

Non Human 341

Chapter 341 Lilly's Loyalty

The rain had returned. This time it was light, but cold. Cold enough that even with the large fireplace burning downstairs, the room still felt cold. Too cold.

Some rain danced on the window from a small gust of wind, and I watched the way the rain slid down the panel of glass. It was blurry, but not because of the rain coating it. The glass was thick, and wobbly. Not very well made, honestly. Not compared to the glass I've seen throughout my travels, with Vim, at least. It was, like the rest of this house and those like it in this village, simply the best they could probably build. The craftsmanship was better than most I've seen, but even I could see where it could have been done better.

Though not of the best quality, this place still felt strangely nice.

Looking down at my feet, and the socks upon them, I shifted a little to see the wood boards beneath me. A rug was nearby, but it didn't reach the wall I stood before.

The wood planks, not really boards, weren't rough. Nothing clung to my socks, or poked me, but they did look worn. There were little grooves in them, from all the years of wear. Plus it looked like they had stuck some kind of stuffing between the boards, as to better insulate the place. So that no drafts could get in. It worked, of course, but it made me wonder what they had used. Some kind of leaves? Wheat? How'd bugs not get in and make the place home? Maybe the general coldness of this area made it possible.

Looking back up from the floor, I glanced around the room I had just spent the night in. There were two beds, opposing each other, one for me and one for Lilly. We were not in Elaine's house but instead one nearby. This was Cat's house. A home she had lived in with two other women, one of which Vim had killed. The other woman had ended up marrying and moving in with another family on the other side of

the village. It seemed it was now hers and hers alone. The extra bedrooms and beds were for those who were sick, or wounded, what with Cat being the village doctor and all.

Although this was considered an extra bedroom, it still looked lived in. The rugs weren't stiff from a lack of use. The beds didn't stink from either overuse or lack of one. The room didn't smell like dust or mites, and especially didn't smell of sweat and old sex. In fact it was... well...

"Like home," I whispered ever so softly.

It really was. Somehow. This wasn't the building I had lived in long ago. It wasn't the same people. But it was the same place. Made out of the same type of wood and trees. Made in the same styles and ways that Witch and her family had crafted with. It was all a little nicer than I remembered, but not so much nicer that it felt wrong to me.

It was really strange. A strange feeling of... being back where I should be, yet still being somewhere I'd never been.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed out a strange mix of feelings.

I was happy. Yet scared. Worried, yet relaxed.

"Is this how you always feel, Vim?" I wondered as I looked back out the window.

Through the window was now a new sight. A pair of men.

I stepped closed to the window, bumping my knee into the shelf beneath it, as I tried to peer through the blurry dullness of the badly made window.

The two men were walking past the house; one was carrying a pair of fishing poles and the other what looked to be little buckets full of random objects.

I see. They were indeed heading towards the nearby lakes.

How nice. I used to fish nearby often. Not just with Witch, but alone. I used to like fishing at a certain one of the lakes, one that was particularly empty of fish. It was a silly thing, to fish a lake lacking of them when surrounded by lakes full of them, but it brought me a strange sense of joy to do so. I had always wondered if one day I would actually catch one, and if or when I did how would I explain it?

A bit of movement drew my eyes. I looked up, and then slowly looked down as I followed a droplet of water. Reaching up, I touched the window pane ever so gently, and allowed the droplet of water to roll onto a finger.

Rubbing the droplet of water between fingers, I smiled at the strange moment.

I should feel like I was in a hurry. As if I had a bunch of things to do. A whole lot of stress, and worry, for many reasons... yet instead I felt so at ease...

Some footsteps drew my ears away from the window, and then I turned my head to listen closer to their sounds. I focused a bit, to tell if I needed to put a hat on or not. I heard Cat take a small breath as she knocked on the bedroom door. "Renn? You awake?"

"I am. Come on in," I said. I was a little glad it was just her. I didn't feel like covering my ears at the moment. I was enjoying the sound of the rain.

She opened the door, smiled at me and glanced around. "Oh...? Lilly's not here either?" she asked.

"She's off doing something. I think she likes to be alone sometimes," I said.

"Ah... right... Owl right? Maybe they do like to be alone?" Cat wondered as she stepped into the room.

I nodded and shrugged, since I wasn't sure. Sometimes owls seemed to be alone, but other times they always seemed to be traveling in pairs, so...

She stepped up next to me and glanced out the window. The two men were gone now, so all that we could see was the nearby garden and the road. A single house was in the distance, at a distant corner, and a lamppost between us.

"Can I ask something Renn?" Cat then asked.

"Sure."

"Why don't you want us to tell anyone else? About who you are?" she asked.

I shifted a little and tried to keep focused on the world outside. Cat was staring at me, and I knew I'd probably show my thoughts on my face if I looked her in the eyes.

"Well... I killed her, Cat. I killed my friend. Your ancestor. Witch," I said.

"Yeah...? We all know, Renn."

"I know you do. But... well..."

For a moment I wasn't sure what to say. But then some words came to mind. "I shouldn't be ashamed of what I did. I know that. She was in pain. Dying. And she wanted me to help her. But... she was my friend. My teacher," I said.

"Didn't Elaine talk to you about this...?" Cat asked.

I nodded. "She had. She said the same things you are. That I shouldn't mind it. That it was okay. But... for now, please. Just keep who I am a secret from everyone. For now," I said.

Cat sighed but nodded. "Right. Sure. But please don't do it forever. Everyone here would love to meet you, Renn. You're a legend. Proof of all our bloodline's purpose and importance. How many others can claim saints in their ancestry? How many more can claim the servants of gods in their family too?" Cat said as she went back to staring out the window.

I smiled and nodded. "I know Cat. I promise, I will... I just want a little time. I'm still... a little shocked to be honest. I'm still trying to wrap my head around this all."

"Did you not sleep a wink again?" Cat asked as she turned, likely to look at the nearby beds. Odds are she had noticed that one hadn't been touched at all, Lilly's, and mine was still made. It was a little jumbled, since I had sat upon it for a few hours and rested, but I hadn't slept in it or got under any of the covers. In fact I'd not even moved a single pillow yet.

"I don't need as much sleep as you Cat, you know that," I said gently.

"Hm... I'm jealous. I feel like all I do is eat and sleep sometimes. Must be nice to have so much extra time," she said.

I smiled at that. "It is sometimes. Other times it's terribly boring. Since I usually get stuck somewhere quiet, dark and alone, so I have nothing to do all night," I said.

Cat shifted at my words, and I realized I had said something that bothered her. I had likely said something she had found sad, or depressing, so I quickly glanced back at the window and gestured at it to change topics.

"Is Elaine awake yet?" I asked.

"Oh. Yes. She's having her morning prayers; she usually finishes within an hour or so."

"Prayers?" I asked.

"As I'm sure you noticed she's... older. She can only perform small miracles once or twice a day anymore; doing much more makes her bedridden for days. She says spending time in the morning praying and purifying herself eases her discomforts and makes it easier to perform her miracles," Cat said.

I frowned at that and wondered if it was true. I couldn't remember Witch performing such prayers. In fact Witch hadn't been religious at all, as far as I was aware.

"What of the young girl? The sick one?" I asked.

"Getting better. Saint Elaine saw her this morning; she said there was no need to perform another miracle. That she'll be fine now," Cat said as she turned and stepped away.

Glad to hear the girl would be fine I turned to watch her. She looked like she was about to leave the room, but instead paused in front of one of the beds. She reached out, grabbed the bed's little frame stand, a wooden pole like thing, and squeezed it lightly.

Was she worried about something? Was that look of forlorn because of me, or something else...?

"You know, Cat," I spoke up, worried for her.

Cat glanced at me, and I smiled at her.

"Witch. She would have complained something fierce if she had seen what this place became," I said as I turned to look back out the window.

The rain had died down a little, though it sounded as if the wind had picked up a little.

"Yet for as much as she would have complained... I know she would have loved this. All of you. This village. She would have been very proud to know her memory lives on, and that there are others carrying on her life's purpose," I said.

Cat was silent, but I could hear her heartbeat. In this quiet room, in this quiet house. In this quiet village nestled deep in a quiet forest... many things were loud. And her heartbeat and quick breaths were very noisy at the moment. Almost as noisy as the footsteps heading our way.

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Nodding gently at my own reflection in the blurry window, I smiled at the young human woman who was hanging onto my every word.

"She'd have been proud Cat. Of all of you. I am too," I said.

Cat sniffed, and was about to say something but Lilly stepped into the room.

Lilly's arrival startled Cat, but not too badly. She made an odd noise and then chuckled. "Hey Lilly," she greeted her.

"Hm. Are you crying? Was Renn being mean to you?" Lilly asked bluntly.

Cat laughed some more. "No! Not at all! I don't think Renn can be mean to anyone, from what I've seen!" she said.

I frowned at that, and knew if Vim was here he'd scoff.

Turning around, I smiled at the two people I considered family. An older and younger sister, maybe.

Yes. I needed to be careful here.

Very careful.

"From my experience the nicest people can be the meanest," Lilly said.

"That means Lilly is the nicest person in the world, I bet," I said.

Lilly glanced at me, Cat held her breath, and then Lilly laughed. "Right!" she said.

I broke out into a smile at her laughter, since it seemed to be a rare thing. It sounded wonderful. She should do that more often. Maybe she would if we weren't around humans?

"Oh. Right. I need to go help prepare breakfast. That's what I came to speak to you two about, to let you know you're both invited to have breakfast with Saint Elaine later," Cat then said, remembering her original task.

"I'd love to. Her house?" I asked.

Cat nodded. "I'll come get you two when it's ready," she said as she stepped away from the bed and to the door.

Lilly stepped aside to let her leave, and Cat hurried away. Odds are she indeed forgot about it, Cat seemed a tad bit unfocused sometimes.

For a small moment Lilly and I listened to Cat as she hurried downstairs and got ready. I heard the sound of her putting on a jacket, and some thick boots. They made tiny squeaky sounds as she walked, as if they were slightly damp, as she left the house.

"I don't think we were followed here Renn. If we had been, they disappeared without me noticing and without any trace," Lilly said as she stepped closer.

"Hm... that's a good thing, isn't it?" I asked.

"For now."

"And you're sure we'd been followed? To your home?"

"Undoubtedly. There was a strange feeling at that little camp, and the horses kept looking across the ridge at something, or someone. Though no one was there," Lilly said.

I frowned as I tried to remember what she meant. We had gone to pick Cat up, and had only been at that camp for a few moments. We'd picked her up and then headed straight back into the forest as to head back to Lilly's house. I don't think I even noticed any weird scent, or feeling, at the time.

"I'll keep an eye out while we're here. Just in case," Lilly said as she looked out the window.

"Thanks... if someone from Telmik had followed us here, what would they do? You think?" I asked.

"With a saint? Renn... they'd kidnap her. Without hesitation," Lilly said as if it was obvious.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed. "She's already so old. And weak. She can barely perform the smallest of miracles without becoming bedridden. What would they possibly get from taking her like that?" I asked.

Lilly was quiet for a moment and then gestured lightly at the window, or rather the village beyond it. "You know what they'd get Renn. Plus it wouldn't be just her. They'd take her descendants too. That young woman, her daughter, hadn't been much older than Cat. She's still young enough to have children. Many children."

My eyes closed as I groaned. "Would they really do that...?" I asked, afraid of the answer.

"They have."

Great. Just great.

No wonder Vim didn't want them to know about her.

No wonder he hides Narli then.

Though... Why did he let the Society know of the Keep then? What if someone went there? And revealed Narli's presence?

Oplar went there, though supposedly she had only been there a few times. Likely alongside Vim when she went, too, but still... Not that Oplar would reveal Narli's existence. She's known all this time and hadn't done it yet, so there was no doubting her loyalty.

"By the way I'm glad your friends turned out to be good people. I had been slightly worried, to be honest," Lilly said.

"Worried...?" I asked. My mind was still focused on her previous comments, so I tried to set them aside for a moment and focus on Lilly's upcoming statement, or question.

"I'd worried what would have happened. Had they been enemies."

Oh. "I don't think they are. Unless you believe otherwise," I said.

Lilly shook her head and frowned. "No. I think they're fine. The saint seems a little... off. But that might just be her age. In my experience most saints are weird, and humans are the weirdest creatures to walk this earth so she's doubly weird," Lilly said.

Smiling, I nodded. Humans were odd sometimes, yes.

Yesterday we had only spent a few hours with Elaine. Most of it had simply been me and her getting to know one another. I told her, alongside Cat, the story of how we had met. How Vim had found her, and what had happened. She had not yet told me of the supposed prophecy that led her to sending Cat and the others out on such a venture, but had told me she'd tell me today.

She had been tired yesterday. Not only was she elderly, she had used her power to heal that young girl. And that had depleted what little strength she had at the time. So after a few hours of talking, and tea, she had grown weary enough to request a reprieve. To take a nap. Well... that nap had turned into a full on slumber. The night had come, and went.

I had not doubted the woman's sincerity, concerning her exhaustion. I had watched Witch not just grow weak and tired from using her abilities, I had watched her wither into a near-corpse unable to get out of bed because of their overuse. It was why she had asked me to end her suffering. It had been too painful for her to endure.

It worried me that this Elaine seemed to be heading down a similar path... but maybe all saints did, inevitably.

Hopefully this morning's breakfast, and the rest of the day, would be far more enlightening. I had so many questions. Last night we had spoken mostly about myself, and my journey here with Cat more than anything. I had barely been able to talk to her about Witch, or this place and her people.

I had much to say. And it strangely felt like I had little time to accomplish it.

As if I was in a hurry. Maybe I was.

"What's wrong Renn?" Lilly then asked.

"Hm...?" I turned my head and wondered what she meant. Had I said something aloud just now? Vim did say I sometimes mumbled my thoughts.

"You look worried," she said.

Oh. "I uh... I feel stretched. As if I should be hurrying, yet don't know why," I said.

"That's because you're anxious here. Hard to blame you, that saint is insufferable."

"She is...?" I asked. She had seemed to me to be nothing but pleasant and kind yesterday. She had even spoken gently to Lilly, even though Lilly was abrupt and somewhat rude the entire time.

"She knows what I am. Yet didn't even mention it. Usually saints either revere us, being descendants of their deities, or hate us for being the ones who helped destroy them. Yet she acted as if I was just another person. Another normal human. Not normal in my experience, for a saint to be like that," Lilly said.

A little stunned, I blinked at Lilly who sighed and shook her head, as if she couldn't believe Saint Elaine's strange personality.

"You've met many of them, haven't you?" I asked.

"Oh plenty. A lot had been born, or had been alive, during the wars. I don't know why there aren't as many of them nowadays, but they used to be everywhere. Used to find one in almost every town, at least human towns. As far as I know there have only been a handful of non-human saints ever born, strangely, but there have always been plenty of human ones."

Very interested, I nodded. "Back in the day, when I had lived here with Witch, we had traveled around a lot. Healing and helping people. She was considered odd but not so odd to be attacked or seen as something crazy. You're right that back then they had been more well known, and seen as more normal," I said.

"Right? I've killed my fair share but if anyone is to credit for their upcoming extinction I blame the humans and Vim," Lilly said with a nod.

Once again my head hurt. "Vim's hatred of them was that strong?" I asked.

"It used to be. At least, so he says. Back when we hunted some of them, it hadn't been because he hated saints but because they had been trying to eliminate the Society. A lot of them had banded together to try and destroy us, so we had to destroy them first. But the way Vim thinks of them? I have no doubt he used to hunt them fiercely. I sometimes wonder what a saint did to him to make him so pissed off... and in that same manner, I've always wondered why he then put up with Celine for so long too," Lilly said.

Gosh!

I groaned, which made Lilly glance and frown at me. "What?"

"I have so many questions!" I complained. I barely had enough brain capacity for the ones I wanted to ask Elaine, now what was I going to do with these new ones for Lilly!?

Lilly chuckled at me. "You sure do sometimes seem to have a lot of those. I bet Vim hates that," she said.

"He does. Half the time he doesn't even answer them, and just starts talking about something else instead," I said, complaining about him.

Lilly chuckled again and nodded. "Yeah. It was funny to listen to him talk to people, and then just turn and walk away sometimes. Some people didn't get the hint and kept asking the questions again, thinking he didn't hear them or something. It was funny seeing people get all upset and angry over it."

I smiled at that and nodded too. "I've seen him do that. To me too," I said.

"You really must be a kind woman then, to put up with that. I'd only be able to do it because I know he'd let me do it to him in return and he'd not get offended. Windle gets all whiny when I ignore him for too long, or keep secrets," Lilly said.

I smirked at that. Yes. Windle did seem to be the type to do something like that.

"So we both have our hands full, don't we?" I said happily.

Lilly nodded... and then her smile died down a little, as she suddenly became a little serious.

I hesitated for a moment, and wondered if maybe she had seen or heard something. Our pursuer maybe? Saint Elaine? I glanced out the window but saw nothing, nothing of note-worth at least.

"Before we go get deeper involved in this... I'd like to say something, if that's okay," Lilly then said.

I shifted, turned and nodded. Lilly's voice had taken a deeper tone, as she lowered her voice.

"I know to you they're family, Renn. Friends. People to trust. But... just in case... if something happens, well..."

I gulped, but nodded. "I know, Lilly. That's why Vim sent me to you, I think," I said softly.

She smiled again, this time a little sadly. "Yes. I believe so too. But I still want to say it, aloud," she started. She turned to look at me, looking away from the window finally, and she nodded at me. "Like I said. To you they're family. Even if humans. And... well..."

Holding her gaze, I noticed her large pupils widen a little. As if she had just unfocused a little, but I knew she was staring deeply at me. Focused on me as much as I was her.

"I don't know if I could kill my own family, Renn."

I blinked, and my heart thumped in worry. Why was she saying such a thing as that!

"A long time ago, before my first child was born, I had been assaulted. By a son. The son of a man who was a friend. Not just my friend, but a good friend of many of us. Vim's friend too. That friend, Yangli, had tried to stop his son from hurting me. From raping me. He hadn't been able to do it. He had tried, but failed in the moment. He had hesitated, unable to kill his own son," Lilly said.

I grabbed my pants, unable to say a word as Lilly sighed and nodded at me.

"I had for a long time blamed him for not being strong enough. But... I also never faulted him. Since it wasn't too long after that incident, after I had given birth to Branches, that I realized why. I had... learned to understand it. His failure had not been from a lack of conviction, or strength, but pure and simple love. Love for his child. So... I get it. I do. If something happens, Renn, let me handle it. So that you don't need to stain your hands with the blood of your family," Lilly then said.

My heart welled, as did my eyes, as I found myself utterly humbled by Lilly's sudden loyalty.

Reaching over, I took the owl's hand. She shifted a little, seemingly bothered, but I ignored her worry as I cupped her hand and held it, as if it was precious. Because it was. She was precious.

"I've already stained my hands, Lilly... but... I'll thankfully accept your kindness all the same, if it comes to that," I said, barely able to speak as tears began to leak from my eyes.

Lilly stared a little wide-eyed at me, but she nodded all the same. She didn't pull her hand away, and seemed to calm down a little... as if growing used to my touch. She even returned the hold, with her fingers clenching my own ever so slightly.

I knew her loyalty to me here, this offer, was because of Vim. She saw Vim so highly that such loyalty and kindness had extended to me... but somehow that only made it seem all the more precious to me.

"Thank you," I whispered again, and meant it. Even if I didn't believe she'd ever need to display such loyalty, least of all here, I was glad to have it.

And I hoped one day, to be able to return the favor. Somehow. Someway.

She deserved it. Every ounce of it.

No wonder Vim trusted her. No wonder Vim loved her.

No wonder he had said I could too.

Chapter 342 Stalks of Questions

How reminiscent.

Little Fly did not have wings, but she was still covered in feathers. And even though most of those feathers were currently hidden under her oversized clothing, I could still hear and feel a few as I carried her.

Carrying her on my shoulders as I walked reminded me of all those times I'd done the same for Lilly. So long ago, when she had been young.

Most things were light to me. Even heavy stuff became light when I put my mind to it. Yet Fly, like Lilly had been, was so unnoticeable that it was almost worrying. As if they were not real at all, and rather something else. Something ethereal maybe.

Feathers. A child. Light as air. And full of questions.

Yes. Very familiar.

"So they're foxes?" Fly asked lightly as I slowly ascended the hill.

"Yep. They have ears, somewhat like Renn. Though no tails. Not anymore," I said.

"Foxes eat birds," Fly then said.

I smiled at her and nodded. "They try to sometimes, yes."

She giggled at me and tapped my head. She did it ever so lightly, particularly compared to those who usually did such a thing. "What are you Vim?" she asked happily.

"Someone who seems to work good as a perch, supposedly," I said lightly as we reached the top of the hill.

I didn't pause to glance around, since I knew where we were and how far we still had to go, but I still used the vantage point to scan our surroundings. Just in case.

We were alone for as far as I could see, and for as much as I could tell. We were still a day or so from Twin Hills, it was north of us through these hills. We were approaching, thankfully, Porka's house directly. We'd not have to round or go near Bordu.

"Are you making fun of me?" Fly asked.

"More so was making fun of myself," I said.

She giggled again, and as she did her little talon feet curled inward. I had to keep an eye on them, since her feet had talons and they could get stuck in my clothes if I wasn't careful. Them ruining my clothes was not an issue, at all, but I worried over breaking them, or hurting her, by not noticing them being stuck and moving quickly on accident.

I'd feel absolutely terrible if I hurt her. She was as frail as she looked. Which was why it was so odd she reminded me of Lilly.

She had Lilly's personality, to a point, but not her strength. At all. A bad combination.

Even Lilly with all her strength had needed saving on many occasions thanks to all the trouble she got herself into, what with her hardheaded stubbornness.

"Porka and her family are very good people. Not long before we met you Fly, Renn and I took another young girl about your age to them. She had needed a home," I said.

"Hm... is this my new home? We didn't travel as far as I thought we'd need to," she said lightly.

"I'm not sure. We'll spend a day or so here, and while we do you can see if you'd be happy here or not. If you do though, you'll have to be very careful. They have lots of humans that come and go here, since they work the fields," I said with a gesture around us. We were surrounded by wheat and other grain like crops.

"They... grow all this?" she asked.

"Yep. There's a human town nearby, Bordu. Humans come from there to work the fields, especially during planting and harvesting seasons. You'd have to either hide in the house, or always wear some kind of robes if you stayed here," I said.

Fly sighed.

