

Non Human 371

Chapter 371 Oddness In the Chill Morning

I should be happy beyond measure. Ecstatic, and pleased with myself.

Instead I was on the verge of tears, as I worried and panicked.

Lying on the bed, I glared at the arm just under my chin.

Vim was actually holding me. In bed. As we slept... or at least, as I tried to.

We hadn't slept, nor done anything else, but it was still something of note worth. Something that I knew I'd cherish as a memory for the rest of my life.

Ever since he's allowed me to sleep with him, while touching him, he's always been gentle. He's allowed me to sleep on his chest. His arms. I've even slept on his lap or on his side since I sometimes lay against him at an angle. And even when I did those things he's never complained, at least not vocally.

He's even on a few occasions held my hand, or gently touched me as he slept. A few times he had even rested an arm along my side, or back, as he slept too.

But not once has he ever actually held me close like this. Not once.

So for it to have finally happened... and for it to have only happened because he was seemingly having a small crisis was very upsetting, not to mention concerning.

He was holding me from behind, and his arms were wrapped around my waist and chest. My own arms held his, but only because I wasn't sure where else to put them. My head rested on a pillow, rather two, since I was lying on my side and at an odd angle thanks to Vim.

I sighed as I listened to the birds on the roof. The sun had started to rise, distantly, and they were noisy about it. I wasn't sure why there seemed to be so many birds living on the roof of Cat's house, when she had several cats as pets.

My sigh reminded me of how tightly Vim was holding me. He had wrapped his arms around me, as if to hug me deeply, but it honestly didn't feel like a hug. In fact it felt even a little awkward, and almost uncomfortable. He was lucky the bed was comfortable, else I'd likely have complained.

Glaring at the other bed, the one that Lilly had claimed but never slept in, I wondered what to say or think.

Vim was being weird. Very weird. Even for him.

Last night he had told me what had bothered him about Elaine's prophecy. That she had confirmed to him, somehow, that a god had created a monarch.

And somehow admitting that fact had made Vim panic and look as if the world was ending, and then he wrapped me in a strong hug. One so strong it had hurt at first, since he had been squeezing me so hard.

Luckily I was unharmed, as far as I could tell, but now... somehow worse... was that Vim had gone all quiet and moody.

He was still awake. And he hadn't held me like this while we had walked into the house and up to our room, but he had been so lost in thought he hadn't even noticed Cat teasing him as he followed me up the stairs. He had simply followed me to the room, after standing by that pond in the dark of the night for well over an hour, and then once I had lain down he had wrapped me in this strange hug.

Frowning at my own thoughts, I drifted into my memories and thought about all the hugs I've gotten from him. I remembered each one, of course, and I was a little upset that there weren't many to remember. And most of them were only because of great emotion, on my end, not his.

When Vim normally hugged me, whether out of simple love and affection or because he was trying to console me as I wept, he did so gently. Wrapping me with his arms around my shoulders and sides, with his hands usually ending just above my hips. It was an affectionate hug. One that made me conscious when he did it, since it was something a little more intimate than a normal hug.

Yet this was not like that at all. It was almost as if he was clinging to me for dear life. As if we were drowning in the ocean, and he couldn't swim.

Vim.

Drowning.

And clinging to me for dear life.

It was so ridiculous I still couldn't believe what was happening.

Just what had bothered him so much...? It couldn't have been the fact that a god had made a monarch... right? I mean he had gotten shocked upon hearing of it from Elaine, but he had seemed to calm down rather well. He hadn't eaten dinner with us, after he had heard of the whole prophecy, but that wasn't too strange either. Vim sometimes stepped away, leaving me to deal with the people we were visiting... so him doing that, and standing outside and staring at the world around us for hours, was not something weird or unusual either.

But this? This strange quietness, as he clung to me?

He's never done this before. Nothing like it. At all.

Even when I'd seen him get emotional or angry, he's not been like this.

So... what had caused it...?

I remembered last night's conversation. I went through it again and again. Searching for any sign, or possible hint as to what had made him this way... but couldn't think of anything. It had to be about the monarch, and the god, but why? How?

After all, Vim supposedly hunted them.

Killed them.

How did, or would, a god summoning a monarch; both things he's proven himself capable of handling, cause him to get this way?

Maybe it wasn't related to the prophecy at all.

Maybe it was something else.

My ears shifted, and I felt my left ear smack Vim in the face. I didn't apologize though, as I listened to a door downstairs open slowly.

I heard Cat yawn as she stepped out of her room, to greet the new day.

Great. I hadn't slept at all.

It was all Vim's fault. I was actually tired. Plus now my head hurt... and I was hungry! Also, I needed to go use the restroom.

"You didn't sleep at all, Renn," Vim then whispered.

Oh...!

My heart leapt into my throat, and I resisted the urge to wiggle around and face him.

He had finally spoken! I had tried to talk to him all through the night, with no success! Yet here he was, talking to me! And he sounded normal!

I knew he'd get better!

I couldn't resist smiling at him. Of course he'd not suffer his strangeness for long. This was Vim we were talking about.

"You didn't sleep either," I said carefully, unable to hide my smile in my voice but also not willing to say much more.

A part of me wanted to blame him for keeping me up, with his strangeness, but honestly it was okay. Plus I knew I'd look back on this moment lovingly, since it had a sweet awkwardness to it.

"I'm used to it," he said simply.

"Strangely I've begun to get used to it too," I admitted.

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Not really, but I wanted to be.

"That's not a good thing," he mumbled.

"It's not... but it's your fault," I said as I tried to shift.

For a small moment Vim's arms wouldn't budge... as if to keep me from turning around... but within the next moment, before I could stop trying, his arms and grip loosened. I resisted the urge to grin wildly at him as I rolled over, and found myself face to face with him.

He still had his arms around me, and I felt oddly giddy as I enjoyed the moment... since I knew it wouldn't last.

We were almost lying perfectly. The way a husband and wife should.

My fingers twitched, since I wanted to wrap my arms around him. But I knew the moment I did he'd likely shift and release me. So I held my own desires at bay as I stared at the man who looked... bored all of a sudden.

Where'd that look of pure terror go?

"Are you... feeling better?" I asked carefully.

"Mhm. Maybe."

Oh? That had sounded normal, but I had felt him twitch. Maybe a toe?

"I'm to assume you won't, or don't, want to talk about it?" I asked.

"For now, if you're willing to let it be," he said.

I wasn't, but knew better than to press it.

"Can I at least ask if you're okay?" I asked.

"I am."

I wanted to frown, since his voice had sounded a little off. Had that just been a lie?

Cat coughed downstairs, and then sneezed. I smiled at the sounds, as I heard her start to rummage and clank something metal together. Either she was getting a bath ready, or starting her morning tea.

"This bed isn't very big," Vim then said.

"Hm...? No. But it's fine when we're like this," I said. It wouldn't have been big enough for us to have slept separately, now that I thought about it.

"Like this," he commented.

I nodded, and liked the feel of my ears smacking his head in the process. Enough so that I actually lowered my head, placing my forehead against Vim's chin, as to push my ears onto his head and into his hair.

"What are you doing...?" he mumbled into my ears and hair, making them feel even weirder, as I moved them around in his hair.

"Feels funny. Your hair on my ears," I said as I wondered what it felt like. I didn't have words to properly describe it, but I did enjoy it. It was almost similar to the feeling I got when I combed my hair, somehow.

Vim sighed, but said nothing... nor moved as he allowed me to keep doing it.

"You held me weirdly all night, I deserve a little weird stuff of my own," I said with a grin.

"Weird..." he mumbled the word, not intending it as a response.

Glad my face was turned downward, as it became hot; I realized I was probably doing something as equally outrageous as he had done through the night.

Closing my eyes, I held back a groan as I felt stupid.

What was the equivalent of ears touching a person's face? For a human? What if Vim saw it as something sexual?

As much as I'd like him to do so, and to finally acknowledge such a thing was even possible, another part of me sincerely hoped it didn't happen here and now.

It'd be very weird if he did something now. Especially since I'd always wonder if he had only done so because of his weirdness, and not out of genuine desire.

"And so what's on your mind, to be squirming and making such odd noises?" Vim asked, and I noted the teasing in his voice.

"Don't ask," I groaned.

He chuckled at me, and I felt my face grow hotter.

Right! I'm as much a hypocrite as he was, and I knew it!

For a few moments he let me groan and wallow in my own embarrassing disappointment, but it didn't take long for me to calm back down and lean back a little as to look him in the face again.

He still seemed bored. Tired maybe... but at least now he had a small smile.

"You sure you're okay?" I asked worriedly.

"Yeah. I was fine hours ago, but I was enjoying your little mumbles and groans through the night," he said.

"That's rude," I said as my tail smacked him on the thigh.

"It is. I am," he agreed.

I sighed at him and wondered if maybe I should just start demanding him to be more open with me. After all, he did love me. Would he be able to resist that love? If I pressed it? What if I demanded honesty in return for my affection...?

I honestly didn't want our relationship to be such a thing. But how long would, and could, I go like this?

There was no doubt that Vim kept secrets for good reason. Like his true bloodline. His reasons for hiding it were sound. Even if I wished he'd trust me to not judge him, or reveal it, if he'd tell me.

So him keeping secrets, and being odd because of them... was understandable. He was old. Possibly thousands of years old. It was bound he'd have more than a few, and many were likely things I didn't want to even know.

But sometimes I really wished... he'd just rely on me a little more.

He rarely did. For anything too serious. Even stuff like helping our members through their rough moments and tears, such as Fly, was really not that big a deal. I'd do such a thing even if he didn't ask me to. So I didn't see such things as me helping him, or doing something for him.

Yet as much as I wanted him to really rely upon me, I knew I also didn't wish to. Because if he needed help that drastic, it would probably be something scary or dangerous. The type that wouldn't end well.

Pondering that for a moment, I heard a tiny bang downstairs, and then I heard Cat's voice as she grumbled.

"Did she hurt herself?" I asked.

"Sounds like it."

Poor Cat. She really was not a morning person, was she?

"She'll likely be heading up here shortly. As much as you'd like to tease her by letting her see this, my shoulder is stiff," Vim said as he started to shift.

"What...?"

I stayed still as he unwrapped his arms around me and started to shift away, letting me go and separating us. I somewhat rolled over, falling to the bed as I rolled off his arm.

"Hm," Vim nodded as he rolled over, and I was half tempted to smack him.

It was one thing to be so weird, but to then claim he had a stiff shoulder! Somehow I doubted it! Did he actually feel such ailments?

Hesitating a moment, I realized I didn't know.

Vim very well might feel such aches and pains. Maybe he just never displayed such things. Maybe his strange healing abilities weren't foolproof...

It'd make sense. The morning was cold. The kind of cold that made old scars ache. And we hadn't laid under the covers, so...

"I'd like us to leave soon. Honestly either today or tomorrow," Vim said as he sat up.

Being left behind on the bed, I suddenly felt cold and empty. As if naked all of a sudden.

Hurriedly sitting up too, I glared at him as he rolled around as to put his feet off the bed and onto the ground. He didn't seem to notice or care that I felt abandoned as he scratched at his head, ruffling his hair.

Oh...? Maybe he felt weird thanks to what I'd been doing earlier. How cute.

Maybe I could forgive him then.

"Already Vim...?" I asked softly. I was okay with leaving, but I also kind of had hoped to stick around a little. Wasn't he going to build me a home?

"Meriah is looking for me. So I'd like to go get Lilly's daughter and head back south along the coast as soon as possible."

"Meriah...? What for?" I asked. Why was this the first time I heard of this?

"She sometimes searches me out when she has a problem she can't handle herself. I need to find her quick, else depending on the direness of the problem she might just try to handle it herself alone. I like Meriah, I'd feel horrible if she died because I'd not helped her," Vim said.

I groaned as I hurriedly got off the bed too. "You should have said something, Vim. We could have left last night," I said.

"No. We would not have been able to," Vim stated.

"Why not?"

"I'd been rather upset..." he said.

A little stunned he had admitted it, I watched as he sighed and shook his head at himself. He stepped away from the bed and glanced out the window, studying it as he did.

"I'll fix her floor, and the chair I broke. While I do, please get whatever you need done while you can. She's old, Renn, even for a saint... being a human and all. There's a chance she may pass before you see her again, so make sure you don't leave anything left unsaid," Vim warned.

I groaned at him. "I was trying to not acknowledge how old she is," I admitted myself.

He chuckled at me.

Stepping over to the third bed, where I'd laid all of my excess outer clothes, I went to getting properly dressed.

"I'll get ready. We can leave today, Vim. Just give me a few hours if you can," I asked.

"That's fine. As I said, tomorrow morning works too."

I shook my head. "I'll not be able to survive another night wrapped up like that," I said as I put on my heavier coat.

"Survive...? Had I hurt you?" Vim turned towards me, and I flinched at the worry in his voice.

He had misunderstood.

Taking a small breath, I coughed and pulled my hood up over my head... to hide from his gaze a little.

"No... I was fine," I said, feeling the heat rush to my face.

"Hm...?" Vim didn't sound convinced, but I wasn't sure if I wanted him to be anyway.

For a few moments I debated telling him my real meaning, but decided against it. For now, at least.

Especially since Cat was climbing the stairs, likely to check to see if I was awake.

Going to the door, to greet her and start my goodbyes... I did my best to ignore Vim's odd smirk that I noticed in the corner of my eye.

Chapter 372 Vim – A Log, A Cat, A Question

Maybe I will get lucky and she'll perish before we return.

It was a morbid hope, but it'd ease this headache that wanted to survive my body's resilience.

I hated saints. They always brought trouble. If not for the world, or me, then at least their own selves. They never came and went without causing issues.

No matter.

Studying the tree, I decided it would do. It was the typical birch found in this region. A hardwood, suited for what I had in mind. Plus its bark was useful too, if I felt like gathering it and preparing it as well.

It was dying already, which meant the lumber would be aged and dried a little. For this damp cold region, it would do well.

Hefting the axe I had borrowed, I slowly circled the tree. I searched for the spot I wanted to cut it down at, while also checking the surroundings. The tree was likely sixty odd feet high, so I made sure there was nothing I could destroy on accident by felling it.

It was honestly far too much wood for what I needed, but I knew better. You always gathered more, not less. Just in case.

I sighed as I stopped studying the tree, and the area around it. I decided it was fine to fell, so went ahead and angled the axe.

"Timber," I whispered as I swung it.

The axe-head hit the tree, breaking a thick layer of bark and getting stuck several inches in. I easily pulled it out, and checked the tool. Both the handle, and the axe-head, were stout and undamaged. I had correctly gauged how much strength to use with this thing.

Now that I was sure, I went ahead and finished the job. Less than a dozen swings later, the tree slowly began to tilt away from me. It didn't make much sound as it fell, but upon landing it made a noisy boom as it fell on hardening ground, as the branches and canopy crushed and crunched beneath itself.

It bounced just once, and then came to a stop. The tree didn't snap, nor did the layer of bark upon it splinter and shatter off. The way it settled easily, without any problem, told me I had picked the right tree.

The sound it had made, and the freshly cut section from where I had felled it, told me that it had indeed been dead already. Which meant the wood would be mostly dried, if not completely, and won't require me to smoke or dry it.

"World's gone crazy and I'm fixing floors and making chairs, for a saint no less," I grumbled as I went to clean the tree.

Although I didn't hurry, I still cut most of the branches and limbs off rather quickly. There hadn't been many to remove in the first place. I piled the limbs aside, debating to use them for anything as I went to remove the bark.

The outer layer of bark was the kind that could be used for roofing, or other similar materials. Some people even used it to make cups, and buckets. But at the moment I had no plans for such things, so I just gathered it all up in a nice little pile near the branches.

I paused a moment, to study the under-layer of bark, and noted just a tiny bit of sap here and there. Enough to tell me that the tree had likely died sometime last year, but the bark had lived through the wet summer. I debated gathering a little up for Renn, but decided against it as I went to cleaning the rest of the tree.

"She has snacks already," I told myself. After spending the morning with Cat, once the saint had awoken, we had gone to the saint's house. So I could check out the floor and chair I had ruined. As I had examined the property damage I was responsible for, Renn had been lured into a breakfast of sweets by the saint and the rest. A breakfast that Renn had more than happily abandoned me to partake in.

Honestly it was fine. She was safe here. Enough so I had been willing to consider making her a house here, for her to stay at whenever she visited. Something similar to the mansio in Telmik maybe. But it had annoyed me all the same, to hear her giggle and laugh while talking with the saint.

"You'd think Renn would doubt the woman's sight, since it is obvious the saint has no idea the fine line she was walking," I mumbled as I finished taking off the bark.

I had not brought a saw with me, but I wasn't a human. I didn't need to carve this into proper pieces out here as to take it home. The only part I needed to trim was the top, which only took a couple swings of the axe since a part of it had broken and snapped in the fall anyway. I cut it down a dozen or so feet, to where most of the log was thick and straight, and then went to do a once over on it.

The tree itself, without its layers of bark and limbs, was probably twice my width in circumference. There were actually many around me that were far wider, but this was a good size. I knew it was too big and heavy for even several horses to drag, but I also knew if I had cut down a smaller one I would have regretted it.

The good wood was near the center. It'd be straighter, and not as porous.

"Well let's get this over with," I said as I dropped the axe and went to pick the freshly prepared tree up.

Instead of rolling it onto a shoulder I just picked one end up, and then once lifted I got myself under it and forced it along until I had a hold of it from the center.

