

## Non Human 331

### Chapter 331 To Steal Them Back

It was now or never.

Slowly approaching the parked wagon, I kept my breathing as even as possible. Although a few moments ago, back before I had left the safety and cover of the thick trees and bushes, my heart had been thumping like crazy it was now steady and normal. I didn't even feel like I was sweating anymore.

The caravan had stopped before dusk. They had pulled off the road and set up camp inside a small opening in the forest. Luckily for me though, the forest had grown far denser, and although they had camped closely with each other thanks to how dense the trees were the wagons were separated enough to make a difference. The wagon Lujic had been tied to, and that had been carrying Ginny, was sitting with just one other wagon. One of the ones that had been carrying cargo, not people. The rest of the wagons, and thanks to that the majority of the humans, were many dozens of feet away all gathered in a larger opening. The largest group of people were currently surrounding a large fire, eating and drinking.

Not all of them were doing normal stuff, though. Not far past the nearby cluster of trees were a few hastily made tents. Right now there were heart-wrenching sounds coming from them.

This wagon of slaves had been emptied. So that the slaves could sleep. But most of the women were gone. A few of the men too.

It was one of the reasons I had to hurry. Not only would at any moment these barbaric humans bring back the slaves they had taken for their own amusement, there was now a chance that someone might interest themselves in Lujic or Ginny.

I felt horrible using others misfortune as an opportunity, but I had no other choice. I had hurried ahead a little before they had made camp, and not far out of this forest was a village. One close enough that made me actually a little surprised that they had stopped in the first place.

The sad reality is they had likely done it on purpose. As to enjoy their spoils one last time.

Rounding a small bush, I crept ever closer to the wagons and the people sitting around them. The knights, or whatever they were, had tied all of the captured people up by their legs. Every person had a thick rope tied around their ankle, which was then connected to another person. Eventually that rope connected with either a tree, or one of the wagons.

I wasn't really sure yet why rope on a leg was enough to make dozens of people resist fighting back, or try to escape, but so far it had worked. Not a single person had resisted as they had been tied together and bunched up near the wagons. Not a one. Not even when some of them had been taken.

How come humans didn't fight back when under such duress? Even a wild animal did... at least... sometimes. Until it was exhausted, at least.

Pausing a moment, I lowered my head and ears as my eyes were drawn to the sound of someone approaching. Through the trees, over towards the other group, I saw a man walking my way. Towards these wagons.

My heartbeat began to thump wildly again, but it quickly became clear he hadn't seen me... and that he had no plans to actually come over here. He stopped at a tree and went to relieving himself, all the while yawning.

Daring a look away from him, I glanced back to the wagons. Just past the wagon in front of me, right behind it, was Lujic and Ginny. From here I could only see their legs. They were sitting next to each other near the wagon's large wheel, resting up against it. I could hear Ginny's soft sniffles and whimpers, but hers weren't the only ones. Several of the people tied up were similarly crying.

I looked away from my destination just in time to see the man stop peeing on the tree and turn away. He sluggishly headed back from whence he came, back towards the makeshift tents.

Glaring at the man for a moment, I returned my focus on my task.

I needed to save the kids. Now.

Ok. Now or never. Really.

Standing up a little, I hardened my heart as I hurried over to the wagon. I rounded the edge of it, and came to a stop upon seeing the kids.

Ginny and Lujic were sitting against each other. It looked like Ginny was clinging to the boy's shirt, and he had a sullen look on his face. Other than their obvious distress, and the ropes attached to their feet, they didn't look too bad. I saw no wounds, at least.

Before getting their attention I looked around at the rest of the people. Like the kids, everyone here was sitting or lying down. Some people were outright sleeping, as if without a care, while others were curled up together and weeping.

Most were older. I didn't see anyone who looked outright as young as Lujic and Ginny, but a few were close. Another scrawny boy was nearby, curled up near a pair of older women. He didn't look like he was with them, since he wasn't touching them or sitting too close.

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Sliding my knife out from its sheath, I ignored the way my heart leapt into my throat. I scanned the people, and very quickly found the spots most useful to cut.

I needed to free Lujic and Ginny, of course, but I needed more than that. Or at least, I felt as if I had to do more than that. The thought of actually being able to save everyone here was a happy one, but I knew it was unrealistic. But at the same time, helping these people might also further help me and the kids as we escaped. If I saved a dozen or two people, and we all ran in different directions, then the odds of us three making it out of here went up... at least in my perspective.

It seemed each rope had roughly ten people connected to it. So I stepped forward, one of the ropes that was connected to the wagon. The same rope connected to Lujic and Ginny.

The moment my knife touched the rope, however, my heart sank as the truth hit me like a slap on the face.

I'd not be able to cut all the ropes.

It took nearly all my strength, while moving the blade as quickly as possible, to cut the rope. It took far too long, and was far too loud.

"What's she doing?" someone whispered, and I bit back harsh words.

"Shush!" was all I allowed through my lips.

"Renn...!" Lujic though didn't seem to care to heed my warning. His shock had been not just real, but vivid. And loud.

"Quiet!" I hurried over to Lujic and Ginny, who were both quickly sitting up. I kneeled down next to them and quickly went to pull the rope off their ankles.

The moment I grabbed the rope though, I realized another truth.

I'd not be able to just slip their legs free. Whatever kind of method they used to tie the blasted stuff made it wrapped so tightly around their legs, even the kids' scrawny ones, made it as firm as iron.

"Renn!" Ginny nearly sobbed as she reached out for me. I ignored her attempt to wrap me in a hug as I kept focused on the ropes. Since I couldn't just tug their legs free, I immediately went to cutting at it.

"She's going to get us killed," someone said flatly nearby.

"Cut mine too!" another said, a little too loud.

"Quiet, they'll hear," I whispered harshly as I freed Ginny's leg. Lujic had stood and moved his leg upward, resting it against the wheel of the wagon, to give me a better angle at his.

I was able to get Lujic's free quicker, for some reason. Maybe the rope had already been frayed a little. I had only needed to cut into it a little bit for it to snap and untangle.

The moment his leg was freed, and his foot touched the ground, he and Ginny rushed forward and wrapped their arms around my waist.

Going still, I for a few long heartbeats didn't know what to think or say... as the two kids squeezed me with their meager strength.

Blinking blurry eyes, I took a deep breath and patted Ginny on the back. "Come on. Let me go now," I asked gently.

"Me next! Cut it already!" one of the men nearby had stood and shouted at me as he approached. He only made it a few feet before he stumbled, falling to his knees, and someone behind him also fell. The rope connecting them had impeded the first, and got the second dragged behind him.

"No! Me!" A woman stood up, pulling another woman up with her as they hurried over.

"Wait," I raised the hand with the knife, not to point at them but to ask for patience... and silence, but it was too late. Before I knew it half the group had awoken and stood, hurrying over towards the three of us. Each asking to be freed, most doing so while pushing the others aside.

"What's going on over there!"

My blood went cold at the new voice. One that had carried not just over the now noisy group of captured people, but the wind and rustle of leaves. Even the noise of the nearby tents... which suddenly grew quiet.

"Come on!" A man stepped closer, but didn't wait for my response or my actions. He simply reached out and grabbed at my knife.

Reflexively pulling my hand back, and stepping backward, I flinched and dropped the knife the moment his hand wrapped around the blade. He grabbed it and took it from me, and hurriedly crouched over to go about cutting himself free.

If he had cut his hand on my sharp knife, something I couldn't imagine not doing, he didn't show it.

"Share you bastard," another man stepped forward and grabbed at the man's shirt. And before I knew it the people around us grew noisy and chaotic. Men started pushing. Women shouting. Those more timid, or not wanting to get hurt in the chaos, had stepped back as far as their ropes would allow... cowering down to the ground.

"Let's go!" I grabbed Lujic and Ginny and turned.

I had wanted to try and help them. But if this was how it was going to go, then there was no need for me to risk ourselves any more than I already had!

"Alarm!" A woman's voice shouted from the trees, and I bent a little as to pick the kids up because of it.

Wrapping my arms around their waists, I carried the two into the nearby forest. I already knew which direction I wanted to run. I had searched the path out before it had gotten dark enough for my attempt at rescue. We were going to head the opposite direction of the nearby road, since it led to an even denser forest with far more hills. A perfect place to run and hide.

"Renny!" Ginny shouted my name as I carried them away. I didn't stop. I wasn't past more than a few trees before I heard people shouting. Orders being barked. People being hurt.

As I ran with all my might, I did my best to ignore the sounds of screams. Of men and women. People being hurt. Maybe even killed.

Because of my actions.

Squeezing the two little lives I carried, I hardened my heart and stopped paying attention. I only focused on running.

Running and surviving.

Nothing more.

Chapter 332 A New Life

Turning the broom over, I glared down at the lizard clinging to the broom straws.

Where had it even come from? I glanced around, and luckily found myself still alone... so I stepped away from the courtyard bricks and over to the nearby wall.

Lifting the broom, I placed the end up against the mossy stone wall... and waited.

The lizard didn't move.

Sighing at the thing, I reached over to tap it. "As bad as Lujic, I swear," I mumbled as the lizard finally took the hint. It crawled along the broom straws for a moment, and then reached the stone wall. It climbed up a few feet, and then paused... only to tilt its head and stare at me.

"What? Did you want to get broomed?" I asked it as I stepped away from the wall as to return to sweeping.

Wait... Broomed...? Shouldn't I have said swept?

Feeling a little embarrassed, and then silly because I had gotten embarrassed over misspeaking to a lizard of all things, I returned to my duties.

Sweeping was honestly one of the better chores to be assigned to. There wasn't much they made me do here, in this giant noble's house, but out of all the things I found sweeping to be the less stressful. It was far better than working in the kitchens, or doing laundry. Not so much because those tasks took a little more attention and care, but rather sweeping was something I typically did alone. Thus didn't need to spend much time with anyone else, or have to pay much attention to what I said or how I said it.

As I swept, I glanced up at the dull sky. It was a little gray today, with the clouds, but I neither smelled nor felt rain in the air. In fact it wasn't even that cold.

A day like this was where I met Lujic and Ginny. I wonder how many seasons have passed since then. Two? Three?

Surely not more than four, right?

"Renn!"

I stood up straight and turned around, quickly finding the old woman who had just shouted at me. She had a large basket, one nearly half her size... and judging by the way the old woman was able to hold it up without any effort, it was likely empty.

Which meant only one thing...

"Come fetch all the laundry! In the guards quarters!" she shouted an order.

Great.

Oh well. Peace never did last.

I hurried over, making sure to not let the cloth headband tied around my head slip off. It was held only by a pair of tied straps, nothing more, so I needed to be careful.

"Nancy's sick. Just gather it all up and hand it off to those working laundry today," the old headmaid said as she put the basket down before me.

I nodded as she held her hand out, open palmed, and obliged her and handed her off the broom I had been using.

"How're the kids?" she asked as I grabbed the large basket. Even though empty it stunk. From its years of being used to hold dirty clothes.

"They're fine. Lujic though suddenly thinks he's going to become a guard," I said as I lifted the thing. I made sure not to do it too easily. I had once lifted a large basket like this, full of stuff, too effortlessly and others had saw me and found it odd. They had almost condemned me to always carrying all the

heavy baskets of dirty clothes, and I didn't want a repeat offense. I'd not be able to laugh it off again if I did.

"All boys do, at least once in their lives. Make sure the boy keeps it just a passing fancy. Any man who wields a sword for a living is doomed, and not worth the time of day," the old maid said with a huff, and then turned away. She walked off quickly, eager to get back to whatever task she herself needed to finish before the day was over.

Watching her go, I frowned at her.

Those words hadn't been scornful, or said in jest. She had been serious.

Turning around myself, I began heading for the guard's quarters.

Luckily at this time of day, the guards would not be within their rooms. They'd all be out doing their jobs. Either guarding the village resting at the bottom of the hill this large compound sat upon, or one of the many roads that led to and from.

Not that I really ever had much issue with them. A few of the other servants who worked here hated them, such as the headmaid, but I as of yet had not had any issues with any of them. A few sometimes made odd comments, or asked if I wanted to share their beds or not, but not a one has pressed anything beyond the polite decline I gave them.

A part of me wondered if maybe it was because they all thought me to be a mother. Lujic and Ginny were my children, in their eyes, and as such maybe no man wanted to really pursue me because of it. But it might also be because of my personality, or maybe my appearance. My clothes were more worn

down than most, having been given the spares and hand-me-downs, and I also knew I wasn't the most attractive woman here. Some of the others, such as a few who directly served the noble family who ruled this town, were stunningly beautiful.

Walking through another courtyard, one I had spent this morning sweeping, I noticed the dried leaves scattering some of the paths and bricks. I knew no one would blame me for them, since it was obvious they were leaves from the last few hours of wind, but it still annoyed me. That meant by morning, again, I'll have a good amount that I'll need to clean up again.

"Though there is a small joy in sweeping a bunch at once," I mumbled regretfully.

I liked the sounds they made as I swept them. It was almost musical sometimes.

Reaching the end of the courtyard, I passed through a small opening in one of the large stone walls which separated different sections of this compound. I entered the area the guards and other servants lived in, and heard the noise that accompanied such a thing. I could only see a few people occasionally, what with them all being busy, but there was only one I was looking for as I walked around anyway.

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As I neared the guard's quarters, I huffed a little as I reached it without finding Lujic. I knew the boy lately had been helping out around the guards area, but I wasn't entirely sure where or who he had been helping.

Like most children his age, they were given chores but not enough to keep them occupied all day. Before Lujic's attention had been grabbed by the guards he had spent most of his day helping me with my own, or just staying at home with his sister.

Entering the guard's quarters, I walked down the large hallway and down another smaller one. This one had a bunch of small rooms, ones that only had a small bed and a few pieces of furniture each.

As I had figured, it was empty. I heard footsteps down one of the halls, but ignored them as I went room to room.

Each room had a large basket near the door. It was all I needed to worry about. If there were any clothes in it, I was to gather them up. If it was empty, I didn't grab anything in those rooms.

By the time I reached the end of the hall, the basket ended up half-full. I took it to the next hallway, and found that this hallway had likely been gathered up already. Each and every basket was empty, not even a sock to be found.

I wasn't going to complain over the lack of weight, so I simply took my half-loaded basket and left. As I did though, I got rewarded.

Pausing a moment, I stared across the yard to a nearby building. Off in the distance was Lujic. He was holding a small bundle in his arms and following what looked to be an older man. One I recognized. He was one of the head guards of this noble family. He was often talking to the headmaid and even the noble family members.

Lujic was following the man dutifully. The two didn't even notice me as they entered the building in the distance.

I smiled at the boy. "Well, out of anyone I suppose," I decided as I carried my own burden away.

Better an older, more experienced man, to take Lujic under his wing than some weird hotshot. Though maybe I should be worried, as the headmaid had mentioned? What if being a guard was actually a bad thing...?

I'll need to ask a little about it. Maybe even talk to that old man myself.

After all... how long would it be before Lujic actually needed to start working? The boy was still small. Still scrawny... and it had been only a few months since we'd arrived here, but I knew better than to think he'd be small forever.

How long did it take for humans to grow anyway?