I waited for her to say something, but she didn't. I felt for the poor girl, but I wasn't going to lie to her. It was the truth.

She was not human. So she had to live like one who wasn't.

The problem wasn't so much that she was a non-human... and covered in feathers... it was rather the sad and simple fact she was now a rarity.

Back in the day she would not be having any issues at all. I would have been able to take her to one of many locations, dozens and dozens, that would have happily accepted her and she them. Yet today...

Today I was down to a handful at best.

The road I was on ended. Or well, turned the wrong way. And kept going the wrong way for as far as the eye could see... so I simply kept on walking forward. Stepping off the flattened dirt path, I stepped through a small patch of basic grass and dirt, and then into the wheat.

Stepping through the knee-high wheat, I did my best to not step on and break too many of the stalks. I tried to search for a path or road nearby, as to get out of the fields as soon as possible.

"Isn't it too cold for this stuff to grow?" Fly asked as I strode through the sea of grain.

Fields of gold, as many have called them.

"The strand grown here, this species of wheat, is the type that can endure winter. It grows big and strong enough to survive the cold, goes into a hibernation like state, and then once it's warm again it returns to growing as if winter never happened. And even if the wheat does die, as most of it likely will, it is fine. They're not really growing this during the winter as to feed themselves but to keep the soil healthy," I explained.

"Soil...?"

I nodded. "The wheat helps the soil out during the winter. Keeps it just warm enough, and allows nutrients to come and go basically. Think of it kind of like a house, or a bedroom. If no one lives in a place for a long time, and it remains empty for extended periods, it gets all dusty and stuff starts breaking down. Bugs move in. It gets worn and old. The wheat is doing for the soil, the ground, what a person does to a house," I said.

Fly hummed for a moment and I felt her turn a little, likely to look at the path behind us. I was doing my best to not harm the wheat but I knew I still left a visible path all the same.

"Is it fun? To farm?" she asked.

"It's hard work. Laborious. Long hours, with little return especially when a crop fails. But there's a joy to it. It's soothing to watch something you've toiled away on grow and prosper. And then you can feel the pride when you, or others, eat the food you grew yourself. Some of the most content people I've ever known were farmers," I said.

"Content?" she asked.

"Happy. Satisfied. In that context I meant that a farmer is usually very at peace with themselves, even if poor or exhausted," I said.

"I'd rather not be exhausted or hungry. I did that before," Fly said simply.

I nodded. "Don't blame you at all."

"Basically all I heard from you is that it's a whole lot of hard work, and you have to really try and trick yourself to enjoy it," Fly said.

I laughed at her. "Now, now. Don't insult farmers, they grow your food."

"I'm not insulting them. If anything I'm pitying them," she said, and I heard her smirk.

"Well... you're not wrong. I myself never have cared much for farming. If I was to do a bunch of monotonous labor day in and day out I'd rather do it on the sea. If I had to do it on land... well... I guess building roads is fun," I said as I thought about it.

"Roads...?"

I nodded as we approached one. It wasn't leading directly in the direction we wanted, but I knew it eventually would. It'd likely only add an hour or two to our travels by sticking to it, so that I'd stop destroying any of the wheat.

Usually I'd not mind such a thing... but if any of the local humans saw me destroying their fields so brazenly as I was, they'd likely pick a fight. Even if they didn't work these fields, there was a very good chance their family members or friends did. And they'd not take kindly seeing their fellow's hard work go to waste in such a way.

"How far are we from Renn now?" Fly asked.

"Just a few days from here. If I don't have any major things I need to do here and we can leave soon enough you'll be able to bug her within the week," I said.

Fly hummed at me. "You mean stuff like you did previously," she said.

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I nodded.

"Checking the fence at the Bell Church. Fixing that grinding thingy... dealing with me and my master in Lumen. Are you always doing crazy stuff everywhere you go?" Fly asked.

"Sometimes. Most places I visit, and the stuff I need to do at them, are rather boring to be honest."

"Are there lots of monsters, Vim? Everyone at the Bell Church said that the master was a monarch. That there used to be a lot of them, but now there isn't," Fly asked.

"They had not been monarchs, Fly. Descendants of them, yes very likely, but they themselves had not been anything but normal creatures," I said.

Fly shifted a little. "What's the difference?"

"Monarchs are special. Usually they're more dangerous. I say usually because your master, those weird plant things, had been rather dangerous. I honestly don't know if the humans would have been able to slay them on their own. That's quite a feat for a creature of flesh and bone," I said.

"Hm... how are you able to defeat them, then?" she asked.

"I'm special too, in my own way."

"How so?"

I smiled at her childish tone. It sounded so much more innocent coming from her than when Renn asked such questions. Though that might just be because of how hard it was for me to lie to Renn, or ignore her.

"Just as you are special in your own way, Fly, so am I. It's just instead of having feathers or talons," I said with a light tap on her right foot. "I have great strength and resilience."

"Can I get as strong as you?" she asked.

"No. But you can get stronger, if you try. There are ways to train. Proper ways to eat. But no, no one can get as strong as me," I said.

"No one...? At all?"

I shook my head.

"Hm..." Fly hummed at me as a light gust blew past. The world became a tad noisy as all the wheat around us flowed and swayed alongside the breeze.

"But yes... Monarchs are rare now. I used to encounter them often. Now I can go years and years without running into one, though for some reason I've ran into a few lately. Happenstance, I suppose," I said, and slightly hoped.

"Some of the sisters, at the Bell Church, said we're descendants from them. That they're our gods," Fly said.

I nodded. "Some believe that, yes. Their faith has a form of that belief in it, kind of claiming monarchs to be angels and whatnot," I said.

"Are we though?" Fly asked the obvious question that usually followed such a thing.

"In a way. Non-humans are descendants of monarchs, basically."

"Huh... is that why some of us are like me?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Then why are so many like you too?" she asked further.

"The bloodlines thin as the generations go by. For instance any children you have will likely be less bird than you. And their children even less so. It'll likely not take many generations for your descendants to become nearly completely human looking. What with no feathers, or talons," I explained.

"So... I could give birth to humans?" she asked.

I nodded again. "That's one way of looking at it."

"Which means the humans came from us," she reasoned.

I chuckled at her. "So some say, yes."

Fly hummed as she pondered that new information, and I noticed as she did her humming had a slight rhythm to it. As if she was humming a song.

Renn hummed like that sometimes. Absentmindedly too.

Thinking of her made me realize my mind had been drifting to her often lately. Even though it's only been a couple weeks since we'd parted.

Hopefully she had made it to Lilly safely. She should be there by now, even with Cat in tow.

Actually by now they'd likely already headed out, to find Cat's home. I hoped it was all going well. Between Renn and Lilly they'd likely find the village, even if Cat failed to guide them properly. The real worry wouldn't be if they found that village, but what would happen afterwards.

It was the village of Renn's friend. Her witch friend. Descendants of her, at least.

"What you thinking about?" Fly then asked.

"If I'll have to destroy a village or not soon," I said lightly.

She shifted a little on my shoulders. "Which one?" she asked in a way that told me she was looking around, likely for the village I spoke of.

I smiled at the fact that she didn't seem too worried, but instead interested and excited over it. She really was similar to Lilly.

A rarity amongst birds. They were usually as timid as they were feeble.

"You like to sing Fly?" I asked.

She shifted again, likely because I had just changed topics rather abruptly, and hummed at me. "Not really."

"You sound offended I asked," I noted.

"Because you assumed I'd like to sing just because I'm a bird, right? Everyone else does that too. It's annoying," she said with a huff.

"Everyone else?" I asked.

"All the people at the Bell Church. And some at Lumen too."

Ah. I see. "Well, it's likely also because you have a pretty voice," I said. I'd comment on how she had a rhythm when she hummed, and that it was pleasant on the ears, but decided not to. She'd likely stop doing it if I made her conscious of it.

Fly shifted again. "I have a pretty voice?" she asked.

I nodded. "You do. I bet you could hit a lot of good notes if you sung."

"I don't know how to sing," she said gently.

"One of the best singers I ever knew claimed one could not be taught how to sing. That it was something you're born with," I said.

"People can't learn how to sing?"

I shrugged gently, as to not bother Fly. "It's just something they said."

She hummed, though this time normally.

"Can Renn sing?" she asked.

I blinked at that, and frowned.

For a few moments I walked quietly as I thought of Renn's voice and her humming.

Yes. She too had a nice voice. And although I myself had never heard it, I have been told by others that she could sing. And did so well, even though embarrassed when doing so.

"I've been told she can, yes," I said gently as I wondered why I'd never heard her do so before.

"You... don't know?" she asked, sounding as perplexed as I felt.

"No. I've never heard it myself. I wonder why, I had planned to hear it for some time now. I guess I've just been distracted and busy," I said.

Fly hummed at me. "Are you a bad husband Vim?" she asked.

I smirked at that. "Maybe. Possibly... I might be, yes."

She sighed. "Poor Renn."

Yes. Poor Renn indeed.

We finally reached the new road, and I left the field of wheat and stepped upon it. It was a similarly dirt road, though one packed and flattened over the many years of use. It was wide enough for a larger wagon, but I didn't see any fresh tracks upon it. It's likely been several days since it's been used.

As I strode along the path, I noticed in the distance some signs we were nearing our destination. There were small gray smoke stacks lazily floating into the air, likely a home or farm. Probably one of the human families that lived around here and helped manage the fields.

Fly shifted, and then rested her arms upon my head. I barely noticed the shift in weight, but now it was directed onto my head. She had likely just leaned onto my head as to rest a little. "How much farther?" she asked.

"Still a day or so away, Fly," I told her again. Hadn't I just said so?

"So... they work all these fields? And we're a day away? How much food is this?" she asked.

I smiled at her. "They manage the workers who work these fields. These will end here shortly, turning back into grassy hills, and then more wheat will appear. There's a lot, but there's not as much as you might think. It takes almost as much wheat as you could wrap your arms around to make a single loaf of bread," I said.

"Hm," she didn't sound convinced so I pointed to the smoke in the distance.

"See that smoke? That's likely one of the farmsteads. It's not our destination, but they work alongside and with the foxes," I said.

"Why's it take so much to make a single piece of bread?" she asked.

"Because the only part that makes the food, the flour, is those stuff at the top. The grains," I said. I stepped closer to the wheat and plucked one for her. Holding it up to her, Fly took it as to study it. I heard her poke and prod the spikelet, messing with the grains.

"Who figured out this stuff turns into bread?" she asked.

"I've been told it was figured out a very long time ago, and was likely figured out not because whoever did so was trying to make food but rather drinks instead," I said.

"Drinks...?"

I nodded. "Alcohol, to be more specific. Though I suppose people have been making bread-stuff for long since before then, just using the more basic methods," I said as I thought about it.

"Basic methods...?" she asked.

"Basically the nicer tasting breads take a little more than just mixing the flour with water. Basic bread has been around for almost forever, while the nice stuff is more recent," I explained a little further.

She hummed and the end of the wheat stalk smacked me in the face as she moved it around. It bounced around in front of me, hitting me occasionally, until she snapped it into pieces and dropped most of it. The wheat stalk fell, and I heard her munch on the grains... but only for a moment.

"Doesn't taste like bread," she complained with a more disappointed tone than an annoyed, or disgusted one.

"Well, no. It wouldn't."

Fly sighed and tossed the rest of the wheat.

About to tell her that birds munched on such things often, and so thus she should have enjoyed it, I was interrupted by a very particular sound.

At first I wondered if I had misheard, but then I heard the sound again. This time coming from multiple sources.

I heard the sounds before I saw them. It took a moment to find them, but I eventually found the little balls of fuzz and claws in the distance.

A pair of small kittens were playing on the road ahead of us. Pouncing on each other and chasing each other around. The sight of them reminded me that this area had hundreds of them.

"What are those?" Fly asks, likely noticing them too.

"Cats."

"Cats...? Oh. I don't like cats."

"Hm...? Why not? Renn's a cat," I said.

"Huh? Oh. When I lived in the sewers they'd steal my food. Whenever I tried to stash it, they'd always make a mess of my little sleeping area trying to get it. They were really the only animals that ever came down into the sewers so they were annoying," Fly explained.

I nodded slowly. That made a lot of sense, actually.

Yet even still...

As we neared the kittens, instead of them running away at the sight of us they instead paused and mewed. Several more smaller cats stepped out of the wheat stalks, hurrying onto the road as they all began to approach us and meow excitedly. As if we were long lost friends that were carrying food.

"Oh my gosh! So cute!" Fly seemingly forgot all about her rough past and hatred as she hurriedly tried to climb off me, as to greet the tiny kittens.

Chapter 343 Saint Elaine

"You plan on leaving soon, aren't you too callous?" Saint Elaine asked as I sat back down.

Pausing a half moment, since I hadn't told her or anyone else yet that Lilly and I planned on leaving soon, I realized who I was talking to.

I nodded with a faint smile. Witch used to do that too. Start conversations as if we'd already been in the middle of them.

"Lilly recently gave birth. Just a few weeks ago, actually. I'd like to let her return to her newborn daughter as soon as possible," I said.

I knew Lilly would likely be a little upset with me if I told her, or anyone else really, about her daughter... but I wasn't too worried. Elaine and I were alone in the house right now, and I believed this woman to be trustworthy. Or at least, I wanted her to be.

The elderly woman sat up a little straighter. "Really now...? How wonderful. I'll make sure to congratulate her and send her home with gifts," she said.

My faint smile grew into a normal one. "That's very nice of you." Hopefully I'm there to see her accept them. Lilly really hated humans so it'd be interesting to see her reaction to getting gifts from them.

"Hm... Might I ask why you are not a mother yet?" Elaine then asked, causing my smile to falter.

"You can tell?" I asked.

She nodded gently with her half-closed eyes. As if she was exhausted, Elaine's glowing eyes were always half-hidden. Almost as if she didn't want to see anything around her, or something like it. "I can. It's very, very, subtle... but someone who has given birth has a slight change in their color. In their source," she said.

Huh... "I've heard of that. I've had it explained it's kind of like a ball of light," I said, referencing Narli.

"Hm... I can see why one would explain it that way. For me it's more like a reflection. A gleam off a surface of something translucent, that I can't really make out," Elaine explained.

I slowly nodded at that and thought of the hearts I've seen. They did sometimes seem like some kind of special glass, a type of glass that almost seemed like they didn't exist. Maybe that was what she meant.

"You hadn't been able to notice Lilly's change then? That she'd just given birth?" I asked.

"Not if she was already a mother before," she said.

Ah... I wonder how that worked. "So you mean once you've given birth, your color changes permanently? No matter how many times or how long ago it had happened?" I asked.

She nodded with a small frown. "You find that odd?"

I did. But I didn't know why. "So you mean to say you had known Lilly was a mother. You just had no idea when or how long ago," I said.

She nodded again. "Yes. Most women her age have had children so it's just... normal to me. I had not found it strange. It's why I find it odd you've not had any yet, being as old as you are. Especially what with you being married," Elaine said lightly.

Although she didn't sound like she was being rude or condescending, it still stung a little to hear her speak of me in such a way. It made me feel like I was... wrong, or failing at some task. That I was weird for not doing something common and expected, by everyone.

"Well... I guess I could use the excuse that I only recently married Vim," I said.

"Hm... how long ago was that?" Elaine asked.

I was about to answer, but paused. How long ago...?

Technically never. Since we'd not officially exchanged vows. Yet, for all intents and purposes we being married was now something the two of us seemed to simply accept as fact... so...

How long then...?

Was it when I first started telling people I was his wife? Or did our marriage begin not when I said so, but when he did as well? When it became agreed upon, basically?

Or was it instead just the moment we started our relationship...? If so was it when we began to openly speak of it, or was it when it started before we even noticed...?

"Quite a long silence for such a simple question," Elaine said gently with a smirk.

I smiled back at her and sighed. "Sorry... I just don't know. Maybe a year or so?"

"Do you non-humans have a different marriage process than us?" she asked.

"I don't think we do. I just... am not really sure when the two of us became what we are. A part of me wants to say it was only recently, yet another wants to claim it began the moment we met," I said.

"Hm..." Elaine leaned back in her chair, and her glowing eyes became a tad brighter as she opened them farther and stared at me.

Although I should have been worried by the look, I knew better. Witch used to study me in a similar fashion... though now that I knew saints could see more than what could be seen, I did admit I was a little interested in what she was studying.

My look? My smile? Or my supposed soul, or source, as they called it? Or was she just smiling at me as an old woman does to someone who looked younger?

"Did you not marry anyone, Elaine...? I've heard you returned with your daughter but not him," I asked.

Elaine blinked, and then smirked at me. "He died. I had originally planned to return with him, but he perished on our trip home. It was my fault," she said.

"Oh... I'm sorry," I said, feeling bad I had brought up a sad memory.

She waved my worry away. "I was young. I thought I could steal a man from another without repercussions. I found out the hard way that everything has a price."

Oh... Oh! I nodded slowly as I realized what she meant.

She had tried to take someone else's husband. And he had lost his life somehow in the resulting drama that followed.

"I've been told that sometimes you're unable to see certain things, or rather certain people, when they're considered close to you... is that true?" I asked.

"If you're asking if I failed to protect him because I had been unable to see his future, then yes and no," she answered.

"Yes and no...?"

She nodded and lifted a hand, cupping the air as if she was holding a cup. "The things I see, the prophecies I foretell and dream, are not really about singular people. They're more concerned on the greater scope of things. Think floods, great calamities, or wars and plagues," she said.

Oh...? "That's... interesting. Witch had said most of her dreams had been about the elders. And only occasionally had been about anything else," I said. The man she had fallen for had been one of the few non-monarch prophecies she had told me about. And even the one about him had been short and simple. It had given her just enough information to tell her that he had been the one she'd settle down with, and have children with, but nothing more.

Saint Elaine nodded gently as clasped her hands on her lap, resting them there. "I believe all of us have our own purposes. We see what we need to, concerning our tasks, and rarely if ever anything more. For instance I knew you would one day show up, but not when or why. I simply saw once that you'd walk through the door to help me in a way only you can," Elaine said.

"What is that task anyway?" I asked. She had mentioned this before but hadn't specified.

"I believe it's to destroy a great evil. Or at least, an evil in our perspective."

"Like a monarch?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "It's odd to hear you speak of things that I even don't know about. But it shouldn't be... you're so much older than me. And you've obviously been around more saints than myself, too," Elaine said as she studied me.

I shifted a little. "Your ancestor called them elders. Great Elders," I said.

The saint nodded. "Yes. That's what I've always known them to be. Ancestors of a bygone age. From when gods walked this realm," she said.

Oh...? That was a unique word. Particularly when said from someone like her. It was the type of word I rarely heard, if ever.

Vim used that word sometimes. He had mentioned it before... in fact I believe he had done so when we had been talking about Witch and her powers. He had claimed she had not used magic. That magic was from a realm that no longer existed anymore.

Back then I hadn't honestly believed him. But now I knew it wasn't that he had lied to me, but rather that he simply was saying I had misunderstood the powers Witch had used.

She hadn't used magic. She, like the elderly woman in front of me, used the powers of the divine. Of gods. Of their creators.

Though... that meant magic was a different thing entirely, wasn't it? Vim had said it had been real. That it couldn't be used anymore, for whatever reason. Which meant their powers, a saint's power, was a different kind of power than this supposed magic.

I wonder what separated the two? I wonder what magic was, compared to the powers of those like Elaine and the monarchs?

"Is it the same one you sent Cat and the rest after? The one that started those fires?" I asked.

Elaine frowned, her eyes going half closed again. "I... am not sure. Yes, maybe. Yet maybe not. All I know is I need to help you do something. Something important," she said.

"I need to do it?" I asked.

She nodded a little strangely, likely because she was in thought.

"Are you sure it's me...?" I asked carefully.

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Elaine blinked and then focused on me. "What do you mean?"

"Are you sure that I'm the one you're supposed to help do something...? And not... well..." I hesitated, and wondered what I was trying to say.

Didn't she mean Vim? Vim was the one who would face and destroy any monarchs, right? Then... didn't that mean she should be helping him? Or was she saying that my presence was needed somehow?

"I can't see your husband, Renn. I know he exists. I know he travels with you... in fact I had expected him to show up with you, but I don't know anything about him," Elaine said.

"Yet you were able to tell what I meant, just now," I pointed out.

She smiled at me. "From what you and Cat have explained about him, it's safe to assume he's some kind of strong and powerful non-human. If he had been on the hunt for the same creature which caused those fires, that means he is capable of handling it... or at least believes himself to be so. So I just put one and two together," Elaine explained.

I nodded. "He is strong. Verily. Far more than I am," I said.

Elaine blinked at me. "Then that is good to hear, Renn. Our stories tell about how you helped my ancestor defeat many great ones. That the two of you defeated several elders, and our saint only accomplished such tasks thanks to you. So if you're capable of that alone, I can only feel further hope upon hearing that your husband is even more capable," Elaine said.

My breath caught a moment, and I shook my head. "I barely helped at all, Elaine. Witch did most of it. She used her powers. Her abilities, to kill them. I simply distracted them, or acted as bait or..." I tried to say.

Elaine chuckled lightly at me, dismissing my growing worry and anxiety as she did. "That's help, Renn. A lot more than you think."

Was it...?

"As much as I'd love to hear all about her, and those moments... since we're on the subject of your husband, may I ask about him?" Elaine asked before I could say anything more on the matter.

I nodded.

"His name is Vim?" she asked.

I nodded again. "Yes. He's a good man. He has his flaws, of course, and some of them are mighty... but I'm very proud of him," I said.

"Is he like you...? With your ears and all?" she asked with a small gesture to the top of my head.

Oh. "No. He's not a cat. I uh... honestly don't know what he is. No one does," I said. Elaine frowned at me, so I sighed and nodded before she could ask the obvious. "Vim is the Society's protector. He believes if people knew exactly what he was, whichever specific animal, it'd cause discord. He believes that by keeping his true bloodline secret, he is able to keep the peace and stop certain people from growing uneasy or upset," I explained.

Elaine frowned but slowly nodded. "That... makes a lot of sense, honestly. If your people are really as diverse as you seem to be, such a thing may very well be not just wise but needed. I'm to assume then, like us humans, your people fight and find differences even in simple little things like appearances?" she asked.

"Oh verily. The true problem though is what one would consider a mindset. Predators and prey. A lot of our members are very weak-willed, or timid, and don't feel comfortable with those with a little more... well, hardheaded mindsets, as some would say," I explained.

"Like a bunny and a fox," she said, understanding.

