it even while holding Root, but...

Before I could shift enough to grab it without waking the baby, Lilly leaned forward and went ahead and patted my face with the thing herself. I happily accepted the strange gesture, and laughed a little as she wiped my face for me.

"I got plenty of experience," Lilly teased as she finished.

I bet she did. I was jealous.

"I have... a lot to say. To ask. So much. But before I do, I need to handle what I was sent here to do or else Vim will get upset with me," I said with a smile.

Lilly nodded, waiting expectantly as Windle shifted in his chair. He was suddenly nervous.

"I have a human friend. Her name is Cat. Vim found her in the south... she was sent on a mission by a saint, from her village, and Vim sent me to find out if you'd be willing to help me. To go to this saint, or at least find her properly," I said, speaking quickly but in a slightly hushed tone. Not because I worried over anyone hearing me, but simply so that I'd not wake Root up.

Windle groaned as Lilly tilted her head at me. "Now that's a story. I of course will help, Renn," Lilly said without hesitation.

"There's more..." I said.

"I'm sure. And we'll face it all together, I bet," she said with a nod.

Windle sighed. "Indeed. Vim would not ask if it was not dire. I'm to assume this saint is not a member of the Society?" Windle asked.

I shook my head. "It's likely a human saint. It's a descendant of a saint I knew in the past, a friend of mine," I said.

"And we're to kill her...? Vim hates saints but she's your friend? I'd not thought him cruel enough to kill his wife's friends," Lilly said with a serious look.

Smirking a little, I shook my head. "I don't think he wants to kill her. Yet, anyway. She had a prophecy. One concerning the birth of a monarch, and..." I started to explain, and Windle actually sat up straight with such vigor he had bumped into one of the other chairs on accident, making it bang against the table and rattle.

Luckily Root didn't even shift or notice, as Lilly glared at her husband. "Windle, if you wake her I'll put you to sleep," Lilly warned.

"Sorry. But jeez, the birth of a monarch? How about we just let Vim handle this one, dear?" Windle asked softly.

Oh. Right. Coward.

"Ignore him, Renn. Go on," Lilly though didn't mind as she looked back at me.

I nodded, and did my best to ignore the whinny groan that escaped from her husband as I did. "Vim doesn't believe it. But there's evidence, I guess. A huge raging fire had ravaged the lands to the south-east of here, near the Summit. As far as we're aware the bison family were the only casualties, other than their daughter Angie. Vim believes the fires are from the monarch, or at least started by them. So

he's worried her prophecy has some truth to it, and he wants us to find her and verify them if we can," I explained.

"And this human? Cat you said?" Windle asked.

I nodded. "She's a member of the group the saint, Saint Elaine, sent to stop the fires supposedly. To kill the monarch. Vim found them instead," I said.

"Yet didn't find the monarch? And you called this human, this saint, your friend...? Yet you don't know where they are?" Lilly asked.

"Oh. I do. I think. I've not been to their village in a long time... maybe half a century or so, but I could probably find it. Rather I think Vim wants you to help me, Lilly, so that I don't get myself in trouble. And... well..." I hesitated a tad, but knew better than to do so. Vim had explicitly told me to tell her everything. The truth, in full.

"Well...?" Windle furthered.

I nodded and sighed. "Vim doesn't trust the Chronicler anymore. Or anyone involved in the church. He firmly believes, or believed, that we'd be followed here. He fears if I go to the village and find the saint alone, I'll be followed by one of the church members. He doesn't want that," I said.

It was Lilly's turn to sit up a little straighter. "You're kidding," she whispered.

I gulped and shook my head.

Lilly then glanced away from me, to her husband. I watched the two stare into each other's eyes for a moment and felt jealous again.

I hoped one day Vim and I had such a deep connection. He already looked at me with such affection as Windle did Lilly, but there was still a tiny bit of a divide. A gap. A missing piece. I kind of knew what it was, but was unsure of how to find it within him. I was betting, hoping, on time fixing it for me.

"It must be bad," Windle then said.

"Very. But this is Vim we're talking about. It might just be him being overprotective of his new wife," Lilly said with a gesture to me.

I smiled at that. "I honestly think that might be part of the reason, yes."

The two smiled at me, and I felt strangely warm. As if it was Vim I was sitting with instead.

Family. They had called me family. And likely had meant that.

I had family...

"Where's your human then, Renn? I hope you didn't leave her at Telmik," Windle then said.

"Oh. No. She's not far outside of your forest, in a very wooded section. Vim had wanted me to leave her at the village nearby but she doesn't seem to like people much. For a human she's more like us than not, surprisingly," I said.

"Yeah? Maybe I'll be able to stomach her then. We'll leave in a moment and go get her, just in case you two were followed," Lilly said.

I nodded. "I also got letters, Lilly. For you and Windle," I said.

"Hm? And no bag?" Windle asked as he glanced at me.

Right. I had left my luggage with Cat and the horses. "I have one of Vim's little pouches, on my waist," I said with a tiny nod to it.

"Of course you do," Lilly said with a smirk.

Shrugging gently, I wasn't too shocked to hear and see that she likely fully knew the pouch I spoke of.

Glancing at Lilly, and the way she studied me while smiling... I thought of all the things I'd wanted to ask her. All the stuff I'd considered and thought of during my journey. From stories about the past, when she had traveled with Vim, to even things beyond Vim. Stuff about the Society, the world... and...

Glancing at Windle, and his gentle smile that I noticed was more directed to his child than me, I wondered if I should ask him too.

After all most of my questions were concerning both of them. Their relationship. What it meant to be husband and wife. To have children.

Unlike most others in the Society, they were not just one of the few actually married and still alive, but they were also the only ones considered true friends by Vim. All his other supposed friends were either single, or had lost their mates already. Like Nebl, or Nann. Berri had been another I could have talked to, but it seemed although Vim trusted her husband Horn he had not been the most astute individual. Someone who didn't like the Society or its purpose even.

Yes. They were perfect for certain questions in my heart, ones I had been contemplating for a long time. Ones I couldn't outright ask Vim, or anyone else.

Not only were they married, they were also trustworthy. Vim himself trusted them. My being here, with Cat in tow, was proof of that.

"Where is Vim during this moment anyway? Telmik?" Windle then asked, likely not even noticing my stare.

"Heading to the Bell Church. A new member, one we met in Lumen, is... regretfully not blending in well there. The young girl is a bird, named Fly. I don't know the whole story, only that she's struggling with settling in. The elders, Plumb, asked Vim to find her a new home," I said.

"Fly...? A bird? What kind?" Lilly asked, perking up. She did so in a way that told me she hadn't known about Fly at all.

"I'm... honestly not sure. She doesn't have wings, not real ones, but she's covered in feathers. Head to toe. Or well, she doesn't have toes. She has talons, for feet. She's a young girl, with pretty reddish feathers. We saved her from other predators, and monsters in Lumen," I said.

Lilly glanced at Windle, and I noted the look between them. Did they think she was an owl? "I think Vim would have brought her here if she had been an owl," I said.

"Yes. He would have. But he may also not have known or had the luxury. Hopefully he'll bring her here before taking the poor egg elsewhere," Windle said.

Lilly nodded. "He will. Where else would he go from the Bell Church with a bird in tow? Especially one so unable to blend in with humans. Even more so for one not able to live amongst the nuns," Lilly stated.

"I'm not sure if it was over religion," I said carefully.

"What else would it be? There's a reason those with half a brain stay away from those idiots. Even Merit's fish brain can comprehend that," Lilly said.

I blinked at the mention of my friend. "Merit did say she was banished from there too," I said.

"Too?" Windle asked.

I nodded. "I am too. Supposedly one of my ancestors killed Plumb's family," I said.

"Ha!" Lilly scoffed a laugh, and quickly started to giggle in an effort to stay quiet. She glanced back at me, and as she did little Root shifted in my arms. The girl noticing her mother's laugh was not surprising. My full attention went to the child as I gently started to rock her back and forth, lulling the child back into sleep.

How strange. I've not held many children in my life, yet my rocking had obviously worked. Root had fallen straight back into sleep without any hesitation. Maybe it was just instinctual?

Or well...

I felt my own frown grow and widen as I realized something serious.

"Renn...? What is it? Is she pooping?" Lilly asked.

My frown turned into a smirk as I shook my head. "I don't think so. No. I uh... just realized this was the first time," I said softly.

"First time...?" Windle asked for his wife.

I nodded. "This is the first time I've ever held one of us. A baby. A non-human baby," I said.

My smirk had grown while I spoke, turning into a huge grin of a smile, but the two hadn't seemed as happy as me. They both frowned sadly, and looked at one another again... as if I'd just said something concerning, and not wondrous.

"She is precious. Almost so precious I worry over leaving her so soon," Lilly said, agreeing.

My ears perked up as I realized her meaning. "Oh...! Oh! Oh no... You're right," I said as I realized her meaning. Root was still so small! A true baby! She likely still needed her mother, for milk and more! What were we going to do?

Lilly giggled at me. "It will be fine, Renn. We're owls, remember? We don't nurse."

I blinked and looked up, and frowned at her. "What? Really?"

She nodded. "I mean. We do. But go ahead, stick a finger into her mouth if you want to know why," she said with a small gesture.

While frowning, I carefully shifted the baby ever so gently... and chose to instead of putting my finger into her mouth, instead I simply lifted her top lip ever so gently.

Sure enough I found teeth.

"I see... Wow," I was glad I hadn't woken her, or put my finger in her mouth. Not because her teeth had looked a tad bit sharp, but because I hadn't washed my hands all day.

"Hurts like you know what when she bites while feeding," Lilly said with a laugh.

My ears fluttered and I laughed with her, and by doing so woke up the girl.

Chapter 322 Leaving the Bell Church With A Robin

Once again I stood alone with Plumb. Though this time not in the church and instead in her own home.

She lived with another sister, but she was currently elsewhere. I wasn't sure where, and I had no intention to find out.

It was time I left. Fly and I were packed, and Fly was in fact waiting at her home for me to come get her. We'd be gone shortly.

"Well Vim, your stay was short but that's usually a good sign," Plumb said.

"Yes. The few requests were simple. I've also drafted a small letter for Brandy for your new fence. Prasta's mother is also working on the design," I said.

"Must have tickled her math fancy," Plumb said with a chuckle.

I nodded. It had.

"Prasta's mother... hm... I've not thought of that poor girl in some time. Prasta never even speaks of her," Plumb said softly.

Shrugging gently, I didn't feel like commenting on that. I had not said such a thing on purpose to cause such thoughts or spark such a conversation.

"Prasta's Prasta. How is she?" Plumb asked after a moment.

"Fine. She's still at the Crypt."

Plumb nodded. "Yes. With Abel," she said as she thought about them.

Or well... maybe she was simply remembering things she'd forgotten. It was hard to tell.

"Plumb we'll be leaving now," I said, both to remind her and also to end this conversation.

She nodded slowly, still lost in her thoughts and half-remembered memories. "Travel well. May you find a new home for the young bird swiftly, and with ease," Plumb said.

I nodded as I turned and left. "Farewell."

Leaving the elder's house, I exited into a wet world of light rain. It was a sprinkle shower, and honestly felt good. Both for how it was a tad warm, yet cold, but also how it kept everyone else indoors.

Though I supposed they would have all stayed in their homes this morning all the same. They all knew Fly was leaving, and would have done their best to not be seen or noticed during such a moment.

Fly wasn't being banished, but she may as well be.

"Stupid," I mumbled the only opinion I'd allow myself to share aloud as I went to Fly's home. Or at least, her previous one.

I found the front door open, and her standing just beyond it. She had three small bags and was covered in a very thick coat. One perfect to hide her features, even from someone up close, and keep her warm and dry during this rainy season.

"You ready Fly?" I asked gently as I stepped into the house.

She nodded and glanced up at me. Her heavy and large hood almost made it impossible for her to do so, she had to tug on it a little as to meet my eyes.

"I'm ready Vim," she said.

I nodded back and bent down to gather up her bags.

Three small bags. Light ones. Mostly full of simple items, or clothes.

Far from the amount of stuff she should have.

"I can carry some," she offered as I secured the bags onto my back and shoulders.

"It's fine. Are you sure this is all you want to bring Fly? We could get horses if you wanted," I asked again, one last time.

She shook her head, though her hood barely moved. Hopefully the heavy and thick cloth wouldn't hurt her by bending or breaking feathers. "No. It's fine. Let Limb have this place," she said, telling me the same thing she had said the last few times I'd asked.

I nodded slowly, though wanted to argue. She should have at least taken more personal affects. They had been made for her. Given to her by the village. She shouldn't have three bags but three trunks of stuff, at least.

But I knew her reasoning. I'd encountered it before. Many times.

When people had to flee their homes, or abandon them... and more importantly also when they were forced out of them, they usually left everything they could. Not just out of necessity, but out of emotion.

The more they took, the more they would be reminded of what they had lost. The more they clung to the harder it was for them.

There was a strange sense of relief in just upping and going. To leave everything behind and start anew. I'd done it many times myself.

"Then let us be off," I said gently.

"Mhm!" she nodded, and sounded a little happy too. I was glad to hear it.

I had mistakenly asked last night if she wanted to say goodbye to anyone before we left. That had made her sad. Had almost made her cry.

I'd not do it again.

Stepping out of the house, I smiled at Fly as she slowly followed me out.

Shutting the front door behind her, I noticed her slight startle at the sound. She turned a little, and I wondered if the thick coat distorted sounds weirdly to her and bothered her, or if she was simply on edge and stressed. Likely both. The more non-human types had heightened senses, like Renn, and were usually too sensitive to them. Especially loud noises.

Patting the young bird gently on the back, I smiled down at her as she tried to once again look up at me. She grumbled at herself after another failed attempt and simply reached up to take her hood off.

Feathers popped out, likely puffed out from frustration over the hood, and she smirked up at me. "Where we going?" she asked.

"Well for now we're leaving the Bell Church," I reminded her.

"Well... yeah? But I mean where next?" she asked. "Are we going back to that strange smelling woman? Or Lumen?" she asked as we stepped away from the house.

I nodded at the young bird who thankfully seemed upbeat. And didn't seem to be trying to be so on purpose, either.

Hopefully she was either too young, or predator-minded enough to not be deeply bothered by what was happening.