My head, neck and shoulders, felt ticklish as the weight of the tree tried to crush me. It only took a couple heartbeats for that heaviness to disappear, and the tree to become almost as light to me as Renn was.

"Stupid," I told myself as I bent down to grab the axe. I made an odd grunt as I grabbed it, not from exertion but annoyance.

I really didn't want to fix that saint's house. But I had broken it. My feet had done the deed, not anyone else's.

It'd not take me long. A few hours once I got back, but I dreaded those hours. Even if Renn and the saint didn't bug me or try to talk to me as I worked, I knew I'd be able to hear them the whole while. The saint seemed to spend most of her time in her house, likely thanks to her age. So I'd not be free of their conversations as I worked, since they'll be within earshot as I toiled.

"My own fault," I admitted as I headed back towards the village.

I left the pile of branches and the bark behind, deciding to let them know about it but not gather it myself.

It wasn't like they didn't have enough resources, after all. I had passed a few recently cut stumps on the way here, along my search for the perfect tree. They forested often, by the looks of it... though I wasn't sure if they used the trees they chopped down for much more than firewood.

They didn't have many buildings. Most were spread out, and more than not were single story and only a few rooms big. The large, multi-floored buildings like the one Renn and I were staying in or the saint's house were the outliers.

The saint's house made sense, but I wasn't sure yet why Cat had such a huge home. She had mentioned she was the village's doctor, but I found that a little hard to believe. She was young. Too young for such a position, really.

I allowed such thoughts to distract me as I carried the log back into view of the village. I noted the chimney and the smoke floating out of it, upon the saint's home and verified my worries. Renn and the saint were indeed still there.

"You'd think a saint had duties, or something," I complained.

As I approached the saint's house, I ignored a pair of men in the distance. They had stopped walking along the village road to stare at me, likely for the obvious reason.

I was carrying a nearly fifty foot log, which was wider than my waist. To them it was likely an absurdity.

Reaching the saint's house, I found a patch of grass that looked like it'd survive my laying the log down upon it as I worked. She had fields of flowers elsewhere, and although I hated saints I didn't hate the world around them, so I didn't wish to harm them. Plus Renn would yell at me if I had.

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"Uh... Okay Vim, you're scaring the villagers."

As I lowered the log to the ground, I paused a moment to glance behind me. I found Cat standing near the open fence of the saint's house, looking at me with a defeated look.

"Something tells me they're easy to scare," I said as I finished putting it down.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Cat said as she approached.

Likely not.

I brushed my hands and arms off as I studied the freshly prepared log. It looked great, I could already tell I'd not have any trouble forming and shaping it to my needs.

"You only broke a few boards, and two legs of a chair, Vim. You could make half a house with this," Cat said as she stepped up to the log.

"A foundation at least, I suppose," I agreed.

"Hm..." Cat hummed as she bent down to touch the log. I ignored her for a moment as I glanced at the nearby house. I could see the front door from here, and it was still shut closed.

I had honestly expected Renn to come out upon hearing my return. I could hear soft voices coming from inside, so there was little doubt that Renn had heard me. If not my voice, at least my putting down the log.

"Prinma is visiting with her daughter," Cat then said as she stepped away from the log.

"Hm?"

"The young girl who had been sick. She's feeling all better and came to give thanks. They made Saint Elaine some food as a thank you," Cat explained.

Ah. Renn had mentioned that the saint had been feeling weary thanks to using her abilities to heal a sick girl.

I suppose it was a testament to the saint's nature. To be willing to give up her own vitality just to help a young child through what had likely just been a common sickness.

It did seem the old coot was good-natured, and well liked. I saw Cat and those like her as cultist, thanks to their fervent loyalty... but in reality it was just them returning the kindness and support they'd gotten throughout their lives from the saint. There was nothing inherently wrong with it, really.

I'd never admit that aloud though.

"So uh, Vim."

Cat stepped forward, putting her hands behind her back. She smiled up at me in a way that made me want to take back all the praise I'd just thought, as I glared at her. "What is it?"

"Renn says you two plan to leave. Maybe even today," she said.

I nodded. "We have many things to do. You know the chaos in the Society, you should have expected it," I said.

"Well... to be honest I had expected Renn to stick around for a bit. Especially when I heard you asked to build a home here for the two of you," she said.

Two of us...?

Oh. Renn might have phrased it that way.

I had not intended my request to be inferred that way, but I suppose it wasn't wrong. After all I'd stay here too, when visiting at least.

Plus... Renn was my wife. So in a way her home would be mine too.

I wonder what she'd think if I told her that I've encountered a few cultures where partners slept separately. Sometimes they even had entire separately built houses, too.

What had happened to those cultures...? Are any still around? It'd be fun to take Renn there.

Maybe after the vote.

"So uh..."

Leaving my thoughts I glanced at Cat. She still stood there, hands awkwardly behind her back, and I realized she'd not yet asked whatever it was she wanted to.

"Out with it or I'll tell Renn you're trying to flirt with me," I warned her.

Cat startled, her hands flapping forward as she waved them quickly. "No! Not at all! I know better!" she said quickly.

Sure you did.

"What is it then...?" I asked as I gestured for her to follow me. Behind the house was a small shed-like section. It was more of a lean-to really, but it was where the saint had their tools stored. I planned to get the rigid two-man saw I'd seen earlier. It was one of those big ones that usually took multiple people to properly use, but I didn't need help.

"Well...!" Cat hurried to keep up, walking beside me as we rounded the house. As we did I heard a young girl's voice from inside.

We reached the small shed, and I opened it to procure the tools I needed. It was actually rather clean inside, but that was mostly because there wasn't much in it. Some iron tools, a few boxes, and some gardening equipment was all it had.

Cat watched as I pulled out the large saw, eyeing it as if it was dangerous. "You're not human, right?" she asked.

Hm...? I paused after closing the shed's door, and frowned at her. "Yeah...?"

Why'd she sound as if she didn't believe it...? Hadn't she just said my carrying this log had startled her fellow villagers? For acting oddly? For doing something no human was, or should, be capable of?

"Yet... you have humans in your society," she said slowly, leading somewhere I was now realizing to be obvious.

I nodded at her, and shifted the large saw as to rest it on the ground. It wasn't too big, really, a little longer than my outstretched arm, but it felt awkward to talk about something like this while holding it up. I placed its sharp edge downward, into the grass, and rested it against my shins. "We do. In fact we have more humans than not, numbers wise," I said.

"What's it cost...? To join?" she asked.

Ah... How lovely.

Cat's eyes were a tad wobbly. She was emotional at the moment. Almost as if distressed. But I could see it wasn't actually stress, just apprehension. She was nearly standing on her tiptoes, waiting for my answer.

Renn would have loved this. Why had she asked me and not her? Was it because I was a man? Some of these northern folks still had that strange mindset, where men made such decisions. I'd wonder if she had asked Renn already, but something told me she hadn't. Renn would have brought it up to me if she had, I think.

"Well... to be honest the only cost is loyalty. To be trusted, you must trust. We demand no dues, no payment... in coin or blood. Only that you never betray, and understand that a betrayal means death. Death by my hands, usually," I said with a small gesture.

Cat nodded quickly. "I believe it," she said with a tiny whisper.

Hm. She would. Having seen what I can do, and even having felt it. I hadn't forgotten that I'd dislocated this poor woman's hip, on accident. She walked fine now, no longer seemingly suffering from it, but I wasn't so cruel as to forget such a thing.

I owed her, since I'd honestly not repaid that debt yet. Would accepting her into the Society be something that would work?

"So there are no costs, other than one's loyalty. Just like you and your people, with your saint. You are loyal to her, but not because of debts or coins. You serve her, protect her, and obey her because it's simply the right thing to do," I said. At least, the right thing in their eyes. Cat nodded though as I continued. "The Society is the same. Most humans who join do so because of blood. Their family was born into it, for one reason or another. But there have been plenty, thousands, over the years that have joined without any real connection. Some join because they become friends with our members, like Renn," I said with a gesture behind me to the house.

Cat glanced past me, and I was half tempted to glance back with her. Had Renn peeked her head out of a window or something right as I mentioned her?

But no, I didn't hear a door or window open, nor did Cat's eyes linger on the house for long.

"Some also join for a reason. The Society can be very useful, honestly. Some join for wealth, or power, or knowledge. Because by joining they can get access to such things, rather easily. Many would argue the Society gives far more than most, if any, could ever return. So it just depends, I suppose," I said, finishing up my little spiel.

Cat nodded slowly at me. "So it's not uncommon," she said.

"Not at all."

For a few moments we only stared at each other, and I wondered if this was going to be another moment where the one trying to ask for permission simply... didn't ask.

I couldn't invite her.

No one could.

That was a rule.

One had to ask. They had to say the words.

Unless they were non-human, of course.

And Cat, although named similarly to our many members... was but human. Nothing more.

So she had to...

Cat took a small breath and nodded again, this time looking down. To my feet, or likely instead the saw resting against them.

Oh no.

"Okay. Thank you Vim," Cat then said as she looked back up at me.

I made sure to not allow my emotions or thoughts onto my face as I nodded. "Hm. If you have any questions about it, just ask me or Renn," I offered.

She nodded again. "Okay. I will. Thank you," she said, a little absentmindedly as she turned and stepped away.

Cat walked away, heading for the nearby dirt road nearby. I watched her go, and recognized the gait she had. It was one distracted. She was lost in her thoughts.

I sighed gently as she left earshot, and I bent down to pick up the saw.

Hopefully she gathered her nerve and asked, be it me or Renn, before we left. It could be years before Renn and I returned here, dependent on what happens with the vote and the Society. For humans that was an eternity sometimes.

If she didn't ask now, before I finished fixing what I'd broken and Renn's conversations with the saint, she'd likely never get to ask again.

"It's too bad, since to Renn they're all members already," I whispered as I headed back to the front garden, as to cut and prepare the log I'd fallen and get to work.

Time was ticking, for all of us. Even I, whose clock stood still.

Even Hands would agree with me there.

Chapter 373 Renn – Books and Prophecies

The small book was so old barely anything was visible on its darkened pages anymore.

I tilted the book, to get an angle on the pages, and stepped closer to the window for more sunlight.

Once the sun hit the page a little better, and at an angle, I was finally able to make out some of the stuff long ago inked onto the page.

There were words... and some kind of illustration. An image had been drawn, taking up most of the page, and...

For a few moments my mind was numb, and then a memory filled my head. One where I was sitting next to Witch at a desk, reading a book with brightly painted flowers and their names and descriptions upon it. Witch had enjoyed teaching, and even more so about stuff she herself had found interesting. Flowers were one of those things.

"Hm...? Do you recognize this one too?" Elaine asked.

I nodded and lowered the book. "It had been about flowers. There had been lifelike drawings of them, and breakdowns of their names and origins... and a few notes on how to properly cultivate them, and their uses," I said as I closed the book carefully.

A book I'd once held so long ago. Hundreds of years ago.

It was strange. It made the book seem heavy. Important. Should I ask to keep it...? But it wasn't even legible anymore. Maybe I could repaint and rewrite the details, though?

If I did that though, would it be the same book? If I replaced the pages, redrew it and rewrote everything... was it the same book Witch had made all those years ago?

"How fascinating. Are all of your kind capable of such memory, Renn?" Elaine asked as I lowered the book and glanced out the window.

"I've been told by many that no, it's not normal," I said as I studied the world outside.

We were on the second floor, and the window I stood before was a circular one. It was nicer in quality and craftsmanship than the windows in Cat's house, but not by much. The pile of wood Vim had made throughout the morning was visible not far from the house, but I knew there was no point in looking for Vim.

He was downstairs, hammering at the floor he had broken. He'd ripped up some other boards, separate from the ones he'd broken, claiming he needed to replace them too for his fix to be proper. I think he was just trying to distract himself, and... well...

I smiled at the sound of him hammering a nail, and decided later on I'd give him a kiss. Or do something sweet for him.

He kept adding work to his load, on purpose. He had finished fixing that chair, and the spot in the floor he had broken, a couple hours ago. Yet was still working and fixing stuff, and based off where the sounds were coming from... he was now on the other side of the room from where he'd broken the floor. Fixing something else entirely.

One did not need to wonder long why he kept finding things to fix. It was obvious, even without it being said.

For me.

To let me have time.

It was such a gentle kindness. It really was.

Turning away from the window, I smiled at the saint who was sitting on the couch nearby. There was another couch across from her, which I had been sitting in earlier.

"It's quite an ability, honestly. I can remember my dreams, flawlessly and perfectly. Even the ones I had in my youth. But for the life of me I can barely remember much else anymore. Grenna had to remind me of the hole your husband made, I had nearly walked into it," Elaine said with a small chuckle.

Although she seemed to be laughing it off, and not intending to, my heart still stung a little. It had been rude of Vim to break her home as he had done, but... well...

Unable to remember such a thing? After only a single night? It had been rather dramatic too, since Vim had done it loudly and with great motion. How could one forget such a thing so quickly?

"Vim is forgettable sometimes, so it's okay," I said, making light of it too... or at least, trying to, as I stepped away from the window and went to sit across from Elaine in the other couch.

As I sat, I placed the book down onto the small box table between us. It belonged on the shelf behind me, but I was still debating asking if I could keep it or not. There were other books on the shelf, likewise similar books passed down through Elaine's family over the generations, and I knew several were similar to the one about flowers. Books that Witch had either made herself, or acquired along her journeys.

I wanted them. For some reason. But I knew they didn't truly belong to me.

I had been her friend. She had been my teacher...

But they were her children.

And to me that meant they were more important. That meant they had more of a claim to them than I did... even if it seemed they didn't read them at all, or keep them safe. Though how one kept a book safe from age was something I didn't know.

"Forgettable... yes. I can see why you'd say such a thing. He's not ugly, by no means, but he's not the most handsome man either. Though I suppose it's hard to compare him, when standing next to you. You're beautiful, and youthful. It's almost a sin that you can stay so young and pretty even though so much older than me," Elaine said with a smirk.

I smiled at her and nodded. She'd mentioned this many times already. Either she really was forgetful, which was growing ever more likely to believe by the moment, or she was genuinely jealous and not just making a small comment. She seemed to find it interesting that he and I were so old, yet looked so youthful.

"It almost makes me wonder if you are a saint, just in your own way. You have what seems to be eternal youth, a mind incomparable, and have the affection of the Great One," she said with a small sigh.

"I'm no saint. If I am, I've never realized it. And I've been meaning to ask, now that we got a moment alone... what do you mean when you call him that? Great One?" I asked.

It had been bugging me all night, but between Cat, her daughter, and Vim's strangeness, I'd not gotten a chance to ask yet.

Elaine frowned at me. "You... don't know?"

I shook my head.

"Hm... interesting," Elaine mumbled for a moment, and then looked down and away from me. Her eyes dulled a little, telling me she had gone into deep thought, and then she refocused on me. "The term is one I heard from other saints. I've met five others throughout my life, including my aunt before me," Elaine said.

Oh...? "You mean they told you of Vim?" I asked.

She nodded rather simply, as if surprised I'd even ask such a thing. "Yes?"

"Do... do you mean they knew Vim? Met him before? Did you know a Celine?" I asked, trying to understand.

"Yes. I met Celine. She came to ask for an orb of darkness," Elaine said with a nod.

I groaned.

Reaching up, I covered my face and wanted to scream. Why hadn't she said that sooner!

No. Maybe it was my fault. None of us had mentioned Celine to her. Neither I, nor Lilly, and especially not Vim. Lilly and I had explained the Society to her, roughly, but hadn't gone into that level of detail.

"I wonder if I should be surprised you know other saints. I shouldn't, of course, not just because of whom you're married to but also who you are yourself," Elaine said lightly.

Oh. "I didn't know Celine. She passed away before I got to meet her," I said as my mind whirled.

Should I tell Vim? I should. But should I go get him now, or first find out what I could from her...? Knowing Vim he'd not let me ask certain questions, or make us leave sooner, if he knew.

"Really now...? Interesting. Well, so yes. I've heard about him from other saints. A few met him personally, others had prophecies about him. His title is simple, he's one capable of fighting on par with the servants of the gods. Those you call monarchs. Plus he's ancient. Unless, like us saints, his title and abilities are passed down generationally as well," Elaine said as she frowned at her own words. She must have found the idea very believable.

I kept the truth from slipping out of my mouth as I shifted and grabbed my tail. For comfort.

Hopefully Vim couldn't hear us. We weren't talking too loudly, but we weren't whispering either. He was still banging below, but I knew better than to think that'd be enough to keep him from hearing.

I had many questions. Now some very serious ones, after learning not only had she met Celine... but had gotten my ancestor's heart from her, too.

"What do they say...? When they talk about him?" I asked first.

"The Great One? Just that you should not make him an enemy. Seek him out if you need the help of the gods, but fear him if the gods wish you dead. As I'm sure you know Renn, a lot of us put our warnings and teachings into ambiguous stories and allegories, so who knows what most of them meant. I can't really remember specifics anymore... I just remember being told about him. I'm rather shocked he's your husband, but maybe that's just how the world works. It's not as big as so many think, after all," Elaine said happily.

I didn't want to hear that. Or well, I did. Kind of. But I had wanted to hear something more specific.

"What about Celine...? You said she came to find an orb of darkness?" I asked.

"Indeed. It was one of the few treasures left by the Saint to our family. But she had a dire need of it, one concerning her prophecies. I had no reason to doubt her, since there would have been no way she could have known of its existence otherwise. We had buried it deep under the house, to the point not even the greatest of saints could have seen it," Elaine said.