I nodded. "Yes. I know that might sound strange, because trust me it does, but it's the truth. In fact that's why Vim's not here right now, he had to go somewhere and pick a member of ours up. A young girl named Fly. She's a bird, and the place she was living at had a bunch of more timid members. They weren't getting along, so Vim has to take her elsewhere," I said.

"I would think birds would be very timid," Elaine said.

"Right...? It's more than our bloodlines though. For instance there is another cat. In Lumen. She and I are very different. To the point she won't even speak to me, because I scare her," I said.

Elaine shifted as she pondered what I was saying, and then hummed at me. "Predator and prey," she stated.

I nodded. "I'm too much a predator in her eyes... or well, in many people's eyes," I admitted.

"You seem very calm to me, Renn. Even if you showed up wearing mercenary armor," Elaine said with a small grin.

I grinned back at her and nodded. "Used to have a sword too. It recently broke," I said.

"Oh...?"

Nodding softly again, I sighed. "To be honest, I don't like how the Society is so split. But I can't do anything about it. No one can," I said.

"It's the same everywhere, for everything. Us humans separate and disagree over similar things all the time, so I'd not be too bothered over it. It's just a part of life," Elaine said.

I nodded again, but didn't outright agree with her. After all I rarely heard of humans uprooting their whole lives and moving to different cities just because their neighbors were a little different than them. Or maybe humans did, and I just didn't realize they did.

"You call your husband the protector. Is that his job or title?" Elaine asked.

"Both...? Is there a difference?" I asked.

"Can others become one? A protector?" she asked back.

Ah... "Maybe. I don't know, probably," I answered honestly. It was hard to imagine someone else doing what he did, even if I wanted to be what he was myself.

I kept the upcoming vote concerning Vim's position in the Society to myself, as Elaine tilted her head. "Have you been a part of this society long?" she asked.

Shaking my head, I heard the wind pick up outside. This house was well built, without any drafts, but I could feel that it was growing colder. I should probably light the nearby fireplace soon, to make sure Elaine would be comfortable. "Just a few years," I told her.

"Why is that?" she asked.

"I hadn't known of its existence until recently. I happened upon some of the members in a nearby town, Ruvindale. Before then I hadn't known about the Society," I explained.

Elaine seemed to find that odd for she frowned. "That is strange," she stated.

"Is it...?" I asked. I mean, it was. I've lived for a long time. You would have thought I would have run into more non-humans, particularly those of the Society, but it is what it is.

"My vision. The one about you showing up here... I had it a long time ago, Renn," Elaine said.

Tilting my head, I frowned at her. "You mean... my walking through the door, with Vim?" I asked.

She nodded.

"But... why is that strange? Hadn't you just seen what would happen? The future or whatever? What would it matter if it was a long time ago or recently?" I asked.

"Because it had been back when I was young. Before my daughter was even born. I had met you when young, back then," she said.

I shifted a little in my chair as I understood her meaning. She was saying that she had foreseen us meeting a long time ago. In her prophecy she had seen us meeting before her daughter had been born. Decades ago, likely.

And I had been with Vim even then.

"Witch had said she saw possibilities. Is that not just what you saw? A possibility? Why's that strange?" I asked.

The idea that I could have met Vim many years ago, and thus showed up here earlier, was an interesting if sad thought... but I wasn't going to dwell on it. It wasn't like I could change the past.

"Possibilities are beyond me. What I see are things that come to pass," she said.

I shifted a little and wondered if she meant what I thought she did. "You mean everything you see comes to pass?" I asked.

"Usually. For instance Brave and the rest I had seen failing. And they had. But I had not seen them die... which is why I had been willing to send them on that quest," Elaine said gently.

Feeling bad all of a sudden, I did my best to not allow my emotions to overcome me. She had already made it very clear that I shouldn't feel responsible, nor should Vim, so I didn't want to insult her by continuing to feel horrible over it. "I don't understand. From what I've heard your prophecies can be wrong. Often," I said.

"Says who?" she asked rather simply.

Well... "Witch for one," I told her, choosing to use her as the answer and not Vim.

Elaine frowned at me. "Prophecies can be wrong, in the sense you can misunderstand them. But the simplest ones, like those I see, in my experience have never been wrong."

"Did you not just say you foresaw me coming earlier?" I pointed out.

She smiled at me. "I simply misunderstood that. You still showed up," she countered.

I hesitated, since it felt almost like she was trying to convince herself more than she was me... and then I realized that was likely exactly what was happening.

Maybe she firmly believed her prophecies always came true. Irrelevant to their actual outcome. Like my showing up late, or Brave and the rest dying on their quest.

Was she simply twisting the truths as to find a logical conclusion she wished to believe in? Or was I reading too much into her statements?

I'd wonder if she was right or not, but I had it on very good authority she was wrong. Not just from Vim, either. Witch and Narli had both said similar things. That they saw potential futures, not guaranteed ones. Those who had known Celine, or about her, claimed similar concerning her prophecies too.

Not wanting to cause issues, I simply decided to ignore Elaine's beliefs for now and guide the conversation along. Yet before I could, someone knocked on the front door.

I stood from my chair, rounded the couch Elaine sat upon and went for the door. As I did I guessed it was Lilly, since anyone else here in this village would have likely simply opened the door.

Opening the door, I indeed found Lilly. She was soaked.

"Why are you so soaked?" I asked as I glanced at the world beyond her. There was indeed a light mist, but it wasn't raining harshly. Nowhere near harsh enough for her to be so wet.

"It's pouring not far from here. It's heading this way," Lilly said as she stepped into the house.

I stepped back, since she was so wet I didn't want to catch any of the droplets that flew from her as she took off her thick outer jacket.

That meant Lilly had once again been out wandering the area around the village, looking for anyone who may have been following us for one reason or another. I knew a part of her efforts were simply her wanting to spend as little time here in this human village, but I also knew she was serious in her efforts. And not just because she firmly believed we had been followed.

She hung her soaked jacket on a spot on the nearby wall, and I shut the door behind her.

"Elaine, Lilly's here to join us," I said as I stepped back into the front room. Before sitting back down though I went to start a fire. It was cold enough that I should have done it earlier.

"Come sit, rest your wings," Elaine said gently, causing Lilly to pause at the entrance of the room.

I glanced at her and noticed the annoyed look of discomfort on her face. She said nothing though as she continued forward and over to a chair. The farthest one from Elaine.

Kneeling in front of the fireplace, I found the few pieces of wood within it were half burnt already. I had to gather some kindling and a couple proper logs from a nearby box as to ready it to be relit. They didn't have the metal fire-starters that most locations in the Society had, but instead simple rocks that when struck would cause sparks. It took a few solid smacks of the rocks to start the fire, and I had to blow on the little flame a bit to really get it going.

"Still... this man must be quite something. It is too bad he hadn't joined you here," Elaine said as I studied the fire for a moment, to make sure it stayed lit.

"Man?" Lilly asked.

"Vim... at least, I assume that's who we're still talking about," I said as I stood away from the fireplace. It would be fine; it was growing strong and would stay aflame for some time by the looks of it.

Lilly frowned at me as I stepped closer to the two of them. I didn't return to my seat though as I watched Elaine cross her arms and close her eyes. I could barely see the glow from them from under her eyelids, even though the glow should be strong enough to pierce them easily.

Her strange interest in Vim was odd. It almost seemed like she had some kind of question she wanted to ask about him, yet hadn't just come out and asked it yet. As if she was beating around the bush instead... or...

"Do you know him?" I asked, wondering if that was it.

"Your husband...? No," Elaine opened her eyes to frown and shake her head at me.

"Then why the interest?" Lilly asked for me. She side glanced the saint as she spoke, telling me she had noticed Elaine's oddness even from these last few moments.

Elaine smiled at Lilly, and then glanced at me. "She's like a long lost sister to me. Of course I'd be interesting in her partner."

My ears fluttered a little and I reached out to grab the back of a nearby chair. It took a small moment for me to soak up her words, and by the end of it I was smiling.

Lilly sighed gently, and I knew it was because she had heard the same thing I had.

An answer to distract from the real one.

But still... it had made me smile all the same.

"Well... before your daughter returns, with Cat and who knows who else, why not tell us about this evil you expect me defeat," I said as I went to sit back down. As to change the topic a little, since it made me feel weird and a little unsure in general. Her interest in Vim was for an obviously real reason, even if she wouldn't outright say it. Odds are she hadn't lied; she likely did have an interest in him simply because he was mine, but... it was obvious there was more to it. More than she was seemingly willing to admit at the moment, at least.

Elaine sighed at me. "We'd have plenty time to speak of all this if you'd not leave us so soon," she complained, again... and then went to tell me about a dream she had that ended up with the world under perpetual day, with no moon in sight.

Chapter 344 Porka's Happy Questions

"If they vote against you Vim, what will you do?" Porka asked.

I shrugged. "Depends on how the vote actually goes, Porka. If they just remove me from my position, then nothing much will change. I'll still travel around, helping those who need my help," I said. "Or want it," I added after a moment of thought.

There was no reason to bring up to her my plan. My real one. Not yet anyway. I was still coming to terms with it myself, after all.

I'd made a decision, now I just needed to decide how I was going to really carry it out.

Porka sighed, and not just at me. "I can't believe they've become so stupid. If they remove you they may as well remove all of us too. Without you, how many of our people will suffer? Or be lost to us? There are entire villages that only you even know about, or where they're at, for crying out loud," Porka said.

I nodded, but only because she was simply venting and not because she wanted me to actually agree with her. She continued, even as a cat ran between us and down the path heading back where we'd just come from.

"The Chronicler has gone mad then. They all have. I mean honestly... if we had trouble with the humans, or another church, what could they do about it without you? It's not like anyone is even strong enough anymore to face them other than you. Lilly maybe, but she's long decided to not spill her blood for us anymore," Porka continued to ramble her thoughts as we walked through the wheat fields.

The wheat here was taller than the wheat Fly and I had walked through on the way here. These stalks were nearly as tall as Porka, blocking most of the surrounding area from sight. At least, her sight.

We weren't far from her home. We could see the roofs nearby, particularly the bright red one, but we were far enough that we both knew we were alone. Not even her mischievous children would be nearby. Though that might just be because they were playing with Fly.

The foxes had been very happy to meet a bird. Lomi had even asked for a feather. I had been surprised to see Fly hand one over. Fly seemed to not like it when people made a big deal out of her being a bird, or even hinting at it. Though maybe when it were young kids nearer her age than us old folks she had more leeway towards.

"I'm glad Lomi seems to be doing so well," I said, hoping to switch topics a little. Porka had been complaining about the vote for a good dozen minutes now and I was tired of listening to it.

"She's perfectly fine. If not for the fact she has little Horn wrapped around her finger, I'd not believe anyone if they told me she hadn't popped out of me like all the rest had," Porka said with a grin.

"Daughter by right and marriage, then," I suggested.

Porka nodded happily. "Yes. I look forward to it. Though I worry a tad, if you'll allow me to."

"Worry...? How so?" I asked. From what I had seen Lomi had been doing fine. Wonderfully fine. After the initial meet and greet between us all, and the many questions she had flung at me about Renn and others, she had ran off with the rest of the fox children to play with Fly. She had acted, and seemed, as comfortable here as any of the other children. More so, somehow, even. There hadn't been anything to tell me that Porka should be worried.

"I worry she has no affection for Horn. I think she's just... still too young, or maybe a late bloomer. But as of now I don't think she's even recognized he's anything more than a sibling," Porka said.

Ah. "Well, I mean... they are still young. Even for you foxes," I said. Lomi was a tad taller than Fly, but not by much. She was still a child, at least in appearance, even if likely in her twenties or so by now.

"By her age I was already sneaking off with Bjorn every chance I could get," Porka said.

I sighed at her. "Well, don't rush them," I said gently.

Really. Why was the world trying to remind me so often about the steps of life? Was it trying to make a point? Or was I just more acutely aware of it all thanks to my circumstances?

First Fly and all her weird questions and now this. Seriously.

"I won't of course. I just worry, Vim. They're my children. My lovely kits... I just want them to be happy, always," Porka said.

I nodded. Her beauty was only amplified when she spoke about such things. Her beauty made me think of Renn, somehow.

"You're going to need more sons, at this rate," I said lightly. Her recent child, born not too long after Renn and I had left last time, was already walking around. She couldn't talk yet, and her ears were far smaller than her siblings, but she seemed healthy and fine.

Porka giggled at me. "Sons are nice, but I prefer daughters. They're cuter," she said.

"And your other children?" I asked.

"Yelma has matured rather well. You'd not think her to be the youngest of all them anymore. She's a quiet girl but has a sharp wit. She's been spending most of her time with Trixalla lately, learning from her. Though what she's been learning I'm still trying to figure out. Something to do with politics. Pelka on the other hand, even though she's been given responsibilities hasn't matured much. She does her job very well, and has been learning properly alongside Montclair and that human boy. Trim. I worry she's more like me, regretfully. I know it's odd to say it, since I had just worried and wished that Lomi had been more like me, but it's true. I wish Pelka wasn't," Porka said with a sigh.

"I'm afraid to ask your meaning," I said lightly.

Porka laughed as another cat ran in front of us, going from one wheat field to the other. It had been an orange one. "Pelka likes that human boy. Tim. They're basically the opposite of Lomi and Horn. She wants him, he doesn't even realize it," Porka said.

Poor kid. "Tim's the son of the lord right?" I verified, straining my memories.

Porka nodded. "Yes. Or well, he's the nephew. He's the heir though, so he may as well be the son," Porka explained.

Right. Not the son. The heir. He had been there when I had been here last time and had negotiated a new contract with the human settlement concerning the wheat.

"Least she's still here...? Has she had any more desire to head out into the world on her own?" I asked. Last time I'd been here the young fox had asked me for permission to venture out on her own.

"She has, but not as often. Like I said, she's infatuated with that human lad. Right now he's all she really cares about. She gets in trouble sometimes at the human village, when she goes to help out the lord. She spends more time with the boy than she should working," Porka said with a small grin.

"Well... that's the better result for now, at least," I said lightly.

Porka nodded, but she too didn't speak further on it. She likely had the same thoughts about it I did.

The moment she lost fascination with that boy, for one reason or another, the desire to venture forth and explore the world would likely return. With a vengeance. Unless of course she settled down with the boy and had children.

"How's the contract going anyway?" I asked, deciding to ignore the young girl's inevitable fate.

"Fine and well. We had a few fields fail to produce as well as they should have last harvest, but it wasn't too bad. We simply sold some of our stores to compensate, out of request. They had worried the price of flour would have gone too high had we not done so," Porka said.

I nodded. Yes. The price of bread, or flour, was indeed a concern to those in power. Enough so they'd go through great lengths to ensure it didn't become an issue.

Revolts happened when people couldn't make bread, or rather couldn't afford to.

"Really Vim we've all been fine. Mork and Trixalla have been happy. Montclair is his typical self. We foxes are doing well, and growing too," Porka said with a grin as she touched her belly.

Yes. It was a little bigger than normal. It made her beauty glow even greater.

Another reminder.

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

"I'm glad to hear that. On my end, other than this upcoming vote, all has been well. Within reason, at least. Little things like Lumen's chaos or Fly's little issue, here and there, but nothing too drastic," I said.

Porka sighed at me. "You're severely underplaying the vote. But fine. Meriah was here recently. A few months ago in fact," Porka then said.

"A few months ago?" I asked. That made no sense, the letter I had gotten about that had surely been longer than that...

"She came back. To see if you'd come through lately or not," Porka explained.

Oh.

Uh oh.

"She's looking for me," I said upon realizing it.

"Seems so. She said if you showed up and you still haven't met her, to tell you that she'll be traveling the western route for the next season or two. I think she's waiting for you," Porka said.

I nodded. "I'll make sure to find her," I said.

"She's really such a handful. She could just stay here and wait for you! She'd have met you by now," Porka said with a sigh.

"Meriah doesn't do well in one place for long, you know that," I said.

"I do, I do... I guess. Ok. Not really, no. I couldn't imagine traveling so much, Vim. How would you be able to raise a child on the road?" Porka asked.

"Some people do it just fine," I said lightly. Not to mention I doubted Meriah would ever have a child.

"Hmph. Wouldn't be able to make children either, I bet. I don't know about everyone else but I need a soft bed," Porka said happily.

I wanted to sigh, since I felt almost as if she was doing it on purpose. But I knew she wasn't. She was just full of glee. Her family was happy, healthy, and strong. And growing. Odds are, based off the size of her belly; she had only recently learned she was pregnant again. Maybe a month or two ago at best.

To her the news was still fresh... and thus her glow. Her happiness was pure, and although usually made me want to bask in it... I instead wanted to run from it.

Wait...

I slowed a bit and flinched.

"Vim...?" Porka worriedly said my name, as I sighed and remembered something I had forgotten.

"Lilly had been pregnant," I said. Odds are her baby had been recently born too. She didn't give birth as quickly as Porka, or humans. It took far longer than nine months, but by now there was no doubt the child had been born.

"Had been. She gave birth to a daughter only a couple months ago. Meriah told us on her visit," Porka said.

Great. Just wonderful.

That meant Renn was there. Seeing that baby. Holding it.

Really. The world was being strangely annoying. In far more ways than one.

"You look annoyed. Why...? It's a happy thing, Vim," Porka asked.

"It is. When Meriah was here, either time, did she mention to you anything about Lomi's village?" I asked as I returned to walking. Porka swiftly joined me, unfazed.

Porka frowned and shook her head. "No? She spoke to Lomi about it, I'm sure, but neither of them have mentioned it. You know how Meriah is Vim, she's a private person. And Lomi, well... I think she just doesn't want to really think of her home or her family anymore. She didn't even cry, I don't think, when Meriah told her whatever she had found out," Porka said.

Oh...? I knew for a fact that Meriah had told Lomi everything. That was kind of Meriah's only real fault. She revealed the whole truth, completely, to those who were involved to it. Sometimes she revealed too much, or a truth that should have been kept hidden for one reason or another. There have been many times her blunt honesty had caused issues. Bad ones.

Yet that meant either Porka was right and Lomi simply didn't care, didn't want to, or Lomi was made of firmer stuff than I had thought.

"She used to have nightmares, does she still?" I asked.

"Not anymore. She did when she first came here, for a few months, but they faded quickly," Porka said with a smile.

I nodded, pleased to hear it. Very pleased.

"Really Vim, what's wrong? You scowl, and then smile happily. What's going on?" Porka asked, pointing out my own faults and issues.

"A lot. Yet nothing really, all the same."

Porka sighed as we rounded a small bend in the wheat. We were now heading back to her home.

The two of us walked quietly for a moment as I tried to weigh the upcoming issues in my mind. The ones I'd need to address soon, if not immediately.

Meriah. The vote. Fly, and then of course that human saint and her prophecies.

Were those issues enough to keep me safe from Renn's inevitably question? Or worry?

She's already brought up several times how she worried I'd not taken our relationship a step further. If she spent the last few weeks holding a baby, and basking in its love and warmth, there was little doubt in my mind that worry will be renewed rather fiercely. Which meant she'd bring it up again, or fret and worry over it.

I really was a bastard. Maybe Fly was right, maybe I was a bad husband.

I've been bad at many things in my life. I've been a bad man often. Yet I had never thought I'd be a terrible husband. I used to think of myself of something of a romantic once, I wonder what happened...?

"Are you happy, Porka?" I asked after a moment.

"Hm...? Haven't you been listening Vim? Yes. Of course I am," she said.

I nodded, glad to hear it. I had been listening, and watching. She was utterly glowing in joy and it showed. But it still was relieving to hear it said aloud.

"How about you Vim? Are you happy?" Porka then asked.

Blinking gently, I kept myself from slowing. I didn't want her to realize how deeply her question had affected me, so I pretended to smile and shrug. "As well as I can be," I lied.

She hummed, and I would have thought she had seen through me but she looked away and warmly smiled. She had believed my lie.

Porka was as smart as she was beautiful, but she was no Renn. Not able to read me. A good thing too.

"Would you like to leave the young bird here?" she then asked, changing topics.

"I'll ask... but I'd prefer not to. She's... well. A bird," I said gently.

Porka nodded. "Yes. A sad reality. It'd be harsh here for her. She'd be stuck inside most of the time, and only able to venture out occasionally. It'd be rough for her Vim, since the kids are always running around outside, doing one thing or another. She'd likely end up lonely eventually, if she stayed here," Porka quickly came to the same conclusion I had about it.

I nodded. "Yes. Though if she does ask, I'll let her know you're okay with it. At least for awhile," I said.

"Oh definitely. It'd do good for my children to have a friend their age like her anyway. They have human friends, but those aren't the same you know," Porka said.

Right. Not the same at all.

Our kind could live for generations. Friendships amongst our kind were... special, thanks to how long they could last.

Maybe I should let her stay here for a few days. These few days could be invaluable to the kids, granting them memories they'd remember forever.

My burden felt a little heavier than usual as I realized I was as cruel as the world to my people. I shouldn't debate letting Fly stay here for days, I should be debating letting her stay here for months or years. As long as she wanted to.

I should be able to grant them such a simple joy. To live in peace. To live without fear or worry, no matter where.

Maybe the vote was needed.

Maybe I really was a failure.

"Children really make it all worth it... it's really too bad Trixalla can't have any," Porca said gently.

I nodded and softly. "Mhm."

"Are there any birds like her left Vim? The few I knew are gone now... other than Lilly, of course, but I couldn't imagine Lilly letting her stay with them. She's so prickly," Porka said as she thought of it.

"There are birds, yes. Though only a few like her, what with all her feathers and animal legs. Most are like Lilly, or Rapti. There's Crane too, nearby," I said.

"Crane's gone insane, calling for that vote. I'd not trust her with Fly even if she would look after her," Porka said stiffly.

I nodded, but agreed for a different reason. Crane was too feeble minded. Too much a prey.

If Fly couldn't mingle with those at the Bell Church she'd no way be able to mingle with Crane. Not a chance.

"Well, at least she has possibilities. I'm sure you know where to take her. You always do," Porka said happily.

Did I...? Didn't feel like it.

"I know Lomi's family being lost was a horrible thing... but I'm so glad she's here, Vim. I love having so many children, and watching them grow. The mere thought that I may even start to have grandchildren soon, someday, makes me so excited too," Porka said.

I smiled and nodded at the happy mother. "I'm glad too, Porka. I really am," I said honestly.

It was the truth, after all. Porka had earned her happiness. It was only right she got to indulge in it.