Witch's children had grown quickly. Too quickly. There had been times I had held the little newborn babies in my arms, and then turned around and found them grabbing at my tail. Only to turn around again and instead of getting hugged but a smile or handshake instead from someone as tall as me.

A little upset over the idea that Lujic was already growing into a man, I barely noticed myself walk into the laundry room.

"Oh? Drop it there Renn," One of the pretty women I'd thought of earlier said in greeting.

I nodded and obeyed, dropping the basket off onto a table. Before I even fully stepped away two other women had stepped forth, tilting the basket over as to go about sorting the dirty clothes.

As I watched them sort and throw the clothes into their own baskets, socks into their own, shirts into another and so forth... I wondered something odd, that I hadn't noticed before.

"How does anyone not know which is theirs?" I asked.

One of the women sorting the clothes laughed at me, which made others laugh as well.

I felt my ears flutter beneath my hat, and panicked for a half moment until I realized none had noticed. They had all been too busy laughing at me.

"Shush! Get out of here Renn, go take a rest. Come back before dinner to help us with that!" the pretty woman shouted as conversations throughout the laundry building picked up. Only a few were about me, at least.

Although a little worried at what had happened, or why they had found what I'd said so funny, I decided to just let it be. I was trying to keep myself from drawing attention, after all.

As I left the laundry room, I sighed and wondered what I'd done wrong again.

This happened more than I wanted to admit. Either I said things that they all found utterly foolish, or they thought I was making some kind of weird jokes... which was depressing since I didn't mean either of those things.

Walking away from the now noisier laundry building, I headed to the south most section of the compound. Where small, single room, houses were lined up along the back of the hill. Where the roads weren't flattened properly, but pointy and rocky. Too pointy for carts or wagons to use.

Although the houses were small... and the roads to them bumpy, they were in fact the reason I had accepted the job here. To be a servant.

It wasn't just a house we got. We got fed. Three meals a day, though the one during the morning was just a single loaf of a bread each. Plus we got clothes, and access to the village's doctor if we needed them.

If I had been alone I would have likely only spent a month or two here. It was fun, but not enough to justify the risk of hiding myself or putting up with the menial tasks I had to do all day.

But I wasn't alone.

Not anymore.

Stepping off the bumpy road, I smiled at the young face staring at me from the window.

"Renny!"

I crouched a little as Ginny ran out of the house at the sight of me. She ran straight into me, and I wrapped my arms around her as she hugged me. Lifting her up off the ground, I squeezed her and laughed as she did.

Lujic may be growing too old to hug me, but Ginny hadn't! At least not yet!

"You stink!" Ginny said as she hugged me.

Oh. Right. The dirty clothes.

"Sorry," I apologized as I carried the young girl into the house.

It really was a simple house. A single room. Two beds. Neither big enough for all three of us to sleep in together. A small kitchen-like area alongside one wall, and another wall full of shelves and chests for storage. Behind the house was a large barrel for water, that other workers filled for us, and a small outhouse. One that needed to be cleaned and emptied more often than I wanted to admit.

"I cleaned today!" Ginny said happily as I placed her down onto the bed.

Glancing around, and not really telling if she had or not, I nodded. "I can see that! What am I going to do without all that dust?" I asked as I patted her head and glanced out the window.

Thanks to how small the houses were, they weren't necessarily close to one another... but the other house near us, one where a single woman lived; one who worked in the gardens, was close enough I always worried over her seeing us. Or rather, me.

I went to close the door, and the shutters of the window, so that I could relax a little and take off my hat and reveal my tail. I only had a few hours before I needed to back and help with dinner, and I wanted to enjoy them.

"What'd you do today?" Ginny asked as she bounced off the bed, to allow me to sit and take off my shoes.

"Well..." I began to tell her of my day. Of sweeping, and then the reason I stunk.

A simple life. One somehow more simple than I've ever lived... yet at the same time, it was more complex than ever.

All thanks to the children.

But it was for these very children I lived it.

For now at least. I wasn't sure how long I could hide amongst these people. But I planned to abuse this place as long as possible.

For now, at least.

Chapter 333 A Decade Later

Brushing the girl's brow, I whined almost as loudly as she did in her pained sleep.

What was wrong with her...?

She had been fine only a few days ago. She had complained about stiffness, and strange aches, but I had assumed it to just be either growing pains or some kind of typical sickness. Something one got over after a few days.

Yet here she was. Lying in bed. Unable to wake, with her eyebrows falling off and her skin swelling as if bloated.

"Oh Ginny..." I whispered the poor girl's name, unable to imagine the pain she was going through.

She was so small. So delicate. Nothing like me, or my sisters.

The fact such a gentle, lovely little girl was suffering so much made me want to scream. But I had no idea who I should scream at.

Taking a deep, shuddering, breath, I stood away from the bed. If I was going to weep and cry I didn't want to disturb the girl as I did so.

Leaving the bedroom, I stepped around the small hallway and out into the living room. Our little home had slowly grown cramped, somehow. I wasn't even sure when or how we had accumulated so much furniture and stuff, but it always seemed like I was looking for a new spot to place something in.

Yet as cramped as it felt... I loved it.

I think this was the ninth or tenth year we've been here. Lujic was now an almost grown... even if he was still scrawny. He stood taller than me now, though I always pretended to not notice. He hated that.

"How long is he going to take anyway?" I wondered. I had asked him to go get the old man. The priest who lived in the nearby church. A strange building with strange symbols and creatures carted into its stone walls.

I wasn't entirely sure yet what to think of that man, or the religion he spoke of, but I did know he was wise in the ways of tending the sick. Many people over the last few years had gotten sick, from one thing or another, and he was the one who nursed them back to health. Out of all the ones I remembered, many dozens, only one had died under his care.

It wasn't a flawless record, but it may as well be one.

Far better than that doctor at that noble's house we had lived at so long ago. That man had been crazy.

"Cutting open a head to heal a foot," I scoffed at the idea again as I walked to the front of the house. I pulled back one of the curtains to peer through the half open shutter, and scanned the road and the distant village nearby.

No sign of Lujic or the old priest.

Really. How long had he been gone? It felt like long enough. Had something happened? Should I go too? But what if Ginny needed me...?

Feeling lost in many ways, I forced myself away from the window and headed over to a nearby chair. Upon it was my cloak and hat, I hurried went to put them on. Both in case I had to leave as to find Lujic and the priest, but also in case they showed up. Didn't want that weird priest seeing my ears or tail. Who knows what'd happen then.

Right now I couldn't afford to get ostracized or chased away. Not with Ginny in her state. It wasn't like when we left that noble's house, when the two kids had been healthy and able to travel. Lujic would have no problem, being the stout young man he's become, but Ginny...? She'd not last a day on the road in her condition.

Feeling anxious I began to pace. Ginny has always been weak. Sickly, almost.

I blamed her youth. That time spent in bed, from being kicked by whoever had hurt her all those years ago. I blamed those days of struggling on her current condition.

But the cause didn't matter. Usually when she got sick... she didn't outright pass out. Not for extended periods of time at least.

She usually spent a day or two in bed... but still sat up to talk to me. To eat and drink.

Now she'd not even fidget when touching or yelling at her. As if she was dead.

She had collapsed yesterday, passing out completely, which had made me panic in the first place... but now she had swelling. Terrible swelling, as if bitten by a bunch of bugs or something. Now her eyebrows were falling off! Why? Why did hair fall off? What caused that?

It made no sense. None at all... and even worse I hated how I had no idea what to do about it.

All any of this did was make me hate myself.

I've been acting as their older sister, or mother, for so many years... why couldn't I do more than play a part? A real mother would know how to help her daughter... right? Surely?

Even my own mother and grandmother, as cruel as they were, knew things. Knew what to eat when sick. Knew what to do when hurt. How to mend bones, and whatnot...

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The fact I was doing worse than they made this even more disheartening.

A knock on the door startled me, but I didn't hesitate to hurry over and open the door. Lujic and a familiar old man were outside, and neither waited to be invited as they hurried in.

"Where?" the old man asked, and Lujic quickly guided him through the house to the back bedroom.

I followed the two dutifully, feeling hopeful. Maybe he'll just know! Maybe he'll tell me what herb to go look for, or what kind of soup to make, or...!

Yet the two came to a stop upon entering the room... because the old man had gone still at the sight of her.

Standing behind Lujic, I peered around the thin boy and hated what I saw.

I held my breath as the old man sighed at the sight of her.

He had decided her fate before even reaching the bed! Oh no!

"Priest?" Lujic stepped closer, noticing the man's expression as well as I.

He slowly shook his head and then quickly made a motion with his hands. They darted around his chest, and then he kissed his knuckles. "I'm sorry, little one," he whispered down to Ginny, ignoring Lujic and I.

My heart sank and I had to hurriedly step around Lujic as to reach out and grab the edge of the bed. To support myself.

No...!

"Old man...!" Lujic stepped closer, sounding desperate.

The old priest turned a little, studied Lujic's eyes for a moment and then turned to look at me.

"I'm sorry Renn. She's afflicted with the lepra... I'll have to report this to the elders, though it looks like it won't matter," he said gently to me.

"What do you mean it won't matter!" Lujic asked loudly. Loudly enough I had flinched, but the old man hadn't.

He had expected such a response from the boy. Yet still he held my own eyes, not even looking at Lujic.

"What do you mean?" I asked softly, afraid to hear the answer.

"She is too far contaminated. She will be dead within the week. And if she's this far along, and neither of you have caught it or anyone else, then it's safe to assume no one else will either... but sadly fate has decided to knock, and she must answer," the man said as he glanced at Ginny again.

He once again shook his head, sighed gently, and then closed his eyes and began to mumble. A prayer.

"Rennalee..!" Lujic turned to look at me, his face contorting quickly from anger into pure desperation.

I gulped, but couldn't find it in me to speak.

What did I say?

What could I say?

Should I argue with him? As Lujic had tried to do?

Debate the man who likely was speaking truth?

After all...

Slowly looking away from the traumatized Lujic, I stared down at my sweet little Ginny.

Yes.

I saw it too.

I had just not wanted to admit it.

She looked... empty. Almost. Hollowed out, like a trunk that was rotten.

Squeezing the covers of the bed, to keep myself from falling over, I gasped for air for a moment... and then gulped again.

"What... what can I do? For her?" I asked weakly.

For a small moment the room was silent, as I ignored Lujic's glare. From the corner of my eye I could see his furious look. He was not happy I had just given up.

But I hadn't. not truly. It was just... well...

Sometimes the world hurt. Sometimes it was cruel.

This was one of those times.

"Keep her comfortable as she goes. Give her whatever you can. When she does pass into the sky, please burn her body. Bury it deep after you do. Have no one else come to this house until after that day, as to keep others safe," the priest said calmly.

I nodded. Okay.

The priest took a deep breath and sighed once more. "I am sorry. I really am. May the Gods take pity on her, and welcome her into their embrace with a gentle ease known only to the innocent. I'll tell the village what is happening... so they will not bother you in your time of mourning. Take ease and rest, I'll see to it you are given your allotted time," the priest said as he turned and left.

The man left rather slowly, as if suddenly tired. But I made no move to stop him. Nor did Lujic.

He walked down the hallway... then through the front of the house and out the door. I heard him shut the door gently, as if in apology.

"What does he mean allotted time?" I asked Lujic.

Staring at the tall, skinny, boy... I felt my heart shatter again as he stared down at his little sister.

He was weeping. Terribly so.

Seeing him weep somehow kept my own tears from breaking free. I knew it was silly, but seeing him break... just made me want to be just a little stronger. For him. For all of us.

Taking a deep breath, I shivered... and felt the tears slide out anyway.

So much for being strong.

"In this village, deaths are sacred. They'll bring us food and supplies for a month, so that we can mourn in peace," Lujic finally answered me. He spoke... strangely calmly. Not sounding at all like the utter mess he looked to be.

Oh. I see.

That was nice of them... I guess...

I'd rather have her though.

Stepping closer to the girl, I reached out to gently touch her. I didn't caress her like usually did... since she was sweaty and clammy. I didn't want to hurt or bother her by touch her too harshly.

She looked so frail.

It reminded me of the first time I'd met her. Back when I had found them in that battlefield.

How could so much time pass... yet she look so similar? As if I had blinked and nothing had changed...?

All that had changed was where we were. We had gone from a small camp near a river, to a full house in a quaint little village.

As I stared down at her, my eyes welled with more tears... and slowly I broke.

Falling to my knees, I began to join Lujic in weeping. Unlike him though... I didn't do so quietly.

I wept. And wept.

Unable to do anything else.

Chapter 334 Another Decade Later

"What's with this?" I laughed as I tugged gently on Lujic's beard.

The boy, who was no longer a boy at all, chuckled with a deep voice as he let me mess with his scraggly beard. It was a full one, large enough to grab handfuls of... but had small patches here and there where it didn't seem to grow. It made him look so silly.

Yet as silly as it looked... it suited him all the same.

He had grown into the old knight he had wanted to. How lovely.

Letting his beard go, I sighed and cupped his face. Were his cheeks shallow...? I think they were. Hopefully he was getting enough to eat, and wasn't stressed.

Though... I could see why he would be, if he was.

I glanced to our right, out past the small field of carrots and other greens, and to the house. Two of his children were running around outside, their mother not far. She was sitting at a small table, one littered with food and drinks... where we had all just been sitting and eating.

My return had happened right as they were putting the food down. As to eat outside, all together. It had been such a lovely sight I had broken into tears over it.

My little boy. Little Lujic. A man with a family.

"Ginny would be so proud of you," I whispered as I looked back at him.

Lujic grinned and nodded. "I like to think so too..."

Sniffing I nodded. She would be. He had even named one of his daughters after her. I had almost stumbled when he had shouted her name, as to introduce me to his kids.

I'd never even considered such a thing. Passing on names was common for humans. Very common. It made me jealous, and wonder about myself.

"How have you been Renny...? Where've you gone? What've you done?" Lujic asked gently as he stared at me as kindly as I was him.

"I've just been traveling... like before. I went and saw the ocean again this time. Caught a huge fish, so big not even I could pull it out of the waters!" I said as I spread my arms apart, to try and display how big it had been.

He tilted his head, and I could tell he didn't believe me. It wasn't his fault though... as far as I was aware he had never seen the ocean.

Neither of them had.

That thought made me sad as I lowered my arms and stepped back a step, as to look down at Ginny's grave.

We had buried her near a large tree. One that had not been as big as it was now when we first settled down here. Today it was huge, full and with many branches. It sounded like there were even birds nesting in it. Ginny would like that; she had enjoyed the songs birds had sung. So I was glad for it.

Thinking of Ginny made me smile, but it also made my heart hurt.

Taking a small breath, I kept myself from crying. Right now wasn't when I should cry.

I should be happy. The young boy had become a man. Had raised a family. Was raising a family. His wife had a growing belly.

The home I had helped them find was now theirs in full. They were a part of the community. A growing village. They were safe. Had a place to belong. A purpose.

Everything I didn't.

"I'm sorry I don't visit often anymore," I said softly as I realized I had gone too long since my last visit, again. Last time I had been here he had not a single child. In fact that was why I had left originally, was because he had married and I had not been able to stand how much she flirted so brazenly. I had wanted to give them distance. Some time alone. I had been trying to be nice.

Plus... although I knew it didn't need to be said aloud, since Lujic likely knew full well, but the sad reality was... I had no choice.