She had wept, several times, but was now speaking calmly as we left. Though that might change soon, once we truly leave. Renn for instance didn't cry in front of others, at least tried really hard to. She tried to do so out of sight, either the night before we left or as we traveled away a few hours later while alone on the road.

"We'll be heading north for a short time. Then west. For now I'm going to have you accompany me, since I need to check on Renn. She's doing something important and I worry for her," I said.

"We're going to go see Renn?" Fly asked loudly, almost a shout.

I blinked as I smiled at the happy girl, and then realized something terrible.

If I took her to Renn, after her being forced to move from her home...

Not good. What if she latched onto Renn, and Renn to her in return, and then I can't find her a new home?

"Yes. We're headed to some friends. Friends who are in fact birds, kind of like you," I said gently.

"Really!" Fly found that even more exciting, and I felt horrible.

I should have realized it sooner. Renn already cared deeply for the girl, to the point she had almost demanded she accompany me here to pick her up. If Cat, that human woman, hadn't been someone she had to worry about she likely would have.

Though the true reason I felt horrible was not the fact I might have made a small error, but that I had regretted making it in the first place.

It was wrong to not want Fly and Renn happy. It was terrible of me to think it was an annoyance that Fly might try to latch onto Renn, and try to ask to stay with her instead of find a new home.

Terrible of me indeed.

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The walk through the village was a somber one, but at least not terribly quiet and unsettling. The rain and light wind from the storm helped keep the world not feel as empty as it suddenly felt. It gave me time to chastise myself for my own shortcomings as both a man, a husband, and a protector. Or well, not enough time I guess. I likely needed many lifetimes to properly assess such personality flaws and failures, and then who knows how long to address and fix them...

Not long after passing the last building, a small shed like building that held a well for nearby farm animals, Fly and I stepped off the proper paths of the Bell Church village and onto normal grass and dirt. The path ended, and wouldn't return until we were several hours away from the village and through the forest.

As we entered the dense forest that surrounded the village, leaving the Bell Church behind us, Fly did something I had somewhat expected to happen.

She had reached out to take my hand.

Taking her hand, I carefully held the little hand that was kind of cold to the touch. It seemed like most birds she was prone to low temperatures if not kept warm. I'll need to make sure to keep her warm then, especially as the world got colder and colder as we both headed farther north and the winter set in.

"While traveling with me, please let me know when you get hungry. Or cold, or tired. I'm a little unobservant sometimes," I asked of her.

"Hm? I'm cold now," she said.

I smiled and nodded. "I can feel that. Did your clothes and feathers get wet?" I asked.

"No. I'm rather dry. This heavy jacket is really nice!" she said as she patted her chest, thumping the thick coat as she did.

I nodded. I had made it a few nights ago for her. From tanned leather and an under layer of half a dozen soft mink pelts, with a thick layer of down feathers between the two. The coat was actually one of the nicest things I'd made in a while, honestly.

I should make one for Renn too. She was not as susceptible to the weather as most of our members, like Fly was, but winter was still winter. And it seemed we might be spending some time in the north during this year's winter too, which will expose her to the colder and harsher elements. Not just snow and cold but sleet and permafrost. Blizzards.

"How far is Renn?" Fly asked, no longer caring about how she was a little chilly even with her own insulation and the coat.

"From here...?" I pondered it for a moment. I knew it took me a little under a week to get there, but that was at my pace. The pace I used when alone. With Fly it would be far slower. Slower even than when I traveled with Renn.

"Maybe two weeks, at most," I decided.

"That's far," she said softly.

I nodded. "It is. We need to round those mountains. There's a huge peak past those ones we need to round, it's too high to cross over," I said. Too high for her at least. Particularly in the winter. "Then we'll cross through some flatlands and forests. I might stop at a few locations along the way, depends on the weather and our time," I added.

"Locations?" she asked.

"Society locations. Little villages, or singular homes. One's a place called Twin Hills, one of Renn's friends live there," I said.

"Oh!?" Fly found that very interesting, and I wondered if maybe that'd be an okay spot for her.

But no. Even though they could somewhat hide amongst the wheat and by being away from the village, there were still humans there. They still frequented it a little too much for my liking.

But where else would I take her...?

Tor's village was the likeliest location. I honestly didn't want to take her to the Crypt, or the Weaver's. Not only was that a far distance from here, they were the two ends of the spectrum when it came to religion and mindsets. The same extremes that had inevitably gotten Fly kicked out of the Bell Church.

The Crypt had the religious. Though those there were a tad more friendly and accepting than most, like Sharp and Prasta, I worried about forcing Fly into a place nearly completely dominated by religion. The same religion that had just basically banished her from her home.

Then the Weaver. As much as Nann and Nasba were perfect for someone like Fly, they were also the wrong ones to entrust her to. The weaver's family was a mix of human and non-human, and most of them were now feeble minded individuals.

If Fly couldn't mix and mingle with the Bell Church then it was very likely she'd be unable to do so with those at the Weaver's Hut too.

I sighed at myself, and hated the fact that Tor's village was likely the best place for her. I didn't want to admit it.

They hated predators, but Fly was not one. She simply knew what it was like to live under a monster's rule. To live under a boot. So she had the mind and personality to survive such an environment.

Fly was not a predator but she'd run and fight like one, if she needed to.

And Tor's village, or rather those that lived there, wouldn't mesh well with that. At least not directly. The only reason it would work would be the fact that Fly herself was not a predator.

Fly would be accepted, and those there like Silkie, would be gentle and understanding with her. Because they would see a victim. She had a strong headed attitude towards certain things, but those like Silkie would understand. They'd know her hard-headed beliefs were sourced from her trauma. So they'd accept them. Even if they kept her slightly at a distance because of it, they'd not kick her out of the village over it.

I had thought the Bell Church would have done the same, though.

The biggest problem wasn't so much finding Fly a place to live... but that I'd likely only get one or two more chances at this.

If the next place I took her ended up kicking her out too... I could lose her. The Society could lose her, and she might simply disappear. Running off to be alone or something like it.

Throughout all the thousands of people I've had to help find homes, since I've joined the Society, I've only lost a few. Or well, failed to find homes for them. Not including those who had died unexpectedly, or ran away before I could even talk to them.

Those I, or we, lost had been those who had given up. Who had gone to location after location, and inevitably ended up realizing they didn't fit in anywhere. Those who had not been able to live with, or around, anyone else... or found that no one else could live around them.

Glancing at the young bird whose hand I held, I wondered how the hell she was one of those.

She was so small. So weak. So frail. And what I'd seen and known of her was nothing but good things.

Some could argue she had abandoned those like herself in the sewer. To join us. But who was to say that was correct? Or that she had any chance or ability to help them in the first place? After all, she had supposedly tried. She had tried to convince those like her. Other children, at least, to join us. None had been willing to even hear her out. A few had beaten her, supposedly, and chased her away when she had talked to them about it.

Her lack of bringing anyone else with her to the Society was not a failure on her part. It was not a sign of any kind of evil or scheme. She had simply done the best she could, to the extent she could have done so.

Other than that... what had Fly done? What did she do? She seemed like any other young girl I've known. Emotional, a little, sure... but not so badly it would or should have caused any issues.

If anything she should be pitied. Not hated or feared.

What was the Society coming to?

"It's starting to rain again," Fly complained as she reached up to pull her hood back over her head.

I nodded, but ignored the growing rainstorm.

"Yes it is," I said simply.

What to do with her?

Maybe taking her to Renn was the best option. Maybe Renn would know. Maybe she'd see what I didn't.

She had wanted to become something of a matchmaker. Granted she intended for that to be concerning love, or finding partners or whatever... but...

In a sense finding someone a home was also the job of a matchmaker too, right?

Just... hopefully it didn't backfire on me.

It was my duty to protect such people. Such small, weak, and innocent lives rested on my shoulders. Within my hands.

Finding them homes, places not just to live but to love and feel safe at, was as important if not more so than actually protecting them. That was one of the main points of my contract with Celine, and in fact one I had happily accepted to abide by.

Everyone deserved a home. One where they could be happy and safe. Comfortable.

But home was more than just a house. More than just food on the table, and clean clothes or a comfy bed.

It was family. Friends. Companions.

People needed more than just the basics. They needed a society. To survive. Mentally. Just as bodies needed food for energy, souls needed relationships to stay strong and not wilt.

Even I did, it seemed.

"Did you have a wedding yet?" Fly asked as the rain picked up.

My eye twitched, as I realized the young girl had unknowingly been used as a tool to taunt me. It wasn't her fault, but it made me want to sigh.

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Well..." I struggled to find a reason that this young bird would understand.

"I'd like to see one! A wedding. Limb told me about them. I read about them too, in one of the books Braid gave me before she got all weird about me borrowing them," she said.

"Weird...?" I asked, focusing on that. That was both interesting to hear, and also a great distraction from the current conversation.

She nodded under her thick hood, which I barely saw and only heard thanks to her feathers. "Once all the drama started. I think she was worried I'd get the books hurt, somehow. So I was only allowed to read them in the library while she watched. I didn't like doing that so..." Fly stopped talking, and I noted her tone had softened as much as the rain falling upon us.

Woops. To avoid feeling bad myself, I had steered the conversation into a direction where it had hurt her instead.

Still... get the books hurt? What a phrase. She wasn't wrong, since that was likely what Braid had worried over. Her harming the books in some way, but it was such a childish way of saying it. As if she wasn't able to articulate things properly.

Though young, and having grown up in a strange environment, Fly was not that simple or that stupid. She was actually well spoken, and smarter than most likely assumed her to be. So that had likely just been her speaking of something that hurt in as round-about-a way as she could accomplish.

"I too hate reading while others watch or listen. They always expect to be read aloud to," I said with a sigh.

"I like being read to, too," Fly said happily.

I bet you do.

"Did you read anything interesting? Other than weddings?" I asked.

"Yeah! I read a book about birds! Braid had called it a enclopadia or something," Fly said, sounding out the word she had barely remembered.

"Encyclopedia. Yes. Did it have illustrations?" I asked. I hadn't realized some of those had survived all this time. That meant there was more knowledge in that library than I had thought, which was a scary thing.

"There had been! I'm definitely a type of robin!" Fly happily told me.

Although I frowned, I didn't do so because she was wrong. Her colors would indeed match, plus she was small and light. And although many people saw them as tiny cute things, robins were actually very spunky and feisty so it made even more sense.

"It's my colors! My feathers became a duller brown more than red the lower they go and..." Fly went on a tangent, telling me why she assumed so and how she had reached her conclusion... and I happily indulged in it as we strode deeper and deeper into the forest.

Yes. This was a far better way to leave such a droll place. With happy voices and great conversation.

No tears. No sorrow.

No pain.

They weren't worth such things, anyway.

Chapter 323 A Small Conversation In a Tiny Room

Slowly closing the bedroom door, I smiled as I heard Cat's snores as she fell asleep.

She really was good at falling asleep the moment her head hit a pillow. I was a little jealous. I usually didn't have much trouble falling asleep, but lately I'd been struggling with it.

The reason, of course, was the lack of Vim to sleep with.

I had assumed so, and verified it on our trip here. The moment we had left Telmik, I had once again begun to have difficulty sleeping. Although I could still sleep, it was only after I was tired enough and only if I forced myself to do so.

Considering I had fallen asleep easily, and had even slept longer than I had planned or wanted to, after Vim had arrived at Telmik it was only telling the reason was him. Or rather his presence.

Though if I'd ever admit to it to anyone but him was another story entirely.

Slowly walking down the hallway to the stairwell, I tried to stay quiet. I wasn't sure where Windle and Lilly's bedroom was, but I had a feeling it was nearby. And as far as I was aware he was currently resting. He was trying to get as much rest as possible before Lilly and I took Cat back home, and found Saint Elaine for Vim.

Stepping down the stairs, I noted the strange red wood this home was mostly built out of. It didn't creak like most wood usually did, even when I tried to apply a little pressure and weight onto the boards. Plus it felt smooth as if it was covered in some kind of weird resin. It was fancy, and gleamed a little in candlelight.

Tapping the stair's handlebar gently as I reached the second floor, I turned and headed for the little sitting area I had recently seen Lilly in. It was near the edge of the house, with windows, and... Yes. She was still sitting there.

I smiled at the owl, who held her baby in her arms. The baby was asleep it seemed, and Lilly was staring out one of the larger windows. One that faced the large tree nearby.

"I like to stare at the tree," Lilly said softly, telling me she had sensed my approach.

"It is pretty," I admitted as I slowly entered the room. As I did I glanced around, since I hadn't entered this room yet before.

It looked like a small study. There was a small square table. A few chairs, which looked comfortable with large cushions. A shelf with books and other stuff, and the big windows to stare out of while sitting and relaxing. But honestly it was a rather small room. It felt a tad crowded as I entered it.

She had been sitting here with the baby earlier as Cat and I found the hallway where she could pick a room in. We had returned to Lilly's home a little before sundown, after Lilly and I had went to get her, and after a few conversations... some introductions, and dinner, we eventually ended up alone. Windle had gone to rest, and Lilly had disappeared with her baby.

Cat had simply thought everyone was tired, but I knew the truth. Lilly and Windle didn't care much for humans. And being one, they likely hadn't wanted to spend much time with her. They hadn't been rude to her, at all, and had almost acted overly friendly, but I knew deep down the two had almost not wanted to even let her into their home.

"Thank you Lilly. For overlooking Cat's presence," I said gently as I stepped deeper into the room tiny room. It had only taken two steps to make me stop, else I'd get a little too close to Lilly.

I didn't want to wake Root.

"It's fine, Renn. As I said you're family. And being family means you... overlook certain things. Your friendship with humans is odd, and I won't say I agree with it at all, but I can understand it. I can respect it," Lilly said.

I nodded, and felt strangely relieved to hear her be so honest and open about it. "Thank you. I promise if Cat ever does or says anything... I'll handle her myself," I said.

"I'm sure you would. And if not you, then Vim would. So it's okay," she said with a smile.

Ah. So that was why.

She trusted Vim. Beyond any shadow of a doubt. So she could then trust me.

Although a little sad to realize that her trust in me was sourced from someone else, I still felt a little happy over it.

She was so unique. So special. There weren't many in the Society like her, if any at all. She outright despised humans. To the point where she was practically banished from anywhere with humans in the Society. Yet...

Yet Vim trusted her. With my life. And that was saying something.