"Speaking of children, love and all the happy stuff that goes into it... when are you going to tell me about her?" Porka then asked.

I slowed to a stop as I glanced at Porka, who had a huge smirk on her face. She looked excited, waiting for me to say something.

Odds are she was waiting for me to huff at her and shake my head. To either ignore her or tell her off.

Talking about my personal life, in any form, was something I hated to do. Despised it. It made me itch in a place I didn't want to acknowledge.

So I did want to ignore her question. To instead change topics, and ask a question of my own. To avoid it. To deny the truth, even to her... who had asked out of pure and simple joy. She was happy, so she wanted to hear how and why I was happy too. So that we could share in our happiness, together.

Porka wanted to hear about Renn. Someone I would normally keep secret. Especially when it came to my own feelings and thoughts.

So... Instead changing topics, or lying, I instead smiled back and nodded. "I thought you'd never ask," I said, deciding to just accept it.

I've kept fighting it. Arguing with it. Avoiding it. And whenever I did all it brought was a headache. Or worry.

Maybe it was time I tried to do the opposite.

So as we returned home, I went ahead and told Porka all about Renn... the woman who had somehow found my heart, and then promptly stolen it.

Chapter 345 A Witch's Grave

My friend had a gravestone.

Such a thing was still neat to me. Unique. Special. Even though I'd seen so many at the Crypt not too long ago, I knew the reality.

Graves rarely were remembered for long. Especially amongst humans. It only took a handful of years for them to be forgotten half the time. And Witch... well...

"Three hundred years..." I whispered the truth, and wondered what to think about it.

Elaine had been nice enough to fill in some information that I lacked. Concerning time. My age. She had shown me her family tree, a blanket that had been sewn by her and many other family members over

the years. A tapestry. It had the names and years of each member of her family tree, and I had been able to do the mental math and figure out how long ago I had killed Witch.

Three hundred and thirty odd years.

That was how long had passed since I had last been here. Since I had killed her. Since I had killed her out of mercy.

It was strangely therapeutic. Because it told me I was older than I had thought. By quite a margin. I had nearly been almost fully grown by the time Witch had found me, and I had spent far longer with Witch than I had thought. Elaine and the rest had records, both written and oral, that told how I had spent dozens of years with Witch. Some of their legends even said I had spent over a hundred years with her. Although it was hard to imagine, I had no choice but to think it possible. Back then in my youth... I had not been the most observant of the passing of time.

It was why I had failed so spectacularly at keeping a track of Lujic and Ginny's ages. It was why I had gone out into the world, only to return to find Lujic old and on his death bed. I had not noticed the years pass as quickly as seasons.

Odds are the only reason I haven't still continued failing to notice the passing of time, was thanks to Vim. The Society and everyone in it. I was paying far more attention to the world around me thanks to everyone, and everything, so I noticed it more acutely. Otherwise... well... who knows how little I'd paid attention to the world around me.

Honestly it was a little sad to think of all the years I had spent alone. Even though I could clearly remember all those years, those endless days alone, they still felt as if they were a blur. But not because I couldn't remember them, but instead because nothing had happened during them.

Walking through forests. Sitting alone by a campfire. Or huddled in a small grove as the snow fluttered past. Sometimes I would have been at a human village, doing all I could to blend in and learn what I could or simply enjoy life. Most of my memories of those years, outside of the time I had spent with Nory or the kids, were just of me traveling from one village to another. Taking my time, and doing my best to stay unnoticed and out of trouble.

Lately the world has felt hectic. Full of life, people and action. But the reality was the world was calm and uneventful. I used to go years without any kind of chaos or drama. There had been times I had gone years and years without feeling panic or stressed simply because nothing had gone wrong.

Not that there was anything wrong with such long years of normal, uneventful, life. In fact there was a certain joy to such years... but, well...

"I've grown fond of my current life," I admitted to my friend.

When I thought of Witch, I did not think of her on her deathbed. I didn't think of her natural colored eyes. I thought of her glowing orbs, brimming brightly as she smiled and taught me about the world. Or as we traveled, either helping people who needed help or hunting down one of those monarchs.

She would have liked the Society. She would have joined it, to help it. She had been that type of person.

She had given her life to help people. Used her powers to heal and save people, even at the cost of her own life.

There was no doubt in my mind she would have wanted to help me and the Society. Those who needed help more than most.

Though maybe she wouldn't have been able to abandon her family. Her descendants. Her home.

"I wonder if I would be able to," I wondered as I thought of such a dilemma.

Lilly had left her baby. To join me. Upon request of Vim. She had done it without hesitation, even though she has mentioned she wanted to leave soon. Though I wasn't sure how much her urgency to leave was so she could return home, but instead so she could simply leave this human village.

Could I do that?

Could I leave behind my child? One just recently born? One not even able to walk yet, let alone talk or take care of themselves?

It was a terrible thought. So daunting it made me almost queasy, as if I was sick... which was funny, since it wasn't likely something I'd need to worry about anytime soon.

Yet I couldn't help but wonder about it. Especially now.

After all... was I going to be able to leave this village?

Glancing away from the stone, to look at the only building in the distance that was visible, I wondered if I'd be able to leave this place without worrying about it.

Elaine was a little odd. Some of her answers to certain questions left me... questioning her. But not so much her loyalty, or trustworthiness, but instead her mind. She may be old. Too old, even for a saint.

Cat was air-headed but a good soul. A good friend. Kind and able to find joy in the simplest things in life.

And the rest of the villagers here, even the little I knew of them, were good people. Simple, hardworking, good people. The types to happily stay in their little village, hidden away in this forest... yet also the type of people to send their own out into the world beyond as to try and help it.

No one here cared much for the world outside of it yet they had been willing to sacrifice their own to save it all the same.

They were all the types that I probably would fall in love with if I stuck around here for too long.

They all were. Even Elaine, as odd as she could be, was someone I knew I could spend a long time with.

Though my own personal feelings about them, and this village, were obviously because of whom they were... or rather who they were descended from.

"I miss you," I whispered to my friend as I looked back to the grave.

The grave was near a huge tree. One I didn't remember existing when I was here last time. We weren't near the buildings, and instead on a small hill. This little hill wasn't far from the nearby lakes, but far enough I couldn't smell them on the air. Not even on the breeze.

It was a nice little spot. Though there were oddly no other graves nearby. Not even a hint of them. Had they not buried her children or husband near her...?

Maybe she wasn't buried here at all. Maybe this was not where she was buried, and this was just a symbolic thing. A reminder, nothing more.

"Doesn't matter," I whispered as I stepped forward. I reached out and brushed off some browning leaves that had fallen onto the stone. It wasn't as big, or as fancy, as the stones back at the Crypt... but it was more than just a slab of stone. Someone had carved some nice words into it, and little flower designs all around them.

"Here lays a saint amongst saints," I read the top few words, and wondered if that was a common phrase amongst such topics or not. It sounded special, yet not at the same time. As if it was just the first thing someone could think up on the spot, or something.

Some noise drew my attention, so I turned as to watch a black and white spotted cat run up the hill. It darted towards me, turned before drawing too near, and then hurried up the tree nearby. It disappeared into the leaves and branches, and then reappeared a moment later as to settle down onto one of the thicker branches and glare down at me.

It stared at me with familiar eyes, and I remembered what Cat had said about her namesake. That she had been named so because when she had been born all the cats in the village had come to sleep around her, it was so odd the name simply stuck.

"How nice," I whispered at the lovely namesake. It was so silly, so simple, that it made me jealous.

I had been named without much thought. As had all of my siblings. In fact I wasn't even aware why we had been named what we had been, or where my parents had even known of the names in the first place.

The cat above me began to purr as I wondered what I'd name my own children.

"Now that's a smile if I've ever seen one."

I startled, and turned. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the cat on the branch hadn't even blinked as I found Lilly standing next to me.

"Learned his sneakiness too did you?" I asked as I shifted a little as my heart quickly calmed down. I hadn't even heard her approach, or smelled her! The ground was slightly wet, and grassy with a lot of fallen leaves from the nearby tree. I should have heard her easily.

Lilly smirked at me as she stepped closer, to stand beside me as to look down at the grave.

"Saint of saints... I see," she noted, understanding who was buried her. Or at least, whose memory was.

"What'd you mean by smile?" I asked.

"You had a huge smile on your face just now. What had you been staring at? The cat?" she asked as she glanced up to the tree.

"Hm... no," I shifted again, and felt the smile return. Did I want to say aloud what I'd been thinking about? It was kind of embarrassing.

"Well... all the same. I'm glad you're finally done latching onto that saint. I'll admit she doesn't seem to have any ill-intent but like always my gut is right," Lilly said with a nod.

"Your gut?"

Lilly shrugged lightly. "She's weird. Like all saints. She acts like she knows everything, yet makes assumptions and believes in things that are wrong or stupid. It annoys me, but honestly I like it when saints make such mistakes all the same," she said.

"What do you mean by that...?" I asked carefully.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

"It lets me know that even though they have powers, and are somehow connected to the gods, they're still human. Still normal. They're not all knowing, even if they all seem to think they are," Lilly said with a mischievous grin.

I hummed as I nodded. I wasn't sure if I agreed with Lilly's happiness over that fact, but I did agree with her reasoning. Even I had noted several things Elaine had said that had seemed odd, or out of place.

"She firmly believes every prophecy she sees comes to pass," I noted.

"She does. That proves she's stupid. She herself has spoken of prophecies that didn't come to pass, or did so differently than she saw. Like you showing up with Vim, earlier than now. But let her make that mistake. We can use that against her if we ever need to," Lilly said calmly.

My ears beneath my hat fluttered a bit, not liking the matter of fact way Lilly just admitted she was making plans for if Elaine and this village became our enemies. She wasn't entirely wrong to do so, of course, but it still unsettled me how matter of fact she spoke about doing so... and how confident she was about it, too.

"Vim would consider that too, wouldn't he...?" I mumbled regretfully.

"Hm... sadly I think Vim would let them live. They don't seem to have any idea about us, or care to either. I've even traveled to the nearby village, the human one that Cat said sold their kids to nobles. The people there don't even know about this one. They're just a simple farming village there, barely any bigger than this one," Lilly said, sounding regretful herself.

"You went there?" I asked. When? I had just seen her this morning, not too long ago.

"Yesterday. During the rain," she said.

Oh. That was why she had returned soaked. The rain had picked up last night, but had never grown strong enough to justify how wet Lilly had been. That was why then, she must have traveled a fair distance.

"Would you like to leave tomorrow?" I asked her.

Lilly glanced at me and frowned. "Here I thought you'd want to stay longer," she said.

"I do. But that's exactly why. If I stay here any longer I may grow too attached," I said as I glanced back to the stone.

"Hm... can't say I understand, but okay. Won't hear me complain," she said lightly.

I nodded. "Vim would have smirked happily just now."

She chuckled. "I know that exact smirk, yes he would have."

"So... you're okay with leaving though? I mean... do you want to question Elaine about anything else?" I asked. Honestly although Lilly had sat in with a few of our conversations, she had never really questioned Elaine. She usually just sat quietly, listening to us.

"Yeah...? I think she's just seen typical prophecies. She saw the monarch being born, or at least that's what she believes she saw. She sees other random events, which she considers cataclysm but honestly they don't seem like anything we need to worry about. A forest fire? Who cares they happen often," Lilly said with a shrug.

"What if your forest is in danger too?" I suggested.

She shook her head. "I'd handle it. I'd protect it. And if I can't do it, Vim will," she said plainly.

I blinked at that and wondered if that was her utter trust in Vim speaking... or the simple truth.

Somehow I could believe that Vim could stop a forest fire. Though I wasn't sure exactly how he'd accomplish it. It wasn't like he could punch a fire away.

Or... maybe he could...? When he had taken Tim's head, back at the Crypt, had he not made a huge gust of wind in the process? It had shaken whole trees, ones as big as the ones around here. Maybe he could...

"Plus... they like you. Too much to threaten you, at least anytime soon. Elaine nearly reveres you. That's a scary thing, Renn. Be careful with that. Humans act strange with those they consider a higher power, or very important. Sometimes they do things that make no sense out of such loyalty and affection," Lilly gently warned.

I slowly nodded. "I've heard similar stories. From Vim, about those who worship us," I said.

"Good."

"How old are you, by the way?" I asked.

"Hm...? Uh... well..." Lilly frowned as she went into thought, and then after a moment shook her head. "I have no idea."

I see. "Vim says you're one of the oldest in the Society. Having been around since its inception," I said.

"Really...? Was I around in the beginning?" she asked herself more than me.

I smiled at her. "How would I know, Lilly?"

"Right... maybe I was? Celine and Vim found me. Or well, Celine did. Then Vim showed up. One of those mistaken prophecy things. She had foreseen Vim showing up earlier, saving more of us. She almost got

us both killed because she had so firmly believed Vim would have shown up in time to save more than he did. Saints are stupid," Lilly said with a smirk, remembering such a thing.

I noted the information and slowly nodded, since I wasn't sure what to say to that. She spoke as if...

"Wait... you mean that in the sense that Vim showed up. Literally. As in showing up out of nowhere, not summoned or called for," I said.

Lilly nodded. "Yeah? That was the first time Celine met him too. I'll have you know he trusted me over her even from the get-go, you know?" she said with a proud smile.

I smiled back at that grin and nodded. He had told me he's always trusted her, even when she was a snot-nosed brat as he called her. "On the way home would you tell me about her? Celine?" I asked.

"Sure? Not much to tell you, though. I didn't like her, Renn. She wasn't just a saint she was also so annoying it made me sick. Plus... I mean... well..." Lilly shifted, and then sighed.

"Hm?"

"Celine tried to use Vim, Renn. Abuse him. I didn't like that. Then she blamed me for certain things, banishing me from Telmik, so... well... I just didn't get along with her. Especially at the end," she admitted.

I nodded slowly. "That's okay. I'd still like to hear about her. To be honest all I've heard about her is from either Vim, or those like Randle. It'd be nice to hear about the woman from the viewpoint of someone who didn't like her," I said.

"Are you saying Vim spoke about her the same way Randle does...?" Lilly asked with a weird look.

Frowning, I shook my head. "No. Not at all. In fact he's usually annoyed when I ask him about her. He's told me too, that Celine had used him. He knows she tricked him, I guess. Though he doesn't seem upset over it. Plus he doesn't like saints, as you know, so," I said with a small shrug.

"Right... Well, I'll tell you what I know then. I take it that means you were serious about us leaving tomorrow?" she asked, sounding a little excited.

I nodded. It was time. I still had so much I wanted to ask Elaine, of course, but I knew it could wait. Or at least, what couldn't wait was my need to leave.

If I didn't leave now I never would. And if I didn't leave... well...

I might lose Vim. The Society. If I stayed here. Not only was this village not a part of the Society, Vim had no desire or duty to protect this place. So if I stayed here he'd...

Shifting a little, I frowned as I realized this place might work as a home. The place Vim and I had been talking about. A place to stay at, hidden away from the rest of the Society.

Lilly knew about it, of course, but I wasn't bothered by that. Lilly was trustworthy. Verily so.

And...

"Renn?" Lilly nudged me ever so slightly, and I frowned at her since she hadn't asked anything. I had been lost in thought, but not so much I would have missed a question or something. Instead I had to glance down, following Lilly's finger.

I found the cat. The black and white one that had been sitting on the branch was now at our feet, rubbing against my legs.

Cute. "Uh... this is neat," I said as I stayed still.

"Is it...? You're a cat aren't you? Should be common. I thought that was why they've all been watching you this whole time," Lilly said.

Glancing at Lilly, I wondered what she meant. "Watching me?"

She nodded and shrugged. "All the cats here. They've been watching you. From a distance, I mean."

Really...? I glanced around, looking for more, but didn't see any.

I gave up on searching for more as I glanced back down at the cat. I grinned at it as the thing purred and rubbed against my shin, rather roughly too.

Was this what it felt like...? It was really rubbing against me. Was it trying to leave a scent on me or something?

"Why the odd smile? It's just a cat," Lilly asked.

"Cats usually ignore me. Or run from me. They don't like me, usually," I said softly, afraid to speak too loudly and remind it I was here. Maybe it thought it was rubbing against Lilly's legs.

"Really...? Weird. Usually animals related to our bloodlines are attached to us. Windle and I always need to chase owls away back at home," Lilly said.

That was weird. But...

Bending down slowly, I hesitated. I wanted to pet it. Or at least try to... but what if by trying it ran off? Or hissed and clawed at me? It'd not hurt, much, of course but it'd break my heart.

Yet as my hand drew near, I felt a strange sense of relief as my hand reached the soft fur... and then began to pet it without any issues.

The cat's purring increased, and I had to take a deep breath to calm myself.

I was petting a cat. One that was happily letting me do so, to boot.

"Well uh... I feel like I should congratulate you or something. You okay Renn? You look like you're about to cry," Lilly asked gently as she watched me bend down, as to pet the cat with both hands.

"I'm fine. I'm just... happy. I wonder why it's not scared of me?" I wondered as I went to petting the cat under the chin. It seemed to love that, and sat down lazily as to enjoy the feeling.

"Not sure...? It might just be made of sterner stuff. Animals can be as varied as us, after all."

I nodded. Yes.

This cat must be bold. Strong. Fearless.

I almost wished to keep it. To take it with me, and to breed it. Maybe help it have countless children, and make sure its children have many more... all so that I could spread its fearless blood all throughout the land. Maybe then I'd not be ignored by my own kind any longer if I did.

The happy idea came and went as I enjoyed petting the cat, but eventually the happy moment had to inevitably come to an end. The cat slowly stopped purring and then stepped away, its tail twitching as it walked away from me.

"Don't be offended. That's a typical cat, they get fickle and leave without a care," Lilly said as she and I watched it walk away. It walked around Witch's grave and then headed down the hill, slowly picking up pace as it left.

I sighed and nodded as I stood back up. "Right. Fickle," I said.

"You don't seem fickle."

I smiled at that. "I don't think I am, no. In fact I don't like it when people are so wishy-washy. It really annoys me," I told her.

"Oh...? Good. That's a good trait to have. Makes sense though," she said.

"Makes sense...?"

"About why you like Vim. He's a lot of things... but fickle is not one of them. I don't think that man has ever changed or broken his own convictions. Not willingly, at least," Lilly said.

Slowly nodding, I found myself a little shocked.

She was right of course. Even though I'd not ever noticed.

Was that one of the reasons I liked Vim so much? Because he was so steadfast? Because he never seemed to change...?

It was more than just his personality. It was he himself. How many times have I said, or thought, that he would likely be the same no matter how many years passed?

A thousand years could come and go, and Vim would be the exact same. In appearance and not.

"I would like him to change a little, though," I admitted.

"Oh? How so?"

"There's a few things. Stuff like how he treats the Society... or his rules..." I listed a few of them.

Lilly sighed. "Right? Don't get me started."

"Plus I'd like it if he was a little more honest with himself," I added.

"Hm...?" Lilly gave me a raised eyebrow, so I smirked and nodded.

Clasping my hands in front of her, as if I was grabbing something, I felt my smirk turn into a wry grin. "I wish he was more touchy-feely," I said, using one of his little phrases.

Lilly laughed, loudly enough that if the cat hadn't already ran off it likely would have.

Reaching over, I patted her on the arm as I stepped away from the grave. It was time I stopped being melancholic.

"Here I'd thought he'd be insatiable! Now that's funny!" Lilly said loudly as she followed.

"I wish," I said.

Lilly's laughs turned into happy giggles, and I found myself giggling with her. She had a wonderful laugh, it was a little singsong. Maybe because she was a bird?

"I'll say goodbye. Tonight. To Elaine and Cat," I said, choosing to change topics just a tad.

"If you don't mind I'll simply pack our bags while you do so," Lilly said with a smile as her giggling stopped.

"We're already packed. You never unpacked," I pointed out as we stepped down the hill.

"That so?" Lilly frowned at me, which only made me smirk and nod.

Right.

Vim really had rubbed off on her. Not only had that smirk been the same one he normally used, it had been for the same reason he would have worn it. As if she was pretending to be him, but she had been completely serious.

It was adorable in its own way... but also concerning.

I'll need to make sure our children don't get as tainted... somehow.

Chapter 346 Windle's Spine

Little Root grabbed at my finger, cooing gently as she tried to pull it to her mouth as to gnaw on it.

"I'm surprised, Vim," Windle said from behind me.

"About how such adorable things can come from you? Yes. Me too," I said as I let the girl go about chewing on my finger. Her teeth were surprisingly a little sharp, but not to the point they'd be puncturing my skin.

Windle laughed as I turned away from the window, to look at the owl sitting at his desk. He had been reading a letter from Porka that I had just delivered. I saw the other letters, that Renn had brought with her, on his desk too. Most notably was the one from Randle. It was still lying on top of the pile, telling me that Windle had likely kept grabbing it as to re-read it.

He was a worrywart. A coward. So it wasn't surprising he'd stress over Randle's request.

"Rather Vim, what I'm surprised about is the fact you're being so calm," he said.

"Calm...?" What'd he mean...? Was there a reason I shouldn't be?

Fly was asleep. Windle was fine. His newborn baby in my arms, safe as can be, and happily chewing on my finger. What was wrong? What was so desperate that I needed to panic over?

"Usually by now you'd rush away, to go join Lilly on her quest. I had figured what with their task, and the presence of your newfound wife, you'd be a little more... well..." Windle slightly gestured at me, as if unsure how to properly phrase the words in his heart.

"You figured I'd worry over their safety," I said as I understood.

"Well... yes," Windle nodded with a frown.

I frowned back at him. "I do. They've ventured out into this world to search out, and possibly confront, a saint. A human one, with no allegiances to us. So yes, I do worry for them... but..." I stepped away from the window and went to sit into the chair in front of Windle's desk. The young owl in my arms didn't even notice her father as she continued to gnaw on my finger, with some rather harsh bites too. She wasn't just gnawing on it; she was actually trying to chew it as to eat it.

"But?"

"But if I can't trust and rely on those two... who can I?" I finished answering him.

Windle blinked at me and then slowly smiled. "Lilly would have loved to hear that."

"She's become sentimental again has she?" I asked with a small glance to the likely reason why. Root was now trying to turn my hand, as to bite not my fingertip but the middle of the finger. At the middle joint. I moved it enough to allow her to do so.

"I feel it's a combination. Lilly's temperament hasn't just changed because of Root, but the recent events," he said.

"Recent events?" I asked. Had something happened...? As far as I was aware, from what he's told me and what I've heard from Porka and the rest, the Owl's Nest has been relatively calm and quiet.