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This village, although not a large one, was a quiet but close community. They all went to the church to pray. There were even days every month where the whole village gathered to celebrate whatever they wanted to celebrate. They ate together. Had dances together. Mourned together, even, when people suffered or died.

I didn't grow old. Not like any of them. And humans noticed that... after a while at least.

I couldn't stay in one place like this too long. Rarely if ever more than a decade. And even that was pushing it to the limit.

"You don't visit enough, no... but I understand, Rennalee. You're... not like us. So I understand, even if it hurts," Lujic said with his new voice.

I shifted a little and glanced at him. Did all boys grow up to be so tall and have such deep voices...? Surely not, right?

"Are you happy?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Very. Almost annoyingly so," he said with a smile.

I smiled back at that. I could feel the pride swell within me, even though I knew I really couldn't claim any of his happiness as trophies for my own deeds.

He had grabbed his own happiness.

He had become a knight on his own. Found a wife on his own. Settled down, started a family, and so much more... all on his own.

I had just... been there to help him a little. Here and there. Nothing more.

In fact...

I had even failed his sister.

So in all honesty I shouldn't be proud at all.

"I... wish I could go with you, you know?" Lujic then said softly.

"Hm...?"

"I remember our trips. Or at least some of them. The one I remember best is when we went to some village. A place covered in snow. To visit some friend of yours. They knew who you were, what you were... but I don't remember their names, or where that had been, strangely enough. I always wondered if it was simply my childish mind or your strange powers affecting me," Lujic said as he pondered it.

Strange powers...? Did he really think I was still some kind of forest spirit...?

Such a thing made me smirk, since I didn't have the heart to tell him otherwise now. If he had believed it for so long, likely nothing I would ever say or do would change it. May as well just let it be then.

"Witch's home," I said gently. It was the only place I had taken Lujic and Ginny to, before we had come here. In fact it wasn't too far away. About a month's distance at most.

"Possibly... though since we're on the subject... I've started to forget things, you know?" he then said as he looked at me.

I stood up a little straighter, and wondered what he meant. "Forget?" I asked carefully.

He nodded slowly, and I noticed how his eyes had grown a little soft. A little duller. He was now not really looking at me, but lost in his own thoughts.

"Like Ginny... I... can't really remember her voice anymore. Whenever I try to think of her... I only hear my own daughter's instead," he said softly.

I shifted ever so gently. "They do kind of sound alike, I suppose," I said softly.

They hadn't. His Ginny, his daughter, had a much deeper voice. A more nasally one.

He nodded. "Hm... maybe," he said.

Feeling strange, I wondered if I should start worrying about him. How strange, when I had just been... so happy that he seemed to be doing so fine. So great, all on his own...

I'd worry of him bringing this up so suddenly... but it made sense to me.

He, nor Ginny, had ever called me mother. Or sister. But I knew they had always seen me as one.

And right now... well... he was opening up to the one he saw as his protector. His guardian. His parent, or caretaker.

He was telling me of an ailment he couldn't tell anyone else. Not his children, or fellow knights, not even his wife.

But the sad thing was... I knew it wasn't a true ailment. Not like the things that had stricken Ginny.

Lujic was simply...

Growing old.

I had seen it, felt it, in his beard. Parts of it had grown gray. Thin. Frail.

"You can come with me if you want, Lujic. It'd be fun to travel together again," I invited him, deciding that might be the best way to help him face such a strange fear as growing old.

He slowly shook his head as his eyes refocused, as to look out over to his family. The kids were now sitting with their mother, either finishing what little food was left or just sitting and talking. "I can't... I have duties now," he said.

Smiling at my little knight, grown so tall and wise, I reached over to pat him on his head... until I found my hand couldn't reach. So instead I simply patted him on the shoulder.

"You've grown into a fine man, Lujic. My brave knight," I said.

He sniffed as he nodded.

"Mind if I stay for a little while...?" I asked gently.

He nodded again... and it was my turn to sniff and nod.

I'll make sure not to wander too long next time. I needed this. Probably as much as he needed it too.

Chapter 335 A Lifetime Later

Slowly approaching the home... I felt strangely apprehensive.

Why? What was wrong? It looked... relatively the same. Almost.

The yards around the house weren't the same anymore. What had been mostly open grass fields were now littered with bushes and trees. Some of them so big, so boisterous... it was almost like it was more a mess than not.

The fence wasn't the same either. I slowed as I neared it, and wondered if maybe for a moment I was approaching the wrong house... but no. Surely not.

I'd not forget that tree at least. The one where Ginny was buried under. Though it had not been that big at all when we had done so. Was it sickly...? It almost looked like it was leaning a little.

The village had grown too. Nearby buildings, other houses and farms had been built nearby. Some a little too close, for my own liking. So close that I'd worry about staying here for extended periods, out of fear of my traits being noticed by strangers and neighbors.

Why had Lujic let them build so closely? He had used to keep them distant. On purpose. So that I could visit without worry. It was why we hadn't lived in the village proper, but out here instead.

Thinking of those days, living here with Lujic and Ginny... made me sad. But not fully. They were happy memories, even if they made me want to cry.

Blinking blurry eyes as I heard the sound of children, I slowed a little as a few came into view. They ran around the edge of the house, chasing each other happily. A few were shouting, but somehow through my blurry eyes and emotions I didn't really make out what was being said.

All I saw and heard were a group of kids, boys and girls, happily playing together.

How lovely. How sweet.

How did Lujic give birth to so many? How did his wife endure? It was almost comical he'd have so many children and I've yet to have one.

I'll have to tell him that. He'd laugh at that. With his deep voice and...

"Oh my goodness!"

I froze, not liking the tone that had just been used to shout aloud. I turned just enough to meet a pair of wide-eyes. Ones swirling with delight.

Rushing towards me, I firmed my footing just long enough to realize who was running at me. Someone with a particular recognizable face, and hair color.

"Ginny...?" I asked as the young woman pushed open the gate to the fence and hurried over.

"Grandma!" the young woman nearly jumped on me as she wrapped her arms around me, embracing me in a huge hug.

Grandma!?

I couldn't help but laugh at the craziness of what was happening, barely believing it as I returned the hug.

"Is that you Ginny?" I asked, not believing it.

Gosh she was taller than me! Bigger! Last time I'd been here she was not even up to my knee!

The girl giggled away, and then squeezed me tighter. "I am! But I'm not too!" she said.

Oh? What did she...?

Oh. Right. She wasn't my Ginny. Not Lujic's sister.

A strange joke, but I'd allow it.

After a few moments of hugging, out of the corner of my eye I noticed others looking at us. They had heard Ginny's shout and were staring at us from a distance, if not the kids from the yard but adults from the windows.

Wait... windows? Plural?

Studying the house... I found it oddly a little different. There were more windows now. Other sets.

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

They had added to the house! I wonder how many rooms it was now!

Plus... those were definitely other adults staring at me. More than just one or two... did they have visitors, maybe?

Maybe that was why there were so many kids. They weren't Lujic's, but guests.

"Come on! Oh my goodness... you arrived at the perfect time. Oh boy..." Ginny suddenly became weird as she stepped back and suddenly frowned.

"Perfect time...?" I asked. What'd she mean?

"Ginny!" a new voice shouted, and the girl in front of me flinched... and as I turned to look at the new speaker, I found someone I recognized.

Lujic's wife...? But she looked...

"Ma! Come say hi! To Grandma Renny!" Ginny said as she pointed at me.

The woman, who looked like Lujic's wife but surely couldn't be, became stunned. Her shoulders lowered flatly, her eyes went wide... and then she hurried away from the house towards us.

Not really understanding what was going on, I felt my mind become strangely numb... as Ginny greeted me, but not with a hug but a quickly hushed whisper.

"Renn...! It really is you?" Ginny asked as she grabbed my arms, as if to hold me out in front of her as to examine me.

I nodded slowly. "And you're the Ginny I remember. You've grown," I said awkwardly, as I realized, kind of, what was going on.

The Ginny I had just hugged. The one I had first greeted, had indeed been a Ginny... but not the young daughter of Lujic. Instead that Ginny was before me now. A full grown woman. With a daughter of her own.

Which was why I had been called grandma. Of all things.

I was a grandma...!

Technically I was beyond even that, but the thought still made me smile as tears attacked the corner of my eyes.

"I can't believe you're here! Just in time too...!" Ginny then shouted, and then shook her head quickly, causing her hair to dance all over. "No time! Quickly! Go see him!" she then pulled me forward towards her, but stepped aside so she could push me towards the house.

"Hm? Lujic? Yeah I'm here to see him and..." I started to say, finding it a little odd they'd rush me so much. What was the hurry...? I wanted to properly introduce myself to the new Ginny, and all the other kids!

But before I could say anything, and be heard, I was pushed forward through the gate and towards the house... by not just one Ginny, but two.

"Take her to him, while I tell everyone what's going on," I heard Ginny, the older one, say with a hushed tone to her daughter.

"Okay Ma," the younger girl obliged as we entered the house, and I was hit with a strange wave of memories.

Walking through the house, even while being stared at by other people. Children, adults, some I felt familiar and others I didn't like, I was guided to a hallway. One I remembered.

The house wasn't exactly as I remembered it, of course. The furniture had been arranged differently. There was more of it in some places, less of it in others... but for a few moments... I wasn't walking through this home, but the one in my memories.

I could even smell the same house. I could smell Ginny and Lujic. Myself.

My eyes blurred a little, and I tried not to cry as I felt a strange feeling. One I'd not felt ever before.

What was this emotion? It was sad, yet happy, and... strangely... it almost felt as if I was now at peace.

As if I was at home.

Then I was guided through a door. Into a room. One that stunk.

And...

Going still... I hesitated... as I recognized the smell instantly. Not just because it was the smell of my young, scrawny, knight... but...

Staring down at an old man in a shallow bed... I instantly forgot all about that warm and happy feeling I just had. All the thoughts, and expectations, of seeing all the new faces. All the new children and family members... all of that just disappeared without warning. Any and all fuzzy joy was gone now. Replaced with utter despair... as I realized what was happening.

My boy. Lujic. That wonderful little knight...

Was now an old dying man in his bed.

Lujic was dying.

A frail old man, with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, was sleeping in the bed before me. All of my memories of the tall, broad shouldered and young knight were so fresh in my mind, that I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing.

How had he gotten so old so quickly?

"Grandpa? Your friend is here."

As the young girl tried to wake him... I realized once again the world was ready to be cruel.

And this time I wasn't going to be able to endure it, was I?

But all the same...

She knelt next to the rickety bed, tapping his shoulder as to wake him.

He didn't wake.

The girl tried a few more times, but I gathered myself enough to clear my voice. "It is fine. Let him sleep," I was barely able to whisper.

She glanced up at me, and then with a knowing smile nodded and stepped away. She left the little room, leaving me and my friend alone.

To say goodbye.

Again.

For the last time.

Chapter 336 A Small Visit From An Otter

Well this happened.

Brushing my hands off, I stepped away from the fire I'd just fed again to keep alive. It was needed right now. To not just keep Fly warm, but to keep cooking the small strips of meat hanging over the flames. Pierced by pointy sticks, held by Fly and our guest at our little campsite.

"Really Vim! You should have waited for me to get back!" Brandy said happily as she spun her little stick.

"Knowing you Brandy that could have been months," I said.

She scoffed a laugh and nodded, completely agreeing with me.

"Is it done yet?" Fly asked as she turned her own little stick of meat. She sounded excited, maybe more excited over the act of cooking than the food being cooked.

"Not yet! You want it to sizzle a little first!" Brandy happily said as she stepped around the fire, as to stand next to Fly. Likely to keep an eye on the young bird's cooking, to make sure she didn't burn it.

Picking the thickest log to sit upon, I slowly sat down and glanced at the horse nearby. It was grazing upon the wet grass not far from us and looked fat. Too fat for a horse used to travel quickly. Either Brandy had simply taken whichever horse she could grab first, or she had chosen the slowest horse on purpose. To give herself time on the road, to think or ponder.

My bet was on the latter.

"Ya' looks like time to take a bite or two. Make sure to blow on it a moment to let it cool just enough," Brandy then told Fly her food was ready. The young bird quickly pulled her stick out of the small campfire and went to blowing on the chunks of meat sizzling at the end of it.

Brandy smiled and stepped away as Fly went to eating. She rounded the fire again, this time to stand before me.

She seemed to be in a very good mood. But that might just be because he had happened upon me and Fly at seeming random happenstance.

We had camped on the side of a lonely back-road a little after sundown. The rain hadn't let up, and to make matters worse a small wind had arrived and seemed to be growing stronger as the night grew old.

Fly was not as stout as Renn. She needed more rest. To travel slower. And with the cold rain, she also needed to warm up far more often than most non-humans.

We had camped not far off the road, since it was not one frequented or even used much by people at all around here. I hadn't worried over us camping within sight of it. So after starting a fire, when I had seen a horse and a rider approaching from the distance I had been rather surprised.

When Brandy had hopped off the horse, shouting happily in excitement as she wrapped Fly in a hug that surprise had turned into slight annoyance. But the good type of annoyance, that made me smile all the same.

We had been heading north. She had been heading south, to the Bell Church.

"I'm glad I ran into the two of you. I take it your visit to the Bell Church went well?" she asked.

I nodded. "All was well. Considering," I said lightly as Fly huffed a little mid-bite. The meat was still too hot, yet not hot enough to make her spit it out.

Brandy noticed and smirked at the kid, then looked back at me. She pointed her own stick at me, and the meat sizzling upon it released light smoke. They too were ready to be eaten, though right now she was using them to accuse me for some reason.

"You, Vim, are a distraction," she then said.

I frowned as I tilted my head at her. "How so? And to whom?"

"Me," Brandy stated as she took a bite from her stick.

"I repeat myself. How so?" I asked again.

Brandy smirked at me. "You've caused a stir. A terrible one! And usually I enjoy it when you do, since it allows me to do sneaky stuff under the watchful eyes of those around me more easily, but this time it has only made it harder! How am I supposed to pilfer coins from under Gerald's eyes when he's so focused out of fear and worry over you finding out what he's doing himself!" Brandy asked, while laughing happily with a half-mouth full of meat.

My enjoyment over this annoyance swiftly turned into a headache as I sighed. "I have my own headaches Brandy, why do I need more?" I asked.

Brandy giggled as she stepped closer, and sat down onto the log next to me. I made sure to not shift too much, not just because I didn't want to seem rude but also because I didn't want to break the log.

Glancing at Brandy for a moment, and her happy grin, I turned my head just enough to look at Fly. She was sticking more bits of meat onto her stick, as to cook more food. She was likely not paying much attention to the two of us at all.

"Vim... did you marry Renn?" Brandy asked softly.

"Technically? No. Not officially. But it's bound to happen eventually, whether I want it to or not," I told her the truth.

Brandy didn't laugh. She didn't giggle. Instead she simply stared at me.

"You should know this was true by now, Brandy. I've heard some of the rumors and stories," I said. Oplar had excitedly told me of a few of them before we had left Telmik. A few had been downright ridiculous, even if laced with truth.

"I thought I had. But maybe hearing it from you has made me realize how little I knew you all along," she said with a strangely soft tone. A little too quiet for her.