"Think she'd wake if I pulled a chair over?" I asked.

"Even if she did it's fine, Renn," Lilly said gently.

Was it...? I felt bad risking it, but I went ahead and did it anyway. Luckily Root didn't wake as I sat down a few feet from her and her mother.

"She seems like a good woman. Wasn't bothered at all by how we live, or Root's wings," Lilly said as I got comfortable in the comfortable chair. The cushion felt strangely soft, yet not so soft that I sunk through it completely and flattened it. I wonder what it was made out of. I'd love some of these cushions in my own home, eventually... maybe even a whole bed made out of this stuff.

"Cat? Yes. Vim says she's like how the humans of old used to be," I said as I continued to touch and mess with the cushion.

"She does seem to be, yes. They had not found us as strange back then. Odd, yes, but not outlandish or freaks. Just a part of the world, like they are," Lilly said.

"Mhm," I nodded. That was how he had explained it too, in a way.

Wait, was the stuff in this pillow really able to return to its original form so quickly? I shifted a tad and felt the cushion actually grow larger a little. As if being inflated by air or something. It was as fascinating as it was distracting..

Lilly giggled at me. "It's made from goose feathers, Renn. Their down feathers are very soft."

"Oh...? I've encountered some strangely soft things since joining the Society, like the beds at the Summit or Lumen, but this wins I think. Are your beds this soft too?" I asked.

"They are. I suggest you get at least a single night's sleep before we leave, Renn. Just in case," Lilly suggested.

I nodded. I might just do so if their beds and pillows were this soft too. It almost wasn't fair!

"Why doesn't everyone have such soft pillows?" I asked and wondered.

"Expensive. It takes a lot of down feathers from special kinds of breeds of birds. Plus not every feather works. Some are also mixed with special cotton or plant fibers, too," Lilly explained.

"Hm..." I hummed as I stopped squeezing the cushion. I was half tempted to not sit on it anymore, and instead hug it in my arms. And Lilly would probably find that weird if I did.

"A long time ago a certain kingdom banned soft pillows and beds. Vim found that hilarious," Lilly said.

"Oh...? Banned them? Why?" I asked. Was something wrong with them?

"Some humans don't like it when others have nice things and they don't. They're greedy," Lilly said.

Ah. Right... "I've come to realize that humans aren't the only ones who do that," I said regretfully.

Lilly softly nodded and glanced away from me, to the window and the tree beyond it. "Yes. Our kind can be just as bad, if not worse, sometimes."

"I've never understood it. We live so long. What use is there in material things?" I said. It'd been bothering me for a while now. Why those like Brandy and the Chronicler hoarded wealth and power, when it was so easy for us to accumulate such things simply thanks to how long we lived.

"I used to think the same. But today... I'd not share this home with anyone. I'd not give it up to others even if they needed it more. Not anymore," Lilly said.

Oh...? "I'd not ask you to share it, Lilly," I said softly. Had she interpreted my words in such a way?

She giggled at me. "No. I know. I just... I mean I can understand being selfish, now. After having lost so much, I now understand why some of our people are so callous. So cruel," Lilly said.

My tail twitched, and I felt it sink into the cushion a little more. I tried to ignore its softness as I studied the owl who looked almost as if she was about to cry.

Had given birth recently made her emotional...? Or had she always been like this? I had thought Lilly to be a little more stoic from my previous conversations with her.

"What does Vim think of this vote?" Lilly then asked.

I perked up a little, sitting up straighter, and wondered if she had just tossed aside our previous topic or if this was a part of it too. "He uh... he's offended. But he doesn't show it or let anyone know. He, being his usual self, believes it's their right to question him. To doubt him. To make him play by their rules. I think there's even a part of him that had expected this to happen from the beginning, so he's a little relieved it's finally happened... if that makes sense," I said as I assessed the man I loved.

Lilly nodded slowly. "Randle says the same," she said.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

Oh...? I glanced to the table and realized I had not noticed some papers upon it. Near a small platter with a couple cups.

Randle's letter was opened and she had read it.

"Randle seemed very worried over it. He... fears those coming. Celine's daughter and the group around her. Landi's sister is amongst them too, I guess?" I said.

Lilly nodded. "Yes. Landi's sister is a troublesome pest. She's not as strong as Landi, but what she lacks in strength she makes up for it in blind faith and a wicked mind. Half the wars had been won by her scheming. And Celine's daughter..." Lilly went quiet for a moment and she glanced down at her daughter. Root didn't wake, but she did shift her a little all the same, as if to start rocking her gently if she needed to. "Celine's daughter is an anomaly. I had only met her a few times. And as far as I'm aware so too has Vim. Celine kept the girl at a distance from us, though we never figured out why... or at least I didn't," Lilly said.

That was interesting to hear. Particularly about Landi's sister. But my mind focused on something else instead.

"Uh... is she actually Celine's daughter? Vim spoke of her as if she was... well..." I hesitated as I realized she had likely heard my true question.

"She's not Vim's daughter, Renn," Lilly said with a smirk at me.

"It was that obvious, wasn't it?" I asked with a smile back.

She nodded happily. "Yes! That had been a very nice tone. Full of worry, yet love. Strangely heartwarming. But no, she is not even Celine's child. Celine had found her somewhere, adopted her. I had been told Celine found her interesting because she had been completely unable to see her in her dreams. Her prophecies. She could see Light in her dreams, concerning other people like Vim or something, but never she herself. For some reason that made her feel like Light was special. Special enough to be declared her daughter," Lilly explained.

"Is she a saint?" I asked.

"I think she is. But her eyes hadn't glowed when I saw her. But Vim one time told me that a very powerful saint could hide their glowing eyes somehow, though it was hard and not something they could do for long," Lilly said.

Oh my! That was very interesting to hear. "That's uh... interesting."

"Very. I don't know about you Renn, but I agree with Vim's perspective," she said.

"Perspective?" I asked. What did she mean?

"Saints aren't to be trusted. They may not destroy without reason like monarchs do, but they can be just as cruel and evil. Just as wrong. Don't trust them," she warned me.

I slowly nodded, and for some reason fully agreed with her.

Did she know about Narli? Likely not.

"Vim did seem worried over what they're all planning," I said gently as I glanced at the opened letter. I almost wished to read it.

"Him worrying over it is normal. He always worries for our people. But Randle worrying over it is troubling," Lilly said.

"Which means I should worry over it too," I said with a sigh.

Lilly nodded. "Yes. Since Vim won't. Not properly, at least."

Right. Of course.

"Can I... say something that might be taken wrongly?" I asked her.

"Hm?" Lilly tilted her head at me, and I gulped.

Should I say it? I needed to. I needed to talk about this. And although I've not spent much time with Lilly, compared to most, I knew one thing for certain about her that I was not sure about others.

I could trust her. Because Vim did.

"What is it?" Lilly asked gently with a smile.

Still I hesitated. If I said it aloud and Lilly took it the wrong way then... well...

But no. I needed to say it. To vocalize it. Else I'd end up stressing terribly over it.

"A part of me hopes they banish him. To free him," I dared to whisper.

Lilly blinked, and then her smile grew wider. "Why Renn, that was beautiful," she said without any hesitation.

"No it isn't. Wasn't. If Vim gets banished he'll honor that vote, and then who knows how many will die because of it... and...!"

Lilly shook her head. "No. Or well, yes. Some will die. But people die anyway. It's kind of what we do, you know. We live, and then we die. But no... you have every right to say such a thing. I too agree with you. So many in the Society are so foolish. If they're stupid enough to push aside the only thing keeping most of them alive, then let them. Plus it would free Vim from those terrible shackles too," Lilly said.

I blinked. "You believe his agreements, like that contract with Celine, are wrong too?" I asked.

"Of course I do? Celine lied to him. She cheated. She manipulated him. She used his fear of her prophecies against him, and backed him into a corner," Lilly said, her voice growing louder as she spoke.

I gulped and shivered. "So that was true," I whispered. Vim had hinted at it all this time, that she had used him. But he had also phrased it in a way that he had used her too. That he had allowed it, and known about it the whole time.

But that was his personality. His way of living.

He didn't force his will. So he bent his own will to adapt and change to the wills around him.

What if to him, bending and allowing Celine to lock him into servitude of the Society was what he had wanted at the time? His way of allowing himself to...

"Vim saw nothing wrong with it. Still might not. But yes. Celine had tricked him. Manipulated him. She had told him, threatened him, with prophecies of chaos and world-ending scenarios. I don't believe those dreams were ever real in the first place," Lilly said.

"Wait...!" I stood, and in doing so woke up Root.

For a few moments my heart thumped harshly in my chest, both in shock and worry. I had just woken a sleeping baby. How rude of me.

Yet although woken up with a startle, Root didn't cry out. Instead she simply yawned, and then reached out to touch her mother's face. She grabbed at Lilly's lips for a moment, and then giggled and cooed.

Awake but not upset.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

Lilly giggled. "You act as if waking a baby is some terrible deed. Really Renn, it's okay," Lilly said to me as she smiled at her baby.

Well... it was, but wasn't. But I nodded all the same, accepting her way of accepting my apology.

"I don't know the whole story, Renn. I joined the Society a little before Vim did. But basically joined the same time. And I did so while young. A child. It was many years before I started to notice the schemes and sickness within Celine and those around her. By the time I noticed it was too late," Lilly said as Root made small noises.

Watching the baby stare lovingly up at her mother, I felt strangely tired all of a sudden. "Vim's not stupid. Why had he allowed such things?" I asked.

"I don't know. Vim sometimes is... neglectful. Or doesn't notice certain things. A part of being who he is. What he is. He simply is so great, so old, he doesn't even notice things around him half the time. Look at

Merit. That stupid fish had tried to catch his eye for years before he even realized she had feelings at all," Lilly said with a smirk, remembering what was likely many neat memories.

"I've... heard of that. I feel bad about it," I said softly.

"Why?"

"Merit's my friend," I said.

Lilly blinked at me, and ignored Root's attempts at grabbing her hair as she studied me. "I see. I shouldn't be surprised. Merit would indeed have liked you. Had you and Vim been a pair when you met her?" she asked.

I slowly shook my head. "Not really. Though I had been trying to. Or it had started, I think. So yes and no."

"That must have hurt. You're right you should feel bad. But don't let it bother you. It's Merit's fault, Renn. She knew from the beginning he had not loved her. Not like that anyway. And she knew he never would. It's her fault for not accepting that fact and finding someone else," Lilly said.

"You knew her well?" I asked. Merit had never even mentioned her as far as I could tell.

Lilly grinned at me. "I was with Vim when we found her. She and her family were terrorizing a village of ducks. Vim rescued her, and she followed him around for a few decades until she realized she wanted to see the world. It took her a long time to officially join the Society, but in our eyes she had been a member from the beginning too," she said.

Huh...!

I felt giddy all of a sudden, no longer tired. "I have so much to ask..." I said as I realized my mind was full of questions. Hundreds of them, about so many topics.

"I'm sure. For now though would you mind holding her? I'd like to go get her some food," Lilly stood and held out Root.

I accepted the child without any hesitation, and held her close to my breasts. She wasn't wrapped in as big or as thick of a blanket as usual, likely thanks to the light rainstorm. It kept the world a little warmer than usual.

Careful to mind her wings, I shifted Root until I was staring down into her huge eyes. I gave her a huge smile, which kind of happened on its own without me even thinking about it, and I fluttered my ears a little.

She noticed the movement above my head, and laughed and giggled at them as she reached out, as if to grab my ears.

I had no plans to allow her to do so, since she was strong. Even for a baby. But I still lowered my head and continued to flutter and move them around, keeping her distracted as her mother left the room.

Lilly headed down the hallway, and I heard her walk down the nearby stairwell. To head for the kitchen.

I debated just following her, but decided against it for a moment. This tiny room suddenly felt huge as I once again held little Root in my arms.

Slowly sitting down, I felt a little silly as my eyes welled with tears. Little Root didn't even notice, or care, that I had begun to silently weep. She just kept giggling and happily trying to reach for my ears.

How lovely. How absolutely endearing and uplifting.

"Grow strong little owl. Grow and stand tall," I whispered to her.

I needed her to. Since it was those like her this was all for. All the drama. All the suffering. All the pain and chaos.

Plus...

Lowering my face as Root grabbed at my chin and cheeks, I smiled and allowed her to squeeze and prod at me. Her tiny hands felt warm, even though she already had fingernails and they were slightly sharp.

Closing my eyes, I sat there. Listening to Root. Her giggles. Her noises. Her heartbeat. I cared not for the sounds of the world around me, but I listened to them too.

The light rain on the window and distant roof a few floors above me. The muddled sound of Lilly in the kitchen beneath us. Cat's snores from the floor above, and down the hall.

I listened to the whole world around me... for any sign of danger.

I'd not let anyone or anything harm this child. And I'd never even give the world a chance to think about it.

No wonder Vim tried to leave after babies were born. Otherwise you'd never leave. You'd stick around until they were fully grown... then you'd stick around longer, worrying for them all the more after you fell even deeper into love with them.

No wonder Vim kept a distance.

Taking a small breath, I sighed softly and forgave him. For being so callous sometimes. For keeping his distance.

I understood it now, somehow, all of a sudden.

He did it out of necessity. Because he was too kind and gentle to do aught else.

But he was only able to do such a thing because of how strong he was. He was strong enough to put a baby down into its crib, and walk away. Leaving it to its own family.

Like Hark at the Nation of Stone. Like Lomi or Fly. They had not been babies but they may have well been, for us.

Vim did not do it maliciously. But he did it all the same.

"I'm not as strong," I whispered.

So hopefully he showed up soon. So he could be the strength I needed. The strength I didn't have.

Else I'll end up living here with Lilly forever.

Which somehow might end up being something I'd prefer anyway.

And for as much as Vim seemed to like and trust Lilly... I sincerely doubted he wanted that.

I bet Vim wouldn't like that at all.

And that put a wry smile on my face, which made Root giggle and laugh at it.

#### Chapter 324 An Unknown Smell

"They are sure lazy today," I mumbled as I watched my fishing line remain as steady as ever.

The line was one of the nicest I'd ever had. Something new to me. I had worked for a season at a fishing village near an inlet, and my pay had been food and supplies. The owners had been rather happy to give me the line as part of my pay. They found it to be a cheap item, likely because they made so much of it in their village to not find it unique. The fishing line had been made out of some kind of plant, something that took them several seasons to grow and then process into what it is now. It was sturdy, thin and light, and even though I've been using it to catch fish for months now it hasn't once snapped or frayed.