"Renn. She likes her. Though I still don't know if she likes Renn because of she herself, or because she's yours," Windle said with a frown.

"Likely both."

He smiled and nodded, agreeing with me.

"Also... I do plan to leave shortly. Likely here in a few hours. Lilly and Renn are stronger, and smarter, than most of our people... if not all of them... but I still worry. I always worry," I said.

Windle nodded as he tapped a letter on his desk. One of his own, that he had likely recently written. "I've requested my children to return home. If you encounter them on your ventures before my letters reach them, please inform them," he said.

"To meet Root?" I asked as the one in question started to slow in her chewing. A glance down at her told me she was slowly falling asleep. It was late. She had been asleep when Fly and I arrived, since we had arrived in the middle of the night. But Windle had wanted her to meet me, so had woken her. Even though I had argued against it, I'm still glad he had done so. It wasn't often I got to meet something so precious, let alone hold it in my arms.

"Rather to speak to them of the world they've seen. To hear of its current state," Windle said.

Watching the young girl slowly drift into slumber, her chewing coming to a complete stop, I nodded. "You mean the Society," I noted.

Windle sighed. "Yes. This vote... it's..."

"Not something we need to worry about just yet," I pointed out.

"Says you Vim. It's to be held in a little over a year, and Randle himself has asked my wife for help. For support against his own people. I think I need to worry about this, right now, a lot," Windle argued.

Well... "Yes, but..."

"I regret to inform you Vim the time to address this isn't now, or in the future, but in the past. Decades ago, even," Windle said without hesitation.

I shifted a little in my chair, but made sure not to break it or cause issues. Root had fallen asleep so I was being careful. "That is very likely Windle... But if that's the case then nothing I do or say now will change the result," I said.

Windle simply stared at me, and in his huge eyes I saw the truth. He was judging me at the moment, and likely not in a good way.

I held his gaze, but only because I deserved it. He wasn't wrong. He really wasn't. But I had my own rules. And I had rules I had agreed to follow, per Celine's contract.

He then sighed and looked away. "What do you plan to do with the young bird?" he then asked, changing the topic.

"She's no owl."

"No. But she is a bird. And a like-minded individual as far as I can tell, and from what you've said. She reminds me of Leaf," he said.

I blinked at the mention of his firstborn. It was very rare that he spoke of her anymore.

It seemed Lilly wasn't the only one who had become more gentle and sentimental. Maybe it was just their age. They were getting old, even if they still didn't look it.

"You're right. She does act like her... though she's not as strong. Fly is weak. Fragile," I said, hoping to remind him that even if similar... they weren't the same.

Leaf had inherited not just her mother's wings or temperament, but her strength. Fly may not be as timid or weak-willed as most birds, like Windle, but she was a far cry from Lilly.

"A better reason to leave her here, Vim," Windle though said.

Wiping my wet finger on my thigh, I nodded. "I'll be honest... I had hoped you and Lilly would be willing to accept her here," I admitted.

"Of course we'll need to see what Lilly thinks, Vim. But for now let's just consider this her home, at least a temporary one. I don't see why Lilly wouldn't allow it, but well... you know her," Windle said quickly, realizing he was about to make a decision he couldn't.

Lilly didn't just wear the pants in this family, she ruled the roost. Windle sometimes forgot that.

"I plan to send your wife home the moment I go find them," I said gently.

Windle sighed at me as he reached over and grabbed the letter from Randle. "Regretfully your failures have forced other's hands, Vim. I must admit I'm glad people are finally picking up the slack, and taking matters into their own hands after all these years... but I worry the outcomes and the reasons for doing so," Windle said as he waved Randle's letter in the air as if it was an annoying pest.

"All I know is he's stuck between his loyalty and his own beliefs. He's come to realize the Chronicler and her ilk are not acting in the best interest of the Society, or the religion they founded and support. I... fear he's not wrong in seeking help, but I..." I hesitated, and went quiet as I realized I was about to vocalize my own opinion. One that would have inevitably caused problems.

Windle noticed, of course, and his eyes narrowed at me. "He's basically asking us to go to war," he said softly.

Root suddenly felt very heavy. As if I was holding a mountain. She didn't budge, nor did I, and I knew Windle had not noticed anything... but I had.

"Yes. He is," I whispered as I held Windle's eyes.

"Sides are being chosen Vim. This vote is forcing us to. Do you not see these letters, Vim?" Windle asked as he placed Randle's letter down and gestured at the dozens covering his desk. I nodded slowly as he reached over and grabbed another. "Lines are being drawn in the sand. Branches and trees are being scouted, and marks are being made," he continued as he held up a light blue letter.

"Merit...?" I asked softly, shocked to see it.

"These are those asking similar requests to Lilly and I. A few are asking us to keep out of it, basically asking us to not take sides and to sit the vote out," he said as he dropped Merit's letter and picked up another. A normal, bland, gray one. I didn't recognize it.

My eyes shifted as I tried to scan the desk. To tell who had sent a letter and who hadn't. I recognized a few, but most were foreign to me. Maybe some had simply sent letters with whatever they had? Usually we tried to give everyone their own color, their own style or design, so even if the letter is blank and empty we still knew who sent it and why.

"Ah... how amusing."

I stopped looking at the desk and looked back up at Windle. He had a smirk on his face, and I realized I had just been caught.

"You're normally not so interested. Maybe your personal life will finally make you not so distant and indifferent to the struggles of us lesser-creatures," Windle said with his smirk.

"Windle..." I tried to warn him, and myself, but he didn't seem to care. For a timid bird he suddenly looked very overconfident, and justly so.

"Merit asked Lilly to keep Renn safe. She says she sees the upcoming chaos within the Society, and begs us to always keep our branches available for her to rest under if she needs such safety," Windle then said.

Humbled by Merit's affection, I nodded slowly. Merit and Lilly have known each other for a very long time. In fact Lilly had been there when we had found Merit, and met her. The two have always been a strange mix of friends and enemies, acting like sisters, so it was very heartwarming to know even after all these years and all the chaos... Merit still trusted Lilly to that extent. That she was still someone with that level of worth and value, at least in Merit's eyes.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

"Honestly we were surprised. We've always gotten letters Vim. Even if outcasts, and even if we're hated, we've always been included and or used as an outside source of insight. I can't even count how many times Lilly or I have been used as a third party to alleviate issues in the Society, since we're seen as not a part of any singular group or cluster. But usually the letters aren't directed to her but through me. Most are too scared of my wife to reach outright to her, typically," Windle said with a happy smile. He seemed to be enjoying the fact his wife was now being bombarded with letters. Even if it was for the wrong reasons. "Though, as worrying some of them are... some are wonderful and heartwarming too," Windle said as he picked up another letter. This time it was a recognizable dull gray. The ones that came from the smithy. Likely was Nebl's letter.

"Nebl's no poet," I said.

Windle scoffed a laugh. "No. He isn't. But because of that when he does speak of lovely things, it feels all the more... real," Windle said as he thought of a proper way to explain it.

I understood his meaning, of course. I wasn't sure what Nebl had said in his letter, but odds are it had been something a little personal. Maybe about the vote, or himself. Maybe he was telling the owls of his recent experience with death. It would explain Windle's gentle smile at the moment, at least.

"I've enjoyed reading about the two of you. It's been a very interesting story. Though it was funny when I'd get a letter that was late, detailing your relationship only for its preceding letter to have expanded on it in greater detail," Windle said with a smirk.

Oh.

I looked away from Windle and his stupid desk of letters.

Seriously? Gossip? So most of those letters weren't about the vote, or the upcoming rift in the Society and instead Renn and myself? Our relationship?

Ridiculous. Maybe the Society should fall apart. Or, from another perspective, maybe the vote and the issues in the Society aren't as dire if our romance was more important than actual problems, and keeping people's attention so desperately.

Windle chuckled, rather loudly. Little Root shifted, though didn't wake at her father's noises.

"I want you to know most of them didn't think you'd accept her. Several pointed out how odd the two of you were, but at first figured it was because she was annoying you. Sticking around you longer than you wanted, and you being the man you are not willing or able to just toss her away. Though one person did notice first, out of all of them, that you'd likely succumb to her," Windle continued to tease me as he put Nebl's letter down and leaned forward onto his desk, resting his arms upon it as to grin at me.

"I'll play along. Who?" I asked.

"My wife, of course."

I frowned at him. Lilly...? She had only known Renn for a day or so. When Renn had been banished from Ruvindale, she had shown up here in search of me. Lilly had guided her out of the forest and to Twin Hills, since that was where I'd been at the time.

Back then was the beginning. In fact it was far before... "You're kidding," I said as I tried to imagine how she had known. Had Lilly and Renn really even spent much time together? Knowing Lilly she had likely escorted Renn to me without even saying much.

"Not at all. She returned home after she took Renn to you that day and told me if you didn't kill her you'd end up sleeping with her. Though... maybe that's not the same, is it?" Windle then realized it himself as he frowned and blinked a few times, pondering it.

I sighed at him. Right. Lilly likely had said just that. That wasn't Lilly saying I'd marry the woman, though.

"Oh well. All that said I'm happy for you," Windle said.

"More like you're just happy you can now tease me back," I said.

His grin widened greatly, and his head lifted a little. His long neck became longer, impossibly long for a normal body, as he chuckled. "Oh it hasn't even begun," he threatened.

Great.

I sighed as the wind outside picked up a bit. It seemed a storm was not just on the way, but had arrived. I could smell it in the air.

It'd not be long until these storms went from rain to snow. Not long at all. A month or so maybe?

Some moments passed as I stared out the nearby window. I was watching the little droplets of rain falling upon it. For a short time only one or two hit every so often and then eventually more and more raindrops fell. It didn't take long the rain to pick up, making the world a little noisier.

Renn liked the rain. Though, like most non-humans with acute senses, didn't care much for the loud thunder or roars of the wind during such storms.

Hopefully she was warm, wherever she was. Even if she could endure the cold and damp, I knew how uncomfortable it made her.

"You know... Vim," Windle spoke up, breaking what had been a growing silence. I looked away from the rain-covered window and found him giving me an odd look.

"Hm?"

"Renn. She's older than she looks," he said.

I frowned at him and nodded. "Yes. She's a few hundred years old, at least," I said.

"Seems more than that, in my opinion," he said.

I shrugged lightly. So? What were a few hundred years? After a certain age people pretty much... settled into who and what they were, in my experience.

"When she was here. She held Root," Windle said with a small point at us.

Glancing down at the girl, confirming she was still asleep, I went ahead and nodded. "I figured," I said. Odds are she had even cried while holding the girl. Renn was not a timid creature, like Windle, but she shared their sentimentalities. She was soft when it came to such things.

Windle coughed and shifted a little in his chair. "Well... I mean..."

"What? Did she drop her or something?" I asked, wondering what was wrong. I doubted that was the thing he was getting ready to tell me, but the odd heavy air made a light joke feel like it was needed.

He smiled and shook his head. "No, Vim... she had wept."

Ah... "Yes. I figured. Renn has a soft spot for children. Or well... anyone she deems pitiable. Women and children are very high on that list for her, regretfully," I said.

"I've no doubt of that... but I more so meant... well..." Windle shifted again and it made me sigh.

"What is it Windle? Out with it."

"Root is the first," he answered quickly, revealing whatever had been worrying him.

The first...?

First what? "First?" I asked.

"Baby."

I slowly shook my head, to tell him he was not making sense. Not too long ago she had held another baby, back south at the Nation of Stone. Yet as I thought of those moments... I rather quickly realized what he meant.

"First non-human," I whispered.

He nodded without saying a word.

I leaned back a little as I scoured my memories. I wasn't as capable of doing it as Renn, of course, but most things concerning her came quickly to me. I remembered what she'd said during those days with that boy. I remembered some of the conversations afterward, and a few we've had in private since.

"Root's the first of us she's ever held," I said as I understood fully.

"So it seems," Windle said gently.

I gulped at the severity of such a fact. It made me shiver, as if suddenly cold.

Renn. Rennalee.

Several hundreds of years old. A fierce protector and advocate of those downtrodden. Women. Children. And yet...

She's never held one of us.

Human children? Probably have held several. But... I mean...

Quickly I scoured my memories of our travels. All the places we'd visited. The people we saw.

Surely at least one of them had a child? A newborn? Right?

Hadn't Pram been pregnant? So had Porka. And what about at the Weaver's Hut? They always had kids running around and being popped out all the time...

Or the Summit? What about there? They were guinea pigs for crying out loud! They multiplied like rabbits!

Yet...

"Vim?" Windle broke my train of thought, but not in a good way. I flinched and nodded.

"It's very likely that Root is the first non-human baby she's ever held, or even met, yes," I admitted to both him and myself.

Windle was silent for a moment, but I didn't care about his stare and the obvious gears turning in his head. I instead tried again to search my memories for another answer.

Lumen. The Armadillos maybe? What about Tor's village...?

Yet no matter how much I searched my mind for another answer, I had no choice but admit the cruel truth.

Somehow, through all of our stops... Renn had somehow missed out on some of the greater moments the Society had to offer.

Instead of finding happiness, joy and new life, full of hope and wonder... she found chaos and pain. Discord. Drama.

Ruvindale. Lumen. Bell Church. Our trip south had been no better. Then our more recent locations had been not just difficult, emotionally, but even physically.

In fact lately Renn and I haven't even been together. We'd been separated a lot lately, and when together we were forced to spend time on other things than each other. While in Telmik the few moments we had got to ourselves had been full of conversations about the Society, the world and its issues within it.

"May I ask why you're so troubled, Vim?" Windle asked with an odd tone.

"I'm just realizing, again, how I'm always making mistakes," I said.

"What...? By not having her hold a baby sooner? Or more often? As much as I'd like to see your children Vim, I have to admit I don't know if the world is ready for a bunch of little Vim's running around just yet," Windle said with a small chuckle.

Glancing at him, I wondered if I should take offense or not. "Don't you get started too," I warned him.

"Oh but I will. Don't think I've forgotten all the times you and Lilly have teased and hidden stuff from me through the years. It's time I got to return the favor!" he said excitedly.

I huffed at him and decided it was time to go. The storm had fully arrived, so it would be the perfect time to leave. I liked running in such thunderstorms.

Plus it'd cool my head, maybe. If I was lucky.

Standing up, I made Windle startle at my sudden movement. He calmed down though as he understood and stood up as well. He stepped around his desk, and I looked down to the sleeping girl one last time.

She really did look like Lilly. Wings and all.

From what I could tell she'd take after her mother in more than just looks. She had sharp teeth. Was strong. Too strong for a baby, even. To the point that we'd have to be careful, or at least Windle and the rest will. A few of their children had hurt Windle as they grew up, before they had grown able to control their strength.

Fly would be an issue too. If she stayed here. I'm sure Windle and Lilly will keep an eye on them, but it wouldn't hurt to remind them.

But more importantly...

Windle in the corner of my eye shifted, and I knew he was patiently waiting for his baby. He knew I had meant to hand her off to him, yet here I was... staring at her as if falling in love.

"I've endangered her, Windle. I've created a world where she'll not be safe, a world that is already dangerous as is," I said gently.

Windle remained quiet, and I nodded as I reached over to gently touch the young girl's cheek. She slept through my touch, which I was slightly thankful for, yet I wasn't sure why I was thankful for such a thing.

I felt as if I wanted to apologize to her. For putting her, and her family, in such a predicament.

And it was only going to get worse... if I did what I knew I should do.

"It's not entirely your fault Vim," Windle said.

I nodded and smiled at Lilly's husband. Ever the gentle soul. "Thanks for saying that Windle... even if you know it's a lie," I said.

He smiled back at me. "I hadn't lied Vim. You have many faults, and have failed in many ways... but I do not believe this is all your fault. I really don't," he said.

Hmph. "You still have no backbone. So here, take one," I said as I held his daughter out.

He sighed, but smiled and chuckled he reached out for her.

Handing Windle his daughter, I noted the way he basically melted upon her touch. His eyes became glossy, his smile softened to the point he looked like he was about to cry, and he released a strangely soft sigh. As if he had just become fully content and all was right in the world.

Although a timid man... he was a good father. A great one.

And a good husband. I don't think most people realized how much his loyalty, and his affection and love, for Lilly meant. He was a timid man, barely able to look at his own shadow... yet he stood side-by-side with Lilly. A woman always wrapped up in chaos and danger. He may not go into battle with her, but he supported her through it all the same.

It took a great man to sacrifice, and endure, all he did to stand by a wife such as her. To take care of his children, Lilly's children on top of it, only made him all the more unique.

Hopefully I could be as good a husband as he one day.

"Choose a side Vim. You usually don't... but that's what got us all into this mess," Windle said gently as he stared down at his daughter, not even glancing at me.

Windle had indeed found his spine. Good for him.

I shifted a bit, but knew better than to ignore his statement. It was the same thing Randle had been saying, before I left Telmik, but... coming from Windle it sounded more sincere.

Randle's been saying it his whole life. This might be the first time Windle's ever said it to me, aloud at least.

Talk about weight in ones words.

Such a heartfelt statement deserved an honest answer. Or at least, a real one.

"Well... to be honest Windle... Whether I like it or not," I started to say, but paused as Windle looked up from his daughter.

He stared at me with his huge eyes, and then slowly nodded as a wry smile grew on his face. "Yes. Odds are your wife will choose one for you. Welcome to my world."

Hmph.

Chapter 347 To Join A Parliament

The morning sun was struggling to peer through the storm clouds. There was no thunder or heavy rain here around us, but off in the horizon behind us were constant flashes of lightning. We had passed through the storm during the night, though it looked like it wasn't over. More dark clouds were ahead of us, rolling overhead.

Lilly and I were walking at a rather nice pace, but not so quickly I felt as if we were hurrying. We were about halfway back to her home, having left Cat's village yesterday. Unlike when we had traveled with Cat, Lilly and I had not needed to stop as to rest so we were making great time.

She traveled like Vim did. At a constantly steady pace without any rest or stops.

"Windle would not have been my first choice, but today I'm glad he's the one I chose. I'd not trade him for anyone, not even Vim," Lilly said.

I smiled at that. "It's hard not to love and cherish such loyalty and devotion," I agreed. Lilly had told me most of their past. How they had met, the years where he tried to court her and the moment of pure devotion that had finally earned her eternal love... even if she had several things she liked to complain about him, even now, there was no doubt she loved the man deeply.

Lilly nodded, her hood making an odd noise as she did. It was made of some kind of leather that was strangely quiet, likely thanks to how heavy it was. It almost reminded me of...

"Not to change topics... but is your cloak made of monarch leather?" I asked.

Lilly turned a little, to look at me. From beneath her hood I saw her grin. "Yes. How could you tell?" she asked.

"It seems heavy, yet moves as if light. Plus it makes an odd sound when you shake your head or move quickly. It's a similar sound to some of the bags Vim and I have," I said.

Lilly hummed. "I'm surprised he hasn't outfitted you in the stuff yet. Though maybe he simply hasn't had a chance to," Lilly said.

Frowning at that, I wondered if that was true. "It was only recently he had given me these bags," I pointed at one at my waist. Unlike others I didn't mind Lilly knowing where they were, or what they were. Odds are she knew about them already anyway, having traveled so often before with Vim.

"He's an odd man. But if he gave you those it's proof how much he thinks of you. As far as I know he's only ever given a few of us such gifts. A handful of us at best," Lilly said.

"Others have gotten some?" I asked. Somehow it wasn't surprising, since there were a few people Vim liked in the Society... but it made me wonder if I'd seen any of them, and if I had who had possessed them?

"As far as I know... Nebl, Berri, Lawrence's brother..." Lilly began to list names, and I slowed a little in shock as Lilly went silent, searching her memories for more.

"So those he considers friends," I said, comprehending quickly as Lilly walked past me. My slowing down had allowed her to gain ground on me. I had to hurry a little to get back to her side, since unlike Vim she didn't slow to match my own pace.

"Well... maybe. He hadn't given Celine any, as far as I'm aware. And although the two were weird, and as much as I hated her I still think he saw her as a friend," Lilly said as she thought about it.

Hm...? That was interesting.

"You know... now that I think about it, he's only given a few people such things. I mean, I probably don't know about all of them of course. A few of the people Vim considers friends are the secluded types. I know there's a few I've never met before or even know the names of," Lilly said as we neared a road.

It was empty, and a dirt one, but it was one I remembered. We had crossed over it on the way here, though I think we had done so a little north of here. We had seen a human settlement from a distance along this road, and Cat had recognized it which led us back south.

"Secluded types?" I asked. Did she mean those who didn't participate directly with the Society?

"There's someone near the Nation of Stone, for example. I don't know who it is, but they live out in the wild. Vim sometimes stops there when he heads out that way," Lilly said, giving me an example.

I blinked at the sudden mention of, what I assumed, Miss Beak.

"Honestly Renn, you may already know more about Vim than I do. At least within reason. I've known him for hundreds of years, but I'm not someone he really opens up to. In his eyes I've always been a reckless kid, I think," Lilly said with a smile to me. She didn't seem offended or ashamed to admit it, it seemed.

"He thinks very highly of you Lilly. He's always spoken kindly of you," I said, not hesitating either to admit it.

It was the truth, after all. Even when everyone else spoke unkindly about her, or used her as a warning for me to not become like her, Vim has never said such things about her.

"He speaks kindly of everyone. In the Society at least," Lilly said with a chuckle.

Well...

I hesitated this time, since I wasn't sure if I should tell her that he did indeed speak ill of members of the Society. At least to me.

He complained about them often... in his own way, at least.

Maybe he didn't do that with others...?

For a small moment I thought of all the times I'd heard Vim speak of other members in front of others. Or with others.

Yes. Although occasionally he'd make a small joke or something, he basically never spoke ill of anyone. At least not within earshot of anyone else.

As far as I was aware of, at least.

"The only time I've ever heard him speak ill of anyone, openly and seriously, is when our members break their allegiance. Though he usually acts before speaking, in such situations," Lilly then said.

"Break their allegiance?" I asked for her to explain her meaning.

"When someone betrays the Society. Either killing one of our own, or breaking a serious rule. Basically when Vim has to execute one of us for doing something stupid," Lilly said.

Ah. I nodded. "He's had to do that in front of me too. Well... two times now, I guess," I said. I'd told her mostly about my journey so far with Vim, barring a few things. We've had plenty of time to talk about them, and she had been very interested in hearing about all the things I'd seen and done with Vim.

I think she used my own experiences, my own stories, as a way to reminisce. For back when she had been traveling with him.