But although strange... I had heard this tone from her before. Though not in years. Decades.

I smiled at the princess I had rescued so long ago. Back then, with Lilly. "You hadn't believed I could fall in love?" I asked, understanding her meaning.

"I... I don't know Vim. Maybe. I guess. Yes? I've always known you weren't just a heartless machine. You endure too much for us to be anything but. Yet... no. I don't think I ever believed you would have actually fallen in love in such a way, and taken a wife of all things," she said.

"Surprise," I said.

She smiled at me and nodded as she looked away from me, and to Fly. She studied the young girl who happily held her stick of meat in the fire. "Was she banished?" Brandy asked quietly.

"No. Not officially," I said, though not as quiet as she. There was no point hiding it. Even if Fly was listening it didn't matter.

This was her life we were talking about. She deserved to hear it all anyway.

Brandy took a deep breath and sighed. "Where will you go?" she asked after a moment.

"Still debating it."

"Yet heading north...?" Brandy asked.

"I just came from the south. Why would I go that way?" I asked.

Brandy sighed at me, but nodded.

Studying the otter, I wondered if her interest in Fly's well-being was her genuine concern or something more serious.

"I delivered Kevin an important letter. He had set sail from Lumen before I had a chance to give it to him. My fault for dallying, I suppose, but lately Gerald and the rest have had him going every which way without rest. If not for that pirate boy you picked up we'd be so stretched thin it'd actually cause problems," Brandy then said.

"Mhm... how is Kevin?" I asked.

My true interest was of said pirate boy, but I knew she'd find that weird so I had asked about the next best thing.

"He's fine. He feels all important right now since the whole fleet is under his command. By the way, speaking of fleets... a rickety, barely floating, ship landed port in Lumen a few months ago. Wish to guess what was on board?" Brandy asked.

"Oplar told me already they had landed and you had accepted them. How are they?" I asked.

Brandy groaned a sigh. "That's boring. I forgot about that stupid bear, of course she found you so quickly. How does she do that so easily?" Brandy wondered.

"You can gripe about Oplar later. The pirates, how are they?" I asked. Renn would want to know.

She smiled at me. "Well, they split. Half joined your pirate boy, the other half now work at the guild. Some are just typical workers, bankers or whatnot, but quite a few joined our security guards so we're actually very happy and pleased with it. Thanks for that," Brandy said.

"Hm... and the leader?" I asked. Damn what was her name...? "One with a daughter," I said.

"Roslyn. She chose to lead the guards instead of sail. Likely because of her daughter. They're all doing fine," Brandy said.

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I nodded, glad to hear it. Oplar had said the same but hearing further proof of it was good.

"Hadn't you passed through Lumen on the way here?" Brandy asked, finding it odd I'd ask of them.

"I spent mere minutes at the guild. I spoke to Reatti and Tosh and then headed this way," I said.

"Ah," Brandy nodded, understanding what I meant.

"Shoot..." Fly mumbled a complaint as one of the pieces of meat she had tried to pull off her stick slipped from her grasp and onto the ground. Brandy and I watched the girl bend down and pick it up, and then after wiping it off a bit she went ahead and tossed it into her mouth.

I shook my head at the girl, as Brandy giggled.

For a few long moments we watched Fly cook and eat food, getting a little lost in the sight to the point that Brandy even forgot to finish eating the few pieces left on her own stick.

Then, after some silence, she turned and leaned closer to me.

"I thought they were all dead Vim," Brandy whispered, nearly into my ear.

My eyes narrowed a little, and not just because I was strangely uncomfortable over her whispering into my ear. It was a strangely intimate thing, and it was coming from someone I didn't want to be intimate with. Though I knew she didn't mean it that way at all.

It was an odd thing to feel so uncomfortable over... but I knew the source of it.

Renn was the one who should be whispering to me, not her.

"Did you know?" Brandy whispered a little louder. As if to accuse me.

"I assume you speak of Light and the rest," I said. A firm hand grabbed my right thigh and squeezed. I frowned at the weird gesture as an answer, but nodded... and then shook my head. "Then no. I had thought them lost to us too, Brandy."

"So even you hadn't known?" Brandy asked.

"No... but it's not like I'd ever asked, Brandy."

"Right... you being you," Brandy said with a small scoff.

I nodded.

"Still... what should I think of it Vim? Does that mean there are other survivors? What if there are whole other groups out there still? If allies, then what of enemies? What am I supposed to believe now when I read a report, or census from now on?" Brandy asked, her voice growing louder as she spoke.

I smiled at her. "How do you think I feel?"

Brandy either hadn't heard me, or just ignored me as she stood from the log, and began to pace. "Celine's daughter, Vim! Less! Massie! They're all alive, all this time, and I just hear of it now?" Brandy began to raise her voice, and I realized now why she had found us on the side of the road.

She had likely been waiting for us. Maybe even riding the roads around here, back and forth, for days.

All for this.

"So I've been told. Less had been at Telmik but I hadn't seen her," I said. Massie...? Who had that been? Likely one of the sisters of songs, but I couldn't put a face to the name.

"Why not?" Brandy asked as she came to an abrupt stop.

I ignored Fly's stare, as she watched the two of us, and shrugged. "She hadn't sought me out to say hello, I guess?" I said.

"Which means they hadn't wanted you to know they were there yet. What are they planning Vim?" Brandy asked as she stepped towards me.

"Honestly I do not know. They're very interested in this church you've secured for them. Enough to bring them all out of hiding all of a sudden. Was there anything special about the agreement you made with Thraxton and his people concerning it?" I asked.

"No...? A typical abbey. A church. Maybe eventually a cathedral or basilica, but nothing..." Brandy went quiet as she pondered it for a moment, and then she took a deep breath and sighed. "What are they doing...? And why have I allowed them to do it?" she asked.

"Allowed...?" I asked.

"I gave them this church. I was the one who worked the deal. I had done it without even asking or telling anyone. I thought I had just done something nice for the Church of Songs, and so when I sent the letter telling the Chronicler what I'd done I had not expected to get such a response at all! And do you want to know what really infuriates me, Vim?" Brandy asked as she stepped even closer. Another step and she'd step on my feet.

"What?"

"It's not my church!" she shouted.

I blinked at that. "What...?"

Brandy stepped away, huffing. "I've been told to give all authority to Plumb and Light! That I'm to remain at the Company! To not interfere, and to just give them whatever they need and let them handle everything! Them! In my own city! I built that city! I made it what it is! We did, all this time, all these years, and now that I finally get authority to build a place of worship what do they do? They take it from me! To claim it for their own stupid schemes!" Brandy had not just grown irate, she had grown furious. Fly even stepped back a step from the fire, holding her stick high like a sword as if to protect herself.

Although she was upset, I could tell it'd not last. Brandy, after her tirade, had already calmed down. Her steps not as harsh. Her pacing not as quick. Her breathing, now more even.

"They're keeping you at a distance," I said as I understood.

"Why...? I've been devoted all this time. I had been told things even you hadn't known, so I had thought I'd been in the Chronicler's circle of trust. Yet look at me. As much a sheep as the rest!" Brandy said.

While Brandy mumbled complaints about her feelings of betrayal, I pondered the reality before me.

They had not included Brandy in their schemes.

All this time I had always thought Brandy had been a part of them. If not a major player of them. Yet...

Studying the otter that I now looked at in a new light, I suddenly felt bad about all the times I'd been abrupt or callous to her over the years. All those times I'd thought she had been against me, or working

alongside the Chronicler against me, had instead just been me misreading her intentions. At least, to a point.

Of course there was a chance Brandy was only acting at the moment, but I highly doubted it. That rage earlier had been very pure, and believable.

Brandy was a terrifying merchant and negotiator, but when it came to her own personal beliefs... such as her faith, she was very open and honest. To a point it was almost worrying.

"That is very interesting though," I said as I realized something.

"What?" Fly asked, since Brandy had kept on mumbling to herself.

"Brandy is a very devout member. And rather well respected. There should be no reason for her not to be involved with the new church. Hell, having her involved would be something any smart person would want or do. She could run both the church and the company without rest or failure, and then some. Even just using her to build the church with all her knowledge and connections in the city... Or her finances, would make it a no-brainer. Then to think of all the ways she'd be helpful, and trustworthy, when it comes to the religious aspect?" I shook my head as I continued thinking of all the ways she'd be useful to them.

For them to keep her at a distance, if not completely separate from them, was telling indeed.

"Sheesh Vim you're a smooth talker. I suppose Renn is to thank for that," Brandy said, returning her focus to me.

"He's always sounded old," Fly mumbled.

I smiled at that. "It's not normal for them to keep you at a distance Brandy. Have you gotten on their bad side? Had they asked you to do something, and you failed to do it?" I asked.

"No...? I hadn't thought so? Over the last decade or two I've done a lot for the Chronicler and her people. Funds, reports, curtailing certain information or gossip... Jeez, I even once bought a bunch of artifacts for them! Out of my own pocket money, because they had worried the humans would have gotten them!" Brandy said.

"Artifacts?" I asked.

"Some kind of bones. I thought they were monarch bones when I saw them, but I think they ended up just being whale bones or something. I sent them to Telmik years ago," Brandy said.

Huh...

"Wait. Didn't I escort a bunch fossils?" I asked.

"You had. You and Lawrence."

Right. I had. They must not have been very important then, if I had been allowed to oversee their transfer. At least, not that kind of important.

That meant Brandy hadn't mentioned those bones to point out the odd requests, but instead it had been something she had disliked doing. She had said she had spent her own money on them. Likely hadn't been re-reimbursed.

Still...

"What will you do then, Brandy?" I asked.

"Hm...? Concerning the church? Stick my nose into it of course. I'll be damned if I let them build a fancy new church right under my nose and not get to enjoy it with them. Nor will I let them profit from all the connections and power it'll bring, either. I know Less and Light are older than me, but I'm not that little girl anymore Vim! I won't let them walk all over me!" Brandy said happily.

Ah. I see.

I nodded and smiled, glad to hear it... though also a tad upset all the same.

So Brandy just thought they were trying to keep all the glory, the religious conquest and financial wealth a church brought, to themselves. As to not share it with her.

She hadn't seen their schemes or ploys as anything too nefarious.

Not yet, anyway.

Brandy let out a large sigh, and then stepped over to the fire and tossed her stick into it. Seemed she had eaten the last few pieces as she had paced and mumbled angrily. She brushed her hands off and nodded, and then glanced up at the sky. Or at least, the treetops above us. What little of the sky could be seen was covered in clouds. Dark ones.

"Well I best be off. If I'm not home in the next few days Gerald will send out a search party, and then I'll have to be even more careful next time I want some time to myself!" Brandy said as she stepped away from our camp and over to her horse.

"Be careful Brandy. If you ever need me don't hesitate to call for me. No matter the reason," I said in farewell.

Brandy paused right before she hauled herself up onto her horse. She turned, gave me a sad smile and shook her head. "Vim... I'd never vote against you."

Oh. Woops. "I didn't mean it that way, Brandy," I said gently. So now was when she'd bring up the vote? I had thought she had been trying to ignore it on purpose.

Her smile broadened. "I know you didn't. You meant that genuinely, from your heart. You're a good man.... And I know now, what with Renn, that you're more than you seemed to be. But to be honest

Vim... I hope I don't need to call upon you. Because if I do it means something terrible is happening, and by our own no less," she said.

"All the same Brandy."

She nodded. "I know. Stay safe Fly. If you fail to find a new nest, return to Lumen," Brandy said as she climbed up onto her horse.

"Lumen...?" Fly perked up at being talked to, and turned to look at me as Brandy nodded one last time at us and then ushered her horse away.

It didn't take long for Brandy to leave earshot. She ushered her horse a little, as if suddenly in a hurry. Likely was, in a way. Brandy wasn't like Oplar. She liked drama, in her own way, but not gossip. Brandy didn't like it when her foundations crumbled.

And odds are that was how she felt right now. That her whole world was falling apart, since she wasn't sure who to trust. Even those she had trusted for centuries.

Odds are I was one of those individuals, at least in a way.

"Vim? What'd she mean by that? I thought I couldn't live at Lumen," Fly asked softly, drawing my eyes from the otter who was hurrying away.

I smiled at the young bird and nodded. "It would be difficult for you to, yes. As you know, of course. But I think she was saying that if nowhere else works, for one reason or another... then go back there. To her and the rest. I think she's saying they'd do all they could to give you as happy a home as they could give, and protect you as well as they can. If needed. She was basically being very, very kind," I said.

Kinder to you than they had been to Renn.

"Oh... I see..." Fly nodded gently, and I could tell she was still wrapping her head around what I had said. It might take her a moment to comprehend it, fully.

As she pondered it, she lifted her stick... and the now slightly charred meat, having forgotten it in the fire a moment, and went to munching on it.

Chapter 337 A Cat's Tea

Watching Cat watch Lilly as she moved logs around inside the campfire, as it was lit and burning, I smiled in awe.

She looked absolutely stunned. As if she was witnessing a miracle.

"Honestly it's a little dry. I think this winter will be a cold one," Lilly said absentmindedly as she finished messing with the burning logs and finally pulled her hand from the flames.

"Oh...? Wouldn't it be more wet if the winter would be bad?" I asked.

"Sometimes. I just feel the dryness in the air is a little off. I could be wrong, but usually I'm not," Lilly said as we three watched the campfire grow hotter and stronger. Lilly had somehow arranged the logs perfectly, for airflow and whatnot, and they were now readily burning away.

Could I have done that? Have my hand in such hot flames for as long as she had, without even flinching?

Her hand and arm didn't look burnt. I didn't even smell any hairs singed or anything.

Lilly being strong wasn't a doubt in my head. Although I'd never seen proof of her strength, I'd heard plenty of times from many people... not just Vim, that Lilly was strong. The kind of strong that made people scared of her, even before her attitude or personality.

So her not being bothered by flames, at least in such a way, wasn't a surprise to me... but I still couldn't help but compare her to myself.

I was almost half tempted to stick my hand and arm into the fire to see how quickly I'd want to pull it back out.

I'd been burnt before. Many times. Enough to know better than to let any part wander near flames. So I kind of knew already what I'd find if I tried it, but here I was wanting to do it anyway.

"I'd like a harsh winter, actually. After spending all summer in the south, I think it'd be nice," I said, still staring at the fire.

"Easy for you to say, you got warm bits hanging on you. Heavy snow sucks for those like me," Cat said with a sigh.

I smirked at that. Warm bits? Did she think my ears and tail alone could keep me warm in the snow? A funny thought. They were usually the first to freeze up and feel like they were going to fall off, somehow. I never understood the how or why, but it was usually how it went.

Stepping over next to Cat, I sat down next to her on the small broken stump. We had set camp in a small meadow. One that was, as Lilly mentioned, strangely dry. The forest we had just left had been covered in dew and moisture so it was a little enjoyable to sit on something and not feel my pants grow soaked.

"Can I start making tea?" Cat asked as she grabbed a bag and opened it, as to dig through it and find the tea leaves and pot.

"We're going to need to talk about your rations," Lilly said as Cat went to unfold the little metal stand I'd found in that wagon on our way to Telmik. Or well, the one Oplar and the rest had found. I had simply taken possession of it since none of them had seemed to want it.