Oh.

Right.

I felt the hairs on my tail stand up a little as I remembered I carried that very heart right now. Hidden in the monarch pouch.

Did... did she know? If she could see them, then surely, right? Why would she not just point at me and say so then?

"I've heard of that. That the orbs glow, kind of like your eyes do, to saints," I said carefully, seeing if I could get an answer from her without actually asking for one.

Elaine nodded. "Glowed so bright it was annoying, really. I'm told they are the hearts of gods. Not hard to imagine, what with the swirling power within them. I never asked what she really needed it for, or maybe I did and just don't remember, but it had seemed important. She had a terribly sad look on her face when I had handed it to her..." Elaine went quiet, and I watched as she realized something. "How quaint. I remember it perfectly. She had looked as if she was about to weep, while holding that dark orb. I've not thought of that moment in years," she mumbled gently as she remembered the moment in her mind.

My tail coiled in my hand, once again not liking what I was hearing.

Celine. Crying. As she was handed my ancestor's heart.

Why?

No. Maybe I knew why...

Even if Vim would never admit it, since he so firmly believed she had tricked and abused his loyalty for her own gain.

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Her letters had not said it directly, but I had read the truth. Between the lines. Between the little notes and prophecies.

Celine had genuinely loved Vim. Even while she tricked him, she had still loved him.

The only reason she would have got my ancestor's heart, was for me. To leave it for me. With her letters.

Which meant she had likely nearly cried, since it was proof. Proof that her prophecies had been real. That I had been real.

"Did she visit often?" I asked gently.

Elaine shook her head. "Just that once."

Somehow that made me feel even sadder.

Though... that meant Celine had known of her. Met her. "Wait... how long ago was this?" I asked. Hasn't Celine been dead for a long time?

"I'd been a child back then, but probably a hundred years? Maybe more?" Elaine said as she thought about it.

A... hundred years...?

Hasn't Celine been dead for far beyond that...? Maybe I should go get Vim.

"It could have been longer ago, Renn. We saints don't live as long as your kind, but we don't die as quickly as the rest of us humans," Elaine told me, likely noticing my worry.

Oh. Right. Witch had lived longer than normal too, if I really thought about it. I had never paid much attention to the passage of time back then while I was with her, but I knew without a doubt it had been similar. Far longer than just a few decades.

"Was she important? You never met her, yet are that worried about her?" Elaine asked, noticing what I was likely doing a terrible job of hiding.

I nodded slowly. "Celine had been a part of the Society. Our Society. It's just... odd to hear her name brought up here, since you're not a part of it," I explained.

If she wasn't going to acknowledge the heart on my waist, then there was no point to bring it up I guess.

"Hm... it's not surprising you'd have a few saints. You said you had some in Telmik? Cat mentioned one too, someone no one liked?" Elaine asked with a smile.

"The Chronicler, she's called. I wouldn't say she isn't liked... she's just... odd. She's very loyal to her church, to the point that some of our members don't get along well with her. They don't see eye to eye," I explained.

"Ah. Yes. The Church of Sisters. Or was it Songs?" Elaine wondered.

"I've heard it called both," I said.

"Hm. Probably separate branches under the same religion. No matter... other than Celine most of the other saints I've met all had their own destinies. They visited for a short time, then ran off to fulfill whatever task they had been sent upon. I'll be honest, I'm kind of glad that I've not ever gotten such dreams. Barring the hint I'm destined to send you on your own task of importance," Elaine said.

I nodded. We had talked about it. Even with Vim.

She had a dream. One of her prophecies, long ago. About me. The first had been about us meeting, my walking through the door with Vim... which I hadn't done. I had entered with Lilly, not Vim. The other dream though was one of parting. She, in her dream, had hugged me and bade me farewell... as I marched off to face a great evil. A powerful being, similar to the great chicken monarch that was burning down the world she had foreseen.

I honestly wasn't too worried about it, since I had Vim. Whatever great evil we needed to face, I could rely on Vim for it. But... it told me that our story together wasn't finished.

Vim had spoken as if Elaine was old. Old enough to die at any moment... which may be true, but if she still needed to have the dream that she'd share with me as to fulfill the other one about sending me off to fulfill a task, then her death couldn't be too near.

Truthfully I was likely just the mechanism to send Vim on the proper path. He'd have likely never come here, to meet her, had I not got involved with him. Which meant he'd never had heard or been told of such prophecies. So my being here, my existence, was not to solve that problem... just to delegate Vim to it.

I was more than okay with that. Since I really didn't like pain or to suffer. And I knew from experience that facing monarchs was not something one did without such sacrifices.

Unless you were Vim, at least.

Though that wasn't a fair assessment. Vim did fail. He did get hurt. To the point that his injuries would kill a normal man... even a non-human one. He just didn't seem to let such wounds and pain bother him.

"Was that the only heart Witch left you?" I asked.

"Heart...? Oh the orbs? Yes. Why?"

I shrugged. "We had hunted several elders. So just wondered," I said.

"Ah... yes. You did, didn't you? Is that what you do with your husband, then? Travel around hunting gods?" she asked.

Well... "No?"

"Hm..." Elaine frowned at me, as if not willing to believe me.

Just what did she think I was? Some kind of warrior? Or like Vim?

"Speaking of glowing orbs... I've been told that Vim looks like the opposite. Within him. That he looks like a dark hole, something that should have light but doesn't," I said as I reached up to cup my hands, in front of my chest where my heart was.

"Hm...? Yes. All creatures glow, to a point. Not like that orb, of course. But we do. Your husband indeed doesn't. Though I'd not say that means he has no soul, rather his just doesn't glow," Elaine said.

"You call it a soul?" I asked.

"I know not what else to call it. For reference," Elaine pointed at me as she spoke. "Yours glows brightly. Far brighter than any of ours, or those I've seen. To the point it's almost as if you're a saint in my eyes. But maybe not as bright. It's hard to remember how bright the others were, since I have to focus to see the brightness," Elaine said.

Oh...? "I'm bright?" I asked.

She nodded. "Verily."

Maybe it was the heart! She just thought it was me!

Strange. It was at my waist. Almost near my butt. Yet she was speaking as if it was a glow from my chest. Maybe it wasn't a glow one could actually see, but instead sensed. Like how I could somehow see the world around me even in pitch black darkness, even when unable to make out finer details. Like knowing where a ledge was, or a tree, even though you could not actually see it.

"Your friend, Lilly, had glowed brighter too. But not as much as you. Maybe you non-humans simply glow brighter, being descendants of the gods?" Elaine wondered.

Huh... maybe she wasn't speaking of the heart then. Unless Lilly carried one around too.

I wonder why she couldn't see or sense it.

Maybe it was because of the pouch it was in. The monarch leather.

"Speaking of your husband... may I ask something a little personal?" Elaine then asked, changing topics.

I nodded. "Of course."

"Can I trust him? Your husband?"

I smiled at her. "Yes. At least, concerning what he speaks of. If you mean his offer for support and aid, then yes, verily.. Vim is many things, but he's most importantly a man of his word... and he is also an enemy of monarchs. In his perspective you two are now allies in a battle, a war almost, against them. So he'll treat you as one, not to mention his affection for me will leak over and spread to you and the rest here too," I said.

"But he would harm us, wouldn't he? If he found us to be threats, for one reason or another?" she asked.

I slowly nodded, unable to deny it. "Yes. But... you'd have to really threaten me, or the Society, for that to happen. To a point that you'd have to suddenly become cruel and unusual, nothing like you are now," I said.

"And this war? That your Society is about to endure? You and Cat mentioned it is having strife. Internal strife," Elaine asked.

I sighed as I nodded again, this time just as begrudgingly. "Yes... it's a problem. But, it's one that's happened before. I can't honestly say what will come of it, but I don't know how you'd suffer from it. Vim is not outright inviting you into the Society, really. He wants this place to be a secret from them. For me. So that I can come here and rest, and be safe, from even them if I need it," I said.

"But they do know of it. Lilly does," Elaine pointed out.

"Lilly would die before revealing this place. She does not like humans, at all, but she loves me. Sees me as family, as so she does Vim. She would suffer terribly and die long before she did anything to harm us. You need not worry about Lilly revealing your home, or you yourself, to them," I said.

Elaine hummed quietly as I noticed Vim's hammering had gone quiet. How long has it been since I'd heard him hammer something? Several minutes, now that I thought about it.

I ignored the strange silence in the house for a moment as I gestured at Elaine.

"As I said... Vim wants this place to be a sanctuary. For me. He... likes the idea of me having places to go, to be safe and comfortable. Happy. I only have a few places to call such a thing, so he's very keen on enabling it if able," I said further.

"Sanctuary," Elaine whispered the word as she studied me.

I nodded. It was how I saw it. How Vim saw it too, even if he didn't wish to outright say it.

"So I have no doubt you'll be safe. If anything it means he'll only protect this place even more desperately, as to keep me happy," I said with a small grin. It felt good to brag like this.

Elaine hummed again as she nodded.

For a few moments I sat awkwardly as Elaine studied me, and I realized I had likely just sounded a little odd. As if desperate, or trying to sell her something.

But I had said the truth. I tried to always do so, really. Especially when about such important things.

"And... you can say no, Elaine. Vim has one single law above all else. One rule he doesn't bend or break. Something he cherishes and values beyond anything, and that's free will. If you choose to not get involved with us, with me or him, then he will not only oblige that desire and decision but will even enforce it. He'll stand against his own people if he had to, just to support your decision. It's part of his morals," I said.

"I can't turn you away. My ancestor would not let me into my heaven if I did."

"Witch wouldn't do that," I whispered softly.

"Maybe not. But I'd like to think she would."

Softly smiling... I ended up nodding, agreeing with her.

Yes. That was a happy thought, in a way, wasn't it?

"I'll not deny you Renn. If anything... we should be the ones begging you to stay. To live amongst us. You're basically our ancestor too. Our elder, in a way. Like a village deity, almost," Elaine said.

I tried not to shudder at that. "I'd prefer to not be treated like that..." I said stiffly.

Elaine chuckled and nodded. "I can tell."

I smiled at her and noticed light voices. From below.

Cat was talking to Vim.

Which meant he was likely done. And it'd soon be time for me to go.

"It sounds like Vim is done, Elaine," I said softly.

"Oh? Right. You and your ears. I'd be jealous if not for the fact they look terribly itchy," Elaine said with a laugh.

"They are sometimes!" I agreed, as they fluttered... as if itchy all of a sudden.

I slowly stood, as did Elaine. She stood slowly, weakly and frail. I noted the way that even when she fully stood, she still stopped a little. Bent a little askew, from an old back.

Age really was cruel, wasn't it?

I likely wouldn't get the luxury to live to such an age. Odds are I'd die long before I reached such a state. Even with Vim to protect me.

It made me somehow jealous.

"Let's go see how he did then. Hopefully he's not got a fine hand, so I can tease him over his rough edges," Elaine said as she stepped away from the couch and towards the door.

I laughed at her as I reached down to pick up the book... but then hesitated.

Right.

Not mine.

Plus what was I going to do with it? Vim planned for us to be traveling for a long while. Heading north, then back south along the coast. Nowhere to put the book.

Best to just leave it here... where it belonged.

Stepping away from the couches, I followed Elaine to the door... and then remembered a question. One I hadn't asked yet, but really needed to.

"Um... Elaine," I got her attention before she could open the door.

Elaine paused, and turned to look at me.

Hesitating again, I groaned and just decided to ask.

"Witch had been able to tell. When she met her destined one. Her husband. She knew instantly. Before she even saw him," I said.

Elaine frowned at me but nodded slowly. "Well... some of us do see our futures, yes. In our dreams or prophecies. Sometimes we see our own, other times we see the future of those around us. I myself saw the man I'd be with, but failed to see him dying. In fact I'd seen other children too, not just Grenna," Elaine said gently, with a sad smile.

I shifted, not liking how I had made her think of something that likely hurt.

"Right... Well..." I hesitated as Elaine's smile softened, and I decided to just get it over with. "Vim. He tells me the future is not set in stone. And, you and others, have... made that seem true. Like just now, you mention seeing more children. Or how you had seen me entering your home upon our first meeting with Vim and not Lilly. You and others have proven that the future isn't guaranteed. At least, not the ones you saints see," I said.

Elaine nodded and her smile turned into a frown. "Indeed. Our prophecies can be wrong, yes."

I nodded quickly. "Right! So... well... Um... Does that mean fate, is uh..."

Jeez how do I ask about it? Celine had given me a few prophecies, and one was deeply unsettling.

But how did I ask about it? Do I just come out and ask if I should worry? That my daughter was going to do something with the moon, and it would cause problems?

"You... wish to know if fate is real?" Elaine asked, or rather tried to voice my own question.

"No! If I did that'd be bad, I think. Rather, more importantly, I guess..." I groaned and shifted my ears, as to make sure Vim wasn't nearby. I heard him still talking downstairs, thankfully. "I want to know, I guess, how seriously I should take a warning? From a prophecy?" I finally asked.

Elaine didn't even hesitate. "Very seriously. I've had plenty of dreams not come to be, without me ever knowing how or why they hadn't occurred the way I had seen them to do. But... that doesn't mean they don't happen, they simply happen in a different way. I had seen more children, but had also seen him and Grenna. He's gone, as are the other children, but Grenna is still here. Same with my seeing you. You may not have entered with him, as I had foreseen, but you had still arrived. And so had he, just later. So it had not happened as I had seen it, but a form of it had. And for every one I've seen like that, there are thrice as many that have gone exactly as I'd seen them. So any warning, any prophecy, I'd suggest you pay keen heed of it. Your husband may not like them, for whatever reason he has to do so, but is it not obvious?" Elaine asked.

"Obvious...?" I asked as I tilted my head. I was paying attention, focused on Elaine and her words, but also listening to Vim.

Cat was asking him a serious question. About the Society. About me.

But I had to put it aside as Elaine stared into my eyes with her glowing ones... and did so rather gravely.

"He hates them. Yet he still acknowledges them," she said.

Oh.

"Right..."

Great.

Chapter 374 Vim – Heading Northward

I dodged the axe, and watched as the man who had swung it spat out spittle in the effort.

He made a weird noise as he inhaled, as to step forward and swing the axe back upward at me, since he was missing several of his front teeth. He sounded as if he was trying to whistle, making as much whistling noise as the axe made as it flew through the air towards me.

Stepping out of the way, I glanced to my left at the three other men. They were no longer stunned by my appearance, or what I'd done, and were readying to assist their axe-wielding comrade. Two had swords and one had a spear.

It was the spear I worried over. Not because I myself feared it, but there was a huddled family not far behind me. They were close enough, and there were enough of them, where even a half-assed spear toss could take life, maybe even from more than one individual. So I needed to handle him immediately before he got any ideas. I'd have targeted him first if not for the fact that the axe now attacking me had been mere moments from chopping off the head of a previous victim.

The man attacking me let out a roar of a groan as he grew frustrated, and took two steps towards me instead of one as he attacked. Him doing so allowed me to not back step, making him misjudge our distance, and get a clean hit square between his eyes.

His head snapped back, crunching into itself, but I didn't stop. I hadn't hit him with a punch, but an open palm, so that I could grab his face and head. Holding it tightly, I stepped forward a step and pushed the man forward alongside me. I basically tossed him at the three, causing them all to startle at the sudden craziness of the situation.

The man's body spun as it flew at them, and even in his death he had held onto his axe. It spun around as he did, and clipped one of the sword wielding men in the arm. The man with the spear was hit by the body in full, sending him to the ground, and the other man with the sword fell backward in shock, even though he had barely been missed by the dead body's feet as they flailed around.

All three of them shouted out wordlessly in shock, as two fell to the ground and the third grabbed at his now profusely bleeding arm. Based off the way the spearman was shouting, he had broken something in the tumble with his fellow's dead body.

The pain, shock and confusion had been enough. None of them were even looking at me anymore and instead at each other. It allowed me to easily stride forward, to re-enter the fray without them even realizing it.

I kicked the uninjured swordsman in the head. Before his body crumpled and fell to the ground, I turned away and towards the man with the bleeding arm. He realized I was now focused on him, and his eyes were wide and white. His pale face was undoubtedly not because of the blood loss, but pure shock and terror.

Even hardened brigands weren't used to such strange carnage, even though they dealt it out themselves often enough.

It was a strange thing. No matter the era, or human or not, I'd always wondered why people became so terrified of their own deaths... even though they brutally handed it out themselves throughout their lives without mercy. Even base animals comprehended that such a life was full of comeuppance. No matter how strong you were, how proficient or lucky, eventually you ran into someone... or something, which would defeat you. Eat you, or kill you for sport.

It was just life.

"Wait...!" the man with the bloody arm dropped his sword, to raise his good arm up as to beg and plead.

I didn't even consider it, and kicked him in the head as I'd done the other man.

"Gods! No!"

The spearman, who no longer had a spear at all since it had gotten stuck under the dead corpse of the man I had thrown at him, was hurrying to his feet. He stumbled forward, towards me oddly enough, but not because he intended to fight me. He landed flat on his face, rather harshly, and let out a yelp of pain. His left leg was askew oddly, telling me that it had been his knee he had broken earlier. It was mangled, and judging by the pant leg being taugth in an odd way a piece of bone may even be sticking out of his flesh.