It was also sturdy enough to let me use several snoods along the line. Letting me use three hooks at once, instead of the usual one or two.

Yet even with the fancy line, several baited hooks and the perfect weather for catching fish...

I sighed as I leaned back, and went to lying down. Maybe a small nap was in order.

Honestly I wasn't that hungry. But I knew if I didn't catch anything today, or tonight, I'd be hungry tomorrow. Enough so to make it annoying.

"Maybe I used the wrong bait for these fish," I mumbled and wondered.

Or maybe I should just start carrying around a net. Instead of a fishing line. But they were so bulky, even the smaller ones, and they got all slimy when used...

Staring up at the passing clouds, I wondered how Witch's family were doing.

It was about time I visited them again. Or well, not really visited... just checked on them from a distance... to make sure they were all still there, and alive.

I was too much of a coward to do anything else.

Blinking slowly, I felt the oncoming slumber. It made my tail twitch. I didn't really want to take a nap, but at the same time was bored of staring at the river and my lifeless fishing line.

Yes. That was it.

I was bored.

Pure and simple.

But this boredom was better than being hunted or fighting for my life. So I wasn't sure what to think about my own grievances.

"Maybe I'm just tired of being lazy," I wondered.

Since leaving that fishing hamlet I've not done much. And before that I had spent who knows how long just wandering a forest in the north.

Lately I've just been wandering around, following rivers and streams so that I could fish. I like usual avoided humans and their settlements until it was absolutely necessary. I was able to blend in, as long as I hid my ears and tail, but only for a short time. Plus lately the villages around here have been wanting some kind of new coin that I didn't have. Which meant if I wanted to venture into a human settlement I'd need to make money again.

I hated making money. It meant having to work amongst the humans. A hard task when I needed to dedicate so much effort in just making sure I didn't get found out or noticed.

It was too bad there wasn't a job I could do that would let me be alone as I did it. Sometimes I sold pelts or stuff I found while traveling, but they never amounted to much. A few coins or a few plates of food at best.

A small wind woke me up, and I blinked at the darker sky. The sun had begun to set.

Slowly sitting up, I yawned as I wondered when I had fallen asleep. What had I just been pondering?

Looking around, I was glad to find I was still alone. Not even a deer or bunny was in sight, let alone a human. And, even better, I found my fishing line had gone taught.

Standing up, I smiled at the sight of the line. It was heavy now, no longer floating mostly on the surface. It had sunk quite a bit, and it looked like it was stuck...

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"Hm..." I grumbled a little as I realized it might not be a fish but something else. A stick or something. It was taught, but not moving or shaking... which meant whatever the hooks were stuck on wasn't trying to free itself or get away.

Stepping over to the tree near the bank, I reached up to grab at the branch I had tied the line to. I didn't untie it, but instead just grabbed the line and began to pull it towards me.

As I did though, I noticed something odd. Something I should have realized sooner.

"What's that smell...?" I asked the world and myself as I frowned at it.

There was a strange stink in the air. Maybe being carried in on the light breeze that had arrived with the night.

As I pulled the line, I wondered if maybe an animal had died nearby. It kind of smelled like a rotting corpse. Maybe a dead deer or wolf? It smelled far too strong to be something smaller. Even to my nose.

Putting aside the strange stink, I felt a tiny tug on the line. Upon feeling it, I hurried in my attempt to drag it out of the river. The line was slightly hard to pull, being wet, and thanks to the fact I couldn't use my nails. I worried over the line snapping or fraying by touching them, so I chose to wrap the line around my right forearm. I kept wrapping it until the tug got a little stronger, but not so much that it felt stuck.

Something was on the line! So I had caught something. Neat!

A few more feet of line and I reached the first snood with its own hook. I no longer wrapped it around my arm and instead just held it clear, so that I'd not get snagged or hooked by it. I had made that mistake once, in the beginning. The darn things had hurt.

I smiled as I finished pulling the line out of the water, and was happy to watch a large fish emerge. It flapped a little, but nowhere near enough. It looked exhausted, and likely was.

Another testament to the line's durability. Other lines I've used before would have snapped long ago. Why weren't all fishing lines made this nicely? Or out of this stuff? I should have found out how they actually made it. Eventually this would snap, and knowing my luck I won't find such a thing again for a long time.

"Hello dinner," I greeted the fish as I grabbed it, and was pleased to feel how thick it was. The thing was as long as my forearm, and weighed enough even I made sure to hold it firmly. Odds are this thing could have fed several people... or at least, normal people.

Stepping away from the bank of the river, I ignored the fish's small attempts to wiggle free. It was making odd noises as it gasped for air, but its attempts of doing so only made it easier for me to find the hook and dig it out of its jaw.

Once the fish was free of the hook, I walked over to the little encampment I had set up. I had no fire going, so I'd need to start one, but for now I just smacked the fish onto a flat rock I had found earlier. I wasn't sure if it died from the impact, but it both went still and stopped making noises immediately after.

Pleased that I'd not go hungry tonight, I realized I really was hungry. The fact I now had food only made my stomach feel all the more empty.

As I put away the line, started a fire, and went to ready the fish to be cooked... I realized the smell in the air had gotten stronger.

"Going to ruin dinner," I complained as I stood and looked around again. The stink was far stronger now, and seemed to be coming in from every direction too. No matter which way the breeze blew in the stink arrived.

Was there a bear nearby...? They did sometimes stink rather badly, but this was worse. Far worse than a bear.

I sneezed, and groaned as I sniffed. The smell really was bad.

Something had to be nearby. If something had died recently why would the smell grow this much stronger? Even if it was nearby? Sometimes the corpses of animals did stink terribly, but this didn't

outright smell like a decaying corpse. Though it could possibly be a creature I'd never encountered before. Some new type of forest animal, maybe? Or maybe bugs?

Grabbing some larger, dried out, logs I plopped them into the fire I had recently started. Not to make it hotter, or because it needed it, but in the hope of drowning out the stink.

I liked the idea so I left my little camp area to search the nearby cluster of trees for moss, or something like it. It'd make the fire smoky, and thus slightly affect the taste of the fish, but the stink was going to ruin it anyway at this rate.

It didn't take me too long to gather up an armful of moss and bark that I knew would smell upon being burnt. But by the time I got back to the fire, I knew it was too late.

The stink was now so strong I had lost my appetite.

Even still I tried anyway. I dropped the bunch of stuff into the fire, and very quickly it began to smoke. The thick smoke stunk in its own way, but not as bad as whatever was in the air.

Letting the stuff burn for awhile, I went ahead and made a new fire. One a small distance from the now smoky one. I went to cooking the fish, and as more and more time passed I grew more and more upset.

The stink was not just getting stronger, it was overpowering everything. Not even the burning moss was making any difference.

I sighed, eventually giving up. I quickly ate what I could, barely more than a few mouthfuls of the fish, and then went to gather up my stuff and put the fires out.

I'd not be able to sleep or stay here if this stink was going to be this strong and stay here. There was no point in enduring it either when a few hours of walking would likely free me of it.

Such smells usually didn't spread far. Not with such wind and clear skies.

Usually.

Chapter 325 A War's Result

A few hours after I had left the place I'd been camping at, heading northward alongside the river... I quickly realized I was wrong about the stink.

Even after a couple hours, as the dark began to really set in, the strange stink still attacked my nose. In fact it even seemed to be growing stronger, if it was possible.

I eventually left the river and decided to head through the now dark forest. Maybe the smell was coming from the river, somehow. Hopefully not, because then that meant I had eaten something that lived in such filthy existence.

After another hour or so of walking... I eventually heard strange sounds. Sounds that weren't common for a forest, at least not during the night.

Birds. Not just birds chirping, but the sound of flapping wings... and...

Following the sounds, I frowned as I heard what almost sounded like something being eaten. But not a large animal eating a smaller one... instead it almost sounded as if there were many smaller bites being taken at once.

"What's going on...?" I wondered as I rounded a cluster of trees, and found a large hill. I climbed the hill and at the top found I had left the forest proper... and found a field of death.

Going still, I stared wide-eyed at the scene before me. There were clouds in the sky, but not enough to block the rising moon. The light it gave off was enough for me to see well enough to realize what I was staring at. A field of corpses.

Hundreds of bodies were lying on the ground everywhere. Many of them were being pecked and prodded by tall dark birds, and the recognizable sound of flesh being torn answered some of my questions.

"This is what stinks," I whispered, a little shocked.

So I had smelled death. I just... hadn't realized what kind of death, nor how much of it.

How old were they...? Sometimes I encountered dead bodies of humans, especially in the forests or near rivers. Accidents happened, of course... but...

The closest body to me was down the other side of the hill and a few hundred feet away. It looked almost as if it was lying on a road... but between all the bodies, the random junk lying around, and what was likely stains of blood I couldn't tell if it was a proper road or a trick of the eye. My eyes ran along the line of bodies, and eventually I found a rather visible dirt path. It was a large one, likely for more than just feet and horse hooves.

"Some kind of battle," I assumed.

I'd heard stories of such battles. Not just from Witch, but my own family. Supposedly my own ancestors had fought in them... though not on the human's side, of course.

How did one even fight like this? How did such chaos happen...? And why didn't I see anyone alive? Wouldn't the victors of such a battle still be here? Not only had they not properly dealt with the dead bodies, it almost looked as if they all still had everything upon them. I saw the glimmer of weapons, armor, and more.

"Maybe they all killed each other and no one won," I wondered as I began to walk alongside the top of the hill.

I had no plans to go down into the carnage. Not just because I had no reason to, but also because there might be a chance some of them could still be alive. I wasn't stupid, those gleaming weapons could hurt or kill me rather easily even if they were wielded by half-dead hands.

Still... I wonder what they had been fighting over.

Humans were so odd. So many of them seemed willing to live and let live, then they just... did stuff like this sometimes.

In my experience, when it concerned me, it was simply because of who and what I was. I was a non-human. A different creature, at least in their eyes. And that was... in a sense, at least, understandable.

One could argue my ancestors, the things that had created me, were their enemies. So them hating me, attacking me on sight even, was believable.

But what reason did they have to kill their own like this? It seemed so foolish.

I tried counting some of the bodies as I walked along the hill, and quickly gave up once I reached several dozens and I had only counted the bodies nearby. I could tell by the shadows moving in the distance, the dark birds flying into the air, that the carnage went on for some distance. There were likely hundreds, if not thousands, of bodies here.

"Whole villages," I mumbled the thought, unable to comprehend it.

Most human settlements I've been to, or seen from a distance, only had a few hundred people living at them at most. This battle was the same as if those whole villages had marched into war, and were slain during it.

I couldn't imagine a whole village just... dying overnight.

What happened in such scenarios? Did other humans show up to live there? Did the buildings just remain empty? Slowly breaking and decaying over the years? Or did they burn them down, so no one could use them?

The questions filled my thoughts even when the bodies began to disappear. As I walked along the hill, the hill ended and I had to descend to the dirt path nearby. Every so often another body appeared, either on the road or near it, and as I walked past one... I realized why they were out here all alone.

They weren't full of arrows. So it wasn't as if they had tried to escape and had been hunted down. Instead... well...

"You survived the battle, but not for long," I said to the young man's body.

He had crumpled and a spear was lying nearby. He had likely been using the spear as a brace as to walk. His left leg was... nasty looking. Even in the dark I could trace his footsteps, and the blood trail alongside them, that led to his body.

Maybe they really had all died then...? Or had there been simply so few survivors that there was no way they could do anything about all the carnage even if they wanted to? Or maybe the survivors, like this young man had tried to be, had been wounded and they had to escape as to get help.

I debated for a small moment to check the young man for a bag of coins, or something valuable. I knew, what with all these dead soldiers, which some human settlements would likely be nearby. But I decided against it, just in case taking something upon him would get me in trouble later.

Leaving the dead man behind, I followed the path until it rounded a new hill. This time though the road hugged the hill so closely it even tilted a little, giving the road a small incline.

"Almost...!"

I stopped walking, and my eyes narrowed as I quickly looked towards the source of the voice. It didn't take long for my eyes to adjust, and for me to see a large blotch of darkness near the hill. It was just hidden under the rays of moonlight, but even in such pure darkness I could see enough.

There was what looked to be a pile of stuff. Stacked rather high, right at the end of the hill. And...

"Luji..." a tiny whine of a voice made my eyes widen and my heart thump.

That had been a young girl's voice. A very young one. One in pain, and terrified.

Stepping forward, I hurriedly glanced around to make sure I wasn't walking straight into a trap. Thanks to there only being one hill, I was able to see most of the area around me. I saw no one else, nothing else, and nothing to cause concern. In fact it was almost a little concerning how normal the world looked around me at the moment. What with me having just been walking through a field of corpses.

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Returning my attention to the sounds of huffing and movement, I focused again on the darkness. I saw what looked to be a small child. They had at first looked like they were kneeling, but upon drawing closer I realized they were just tiny. They were grabbing something, and it looked like they were trying to pull it out from under something large and dark.

A horse. It was a fallen horse. One lying on its side. Was it dead...?

It had to be. The boy was struggling with all his might to pull whatever it was from out under it, but for a moment I didn't try to tell what it was. Instead I looked around for the source of the girl's voice from earlier.

I had definitely heard a girl's voice. Or maybe that wasn't a boy? He had spoken first, though, and it had definitely sounded like a boy's voice. Though maybe it had just sounded strange thanks to their efforts. The strain had maybe made the voice sound odd, during that singular moment...

"It hurts!" the girl spoke again, and I went still.

No. I hadn't misheard. Nor had I misunderstood. The child before me was a boy. And he was indeed trying to pull something out from under the dead horse.

His sister.

"Hold on... I'll... try to dig some more!" the boy coughed as he stopped pulling on the girl's arms. He fell down to the ground next to the horse, and I heard the sound of mush.

Frowning I stepped forward. Why was a young girl stuck under a horse? And why here and now? Near a battlefield?

The boy quickly began to dig at the ground, and as he did I heard not just grass and dirt tear and get flung... but the sound of squishy muck too.

Muck. Alongside a packed dirt road. It hasn't rained lately either, as far as I remembered. Why was it all mushy?