It was a neat little thing, it was like a little fold-able table that could be used to cook food or boil water, or make tea, with only a little movement. The only real downsides to it was both that I had to fold it up and pack it away, and thus carry it, but also that it took a long while for it to cool down after using it. It meant that if a day ever came I had to abandon a campsite quickly; it was very likely I'd have to abandon it too.

"What's wrong with our rations?" Cat asked for me as I watched her put the pot onto the stand, and then go to pick up the water jug we'd filled a little bit ago.

"It's not that there's really anything wrong. It's more that you just don't have enough. This is our third day making camp, and this is the third time I'll be drinking your tea. Please, next time, let me pack our supplies or at the very least let me add to them," Lilly spoke evenly, but almost sounded like she was begging.

"Is the tea that bad? I thought it was nice. Oplar gave the leaves to me," I said as I reached over to grab the small box Cat had just spooned some leaves from as to pour into the pot.

Smelling the leaves, I wondered what was wrong with them. They smelled fine. And from experience, as Lilly said our last few camps, I knew they tasted fine when boiled too.

"It's not that they're bad... I just like variety. Listen, I traveled with Vim for years. You should know what that means, Renn. I really thought you'd be better than him," Lilly said with a sigh.

"Oh...? Wait... are you saying Vim doesn't, or didn't feed you well?" I asked.

"No...? I mean he fed me, and whatnot. He just never cared to add variety or flavor. He doesn't eat or drink, ever, so it's not his fault. He just doesn't notice or care. Geuh..." She made a weird sound as she smelled the tea that had started to boil. "I'll just have water I think this time..." she complained.

I smiled at her, although Cat only shook her head in confusion.

"Vim's always fed me well. Though I'll be honest I don't care much for his real cooking. His personal dishes are annoyingly smelly, for some reason," I said.

Lilly sighed and nodded. "Right...? Nasty stuff isn't it?"

"Well it's usually not bad," I admitted.

"Yes it is Renn. Don't trust your tongue. If your nose, eyes, ears and everything else are telling you the stuff is nasty then it is. Don't let your tongue fool your senses," she said with a grin.

I smirked back at her and found that hilarious.

"Tea's done," Cat then said, interrupting our conversation.

I leaned forward, to accept a cup from Cat. She then handed one to Lilly, and then she lifted the pot off the metal bracket table and went to filling our cups.

Or well, my cup and Cat's. Lilly held her cup closer to herself, not extending it when Cat offered to fill it for her.

"I'll drink water," Lilly said calmly.

"Oh...? Okay..." Cat nodded, putting the pot down onto a rock, and then handed Lilly the water jug.

Cat didn't seem too bothered, likely because of Lilly's earlier complaint about tea... but I had realized something else.

The last few camps we'd made... Cat had only cooked, or prepared tea, one other time. That time too Lilly had not accepted any tea, or food. Claiming that she wasn't hungry or thirsty.

Yet the other times we'd camped, when I or Lilly had prepared the meals and drinks... she had eaten heartily and without hesitation. Even going so far as to vocally complain that the food had been taking too long.

Sipping my tea, which was a little too hot still, I studied Lilly who finished pouring water into her cup. She looked bored.

Surely not right?

She didn't hate humans so much that she... actually wouldn't drink or eat anything they had prepared...? Surely? I mean... it was the same food, and tea, that I prepared. Or she did. It wasn't like it was any different.

Yet somehow it made perfect sense to me.

Lilly had refused the tea... simply because Cat had been the one to make it.

I kind of wanted to test my theory, but at the same time didn't. Because all it would do is make me sad.

Cat was a nice woman. A little young and odd, but nice. She was no threat. Not a danger or harm to either of us, or the Society.

But Lilly didn't care. She didn't see that.

All she saw was a human.

She could talk to her, though. Hold whole conversations.

She had even allowed Cat to hold her baby for a little while, back at the house before we had left. She had only done it when she had been nearby, and I had noticed Lilly had watched Cat and Root like a hawk during those moments, but... she had still allowed it.

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Maybe I was just looking too deeply into it. Surely.

Though even if I was right in my assumption... did it matter?

It wasn't like I could change Lilly's perspective on humans. And it wasn't like I really felt the need to either. If Lilly truly hated humans to such a degree she'd not even drink tea prepared by them... then odds are there was a good reason for it. A reason so ingrained, so deeply rooted into her, that there was nothing anyone could do or anything that could happen to change those beliefs.

Her hatred was likely as pure as Vim's belief in free-will. Unbreakable.

"We should be nearing some lakes soon. I don't outright recognize this meadow, but I feel like I should. I bet I'll start to remember things we pass soon. Near the lakes is a human village. Puddle. Worst case scenario we can find that and I can get home from there," Cat said after a drink of her tea.

"Puddle?" Lilly asked.

"We trade with them. Sometimes. Sparingly. Honestly we don't mingle with them much, but I've been there a few times," Cat said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"They trade in children. They sell any children born past their firstborns to nearby nobility in the west. We don't like that," Cat said.

Lilly scoffed, but I frowned.

"Your saint allows that?" I asked.

"Of course not? But we can't face them. Every so often she sees one of the children being sold, or running away in the middle of the night, and we get sent to pick them up. But we can't do much more than that. The village is many hundred strong, and they have a small mercenary band. They're too strong to face upfront outright, not without great losses. Plus... well..." Cat shifted a little and shrugged. "Lots of villages around us do it. So if we tried to stop them, the rest might figure out about us and send people out to destroy us. It's a hard reality, but there's not much we can do about it," Cat explained.

Lilly nodded as she sipped her water. "Yeah, unless you'd be willing to kill the whole village off all it'd do is get you a lot of enemies for no reason."

"Still..." I mumbled.

Hadn't she said that one of the men Vim had killed, a brave man, had been strong? Very strong? Blessed by their saint? Why hadn't he been able to handle the village?

"Humans don't wage war easily Renn. Not like that anyway," Lilly said, likely noticing my thoughts.

"Since when has the north had such a thing happen anyway? I don't remember there being slaves or anything last I checked," I said. Not like there were down south at least, near Landi's place.

"Been that way forever, I guess? It got worse when Telmik really grew powerful. When the Nation of the Blind outlawed slavery, they forced all the people who liked it or supported it out of their nation and surrounding territories. Up here got a good chunk of them. I've had to deal with them over the years too, with Vim. They usually sell the slaves off at the ports, either at the western ocean or near Lumen at the inland sea to those far away," Lilly explained.

"You guys hunt slavers?" Cat asked.

"We used to. But most of that had been because they had been capturing and selling our people. We used to be more well known amongst the humans, so the eccentric and wealthy had tried to buy us all the time. When I was younger a king had once offered Vim a hundred chests of gold and silver in my weight for me," Lilly said with a huge grin, as if proud and happy to tell us about it.

"Whoa...!" Cat whispered in awe, which only made Lilly smile even prouder.

A... hundred chests? In her weight?

Lilly was a tad taller than me, but still somewhat skinny. More like me than Oplar or Brandy. But even still she was likely talking about a vast fortune. Maybe even as much as the vaults in Lumen had within them.

"Still, I suppose that is one thing I got to give those idiot sisters credit for. As much as it pains me to admit it, I guess," Lilly said with a sigh, her smile fading.

"Sisters?" Cat asked.

"The Sisters of Songs. The religion that Telmik is founded around. The one Celine and the rest made. They outlawed slavery, amongst other things. I don't care for humans or about them, but I at least got to admit that was a positive. It wasn't like it was easy. It took a lot of deaths, and stress and pain, but they did it. At least in their own corner of the world," Lilly said.

"Huh... I thought all those people walking around in those bland robes had been slaves," Cat said as she thought about Telmik.

"Vim says they are, in a way," I said as I took a drink of tea.

Lilly giggled. "He does! And he's kind of right. They're slaves to their gods. Their religion. It's true, in a way, I guess," Lilly said.

"Huh... does that mean I'm a slave to Elaine then? Since I do whatever she asks?" Cat asked.

"Well... maybe? In a broad sense, I guess? But I've always figured a slave is someone who obeyed another under the duress of death or pain, not because they wanted to," Lilly said.

"Vim would argue we are all slaves, I think," I said as I thought of how he looked at life.

"Vim's got a broken brain. His thinking is all weird, you can't use him as a base," Lilly said.

Cat giggled happily as I smiled and nodded. "He is odd."

"The funny part though is that Telmik, the people who outlawed slavery, had used slaves to build most of that city. Hypocrites," Lilly said with a shake of her head.

"Wait what...? Really?" I asked, surely not right?

She nodded though, and it made me groan.

"That probably took forever," Cat mumbled.

Yes. Telmik was huge. Even discounting the massive churches and cathedrals, it was still huge. Bigger even than Lumen.

"I'm surprised Vim allowed that," I said.

"Why? Because of his free-will doctrine? It is a powerful thing, but he doesn't force his will on anyone. Not even those without freedom. They have to ask for it first. Which, by the way, they eventually did. That's how I think the religion of the blind found its humanitarian side and abolished the act of slavery," Lilly said.

"You think Vim did it?" I asked.

"I do. Though I don't know when or how he did it. I just returned one day to find all the slaves freed, and it outlawed. Celine was a saint, a real one, and damnably annoying in her convictions, but she would not have abolished slavery so readily. Like I said. She and her people used them to build half that town," she said.

Huh... "I'm starting to not like this Saint Celine. I thought all saints were good people?" Cat said, reminding the two of us she was still here.

Or at least, reminding me. Odds are Lilly never forgot her presence.

"Right? If I can put up with you long enough I'll let you know all about the saints Vim and I hunted down in the beginning! There were some nasty ones, doing crazy stuff you know?" Lilly said proudly. A little too proudly.

"I would like to hear that, but maybe not now..." I said gently, hoping to slightly hint to Lilly that she should probably avoid such a topic.

After all, the entire reason we...

"You're... not going to kill her, are you?" Cat then asked.

I flinched, but had expected it. Lilly had kind of hit that topic on the nose with her earlier comment.

"Kill who?" Lilly asked for me, not realizing what she'd done.

"Saint Elaine. She's... a kind woman. Really. I don't know why you're so worried about her, but she really is a kind person. She tries so hard to help when she can, where she can, and...!" Cat began to almost beg for her saint's life.

"Whoa... Cat... Wait a moment," I quickly stopped her before she got too heated, and she gave me a terribly sad look. As if her heart had just broke.

"Why lead us to her if you thought we'd be killing her?" Lilly asked.

"I hadn't thought I'd been doing that. Or well... I still kind of don't I guess? Vim said, he promised, you'd not hurt her. Not if she was a good saint. A good person. But suddenly I just got... worried, I guess," Cat grew a little red in the face as she spoke, and I felt bad for her.

It was obvious that our previous conversation, or at least Lilly's comments, had sparked this worry and fear in her. And the worst part was that her fears were honestly not unfounded.

Lilly had not lied. I had no doubt she and Vim had hunted saints. He hated them as much as he hated monarchs, somehow.

Yet she should have known better than to say it aloud, here in front of Cat, when we were about to meet the woman's saint and holy woman.

"This is your fault," I said to Lilly.

"What? Why me?" Lilly sat up straighter, as if shocked I'd even suggest such a thing.

"You don't like humans, Lilly. And it kind of shows," I said. I'd not point out the earlier comments or the way she had not accepted Cat's tea, simply because it had been she who had made it. It wasn't just her dislike for drinking the same thing so often so recently. It was also pure prejudice and discrimination.

As if to prove my words true, Cat nodded quickly.

"Bah!" Lilly huffed but didn't seem too upset or bothered over it.

Turning to Cat, I nudged her ever so slightly with my tail as to get her attention. She turned to look at me, and smiled at me in a way that reminded me of Ginny or Nory. That smile was instinctual. As if it'd plant itself on their faces no matter the situation, as long as they looked at me.

Vim had that too.

"We don't want to hurt her. Don't plan to. In fact, Vim only wants to talk to her. He just wants to make sure her prophecies are correct, and likely to hear more about them. He doesn't like the creatures she told you to hunt down and kill, before it was born. He hates them fiercely," I said.

"You have no idea how much he hates those things. Really," Lilly nodded, supporting my statement.

"Is he a saint too?" Cat then asked.

Lilly chuckled. "Saints can only be women."

"Wait, really?" I asked. You're kidding!

"What you didn't know?" Lilly asked back, almost offended I had doubted her.

"Well... I assumed but..." I mumbled as I thought about it. Had anyone told me that before? Maybe? I felt almost as if Vim had mentioned it somehow, yet couldn't quite recall it. Which was strange. I could remember practically every word he's ever said... even the ones he thought I hadn't overheard.

"You've been with Vim how long?" Lilly asked.

"Hm...? Two years?" I asked Cat.

"Why ask me...?" she mumbled with a frown.

Looking back at Lilly, I found her smiling and shaking her head at me.

"What?" I asked. What was that look?

"For you to know so little after all that time? Either Vim's as absentminded with you as he is with all of us, are you two only flirt all day and don't even talk about anything else," she said, teasing me.

"They do flirt rather well!" Cat didn't hesitate to let the world know.

"Oh? Do tell," Lilly lifted her empty cup, as if to accept tea from her finally.

Cat didn't hesitate to fill her cup up with freshly boiled tea, or to tell her of all the stuff she had noticed during our stay in Telmik... and even a few things she had noticed on her way there with Vim.

Chapter 338 Buried Treasures Beneath Weeping Willows

Fly walked a little close, as if scared of our surroundings.

Which was honestly a little funny, since we were walking through one of the most peaceful places I'd seen in ages.

Hundreds of tiny chirps from thousands upon thousands of little birds drowned out the very light rain falling upon the world around us. There was little, if no wind, and the light rain had made the meadow of flowers give off a lush and vibrant smell.

It was midday. The air was clean, thanks to the rain. The world was bright, cheerful and the countless little colorful birds all around us made it even more so.

Yes.

Not scary at all.

"This place is weird," Fly said worriedly, as she stepped even closer.

"How so?" I asked. Maybe she'd tell me why she found such a cheery location and moment so terrifying.

"Why are there so many birds here...?" she asked carefully.

Oh...? So it was the birds. Or rather, the amount of them. I wonder why. Maybe being a bird herself, she found it odd so many would gather so closely like this.

"Well, there are a couple reasons. This is one of the first gentle meadows between the nearby inland sea and those mountain ranges to the west of us. Plus the surrounding forests block the winds, yet the canopies of the trees are light and thin enough to allow plentiful sunlight," I explained.

"So... they like it because it's pretty?" she asked.

"Well, yes. And all those conditions allow them to eat gracefully. You see the conditions create these fields of flowers, and the fields of flowers and this dense forest make it a trove for insects. The kind they love. Plus, most importantly, a severe lack of predators. It's a great place to eat, sleep, and mate. Basically it's just a very quiet and peaceful place," I explained further.

Fly huffed as some birds hopped out of our way. Most didn't seem bothered by our presence at all. Sometimes I, or Fly, had to step over some that didn't even move out of our way.

Their numbers, and their obvious indifference to us, were likely the cause of Fly's unease. It was almost unnatural, in a way.

"Sounds like a lot of nonsense. Why aren't they flying away from us? Birds usually do," Fly asked, further proving my assumption true.