Feeling no pity for the man, I stepped over to him and right before he could lift his head as to look up at me I stomped down on the back of his neck.

He crunched a little oddly under my boot, and for a few heartbeats... there was silence.

Glancing around, I made sure the brigands were all dead. I counted the six bodies real quick, verifying each one wasn't moving or making noise, and then glanced around again at the surrounding area. I checked the trees all around us; past the road we were on, and made sure once again that none of their comrades had hidden back instead of joining in on the fight.

I hadn't seen any, and still didn't see or sense any others... which told me if someone had indeed stayed back and not attacked with the rest, I'd likely not ever know. They'd undoubtedly now stay hidden away, out of pure fear.

Still I kept my guard up as Renn emerged from her own hiding spot. She hurried out onto the road from behind the larger bushes, and without even a glance to me hurried over to the huddled family I had just saved.

"Is anyone hurt?" Renn asked worriedly as she approached the two older women and several kids. Now that I had a small moment I went ahead and counted the small group hiding under and behind the two older women, clinging and cowering in fear. It looked like there were at least five of them, most not much taller or older than Fly or Lomi.

"I... I don't know," one of the older women whispered an answer, and I knew the reason.

They were fine. I had intervened before the brigands had touched any of them.

Renn too turned to look away from the group, and we both glanced at the man lying not far from me. One who had not been a part of the six I had just counted.

A man still breathing. One on his back. Beaten.

I assumed it was the husband of one of the women, or father, of the group of huddled kids. He had gray hair, but he had received a hard beating. His face was already swollen magnificently, and he had blood oozing from a few places. Not just his nose and mouth, but one of his eyes and forehead too.

Stepping over to him, I stared down at the man and wondered if I should treat him or not. He looked bad, by appearance, but his breathing wasn't strained. His left eye was open, staring up at me rather clearly if winced and in pain.

He had received a beating, but I didn't see any life threatening injuries... in fact the worst of it, other than the swollen face, was his left hand. One of the brigands had stomped on it with a heavy heel. It had broken and crushed fingers, and likely many bones in the hand itself. In today's era it likely meant he'd never be able to use it properly again. He'd not need it amputated or anything, but hopefully this man was right handed.

"You alive?" I asked him.

The man wheezed, and a very noticeable smile wormed through the swollen cheeks. "I am," he groaned.

"Dear!" one of the women heard his voice and stood, scampering out of the huddled group and hurried over. She fell to the ground next to him, skidding to his side, and went to grab at his face. "Honey...!" she cried at the sight of him.

Hmph. He was fine. He'd not like eating or drinking for a few months, and his hand would trouble him for life, but he was not in danger of dying.

I could leave the tending of wounds to his family. There was no need for me to worry about it.

Stepping back as the rest of the family hurried over, even the children, I frowned when one of the younger boys ran at me instead of his father. I noted Renn stand and approach, smiling weirdly, as the boy wrapped me in a small hug. "Thanks mister!" he said as he clung to me.

"Hm." I patted the boy's head, as Renn walked up to us.

Ignoring her smile as she stared at me, and glanced at the families two wagons. They had two donkeys pulling each of them, and both looked fine. It seemed although Renn and I had come upon them as they were being robbed, we had done so rather early into their traumatic event.

The brigands had been beating the man, the only resistance, and had been doing so leisurely. If they had simply killed the man, they may have been able to do more damage to the family before I had gotten involved. In fact, depending on how quickly they could have done it... I may not have been able to help at all. Instead I would have only been getting revenge.

Sometimes such scum's cruelty was a good thing, it seemed.

"Thank you, sir knight," the man was now sitting up, half being held up by his family and half slouched forward in a slump. He looked like he needed a long vacation.

"Yes! Thank you, ever so much!" the other older woman said, and I noted she didn't sound or look at all like the other woman who had called him honey. Was she an older daughter then, maybe? Sister?

Did it matter...?

The young boy released me from his hug, and then hurried away. I watched him run around his family and over to one of the dead brigands. The first one I'd killed, the one who had been stomping on the man's hand.

The boy began to kick at the corpse, right into the man's sides. Even his little kicks sounded hefty and mushy, thanks to the fact I had crushed the man's rib-cage rather completely.

"Don't let him do that," the man whispered, and one of the older women stood and hurried over to grab the boy.

"I suggest leaving quickly. Tend to his wounds on the road. Get to your destination and heal there, not out here," I said simply to the group.

They all looked over at me, as I nodded and glanced at Renn. Her weird smile faltered, and she glared at me a moment as she sighed and nodded.

Glad she understood, I nodded again and turned. I stepped away from the group, the wagons, and dead bodies and headed down the road. To return to our path.

Luckily they were heading the other way. They had been heading south. It gave me another excuse to not get involved with them.

"Goodbye! Take care, and I hope the rest of your journey is safe and happy!" Renn said loudly as she followed after me.

"Wait...!" the man groaned a request, but I ignored it as I stepped past the dead spearman.

"Sorry... He's in a hurry," Renn apologized on my behalf, which made the small group go silent. Luckily they remained silent for several minutes as Renn and I left their vicinity.

Once we were out of earshot, at least to them, I heard them hurriedly begin talking amongst themselves. I ignored most of their conversation, as Renn hurried over to my side. She grabbed my sleeve as she glanced back, to stare at them.

"They'll be fine Renn. He's not as bad off as he looks. They'll be able to travel shortly," I told her.

"I figured... but still," she said softly.

"Even if we lingered all I'd do is bandage him up a little. Nothing more than they'll do, really," I said.

"How can you say that Vim? You know so much more than any of us," she said, accusing me.

I shook my head. "I do, but it'd take time for me to tell if he needed any kind of specific help. I'd have to wait to see or hear certain issues, such as internal bleeding or something, and that could take time. Time we don't have to spare for those not of our own," I said.

"Mhm..." Renn made a noise that told me she understood, and maybe even agreed... but didn't want to.

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"The important ones are fine, Renn. That should be enough for you," I said.

She sighed at me as she finally turned forward; to no longer look at those we left behind. "I suppose, in a way, yes."

I smiled at her, glad I understood her so well.

It was the women and children she really worried over. Not the man. In a way it made her kind of sexist, I suppose.

"Odds are wherever they're headed can't be too far, Renn. People up this far north don't travel very far usually. A few days at most," I said.

"Oh, I know. I think there's a village a day or so away from here. I think I've traveled this road before," Renn said.

"Really?"

She nodded as she glanced around, and I noted the way she still clung to my sleeve. Was she worried about something? Why not just grab my hand, or arm itself? Why the sleeve, as if she was a little girl afraid to take my hand?

She hadn't done that even in the beginning, back when we first met. She had grabbed me fully even back then, though I don't think she ever really realized she did so.

"This road will eventually lead us to a mountain village. One that has a mine, I think," she said.

"Really...?" I tried to remember if that was true or not.

It was hard to, since I'd only been up this way a few times recently. And by recently that meant in the last few hundred years.

Lilly had given me the general directions to where Sap was, but even she didn't know the exact route. We simply were making educated guess... and hoping, really, that she was still there after all this time. But it was fine. If we didn't find her in a week or two we'd head southwest, since there was another location we could stop at along the way. And after them, we could check in on Elk and the other members up here before heading to the coastline.

"You know Vim... why does it feel like there's more violence lately?" Renn asked suddenly as she glanced at me.

"Hm? There's always violence," I said. What'd she mean?

"I went lots of years between seeing, or experiencing, violence. Dozens at a time. Yet now it feels like it happens every few days. In fact I've seen more violence since joining the Society than I have my whole life, I think," she said.

Hm... She likely had a point. Her life before joining the Society was... one of solitude. Even when she had traveled around she had done so carefully, and alone.

Still, wasn't the answer obvious? I mean I was right in front of her.

"Would you have interfered? Before. Back before you joined the Society, while traveling around alone. Had this happened while you were alone, finding them being attacked and needing help, would you have done something about it?" I asked, deciding to tackle the question that way instead.

Renn slowed a little and frowned at me as I heard her ears beneath her hood and hat shuffle and move. "Before..." she mumbled as she thought about it.

I waited for her to find her answer as I glanced around again, to make sure once more we were safe. I felt almost as if there should have been more enemies, though I didn't see or sense any.

"I see," Renn then said as I looked back at her. She nodded, more so to herself than me. "Yes. I see what you're saying," she said.

"Hm...?" What had I been saying again?

"You're saying the world seems more violent because I myself have become so. You're right... I might not have helped had I come upon them back then. Six men, armed as they had been, would have been terrifying. Even today, even with all you've taught me and all I've done, I'd hesitate likely. But back then? I would have hidden myself. I might have tried to save the children, had an opportunity arrived, but odds are I would have failed. At best I might have been able to hurt or kill one or two of them, and then run off since I'd gotten hurt myself, and at worst I would have cried and ran away," she told me.

Hm.

She was speaking not of hypotheticals but experience.

She was telling me what she'd done before, under similar situations. Back in the day.

"Well... I'd not meant it that way, Renn. Though you are right, that today you may be more inclined to participate in violence thanks to me and the Society. What I more so meant was... well... I'm here now," I said with a point to myself.

Renn's frown deepened as she glared at me. "Are you saying you attract violence?" she asked.

I nodded. "Isn't it obvious?"

"I... I don't know. I always figured all the chaos that happens around you is because of the Society. You get involved with it all because you're forced to... not because you yourself summoned it forth," she said.

Shrugging, I smiled at her. "I don't try to call it up, Renn. I just mean I'm always encountering it. And you're now with me, so you get involved too. Guilty by association and all that," I said.

She giggled at that. "Association," she said, making fun of the word I'd chosen to use.

"That being said... I'd hope you would be smart about confronting such scenarios, Renn. You're strong. Far stronger than you think, even. But you're still... well..." I didn't want to say she was still a woman, since it wasn't fair of an assessment. That didn't work when she was stronger than any man to exist. Even if I did feel such a thing was true. Have I always been such a chauvinist, or was it just because she was my wife?

"Your wife? Yes, I know. I'm precious," Renn said happily.

Ah. Shoot. I hadn't meant that, but she seemed so happy to think so. Though it wasn't wrong...

"Yes, basically," I admitted.

Renn made an odd noise as she giggled and hummed, and nodded at me. "Right. Yet at the same time I know the truth, Vim."

"Truth...?" So she had realized what I meant, then?

"You like it when I go out of my way to help the less fortunate. In fact you expect it," she pointed out.

Oh.

I sighed and nodded. "I do," I admitted again.

Renn grinned at me as she reached over to grab my hand. I accepted it, and kind of wished she wasn't wearing gloves.

"Still... I hope you don't endanger yourself needlessly Renn. I'm very proud of you for being the type to try and protect those less fortunate than our own, but remember you have duties and responsibilities.

To many people, thousands even. Dying for someone not related to the Society, even children, would be a great loss. One that the Society may not be able to endure," I said.

Renn studied me as we walked, and I noted the way her pupils had shrunk and elongated. She was very focused all of a sudden.

"Then you better always be there for me Vim. To make sure that doesn't happen," she said softly.

Although a little stunned at her response... I couldn't help but smile and nod.

Yes.

Very true.

And very fitting too.

"You know you promised to teach me more often. About to defend myself," she reminded me.

Right. I had. "Yes. We'll start doing that."

"You said that last time," she said with a smile.

I had. "We've been busy."

For a moment Renn didn't say anything, and then she glanced behind us. I didn't follow her gaze, since I knew the wagons and family were no longer in sight. We had walked far enough, and rounded enough bends, that seeing them was just not possible anymore.

"Before we get too distracted, good job Vim. You did well," she said gently as she looked back at me.

"Hm, yes. I surely accomplished a great feat, defeating a bunch of humans with ease," I said, a little sarcastically.

She huffed at me. "No matter how easy it was for you doesn't change how great it was, Vim."

"True. I was just being snarky," I said.

Renn giggled at me. "Snarky? That was you being snarky?"

"I think so, yes."

She laughed for a moment, and then squeezed my hand as she swung our hands a bit. Although I wasn't sure why she had found such a thing so funny, I was very glad to see it all the same. She looked, and sounded, lovely when she was like this.

It felt very good to be walking with her like this again. Without anyone else to bother us.

I wanted to enjoy this. Since I knew soon our life would become hectic once more, likely far worse than it has been in a long time. At least for me.

Training though...

Glancing at the forest around us, I knew I should say something.

I had a lot to say to her, after all. There was much we needed to talk about, before we were surrounded by others. While we were alone.

There was a chance that Sap would want to join us back south, so I needed to take this opportunity and use it while I could.

But...

Glaring at the dense trees, I wondered what I was going to do with myself.

Have I really always been such a coward...?

Yes. The sad truth was yes. I have been.

I didn't need to fear death, and didn't fear pain, so I feared other things. Things simpler. Less unobtrusive.

Like just telling the truth.

"Vim...?" Renn, like usual, noticed my discomfort as I kept my eyes on the forests for a moment... and then glanced over at her.

She gave me a gentle smile, and I felt my heart melt at the mere sight of it.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Everything," I whispered.

Her smile didn't falter, and in fact grew stronger. "I'm sure!" she said happily.

Damn.

Feeling oddly relaxed all of a sudden, I sighed at myself and nodded.

"We have a lot to talk about, Renn," I said.

"We do. I've actually been looking forward to this trip, though it hurt to leave such adorable people behind," Renn said as she stepped closer. She wrapped her arms around my own, and squeezed it. I enjoyed the feeling of her closeness, even if it made me more acutely aware of how heavy a responsibility she was for me.

I had so much to tell her. To explain.

More than she could know.

And I knew she'd accept it all. Which only somehow made me more anxious.

I had to tell her of my decision. Of what I was going to do about the vote. The Society, as a whole.

I needed to tell her why I was gathering up the items I've hidden around the world.

I needed to tell her why I had been so disturbed by her saintly friend's prophecies, and why even though she was a saint and everything I despised I had asked for permission to build her a home there in that village.

I needed to tell her everything. Because she deserved to know it.

Her very life depended on it.

But I couldn't, could I?

The few people in my life I've revealed things to, like Miss Beak, had not even been told everything. And those like Miss Beak had been told such things simply because they had been involved. In their own way. They hadn't needed to be told some things, because they had already known. They had already experienced, or seen it, themselves.

When'd I become like this anyway? In the beginning I didn't remember being so secretive.

I sighed. "My problem Renn, is the type of man I am," I told her.

"Hm...?"

A small gust blew past, and the coldness of it told me a storm was heading our way. Maybe one even cold enough for snow.

"I need to tell you things. But I can't tell you everything. Yet, to tell you certain things... reveals other things. Basically because I'm the type of man I am, to keep certain things secret, I'm unable to tell you one thing without telling you another. It makes me feel wrong. Sick, almost. It'd be like teaching you how to grow food, or catch fish, but at the same time not teach you how to properly prepare and cook it. It goes against reason for me," I said, explaining what was bothering me.

"But I know how to cook, Vim," Renn said gently.

I smiled at that and nodded. Yes. She did.

"But you don't know anything about the world before," I said.

Renn didn't respond with a silly joke like last time. Instead she remained silent as we walked for a bit.

Shrugging gently, since she was clinging to my arm, I decided I felt lost... and had no idea how to find myself. "Basically I need, want, to tell you things. Yet I fear doing so."

"I'm willing to wait, Vim, it's okay," Renn said softly.

I shook my head. "You've been waiting. And... now there's no time to wait. Not enough, at least."

"Why...? Because of the vote...? Or...?" Renn asked.

"The vote is a part of it, yes. But no. In a certain way the vote is now the least of my concern," I said.

"You're talking about what Elaine had said. Her prophecy," she said, understanding quickly.

I nodded, and felt my body tense up a little.

Yes. Right.

I smirked at my own ridiculousness. I had actually gone stiff at her pointing it out so readily! What was wrong with me?

"Yeah. See? You figured that out so quickly. That means you'll figure out everything else just as fast, once I start telling you everything. By my parents that's terrifying," I said with a small laugh, as if it was funny.

It wasn't.

"It was kind of obvious Vim," Renn said gently.

No.

It wasn't. Not like she thought, at least.

Oh well.

"Just... be gentle with me Renn. As I try to guide myself through these strange waters we've found ourselves in," I asked of her.

She squeezed my arm. "I'll try my best," she offered gently, speaking rather seriously. I glanced at her and was a tad surprised to find her without a smile, or even a hint of mischievousness. She had been, and was being, serious. Completely.

Somehow that scared me more than anything else.

But I knew better than to take such lovely devotion lightly.

Nodding gently, I focused on her warmth around my arm and side. She had drawn closer as we walked.

"Okay. Maybe between the two of us, we can overcome my shortcomings," I said.

"A hard task, but I'm sure we'll be fine," she said.

Smirking at her, I nodded. "Surely."

For a few steps she only giggled at me, but then she squeezed my arm... and I noted the gentle smile on her face as she tugged herself closer to me.

"So... shall we start?" she asked.

Damn.

Where were more bandits when I needed them?

Chapter 375 Glossary - Prophecies

Celine's Letter to Renn:

Celine's Prophecies,

Here, as of writing, are the list of prophecies unfulfilled to this day:

Vim and his heart need to save the oasis in the dry ocean. To keep the kingdom of non-humans intact, less their downfall bring forth others.

Take Vim to the northern plateaus beyond the ice. There lies a monarch in sleep. Vim will know what to do.

An injured bird will need to be saved. You'll know when and who upon seeing the feathers float upward instead of down.