"You mentioned that. You said one of them was at the Crypt right?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Sharp is still there, right?" she asked.

Oh...? She hadn't asked about her last time we'd spoken of them. "Yes. She is."

Lilly hummed as we neared some dense trees. The type that would make us have to pay attention where we walked.

"I got along well with Sharp... at least until I brought up Rapti with her," I said as I remembered the small woman's face upon mentioning Rapti. She had looked as if I'd slapped her.

Lilly chuckled. "I've no doubt about that. Those two have history."

"I've heard... or well, I've heard that they have a past, but not the specifics," I said carefully, hoping Lilly would hear my own interest and inform me about them.

She glanced up at the trees we began to walk under, as if to study their branches. "Sharp tried to marry her brother. It didn't go very well, at all. I think Rapti blames Sharp for his death, at least indirectly. It's stupid because the only reason Sharp even tried to like him was because of who he was," Lilly said.

I slowed a little and then came to a stop near a tree. I flinched a little as I quickly understood what Lilly had just revealed to me.

Rapti blamed Sharp for her brother's death. A brother that Sharp had tried to have a relationship with. "You mean she only tried to do so because he was Rapti's brother," I said, noticing the finer detail.

Lilly noticed I had stopped and stopped walking as well. She turned and nodded at me. "Yes. Sharp and Rapti were closer than sisters. I don't know the whole story, it happened during the wars, but I think the only reason Sharp even tried to be with him is because of Rapti."

"Was his death actually related to Sharp somehow?" I asked as I returned to walking. My owl friend giggled at me, which made me stop next to her. "What?"

"I like you. You're a gentle one, but not afraid to admit and face the harsh realities that our cruel world forces upon us," Lilly said.

I frowned at that, and wondered if she had just complimented me or teased me.

Lilly then nodded. "Yes, Renn. I don't know the whole story, but Rapti's hate has ground to stand on. Enough so that even Vim and Sharp herself don't fault her for it. So I've always assumed so. I never got along well with Sharp. I saved her once and she was rude about it," Lilly said.

"Rude...?" I asked. Sharp was sharp tongued, but I didn't realize she'd be rude even to someone who had saved her.

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Lilly nodded as we both returned to walking. "It had been not long after all the drama. Rapti's and hers. I think she had wanted to die, and I saved her at the wrong moment. So I don't really fault her, but ever since she's been rude to me," Lilly said.

Oh... "That's sad," I said softly.

She shrugged, not seemingly caring about it.

It made me wonder if maybe the reason Lilly was seen so lowly by most of the Society was for similar reasons. It'd not surprise me, honestly, since so many of our people were so weird sometimes.

Though... why was she compared so often to Yangli? Her name and his were usually used together when giving me warnings, or when people spoke of outcasts and failures of the Society. I knew Lilly had participated in the wars, hundreds of years ago, but from what I could tell she hadn't done something as terrible as Yangli had, right?

If she had, I would assume Vim would have banished her or killed her... so...

"You know Renn... since we have a moment alone, mind if I ask something personal?" Lilly then asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I nodded quickly, and kept the fact that she and I have been talking rather personally for some time now. Ever since she and Windle had declared me a member of their family, I've been rather open with her. And I had thought she had been doing the same, honestly.

Lilly glanced at me as we walked around a cluster of trees, and she gestured lightly in front of us. "Vim. He's... special," she said, speaking slowly... as if unsure of what to say.

I nodded slowly and felt oddly anxious. What was she about to ask?

"I don't even know what he is. I barely know anything about his past, where he came from or anything like that. But what I do know, rather surely, is Vim's rules," she continued.

I slowed again, and suddenly felt worried. His rules? She was bringing them up here, and in this way? I wonder what was wrong.

Lilly slowed as well and we paused near a group of bushes with lots of little bugs flying around them. Some kind of colorful things, likely the types that hung around flowers. She looked me in the eye, and I noticed a strange look of worry on her face. Was she struggling to ask the question...? It sure did look like it.

After a moment Lilly sighed and nodded. "He once told me, a long time ago, that the reason he so dutifully protects us, the Society, is because of something he did once. That everything he does today is his way of paying off a debt. One so large he had said at the time that it might take thousands of years of service to even pay the interest," she said.

I gulped. Yes. He had said similar to me. I was rather shocked to hear he had told others about it, since he seemed to keep it so secret.

Though this was Lilly. Someone he obviously trusted.

Vim's owl friend shifted and reached up to scratch under her hood. I heard her hair as she itched at it. "Well... I was wondering if you knew what he did? What was his mistake? To make him so weird?" she asked.

Oh.

My anxiety ended rather quickly, and was replaced by a strange feeling of defeat. "I don't know. I know about his mistake, that he made one at least, but I don't know the details. Vim... doesn't like talking about himself. It was only recently he's even been willing to talk to me about simple stuff like his parent," I said.

Lilly perked up. "His parents!"

Woops. I nodded quickly. "Honestly Lilly you might know as much as I do, if not even more about Vim at least concerning certain things. You've known him so long, after all," I said quickly, hoping she didn't focus too deeply on what I'd just revealed.

She shook her head. "What were his parents like? Are they still alive?" she asked, uncaring at all about how foolish I felt.

I took a small breath and shook my head. "No... they're dead. And I don't really know much about them. I don't even know their names. I was just trying to say he's only very recently started to even talk to me about things such as that. Little personal things that most people wouldn't even hesitate to tell anyone about," I said, explaining a little.

Lilly sighed and nodded. "Right. He's like that. It's so weird, isn't it? He'd willing teach us anything we asked. How to build something, or make certain materials, but the even a simple question like where he's from or whatever makes him go all quiet," Lilly complained as she returned to walking.

I followed after her, keeping pace with her as I nodded. "Right! Half the time he just outright tries to change the topic of the conversation, not even saying why or what he's trying to avoid to talk about! Makes it a pain sometimes, he's lucky we love him so much!" I said, agreeing.

Lilly laughed. "More like he's lucky how much I love not having a headache! But yes... hm..." She paused a moment, to ponder something, and then nodded. "You've obviously learned things about him that I

don't know. Maybe I just need to wait a little longer then. You are right, it's only been a couple years. A blink of an eye," she mumbled to herself.

I smiled at the woman who was acting exactly how I would had our positions been reversed. I too wanted to know more about Vim, after all.

"To be honest there's a few things I want to ask you about him," I said.

"Like what?"

Blinking at her openness to being asked, I hesitated.

What did I want to ask...?

Rather what could I ask about that wouldn't cause issues?

I wanted to ask if she's ever seen one of his wounds reopen, after healing.

But if she hadn't then my asking of it might cause problems. Same with his exhaustion, and his inability to sleep without great effort.

Did I want to ask about Celine? Or any other women he may have had a fling with? Or should I ask something more simple?

Although many questions came and went... there was one I really wanted to ask, now that we were alone. Cat had stopped me from asking it, even though I trusted her to a point.

"Do you think he'll actually step down? If they vote against him?" I asked.

Lilly hummed and nodded. "That is a question indeed, isn't it?"

"You don't have any idea?" I asked. Surely she had at least an assumption?

She shrugged. "Vim's weird, Renn. He's got a bunch of rules. And not just the ones he agreed to abide by with Celine in their stupid contract. A part of me wants to say he'd ignore their vote, and keep helping anyone who asks for his help. While there's another side to Vim that... well... yes. He'd see the vote, no matter how it goes, as law. As something almost holy and divine. So yes, if they vote against him there is a chance that Vim will just... leave the Society. No longer helping anyone. As stupid as it would be for that to happen, I can see it happening indeed," Lilly said, speaking rather calmly. She didn't seem to have to ponder it very long, which told me she'd long thought about it already.

"That was my same conclusion. He'll either obey the result completely, or he'll just start only helping those who ask for his assistance," I said, nodding in agreement.

"Regrettable... but to be honest it was bound to happen eventually. Though I always figured it'd happen because of dilution," she said.

"Dilution?" I asked. Did she mean the same thing Vim did? When he spoke of bloodlines?

Lilly nodded as she raised a hand to point at me. "I've always figured the whole of the Society would die out. From not just chaos but our children. So many of us being born, even between two non-humans, are less so than their parents. I've even had children, most of them, that are more human than not. Lacking wings, feathers, or our strength," Lilly said.

Huh. "Where are your other children anyway? I know one is a part of that mercenary band, but what of the others?" I asked. As far as I was aware she had at least seven other children, not including Root who was at home.

"All over. Windle has requested them home, so you may see them here soon. Most don't travel too far from us. The one who flies farthest from the nest is Sap. She's a loner, I may have to go get her myself," Lilly said with an annoyed sigh.

I smiled happily. "Want me to go get her?" I asked.

Lilly chuckled at me. "You probably would be able to find her. She lives in a forest far to the north. Where there's permanent snow. But no, I'll do it. It can take a month or so to go there and back, and knowing Vim he'd be upset if I sent you on such a quest," she said.

"He's been busy lately," I said.

"Still. The closest is Crown. If you're asking for something to do, since it might be weeks before Vim shows up, then you can go get her if you want. She lives in a town nearby, a small fishing village," Lilly said.

"Oh...? Sure. I'd be happy to," I offered my services without hesitation.

Lilly nodded as we left the dense trees and entered another field. This one was full of thin grass that was tall and wet. Off in the distance I saw some hills, and beyond them were obvious signs of a settlement of some kind. There were small stacks of smoke, the gray types that told me there were fireplaces that way.

"Honestly Renn... there's a chance the world may become chaotic for us soon. So maybe you're right. Maybe we should gather the parliament while we can," Lilly said softly as she thought about it.

"Parliament?" I asked.

"It's what a group of owls are called. Vim told me. He says it means a group of people who represent the authority of a nation, or a group of peoples. Something like ministers and nobles," she explained.

Ah... I nodded, unsure of what to say about that. Why was such a thing used for owls? When I thought of a group of nobles or rulers, I didn't think of a bunch of strong people or great hunters.

"Do you have any family Renn?" Lilly then asked.

I blinked, and wondered why she had just asked me that. I had told her my story before, when we had first met. Back when I had been just banished from Ruvindale.

Shaking my head lightly, I pointed at her. "Just you and your family. And Vim... and maybe Cat and Elaine, I guess? Indirectly? Though rather than family I'd more so say I feel responsible for them. And if that's the case I'd probably include others too... like Merit?" I said as I thought about it.

Honestly I had many people I now cherished. Even those like Landi, as odd as she were, was now someone I considered special and important. Though, just like with Cat and the rest of Witch's descendants, I wasn't entirely sure if my affection and care for them was anything more than the strange sense of responsibility I had for them.

I had affected their lives. Drastically... so I felt as if I should care for them. Just as Vim did, in his own way, to the Society I too saw it the same way.

"Yes... I guess in a way I do have more than just your family and Vim. But I'll be honest many of them are those I simply care about, or feel a desire to help and protect. Like Lomi, or Fly," I said, explaining it better not just for Lilly but myself.

Lilly chuckled at me. "So the letters are true. You're as bad as Vim," she said, teasing me.

I smiled at that, feeling rather good over getting such a lovely compliment. "Yes. In a way I do see the whole of the Society as family... but I mean what I said. Right now, other than Vim, you and yours are my only true family. And maybe Merit, if she'll allow it. She's so touchy about such things, after all," I said.

"You have no idea," Lilly said softly... and then tilted her head. "Well, maybe you do," she corrected herself.

Yes. I thought I did, at least.

"Still, my little parliament is definitely growing. What with Root and you now... what is that? Twelve people? Though you included Merit and the rest too... I wonder if that means I have to too," Lilly wondered as she crossed her arms and sighed.

I grinned at her. She really was including me in her family! How wondrous. Hopefully I could genuinely earn my right to be a part of it, and not just be considered a member simply because of my relationship with Vim.

"We don't really have to gather everyone do we...? Something tells me most of them wouldn't come even if we asked them to anyway," I said, hoping to not make it awkward. I wasn't sure what many of them would think if we asked them to join us. Merit wasn't the only one who was prickly and stubborn.

"Right...? Though it's good you don't have any real family left, though. Or well, it's not. It's sad you have no other family, Renn... but it's common amongst our kind nowadays. Though this does mean we won't have to gather them all up too. Less work for us," she said after a moment.

Oh... that's why she had asked.

She planned to gather her own children as to keep them safe during this vote. For when she leaves, likely with Vim, to head back to Telmik. To possibly side with Randle against the Chronicler and her people.

Because the Society might splinter and break. Because the Society might end up fracturing and members may actually go to war over it.

Right...

"Do you actually think it can come to that, Lilly? That this vote can result in more than just words and rule changes?" I asked.

She glanced at me, and I didn't like the look in her eyes.

I held them for a moment until I had to look away. They hurt my soul, somehow.

"Yes, Renn. I fear blood will be shed over this vote... let's just hope Vim's not the one who does the deed," she said.

Chapter 348 A Mapple To Scare

I had expected life to force my hand soon. But not like this.

I stood a few feet away from the bundle of blankets. Light snores came from beneath them, and the slumbering woman sounded deep in sleep. Odds are even if I hadn't been able to be as silent as I was she'd not have woken on my approach.

The nearby campfire was just a pile of smoldering embers. Another small pack, similar to the one resting beneath her head and being used as a pillow, laid nearby her feet, half open. She must have dug something out of it before lying down. Maybe a snack or something.

Keeping a sigh from escaping, I glanced around at the nearby trees. We were just on the edge of the Dark Forests. The large forest that surrounded the Owl's Nest. Not far from here was the edge of the forest, and beyond that a huge prairie of grass and small hills. Those hills used to be full of flowers, which were gone now. When had those flower fields disappeared...? And why had they? Had a flood occurred or something?

Paying the change in scenery not much mind, I returned my attention to the sleeping woman in front of me.

I'd usually not bother someone sleeping like this. Although the Owl's Nest was secluded, the forests around it were not. Many humans traveled around this area, thanks to the nearby towns and villages. Some came here to hunt, others were just passing through. Such people were usually not worth my attention, or worry. No humans dared the darkness of the forests around Lilly's home, and even if they did there was no reason to worry. Even if they somehow survived the bear, odds are they'd not find the small patch of light within that very darkness. And even then, they'd have to then deal with Lilly and Windle.

As far as I was aware in all the years the owls had lived in their nest, only on three occasions had humans been able to reach them. And of those three, only one had survived the journey. One had wounds too severe to survive, and the other had starved to death. They had wandered the forest, lost and unable to find food or water. The third had survived the journey, but not Lilly.

Shifting a little, I glanced at the direction the woman had been facing before lying down. Where I had come from.

This spot was a little unique. And not just because it was near the small cabin that Lilly had built for our weaker members. A place for them to stay and wait for Lilly to come to them, so they didn't have to dare the forests and the monstrous bear that lived within it.

I had passed by it, checking on it, on purpose. Not just to make sure no one was there waiting for Lilly, or any letters, but also to make sure it was unoccupied still. There'd been a couple times that humans had tried to settle down at it, thinking it abandoned and unoccupied.

Humans usually didn't mind sharing their hunting lodges, so to them it was normal. They knew that as long as they kept it tidy, and replaced anything they used, they were usually allowed to use such places as long as they're unoccupied. When someone spent longer in it than necessary Lilly or I would bribe them to leave. A small bag of coins was normally enough to make them hastily pack up and leave, never to return.

Though...

Looking back down at Mapple, I glared at the foolish woman.

The cabin had been empty.

So why was she camping out here, alone?

Mapple had always been weird. She hated the church. Not like I did, but with genuine disgust and vitriol. Yet she served the cloth, and even wore their robes and colors. I'd always praised her for the loyalty she displayed to those she deemed her mothers, but... sometimes she took that loyalty too far.

She did not get along with Lilly. Not because she felt Lilly was a psychopath, or murderer as so many others in the Society did. Rather only because of Lilly's and the Cathedral's differences. She sided with the church, thus saw her as an enemy.

But although she saw Lilly in such a way, she did not and would not have ignored the cabin. There was no point to. She was still a member of the Society after all, as was Lilly.

Which meant her camping at a distance from the cabin... had a meaning behind it.

The first, and most obvious and likely reason, was Renn. Mapple must have been sent to keep an eye on Renn and Cat as they headed northward.

I had left the same night that Renn and Cat had from Telmik, so it wasn't a stretch to think Mapple had sneaked away not long after I had left and caught up with the two. Renn was actually a seasoned traveler, after having spent so long with me, but Cat had been human. She would not have been able to move quickly enough to outpace Mapple.

But I had expected someone to follow her. Though to be honest I had not expected one of our own. I had expected a human. A member of the cloth, sent to watch Renn and Cat from a close distance, since they would not have outright noticed or assumed a traveling nun or priest to be anything dangerous.

Yet Mapple...?

I had not thought her willing to incur my wrath in such a way.

So... What to do?

Mapple's snores were light, but consistent. Her feet even twitched occasionally, from her dream. She looked peaceful as she slept, enough so to make me almost feel bad about what I was about to do. Almost.

"Do what?" I asked myself, whispering aloud. Mapple didn't wake; her light breathing didn't hesitate or change. She slept through my voice.

Which told me she wasn't as acutely aware of me as she pretended to be.

Renn would have woken from that. Even my smallest whisper could wake her sometimes.

Really... what was I going to do?

She was a member. And by all rights may not even be here to do anything nefarious.

Odds are she had simply been told to make sure Renn actually went to Lilly, and took Cat home. Just a simple verification that her task had been a real one, and she had set forth to actually fulfill it. Nothing more.

So then why did I feel so betrayed at the sight of her?

Was it just because I had hoped my fears and assumptions would have not been proven correct? Had I been hoping to find no one following or testing Renn? Had I hoped that the Chronicler, and her ilk, would have left Renn alone?

Yes. I had.

But nothing ever went my way.

Stepping closer, I knelt a little. Reaching out, I firmed myself as I grabbed Mapple's shoulder as to shake her awake.

"Mapple," I said her name, and had to tilt my head to the left as her hand shot out from under her head.

Although I had dodged the knife, I had not dodged it enough. It clipped my right ear, stabbing through it.

"It's me Mapple," I said calmly as she shot to her feet, half-rolling and half falling as she hurried out from under her blankets. She took two steps back, preparing to attack again, but I remained kneeling there as I watched her wake up.

Mapple blinked at the sight of me, and by the third blink she seemed to have realized who I was. Her pupils went wide at the realization, and she gaped at me. "Vim!" she shouted.

I smiled and nodded as I stood. "Sorry about that," I apologized, but only to a point.

I had done it on purpose after all.

Studying Mapple as she calmed down, I kept a small sigh of relief from escaping.

She wasn't in a full blown panic at being found, or caught, by me. She had been shocked, rightfully so, to be woken up without expecting to be... but not simply because it was me.

"Jeez Vim, you scared me! I got you, you're bleeding," she said as she put her little knife away, sliding it into the left of her robe.

"I'll be fine," I said as I felt the blood roll down the side of my head. It barely stung, but I could feel the tingle of a chunk of ear separated. She had likely split it in two.

"Well... yeah, but still," Mapple nodded, knowing full well such a wound meant nothing to me. She sighed again, and stretched a little. "I was having a good dream you know," she said as she stretched.

I bet. "I'd have let you sleep, but figured you were waiting for me," I said gently.

"Hm...? Oh..." Mapple made an odd sound as she stopped stretching, and realized the position she was in.

I pretended not to notice the way she flinched and scowled at herself, realizing the obvious, and she sighed. "I wasn't here for you. Or I'm not? I'm here for Renn, the cat," Mapple said as she stepped over to her makeshift bedroll. She bent down to gather up the blankets she had flung everywhere in her earlier fluster of movements.

"Renn?" I asked gently, pretending not to care much.

She sighed as she rolled up the largest blanket, as to fold it and put it away. "The old hag sent me to follow her. To see where she took that human. Less and I followed her here," Mapple explained, like usual not able to keep much of a secret.

"Less?" I asked as I looked around. Landi's sister was here too? I didn't see her, or smell her even.

"Not here anymore. After we realized she went into Lilly's home, and has been there since, she went back to Telmik. I'm supposed to stick around for a little bit before heading back... or until she leaves," Mapple explained.

I grabbed her small pack and held it out to her. She smiled and took it from me as to go about putting the folded up blankets into it.

So she, and Less, thought Renn were still in the Owl's Nest. With Lilly.

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They hadn't seen them leave... likely thanks to Lilly. Or they had left on the opposite side of the forest, even though this was the way they had been heading. Maybe Lilly had them leave from the south, and round upward as to check for anyone following them.

"Why's the Chronicler interested in what Renn's doing?" I asked as Mapple went to folding up another smaller blanket, one she had laid under her head and over her other pack.

Mapple shrugged. "Light had a dream about her, I guess. You know I still don't think their so called prophecies ever amount to anything, really," Mapple complained with a huff as she paused a moment to look up at me.

For a long moment I stared down at Mapple. She wore the typical traveling attire of the churchmen around these parts. Thick robes and a headdress. They were dark grays with light blues mixed in, particularly around the cuffs and hems of the robe. On Mapple it looked rather good. She was a pretty woman, and looked the part of a pious nun even though she herself was a pagan.

I blinked, realizing I had been trying to distract myself with her appearance. A terrible effort, since my mind was still numb.

A dream. A prophecy.

About Renn.

Light had one too. Like her mother had.

"Vim? Everything okay?" Mapple asked, sounding worried.

"No. I hate prophecies," I said, hoping that was enough of an excuse to cover up the real reason I was about to panic.

She giggled. "Right! I knew you'd react like that!" she happily declared, and then went to laughing loudly.

Doing everything I could to smile, or at least pretend to, I tried to calm down. Before I shifted and broke the world around me.

Celine's damn letter had been more than enough as it was. Now there were more?

Why? What for? How? What was it about?

Damn them. Damn those stupid gods, and their stupid toys and plans and...

"I mean really, I'll be honest Vim I really had thought we were all through with all those stupid dreams and stuff. What with mother and the rest dying, and all. Yet here we are, getting involved in it all again..." Mapple let out a deep sigh, sounding suddenly depressed. When had she stopped laughing?

"You mean Light," I said gently, understanding her meaning.

She nodded. "Yeah. She's like Celine, right? Not like the Chronicler," she said as she frowned and looked up at me.

I nodded back slowly. Yes. "Light's a real saint, yes."

"Great," Mapple complained, somehow sharing my sentiment even though not even on my side.

Though... that wasn't entirely true. Mapple was honestly not our enemy. Not yet anyway. Not mine especially.