"Well, I bet if you stepped on one they'd get the idea. Maybe," I said.

Fly groaned, and I knew it was because she didn't want to do that. Though if she didn't wish to because it was simply cruel and wrong, or because she feared repercussions was another thing entirely.

"Want to try picking one up?" I asked, suggesting a method to cure her of her strange fears.

"Uh..." Fly hesitated, and I smirked. So she was scared of them. I wonder why. Had she always been scared of birds? Some people were, so I've been told. Though I wasn't sure if I'd ever met anyone with such a silly phobia.

Though I suppose no phobias were silly. Not to the people who had them.

"Why're we here Vim? Does someone live here?" Fly then asked.

"Hm? No. We're making a very tiny detour. About half a day out of our way. No one lives here, at least... I don't think anyone does."

"Then why are we here?" she asked worriedly as she stepped closer, as to avoid walking near a larger bird. It hadn't moved even as she drew closer.

Fly reached out and grabbed my arm to steady herself as we walked through a rather dense grouping of birds. Since she was so focused on not stepping on any of them she needed my support to stay upright.

For a few minutes neither of us spoke as we zigzagged through the flocks of birds.

Honestly it was interesting how uncaring they all seemed to be. I myself being ignored was typical. Understandable. I had no presence. Not the type at least that animals usually cared about. Fly however was a different story. Not only was she a very animalistic non-human, she was also closely related to them in the sense of her ancestry.

Though maybe that was why they weren't bothered by her. Maybe it was bloodline that made them so relaxed. Maybe to them she was just another bird. Another one of their own kind.

It was an interesting thought, but not one I'd voice aloud. Little Fly had enough on her plate right now; she didn't need some weird existential crises to burden her little shoulders alongside all the stress.

Once through the denser group of birds, we had some luxurious freedom for a moment. Fly and I were alone for a small moment, not near any birds, but Fly still didn't separate from my arm. She held on even as we passed between some trees and entered a denser part of the forest.

"So... Why are we here again?" Fly then asked again.

I smiled at her. "I'm looking for something. I think I remember where it is, but if we don't run into it by the time we reach the end of the forest we'll just head out and I'll try again another time," I said.

"What are we looking for?" Fly asked.

I noted how she included herself in my task, and nodded. "I buried something here. And..." I began to tell her about it, but we rounded a large shrub taller than even me, and found a flock of birds.

This one was more dense than the last, and these ones were noisy. They chirped at each other as they all danced around, hopping and pecking at the wet grass and eating all the bugs.

Fly groaned at the sight of them... but beyond them was my destination.

It was barely visible through the line of trees opposite of the open meadow, but I could make out its very unique form. It wasn't like the tall thin trees around us, although a similar shade of green.

"I do believe it'd be a pain to stroll through them, as neat as it is..." I said gently as we paused in front of the crowd of birds.

"Strolling isn't what I'd call this," Fly complained.

I smirked and nodded. "Indeed. So why not fix it for us?" I asked her.

She shifted a little and then glanced up at me. Her feathers raised upward as she frowned and raised an eyebrow. "Fix it...?"

I nodded again at her. "Scare them off. Run into the huge group, making noise and whatnot. They'll fly off if you do," I suggested with a light wave at them all.

Fly looked away from me and to the birds. She went still and I watched her mind race as she understood what I had just suggested.

Then without a word, or any hesitation, she rushed forward. She released my arm, and immediately began to shout loudly as she jumped straight into the huge flock of birds, flapping her arms wildly as she did.

Fly yelled out wordlessly as she ran forward. The birds finally noticed her existence, and did so with gusto. The world became both noisy and chaotic as thousands of wings flapped, and every bird in the vicinity flew into the air.

"Hahaha!" Fly's boisterous laughter was all I could hear through the thunderous wings and feathers as she continued to run around as the birds flew in every direction. Some seemed unsure of where to go, so flew around us for a moment before flying upward and into the sky.

While Fly ran around, the world quickly became quiet and more lonely as the last few birds escaped the trees and shrubs, and flew off elsewhere.

I sighed as the world went back to being quiet, and Fly slowed to a stop nearby. She was huffing a little as if she had just committed a great feat, what with a huge grin and a stuck out chest.

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"Feel better?" I asked.

"Yeah!" she happily nodded at me, and a little loudly too. The thousands of birds had been loud even to me, so I had no doubt her ears were likely ringing something fierce.

Some feathers lingered in the wake of the chaos, and for some reason something told me a few weren't from the tiny birds, but Fly instead.

Stepping over to Fly, I smiled at the young girl who still had a huge grin on her face. Odds are those few small moments of running around, scaring the birds, had been more stress-relieving than anything she's done in years.

That alone made coming through this forest, going out of our way a little, all the more worth it.

Patting the young girl on the shoulder, I smiled and nodded. "Well done," I said.

She huffed at me as her grin turned into a gentle, if sad, smile. "Will they ever come back?" she then asked.

Oh...? Regret? Already? Funny.

"I'm sure. And probably earlier than you think. So let us do what we need to and be off," I said as I stepped past her.

Fly groaned as she followed and we walked through the now empty meadow. We passed through a small cluster of trees and entered another meadow-like opening in the dense forest. This one though, instead of having birds, had a mighty tree. One that was very unique for not just this forest, but this whole region.

A willow.

Just as I remembered it. At least, so I thought I did. Had it always leaned that way?

Oh well. At least the large tree was still here. For some reason I felt surprised, but knew I shouldn't be. As I had just told Fly a few moments ago, this place was peaceful. A small corner of quiet, peaceful and untouched world that was hidden away.

"What kind of tree is this?" Fly asked, pausing in front of it.

"A willow tree," I said.

"Is it special?" she asked as we neared it.

"Not really. The world won't notice it disappear if it did. Nor would it suffer for it... But..." I went quiet as I wondered if it'd bother me or not if it disappeared.

Likely would, somehow, even though it made no sense. It wasn't like this tree was actually special. It was just something I found one day and decided to use as a landmark. Nothing more.

Fly hummed. "Willow? Looks like... vines. Or grass. Is it sick?" she asked, sounding just as concerned of it now as she had been those birds earlier.

I chuckled at her. "No. In fact it's a type of tree that's very stout and healthy. They can survive immense damage, compared to other trees, and endure even harsh weather conditions. Their bark sap also contains a type of medicine, a rather strong one," I said as I stepped towards the willow tree.

"Oh...? Medicine?" Fly hurried to follow as we stepped under its leaves. Thanks to how big, and old, the tree was there were many that reached the ground and then some. I had to move some of the strands aside as to draw closer.

Fly followed me up to the tree itself, and brushed off some of the elongated leaves and branches that had clung to her as she walked through them.

"They're just long branches, drooping," Fly said as she studied the thing.

"Yes. Basically," I said.

Studying the tree, I tried to remember which side I had buried the thing.

While I slowly examined the base of the tree, and the roots and ground around it, I realized I couldn't remember at all where I'd buried the item. Hadn't I done it a few feet away? I'm usually smart enough to not bury the stuff I tried to hide near trees right next to them. Since the trees could overgrow, or destroy the item with the roots if I buried them too closely. Especially a tree like this, willow trees weren't known for their gentle roots and...

"What are we doing Vim?" Fly asked.

"Just grabbing something I left here a long time ago..." I said as I stepped away from the bird, to round the tree.

There. That spot. I wasn't sure why, but it felt right.

"You... left something here? Why?" Fly asked as I went to kneel down near the spot I felt was right.

"Not really sure to be honest, Fly. Sometimes I do things without much thought or reason," I said honestly as I slid my hand into the moist soil. It wasn't as wet or cold as I thought it'd be, but even if it had been as solid as rock it'd not do much to stop me anyway.

As I dug, Fly drew closer. "Are you hurting it?" she asked as I pulled a root out of the way.

"A little. But it'll heal. It has hundreds if not thousands of feet of these roots beneath us. Plus it's resilient, at least this type of willow is," I said as I continued digging.

Scooping the dirt away, I found a root. I dug around it, and beneath it, and eventually my fingers hit something a little too hard to be just a rock or root.

Feeling the thing in the dirt, I smiled at the feeling of a corner. Something too sharp and pointed to be natural. Something man made.

"Did you find it?" Fly asked as I began to dig the box out of the ground. She drew closer, leaning over nearby to watch me dig the metal box out of the earth. I had to shift a root a bit, but only a few moments later I pulled the metal box out and sat upward to study it.

"A box?" Fly asked, sounding a little excited. As if we were unburying treasure.

"It is," I said as I scraped a bit of dirt away, and searched for the thin groove near its edge.

"So... you buried it there?" Fly asked as I found the groove. I pushed on it, and snapped open the lid of the metal box. The steel snapped, breaking, as it opened.

Within was a small bundled up piece of leather. A familiar type of leather that I'd not felt in a long time.

Grabbing the object, I hesitated a moment at the touch of the leather. It felt smooth, like silk, but I knew it was so strong it could endure my own strength.

It didn't deteriorate. It didn't wear. It didn't get scratched, and couldn't burn.

And the only weight it had was from the object it was wrapped around, not from the leather itself.

"What is it...!?" Fly excitedly drew closer. Thanks to the hole I had dug, she had to step over to my side and lean around me, since she wasn't tall enough to look over my shoulder. Not with me on my knees.

Instead of answering vocally, I unwrapped the leather and revealed the small book.

"Oh..." Fly's excitement immediately died down, and she sighed at the sight of the small black book.

I chuckled at her. "I thought you liked to read," I said.

"I do. But that's no fun. I was expecting something shiny," she complained.

I nodded, right. One usually did want something shiny when you dug something neat up from the ground.

Though... this small book was worth more than a chunk of gold as big as her. Not that Fly would likely understand even if I explained as to why.

As I slowly stood, leaving the steel box on the ground, Fly bent down to pick the box up. She seemed to find it much more interesting than the book, or the bundle of leather I had wrapped around it. I opened the book, not to read it but to make sure it was all in one piece.

It was. The writing was still perfectly legible. Nothing like that shoddy decrepit book that Celine had left for Renn.

Monarch leather really was useful, sometimes.

I wrapped the book back up in the leather, as to keep it protected, and went to slide it into my bag. I still had a monarch leather pouch at my waist, but it wasn't big enough for the book. It was only big enough for a single heart, or something small. I had given Renn my two other bags, so she now had three of them.

She needed their extra protection and durability more than I did. At least, at the moment.

"It's heavy," Fly complained with a grunt. I glanced down and found her trying to lift the box. It seemed she hadn't been strong enough to do so.

"Oh... Want me to lift it for you?" I offered. I hadn't realized she had not been able to lift it on her own.

Fly huffed in exhaustion as she stood and stepped away, shaking her head. "Is it important too? How's it so heavy?"

"It's a special metal," I said. Though it honestly shouldn't have been so heavy she couldn't lift it... maybe she was weaker than I thought. How heavy was that box, I wonder? It was only a few feet big.

It was too bad Renn wasn't here to lift it for me and give me an idea. Maybe it was far heavier than I thought.

Fly stared down at the dirty box, but didn't seem to have any intention to try and pick it up again. If anything she looked a little bored now.

"Want the box Fly? Otherwise I'll just leave it here," I said.

"Hm? No. Are we done?" she asked.

I nodded. "Let's go. If we get out of the forest before nightfall we can make it to our next destination not long after the morning," I said.

"Oh? Another Society location?" Fly asked as I stepped away from the box and the hole I just dug.

"Yes. A small family lives nearby. A family of... simple, but nice people," I said.

"What are they?" Fly asked excitedly as she hurried to follow me, uncaring at all of the box we'd just left... or the book I had just hid away.

I smiled at the young bird, and went to tell her a little about the family we were about to visit.

We'd not be staying there long, on purpose, but there was nothing wrong with her enjoying the time we spent there. Or the time we spent going there, or the time we spent afterward as we left.

After all I wanted this little trip to be a happy one for her. As much as it could be, at least.

Especially since soon the world may become chaotic. The kind that made little birds like her have to struggle just to survive.

Last time the world became this chaotic, even the strong hadn't survived. Even the mighty had broken.

If they hadn't lost their lives, they had lost their minds. Their souls. Their reasons for living.

It had taken everything I had to hold the Society together. What few who had survived. What few who had remained. It hadn't just taken my everything, it had taken so much more too. Lilly's wings. Celine's life. Family and friends. Entire kingdoms and armies.

It had taken so much just to endure. Just to survive...

And this time...

Well...

Some clouds rumbled over head, and Fly groaned. "Really!" she shouted in complaint to the world, as rain began to fall. Heavy rain. The type that precluded a storm. A real one.

Smiling, I nodded.

Yes. The world noticed it too. It always did. Just to taunt me.

It knew this time I'd not be here to protect them. So it was weeping.

Weeping with all its might.

Chapter 339 The Saint's Village

"Is this the village you remember, Renn?" Lilly asked with a whisper.

Studying the village in the distance, not far beyond the hill we stood upon, I shifted a little and wondered if it was.

It was so hard to tell. There were now several buildings, less trees, and... well...

Just more stuff in general. There were fences. Barrels and boxes scattered around. Proper roads and even lampposts lining them, though none were currently lit. None of the buildings, the remaining trees, or any of the area around us looked familiar to me. Which was shocking... yet...

Glancing over to our right, I studied the distant path. One that led deeper into the forest. One that I somehow felt was familiar, and... well... "I think that path leads to the lakes. So... yes. I think I do remember this place. Though it obviously doesn't look at all how I left it last time. Last time I'd been here there had only been a couple buildings, and they had been simple wood ones. With thatch roofs," I said.

Most of the buildings here were made of wood too, but they were fancy. Instead of roofs made of straw or leaves they had what looked to be wood with leather straps upon them. A few even had gutter-like attachments, which rolled down the sides of the houses and to the well kept grass lawns around them. They looked well made, almost too well made, for being out here in a deep forest all alone. Far from any other village or town.

Not to mention there was no direct path or road to get here, either.

"Well..." Lilly sighed at me, and I knew why.

We had allowed Cat to enter the village first. Alone. Without us. Lilly and I stood up on a small hill, near some dense trees and foliage. Enough to be hidden from sight, but still overlooking the village to a certain degree. The hill wasn't high enough to see the whole village, but we saw enough of it from this angle that Lilly felt comfortable enough to not feel in danger.

"It likely is, Lilly. This is the area... and it does smell kind of familiar," I said honestly.

Lilly sighed again. "We should have not let her go alone. We should have gone by ourselves first," Lilly said.

"By ourselves...? Why?" I asked. She wanted us to leave Cat back and alone, without us? While her home was right here?

"To verify the truth ourselves. Before she has a chance to speak to anyone, particularly this saint. Who knows what she'll tell them, or warn them about," Lilly said.

"Ah... I don't think Cat would do that, Lilly. If not out of respect to me, she knows what Vim is capable of. She'd likely be too scared of him to do anything like that," I said.

"Humans are surprisingly foolish when they're full of fear, Renn," Lilly whispered.

That was likely true, but still...

I wanted to believe in Cat. I really did. It'd break my heart if she betrayed me, or tried to.

"I don't think they'll be able to do anything now, Lilly. We're both here. They'll not be able to escape us now," I said.

"It's not them escaping I worry over, Renn," Lilly said.

"If they try to attack us we should just run. Let Vim deal with them," I said.