Two mountains will collapse inward. Vim will need to defeat the angry lifeblood that flows outward.

An important friend of Vim's will arise to try and take his place. You should not allow this to happen, or else the world will suffer greatly.

When the Society splits, Vim must not sacrifice one for the other. Either choose both or choose neither.

Vim will be betrayed by someone close to his heart. When it happens, don't let him forgive.

Vim needs to hunt the Monarch that eats the dreams of those awake. Else the world will end.

One day when you find a silver coin that sings, put it back where you found it.

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

Don't let your daughter touch the moon.

Below is the proper glossary of prophecies!

Chapter 376 Renn – Argument Upon A Mountain

"There has to be more to your plan Vim! More than just..." I groaned as I felt sick.

I didn't even want to say it. Not aloud. Not again.

"The best plans are the simplest ones," Vim said as he made some rocks shift. I watched the way a few of the smaller pebbles slid down the mountain before me, they didn't roll too far since the incline really wasn't that bad, but I was glad that I was following him at an angle and not directly behind him. They'd have slid my way otherwise, which meant I would have had to be more careful in my own walking.

And I was far too upset right now to need such dedicated attention, especially to just a few rocks and pebbles.

"If this is your best plan then I'm severely questioning every other one! I can't believe you'd just step down, it's so stupid," I said heatedly.

I was heated. I wasn't going to ignore, or deny it. There was no reason to. We'd been talking about it for a few hours now, ever since he told me about his plan to step down as the protector of the Society... no matter the outcome of the vote.

It was so stupid! Such a ridiculous thing to do! It made no sense, at all!

What was the point then? All these years of his service? Hundreds of years! For nothing!

Vim seemed to not be too bothered by my frustration, but he occasionally glanced back at me as we continued to ascend the mountainside. Though the reason he did so was likely more so just to make sure I was fine, not much else.

And I was. Even with me being so frustrated, this mountain was nothing to me. It wasn't steep enough, or rocky enough, to bother me. Though if we continued to climb it, and reached the snowy peaks in the distance, that might change very quickly. I knew how difficult it was to climb those snowy inclines. Sometimes it was impossible.

He'd have to carry me if we went that far up. But I could tell by the angle we were walking at, that we weren't heading to the peaks but around them. Vim was leading us deeper into this huge mountain range. One I somehow felt like I remembered, but couldn't quite place why.

I had likely been here before. Maybe not this mountain, this side of it at least, exactly... but there was no doubt that I'd seen this mountain range from a distance before.

We were very likely near the place of my birth, oddly enough. I wonder if I could find it again, if I tried.

The thought of home calmed me down, somehow, and that only upset me further.

"Really Vim... it's so stupid of you. Why would you even consider it? There are so many who depend on you, stepping down is the same as abandoning them. I had not thought you the kind of man to be so callous," I said as I glared at his back. Why'd he look like he was slouching a little? The incline wasn't that bad, was it? Maybe it was becoming so.

"I'd not abandon them, Renn. I'd still travel and help anyone and everyone. Just... I'd only help the ones who actually ask it of me."

"And what of the ones who won't ask before it's too late? Thanks to their stupid pride?" I asked. I could think of many myself I knew that would be so.

"They already suffer their own hubris, Renn. It won't change as much as you think," Vim said calmly.

I growled at his tone, since I didn't like how calm he was. It made my own anger seem... not as just worthy, somehow.

"I like your growls," he said lightly.

I growled even harder. "Don't! I'm upset with you," I said with a huff.

He chuckled lightly, and slowed as to turn to me. I noted the loving look in his eyes as I approached, and hated how I couldn't actually hate him.

After all... I understood where he was coming from.

Why protect people who didn't want your protection? Who didn't deserve it? Or desired the opposite?

But...

"I love the Society Vim. Faults and all," I said softly as my eyes welled with tears again. I tried to not let them do so, since I'd already cried earlier before we had started walking up this mountain... but I couldn't help it.

This moment was a sad one. Full of strange angst and sorrow. I didn't like it.

"I know, Renn. I do too. But..."

"But what...? You just want to break it. Let it slip between your fingers, just because a few of them are upset with you? Just because a few are stupid? It's dumb, Vim. Really dumb," I said before he could say anything. Or well, based off my own voice echoing in the distance, I knew I wasn't speaking. I was yelling. Shouting, maybe, even.

Vim allowed me to yell at him, smiling gently at me as I did, and it only made me hate the conversation even more.

All this time I'd been worrying over the vote, I had been relatively calm. Because I had believed that wisdom would have won through in the end. That enough people, like Randle and Oplar, would vote in our favor. Vim's favor. That those like Crane and the rest were the minority, not the majority.

Plus it seemed Randle and Lilly, and I had originally thought Vim too, had been planning as well. To make efforts to aid themselves, and help sway the vote. To find out what was really going on, and address it. What about all those conversations we just had with Lilly and the rest? What about all those letters that Windle has gotten lately, from those like Merit? Voicing their own support, and trying to gather information and insight between those who were like minded? What of their efforts?

None of that mattered if Vim just gave up.

Vim giving up made no sense. At all. In any form.

"Defend yourself better, Vim, or else I'll end up being disappointed in you," I pleaded.

He nodded gently. "I know, Renn."

"Then...?"

His smile softened and his brow furrowed. "Remember those I told you about? Those who left? To lands beyond the seas?" he asked.

I nodded carefully. Why were they being brought up right now?

"They left because of many reasons. First and foremost... they felt unwelcome here. Unwelcomed with those they left behind. Who do you think they were?" he asked.

"Who...? I don't know Vim? Randle and the rest said they had thought Light had gone with them, all this time," I said.

"She likely had, Renn. But that's not what I meant. I meant more so... what kind of people do you think they were? What kind of mindsets do you think they had? Beliefs?"

Oh.

"Predators maybe...?" I wondered. It would make sense, since there were so few of us left.

"No, Renn. The opposite. Those who left were all prey. Weak willed. More non-human than human, yes, but it was mostly the weak. The infirm. The scared. They had survived the wars, and saw that the humans had emerged victorious and would soon rule the world, and so ran from it. From us. The Society too. Because they felt even the Society, and those left in it, were too dangerous to be around," he told me.

I shifted, and ignored the tiny pebbles beneath my feet I had dislodged. A few bounced a few feet down the slope, but not much farther. "What are you saying Vim?" I asked carefully.

"That people act rashly when scared for their lives. Always have and will. I cannot change that, Renn. I will not force my authority on anyone, and forcing people to accept my protection and assistance is just that. So just as I helped that group leave these lands, and find another home elsewhere away from me and the rest, I too will go out of my way to accommodate those here who no longer wish for my help," he said.

My stomach twisted as I stared into his eyes. They didn't look hurt. Or annoyed. They looked calm. Collected. Strong.

Like always.

It made me sick.

"This is your line then? To step down... and just help those who ask for it? To no longer just travel around, as you're doing?" I asked.

He nodded. "It was bound to happen eventually Renn. I knew from the beginning that this Society wouldn't last. Or at least, my connection to it. Nothing lasts. Though I'll admit I had not expected it to happen here and now, this way at least," he said.

"But... why step down if they vote in your favor? If the Society still wishes to have you as their protector, isn't that their will? Why deny them that?" I asked, trying to point out something he seemed to be ignoring.

"Because even if the vote goes well like that, it'll not be unanimous. There will still be a portion that will not want my help, and as such may decide to split from the Society entirely because of it. They'll, like the group who left this lands after the wars, will feel threatened. Now not just by me, and my presence, but the others. My stepping down, before the vote even happens, nips that confusion and distrust in the bud before it can sprout. Hopefully keeping the Society intact, as a whole," he said.

The genuine version of this novel can be found on another site. Support the author by reading it there.

"Where you hope that even those who don't want your help will call upon it if the need becomes dire enough," I said, understanding.

He nodded with a frown. "Yes. They may no longer call me to fix their homes, or help them relocate, but they may still call upon me if their lives are in danger. True danger. And that alone makes it worth it. My stepping down, officially, is the best result Renn. It keeps the Society whole, un-fractured, and still allows me to help any and all who need it. Yes a few may become lost to us, and many may perish throughout the years because I no longer travel around as I do now, but the loss will be a fraction of what it would be otherwise," he said.

Groaning at him, I felt my tail squirm and twitch in the air behind me.

"When did you decide this, Vim?" I asked.

"Not long after you left Telmik with Cat. During my trip to pick up Fly. I..." Vim sighed and shifted, crossing his arms in front of me. "I realized that my agreement with Celine is no longer valid. Because those in the Society today, the vast majority of them, no longer think like her or agree with her methods. The Society today is no longer the Society of yesterday, basically. Today it's just a bunch of random families and groups, sticking together with thin agreements and bonds. There are entire sections of the Society that don't even know about the others, thanks to how distant and secluded so many of them have become. A fault of my own, one could argue, but it's the reality. I fear if I stay the protector, even if I feel my presence is still needed, all I will do is cause those separate locations to split and fracture. To become enemies, even, possibly," he said.

"Enemies," I whispered the word, and realized what he meant.

He nodded. "Like how Randle and the Chronicler are now at ends with one another."

Stepping forward, I reached out. To grab his arm, but didn't. My hand lingered in the air as I hesitated. "That's not your fault, Vim! That's all happening because of the Chronicler! Not you!" I said defiantly.

"Says who...?"

My outstretched hand clenched up as I groaned and glared at him.

He held my gaze and nodded. "Don't be foolish Renn. I know not what the Chronicler and the rest are doing, but you'd be a misplaced to think it doesn't have something to do with me somehow. Light is involved, and trust me when I say she is her mother's daughter. I find it hard to believe Light would not be acting for a purpose, especially after being hidden all these years. Hidden from me, by the way," he pointed out.

Clenching my hands, I shivered as if cold. It was a little cold, but not cold enough to make me do so while wearing the thick gear I had on. "So what does you stepping down accomplish then? You just give them the victory without a fight!" I said.

"A fight...? Renn, if I fight the Society is doomed anyway. The entire reason for my decision is so that I do not get involved in a fight," he said simply.

My heart thumped as I stepped backward. Thanks to the slight slope we were on, it made me stumble a tad. Vim's arms uncrossed, worriedly, but he didn't reach out to grab me. I had firmed my footing and steadied myself readily and easily.

Right.

He wasn't wrong. At all.

If Vim actually had to fight the Society, or groups within it, they would lose. Entirely. They would not survive.

Which went against everything Vim stood for. Not just was his entire purpose to protect those in the Society... he also didn't believe in forcing his will upon others. And doing such a thing in this context was the same as forcing his opinion and desires upon them. It wasn't like he was killing bandits, or monsters in this scenario. He was facing others like us. Fellow non-humans, who may be mislead or foolish, but still like us. People who just... had different opinions. Different viewpoints and beliefs.

"There has to be another way," I whispered worriedly, as I regrettably accepted the fact that Vim was going in the right direction.

He had no choice, did he? If he stayed as he was, or tried to convince the Society to vote in his favor... he'd be alienating those who were voting against him. Effectively splitting the Society in two, as had happened once before. Which is why he had brought that group up, the one that had actually left these lands because of it.

He didn't want the same result. And him staying the protector, with the vote or not, would cause such a thing. Even if inevitably, down the road, it was almost guaranteed.

So he had no choice. He had to step down. If not remove himself from the situation completely.

"That's why we're talking about this Renn. And by the way I'm very moved by how emotional you are right now, and how angry you are with me. It tells me how highly you think of me, to be so offended in such a way," he said with a smile.

I wanted to bite him all of a sudden, but at the same time a huge smile planted itself on my face. "Shut it," I said.

His smile grew as he nodded, and I felt strangely warm all of a sudden.

Hadn't I already been warm? From anger? Why was I hotter all of a sudden, even though not angry anymore?

For a few quick heartbeats I ignored the world around me, and my own thoughts, as I tried to understand the weird feeling that had suddenly taken over me. I was upset, yet not. Frustrated, yet relaxed.

Maybe I was just relieved. Relieved that Vim had obviously put a lot of thought into his decision, even if it had made me upset. He hadn't made it lightly, and was still open to hearing differing opinions and ideas.

Yet...

"Plus, Renn..."

I looked back at him, and glared at him anew. Why was he distracting me? I was enjoying the new, if weird, sensation pulsing out of my heart.

Vim shrugged lightly at me. "There's... a new problem. A new task I must address. One that may not allow me to be the Society's protector, at least in full while I'm focused upon it, at least."

Hm...?

"What do you mean...?" I asked. Did this have something to do with what Elaine had said?

"We'll talk about that later," he said.

"So I can keep arguing with you about your foolish decision, then?" I threatened.

He flinched but nodded. "Yes, I suppose."

"Hmph," I smirked at him and felt a little better.

I was very glad he was making progress, if slowly. But he had also given me permission to... press him a little. So I planned to do so. But right now this conversation, the one about his decision to step down as protector, took precedence. At least to me.

Stepping forward, to start walking beside him since it seemed the upcoming path before us was more even leveled, I gestured lightly at him. "If the whole of the Society voted in your favor Vim, say... only a handful voting against you, would you still step down?" I asked.

"Honestly I don't know. A part of me wants to say yes, since I've made the decision... but in the off chance that only a dozen or so actually voted against me, and the rest didn't, then I suppose there would be no reason to change the status quo," he agreed.

Somehow that didn't feel like the win I had hoped it would have been. Maybe because even I knew how outlandish the idea was of only a few voting against him were. I could probably think of double or triple as many off the top of my head, just by those I knew myself. Let alone all the others I didn't.

We returned to walking, although a little slower than before. He stayed by my side, instead of walking ahead of me. "Have you told anyone else yet?" I asked.

"No. I hinted at it with Lilly, so I think she might know, but I haven't outright said it yet."

Good. Maybe I can convince him against the idea before it happened, or at least before he declared it to the rest of the Society.

Though...

"Is this another reason you asked Elaine if I could build a home at their village?" I asked gently.

He nodded. "Yes. I plan to build you few homes, actually. Or at least secure you a few others too. Just in case everything goes... awry," he said.

I sighed at him. As much as I loved the idea of having such places to go, to feel at home, I also didn't want them for this reason.

I didn't want a home just because I needed a place to escape to.

I wanted a home to... feel at home in. Not to hide at or flee to.

Plus to me a home was a place that had visitors. Friends and family that came and went. If I indulged in those locations, barring a select few, who would visit me...?

"And also why you're gathering all those items you've hidden," I said, hoping to distract my heart a little. It had started to hurt over the idea of living in a home that was always empty.

It had been why I had always traveled around, and never stayed one place for long. I had hated the silence.

"Yes. Though... that might not have been because of the vote, honestly," he said oddly.

"Hm...?" I glanced at him, and wondered what that look on his face was. Was that worry?

He nodded oddly. "Might have been my instincts. Strangely enough."

"What do you mean...?" I asked.

"We'll see. Not to change the topic, not intentionally but instead before I forget, did you ever happen to ask that saint if she knew the locations of the other saints she knew or met?" he asked.

I side-glanced him. He may indeed just be asking before he forgot, but this was usually how he made me stop talking and asking about certain things... "She mentioned she had only met a few in her life. Like Celine, they had kind of just come and went without really saying much I guess," I said.

He nodded slowly and sighed. "I wonder when she had gone there. It makes me wonder how many others she met without me knowing," he said as he shook his head. "I really should have been more aware of what had been happening. In my attempt to keep a distance from Celine and those like her I had failed in other ways. I really can't win no matter what I do, sometimes," he added.

I agreed with him, but wasn't sure if I wanted to say it aloud.

I wanted to be a little upset with him at the moment, after all.

Wait...

"You knew she met Celine?" I asked. I hadn't told him until now!

"Hm? Yes. I heard you and her talking when I had been fixing the floor, Renn."

A little stunned, I slid to a stop. "So you had been listening!" I shouted at him.

He stopped too, glancing at my feet. He had likely just been checking if I had been about to slip or not, but it still made me even more upset. He should look at me when I was angry with him!

"I had. You hadn't necessarily been quiet about it, Renn... and I tried not to listen too closely, but I had been upset to be honest. Not just because she's a saint, but because of the implications. I'm... on edge, Renn. For many reasons. I'm sorry," he apologized, looking me in the eyes as he did.

My heart fluttered at the look on his face, and the pain in his eyes.

He was being genuine. Completely so.

"I don't like how well you can defend yourself," I grumbled admittedly.

He smiled at me, and was about to say something but he turned and looked over my shoulder.

I frowned at the look on his face, and turned just as I heard it.

A flap of a wing.

A huge one.

Staring up at the sight, I felt my eyes go wide and my ears go stiff as I watched a huge bird land nearby. A few dozen feet away, a huge pair of brownish red wings curled, as a woman stood up fully and tilted her head at us.

My eyes shivered as I saw a young Lilly before us, though with huge wings bigger than her and far shorter hair.

"What's with all the noise, Vim? Who is this?" the woman asked, sounding upset at us.

Vim chuckled as he gestured at me. "Hey Sap. Meet my wife," he said, greeting me.

Sap's face contorted, as her wings flapped open... and then she broke out into laughter.

Chapter 377 Vim – A Wing of an Idea

"It's really cold up there, especially this time of the year, but there's also a lot of drafts and stuff that get in the way if I wear anything heavier. Though I've always wished I could somehow get a set that covered my whole body without bothering the wings," Sap said as she opened her wings more, to allow Renn to see her back.