She hated saints, and their powers, as much as I did. It was just her loyalty; her allegiance to those who had saved her, over-rid her hatred and scorn.

Honestly we were more alike than I wanted to admit.

Stepping away from Mapple, I pretended to get distracted by the campfire. A tiny little flame was all that was left, doing all it could to survive. A pair of small clumps of charcoal was all that remained, surrounded by white and black ash.

Stay strong little flame. You're my only distraction. The only thing keeping me from making a mistake. Another one.

Where was Renn when I needed her?

Though maybe it was better she wasn't here. Who knows what kind of questions Renn'd be hurriedly asking Mapple had she heard what she had just said.

The worst part was she had a right to know. They were dreams about her, after all.

"So uh... Vim," Mapple spoke up, but I kept my eyes on the tiny flame.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well..."

Closing my eyes, I took a small breath of the forest around me. It smelled wet. Damp. And Mapple's stink didn't help much. How come I couldn't smell Renn? She had spent a few nights at Lilly's, supposedly, yet I hadn't smelled her at all. Though that might be thanks to the owls always having all their windows open. They liked the open breeze, even when it was cold and chilly.

What's it even been? A couple weeks at most? You'd think someone my age would not be as bothered by such a short time apart. Especially when I knew I'd soon be back with her.

Once I dealt with this...

"What is it?" I asked again as I looked away from the fire. It was moments from going out, so there was no point watching it anymore.

I found Mapple standing a few feet away, holding her bag close to her. She looked... strangely unsettled, and was staring at me as if I was the cause.

I glanced around, to make sure we were still alone, and realized I had probably just ignored her. She had likely said something, asking a question, and I had not noticed.

"Sorry. I've been distracted lately. What is it, Mapple?" I asked again, this time a little gentler.

She audibly gulped, and nodded. "I... was just wondering if Renn was with you. Or if you're here to pick her up, or something," she asked, speaking softly.

"Yes. I plan to head westward, checking the western coast and the members along it. Unless you have news that I need to know, and will change my plans?" I asked.

She quickly shook her head. "No! I was just told to watch Renn, and protect her at all costs if I had to," she said quickly.

I blinked at that. "What...? Protect her?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yeah...? That's why Less was here. I mean, I'm stronger than most humans and stuff but I'd be no match for a true predator after all," she said with a shy smile, as if embarrassed to admit it.

Huh... "Was that part of the order from the Chronicler or Light you think?" I asked, unable to not.

Mapple shrugged. "I'm not sure? I'll be honest Vim... I try not to get too involved in Light and the rest of them. Even Less," she said with a gesture behind her, as if Landi's sister was here or nearby. "Did nothing but bug me about my faith along our trip here. Kept telling me my mother would be ashamed that I still wore her clothes but not her soul," Mapple said with a huff, annoyed to even say it.

I slowly nodded, not surprised to hear her discontent. Though it was interesting that Less seemed to have become such a devout woman.

She used to be so like Landi. Where and why had they gone down such different paths...? I remembered them fighting, and separating, but not to that degree... or had they and I had simply not noticed?

"Well, I plan to leave in a few days to return to my path. I'll head up north a bit, check on a few of the families I didn't last time I was up here, and then head along the coast. Likely to at least Tor's village," I said, deciding it was time to end this conversation.

If I didn't I'd end up hearing, or saying, something that would cause terrible problems. The type that only resulted in bloodshed.

Celine's daughter had a prophecy about Renn. One that had made either her, or the Chronicler, send their closest subordinates to protect her. As if she was in danger.

Renn. In danger.

While I stood nearby?

Such an idea was ridiculous. What could Mapple or Less do what I couldn't? What could any of them do?

Yet...

"If that's the case I'll just head home. You'll be heading back to Telmik in a few months anyways on that route, and I don't see how I could protect Renn from something you couldn't," Mapple said happily as she went to finish buttoning up her pack.

I nodded slowly. "I'll keep their warning in mind," I said gently.

"Hm. Oh..." Mapple paused mid-putting the pack onto her back, and then she sighed and shook her head. "Sorry Vim," she apologized.

"For?"

"I uh... probably should have asked. What the dream was about. Why she needs protection. I'm sorry," she apologized again, and sounded sincere while doing so.

"It's fine," I said, and was glad I sounded calm enough to be believable.

Fine? Not at all.

Not. At. All.

Stepping over to the small fire, I went ahead and stomped on it a bit. It was already out, but I wanted to be sure. This wasn't just any forest. This was Lilly's forest... and it was the very forest that kept her and her family safe. I'd not risk it.

No matter how annoyed I was, or how chaotic my mind were... I'd never make such a stupid mistake as that. At least, I liked to think so.

"Then I'll head off then. May as well travel now before it starts raining again. It was storming something fierce the other day, I almost ended up having to hide in that cabin," Mapple said with a small laugh.

"Why didn't you?" I asked, that had bugged me earlier.

"Less hadn't wanted to. She claimed it was unholy or something, I don't know, and I wasn't in the mood to argue with her. You know how she gets, she and her sister are both freaks," Mapple said as she picked up her other bag, the one she had used as a pillow. It was a smaller one, and she tied it to her waist instead of her back.

"I see," was all I said about that.

After Mapple finished getting ready, she smiled and nodded at me, and then pointed at her right here. "Sorry again," she apologized.

"It's fine. Travel safely, let them know my route," I said.

She smiled and nodded. "Sure thing! I'll see you later Vim, maybe next time you're at the Cathedral you'll be willing to have dinner with me? I could use someone to complain to about all the holier than thou jerks," she asked slyly.

"I'll consider it, I usually get in trouble when I indulge you in your heresy," I said.

She laughed, in a way that told me my words had really tickled her in a happy place. "Please Vim!" she shouted in-between her giggles as she stepped away, waving as she did.

I nodded and waved goodbye as she left. She continued to giggle as she stepped away from the small campsite, heading to the edge of the forest. I knew she'd likely follow the edge until the nearby hill, and not long past that was a road she'd be able to travel upon. One that would lead to a main road, one made of brick, and that one would lead her to Telmik.

Watching her go, I relaxed a little... glad that I had not said, or did, anything that could have caused me and others problems down the road.

I had so desperately wanted to.

I was half tempted to go back to Telmik myself. To get answers, real ones, from Light herself.

But I knew if I did that I'd just force the problem. I'd make it worse than it already is. Or was.

But...

Shifting a little, I glanced around and felt stupid. As if I had made a mistake, or many mistakes in quick succession. Big ones, too.

I should have questioned her harder. I should have expected something like this to happen.

Yet like always reality just... slaps me upside the head without warning, reminding me that sometimes I really did need to be a better man.

It was one thing for them all to scheme. To do stupid things, in stupid ways. Although the current vote was annoying, and everything else they were doing, it was still in the realm of normalcy to me. It was within reason. It wasn't something beyond my understanding, or something I didn't believe I couldn't handle.

In fact I was more worried over my own personal problems than I was the vote at the moment.

My exhaustion hasn't gone away. In fact I knew it was getting worse. It was why I had been growing so... unobservant lately. I've always been bad, failing to pay attention on some occasions, but it was getting worse. Far worse.

No matter how shocked or pissed off I was, I should not have ignored Mapple as I had just done. Not when every word she said could have revealed to me more of their schemes and plans.

And there were more issues too, than just my exhaustion...

Reaching up, I touched my ear. I felt the tiny gap where Mapple's knife had sliced it. It was restitching already, connecting back into one... but...

Lowering my hand, I glared at the glistening blood. Blood that was fresh. Wet. Not dried at all.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" I asked myself, and my parents, as I realized the tiny wound had not healed yet. Even though such a fine cut should have healed twice over by now.

Not only hadn't it healed fully... it was still bleeding. As if fresh.

As if I was normal.

Squeezing my hand, I ignored the blood as I squished it.

And now there was another thing to worry about. Something very concerning. Enough so to make me question my own decisions, and my upcoming actions.

Renn was in danger... the woman who I called my wife, and loved, was becoming the center and focus of schemes nefarious. And not just of normal men and non-humans... but of prophecies too.

And the worst part is, or was, that the Chronicler and Light hadn't told me about it at all.

"They had known."

And had not told me.

And to me that was more a betrayal than the vote.

Chapter 349 Their Return to the Owl's Nest

"Hold on," Lilly whispered as she slowed to a stop.

I obeyed, and scanned the forest ahead of us. We were in the forest where her home was located, nearing the spot where it became dark and scary. I scanned the area, the trees and bushes, and the distant darkness we were approaching for whatever had caused Lilly to make us stop but...

I didn't see anything. At least nothing too drastic.

"What is it?" I asked softly. She had whispered, so I knew better than to be noisy.

"I think that's Vim."

Hm...?

I perked up, and felt the smile on my face grow as I quickly tried to follow her line of sight. She was looking directly in front of us... and...

No. I still couldn't see anyone, or anything of note. Some weirdly shaped trees... the weird way entire rays of sunlight seemed to just disappear when they met with the darkness in the distance... some distant bugs and animals...

"There. Sitting on a rock," Lilly pointed, and whispered even lower.

I focused on the spot... and after a moment I realized what she saw. I had to step to the left a little, to get more into her line of sight, and I saw what she did.

A man. Sitting on a large boulder, his back facing us. And...

"It does indeed look like him," I admitted. He was sitting the same way Vim did. Leisurely, and he didn't look to be carrying anything. No packs or weapons. Basically not the kind of attire or getup that most men would have out here in this dense forest, far from civilization.

"Hm..." Lilly hummed softly as she glared at him, and I wondered what was wrong.

I wanted to hurry forward. To run to him. Yet she was acting so odd... it was almost more interesting to not approach Vim, and instead see what and why Lilly was acting this way for.

"Lilly?" I asked, unable to contain my interest.

"He's waiting for us," she noted.

Well... "Likely, yes?" I agreed.

Lilly crossed her arms and sighed. "The fact he's not waiting at my home means something happened," she said.

Oh.

I shifted a little and began to worry alongside her. "Right..." I agreed. That was odd. Why wouldn't he just wait with Windle and Root?

"Plus the fact he's just sitting there means he knows we're here. Yet he's not coming to us. Or is he the type to make his woman approach him and not the other way around?" Lilly asked me.

"Oh...?" I perked up again, and couldn't help but smile at her. She was blaming our relationship for the weirdness? How neat! "I don't know... Usually I run to him, I guess, but he also approaches me... I don't think Vim's rude like that, in my perspective," I said.

She smiled back at me. "I know. Just find it odd... I had kind of wanted to see if he'd hurry over to you all excitedly, like how Windle does for me," she said, teasing me as she stepped forward.

I hurriedly joined her, walking alongside her as we approached Vim. "He will get this weird smile on his face once he sees me," I told her.

"Does he now...?" she asked quietly.

I nodded. "Usually he does at least. Or he'll frown, as if upset and bothered. It's either the smile or the frown," I said as I reached up to touch my own cheeks. I had wanted to frown in the way he did, as to show her, but my smile wouldn't let me even with me pulling on it a little.

"I know that frown. Rather well, honestly. Too well," Lilly admitted.

The two of us were speaking quietly as we approached, as if we wanted to sneak up on him. I knew that we'd not be able to, and I even knew that Lilly knew it too. Yet as we drew closer... the two of us went quiet. As if to attempt it all the same.

As we got closer to Vim, I realized the rock he was sitting on was rather large. It was covered in some kind of mossy grass, so it had blended a little with the ground from a distance. He wasn't sitting on the top of it though, but one of the smaller bulges of it.

I was glad he looked okay. I didn't see any injuries on him, and his clothes from here looked decent at least. Maybe I'd be able to hug him for once and he'd not feel prickly while doing so.

Vim kept his back to us, but we were approaching him at a slight angle. I could see the side of his face, and I could see he was messing with something. He had what looked to be a small object in his hands, and he was focused upon it. Maybe he was crafting another gift?

"Vim," I greeted him upon drawing close enough, and although was going to say more... I found my voice catching in my throat.

I hesitated a moment, as I realized I was feeling rather emotional. As Vim turned to look at me, I found my eyes grow a little blurry... and I watched through the tears as he smiled at me.

"Renn. Lilly," he greeted the two of us, even though Lilly had slowed behind me. She was many feet behind... likely on purpose.

She was kinder than people realized.

"You're supposed to ignore me, Vim. Greet your wife first," Lilly said, sounding a little angry.

I laughed and glanced at her. She was still behind me, and standing still. She had crossed her arms and nodded at me as if in support.

"I'd not be happy if he ignored you, Lilly," I told her as I blinked away the tears.

"Really...? I'd be upset if Windle greeted another woman before me," Lilly said with a frown.

"I had said her name first," Vim defended himself as I turned to watch him slide off the large boulder. He landed loudly, being heavier than he looked, and he smiled at me. "The two of you look fine, though no Cat in tow... so?" he asked as he stepped towards us.

As he approached Lilly stepped up to stand next to me. I shifted a little as the three of us neared one another, and I realized I had missed the opportunity to hug him.

Really. What was I going to do with myself? It wasn't even as if we'd been separated long. A couple weeks at most.

"Cat's at home. Their village is in fact at the very spot I used to live, with Witch, near some lakes. They call it Witch's Rest," I said.

"Is that what they call it?" Lilly asked, sounding offended.

I nodded. "Cat hadn't even known. I had to ask Elaine," I said.

"Hm... and it still stands?" Vim asked me and Lilly.

"Regrettably," Lilly said.

He smirked at her as I nodded upon his glance afterward. "Elaine is a little... odd, but I don't believe her to be a threat. She genuinely sent Cat and the rest of them out to try and stop the fires. To defeat the monster, as she called it," I explained.

Vim nodded slowly as I glanced down at him. I at first studied his clothes, glad to see none of it looked destroyed or too dirty... but my eyes eventually ended up lingering on his hand. His right one.

It held what looked to be a small box. Or at least, the form of one. I didn't see any hinges upon it, or anywhere for it to open. Maybe it wasn't a box, but just a block of wood...?

"Waiting for us here Vim? Root's not old enough yet to make you want to flee to silence is she?" Lilly asked, teasing him a little.

"Hm? No. I actually was getting this," he said as he lifted his right hand, to show us the object.

Upon him lifting it, I noted the way it gleamed a little. The wood looked really smooth and... yes. There seemed to be designs etched onto it.

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"What is it?" I asked.

"Something I buried here a long time ago," he said as he held it out to me.

I frowned as I took the thing from him. He dropped it into my hands, and I nearly dropped it. Not because it was heavy, or unbelievably light, but instead because of how smooth it was. It had almost slipped through my hands, I was barely able to get a grip on it. How had he held it with just one hand as he had?

"You what? Buried it? Here?" Lilly stepped forward to study the thing I held. She sounded offended again.

Really. How was it so smooth? It had grooves in it. Little lines. They were carved and dug into the box-like thing, deep enough and numerous enough that there should be plenty to grip onto. Yet no matter where I touched it, the thing wanted to slide and slip... as if it was wet or something. Yet it wasn't. It was dry.

Another odd thing. What was Vim doing? And why had he buried it here and...

Oh.

I blinked as I remembered him telling me that he planned to start gathering up stuff he'd hidden throughout the world. Maybe this was one of those items.

That meant this was special, somehow. Like a monarch's heart, or something his parents had made.

"I hadn't buried it here. Over there, in the darkness. I figured I'd wait here for a few hours after I had gotten it, to see if you'd show up. It was about time you two returned home," Vim said.

Glancing away from the strangely smooth box, I studied the man who sounded far too calm and even-toned to be lying.

He had just fibbed about something. I wasn't sure what, but...

Moving my eyes, but not my head, I side-glanced Lilly. She was still focused on the box. If she had heard Vim's lie, she didn't show it.

Handing her the box, she let out a small noise as it fell from her fingers. It landed with a small thump onto the leaf-covered ground and she glanced at Vim.

"It'll not break that easily, you're fine Lilly," Vim said gently to her.

She smiled at him and I blinked at the way she did so. It hadn't been flirty, at all, but instead... well...

Watching Lilly bend down to pick it up, I watched the old owl grin like a child as she ran her hands along the box of wood. "What is it Vim? Did you lick it or something?" she asked with an odd tone.

Oh my? What was this?

"Please. I bet it'd just taste like dirt. It's been buried for years," Vim said with a huff.

Lilly chuckled as she turned the box around and over, to look at it from another angle. She lifted it, as if in an attempt to better make out the stuff carved into it. But we were on the precipice of the darkness. There wasn't much light here. Even for us.

Watching her as she studied the thing, I realized something very interesting.

The Lilly I knew was a stoic woman. Strong. Wise. Calm. A little brunt, even.

Yet standing before me right now was a different woman. One who wasn't afraid to act childish. To smirk and grin, and giggle and act silly.

Glancing at Vim, I found him staring at me. His smile softened upon our eyes meeting, and I couldn't help but sigh at him.

He likely didn't even realize it. That Lilly was so comfortable with him that she became like that thanks to his mere presence.

To her Vim was something akin to a big brother. Maybe even a type of father.

No matter that she was old enough to be a grand-mother to a grandmother.

"Mhmkay. Is it some kind of box? It feels empty, and I think I hear something when I shake it," Lilly spoke up, drawing my eyes from Vim's.

I turned and focused on the thing as she shook it. I squinted my eyes as I tried to hear for any kind of sounds, banging or tinkling... and...

Yes. Sure enough there was a sound. Almost like there was a coin inside of it. A singular coin though, not multiple. The sound it was making was very tiny, and dull, not a metal on metal sound but a metal upon wood.

"Sounds like a tiny coin or something," I said as Lilly shook it harder.

"Damn your ears. Here, give it," Vim reached out for the thing, which Lilly at first seemed not willing to give. She held it still for a moment as he grabbed it from her hand, and she glared at him. In a way that a child would when a parent took a toy from them.

Yes. She definitely acted different around him than others. Maybe anyone else.

With Windle she was a stern, but loving, wife. Root she was a precious mother. With me she was something like a stable sibling, a stout sister I could rely upon.

Humans? She was the epitome of her bloodline. A majestic bird of prey, staring at you from the distance... ready to pounce or take flight the moment you went out of line.

Yet with Vim...? She, well...

"Well? What is it? Open it, come on," she said, ushering him as he sighed at her. She had even stepped forward, and I knew if she still had her wings they likely would have flapped in anticipation based on how she had done so.

I couldn't help but smile at her.

She was like a child with him. How cute.

"It's not something I can just open and close you know..." Vim said as he turned the box around in his hand, to have one of its sides face directly at him.

"You just said you were going to open it!" Lilly complained.

"I had not. I had simply told you to give it back," Vim said as he smirked at her.

"You're not going to open it are you?" Lilly asked, sounding upset.

"No. If I open it I'll not be able to close it again. It's a one use box, basically," Vim said.

"Why? Or well, why won't you open it?" I asked, hoping to get him to just answer before Lilly got upset. I wasn't sure if she actually would or not, but I didn't want to take the chance.

She was acting a little childish right now, so it'd not surprise me if she did.

"Inside is an object made by a god. It's not something to handle carelessly," he said simply.

Both Lilly and I shifted and glanced at each other. Then we looked back at Vim. "A god?" I asked.

He nodded. "It's actually not that impressive. The thing just constantly sucks in air, but not so quickly or strongly that it's very dangerous. It's just a real pain in the ass to seal, so I'd prefer not to open it if that's okay," Vim said.

"Sucks in air...?" Lilly asked, finding the statement as dubious as I did.

He nodded again. "Think like the opposite of a gust of wind. It makes wind, but towards itself," he explained.

I glanced at Lilly as she frowned. "Do you understand what he means, Renn?" she asked.

"Only that it's probably something really dangerous, so we should likely just let it be," I said.

She nodded. "Yes. He's likely understating its danger. Why else would he have buried it in the darkness?" she asked with a sigh.

I nodded, agreeing with her.

Vim sighed at the two of us and stepped towards me. I stood up straighter at his approach, and he reached over to grab at my back.

For a small moment I stood still as he opened the bag on my back, and he deposited the box into it. He tied the bag back up and nodded, content.

"He's making me carry something dangerous," I said with a sigh.

"Eh, you'll get used to it," Lilly said with a smirk.

That was the problem. I already was.

Once Vim was done, I shifted away from him. As if by my staying near him could result in me acquiring more stuff to carry. More dangerous stuff.

I of course knew he'd not actually give me something terribly dangerous. And especially so not without at least a few warnings, or pointers, but it was still fun to fault him for something as silly as this.

"So instead of coming to us you were digging up dangerous artifacts?" I asked.

"Hm... I had planned to come find you if you hadn't shown up in the next day or two," he said lightly. "And by the way Lilly, congratulations. Root is absolutely adorable. She has your wings," he said to her. I noted the way he spoke as he turned to Lilly.

He had just forcefully changed topics. Again.

Though this time I could hardly fault him as Lilly grinned wryly and shifted. "Well... yea, thanks," Lilly bashfully accepted his praise as she reached up and scratched behind her head.

Gosh she was suddenly so cute. Where was this woman all this time?

"She has her strength too, in case you didn't notice," I said.

"I did. She likes to nibble, what with her teeth too, how're you dealing with that Lilly?" Vim asked with a grin.

"Shush! You know we don't nurse!" she shouted at him.

He chuckled in a way that told me this was something he's teased her about before. Maybe even every time she had a baby.

"You don't nurse at all...? I thought maybe when you had said that before that you simply meant she could already eat normal food, not that she doesn't need milk at all," I said.

"Hm...? Oh... no. Not at all. I've never even produced any milk, ever," Lilly said.

Huh... "Seems better that way. Why aren't we all like that?" I wondered.

"Birds don't produce milk. Or well, most don't. Flamingos make a type of it, but not the same, it's..." Vim started to explain a little, but he went quiet as Lilly and I looked at him.

He glared back at us for a moment, and then sighed and shook his head.

Lilly and I exchanged a happy smirk as we glanced at each other. It felt good to have such normal and silly conversations. Especially since many of the topics Lilly and I had discussed on our trip back here had all been... rather heavy and serious.

We had talked long and hard about stuff like the vote, or the direction the Society was headed. Good and bad theories, and such, about our future and so on and so forth.

Conversations I had enjoyed, since I was fascinated by her viewpoint, but also honestly slightly regret having.

Lilly was not as hopeful as I was. Not at all.

I knew soon those conversations would resume. Not just between Vim and I, but Vim and Lilly as well. Odds are she had as many questions as I did.

So I was glad to enjoy such simple moments as these. They were lovely, verily so.