"My legs hurt," she whined, and the boy said nothing as he increased his efforts.

For a small, almost impossibly tiny moment... I considered not helping. But before I could even let such a thought nurture and grow, and find reasons to support it, my feet were already making my decision for me.

Stepping forward, I stepped off the road and approached the hill... and realized quickly why the area was gross.

There wasn't just a single horse on the ground. There were multiple horses, and people. Dead bodies were scattered around, and most of them were littered with arrows.

Looking up the hill, I stared at some of the silhouettes up top. I quickly realized that the hill wasn't as bumpy as it had looked originally. Those were other bodies up there. Bodies and arrows littered it.

That meant if I crossed over the hill, I'd likely find more carcasses on the other side. Either that side had the continuation of the battlefield, or this was just another one entirely.

No matter.

"Lujic!" the girl shouted, almost a panicked scream, and I went still as the boy spun. He spun so quickly he fell backward, landing on his side with a loud oomph.

I quickly raised both my hands, open palmed, and smiled... then realized the two likely couldn't see much in this darkness. Even I could barely make out their finer details, though I attributed most of that to the muck caking both of them.

"Let me help. My name is Renn... I can help her, if you'll let me," I said gently.

Witch had always told me to speak calmly to children. Especially if they were stressed. That they could become calm if I was, or at least I acted so.

The boy found his feet, and as he did I heard the sound of something metal. I squinted my eyes, and noted what was likely some kind of weapon in his hands. Though it wasn't gleaming, so if it was metal it was some kind of dark colored one. Iron maybe?

"Stay back..." The boy tried to sound intimidating, but I heard the whimper in his voice. A whimper that came from more than just exhaustion and strain.

"I'll not hurt you. I promise. Just let me help get her free," I said as I stepped forward.

He hesitated, but only for a tiny moment. He stepped forward, and suddenly he was between me and the girl.

I came to a stop again, and couldn't help but praise the boy. He wasn't very tall, and even in the darkness and while covered in gunk, he looked scrawny. The type of scrawny that didn't just come with youth, but a lack of food.

If that girl was his younger sister, she really needed to be saved immediately. Especially since it looked like it wasn't just a horse upon her, but all the stuff horses had on them when they were sent into battle. It had more than just a simple harness and saddle, it looked to have some kind of leather bags and armor too.

Too much weight for such a small thing.

"Luji...!" the girl said his name, and I noticed the strain in her voice. He did too, and he turned to look down at her.

A cloud shifted, and I got my first good look at the boy's face. It was covered in gunk, as was his hair, but I could see enough to know he was definitely the girl's brother... or at least, thought himself as one.

He was looking down at her as if his whole world was falling apart.

"Please. Just let me help," I asked gently. Nearly begging. If he wouldn't let me even after this, I'll need to force the matter. Hopefully I could knock that weapon out of his hands without hurting him too badly.

However I didn't need to do such a thing. He simply nodded and stepped back.

Relieved, I hurried forward to get a better look at the situation.

Once close enough, I found a pair of tear-filled eyes staring up at me. She was stuck beneath the horse at an angle, lying somewhat on her side, and was buried from her waist down. The ground all around her had been dug at and torn apart, likely the boy's efforts, but it seemed he had dug more-so in front of her than actually under her. Most of the digging looked to have little to no affect.

And, upon closer inspection... there was also a body on top of her too. Or well, on top of the horse that was on top of her. It looked as if he had either slid off the horse as they tumbled down the hill, or the boy had pushed him off. But he was only half off. Enough of his body was on the horse that I was sure the weight was pushing downward on the girl as well.

Shifting a little, I felt the soft ground underneath. It really was muddy... and through the stink of death I could smell the metal. I could taste it, even.

The blood soaked ground was the only reason she was still alive, likely. It had allowed her to sink a little into the ground, and not just get outright squished.

"Lujic?" she groaned a worried question as I studied the girl's situation, and I decided to just lift the horse itself. If I pulled on her I'd likely just hurt her more than help her.

"I'm going to lift the horse. You pull her out," I said as I stepped over to the horse and girl.

"Okay!" the boy agreed without hesitation as I kneeled and got my hands under the horse. I made sure to grab at the horse itself, and not the stuff upon it. I didn't want to grab the saddle or something and have it snap and break off as I lifted it. All that would do is possibly get the girl hurt even more.

"Ready?" I asked as I firmed myself. I could tell already that I'd be able to do it, though I wasn't sure to what extent. How heavy were horses anyway?

"Ya!"

Without hesitation I lifted. I pulled with my arms, and pushed with my legs. And for half a moment I panicked, thinking I wasn't strong enough to lift it at all... but then the thing raised upward rather quickly. So quickly in fact I panicked for a new reason, as the horse and everything on it began to shift and move in a direction I hadn't wanted it to. They began to slip from my hands, falling backward thanks to the angle.

Stepping closer, I got more of my arms under the horse and solidified both my hold and the carcass. I breathed a small sigh of relief, having not dropped the thing, and then realized it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

"She's free!" the boy shouted behind me, from several feet away.

I glanced back to verify it, and sure enough found the young girl and boy both on the road. They were on the ground, with the girl holding him and crying. She was likely hurt, but at the very least no longer stuck under the horse.

Letting the horse down, I felt some of the muck splatter from the drop. It splashed me all over, but I ignored it as I stepped away from the dead bodies and back to the road.

I had lots of questions, and worries... such as of course, obviously, why a pair of kids was here in the first place... but for now all I cared to focus on was the fact the crying girl had gone quiet.

"Ginny? Ginny!" the boy panicked, noticing it too, so I stepped closer and knelt down next to him. I lifted the young girl's head from his lap, and found she was just unconscious.

"She's asleep," he said worriedly.

"Yes. Here... let's get her checked. You too," I said as I went to pick the girl up. The boy didn't argue at all, and in fact seemed to help push her into my arms as I lifted her up.

The small girl was impossibly light in my arms... and I blamed it on the most recent thing I had lifted. Hopefully that was all it was, because she felt far too small. Were all children like this...? I couldn't remember my little sister feeling this tiny. Though maybe it was just that long ago...

"Is she going to be okay?" the boy asked as he stood up too.

"I hope so," I admitted, and glanced around.

Where should I take her? I knew that river I had been following was nearby... but maybe I should take her to a human settlement instead? Though what if by doing so I just got these two killed? I had no idea what had happened, or how and why... there was no telling what their relationship with these dead bodies was.

The girl twitched, and I glanced down to find her arm trembling upon her chest where it laid. Trembling in a way not from cold... but pain.

She was hurt. Not a surprise... having been squished by a horse.

"This way. Let's get her cleaned up first of all," I said as I decided to go to the river first. I'll tend to the two of them tonight, and if I can't help them enough to satisfy my worry then I'll risk taking them to a nearby human village.

"Hurry...!" The boy agreed, but did so as if he was in charge. He stepped in front of me, while staring up at me and he hurried to keep pace. He did so with such surety and urgency, that I myself broke out into a small run as well.

Chapter 326 Lujic And Ginny

The night had gotten cold, even with the fire roaring strong.

It'd been a few hours since we set up camp and gotten cleaned up. The little girl, Ginny, was sound asleep. I had bundled her up in the few blankets and clothes I had, since hers and her brother's were still damp and drying off. The boy, Lujic, I had given my jacket and he sat near the fire. He was a little too close for my comfort, so I kept an eye on him just in case.

"Uncle said it was going to go badly, but not like this," the boy said with a defeated voice.

He looked like his whole heart had broken. Yet... for as worried as he's been about his sister, and as devastated his life was at the moment... the boy had yet to actually cry. A few tears had been shed, earlier, but nothing more.

Lujic, although small and scrawny, was a proud boy. Almost too proud in my opinion.

"Was he the one on that horse?" I asked worriedly. Maybe I should offer to go bury the body? We weren't too far from there, but I'd worry about leaving these two alone in the night. The stink of those dead humans would undoubtedly draw forth larger predators from the deep of the forests. One would think they'd not bother with living humans when so many dead ones were so close, but I knew a large bear would not see any difference between these two small children and a dead corpse. They were equally nonthreatening.

The boy shook his head. "That was one of his friends. Tried to help us escape," he said.

I see.

I'd not really understood the whole story, since the boy had kind of given it halfheartedly, being dejected and depressed... but from what I understood the boy and girl had been living with their uncle. A man who had been employed to fight for some nearby lord or some such. And well...

That fight had gone terribly. Not only had their group been defeated, but the camp where their wounded had been getting tendered to and resting at had gotten attacked. Thus their attempt to flee along the road. It hadn't gone well.

I wasn't sure how a force capable of killing many dozens of men, some fully armored, had not been able to also kill two small children... but maybe they had simply not cared for them. Or maybe whoever had done the killing had not wanted to kill children. I know I'd struggle to do such a thing, if it was even possible for me.

Lujic sniffed as I stepped away from the fire. I wasn't dressed as fully as I usually was, since I had given the kids most of my clothing, but my tail was still hidden. My ears, however, weren't. During the setup of the camp, when we had lit the fire and cleaned Ginny of the muck and checked her for wounds, my hat had slid off. The boy had of course noticed, and had stared oddly at me for a moment... but his concern for his sister had quickly overshadowed any worry he had of my non-human traits. Even now he was staring into the fire, almost absentmindedly... uncaring of me at all, almost.

He had thanked me for helping them, but it still felt a little strange to me. I knew I looked like a young woman and all... but why wasn't he more worried about me? Even if I didn't have huge cat-like ears on the top of my head, I was still a stranger. He should have been more on guard, even under better circumstances.

But it was fine. I was glad to not have to feel like I was walking on eggshells, at least for the moment.

"Why don't you get some sleep, Lujic? I'll keep an eye on your sister," I offered as I checked their clothes. I had strung them up near the fire on some sticks, and was glad to find that his clothes felt dry. Hers however were still damp enough that I knew better than to let him use them as pillows or blankets.

"Mhm..." Lujic made a noise as I gathered up his dry clothes and stepped over to him. He seemed to ignore me for a moment, but then looked up at me.

"Are you a forest dweller?" he asked.

Forest dweller...? "I uh... like the forests, I guess? I suppose you could say I live in them," I said, unsure of how else to answer such a question.

He nodded as if my answer had made perfect sense, which was a good thing since I hadn't comprehended it much myself.

"I've heard about you, though usually you're—" He started to say something but a sudden fit of coughing drew our attention.

Lujic shot to his feet and ran over to Ginny as she rolled onto her side and coughed wildly. I hurried over as well, bundling up his clothes in my arms in case I needed to use them as a makeshift pillow for her.

"Ginny!" the boy shouted in panic as his sister heaved and coughed with a strange seriousness. It was the type of cough that came after drinking or eating something and it getting stuck or...

As I knelt down next to them, I watched as she spat something up. Something liquid. At first I thought she had just thrown up, maybe from the stress and pain, but the way the fire's light danced and gleamed off the stuff made me frown.

Reaching over, I brushed my fingers with the stuff, and didn't like the dark blood that stained my fingers.

Looking away from the blood on my fingers, I found Lujic's eyes. He had a haunted look as he stared at me, having seen and realized what had just happened.

She had coughed up blood. And not a small amount either.

"Help her sit up a little," I said as Lujic lifted his sister off her side. She seemed like she was still unconscious, which was very unnerving to me. She wasn't coughing anymore, but I couldn't imagine sleeping through such a fit as that. She must really be hurt...

But how? I had cleaned her off myself. I hadn't seen, or felt, any obvious wounds. She had a broken leg, I think, but I wasn't sure how such a thing could have caused her to...

"Hold her steady," I ordered as I reached over to lift up the girl's shirt. It was one of my spare ones, so it was huge on her and took a few moments to gather it up enough to reveal her stomach, and once I got it out of the way I felt my own stomach sink.

The girl's whole stomach, and what looked like her chest, was a myriad of dark colors. A huge bruise, centered just below her chest, was expanding outward.

"Ginny...?" Lujic's voice cracked, and the boy finally started to cry for real as he saw it too.

"Had she been hit by anything?" I asked as I wondered if maybe the horse had broken more than her leg.

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Lujic sniffed. "Yes! She was hit by a foot, kicked, by uh... well..." he began to stammer, and I winced at the information.

Why hadn't he said anything earlier? I had asked him, directly; as I cleaned her up and checked her if she had been hurt in any other way than the horse falling on her.

No matter. It wasn't like I could change what had happened... though...

"Help me lay her down," I asked the boy gently as I went to put his bundled up clothes beneath her head. They, added to the small pillow like thing I carried around for myself, would be enough to give her as much comfort as we'd possibly be able to give her at the moment.

"What do we do? What can I do?" Lujic asked worriedly as he laid her down, a little too slowly.

Once she was laid down I kneeled closer and put my ears close to her face. I listened intently to her breathing, and did my best to ignore the whining whimpers from the boy.

She was breathing rather smoothly. I didn't hear any wheezing, not enough to make me fear for her ability to breathe...

So why had she coughed up blood?

I moved a little, to angle my ears to her chest. I listened to her heartbeat and breathing, and once again couldn't hear anything too amiss. She breathed as if she was in pain, but was not struggling or making any weird sounds.

Whatever was broken was at least not stopping her from breathing.

"What do we do Renn?" Lujic asked again as he watched me.

Sitting up, I felt my ears flutter as I wondered that same question.

Something was obviously wrong. She was hurt. But this wasn't a broken arm or leg. How was I to treat it? It wasn't like I could just wrap her chest and put ointments on it or something.

I went over the times I had watched Witch treat and help such people. Usually she had used her powers, her magic, to heal them... but occasionally she had helped them in a more normal way. She too had listened to their breathing and heartbeats, but after that...

"For now we just make sure she doesn't suffocate. I'll stay up and keep an eye on her," I said as I decided the best course of action right now was that.

"What...? That's it?" Lujic asked worriedly.

I nodded. "It's all we can do." At least, all I knew how to do.

"Can't you use your magic?" he asked.

I blinked at him, and then realized something obvious. Something I should have noticed earlier.

He had called me a forest dweller. He thought I was some kind of spirit.

"I can't use magic. I'm sorry," I apologized.

His face scrunched up, and I felt as if I had just received a blow as mighty as the girl had gotten. My chest hurt for some reason as I looked away from his sad glare, and I gestured to the girl.