Her shirt, if you could call it that, covered her front only and even then barely. It was fastened to her waist and up to her neck. At least she wore real pants this time. Last time I'd seen her she had been basically naked, and unlike Fly or her mother she didn't have feathers anywhere else. Her huge wings were her only trait. It was interesting to see the way her wings connected to her back though, just under her shoulder blades. I knew from the many times I'd held them as babies, or had killed them during the wars, that those like her had basically a secondary set of shoulder-like joints beneath their shoulder blades. The wings emerged from near their spine, but were in fact connected to their upper skeletal system near their clavicle through a series of joints. Almost as if they had another shoulder entirely, though it didn't protrude or stick out like one.

Mother would have found them amazing, honestly. It was as if they were deformed, but in such a spectacular way that it just made sense... almost as if a human body had been made with the idea of wings in mind from the beginning.

Though I suppose humans had tailbones too, so the idea of having tails was believable as well. Like with Renn, for instance.

Watching Renn as she stepped closer to Sap as they walked, to study the wings, I smiled as I watched her tail twist and jerk in the air behind her. She was fascinated.

"Do they feel heavy? They sound and look so," Renn asked.

"Not really? I notice them when they get wet or icy during a snowstorm, but right now? I barely notice them," Sap said.

"Huh," Renn nodded at that as Sap folded her wings back up.

"How about your ears? Do you actually hear from them?" Sap asked, continuing their introductory conversation.

Renn's ears fluttered as she reached up and touched them. "Yeah? In fact I hear better from them than I do these ones, to the point I half the time don't even realize I hear anything from them at all," Renn said as she then pushed her hair aside to reveal her human ears.

Following the two as they got to know one another, I glanced around at the forest we were walking through. It was the same as earlier, but we were now heading southwest a little. At least we were on more flat ground now; even though still high in elevation. Renn had been surprisingly capable at walking up a mountain, even at a steeper incline, but it had still worried me.

She seemed so frail, appearance wise... even when I knew she wasn't, I still worried as if she was as fragile as the young human woman she looked to be. And I knew a fall down a mountainside was not a simple thing. Even a nonhuman could suffer severe injury from such a thing.

"I've met a few of the foxes with similar ears, Porka particularly. Yours look more active though, like actual cat's ears. I don't think theirs move around as much as yours do," Sap noted.

"Hm? Maybe," Renn shrugged as she spoke, as her ears shifted and turned as if to display just how much of a range of motion they had.

I smiled at her as Sap reached out, then paused, as she realized she had been about to touch them. Renn noticed, and laughed a little as she leaned forward, lowering her head a tad. "Go ahead!" Renn offered.

Sap's shoulders, and wings, softened and lowered as she smiled and sighed. She gently placed her hand upon Renn's head, and I watched as she felt her ears and hair... notably the parts where small patches of fur mixed with the hair.

"Why you're so soft!" Sap couldn't contain herself as she began to giggle, as if a little girl again.

I slowed to a stop, since the two had as well, and I watched as Sap then offered her a wing. Renn glanced at me, beamed me a triumphant smile, and then went to carefully touch it.

Sighing at the two, I wondered what it was about Renn that made people let their guards down so easily. Did she not know who this woman was?

She was Lilly's daughter... but more than that, she was the daughter who had inherited Lilly's passion for solitude the most fervently. She had not inherited her mother's strength, but she was more a loner than nearly anyone else in the Society.

It was rare for nonhumans to so readily allow others, particularly people they just met, to touch their traits so readily. Taking into account who Sap was, only made this moment all the more unbelievable.

Yet it was happening. Before my eyes.

Again.

Renn made a happy noise, something akin to a giggle, as she finished touching Sap's wing and turned to look at me. "Jealous Vim?" she asked.

"Do you want me to be?" I asked back.

Renn hesitated, which made Sap snort a laugh. "Ha!"

Slowly approaching the two, since it seemed I was finally being allowed into their conversations, I wondered if there was anything even left to say.

Renn had already fully explained to Sap what was going on. About the vote, the Society, and all the issues around it. She'd omitted a few things, per my and Lilly's request, such as the saint and her village... and her newborn sister Root.

Lilly and Windle liked to keep such things as surprises. They didn't want their children knowing of their new sibling until they saw them with their own eyes. It was just how their family was. Lilly even kept her own pregnancies a secret from Windle, for as long as she could. It was like a game to them.

We'd found her earlier, and the day was growing old. She hadn't wanted to go get anything as to prepare for her trip home. She had simply started walking with us back towards the south. Renn had found it a little odd, but I knew the truth.

Sap likely didn't have anything to take home, in all likelihood. She had undoubtedly built a nest of sorts somewhere, maybe a small house or something, but knowing her she likely only had a set or two of clothes and nothing more. She may not even have a real bed, and instead something of a hammock. I once found her home years ago, and it had just been a hallowed out tree with a hammock and a small bag of stuff she carried.

She was not a materialistic person at all. Just as she liked to live alone, away from even family and friends, she also lived simply. Off the land around her.

I respected her for it, even if so many others found her strange because of it.

"Though... I have to know, how did you know where she was Vim?" Renn then asked as she glanced at me.

Sap shifted, her wings folding a little closer into themselves, and I noted the glance she gave me. She was unsure of what to expect for my answer.

"You can tell her if you want, Sap. It is your secret, not mine," I told her gently.

Sap blinked at me, and then looked to Renn who was now smiling sadly.

"If it's a secret it's okay," Renn said before Sap could say anything.

For a moment the owl said nothing, and then with a shift of a heel she glanced at me again. "She's... truly your wife, Vim?" she asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked back.

The owl frowned but then smiled. "I guess it is..." she admitted.

Renn smirked at that as she side-glanced me, and then looked back to Sap. "I'm to assume you mean my yelling at him earlier. I'll have you know that's not something I do often! I think I've only ever really yelled at you what? Four times, Vim?" Renn asked.

"You'd know Renn," I said lightly.

She huffed at me. "About to be five..." she grumbled.

Sap giggled, reminding us she was a bird. It sounded lovely, even if a little inhuman. "I have a heart," she then said, revealing the reason I was able to track her so easily.

Renn's ears went straight up, startling. "What...?"

Sap reached up and tapped her midsection, right under her sternum. "I have a heart. It's a tiny one, and not very powerful, but it's enough for him to sense I guess. I can't hide from him, since he's such a jerk," Sap said, explaining her circumstances.

"What...? But..." Renn glanced at me, her eyes a little wide in shock.

I nodded. "She's like Landi, Renn."

"Oh...? What's this? Landi has one too now?" Sap asked with a grin, as if glad to hear it.

I nodded again. "She in fact, has two now."

Sap sighed, as if jealous, while Renn fumbled around with one of the monarch bags at her waist.

My eye twitched as I watched her dig into it, since I knew what she was doing, but I kept my thoughts to myself as she pulled out her own heart.

"I got one too! Though I uh... don't plan to put it inside me, anytime soon, I think," Renn said as she held up the black orb.

Sap's eyes went wide at it. "Oh my...! How had I not sensed it?" Sap wondered as she reached out and tapped it with a long nail.

"Right...?" Renn nodded, as if it didn't make sense to her either.

"Just because you two are sharing secrets doesn't mean I have to too," I said simply.

The two glanced at me, one with a glare, but I ignored them as I made sure to keep an eye on Sap.

I didn't actually think she'd try and take the heart, or absorb it either, but you never knew. She had inherited her wings and some of her temperament from her mother. Lilly had once tried to steal a heart from me, as to absorb it, so I wouldn't and couldn't put it past Sap to do the same either.

Sap though didn't seem to have any intention of such a thing as she crossed her arms and leaned back a little, as if to study Renn instead of the heart. "You seem like you'd be okay taking a heart in. Why haven't you done it yet?" she asked Renn.

Renn lowered the heart, frowning at her. "... don't know. Vim suggested it once, but at the same time he also kind of hinted at the fact he'd prefer I didn't. So I've been kind of just... waiting to see what he decides for me. I figured I'd just wait to do it until he told me to," she said.

Wait what? "What Renn? Really?" I asked, a little shocked to hear such a thing.

She nodded a little oddly at me, and I noticed a tiny blush on her face as she did so. "Yeah...? I mean... well...?" she shrugged as she spoke, as if the reason and answer was obvious.

It was, but I didn't want to admit it.

I sighed at her and shook my head. "I'd never force my will on others like that," I said. Particularly not my own wife of all things.

"I'd think being her husband, she'd be the one you would do such a thing for Vim, right? I mean isn't it your job to do so?" Sap asked.

"Your archaic way of seeing relationships is thanks to your parents," I complained.

"But Lilly wears the pants, doesn't she?" Renn asked, noting the difference.

Sap chuckled at her. "The stronger one does, yes. And Vim's obviously the one then, in your case," she pointed out.

"Ah..." Renn nodded with an odd noise, as if it made perfect sense what Sap was saying.

My mother would be so disappointed if she heard this conversation.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

Not in them, of course, but in me.

"For the record, Renn, taking a heart in would reveal your presence to monarchs and saints. Since they'd be able to sense it," I said.

And gods. Gods particularly.

"Oh. Right," Renn then nodded stiffly, realizing what I was saying.

"You just said you'd not force your will Vim," Sap said with a sigh.

"What? I hadn't?"

"Yes you had. You may not have told her what to do, but you influenced her decision. See? This is why I've never married," Sap said, upset with me.

My eye twitched as I glanced at Renn, who was smirking at me. She seemed to find Sap adorable and most likely even agreed with her.

Just great.

Felt like I was arguing with my mother again.

"Sap is just complaining because she doesn't like how I can track her thanks to it," I pointed out, to turn the tables a little.

Her wings jolted stiffly as Renn giggled. "I bet that is annoying!"

"You have no idea..." Sap grumbled.

Smiling at the two, I decided to somewhat change the topic. Before it got any closer to the stuff I'd really rather not talk about. Least of all right at this moment.

"We plan to head to the coast from here, Sap. You are free to join us if you'd like, but your mother did request haste," I said.

"I know. I plan to walk with you until the humans start popping up then I'll fly the rest of the way," Sap said.

Good. She'd only be with us for a day or two then, at the most.

"Have you lived in this region for long, Sap?" Renn then asked.

"Yes. A couple dozen years at least," she said as the two turned and started walking again.

Renn went to putting her heart back into the little monarch pouch, as she hummed and thought about something. Once she finished, she pointed to the left, without much thought to it. "I think my home is near here. Where I was originally born. I remember this mountain range, at least seeing it from a different angle, but I'm not sure how far away it really is. I bet it's within a few weeks distance though," Renn said.

Oh...? Really?

"Really now? So we're neighbors?" Sap asked, sounding a little upset over it.

Renn noticed, and laughed. "You're bothered by that!?"

"Well... maybe not. You might not bother me, so it might be okay. Especially if you've been living nearby all this time and I've never seen or smelled you and..." Sap went quiet as she slowed, and I was able to see the moment it clicked in her head.

Renn must have noticed too, for she grinned at Sap and lifted her head, as if to present her neck. "Go ahead? Take a sniff. You won't smell anything," Renn declared.

Sap's pace became slower as she stared innocuously at Renn. Likely as dumbstruck by the fact Renn had no scent at all as was her strange attitude about it.

"How's that possible...? Wait... so you're like Vim! I mean, it makes sense, but..." Sap hurriedly looked at me, frowned, and then looked back at Renn. "Wait... you're a cat, Vim? Really? After all this time, that's what you are?" she asked, sounding absolutely stunned at the realization.

Oh. Woops.

"No. I'm not a cat," I said with a sigh.

Renn laughed at that. "I don't think he is either. No, I don't have a scent because I'm whatever he is, but instead because of him! Our running theory is that since we sleep together I've lost my scent, just like how he eliminates the smell of his clothes and stuff," Renn told Sap.

"Oh... okay right, yeah. Sex, that makes sense," Sap nodded quickly, as if glad to have an answer that made more sense than me being a cat.

"Oh... well..." Renn hesitated, and I tried not to notice her sad frown.

"Careful Sap. You probably would end up living with her if you're not careful. She has a weird way of making people lower their guards and do what they usually don't," I warned her.

"What's with that?" Sap asked with a grin.

Renn huffed at me, but did so in a way that told me she was thankful for my comment. Likely because I had changed the topic a tad. "I'd be a great neighbor. I'd watch your kids, help out with chores, share fish I caught, and my husband will fix your house up in no time at all without pay! What more could you ask for?" Renn asked.

Sap laughed at that. "Vim! As a neighbor...!" she shouted as she thought of it... and then her wings shivered. "Actually I don't know if that'd be terrible or wonderful. I'll have to think about it," she admitted after a moment.

"Terrible? How so?" Renn asked as the two returned to their normal pacing.

"He and my mother are too close. Which means if I ever annoy him, he'll just tell her and she'll beat me because of it," Sap told her.

"Lilly would?" Renn asked.

Sap nodded seriously. "Yeah."

"Careful Sap. Renn's gotten rather friendly with Lilly. To the point Lilly takes her side over my own lately," I warned her again.

Sap shivered again, this so strongly she had actually stepped away from Renn. "You're kidding!" she groaned worriedly.

Renn glanced at me with a glare, and then looked back at Sap. "I'm surprised to find out you don't get along with your mother, Sap. She had praised you rather mightily, practically saying you were the most like her out of all the flock," Renn said.

"Hm...? Mother said that? Really?" Sap immediately stopped fidgeting as she focused on Renn, and even drew closer to her.

Renn nodded. "Yeah? She's proud of you. Verily."

Sap was silent for a moment, staring with wide eyes at Renn... and then she blushed and looked away, down to her feet. Her wings shuffled a little, as if she didn't know what to do with them all of a sudden.

Oh. How adorable.

A mighty smile planted itself on Renn's face, having witnessed what I just had, and she glanced at me. I nodded gently at her, to let her know I had seen it too.

Sap the black sheep and loner of the family still held her family in high regard it seemed. Particularly her mother.

Here I had thought she had nearly abandoned them, in her own way, after all this time.

This was a pleasing revelation, like a tiny little victory in a sea of defeats.

Still...

Studying Sap as we walked, I wondered if maybe Lilly didn't tell her children often enough that she loved them and was proud of them. Windle did, I knew for a fact, but maybe Lilly was a tad bit too strict with them. I'd never really considered it before, because usually when they were all together they were noisy and seemed happy. But it made sense. Lilly's talked to me before, often enough, on how disappointed

she was in some of her children. But I had always thought those talks had just been private moments where she opened up to me, since she saw me as something akin to a father. That she had told me stuff she'd never share with anyone else.

Though I suppose even if Lilly only ever told me of such personal feelings, that didn't mean the children didn't sense them all the same. Particularly these observant owls.

"Do you have any children, Renn?" Sap then asked, and I realized I had missed a small part of their conversation. The two were talking fluently again, with Sap no longer being odd.

"No. But I've only been with Vim for a couple years now, so I'd like a little leeway about that matter if you don't mind," Renn answered.

Sap tilted her head, and then giggled. "I see! What's wrong Vim? From what I've heard most people don't settle down until a child is born in the first place, why are you doing it backwards?" Sap asked me.

"Your parents settled down together long before they had Leaf," I said.

Sap paused a moment, frowned, and then nodded. "I suppose you're right, aren't you?" she admitted.

"Now that you mention it, is that how it works? That explains so many people having children right before, or after, they get married," Renn said as she pondered it.

"Humans have very short lives. Using them as a basis makes no sense," I warned her from making assumptions.

"That is true. There was this woman I met a few years ago, one who fished a river nearby. When I first met her she was basically just a kid. I had helped her out a little, since she had been alone. She grew old and died before I even realized it," Sap said with a nod.

Oh...? Interesting.

"I know that feeling. But you're that old, Sap?" Renn asked, and I noted she had tried to change the subject a little.

"Guess so? How old am I, Vim?" Sap asked me.

"Almost a hundred," I said.

"Really...? Hm..." Sap didn't seem to believe me as she frowned and thought about it.

Renn smiled at her, and then glanced at me. She didn't say anything, but I noted the wry smile on her face. She was enjoying herself.

Which I was glad for. I'll need to thank Sap later for Renn's change in attitude.

She had been rather upset with me earlier. After having been told of my decision to step down as the protector.

I had expected it... but honestly had not expected her to get so riled up about it. Upset? Sure. Angry and disappointed? Of course. But Renn had gone past that. She had been absolutely livid at first.

It was why Sap had so readily found us, even though she had been almost a day away from where we had been. She had heard Renn's voice echoing through the mountains and forests. As she yelled at me. She had likely flown to us to find out what was going on, being a rarity to hear a woman's shouts in such a desolate place, and had found us instead.

Honestly her arrival had saved me from having to talk about certain things. Though Renn had been starting to calm down just before Sap's arrival, she had still been rather confrontational with me. A rarity for her. Renn was usually so patient with me.

But maybe that was what I needed. For someone to just stand up and argue with me. Someone I cared for, especially.

Miss Beak had done it too, but I usually won against her in such debates. Mostly because although wise beyond reason... she had not been a human. She had been a monarch, through and through. She had not seen the world like others, like myself or Renn. She saw the world in a way that had allowed me to avoid certain topics, and win certain debates rather easily... simply because Miss Beak had not been able to truly think like a human. It had been beyond her.

Renn however was the opposite. Although a nonhuman, and although old and with a strange perspective on life... she was likely the closest person near me with a human outlook that I knew.

Rather, she was the only one with such a human perspective that I actually valued the opinion of.