"Well, you ready?" Vim then asked me. I noted the way he looked straight into my eyes, almost as if to make it a point he was speaking to me.

"For my hug? Yes."

He blinked, and Lilly snickered. Likely thanks to the weird look he now had on his face.

He then smirked at me. "I meant to see Fly," he said.

Oh.

It was my turn to blink in shock, and I realized what he meant.

Fly. She was here. Of course she was.

"Let's hurry!" I said as I rounded him, ignoring the arms he had slowly opened in anticipation.

"Ha!" Lilly laughed at him as I hurried towards the darkness.

Chapter 350 Conversations Within the Owl's Nest

The house had finally quieted a little... but I knew it was about to become far more hectic. For me, at least.

My headache had not started while listening to Fly and Renn seeing each other again for the first time, or Lilly and Windle as they enjoyed it, but rather would begin here and now.

During conversations not of simple glee and joy, but foreboding and brooding.

Honestly I was dreading it enough I was half tempted to leave. Maybe I should go wrestle that shadow bear or something.

Or maybe I'll get lucky and they'll all spend the night talking to each other. Getting lost in their stories. Fly going to sleep endangered such a hope though. They were too kind to the girl. Not wanting to stress her by talking about all the chaos currently swirling around her. Especially since she was already burdened as it was.

Some light footsteps further proved I was in danger as I glared at the door... hoping it'd stay half-closed.

It didn't.

"I don't know what's worse Vim," Lilly said as she entered the room.

"Hm...?" I felt my eye twitch as the owl sighed and sat down at the table nearby. My tiny quiet room was now in danger.

"Fly or Renn," she stated.

I frowned at that, since she could mean that in many ways. "For me Renn is the most dangerous thing to exist... though to you I'd think maybe Fly, right now at least," I said. I wasn't sure if Windle had brought up his idea to her or not yet, but I had little doubt that even if he hadn't she already was thinking of it.

Fly needed a home. And well...

This was a perfect one for her. Especially since Lilly will soon be traveling. Windle could use the help around the house, with the baby, at least until his kids showed up.

And who knows? Maybe one of their sons would take a fancy to her... though she was still a little young for that.

"Funny," Lilly smirked at me as she leaned back a little. The chairs here had backrests, and even headrests, but they had openings in the center. They gave enough room for Lilly, and Windle, to sit back leisurely. What with their little nubs they had left for wings.

"I hadn't meant it to be," I said simply.

She scoffed at me. "Your cat is falling in love with us," she then said.

My eye twitched again. "She falls in love with everyone, I think," I admitted... a little ungracefully as I coughed and shifted.

"Yeah? Well from where I sit, I worry about not having a new bird making roost, but a cat too. Or well... what do cats do? Nest?" she asked as she frowned and thought about it.

"Depends on how you wish to view it. Some see cats as lazy, so they'd say lounge. Others would say they prowl, though I suppose neither work in that context. Larger cats make dens, or nests, so you're right," I said.

"Prowl. Yes... although not doing so with sadistic intent; that's a good descriptor for her. She does sometimes just... stay quiet in a corner and watch; though I don't think she does it because she feels out of place or not welcome but rather because she simply enjoys it. It's like she basks in other people's conversations and stuff, finding pleasure as she listens," Lilly said as she crossed her arms.

Ah. So she was giving me her thoughts on Renn. While we had a chance, and were alone.

It seemed some things never did change.

Still... that being said, I was pleased to hear that in the short time Lilly and Renn had been together... it seemed Lilly had genuinely studied Renn, and noticed certain things about her that even others hadn't. Lilly had always been observant. Sometimes even in odd ways.

Though all those letters she's received over the years from others, namely those like Merit, may have helped in such an assessment.

"Could you live with her?" I asked bluntly. If she was just going to have this conversation now, there was no point to beat around the bush.

Lilly wasted no time in nodding. "Yes. Though... I do have a fear about it, if you'll promise not to repeat it," she said.

I nodded, also without any hesitation.

"My sons. She's adorable, Vim. Plus as you know... other than Branches, they're all softhearted. Like Windle. She's exactly the type they'd fall head over wings for," she said with a huff.

I couldn't help it, I laughed. "By the divine I think you're right!" I said, unable to deny it.

For a few moments I laughed, almost a little too much, and although Lilly gave me an odd look... I couldn't help but admit it felt good to do so.

My laughter didn't take long to die down. Like all things, my body rarely allowed strangeness to linger or endure. Even the good types.

It's been a while since I've laughed like that, so I basked in it for a moment... and then I nodded and sighed. "You're right. They would. And I wouldn't rule out Branches either, for that matter," I said, warning her.

"Oh I know, I just meant she'd more likely win the other's hearts first," Lilly said, grinning gently at me. She had obviously found my laughter odd but had made no comment about it. She likely would to Renn later though.

Funny. I had laughed because it had told me a lot about Lilly. Even if she hadn't realized it.

She had basically just admitted that she and Renn were very, very, similar. For the same reason she worried her sons would fall for her; twas why Windle had fallen for her. He liked strong women with backbone, yet had a gentle side to them that no one else saw.

Though I suppose in Renn's case her gentle side was far more open... almost too much so.

About to say something else, I went quiet as Lilly and I both turned... as to watch Renn hurry into the room. She nearly gasped for air as she slouched and glanced around, smiling strangely at us. She looked as if she'd just run around the world.

"What?" Lilly asked.

Renn blinked just once... and then with a few deep breaths calmed down and stood up straight. Her eyes fell upon me, and I smiled gently at her. I liked the way I could see a tiny bead of sweat forming at her brow. Had she strained herself running up here? Why had she hurried so desperately?

"What'd you do? Drop Root?" I asked, amusing myself at the thought. The baby was no longer in her arms. A rarity, she seemed to treasure Root. She'd been holding Root more than her own mother had, though Lilly had seemed happy over that fact.

"What...? No! I uh... well..." Renn grew red in the face, and I felt my shoulders go stiff as I realized what had happened.

She had heard me laughing. And had rushed here to either enjoy it up close, or find out the reason why.

"Wait... did you hear his laughing? Is that why you ran here?" Lilly noticed too, almost as quickly as I did, and Renn became redder.

A part of me fell for the damn woman again, but another part of me wanted to look away from her and shake my head while sighing.

Lilly laughed, nearly as boisterously as I just had, and Renn groaned as she reached up to cup her face. She hid herself from me, and the world, for a small moment as she hated herself.

How lovely.

In fact it was more than just her that was lovely.

Glancing at Lilly, I studied the grin on her face.

It was warm. Genuine. Soft.

A rarity. Usually only appearing on her face when she stared at her children, when they didn't realize they were the target of her focus.

Renn eventually calmed down and sighed as she finished entering the room. She stepped around Lilly's chair, and instead of sitting next to me went ahead and sat next to her instead.

A little amused at that, I wondered if Lilly's earlier concern had more weight to it than I had first assumed. Renn always got close to those we met, until she was pushed away or kept at a distance... but usually in such a scenario she would have sat next to me.

Though I could just be reading too much into her actions. She may simply be annoyed with me at the moment, having teased her, so didn't wish to grace me with her proximity.

"Kids are asleep are they?" I asked a question I already knew the answer to.

Renn nodded. "Windle's cleaning up the kitchen, Root and Fly are asleep... Thank you by the way, Lilly. For letting Fly into your home," Renn then said as she turned to her friend.

Ah. Maybe that was why she had sat near her. For this.

Lilly shrugged. "She's fine. In fact..." Lilly paused a moment, and then sighed. "I should maybe speak to Windle before saying it, I suppose," she realized.

Renn tilted her head and glanced at me. I smiled at her. "They're considering allowing Fly to live here. With them," I said.

Lilly's eye twitched as she glared at me, and Renn's eyes went wide with shock. "Really...?" she whispered.

"Yes. She's... weak. But I've raised weak children before. And although weak, she's more like us than the idiots elsewhere. Though Vim hasn't really given his opinion on it yet, as far as I'm aware," Lilly said as her glare subsided.

"I'd agree with the idea... My plan was to take her to Tor's village, otherwise, and if that didn't work I'd take her east," I said.

"East?" Renn asked.

"Likely Nasba's place," Lilly said.

I nodded as Renn frowned. "Vim... they don't like predators," she said.

"Fly isn't one. She just sees them as friends. But unlike the Bell Church, the ducks and weavers won't abuse her over such a thing. Nann and Nasba both are prey, yet aren't afraid to kill or do what they must. They'd understand," I explained.

Renn hummed at me as she thought about it.

"No point talking further until Windle and I speak about it, though," Lilly noted.

I nodded. "Of course."

"Either way Lilly... thank you. Thank you so much for being kind to her," Renn said.

Lilly smiled at my wife. "You act as if such a thing is really worth praise, Renn. Really. Helping each other is kind of expected of us, isn't it?"

Renn shifted in her chair, and I was able to read her thoughts rather easily.

She agreed, but knew so many in our Society didn't... or at least they preached such a thing, but didn't actually act on such ethos.

"What was the reason for her banishment anyway Vim? Was it really because she got into fights?" Renn then asked.

Oh...? I had thought she and Fly had talked about it. I thought I had overheard them mention such a topic earlier.

Maybe not. Or maybe she simply wanted to hear my opinion on it.

"It was a combination of things Renn. Those at the Bell Church despise those they claim as troublemakers. Predator or no. Their reason for it though, is a valid one. There are those like Prasta, whose son had committed terrible deeds, who live there. They're touchy about such things thanks to their pasts with such individuals. Add that to their religion they so desperately cling to... and well, it becomes a line they don't approve of crossing. Not even on accident. Fly wouldn't voice her support of such an ideology. She'd argue with them, saying not everyone who commits violence does so out of evil, that sometimes it is needed. Then add the fact she didn't quickly convert to their religion, and her willingness to scuffle with some of the younger members, and it all just resulted in what occurred," I explained.

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Renn's eyes held my own, and I realized she had likely known the truth. The truth I had omitted.

The real source of Fly's discontent with those at the Bell Church had been their badmouthing of Renn.

"How is Prasta anyway?" Lilly asked before Renn could say anything more on the matter.

"Fine. Like always enthralled by her sciences," I said.

Lilly scoffed. "Hiding in them, you mean," she said.

Well... she wasn't wrong.

"You mean Prasta's mother, don't you?" Renn asked.

Lilly nodded for me. "They named their children after their own names. It had been a family tradition."

Renn glanced away from me and side-glanced Lilly... and I wondered if I had ever told her what Yangli had done. Had I? Surely right?

No. Maybe not. Yet she was looking at Lilly as if she knew the full story. Though... it wasn't an impossibility. Although most of the Society didn't know the exact details of what Yangli had done, and what I'd done afterward, there were a few who did. And several of them had ended up liking Renn. Enough to tell her such stories.

"You name yours after parts of a tree... what will you do when you run out of parts?" Renn asked.

Lilly smirked at her. "Just how many children do you think I'll have? Windle has worried over the same thing, though. His plan is to use similar things from nature. River, and stuff like that," Lilly said.

Renn perked up at that. "That's cute!"

Was it?

"How about you Renn...? Any ideas for names?" Lilly then asked.

Renn's ears fluttered as she sat up straighter and then glanced at me.

"What? Don't look at me, people always vote against me when it comes to naming things," I said.

Renn's eyebrows twitched a little, and I couldn't help but smile at the way she looked stunned. She had not expected me to respond in such a way.

"Rennalee is neat. Sounds old. Fancy. Maybe keep using that style?" Lilly suggested.

"Fancy...?" Renn asked, though I noted the way her eyes lingered on me even as her head turned to look at Lilly.

Lilly nodded. "Sounds like a name from one of Windle's old books. But... that is an interesting thought... Vim, do you have any children? Other children?" Lilly then asked me.

Great. Headache was here.

"No."

Lilly hummed as she studied me, and then looked to Renn. "He may be impotent, Renn. I know for a fact he's had little trysts over the years, enough times that he really should have a few by now," she said to my wife.

Renn frowned as her ears fluttered again and her eyes locked back onto mine. This time with a glare.

Was she upset over Lilly mentioning my past lovers, or the other thing, I wonder?

"I'd worry about it if we were already trying, but we're not," Renn then said, speaking a little stiffly.

My eye twitched as Lilly smirked, and I recognized that smirk.

This was not the first time Lilly had heard about this. That smile was one that she wore when she amused herself over a long-running joke. She and Renn have had this conversation before. Maybe even many times.

So they were just teaming up on me. Or well, maybe Lilly was just trying to help out her friend.

Just great. Wonderful.

"I'd rather be talking about the vote," I grumbled as I looked away from them and over to the window.

"It is a strange idea though. Little Vims? I wonder if they'd be strong like him," Lilly said, completely ignoring what I'd just said.

"I've wondered about that too. Maybe whatever he is might also appear on them too, little traits he doesn't have?" Renn said, doing the same.

Where the hell was Windle?

"I'd rather them inherit yours, Renn. Those ears are bloody useful. She can hear better than I can, Vim," Lilly said.

"She hears well, yes," I said. Likely better than anyone else alive today, anymore, at least. "Usually she hears my tiny pleas to avoid certain topics, but it seemed this time her ears weren't working, though."

The two laughed at me, and upon the window I saw the two shift in their chairs. Renn's ears fluttered again as I heard a door close downstairs. Windle was likely on the way.

Good maybe he'd change the conversation a little. Hopefully.

"As much as I enjoy teasing him... You mentioned most of your children didn't inherit your strength, right?" Renn asked Lilly.

I heard her nod as I watched the world beyond grow darker. Some clouds were settling in, blocking the moonlight.

"Mhm. Not just my strength, but my temperament too. Only Leaf and Branches are like me, really. The rest are more like Windle," Lilly said.

"And she loves them all the same," Windle said as he entered the room.

Lilly giggled. "I try," she said.

Looking away from the window, I watched Windle sit down on the other side of Lilly. Feeling a little alone on my side of the table, I wondered if this was because they instinctively knew they wanted to interrogate me or something.

While Windle got comfortable, I noted Renn's look. She had a soft smile on her face, and her eyes looked warm. She had likely really enjoyed the previous topic, a little too much... but I also knew she may have heard the small truth in Lilly's joke just now.

She loved her children. Without fault. But it'd be a lie to say Lilly wasn't disappointed in some of them.

It was hard to change who you are. Even for your children.

"Speaking of our children, I suggest getting Crown first. Then someone will need to go get Sap, since no letters will ever reach her," Windle said.

Oh...? Right. They wanted to gather them all home.

Windle and Lilly seemed to believe the Society may fracture. And... well...

It was possible.

"I can go get Sap real quick. I need to stop at a few of those locations up north anyway," I offered.

"Ah... didn't think of that. Yes. Then I'll go get Crown, and maybe Bark too since I'll be at it," Lilly said.

"Where's Bark? Still on the coast?" I asked.

"No. He's near Telmik. Along the way there," Lilly said.

"Nasko," Windle answered.

"Oh? We passed through there on our way here," Renn noted.

I nodded. That was indeed on the path. Which meant Lilly would be able to get two of her children within the week or so if she didn't dally, which she never did.

"Then after Renn and I visit this saint of hers, we'll head north and let Sap know to come home. We'll likely head back southward though, not return here," I said.

The owls both nodded, but Renn frowned.

"You don't have to. You can stay here, Renn," I offered, noting her sadness.

"Huh...? Oh... no it's okay. I was just a little worried over the way you mentioned Elaine," Renn said.

"Hm...? Had I said it with malice?" I asked the owls.

Windle frowned and Lilly shook her head. "Not really? But we're used to your hatred of saints. Maybe she isn't yet," Lilly said.

Ah. So I had a little. Interesting. I had thought I'd been rather calm about it, all things considered.

After all... a prophecy? About Renn?

"Look at his face. He just got angrier," Renn said with a sigh.

"You should be nicer to your wife, Vim," Windle said.

Lilly glanced at her husband as I sighed and leaned forward, to rest my arms on the table. I was tired all of a sudden.

"I could send your siblings home too, if they're still on the coast," I said, forcing the conversation to continue elsewhere.

"Please do. I'd like them all home before you return to Telmik and this vote occurs," Lilly said.

I nodded, agreeing with her.

"Fly said you ran into Brandy, Vim?" Renn then asked.

"Yes. Along our way back north. A few days outside of Bell Church," I said.

Renn's ear, her left one, twitched. "Was she nice to Fly?" she asked.

Oh...? Out of all the things to ask about concerning Brandy, that was what she worried most over? "Yes. Brandy's not as weak willed as others. She simply plays the game, to further her ends. She would vote against Fly's residence at Lumen but not because she doesn't like Fly but instead because her presence would threaten her goals and purpose. If she'd even vote against her in the first place. Honestly she may not do so, Brandy as shrewd as she is in business is actually very pious. Like Randle. She'd not abandon a child, let alone one of our own," I said.

Lilly nodded. "I don't like Brandy, but her cruelty is not from malice or disgust. She simply focuses on her goals, nothing more," Lilly said.

"And did you ask her about what they're doing? In Lumen?" Renn asked.

"I had," I said.

The three were quiet for a moment, and I realized they wanted to hear more.

Right.

"They're not allowing Brandy to get involved with the new church. They're keeping her at the Animalia Guild. She's offended, and doesn't understand the reasoning, so she wants to force her involvement if anything out of principle. But if she'll actually do anything about it is another story," I said. I kept the fact to myself that I figured Brandy would stick her nose into the schemes enough to find out the truth... but I wasn't sure yet what she'd do once she found it.

"Brandy does have fight in her, when it comes to her coins," Lilly noted.

I shrugged. The church wasn't really about the coins though. I mean... it would make a lot of money. Churches always do. But for them, at the moment, it was more about political power. Maybe even a restructure of their logistics. They might even make Lumen the new capital of faith, at least for that faith.

"What of the vote? What does Brandy think of that?" Windle asked.

"She told me she trusts me and would not vote against me. But..." I shrugged lightly.

"People have said that to you and done the opposite behind your back. Yes," Lilly agreed.

I nodded.

"Would she though? Really?" Renn asked.

"A part of me would say no... since Brandy, out of most of the Society, knows full well how useful Vim is to our needs. But... well..." Windle shifted as he noticed everyone looking at him. He flinched and then nodded. "She's one of the few who have proven she can survive without Vim. That they all can. She's made her way in this world, through her own methods. Off the back of Vim's feats? Of course. But now that the foundation is built. His talents are no longer needed, and she may not care for the past and only the future," Windle explained.

"In my opinion the future is all that matters," I said lightly.

Renn ignored me as she leaned forward on the table, as to look past Lilly and at Windle. "Brandy seemed to know more about Vim than most. I can't imagine someone who's helped, and been helped, by Vim actually thinking he's not valuable to the Society. Even if the opinion that we don't need Vim anymore was a correct one, why would anyone toss aside his assistance so fruitlessly? Even disregarding his strength, look at all the stuff he knows and can do," she said.

Lilly giggled at her. "You mean all the secrets he keeps? The same ones that have gotten our kind mercilessly slaughtered when he did share them?" she asked.

Renn's ears went up straight as she leaned back. "What do you mean...?"

"Many of Vim's secrets are secrets for a reason. He does not believe in keeping information, or knowledge, from others. It's against his belief of free-will. But over the years, most of the times he's shared such knowledge with those who sought it... chaos and death are all that come of it. So, against his own beliefs, he's decided to no longer share certain things. Not even with those who could use such knowledge, or need it sometimes," Windle said.

I frowned as the three seemed to forget I was even here. Renn shifted a little on her chair, turning as to properly face Lilly and Windle. "Is that why only a few people know certain things? Like Nebl and his forge, the camels and their dyes?" she asked.

The two owls nodded. "Yes. In the beginning he had shared such information freely, with anyone who asked. In fact he had helped many people gather such knowledge during the wars, as to preserve and protect them. Books and stuff. It actually used to annoy me, because even back then he'd not share information on how to build weapons with me when I wanted them," Lilly said with a glance at me.

I ignored Renn's look, and particularly the way she looked hurt.

Hadn't we had such conversations before? And even if we hadn't... surely by now she had to have realized it, right?

I didn't mind sharing knowledge. My mother had wanted me to be a teacher. Teachers taught. Keeping such knowledge tucked away was almost as against my personal ethos as not allowing someone to make their own choices.

But there was no denying the truth.

The mountains of bodies attested to that.

"We've lost many over the years because of things I've taught them. Either the knowledge itself gets them killed, or their use of it. One could argue who claims responsibility, but the fact remains most of the knowledge I used to share had done more harm than good. So now I only share things that either can't bring harm, or have proven to not be too harmful," I said calmly.

"Then why did you give Rapti that book? To cause all of this?" Renn asked.

Feeling almost as if I had just gotten hit in the stomach, I shrugged lightly. "I had not thought it could have caused this big of a problem... and honestly, it was likely just a useful mistake. Their plans have been in motion for a long time, it could have been anything that set them off," I said.

"I'd like to tease him and say such a thing is a good excuse, but it's the truth. Light and the Chronicler could have, and would have, used anything once they were ready. From the few letters I got, they had even planned to use you Renn. Still kind of are, too," Lilly said.

"Me?" Renn glanced at me, and I tried not to look away from her.

"They had originally hoped you were a problem maker. They had hoped you were another Lilly," I said with a small point at the owl.

Windle laughed at that, but Lilly ignored me. "They wanted to blame all the chaos on you. Ruvindale, Lumen, and such. But there have been plenty of people who have voiced against such claims, even those like Crane. So it's already fizzled out I think, but they had tried," Lilly said.

"The Chronicler had? Really Vim?" Renn asked.

"Someone had. I don't get those letters Renn. I've only heard of such conversations through word of mouth, like from Oplar," I said.

Renn huffed. "If I'm going to be used against you, at least do it in a proper way," she complained.

"Like how so?" Windle asked.

Renn smirked at me. "At least say I'm distracting him or something. Since he's so in love."

While Lilly and Windle chuckled at her, and Renn grinned happily... I did my best to not let my own thoughts show on my face.

They had all thought such a joke was funny.

How little they knew.

Reaching up, I rubbed my eyes... which only made Lilly and the others laugh even more. But I was not doing it out of annoyance... but instead exhaustion.

My own exhaustion. Because it was growing harder to face the truth.

Renn was a distraction. More than they knew. Or possibly could know.

And I was completely fine with it.

Which was the problem.

Endure, Vim. For now... at least.

"Tell me about the saint," I said, changing topics... so that I could ignore and deny the harsher realities before me.

For as long as possible.