"Easy for you to say."

It was.

"Plus what if it takes Vim months to get here? Sometimes his quests have him astray for long periods of time. In months they could all run away," Lilly then said.

I bit my lip a little and nodded. "I know, Lilly... but what else do we do? It'd be a lot easier to learn about this saint if we do it with friendship and not pain or violence," I said.

"I know Renn. I know. I just wish it was simpler," Lilly said.

Simpler...? To her simple must be simple violence. To kill or be killed. I understood it, but didn't like it.

Vim was like that too sometimes.

"Do you really think Vim could take that long?" I asked worriedly.

Lilly smirked at me and glanced my way. "It might. Surely you know as well as I do how hard it is to find a home for our people? I don't know this Fly, but depending on her temperament it might take Vim several stops until he finds a place for her... if he finds one at all. There have been many who have traveled around with Vim, or others, for years before finding a place to settle down."

Great.

"Fly's a kind girl. A young bird without a mean bone in her body. I don't understand why they'd banish her," I said, worrying about her again.

"They're prunes Renn. Old hags who believe they know better than anyone else. What do you expect?"

"I expect our people to be gentle with our weaker and fragile members," I said simply.

Lilly didn't respond as I noticed someone leave one of the buildings. I studied the man as he walked away, heading the opposite direction of us. He didn't seem to be in a rush, or acting oddly... he seemed to just be leisurely walking to wherever he was headed.

"Well she's not raised any alarm yet, at least," Lilly said.

"Will you be able to tell if she's saint? Right away?" I asked.

"If she has glowing eyes, then yes. If not it might take a little studying or questioning. They usually give themselves away, even when they try to hide it," Lilly said.

"How so?"

"Saints always act as if they know something they shouldn't. If you pay attention to the way they speak, it becomes rather obvious. Just pay attention to how they seem to ask questions offhandedly, or not ask them at all."

I nodded slowly. She was right. Witch, and Narli, both had spoken in ways that had made me pause sometimes. As if they had asked a question they already knew the answer to, but still felt they had to ask anyway.

"If uh... if she does betray us... what will we do?" I asked, suddenly feeling like the very people I had just been thinking about.

"To be honest I'd like to eliminate them if able. But I know better than to risk you, or myself, in the moment. We'll simply retreat and wait for Vim," Lilly said.

I frowned at that. "I expected you to not be passive."

"I'm sure," Lilly said with a grin. "But it's the truth. Not only are you Vim's wife, I'm a mother to a newborn. Vim would beat me senseless if I got either of us hurt or killed because of impatience or negligence," she added.

I smiled at her. How adorable! She didn't feel herself was valuable, yet felt her being the mother of a newborn was what was valuable. And it was even more adorable that she was somewhat wrong.

Vim would have felt horrible if she got hurt. Newborn baby or no.

I kept that to myself though, since she wasn't necessarily too off. Vim did value certain things in such ways. As did I.

"Hopefully it won't come to that," I said gently.

"As much as I hate to admit it... There's little chance it will," she said with a sigh.

My smile grew at that, glad to hear her true feelings on the matter. Even if she was upset to both admit them, and the fact of her belief.

She knew Cat was trustworthy. And it upset her, what with her being a human and all.

Lilly was strangely adorable.

"Though we do have another problem. Which I suppose this is a good time to address, being alone finally," Lilly then said.

"Oh...?" I glanced around. What was wrong?

"You two had been followed."

I turned, no longer focused on the village. "What?"

"You and Cat had been followed to my home. Whoever they are, they're good. I've been watching and searching for them on our way here, and I've not seen or smelled hide or tail of them. Almost as if we're not being followed at all," Lilly said.

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"Wait... are you serious?" I asked.

She nodded, rather nonchalantly.

"And you just mention this now?"

She smirked at that. "I hadn't wanted to say anything in front of the human. In case she was involved in it."

"That'd be even more reason to let me know!" I argued.

"Possibly."

"Did you doubt me too or something...?" I asked. Why hadn't she just told me? We would have had plenty of opportunities for such a conversation, Cat was a deep sleeper and slept far more than we did!

"You? No. Not at all. You're family. But I did worry over how you'd react upon finding out your friend might be a possible enemy. But now I know for sure it wasn't her. Your friends had nothing to do with it," she said.

"And... how do you know that?" I asked, choosing to focus on that and not the worries she was actually very justified and right about worrying about.

"Whoever had been following you... If they're not related to the human, or this village, that means they're likely someone else. If they started following you from Telmik, or around there, that means they're most likely related to the church. The Chronicler and her people. It would explain why they followed you to my home, and possibly didn't follow afterward. Or if they have, they've done it at a very

far distance. Either because they knew I'm now with you, or because they'd only been told to monitor from a distance and nothing else," Lilly said.

I sighed. "Vim did mention someone might follow or want to know what we're doing," I said.

"I'll stay outside the village for the next night and day. After we meet the saint, and confirming she's not a direct enemy. To keep an eye out for whoever may have followed us," Lilly said.

"Want my help...? I'll admit I don't have much experience in this stuff, but a second set of eyes and ears has to be worth something," I offered.

She smiled at me. "Maybe. For now just focus on the task Vim sent you on."

Great. Now I'll need to do it while even more worried than I already was.

After all...

Looking back at the village, I sighed at myself and it.

Witch's home. Her family. Her descendants.

They knew what had happened. That I had killed her. Yet they saw it as some kind of blessing. A mercy. They did not see me as a threat, or an enemy, but something akin to a legend.

Yet... it still felt wrong.

I had killed her. I had helped end her life. Just as Vim did for Trek and so many others.

Unlike Vim though, I couldn't bear the burden. I ran away when it happened. I panicked. It made it hard to breathe and...

Shifting, I glanced down at my hands, and opened them to see my clammy palms.

Yes. Even now I was sweating. Even though it was slightly cold, and not very damp, and I'd not been doing anything too extraneous. We'd only walked here, after all, we hadn't ran or carried lots of luggage...

"Oh there she is."

I looked up and found Cat walking away from one of the mid-sized buildings. She was heading our way, alone, and had a small pip in her step. After a few moments she increased her pace and even began to jog a little, hurrying towards us. If not for the huge smile on her face I'd worry that something was wrong.

"Looks like all's well," Lilly said with a sigh.

"You're too much like Vim, Lilly. I'm to assume you learned it from him," I said.

"Only some of it," she admitted.

Smiling at that I nodded as Cat hurried up the hill. She rounded some trees, and some thicker bushes, and then approached us a little slowly. She huffed a bit as she drew closer, likely thanks to the hill's steepness, and then coughed.

"Saint Elaine wants to meet you. But she asks for a few moments to ready herself," Cat said between breaths.

"Ready herself?" Lilly asked, sounding offended.

"She was in a nightgown. She had been up late, praying and blessing little Lena. She's been sick lately, some kind of fever and Saint Elaine is trying to help her break it," Cat explained.

I frowned at that, and wondered if that meant the sickness was a strong one, able to survive a saint's miracles, or if this Elaine was simply not as strong as the saints I was used to. Or rather, Witch. Witch had been able to cure such things easily, even though it had been exhausting for her to do so later in her life.

"Is it the plague?" Lilly then asked, and I startled.

Oh. Right. Forgot about that.

"I don't think so. Elaine thinks it's just a common fever. The poor girl is just sickly, has been since birth. She was born too early," Cat said with a frown.

Lilly nodded but said nothing more as I glanced at the building Cat had just come from.

It wasn't the same house Witch and I had lived in. But it somehow felt familiar. Maybe it was in the same position? In fact where was that house? Had it been torn down and rebuilt maybe? Had enough time passed for such a thing to be needed...?

"You'd think she'd be more excited to see you, Renn. Being her ancestor, and all," Lilly commented lightly.

"Oh she is! But she knew we were coming. When I walked into her room she looked past me and asked where Renn was, as if she expected her to just walk in with me," Cat said.

Lilly sighed.

"I probably would have... had you not been here," I said to Lilly.

"Yes. Very likely so. And if you had been with Vim, you would have too, what with him by your side and feeling safe. I wonder which was the better outcome?" Lilly wondered.

"Uh..." Cat made a noise, the type that told me she wanted to say something but didn't know how to or if she even should.

"Yes Cat?" I asked, to keep her from feeling her voice wasn't allowed to be heard.

She gulped and smiled, nodding gently. "She only asked for a moment Renn. To get dressed. She's likely ready, or will be, by the time we walk down there."

Ah. Right.

I nodded and stepped forward. Lilly remained behind us, and for a moment I thought she'd not join... but she eventually followed. Walking silently, kind of like how Vim did on occasion.

"Does she live alone?" I asked.

"Saint Elaine? No. Her daughter lives with her, but only to help her out. The saint lives on the bottom floor, her daughter the second. Grenna is there, but she'll leave if we... or you, asked," Cat said as she took my side as we stepped down the hill.

"Daughter but no husband?" I asked.

Cat giggled for a moment. "No one knows who her husband is. She left one time, a long time ago, and came back alone a few months later and was pregnant. It's a story we all kind of just ignore, but it makes sense you know?" Cat said.

"Makes sense?"

"She's a saint! We're all like children to her. So she probably left to meet someone she wasn't related to, or saw as a son or brother or something."

"Hm..." I nodded slowly, that made sense. If she had been like Witch then she had likely seen the man she had gone to see, had known about him long before he came into her life. Though it was odd she hadn't chosen to bring him back. Though maybe I shouldn't dig too deep into such personal things.

As we rounded a patch of thick briars, and then some trees, we finally reached the end of the hill. Lilly was still following us, but doing so at a farther distance... as if doing her best to not be noticed.

While we approached the houses, Cat began to giggle excitedly. She even began to bounce a little in her steps as she walked.

I grinned at her excitement, and wondered why I didn't feel just as she did.

I was excited, sure. But not as much as I should be. I felt strangely stressed. And nervous. A little queasy too, to be honest. As if I needed to eat desperately, even though I didn't feel hungry at all. I bet I couldn't swallow a single bite at the moment even if I had been.

It really was too bad Vim wasn't here.

Cat had mentioned just now that he and I walking through the door with Cat, not hesitating and waiting back as Lilly had wanted us to, had likely been a possible future. One that this Saint Elaine had seen. Had expected.

That made me wonder, and question a lot of things. Had we made the wrong choice? Should I have waited for Vim to come here, as to come here with him? Or maybe there was more at play than I thought. Maybe it was Vim who had made a mistake, or maybe I should have just waited at Telmik all along with Cat for him to return originally.

Maybe Lilly wasn't supposed to be here. Or maybe us being here, without Vim, was the proper outcome. What needed to happen, to stop something terrible or...

I blinked as I realized I was standing in front of the house.

Cat was stepping up to the door. She was grabbing the handle, as to open it. She still had that silly grin on her face. She was looking forward to my meeting Witch's descendant. More than I was, somehow.

I gulped a little as the door opened, and I was able to see inside the house. It looked warm. Cozy. The place looked clean, and rather full of stuff. Rugs, furniture, stuff hanging on the walls with all the tables and shelves full of items.

There was a small smell coming from it. But it wasn't a bad one. It was the scent of something being cooked. Some kind of bread, or pastry. There was the smell of clothes, wood, and a fireplace's stink though I couldn't hear or smell a burning fireplace. It was cold, but likely not so cold the residents of this dense northern forest needed a warm fire just yet. They'd likely wait until later in the day, near nightfall, before they lit the fires as to warm the house.

"I've brought her!" Cat happily said, a little loudly, as she entered the house.

Stepping forward to enter behind her, I took a small breath... to calm myself. Suddenly my heart was pounding.

Entering the house, I felt a little dizzy. It didn't last long, nor was it bad enough to worry me, but I made sure to pause a few feet into the house as to give myself a moment. To gather myself, my breath and my mind.

Don't panic. This isn't the house. Witch didn't die here. I hadn't killed her here.

Surely.

Looking around, I compared this house to the one from my memories. The large room with tables and chairs. The hallway that led deeper in the house. The stairwell not far down the hall. The scent of the building, soaked into the wooden frames and boards... the floor...

It wasn't the same house. Surely. The hallway was different. The scent was a little off. Surely...

"Saint, are you dressed?" Cat asked as I heard her knock lightly on a door. She had rounded the hallway at the end, so I couldn't see her anymore.

"Of course I am. Stop shouting Cat, you're not living up to your name," a calm, slightly deep, female voice responded to Cat. I heard the woman step out of the room and out into the hallway, but pause a moment. Maybe to look at Cat, or close the door behind her.

A door then did close, but not one down the hallway. I turned a little to look at Lilly. She had shut the main door to the house, and was standing near it patiently. She looked alert, but a little bored.

"She's over here!" Cat happily guided the saint around the corner, and upon seeing her... my eyes went blurry.

Saint Elaine looked just like Witch had, so long ago. Though a little older. A little more wrinkly. And with grayer hair.

And with eyes that glowed just as strongly.

"Hm. I had thought we would have met earlier, but it seems this is still the same. Go ahead, I've been waiting for these tears for most my life," Saint Elaine said as she held her arms outward at me. It was

hard to tell through my own blurry eyes, so I couldn't see them... but I heard her own tears in her voice. It had whimpered a little, as if she too was about to cry.

Stepping forward, I barely made it to the old woman before the tears began to fall.

Wrapping her in a hug, I made sure to do it as gently as I could, as I held the old woman and wept alongside her.

Chapter 340 A Question Amongst a Homestead

"I'm so glad you showed up Vim! I was worried it'd be months or years before we got this fixed," Nora said happily.

"Hm. I'll make a few extra parts, so you can swap them out when they break again," I said as I unhooked the main wheelset, taking it off the grinding wheel.

Nora moved out of the way as I carried the large wooden wheel over to the table. It was rather large, larger even than having need be, and heavy. Not that I'd drop it on her, of course, but instinct made one move out of the way usually when someone lifted something as heavy and cumbersome as this.

"Please and thank you. It's so annoying to thresh and grind the wheat by hand!" Nora said excitedly as she bundled up a towel she had been using to wipe off the table I was now using. She had worried it had been dirty, and would thus get the parts of the machine dirty, which would then thusly get her food inevitably dirty.

A silly worry, but it was fine. I had willingly helped her clean up this mill house a bit before getting to work. It made her happy, and comfortable, so that was all that mattered. Their little homestead wasn't dirty, honestly. Even if I saw them as simple people, they weren't dirty. They weren't uncivilized. In fact

this small home, with its mill and wheat farms amongst other things, was rather quaint and nice. It was cozy and homely.

"It is a pain, isn't it?" I agreed as I turned the wheelset a little, to look at the group of teeth that had broken off. About a dozen of the larger teeth for the main gearset had broken off, somehow, which had made it impossible to turn the thresher or grinder. The missing teeth on the wheel usually weren't that big of an issue, but this was the main wheel and enough of the teeth had broken off to make the wheel slip and slide as it spun, only further stopping its function.

Basically it kept getting stuck, and unable to turn. Odds are a single piece of tooth had broken originally and they, not realizing the issue, kept pushing forward as they spun the machines continuously only further breaking it more and more as it got stuck again and again.

I didn't tell her they were the reason it broke, since there was no point. Even if I explained how they had done it, and why it had happened, they'd do it again. They always did.