Which made her a scary debate partner.

Reminded me of my mother, in a way. Though mother had been crueler in her arguments. She had sometimes argued in ways that would have made even Miss Beak feel uneasy.

"Vim."

I blinked and looked up, realizing I had gotten lost in thought again. "Hm?" I frowned at the two who had stopped and stared at me.

The two were quiet for a moment, and then glanced at each other. They both sighed, likely at me, and shrugged. "Maybe he's tired?" Sap wondered.

"Maybe," Renn softly admitted.

I wasn't. At least, not really. I felt the exhaustion, like always, but it was no more or less than usual. To be honest ever since Renn and I had returned to being together as we traveled, I've felt rather good and

not as tired as before. Though a part of me wasn't sure if the feeling was genuine or just my hope blinding my own sense of self.

"Is it fun? Being married?" Sap asked quietly, informing me that they had decided to either ignore me as they continue to whisper amongst themselves. Maybe they hadn't asked me a question, but instead had just wanted to see if I was listening into their conversation or not.

I decided to let them have their conversation, so I slowed my pace a little. They themselves weren't walking too fast, since they had stepped closer and began to talk quietly to each other, so it felt a little uncomfortable to walk so slowly as to give them distance.

But it was fine. Although we were in a hurry... we also weren't.

And I had decided, after all. Part of my decision to abandon my duties, to step down as protector...

Was for her.

And such a little conversation, as odd as it seemed, was the very kind of precious moment I wanted to protect.

Renn needed these moments. For more reasons than I could explain. They were precious beyond reason.

Smiling at the two as Sap inquired about married life, and how it felt to have a partner, I wondered if maybe Renn was right.

Maybe I was going about it wrong.

I felt like I needed to step down. To keep the peace. To make it so I could protect those I could, while not infuriating and stirring the pot with those I couldn't.

But maybe I just needed to... do something a tad different...

Studying Renn and the way her whole body swayed, not just her tail, as she excitedly talked to Sap about love, me, and the feeling of having someone you trusted and could count on, I wondered if maybe the real answer had been in front of me the whole time.

Could she do it...?

With my support? And the support of others...?

There were those who didn't trust her. Her banishments were proof of that. But what if she could overcome those issues? Especially if we presented it to the Society in a way that made it easy to swallow? Or would she just have the same issues I did? Or would they only be further amplified by her relationship with me...?

It was an odd thought. Since there was a lot at play. I had thought the Chronicler and the rest had been wary of Renn, yet they had tried to protect her. I had thought Randle and the rest would keep a distance from her, yet they had involved her before even involving me.

She had friends on all sides. From those like Lilly and Landi, to Merit and Nebl, and beyond even them... like young Sap right before me.

Sap was not this talkative with me. Never had been. At least, not since she was a child. She's always been a recluse. A quiet one. A distant owl, staring at me and the Society with a gaze of longing. One I'd understood, but had never been able to connect with her with.

Yet here was Renn. Getting her to open up immediately.

What was it about her...? It wasn't as if Renn was actually charismatic. Or maybe she was, and I just didn't realize it.

Though...

I frowned and wondered if maybe it was her lack of scent. It would explain why some of those, like Sap, who would usually be on guard around such a predator ended up letting their walls down so easily.

But had not people done it even before her smell had disappeared...? The Clothed Woman had done it too, and that had been before I had genuinely considered Renn to be my partner.

No matter. It was something that would take time to ponder. And a lot of testing. I'd also need to talk to not just her about it, but many others.

But it was a possibility. A unique one, that I hadn't considered just yet.

Rather... what if she could do what I couldn't?

Renn could be the protector they not just needed, but wanted.

After all it'd let me still protect them too. I'd be right by her side all the while, after all.

It was an idea, at least. One I would need to ponder. It might lead nowhere... but it was worth exploring.

She had wanted to be like me all this time, after all.

And fate was odd like this. Making it happen in this way, almost as if begrudgingly.

"He does what...!?" Sap raised her voice, to almost an indoor one, as she glanced hurriedly back at me.

I frowned at her, since I had not heard or noticed what Renn had said... as the two went back to whispering about me. Sap even unfolded her wings, as if to cover the two and further hide themselves from my attention.

Smiling at them, I realized I was way in over my head... and it felt great to be so.

Chapter 378 Renn – Sap's Gift

"I can fly home from here," Sap said gently.

Nodding slowly, I resisted the worry that wanted to grab at my tail. "Okay... I'm jealous," I said, hoping to lighten the mood.

Sap grinned at me. "No reason to be! You may not have the skies, Renn, but you have a man who can break them. That's more special in my opinion," she said.

"Break them...?" I mumbled as I glanced to the man in question.

We had stopped in a small clearing outside of a forest. There was a stump nearby, from a fallen tree, which Vim was sitting on. He'd been relatively quiet the last day and night, letting Sap and I have time to ourselves, but he looked happy for some reason. Maybe it was because of the little mink sitting on his shoulder.

"Animals don't normally go near him. Probably doesn't even realize he's there, thinks he's a rock or tree or something," Sap figured.

"It's cute," I said.

"Is it...? They're annoying things, always sticking their noses where they don't belong," Sap said with a sigh.

Smiling at her, I glanced away from Vim and the small animal as to see her frown. She looked genuinely annoyed, which told me she's had a bad experience with such animals before.

I hadn't meant the animal itself was cute, even though it was. I had meant the scene. Vim, with it sitting calmly on his shoulder, was what I had found adorable.

I didn't correct her though. "Will it take you long? To fly home?" I asked.

"Hm? From here? No. It'll take me the rest of the day, but I'll be home tonight," Sap said as she glanced away from Vim and off to the horizon.

How sweet. She really did still call it home.

Lilly and Vim had made her out to be something of a loner. One who didn't like people at all, not even her own family. Yet I had not gotten that feeling from her at all. Our conversations over the last day and a half or so had been nothing but lovely and wonderful. She reminded me of Lilly, and also at the same time Fly somehow. She still had a childish innocence to her that Lilly no longer did, yet had a firm gruffness to her one would expect from someone who lived alone out in the middle of the wilderness.

It made me wonder if others saw me in a similar fashion. After all, I too had grown up and lived alone like her. Out in the middle in these forests and mountains.

The fact the two of us seemingly grew up and lived in similar environments made me feel... strangely close to her. As if we were kindred somehow. Though I'd not said such a thing, since I knew it would have seemed silly. I might tell Vim later though.

Sap then shifted, and reached behind her. At first I thought she was just scratching an itch or something, since she had no bags or even anything covering her back since it was exposed, but then she pulled her hand back around... and revealed a feather.

One freshly plucked by the looks of it. It was nearly as long as my forearm, and just as wide.

A little stunned by it, since it was pretty, I barely noticed Sap hold it out to me.

"Oh...?" I wasn't sure what to think as I reached out to accept it. She handed it off with a smile, making my heart flutter a little.

"My wedding gift. Congratulations," she said.

I blinked as my heart fluttered again, and I carefully held the feather closer. It was now one of the most precious things I owned.

"Thank you..." I whispered, unsure of what else to say.

"Mhm. Hopefully you don't take too long with Vim. With you around maybe my siblings won't be so insufferable," she said with a smile.

I grinned at that and nodded. "I'll make sure Vim let's me come visit soon. I promise."

Sap nodded, and then glanced over at Vim. "You promise to let her visit, right?" she asked.

"Aye. I'll send her your way if I get too busy, no matter what," Vim promised. As he spoke the little animal on his shoulder turned, to sniff at Vim's face as if it suddenly realized he existed.

The animal didn't seem too bothered, even as Vim glanced at it and sighed, which only made it seem all the more adorable.

"Alright. If I don't leave now I might get caught in the storm, so I'll be going," Sap then said to me.

I nodded quickly. "Mhm. Fly safe, Sap. Let your family know I look forward to meeting them soon," I said.

She grinned and stepped back, her wings unfolding as she did. "You'll regret that, Renn. You may have the patience to put up with Vim but not even you will be able to handle them, I swear," she said.

Before I could say anything more Sap flapped her wings a single time. The gesture was so swift and strong I flinched as a wave of air buffeted against me, as if from a gust of wind. She rose up into the sky, flapped her wings again and then went even higher. "Bye Renn! Vim!" Sap said loudly as she flew into the sky.

"Bye...!" I waved her off as she flew upward, and then began to circle a little. As she flapped her wings and flied higher, she started to fly around in us a couple times as she rose upward... and then she flew away. Within a few moments, and a few wing beats, she had flew high enough that I couldn't even hear her flap her wings anymore as she became tinier and tinier in the distance.

For a long moment I was enthralled by her, unable to take my eyes off her.

She really could fly. Like an actual bird.

It was amazing.

I had not really seen her do so when she had landed the other day, upon finding us. By the time I had looked at her she had already been on the ground. So honestly I hadn't been sure how she would have looked while flying. It was interesting that her whole body seemed to float a little as she flew... I had somewhat expected her legs to dangle beneath her, for some reason. But when I thought about it birds didn't do that when flying either.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I suddenly felt... cold. Sad.

She had been a sweet girl. I had enjoyed talking to her. Especially about Vim, and her interest in finding a partner.

Sap disappeared into some darker clouds as she flew higher, and then didn't become visible again. I still stood there, staring out at the horizon, to see if I caught sight of her again... but if she did drop back below the dark clouds I didn't see her do so.

After a few moments of watching the skies, I sighed again and looked down at my hands... at the feather I held within them.

It really was pretty. It was a dull brownish color, but it had a pattern on it. It was different shades of red and brown, and the top of the feather, at the tip, was darker. Almost a black. It felt light, like all feathers, but I could tell just from holding it that it was far stronger than it seemed. It felt as thick and solid as a strong stick.

Gently touching it, I smiled at the gift. How wondrous.

Turning to face Vim, I hurried over to him as to show him the feather. "Look, I got a gift," I said.

"I saw. It's a mighty gift, actually. I can tell you with full confidence that you are very likely the only person to ever be given a feather from her. She gave me one once, a long time ago when she had been a small child, but odds are she doesn't even remember doing so," Vim said.

My smile grew and became warmer. "Does it mean something special? To the owls?" I asked.

"Actually yes, it does. To them it's the same as declaring eternal friendship. They're basically saying; here's a part of me, keep me safe while we're apart," he said.

Oh my...!

My tail squirmed behind me as I made an odd noise in glee. How sweet...!

My making noises startled the creature on Vim's shoulder, and it darted down his back and side... then down the stump and off into some nearby bushes.

"Sorry," I apologized to it.

Vim ignored it as he gestured to the feather in my hand. "I'm to assume you'll want to cherish it?"

I nodded gravely. "Yes."

"It's too big to fit into a book, or your pouches. Put it in mine, the monarch one, once you're done enjoying it. Later on, when we have the opportunity, I'll make a case for it. To preserve it for you," he said.

My smile turned wobbly as I nodded. "Thanks," I said with a small sniff.

Vim's brow furrowed, likely because he noticed and heard that I had almost broke out into a cry.

But I couldn't help it...! It was so sweet! Not just the gift, and Sap, but him too.

"We've actually begun to accumulate quite the small treasure trove, haven't we?" Vim then said, likely referring not just to the stuff I have begun to gather but him as well.

"Yeah, your bag has become noticeably more bulky," I noted. It was resting at his side, and did in fact look twice as large as normal. Which was odd... maybe the monarch leather expanded somehow when more full than usual?

"Hm... I planned to take you to one of the places I've used as something akin to a vault, near Tor's Village. We can put some stuff there if you'd like, they'll be kept safe at least."

"Oh...? You mentioned that before. Is it kind of like the Keep?" I asked.

"Kind of. How'd you figure that out?" he asked with a frown.

I shrugged and smirked at him. "You used that word to describe the Keep too," I said.

"Word...? Oh. Vault? Yes. I likely had..."

I nodded. He had.

"Speaking of items... how many more do you have, Vim? Like that box, or the book Fly mentioned?" I asked.

This text was taken from Royal Road. Help the author by reading the original version there.

I hadn't even seen the book yet. I figured I'd wait until we were somewhere I could rest and scrounge through his bag first. Though I had decided not to do so without permission, since he had mentioned the box he had acquired at the Owl's Nest was dangerous. It meant the other stuff he was gathering could be dangerous too. I wasn't sure how a book could be dangerous, but I hadn't figured how a small box could be dangerous either, yet it was.

"More than I'd like to admit, but not that many. This region...? Probably six or seven, depending on the route we take back to Telmik," he said.

"Hm... are they all like that box? Things that are dangerous?" I asked.

He nodded. "Somewhat. It's why I had hidden them away, after all. They're either dangerous, or special. Too precious to risk getting lost, or in the hands of others."

Huh...

"This... vault you speak of. Could we make a home there?" I asked.

"Honestly yes, that had been my plan. I want to make sure you have a safe location in every region. Places you can get to swiftly, if you need to. I figure we'll make five or six them over the next few years... unless of course something drastic happens," he said.

Drastic. "Like us leaving the Society completely," I said softly.

He nodded, but looked hurt as he did so.

I had wanted to comment on the fact we still weren't done talking about his foolish decision of stepping down as the protector... but that look made me hesitate. I instead twirled Sap's feather, reminding myself I still had it.

While staring at his somber expression, I lifted the feather and brushed it against my face again.

Smelling the feather, I closed my eyes and dedicated the scent to memory.

It was an odd smell. Sap's smell. She smelled like a bird, and the forest. The cold, damp, forest of the north.

Yet it wasn't a disgusting smell... and in fact...

"Reminds me of home," I whispered softly.

"If your instinct is right and your birthplace is nearby... then it likely does," Vim noted.

I nodded. "I think it is."

"Would you... like to go find it?" he asked with an odd tone.

I frowned at him, and slowly shook my head. "No. Not really," I said honestly.

Vim blinked at me, and I knew he wanted to ask if I was sure or not. I could see it in his expression. He was worried I was being considerate.

But I wasn't.

I genuinely did not want to go home. Or find it. At all.

That wasn't home anymore. Not to me.

My home was with him. The Society.

With... the people who made me happy. Like the ones who would give me a feather. Their feathers.

Smiling again at the feather, I gently brushed it against my cheek. It felt funny, but soothing. Hopefully Sap wouldn't mind such a thing, since it did seem kind of weird. It'd be like someone rubbing their face against my tail or something.

Though... I'd be okay with it. In a way.

"Ready Renn...?" Vim asked, and I realized he had stood up from his stump.

"Mhm," I nodded.

"Get your fill of it. It's about to rain... though the rain won't really hurt it too badly, being what it is, it's best to not risk it," he suggested as he stepped forward, patting me on the back as we both turned as to return to walking.

"Right...!" I nodded, realizing he was indeed exactly right. I had just watched Sap fly up into dark clouds, after all. It was about to rain, maybe even snow.

"You'll need to think of a gift in return," Vim said.

"Right...!" I stood up straighter, realizing he was right again.

He nodded. "In many cultures, the newly married couple gives back to those who gave to them during their festivities. Usually it's a feast for the whole village, or something, but that's boring," Vim said.

Hm... "What would she like...? She seems to not own anything, Vim. I'm actually surprised she even wears the little clothes she does," I said. She reminded me somewhat of my siblings, though without the cruelty and rage. She was more nonhuman than she appeared, what with her wings being the only trait visible upon her.

"I'm not sure. She doesn't live in one place long, doesn't care for much... she'll be a difficult one. But the gift doesn't have to be material. It can be something more personal, maybe words or emotions. A gesture, maybe?" he said as he thought about it too.

Brushing her feather against my lips, I wondered deeply what I could possibly give her in return.

Hopefully I could think of something before I saw her again... since she seemed to be the type to run off and live alone for extended periods. If I didn't figure something out before seeing her again, it could take me decades before I got another chance.

"Why did she eat a heart, Vim?" I asked, wondering if maybe knowing that would give me some insight into her personality.

"She had been born weak. Infirm. Think as weak as Fly. It made her fragile, and unable to fly. Lilly asked for a heart for her, in hopes it would keep her both alive... and give her the strength to endure the world. I agreed, and got one for her, but made sure it was a smaller and weaker heart. As to not have any major side-effects like Landi's," Vim explained.

My world grew warm again as I reached out with my free hand and took his. "That's lovely of you, Vim," I said softly.

"Mhm... Keep it a secret though, Renn. Not even her siblings know about it, only Lilly and Windle do," Vim said.

Oh...! "She told me so readily," I said softly.

He nodded and smiled. "You became fast friends. A lovely thing, if a little annoying sometimes," he said.

"Only you find such things annoying," I said with a huff, but smiled at him all the same.

"I'm sure others find it annoying too," he mumbled.

"So there'd be no need for another heart, or something like it. She had only needed it for her health, and already benefits enough from it," I said, understanding her predicament.

"Yes. Though I like your train of thought."

Grinning at him, I pointed Sap's feather at him accusationally. "Again with that word! What's it mean? You never answered last time," I asked. I'd assumed he didn't mean to imply my mind was training as it thought, though in a way that might make a little sense.

Vim frowned and slowed, and then realized what he'd said. "Right... well... that's hard to explain," he said softly.

"Oh...?" I grew excited. Was he going to try? Last time he had basically explained its meaning, it meant ones direction of thought, but he hadn't actually described the word itself!

"Hm..." Vim's frown deepened, and I squeezed his hand... this time in frustration. He noticed, and gestured lightly at me with his other hand. "Wait. I'm not trying to avoid it... I just don't know how to properly explain..."