"Let her sleep. In the morning we'll head towards the nearest village... maybe they'll have someone who can know or help better than me," I said.

"There is no village anymore. It was burnt down!" Lujic said loudly.

Oh.

Right. War.

"Um..." I hesitated, since he was now looking at me with something akin to disappointment. It wasn't hard to understand the why, but it still hurt to be looked at like that.

Yes. I know I was useless in moments such as these. I should have learned more from Witch. I should know better, and be better.

But it wasn't like I had many chances to learn such things. Other than Witch... and the few humans I've tricked and been around for short times, I've not had much chance to learn much.

"I promise you Lujic... we'll both do all we can. Right now her getting rest, and you getting some too, is the best thing we can do," I said to him after a moment of enduring his glaring.

His eyes softened, and then watered up as some new tears fell. He nodded weakly as he looked back down at his sister.

I was glad he had found me convincing, since I hadn't felt very much so.

"Lie down and sleep Lujic. I promise I'll wake you if she does," I said.

"Okay..." he grumbled an answer and went ahead and laid down where he sat. Right next to the girl.

I didn't offer him any other blankets or pillows, simply because we didn't have any to offer. Not unless I was willing to take off the last layer of clothes I had on me.

It was cold, but not so cold my light undergarments could make much a difference. So I decided to just let him be, and make sure the fire was fed through the night. And once her clothes were properly dried I'd lay them over him too.

Why didn't I have a blanket anyway? I had something of a pillow, and a large hooded jacket since it was useful to wear during storms and to hide my features when needed, but that was it.

Maybe I was just not as bothered by the elements as humans were. Witch had always carried around such things when we had traveled. Or well, I had carried them. She had not only always carried extra sets of clothes but several blankets, and two whole rolled up pillows. They had been hard, but more comfortable than the ground at least.

Odds are I'd been neglecting myself. And I was now paying the price.

My ears fluttered as I stepped over to the fire and glanced around. To check our surroundings... and to try and distract myself.

The boy was already snoring. Right alongside his sister.

After a few moments of looking around my eyes wandered back to the children. They looked odd, covered in mismatched clothing and lying there together. From here they didn't look too bothered, or hurt. I could see a few bruises on the boys arms and legs, since they were visible, but from here I saw none upon the girl. The two looked like they were fine as they slept, even the girl didn't seem to have much pain on her face. Nor did I hear any change in her breathing either.

Maybe, if lucky, that earlier cough of blood had just been a once off event. Maybe she had simply coughed up what she had swallowed from the event, maybe from a cut tongue or cheek.

If not... well...

My only hope would be to find other humans. Preferably ones who knew how to tender such wounds.

Maybe I could even find someone like Witch. Someone able to use magic. Though she had told me how rare those like her were, there had to be more out there somewhere. Where there's one there should be many.

I blinked at that thought and smiled at myself.

I was likely proof of such a thing being false. What with me having traveled so much and not seeing or hearing hide or tail of anyone like me.

The boy had basically called me a forest spirit. An apparition. Some humans saw them as evil, needing to be slain on sight. Others saw them as mystical beings that could bring luck or misfortune depending on how you treated them. The humans had plenty of stories about them. Even Witch had told me a few.

Yet...

How many forests have I traveled through? How many have I spent entire seasons in?

And not once have I ever encountered such spirits.

Witch had tracked down, and killed, Elders before. What I'd likely consider to be the source of such tales and stories... and I was honestly glad I've never ran into any since then.

Pulling my tail out from under my pants, I sighed in relief. It had been getting stiff, and not just from worry. If the boy hadn't caused a scene over my ears, maybe I'll get lucky and he'll not do so over my tail either.

Sniffing a little, I kept a grumble of a complaint inside as I did my best to ignore the terrible stink in the air. It was terrible... enough so that I couldn't comprehend how the two kids had fallen asleep so easily.

Even if hurt and exhausted, the smell was so terrible that it was unbelievable.

Sighing a little I found my eyes drifting to the kids again... and I felt my tail twitch as I studied them.

Children. In my care.

Human children.

"What are you doing Renn?" I asked myself.

Hopefully the right thing, at least.

Chapter 327 A Mother's Duty

The sound of Lujic running and shouting made me smile. I stepped to the left a little, as to stare out the window nearby.

He was chasing after a chicken. A fat brown one that was outpacing him rather easily.

I had asked him to catch one, as to make dinner, but had I known how difficult it would prove to be for him maybe I shouldn't have.

The poor boy felt restless. His sister had still not woken... and he had a strange sense of pride. One that made him unable to just sit and wait, or rest.

I had asked him to draw water the other day and he had tripped and dropped the bucket he had filled not far from the house as he brought it back. He hadn't cried, but he had become rather quiet. He spent the rest of the day bringing water from the nearby river, to fill up the large barrel this house had. We hadn't needed that much water, not now anyway, so I think he had done so simply to prove to himself he could do it without falling.

It was honestly a little adorable, and it made me wonder why I wasn't bothered by his pride but I had been my own brother's.

Was it because he was still so small? Maybe if he had been fully grown, I would have not look kindly on such stubbornness?

Pondering that, I turned around and looked away from the window as Lujic disappeared out of sight. He had chased the chicken over a hill and towards some trees.

The kitchen I was in was small. And had a strange window inside, one that was on the opposite wall and allowed me to see into what was considered the sitting room. Lujic had called it a living room, though I wasn't sure why. Maybe one was supposed to live in it? Rather, sleep there instead of the beds?

I wasn't sure why it was odd to me, since it was actually kind of neat. I could see how such a window would be useful. Like allowing someone in the kitchen, while working, to easily see and speak with someone in the other room. Plus it'd let the smell of the food fill the house better, too.

But right now the window was useless. Other than myself and Ginny, no one was in the house... and likely haven't been in a long time.

A few days ago we had happened upon this little homestead. A small house, with a barn and some fields. It seemed abandoned, and it seemed it had been for a while now. The house had been dusty, cold, and lifeless. The storage, such as for the water and food, had all been empty and even the crops nearby had all been overgrown and full of weeds. There were a few remnants of the previous tenants, like the chickens scattered around the area, but there were no more larger farm animals. The barn had a pen next to it, one built not for chickens but something bigger. Pigs maybe. But they were nowhere to be found, not even their corpses.

I wasn't sure why this place had been abandoned, since it was actually a very nice home. But I wasn't going to miss on the opportunity to give Ginny and Lujic a chance to rest comfortably... especially since Ginny had yet to wake for more than a few moments since I had found them.

She was in one of the two other rooms of this house, a large bedroom with three beds. I could hear her soft breathing as she slept,

Ginny had only coughed up blood once more since that first incident. And it hadn't been anywhere as bad as the first time. Since then her breathing has been clear and healthy, and her sleeping sound. I wasn't really sure why she hadn't woken up fully yet, but something told me it was just pure exhaustion. I remembered a few times in my youth when I had been beaten and thrown into the pit that I had spent days in and out of consciousness while healing. Maybe she was just going through something similar.

The sound of bubbling drew my attention, and I smiled at the pot that had started to boil over. I quickly went to grab it, using some of the thick cloth I had found in one of the cupboards to hold it. I poured the excess boiling water into a different pot, and then put the original one back onto the stove.

There wasn't much in the way of food in the pot. Basically no meat at all. I had slaughtered a chicken yesterday, and had thrown the thing's bones and refuse into the pot as to make broth for today's meal. I'd eventually be making a makeshift soup... which was regretfully more greens than not. It was to be stuff Lujic and I had gathered from the nearby farm fields... which honestly wasn't much, but it was food at least.

Once the food was done and Lujic had brought another chicken, and I cut and prepared that one for our upcoming meals, I planned to head to the nearby river to catch some fish. It was a small distance from here, but close enough I could probably catch a few larger fishes and be back before nightfall as long as Lujic hurried up.

"Maybe I should just go catch one," I wondered. How long did one give a boy to complete a task before you stepped in? Would his pride be offended if I just caught one? Or would he understand?

My brothers would have beaten me if I did such a thing. But I wasn't sure if the young boy would do such a thing. He seemed to get quiet and sullen more than angry, from what I'd been able to see so far at least.

Stirring the pot, I smiled at the swirling water. It had begun to darken. I knew I could soon add the stuff I'd be using for the soup proper into the other pot. Then I could add the brother later, and make a proper soup.

A light cough made my stirring stop, and I quickly turned my head towards the direction of the room and hallway.

Ginny coughed again, and this time also groaned.

She was awake!

I hurriedly abandoned the pots, since they were just boiling and would be for a while anyway, and rushed to the bedroom.

We had left the door open, both so I could hear her better and for airflow, and so I found the girl shifting in bed... struggling to get up and out from under the heavy covers.

Unable to contain my smile I stepped into the room and went to the largest bed that she was in. "Morning Ginny," I said, greeting the girl as I grabbed the blankets and lifted them up and off her.

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The girl went still at the sight of me. She blinked up at me, and I heard her legs and feet twitch and shift under the covers. "Uh..." she made a sound as greeting back, and I grinned at her.

She blinked at me a few times. "A cat..." she mumbled under her breath at the sight of me.

"Can you sit up? Do you need to go tinkle? How are you feeling?" I asked, and realized I had probably asked too much at once. Really Renn, be calmer!

"Um..." she made a different sound this time as she slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position. About half way up though she winced and made a tiny whine. "Oww!"

She reached down and pulled at her shirt. I helped her lift it and we both stared down at her stomach. It was still bruised, rather heavily, but not anywhere near as bad as it had looked the other day. It was already starting to lessen in color and size.

"Lujic said you had been kicked," I said. Though not necessarily by who or what.

"Mhm...!" the girl flinched as she nodded and she leaned back down. Tears welled at the corner of her eyes as she writhed a moment in pain, and at the sight of such a thing I panicked.

"Ginny? Ginny...!" I felt a strange sense of unease fill me as I watched the little girl grab at her clothes and blankets in pain. She had closed eyes, and was beginning to cry.

What do I do? She was in pain, obviously, but it wasn't like I had anything to give her for it. Witch had used to make drinks for people to drink after she performed her miracles, drinks that had eased their lingering pains and stuff, but...

I scoured my memories of the surrounding forests and plains. While checking this empty house for supplies I had also walked around the immediate area. Mostly to make sure we were truly alone and no one else was nearby, such as living at another nearby farmstead. While doing so I had checked for any familiar plants or herbs, ones that I knew from watching Witch worked for such medicines.

None that I recognized were here. I had traveled too far from home, and now didn't know most of the plants here in this region.

The best I could think of were a few weed looking things near the river. They had looked somewhat similar to some stuff that Witch had always gathered when she saw them, stuff she used to make her herb drinks. But they were a different leaf. A little more pointy than the ones Witch had used.

It worried me to feed the young girl something I didn't fully understand. What if it only made it worse for her? I knew some plants could be just as poisonous as a snake bite. One needed to be wary...

"Ginny!"

I stood up a little straight as I was basically pushed aside as Lujic ran into the room. As he rushed up to the side of the bed, something flapped and clicked and clacked behind me. I turned and found a chicken. Not the large brown one from earlier but a smaller one. It was flapping as it righted itself upward and got onto its little feet. Lujic had likely tossed it aside at the sight of his sister being awake.

"Luji!" the girl greeted her brother through clenched teeth and shut eyes. The two found each other's hands, clasping them, and I felt strangely dizzy as I watched the boy's face contort into terrible worry. As if he too was now feeling the same pain his sister was.

How lovely. Why hadn't my siblings been like this?

"Renn! What's wrong? Why's she hurting?" Lujic asked worriedly as he turned to look at me. Although he had turned half his body, and his head, his eyes had remained on his sister. Eyes now brimming with tears.

"She woke up, Lujic. So she feels the pain now," I said, giving the only answer that made sense.

Lujic finally looked away from his sister and up at me. "What can we do?"

Once again his eyes of worry dug deep into me. How come such heartfelt eyes hurt so much? It wasn't as if he was blaming me, he was just desperate.

"Just be there for her. I'll go boil some cloth, maybe something warm on her stomach will help," I said. Witch had done similar for people with such bruises before. Though she had boiled those bandages and cloths with herbs, not just water...

"Lujic, it hurts," the girl whined, and although it made my heart turn and writhe... I noted the voice she had spoken with.

Stepping a little closer, I studied the way she peered at us through now half-open eyes. Her little pupils were not as strained, and her body wasn't trembling as strongly as before.

She was getting use to the pain. Rather quickly.

A little relieved, I smiled gently at her. "Keep an eye on her Lujic, I'll also get her something to drink," I said as I patted the boy on his head and stepped away.

"Mhm!" he didn't hesitate to agree, making me a little jealous somehow.

As I stepped away from the bed, I hurried over and grabbed the small chicken that was still in the room. It had calmed down enough that it barely noticed me picking it up, and even as I did it didn't fight back at all. It simply tilted its head at me as if to ask where we were going.

"You're a little small," I said to it as I left the room and headed for the kitchen. Should I toss this chicken out and go grab another? It wasn't even half the size of the one Lujic had been chasing before.

I debated until I reached the kitchen, and decided to do just that. I tossed the smaller chicken out of the window, where it fluttered its wings and flew away. It landed a distance away, near one of the farm fields, and made noises as if insulted at how it had been treated.

Ignoring the thing, I checked on my soups, and went to prepare a new pot of water. One to boil some of the thick and rough cloth that could be used to lay over the girl's stomach and chest. If done properly it might relieve her of some of the pain.

If that doesn't work maybe I should try boiling and preparing some of those herbs near the river. I could always drink some first, and wait a while, to see if they'd make me sick or not. Then once I verified I was fine, I could have the boy try a cup full too. Just in case. Then afterward I'd catch some fish and a larger chicken. For dinner and breakfast tomorrow.

Flicking my ears a little as I became busy... I listened to tiny voices. Coming from the other side of the house.

The siblings were quietly talking. He was telling her who I was and how we had found this house. That their uncle was dead, as were their friends.

Somehow listening to them felt wrong. As if they were speaking of precious secrets no one else should share... but it was hard not to hear them. The area was quiet. The house even more so. Even with the boiling pots, and the clucking chickens outside, I'd be hard pressed to not catch a few words no matter what I did.

Still...

Stirring one of the pots, I frowned at myself as I listened to the two children go quiet. I heard the boy sniff, and no more sounds from the girl.