Nora and her family were good, nice people, but simple. The types that didn't really care to learn how to fix something themselves if they didn't have to.

Even the extra parts I'd make for them would likely go unused. Which was odd, but not something I could really explain or ask why.

After all it wasn't like they were downright stupid. Nora spoke well, eloquently sometimes, and her children weren't necessarily dumb or idiots either.

A few of them even knew how to read, and write. So it wasn't a lack of education it was just... well...

"Other than this Vim we're honestly all fine! The wells good, the river nearby hasn't flooded or nothing, no humans or people visiting... no fires, or plagues, not even a harsh winter or two! In fact it's been so calm and peaceful it almost worries me! Well, other than this blasted thing here! I haven't been able to make my breads lately, not as many as I like, and I'm tired of hearing all the kids complain about it!" Nora said with a huff as she hit the large machine with her towel.

"You act as if your husband would leave you if not for your breads," I said lightly in jest.

"Ah but the bloody fool would! He's not lain with me once these last few months, complains he's not got the energy to do so! All because I've not made any bread treats he says, the fool!" Nora complained.

I paused a moment and frowned, but said nothing. Sadly I didn't think her words were mere jest, she was likely being serious.

I wanted to ask why they didn't just grind the wheat themselves, or go to the nearby human village to purchase some. Or even borrow one of the nearby human mills, which could usually be used for a small portion of the flour ground from them. But knew better than to do so.

After all, the reason they had not done such a thing was simple. Just as simple as they were.

They looked human. Acted human. Could blend in just fine with humans.

Yet they likely never even considered going and buying parts for the mill, or ground up flour, or getting their own wheat ground elsewhere. The thoughts had likely never even entered their minds.

They instead had simply waited, and waited, until I showed up.

Yet didn't send a letter to Telmik, or anyone else, alerting me that they needed help either.

You'd think the issue was not that big a deal, until you realized they were the type of non-humans to nearly subsist entirely on the food they grew.

Nora and her family were a type of deer. The type that only ate fruits, vegetables and the stuff they made with their wheat. They didn't even eat fish, let alone meats of any kind.

In other words this mill, this thresher and grindstone, to produce flour for their meals... was almost their lifeblood.

In fact...

"So...? Do you think you can fix it?" Nora asked as she drew closer, to look at the wheel on the table.

"I can. I'll go grab some wood, and a few of those stumps your sons gathered, and make them tonight," I said to the woman next to me. She was a tad taller than Renn, but skinny. But not because she always had been.

Her joke earlier about her husband not wanting to lay with her out of a lack of energy had been no joke at all. She, her husband and her children, were all far skinnier than I remembered them. Each one of them looked as if they'd just endured a great sickness. Or recovered from heavy wounds. They looked malnourished. Tired.

Starving.

"Oh thank goodness!" Nora sighed out in great relief, after being told again that I could fix it promptly.

I nodded and smiled to her. "All will be well. In fact I can probably get the grinder fixed here soon enough you could make dinner if you'd like," I offered.

"Oh yes! Yes, yes!" Nora nearly jumped in excitement, and reached over to wrap herself around my arm. She squeezed me tightly, delighted, and then bounced away. "I'll go prepare now!" she shouted.

Nora left the mill house, and I heard her run off to the main building. The dirt road was slightly rocky, and by the sounds of her footfalls she was running with all her might.

"Hm," I shook my head at her.

Such a strange people.

Starving themselves, almost, just because their precious milling machine was busted.

It made me wonder how they and those like them survived in the wild back in the day, before those like myself watched over them. How had they lived? Alone? Without help?

Strange indeed.

But they were still my people.

So I needed to promptly fix this.

"Luckily it's easy to fix," I mumbled as I stepped back over to the large mill. I went to the grindstone and went to dismantling the main gear set. The one that usually connected the center one, that powered both of them via wind and manpower. Or well, deer-power, usually.

With the main gear being busted, and it being so darn big and important in the mechanism, I'd not be able to fix it immediately. Not soon enough to grind some wheat for their dinner. But I didn't need to fix the main gear set immediately. I simply needed to detach the grinding stone, and then manually spin it myself for a moment. The stone was large enough it'd only take a short while to grind enough flour for Nora to make her and her family, and Fly I suppose, a full course meal. Or at least, however much bread she considered a full-course meal would be.

Why were they so skinny anyway? They were still eating vegetables and fruits, right? Sure it wasn't a completely balanced diet, but it wasn't like eating just greens could kill you or make you that frail so quickly.

Right...?

"Maybe they are sick?" I wondered quietly to myself.

As I tinkered with the grinding stone, I checked a nearby bin. A large wooden crate full of already threshed wheat. Some of it looked a little old, but not old enough to worry me. There were no obvious signs of infestations or rats, surprisingly, but I knew it was likely because this mill house was surrounded by flat dirt and rocks. The building was a small distance from any field, or forest, and it was heavily frequented by Nora and her family. Or at least, it usually was when the mill was working properly. Though knowing them they still came here often throughout the day.

"Vim...?"

I turned as I began to pour some wheat into the top of the grindstone, as to begin grinding it into flour.

"Fly?" I raised my voice a little, and sure enough after some quick and tiny footsteps little Fly peeked her head into the mill. She saw me, smiled and then hurried in.

I studied her for a moment before returning my attention to the grinder. She looked fine. She even had a small smile on her face.

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She had been playing with Nora's children. She had two younger daughters and a son not too much older than Fly. Though she had other children, they were a little too old to be playing around with Fly in such a way. Odds are those older siblings were off with their father, working the fields nearby.

"Vim... Vim!" Fly got my attention, and at first I thought she wanted to show me something... but instead she was gesturing for me to bend down to her.

I did so, frowning as she leaned forward to whisper a question.

"What's sex?" she asked.

A strange noise filled the room, disappearing quickly, as I blinked and wondered what I had just been asked.

Then as the understanding came, and went, then came again... I sighed as I stood back up.

Looking down at my hand, I found it clenched rather tightly. I opened it, and watched as flattened pieces of wheat grains fell out of it. Some were so flat they looked weird now, like something hard. Hard and flat pieces of wood, maybe.

"Why are you asking me that, Fly?" I asked carefully.

"Gordon asked if I wanted to do it with him."

My eyes closed and I shifted, to listen around the building. Luckily for Nora's son, one of the older ones, he wasn't anywhere around us.

Sighing gently I went to grab more wheat. The grinder wasn't full yet. "Sex is the act of procreation. Though for some it's a pleasurable past time, and not just about having children. You remember what Wool was forced to do all the time? It's that," I said gently as I scooped up more wheat.

"Oh."

Glancing at the bird, who looked unbothered as she watched me pour wheat into the grinder, I wondered what to say next.

After all it wasn't that surprising she had asked me such a thing. She was a child, but only to my eyes. In human terms she was old enough to be married and start having children, and even to our kind she wasn't far off from it. Plus it wasn't as if it was necessarily a bad thing. It was something everyone did, all the time, inevitably.

Usually.

Yet I knew I needed to say something. Or at least try to. Even if it somewhat went against my own rules.

Renn would want me to say something. So let's try to... well...

"Renn would tell you it's something you do with someone you really cherish. Not someone you just met," I said carefully.

Fly giggled at me. "She would, yeah! So would most people, I think. His mother hit him with a spoon when he asked," she said.

I frowned at that. "Nora did? He said it in front of his mother?" I asked. When was this then? Nora was just here.

"Yea. Earlier this morning. She went red with anger too! Hit him so hard it drew blood! I ran off with the girls after, but I wanted to ask about it so I snuck away. I figured that was what he meant, but I wanted to make sure. Why's it called that? They called it mating in the sewers," Fly said, explaining the situation a little better.

I calmed down a little and smiled at her. I see. So I didn't need to worry. At least, not yet.

"I... well... you know, I honestly don't know. A long time ago they used to use other words for the act, as you mentioned. Coupling, mating, cleaving even was used for a while. But even back then some people used that phrase too, so I'm not sure where it came from," I said as I finished pouring enough wheat into the grinder. It was full now.

"Hm... now that I think about it, no one in the Society has really talked about it much. Or done it, as far as I can tell. The people in the sewer used to do it all the time, like you said, about Wool and stuff," Fly said calmly as she watched me grab the large circular stone and begin to turn it.

It was big enough that I knew it was likely too heavy for a normal person to manually turn. At least, not without lots of leverage and pulleys. But I was not a normal person.

"Well your experience with the Society so far is Lumen, for a short time, and then the Bell Church. One was having a bunch of chaos and issues at the time, and the other a village full of nuns. So..." I shrugged as I spun the wheel, grinding the flour. I made sure not to push too harshly, less I ruined the flour by squishing it too hard. It wasn't the squeezing you wanted, it was the grinding. The moving. The rolling.

"Oh. Right. People too old or too religious," Fly nodded her head as she drew closer to the machine. She stared down at the little slot, the gutter-like bowl all around it that the freshly ground flour was pouring into, from out under the grinder.

She seemed far more interested in the grinder than the conversation, so I was about to change topics... to one much better suited for the moment, but Fly beat me to it. "Have you done it before?" she asked.

I knew better than to hope, or expect, her to have meant something else.

"Yes."

"Is it fun?" she asked.

"It can be."

"Hm..."

Studying the bird, I found myself worrying again. Great. What if she ran off and invited that stupid boy on a whim...? I mean it wasn't like it was something terrible, she was her own person and was free to do whatever she wanted, and young adults did indeed do such things often... but...

Well...

Somehow it felt wrong. Or at least, it felt like it should be wrong.

Maybe it was because I felt responsible for her. More than usual. My actions, my choices, had made her join the Society. Had made her go through what she had endured in Lumen. And her now being homeless, again, was indirectly my fault too.

I should have made sure she would have been fine. Before leaving Lumen. I shouldn't have allowed Reatti and the rest to just toss her off onto the old nuns without hesitation. I should have known better. Been better.

Though... another part of me worried my own discomfort came from more recent events.

Renn. The Vote. The recent problems.

Maybe I was just getting sentimental. Or looking for something to use as a distraction. Not that Fly's predicament was not legitimate, of course, but...

"Did you squeeze these?" Fly then asked.

Pausing in the grinding, I turned to see what she was now holding. She had picked something up off the ground... and yes, it was one of the wheat pieces I had been holding earlier. It looked ridiculously large in her hands, and flat enough that it should bend and break, yet it wasn't. It kind of looked like a chip of wood or sliver of stone.

"Yes."

"You did it when I asked the question, about sex," Fly said.

"Well... yes."

"Why?"

I sighed a little. "It caught me off guard. Honestly something that doesn't happen very often," I said.

She grinned at that, as if proud to have done such a thing to me. "So it is weird? To just ask someone to do it with you?"

"Well..." I hesitated, and realized I should answer honestly... but also at the same time, didn't want to. "Kind of. Depends on the situation. There are those like Renn, or many others who would say yes. It's very weird to do something like that. Then there are those... well, like the deer family here, that would not find it odd at all," I said.

Fly hummed as she turned the flattened piece of wheat, studying it closely. As if it was one of her feathers that had fallen off her.

"Most see the act as something personal, Fly. Something you do with a loved one. The loved one, of your life. Others see it as just a normal, instinctual act. Something everything, and everyone, does. Some do it just to breed, to have children. Others do it purely for pleasure. You'll one day need to find out your own beliefs and ideals, and decide which type you are. Most end up being some kind of mix of the extremes, one way or another," I said.

"Wool used to cry. After. A lot of them did. Doesn't it hurt?" she asked.

"It can. It does. But it shouldn't. That goes back to the whole, doing it with the right person, type of thing. If it hurts it's because you don't want it to happen. Which is another issue all on its own," I said.

Fly's eyes held mine, and I made sure to give her a gentle smile. We were talking about rather important, and slightly heavy, things... but it wasn't the first time I've had to have such a conversation

with someone. It didn't happen often much anymore, since orphans and children without family or parents were rare nowadays, but it did still happen sometimes.

It was too bad Renn wasn't here. She'd have been better suited for this. Though maybe I could ask her to sit with her later, and have a more in-depth conversation. Women were usually better for this type of stuff, in my experience.

"Could we do it?" she then asked.

Luckily I had not been holding onto the grinder anymore. I'd have broken it otherwise. And thus would have broken my promise with Nora about having enough flour for her dinner.

"No. Not only are you too young for me, I'm married to Renn. She's my special person," I said, doing my best to sound as calm as possible.

"Oh... No, I didn't mean that Vim," Fly then said, sounding as calm as I wished I felt.

I frowned at her as she gave me a sad smile. Then she sighed and dropped the flattened piece of wheat back onto the ground.

"I meant... I'm a bird. You're not. They're not. I mean, look at me. Compared to most of you I'm so different! Am I even able to have children with anyone else?" Fly asked as she held out her arms, showing off her feathers. She only wore a light shirt and jacket at the moment, not the heavy stuff we'd been traveling with.

My panic and worry immediately disappeared, as I realized the entire source of this conversation. Her original query hadn't just been about the term, or what Nora's son had asked of her, but instead this.

This is why she had snuck away from fellow girls her age, a rarity amongst our kind. To ask this question. This terrible thing that regretfully she wasn't the only one who worried about, and wouldn't be the last.

Slowly nodding, I did my best to not feel horrible as I smiled at the young bird who suddenly looked terrified. "Yes, Fly. I believe you can. I've met plenty like you, even many who were far more animalistic. Those with wings instead of arms. Beaks instead of noses and mouths," I said with a small gesture to her face. She softly smiled at me as I continued. "Yes, I've even met those who lay eggs! Some of them live even today, to our east. Far to the east. Even they were able to have children normally, even with others. Some even have children with humans, and their children are born just fine," I said.

Fly's eyes widened a bit, and although her smile softened... she looked many times more excited and happy to hear it. Her whole body shifted, growing larger as her feathers raised upward as if she was agitated. "Really? Eggs?" she asked.

I nodded. "They did. Or do...? I'll be honest I don't know if they still do or not, I've not asked. They once teased me by making me eat some without them telling me about them, and I've made it a point to never put myself in that position again," I said.

Fly immediately began to laugh, to the point she had to reach over to grab onto the grindstone's support base as to keep herself upright. "You ate them!?" she asked with a shout between her laughs.

"They had been tasty too," I said, not willing to hide the truth.

Fly buckled as she fell to her knees, laughing heartily. She seemed to find that absolutely ridiculous.

Which was adorable and super relieving. Thank goodness she hadn't been serious about that earlier statement, and thank goodness my answer had suited her well enough to keep her depression at bay.

For a moment I just watched Fly laugh and giggle on the ground, she looked like she could very well envision my face as I was told I'd just eaten an egg. An egg laid by those darn ducks.

Reaching back over to return to grinding some flour, since I knew it'd not be long until Nora returned with a large basket in expectations of being able to fill it full... I ignored Fly's laughter until it died down enough. Once it did, I asked her to help me fix the mill. She of course readily agreed, excited at the idea of helping in such a way.

I of course didn't need any help grinding flour, or fixing the broken machines. None at all.

But it was a good excuse. To keep her away from the simple minded weirdos around us.

I had no doubt or worry now that Fly would do something foolish, but it wasn't her I worried over anymore.

Though I'd never say such a thing out loud.

Not until after the vote, at least.