She had maybe fallen back to sleep.

My eyes began to blur a little at the weird feeling of relief. If she had woken, and fallen back to sleep, then maybe she would be okay. She just needed time. Time to heal. Tender care as she did.

She'd be okay. As would the boy.

I just needed to keep the two fed. Warm. Safe. Honestly it didn't seem too difficult, really. At least for now... even if I was still anxiously worrying about the girl's health.

Decent food. A nice bed. Warm clothes. Safety from the outside elements, especially the cold and damp. Maybe some remedies if I can find and prepare some.

It felt like I needed to ensure so much, yet honestly most of what they needed was simple. Simple, basic necessities to survive.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I tried to not think of my own family. Of my own siblings... and especially so my own parents.

"If they're not even my children... and I still feel like this... how come my own parents hadn't?"

Chapter 328 One Issue, After Another

Staring down at the bowl of eggs, I wondered how long a human child could survive on just a few of them a day.

Crossing my arms, I tried to do some mental math. Lujic, for as scrawny as he was, ate a lot. It felt as if he asked for food a dozen times a day. And Ginny, as tiny and bedridden as she was, always ate everything in her bowl whenever it was time to eat. Which meant she could probably eat more too, but she simply didn't ask for it as brazenly as the boy did.

Ginny was healing. Just slowly. She had even walked a little this morning, to come sit out here in the front of the house as to talk and listen to me and Lujic as we cleaned up around the house. Right now she was back in the room, taking a nap.

Her bruise had faded, and she no longer writhed in pain or cried just because she tried to sit up. She still flinched occasionally, when she moved too oddly, but there was no fear anymore of the girl succumbing to her injuries. I knew in no time at all she'd be back on her feet, and not long after that the bruise would be gone and it'd all be just a distant memory for her.

But with one problem gone... a new one had arrived.

Picking up the bowl of eggs, I stepped over to the cupboard and put them away within it. Lujic and I had gathered up all the remainder chickens, at least the ones we could find, and had placed them into the enclosed barn. A few were egg laying ones, so we made sure to gather up the edible ones each day. But... well...

There were only a few. Nine chickens and only three laid eggs. And one of them only did so occasionally.

Not enough.

To make matters worse the fields around the house had been plucked bare. Yesterday I spent some time cleaning them up and re-planting a few things, but I knew better than to think it would make a difference. The farms had been neglected before we even found this place. Half of them had been destroyed by wildlife before we had even arrived.

My only hope for sustainable food was the river. And although my fishing line was nice, and had multiple hooks, I have only been able to catch a few fish a day. It was enough to keep the kids from starving, but I knew eventually it'd not be enough.

Plus one needed more than the same exact meal every single day. Eggs and fish were fine, until it wasn't.

Really. And here I was recently thinking on how easy it was to take care of children.

Foolish of me.

Sighing, I stepped out of the kitchen and glanced around. The house wasn't as empty as it first appeared, but it was still not full of stuff. There was nothing left to clean. No refuse left to dispose of, or try to fix. Lujic and I had basically cleaned up not just the house, but the barn and the surrounding area twice over already.

Where was Lujic anyway...? The boy sure did seem to like to keep busy.

It was as if he was trying to be as active as possible, since his sister wasn't able to do so.

Walking down the hallway, I peeked into the bedroom to check on the young girl in question. I found her lying on her side, snoring away gently.

A good sign. Not just that she slept so comfortably, but was now doing so in ways other than just on her back. It meant her wounds weren't bothering her as much.

It was her left side, really. It had been the most tender, and when I had tried to check it I had felt some strange swelling. It had been visible too, even from beneath the skin. Ginny, like her brother, was scrawny. As if they'd not been getting enough to eat long before I had found them. So the swelling had been obvious once I really looked at her.

Most of that swelling though was gone now. Thankfully.

I let the girl slumber and returned to the front of the house. The living room, as the two called it.

"Living room," I whispered the name of it and found it to make a little more sense. It wasn't that you slept in it, but rather you genuinely lived in it. It was where you spent your time with others. Living.

I smiled at the thought as I left the house. I shut the door firmly behind me and glanced around again for Lujic. I wanted to find him so that I could ask him to keep an eye on the house, and thus Ginny, while I rummaged around and searched for another source of food for us.

In the barn, there was a small room used for storage. Not much was left in it, but I thought I saw a bow hanging on the wall. I had ignored it originally, not caring much nor needing it... but now the idea of taking down a large game was appealing.

The forest we were in was rich with life. And the nearby river helped in drawing all that life to our area. They came here to drink, and eat. I bet I'd be able to track and hunt a larger deer or something rather easily if I just took the time to do so.

But I didn't want to just up and leave the kids without telling them where I was going, and why. Last thing I needed was for them to run away while I was gone.

I slowed to a stop a few feet from the house and realized what I had just thought.

"They could leave if they wanted," I said softly. After all, why not? If Ginny was healed enough to get up and about... there was nothing to stop them from doing so. It wasn't like they were actually my children... or that I owned them or anything.

For a few moments I stood still and pondered my own emotions. Had I worried about them leaving because I had become possessive? Or was it simply my worry that without me to help them, they could possibly be put in danger again? After all the very chaos that had gotten them hurt and separated from their uncle was still nearby. Who was to say there weren't more wars and battles happening at this very moment?

The thoughts and feelings were odd. I had only known the two for a little over a week and yet here I was, skipping a heartbeat at the mere thought of them leaving.

What would Witch say, I wonder?

She would have helped the children without question. To the point of sacrificing her life, even, if needed. But how far would she take it?

I had watched her help such people before. Those who were alone. Or lost. Even though she had helped them... she had never once offered to take them under her guidance. She had not tried to become a child's mother. Or offer her own home and hearth to them.

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Where was the line drawn, I wonder? How far did one go to help people, and where did one have no choice but to stop even if it meant those they helped could get hurt?

"Renn!"

I turned and smiled as I watched the young boy run towards me. He had mud on his knees and pants, but nothing in his arms or hands. Had he been playing in the mud or something?

"Where've you been Lujic?" I asked as he hurried over.

"Planting!"

Planting...

My smile warmed as I realized he had been trying to help. Which meant he may have noticed my worrying over our food supplies. "What have you been planting?" I asked.

"Apples! I found an apple tree so I gathered up all the fallen apples and buried them!"

Oh...? I wonder where he had found that. I had not noticed any apple trees around here. "I see. Later on you can show me where that tree is, and we'll collect some from the branches," I said.

He smiled up at me and nodded. "Yeah!"

I didn't have the heart to tell him that his efforts had been wasted. Unless of course we stayed here for years. I wasn't really sure how long it took an apple tree to grow enough before it started producing fruits, but I knew it wasn't quick. There had been a few near my home when I was younger and even back then, when I had barely noticed the passing of time, I had noticed that it took apples a long time to grow. Even from fully matured trees.

"If you're done would you mind staying near the house for me? To keep an eye on your sister?" I asked.

Lujic's smile died a little as he tilted his head, and as he did I noticed a scar on his left temple. It looked like he had been hit in the side of the head, rather harshly too. How old was that scar? Why hadn't I noticed it until now? "Why?" he asked.

"I'm going to go hunting. Depending on how long it takes I might be gone through the night, so if you'll make sure to watch her for me I'd appreciate it," I said.

He blinked, but said nothing.

A little startled by the strange look that had suddenly planted itself on his face, I shifted and felt my ears flutter.

What was wrong...?

Was he scared of the dark or something? Or was he upset that he had to watch his sister for an extended period of time...? Surely not, right? He was so protective of the girl. These last few days, whenever Ginny was awake he'd stop anything and everything he was doing just to come into the house and sit with her. Half the time they didn't even talk, he just wanted to be nearby.

"Is that okay Lujic?" I asked again, a little gently this time.

He slowly nodded, and then coughed. "um... Yeah. I'll watch the house," he said, a little blatantly.

Huh. Something was definitely wrong. I wonder what it was...

Feeling strangely awkward all of a sudden, I nodded back and smiled anyway. "I'll head out then. I'll grab some supplies from the barn first then go. If your sister gets hungry there's eggs and more green stuff in those cupboards she can eat," I said as I stepped away.

"Yeah... okay," Lujic answered a little stiffly again, but not as awkwardly. He even smiled at me this time.

Stepping away from him, I felt his eyes on my back as I headed for the barn. I entered it, making sure to not let any of the chickens escape as I did so, and went to locate the bow I had seen earlier.

It was still hanging up in the small room in the back, as I had remembered... but as I searched the rest of the room for arrows I found a severe lack of them.

"Great," I mumbled as I stood away from the last box that could have had arrows in it. I glanced around the room, and the barn proper, one last time to see if I had maybe looked over any but it proved fruitless.

I could make arrows, maybe, but by the time I did I could probably just track and hunt down a deer naturally. I didn't jump on them and claw at their necks anymore, as my family had trained me to do, but instead now threw rocks. I was able to throw a rock hard enough to knock out even larger deers nowadays, and although sometimes I missed or the rock hitting them didn't kill them outright, it was still a viable method for me.

All the same I took the bow off the little hook that it hung from... and realized another issue.

Sliding my fingers along the string, I found it to be terribly frayed. Decayed, even.

I knew even a slight tug would likely snap it, so I went ahead and pulled on the bowstring in the middle. It didn't take much force at all and the thing promptly snapped.

Sighing at it, I shook my head and placed it back down onto a box.

I could make string and arrows later. For now though I needed to go get food. A single deer, even a smaller one, would last us long enough for me to be able to properly make traps and stuff for genuine hunting.

Leaving the barn, one of the chickens clucked loudly at me as I left. As if telling me goodbye.

Heading back towards the house, I paused a moment to listen around the home and the surrounding area. Both to check on Ginny, who was still sleeping, and to make sure there were no issues or dangers around us.

Once confirming the area was safe, as much as I could tell it was at least, I began to walk towards the edge of the farmstead. I headed towards the river, since I knew I'd be able to not just find something to hunt there but I'd also find plenty of properly sized and shaped rocks to use as weapons.

Right as I left the area, stepping into the tree-line, I glanced back at the house one last time... and found a pair of eyes staring back at me.

I hesitated, and went still at the sight of them.

Lujic was staring at me from the window. Half hidden, not because he was hiding... but rather simply because he was so short.

At first I thought something was wrong... but then I realized he likely couldn't really see me. Not from this distance. Humans did not have the best of eyesight.

But...

Squinting a little, I studied the boy's face.

It looked worried.

As if something really was wrong.

But I knew there wasn't. Shouldn't be.

Ginny was healing. She was resting still, even now. There was no danger around here... and although I was worrying over the food supplies... we honestly weren't that bad off. I'd catch something, and then I'd continue doing so too. There was no reason to panic.

Yet there he was. Staring at me as if...

"He thinks I'm leaving," I whispered as I realized what those eyes were.

My whole body went cold, and I had to look away from the window and the boy's look of utter defeat.

He thought I was leaving them. Abandoning them.

That was why he had acted so oddly earlier. He had interpreted my request as an excuse.

Why...? Was it to be expected? Common?

Why would a little boy think such a thing so instantly? Without reason? What had I done to make him even think such a thing was a possibility?

If I was going to leave... I would have simply told them.

Right...?

For a small moment I thought about going back. To tell him I wasn't going to leave. To prove to him his worries were unfounded.

But I knew the best way to prove such a thing wasn't to say it, but to do it. To prove it through actions, not words.

"I'll be quick," I decided firmly as I stepped into the forest.

I'll find something fast. I'll return as fast as possible. Even if I have to bring back just a pair of small rabbits or something.

"I'll not abandon you," I vowed.

I wouldn't. I refused to.

Because that was what my family would have done. My own mother would have.

So I'll not do it. Ever.

Chapter 329 – Footprints and Heartbeats

Finally returning home, I sighed a little in relief at the sight of the house.

So much for being quick.

My right shoulder was a little stiff, but I didn't bother moving the large stick that was causing the discomfort. I was almost finished. I'd be able to put the stick, and the half carved deer, down shortly.

It was the middle of the night. The full moon was peering through clouds, and although it wasn't raining at the moment I could smell it on the wind. It'd likely start raining soon.

The house was dark, even the so called living room. Which meant Lujic had either not lit a fire, or it had gone out already. Odds are it had simply gone out, since the boy was usually studious about keeping the fire going for his sister. It was late enough that he was likely fast asleep.

Like most humans they went to bed rather earlier. Not long after the sun finished setting. Odds are he had been asleep for hours. I blamed their inability to see well in the dark.

As I approached the house however... something made me pause.

Looking around, I studied the farmstead. What had I noticed? For some reason something had seemed off, but I couldn't tell what.

The fields looked fine. The dirt paths looked unbothered... The grass, and nearby hills and trees all looked the same too.

The house maybe...? I looked back at the house, and the barn, and wasn't able to find any difference between it and my memories of it. Though maybe the...

Blinking as I realized it, I frowned at the sight of the front door. It was half open.

Stepping forward I lowered the deer and stick it was tied to. Placing it down onto the ground I slowly approached the house and walked alongside it a moment, as to stare into the window.

It had shutters, but they were half open too. I didn't find it odd before however simply because they weren't able to close all the way. They had been broken before we had got here and found this place. So it had not seemed odd to me.

Inside the house looked normal. Dark. Cold, maybe even.

No signs of anything wrong.

Reaching behind, I grabbed hold of the small knife at my waist. It was the one I used to cut and clean stuff I ate, or chop small pieces of wood with. Hardly a proper weapon, but it was better than nothing at the moment.

Slowly approaching the front door, I took a few deeper breaths... and realized finally what had tipped me off that something was wrong.

There was a strange smell in the air. One I didn't recognize. Not from the house, this area, or from the kids or myself.

Was it a person? An animal? I didn't know, but now that I really recognized it the smell was distinct.

Reaching the front door, I reached out and slowly pushed the door open. I opened as carefully as I could, but it still creaked a little. Scanning the inside of the house, I noticed the strange smell was now a little more potent.

Someone had been in the house. Someone else. I could smell leather, metal, and bad breath.

A man, maybe.

My heartbeat slowly grew louder as I entered the house... and strained my ears to listen.

I couldn't hear anyone breathing. No shift of weight on the floor. And although the smell of a stranger was burning my nose, I could tell it was not fresh.

Walking deeper into the house, I felt my stomach grow heavy as I realized something even more serious than a possible intruder and enemy.

I couldn't hear anything. The house was as quiet as could be.

Not only did I not hear whoever had come into this house uninvited... I also couldn't hear the sound of Lujic and Ginny. At all.

And as I slowly walked down the hallway, the cold fact I couldn't hear them become more and more obvious... and upon reaching the bedroom, I went still as I stared into an empty room.

Lujic and Ginny were gone.

Lujic being missing from the house would be weird, but not unbelievable. But Ginny? The poor girl could barely walk to the kitchen without having to sit down and rest.

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Had they left? On purpose? Or was that strange smell, the smell of what I could only assume was a strange man, the cause of this?

Had it been their uncle maybe? They hadn't outright said he had been killed in the fighting... Though I had assumed so, since they hadn't asked to go and find him.

Entering the room, I studied the beds... and noticed the odd way the blankets were shifted around. Ginny's were half on the floor...

Studying the bedding, I wondered what had happened. If they had simply left, on their own, why did it look as if they had jumped out of their beds in a hurry?

Hurrying out of the room, I was careful as I checked the rest of the house. A part of me wondered if maybe the two kids had hidden themselves, and were still in hiding even now.

It'd make sense. If a stranger broke in, they might have just hid... as to keep themselves safe...

Yet as I checked the small house, it became clear they weren't here inside of it. Nor was anyone else, either.

I left the house to go check the barn. Hurriedly opening the barn door, I came to another stop from surprise.

The chickens were all gone.

Hesitating a moment, I slowly walked into the barn and looked for any sign of anything alive. Human or otherwise.

I found none, and left the barn. I felt a strange apprehension feel me as I wandered back towards the front of the house... and slowly looked around.

I felt as if I should be running somewhere. To hurry. As if my life depended on it.

But I had no idea where to hurry to. Or why I should in the first place.

There was no one here. Unless someone was off in the nearby trees, hiding quietly. But the smell in the air wasn't strong enough to justify that in my opinion. Outside of the house the strange unknown smell was weak and barely noticeable now. It was being carried away by the wind, and I was growing used to it.

"Lujic...?" I dared to speak, and for a few heavy heartbeats I went still and listened to the world around me.

Other than the rustling of leaves and grass from the wind, I heard nothing else.

"Lujic!" I said louder, this time loud enough that even if a human was hiding in the nearby tree-line they'd be able to hear it too.

Once again my answer was only silence.

Groaning I hurried back into the house. "Lujic? Ginny!" I shouted as I checked the house again. I even checked in some of the cupboards.

No one and nothing. No answer. No responses.

I was alone in an empty house. In an empty farmstead.

Feeling sick, I found myself standing in the living room. I slowly spun, looking all around me as if for answers... but had no idea what kind of answers I even needed.

What if it had just been their uncle? Maybe he had picked them up and left. That would have explained the chickens being taken too. For food.

I'd not fault them. It'd be for the best, even. They were not my children after all... and they should not just be with their own kind, but their own family.

But...

Remembering the way the blankets were all strange, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Maybe they had simply jumped out of their beds in joy. At hearing or seeing their family member.

But how had he found them...? We were several days away from that battlefield. Plus this farmstead was rather deep into a thick forest. Even if one followed the river, as we had done, it wasn't like they'd just be able to find this place that easily. The only reason we had found it was because I had smelled something odd on the wind. An unnatural stink. It had been the smell of the rotting and overgrown farm plots.

Though... stuff did happen randomly, sometimes. Just pure happenstance and...

"What if it wasn't their uncle?" I dared to whisper the harsh truth that I'd been trying to ignore.

What if it had been the owners of this farm? Or another one of those soldiers? Though why they'd take the kids...

Hurrying out of the house, I stepped out onto the dirt... and looked around at the ground.

It took a little while, since I had to let the clouds shift and move as to get enough light, but I eventually found what I figured I would.

Footprints. And not just human ones either.

Stepping over to the group of prints, I knelt down and immediately recognized the tracks of a horse. Maybe even two or three.

I hadn't noticed them earlier thanks to the dark, and my slight panic. But I was calming down now. A little bit, at least.

So it hadn't just been a single man. There had been a group. That explained the strange smell. It was a mixture of many scents.

Honestly it made the chance of their uncle being the one to have shown up the more likely scenario. Though I wasn't sure how right that was, since it might just be my own hope overriding common sense.

"What should I do...?" I wondered. Was there even anything I could do? If they were on horses I'd likely never be able to catch up or find them even if I tried. In the dark, out here in the forest, I'd not be able to track them well. The ground here was mushy, but not so much their tracks would be obvious for long.

But...

Glancing back at the house, I felt suddenly tired. I almost felt as if I hadn't slept in days. But I knew I wasn't actually tired. I wasn't actually exhausted. It had taken me longer than I wanted to catch that deer, and it had been a little annoying carrying it here... but it hadn't been exhausting.

If I don't at least try to find them... I'll never be able to know what happened.

Without knowing I'll always wonder. Every time, right as I drift off to sleep from now on, I'll ask myself what had happened. If they had survived. If their uncle had actually found them, or some other strange man or enemy.

Standing up, I stepped away from the footprints and hesitated. I had been about to follow the path, to the south. To follow the few prints I could see.

"What do I do?" I asked.

No one answered, of course, but my heart did.

So... following my heart...

I stepped forward, and broke out into a run. Leaving the empty farmstead behind.

Chapter 330 A Cat's Hunt

My breathing was not steady at all. Nor was my heart, as I leaned against the large tree for support.

Distant voices filled the air, and I struggled to calm myself as I tried to hear what was being said. Through my loud heartbeat, and the noisy wind, I heard not just the voices of men but women.

They were talking about many things. The oncoming storm. The lack of drinks. One of the women was complaining about her horse, it stunk.

Calming down a little, I tried my best to not panic. It was so hard to do so, but I knew right now it was the last thing I should do.

Witch had always said a calm mind was the answer. No matter the situation. No matter what.

But it was so, so hard...

Slowly crouching, I half-crawled around the tree I was hiding behind as to get behind a thick bush. I made sure to keep my ears as low as possible against my head as I peeked out over the bush, to the nearby road.

Several wagons were on the road. Rolling along slowly, with men and women in armor and carrying weapons walking alongside them. Some rode horses. Others marched side-by-side, chatting lightly.

I was lucky that the area was heavily wooded. On this side and the other side of the path were dense clusters of trees and bushes. Some of the bushes, like the one I hid behind, were as tall as I were and many times thicker. Especially when they grouped together. In fact, I'd been following this little caravan of people for a good while now. I had to do so from a distance at first, since there had not been enough trees and hills to block me from their sight, but as the trees became more dense I was able to approach more easily.

Lowering a little as one of the women glanced my way; I stared through the bush at the passing figures. They were a rock-throw away, so I doubted they could hear me or smell me, but I was doing my best to be careful.

Most of them were wearing metal armor, if only in patches like on their chests and thighs, but a few wore just normal clothes. I wasn't really sure who they were, or what they were, since their wagons had little flags hanging on the sides of them. The flags were decorated a strange blue, with little birds upon them. I of course didn't recognize them, but the way they were all leisurely walking and talking told me they were very confident. Odds are they weren't bandits or anything but some kind of army, or at least a portion of one. Maybe knights, even.

They were not people I wanted to get involved with. They didn't just have swords and axes, but bows. Most of them did.

Between their weapons and many horses, I'd likely not survive a confrontation with them. Especially since I wasn't sure how deep this forest patch was. Back the way we had come had been an almost open field, though littered with hills and trees. Not the type of environment I could survive while escaping and trying to hide from such pursuers as them.

"Hurry up!" A snarky voice shouted, quickly followed by the sound of a small child yelping.

I flinched... waited a small moment, and then peaked back over the bush.

Quickly my eyes found Lujic. The boy was near the end of the caravan, walking next to a large wagon with a covered top. His arms were tied at the wrist by a thick rope, which was connected to the wagon. He wasn't the only one tied to it either. He was walking in line with other men and even a few other boys his age. They were all like him, dirty looking and tied to the cart by rope.

I shivered at the sight of him and had to kneel back down. Not because I had been in danger of being seen, but because my blood was boiling.

It was definitely Lujic. I'd not mistake that dirty blond hair anywhere.

Ginny was nowhere to be seen, but I heavily suspected she was in the wagon. A few times a harsher breeze had blown by; the flaps at the end of the wagon moved enough to show there were people in it. A lot of people.

There was no reason to believe they were anything other than captured people. The rest of the caravan were all soldiers, or at least a part of them.

Why they'd capture Lujic like this was of course something I could not understand... but right now there was no point in trying to understand anything.

He was tied up. Being abused. There was a taller woman walking near him, dressed in leather armor. She had a spear and kept using the butt of it to smack and poke at Lujic and the rest of the tied up people. There was no reason for her to do so, since none of them had actually stopped walking. Plus the wagon was only moving so fast anyway, so forcing them to pick up speed only made their ropes go taught as they waited for the wagon to keep up with them.

It was that very abuse which made my blood boil. It was one thing entirely to tie the boy up like that, but to smack him for no reason?

That was something my siblings would have done.

The wagon, and Lujic who was tied to it, rolled past. I studied the boy as he fumbled while walking. What had been a happy boy, running around everywhere and chasing chickens, was now limping. He was favoring his left leg.

This story originates from a different website. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

There was no way their uncle had found them. Right...?

But no. I knew the truth. Since my own family had been the same.

It was very likely their uncle was a part of this. A few did have the same hair as him... though none outright seemed to be related to him as far as I could tell.

In fact, none of the knights or whatever they are even seemed to really care about Lujic and the rest tied to the wagon. Only that woman, who had walked over to the other side to torment those tied opposite of Lujic, seemed to have any interest in them.

After a few moments the wagon rolled away from my area. The path they were on, the dirt road, seemed to head in a rather straight direction for as far as I could see. I had absolutely no clue where it led, but knew eventually I'd lose them if I didn't figure something out.

They'd either enter a town, or leave this forest area and enter another large open field and plains. Either result would force me to back off... which would only get Lujic hurt, or worse.

But what could I do...? It wasn't like I could just walk up to him and untie him.

Were they possibly slavers? If so, could I buy them...?

"With what money, Renn?" I whispered angrily to myself as I grumbled and glanced around.

I found the path I'd take and stepped away from the bush. Keeping low, I slowly walked through tall grass and dense foliage. Keeping myself quiet, I slowly kept pace with the caravan and Lujic.

I needed to save him. Somehow. And Ginny too.

But how?

I could possibly kill a few of them. I could ambush them, or just outright overpower them... but I'd not be able to kill all of them. Not by a long shot.

I couldn't just take them back. If I walked up and tried to claim they were my children they'd likely just tie me up too. At least, until they saw my ears and tail. Then they'd just kill me, or worse. So I couldn't do that either.

Could I somehow steal them back...?

The wagon Lujic was attached to was not the last wagon in the group. There were two more behind the one he was attached to. But the other two were smaller, and not covered. They were the flat box types, stored with goods and boxes. One was even being pulled by a pair of oxen and not horses.

Reaching a new bunch of trees, I hid behind the largest with the lowest branches and peered around it to count the people near Lujic. Not including those tied to the wagon like he was, I counted a quick thirteen. That included the abusive woman with the spear who had slowed a little as to talk to a man on a horse.

Thirteen people. And that was just at the end of the caravan.

My stomach hurt as I stared at Lujic. The boy didn't look like he was crying, but his face was skewed with sadness. The poor boy almost looked as sad as he had when his sister hadn't been waking up and had been coughing blood.

Hopefully Ginny was fine.

This explained their bedding back at the house. They had likely leapt out of bed, shocked at the intrusion. Ginny may have even been pulled out of bed by one of these bastards.

Would... would they have hurt Ginny?

I nearly ran out from behind the tree, just to rush over to the wagon and check for her. The thought of them killing her, leaving her dead in some ditch somewhere, made me nearly lose it.

It was possible, of course. What if they thought her too sick? Too disabled or broken to be worth anything? Not even their time?

Looking away from the wagon and Lujic, I bent over and clenched my teeth. I felt like I was about to throw up.

This wasn't good! Not at all!

My head began to throb, and I forcefully calmed myself down. I took slow, but deep breaths, and made sure as my tail twitched and spasmed it did so low to the ground, and not against any of the nearby bushes as to keep it quiet.

Don't panic Renn. Don't freak out.

I can figure this out. It wasn't impossible. There were ways.

Surely...

After a few moments of wallowing in my own thoughts and the despair laced through them, I slowly sat up to peer around the tree again.

Lujic had his head hung low. The woman with the spear had returned to his side of the road, though her focus was not on him. She was messing with a leather pouch... which as she lifted to her lips and took a drink out of; I realized was a water pouch.

I glared at the woman, hoping she'd choke, but she didn't. After a moment she finished and tossed the leather pouch onto the edge of the wagon Lujic was tied to.

Although glaring at her made me feel better, I knew I needed to do more. If I just hid behind the shadows all this time, I'd not be able to save the kids.

So I needed to first figure out more. I needed to study these people. I needed to find an opening, and find a way to exploit it.

Just like when hunting a large prey. Just as when Witch and I had hunted those elders. Even though it seemed impossible at first, there was always a way if you just calmly assessed the situation and took your time.

"They don't have time..." I mumbled angrily, and shook my head at myself.

Crawling a little to the next group of bushes, I stood up a bit and hurried away from them. I went deeper into the forest, so I could outpace the caravan. My plan was to go as far as I could ahead of them, to see maybe if I could tell where they were going. Or if the forest would continue so that I could have at least a few hours as to formulate a plan.

I honestly wasn't sure yet what I was going to do. If it was just Lujic, I might be able to rush forward and grab him and escape before they could catch us. It was a stupid idea, and a long shot, but it was at least something I'd be willing to attempt.

But with Ginny being nowhere in sight, I had no idea where she actually was. Which meant I'd need to find where she was first before doing anything. Last thing I needed was to find a way to save Lujic, only for them to threaten her life as to get me to give up or something.

As I hurried ahead of the caravan, staying out of sight, I continued to think of all the different ways I could probably save them.

Regretfully most of the ideas died as quickly as they were born... but I kept thinking and trying to find ways.

I'd save them. No matter what.

One way or another.

Hopefully.