"You don't normally find such a thing difficult to do, usually," I said.

"Right... well..."

A distant rumble in the sky told me the storm was approaching, and I pointed up at it with Sap's feather. "See? Even the world is annoyed at you right now."

He smirked and nodded. "The origin of the word comes from another. The original word was used to describe the act of pulling or drawing something. Usually something heavy or with great burden," he said.

My frown turned into one of confusion. "So... you're saying you like how my mind is pulling something heavy?" I asked, trying to understand.

"Well, no... there's more to it than that. Imagine a lot of wagons behind you, all connected. And you're pulling them all to your destination, right?" he said as he pointed behind us, as if we were in fact pulling a bunch of wagons.

"Uh... okay?"

"The term, or phrase I suppose, is basically like claiming that you have a very orderly sequence to your reasoning. Each wagon, each cart or part of the train, leads to the next. Then the next. Until you are led to your destination. Imagine a bunch of strings tangled up together, if you wanted to find the start and end of the string you'd follow a singular path right? A single strand, and so on and so forth? It's the same line of reasoning," he explained.

I sighed at him. "I was expecting something more interesting than that," I said honestly.

"Well, it actually is. But I can't tell you about it."

"What...? Why?"

He flinched again. "Okay. I can. I just don't want to."

"Bah!" I reached over and poked at him with Sap's feather. I did so gently, as to not harm the feather, and Vim softly smiled at me as I brushed it against his eyes and face.

"It does smell like the forests, doesn't it?" he noted.

"Hmph!" I stopped messing with the feather and reached to his side, as to grab at the bag he carried. I could now smell the rain approaching us, so I wanted to deposit it safely away before it got ruined or a gust of wind stole it from my grasp.

While Vim paused, to help me put the feather away securely... I noted the stuff in his bag.

Clothes. Little bundles. That box he had dug up, and some of my own items... like the book I had taken from Witch's descendant, Elaine. The one about flowers that was now ineligible. I had decided to take it after all, though a part of me regretted it. The thing looked absolutely weathered compared to the other stuff in his pouch. Old and worn beyond reason. It'd not be long until it needed to be tossed aside, if it wasn't already.

"Can wrap it with this, that way it won't get smooshed or anything," Vim said as he un-bundled one of the extra shirts I sometimes wore.

"Smooshed," I said, liking the word. It was a new one from Vim, but the meaning had been obvious. I really liked the sound of it.

Another loud rumble echoed overhead, and I heard the distant rain start to fall. It was approaching fast, and sounded heavy. Heavy enough that I needed to quickly cover myself again, hiding my tail and putting up the heavy hood.

Before I did though, once the feather was securely tucked away safely, I patted Vim's arm and got his attention.

"Sap's lonely," I told him.

"I heard. And saw. A surprise, to be honest. I had not expected it... I'd always thought her a solitary creature."

"Why does she not just go back home then? Live with her parents, and the rest?" I asked as I covered myself properly, putting my hood up and tucking my tail into my pants.

"I'm not sure, Renn. They all seem to get along, but there are issues. Some of them don't like Lilly. A few don't like Windle. Others don't like each other. I'd say it's just typical family squabbles... but who knows anymore. I try to not get involved in any of that stuff, you know me," Vim said as he finished messing with his bag and crossed his arms as to watch me mess with my ears under my hood. It was a heavy thing, the kind of heavy that was uncomfortable if I didn't properly position my ears.

"Does it bother you that I get involved?" I asked him.

"Not at all Renn. I mean... I guess in a way it does? Because it means you can potentially get hurt over it. Emotionally, more than physically. So it worries me. But although I grumble about it, I honestly find it both adorable and lovely. I like how you try to become family with everyone you meet, in a way," he said.

Feeling oddly humbled, I smiled up at the man who had an odd expression on his face. He looked... troubled, I guess. Maybe it had bothered him to admit something like that so readily?

"I've been told to consider them family. That I'm a part of their parliament," I said.

He smirked and nodded. "Yes. A member of their flock. A cat amongst birds, a funny thing but not the craziest pairing," he said.

I wanted to grumble at that, but the rain hit us. We went from being dry, to being soaked as a massive downpour fell upon us.

Groaning at the loud rain, and the heavy droplets falling upon me, I wondered how Sap flew in such a mess. Maybe this was why she had flown off when she had, as to avoid it.

"Come on, Renn. No point lingering in the rain," Vim said, his voice somewhat distant thanks to the loud rain and the thick hood covering my ears. He patted me on the back, leading me to join him as we returned to walking.

I of course joined him, but made sure to do so closely. I wrapped my arms around his, both for warmth and so that I could hear him better as we talked in the loud rain.

"Where are we going next?" I asked.

"We're going to meet Elk and his family."

"Elks...!" I nodded as I remembered the family name, and location, on the map at Lilly's home. The one Windle kept updated. The family had been a larger one, with several members. Akin to Lilly's.

We were closer to the coast than I had thought, then. Which was strange. I couldn't smell the sea at all. Maybe the heavy rains were keeping it at bay?

"I'll need to thank Sap as well, she saved me from your anger earlier even if she doesn't realize it," Vim then said.

I grinned at that, and debated teasing him over it... but decided not to. I was in a great mood, so I didn't feel like getting upset or angry. At anything at the moment. Odds are I couldn't even if I tried, honestly.

"What would you give her as a gift?" I asked, choosing to focus on that instead.

"A hammock."

"What's that?"

"A type of bed. Usually a net of rope, hanging off the ground."

Huh... a few memories of beds fashioned out of cloth, hung upon walls or posts, came to mind. Maybe something like that?

"Think she'd like it? Even though she seems to not care for stuff?" I asked.

"Yes. Especially if it's something light and easy for her to carry. We can make it together if you'd like," he offered.

"Mhm...!" I happily agreed... and squeezed his arm closer.

I loved getting gifts... but this would be something special for me. And not just because it was a gift given in return for a wonderful one.

I'd not given gifts before. Not like this. To anyone. I've never had such an opportunity.

I looked forward to it.

"So... does this mean we need to prepare gifts for the whole Society, Vim?" I asked, absolutely loving the idea.

Vim groaned.

Chapter 379 Vim – Visiting Elk Once More

"Betty will love this, Vim. She's been wanting a friend," Elk said as I lifted up the log he had just felled.

He and I had cleared out a small area not far from his village. He had already made his quota, and then some, of lumber but wanted to build an extension to his house and so needed some extra for himself. So I was helping him. I planned to spend the rest of the day cutting and preparing a few of the logs we were gathering for him, so through the winter they'd properly dry and he'd be able to build his home come spring.

It was a tad odd to be cutting down trees again so quickly, but I wasn't going to complain. I was much happier having to do such menial tasks when visiting locations, instead of finding heartbreak or chaos.

"Well, Renn's a good friend to have. She may be a large forest cat, which are usually solitary creatures, but she acts more like a one of those savanna cats. She cherishes and goes out of her way to protect and care for those she considers a part of her pack," I said.

"I know not what a savanna is Vim," Elk reminded me as he picked up another log. One a little smaller than my own, but just as heavy.

"Larger cats from such a region form packs. Herds, like you elk, called prides. The female cats of such groups are usually highly protective and caring, sometimes even fighting harder and more often than the male dominate ones," I said as I waited for him to walk first. We were going to carry them back to his home.

"Huh... she doesn't look it, honestly. She's tinnier than Betty!" Elk said with a laugh.

I didn't comment on that since most people were.

Well, Betty used to be small too. I had met her in the south, at Merit's Oasis, and she had been scrawny back then. Fitting for a doe. I wonder why she was larger now, was it just her having children over the years...? It can't be their diet, Elk and them all basically ate leafy stuff with barely any meat.

Maybe that was why Elk wanted to add to his house...? He hasn't had any new children lately, still had four children and his wife... and his house was already one of the largest in the village...

No matter.

"Think this winter will be a harsh one?" I asked, changing topics a little. It wasn't snowing here yet, likely thanks to how close we were to the ocean, but I knew it was about to start. Renn and I had encountered snow, the early not very long lasting type, on our way here from the mountains after finding Sap.

"I think it will be, yes. The last couple years haven't been that bad, and this summer was very oddly dry," Elk said.

I nodded. I agreed with him. Renn and I had spent most of the summer down south, but even I had noticed the lack of monsoons and the strangely hot weather. Plus the rain season had been wet, but strangely warm too.

I'd yet to find a suitable fox for Renn. I had been keeping an eye out as we traveled through these dense forests, and although had seen a few none had been of suitable size. Even the villages we had passed through, the human ones, I had kept an eye out for any pelts too... since I worried Renn would get upset with me for killing a fox just for its pelt. But none had shown themselves yet.

Though maybe Renn wouldn't be too bothered by it. She had no qualms when we killed animals for food during our travels, and she was of course a predator herself. It was nature. Foxes hunted and ate countless creatures in their life, and like cats, sometimes even did so not for sustenance but purely for the game and fun. And it wasn't like I'd be killing it for no reason...

Smirking at myself, I wondered how long it had been since I'd worried over the weather, or the act of slaughtering a simple animal. It seemed like such... little and worthless worries to have at the moment, with so much happening in the world.

Why fret over a fox pelt when a god was possible walking this world, causing chaos?

Well. Because my wife might get cold this winter. That's why.

"How'd that little fox end up anyway? The girl?" Elk then asked.

My smirk became an odd frown. Had I said my thoughts aloud or something...?

"She's found a home with fellow foxes at Twin Hills. Porka and them," I said.

"Ah. A ways away!" Elk said.

Right. Although Elk was well traveled, having traveled around with his parents during the wars as they helped the Society, he himself didn't seem to like doing such a thing. To him even a week's travel distance was a world away, and not worth even contemplating.

Speaking of other members, though...

"Did Meriah visit?" I asked.

"Meriah? No. Not recently I don't think. Not since your last visit at least, only..." Elk then paused, so I had to stop too. He too was carrying a log, and we'd run into each other if I wasn't careful.

"Elk?" I asked. What was wrong? He had gone completely still.

Elk then spun around, so I had to hurriedly arc and raise the log I carried so that his wouldn't hit mine. I barely got it out of the way in time as Elk dropped the log he had just spun and hurried towards me.

I too put the log down, and frowned as I looked around. What had gotten him so riled up? I didn't see, hear, or sense anything. At all. We were completely alone still, with quite a distance from his village.

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"Crane came!" Elk then shouted at me, sounding suddenly very upset.

Oh.

I nodded carefully. "I'm sure. She's been..." I started to say it, realizing I had not yet told him of the vote. Not my fault really, Renn and I had arrived this morning. Just as Elk was setting out to work, before daybreak. I had simply joined him, without much thought.

Elk though cut me off. "They're going to vote! Against you! To remove you!" he shouted worriedly, as if he was the first person to inform me.

Gently nodding, I did my best to not smile at the man who was a moment away from grabbing me by my arms, as if to shake some sense into me. "Yes. They are."

He raised his hands, and at first I thought he was indeed going to grab me, but instead he just reached up and grabbed his head. "Those fools! You've got to be kidding me!" Elk shouted as he turned and groaned, huffing loudly as if under great stress.

Oh my. I'd not seem him like this before. Angry? Sure. His parents had been murdered, and I had arrived shortly after they had been so. He had begged me to help him get revenge, and he had been furious then... but that had been a different kind of anger. Not like this.

Elk began to stomp around, with very heavy steps. The soft ground, and the foot of grass upon it, barely cushioned his heavy footfalls as he left huge prints as he began to pace. The impacts were heavy enough to remind me that Elk, although a very passive man, was not weak at all. Maybe even as strong if not stronger than Renn. "The absolute fools! They'll doom us!" he shouted.

I took a small breath and wondered how to handle this. He was suddenly furious, having remembered it. But honestly there was no need to be... yet at the same time, I was slightly humbled he was seemingly so troubled over it. Even if he was simply perceiving it as a threat to him and his family, and not really because I was his friend.

"It happens Elk. This is not the first time. Remember you and your parents helping me during the wars? It happened then too," I said.

"They're fools! Bastards! I oughta' take my hammer to their heads!" Elk shouted angrily, as if he hadn't even heard me.

Oh my. Maybe I had misjudged the man all these years. Maybe he did see us as friends.

Interesting. I felt a little bad now... since I'd always thought he had wanted me to stay at a slight distance. He had always been friendly to me, like his parents had been, but he has also always been distant. At least, so it had felt.

I watched with interest as Elk slowly stopped pacing, and with great huffs he looked up at the sky... and I noted the very faint haze of his hot breath. He was furious, wasn't he...?

Still it didn't take long for Elk to calm down. He took one last deep breath, and sighed. "I'll need to think further about this Vim. Else I may do something I'll regret. I can't believe I had forgotten until you mentioned it! I had been so furious last time, too!" Elk said loudly.

"Mhm... don't get too heated over it, my friend. Even if worse comes to worse and I get removed as protector, or even banished, I'll always come to you and your families aid without hesitation," I said gently.

"Oh, of that I know! But that is not the point, Vim! We're a herd! A collective! Who do they think they are to remove our protector? Who would replace you? Who has your strength or knowledge? And more so who would not be tainted or biased about it? Not a one! Not any of them!" Elk said as he gestured at the world around us.

Oh my. He sounded like Renn.

"As you know, though, if that very herd does agree to such a thing Elk... it'd be against the herd to choose otherwise," I said.

"Shut it Vim! That's what Crane said! I nearly chased her off when she did!" Elk shouted at me.

Smiling at that, I wondered if he'd chase me off too if I kept it up.

Elk huffed again, and for a tiny moment looked as if he was going to start pacing angrily around again. Instead he shook his head and went to rubbing his face, as if suddenly exhausted and covered in sweat. We had fallen about dozen a trees, but we'd not done enough just yet for such a thing to be the case.

"Really Vim? What is their problem? At least the ones who left so long ago had some sense. They didn't agree with us, yet still knew to trust you. They even had you escort them to their new home!" Elk said.

Surprised he remembered, I nodded. "Yes. They had. I'm hoping this time too the Society will see reason... but well..." I hesitated, and realized I hadn't told him yet.

Of my intention.

To step down. No matter the result of the vote.

In fact, to do so before the vote even happens.

Frowning, I hesitated as I realized saying it now would likely cause problems. If he had gotten so furious over the mere thought of just my removal being voted on in a few years, what would he do if I simply told him I was stepping down either way?

"Bunch of fools...! But what do you expect? They build giant towers and cities, and then cry and whine when the world notices and brings them down. They're all idiots!" Elk said as he stepped over to his log. It had rolled away a bit when he had tossed it.

Nodding gently, I kept myself from verbally agreeing outright. I too believed half of our problems stemmed from our own members getting themselves in trouble, such as painting huge targets on their backs by making the world notice them, but it wasn't my position to dictate such things. Only to protect them when their own mistakes arrived to bite them in the tail.

"When did Crane come by, Elk?" I asked as he stared down at his log. He looked as if he was angry at it, not our members.

"Hm...? Oh... I don't know. A few months ago maybe?" Elk said as he turned to look at me.

I nodded. That sounded about right. From what I'd gathered Crane has been traveling around, mostly up here in the north and the coast only going so far as Telmik a few times, to include as many as she could in her little scheme.

After leaving here, and stopping at a couple other places, we'd reach Nevi. Supposedly Crane had been staying with Rapti since the destruction of the Sleepy Artist, so that meant it'd not be long until Renn and I encountered her.

I wasn't sure yet what to think of either of them. Or what I wanted to say to them, but I just hoped Renn didn't get too emotional when we did meet them. Renn knew my stance on free-will, which meant I had to accept the fact that sometimes even the very people I protected were not on my side, but that didn't mean she herself had to abide by such rules.

Even though I liked how Renn got defensive, and angry, over me... I also sometimes wished she wouldn't.

"I'll go vote Vim. I promise. I don't know if Betty and the kids will come with me, but I at least will be there!" Elk vowed to me.

I slowly nodded. "Thank you Elk. Hopefully it won't get to that point, honestly, though," I said.

He shrugged as he went to pick up his log. He lifted it with an exasperated huff, as if it took him great effort to lift even though it obviously didn't.

"Hmph! I feel like running into a tree! I swear!" Elk shouted angrily as I went to pick up the log I had put down too.

I smirked at that as we returned to walking back to his home.

Me too, sometimes.

Chapter 380 Renn – A Family of Whiskers

I gently rocked the crib as I fought back tears.

Two small babies were lying in the crib together. Sleeping. Twins, as Vim had called them. I hadn't even known what a twin actually was, but now it made perfect sense. It wasn't that they had been born at the same time, but rather that they looked just like the other! As if you were looking at two sides of a mirror!

So Twin Hills had been named because there were lots of similar sized, nearly identical, rolling hills all around it.

Funny. I had just thought it to be a name of a city. Or village, I guess, since the city of Bordu was near it.

When I had first been told to rock the crib, I had done so very gently and worriedly. Because it had seemed strange for a large bed-like thing to rock as if a boat on the water. What if it tipped over? Or fell? But after doing it for a while I've realized that the thing was solid and would not fall easily. In fact if I rocked it too harshly, the crib itself would slow in its rocking and lock into place almost. I wasn't really sure how it had been designed for such a thing, but I liked it. It made me feel more relaxed about letting such small babies sleep in something so strange.

Right now I was alone with the babies, but their mother wasn't far. She was rummaging around in the nearby kitchen, making us snacks she had said. A daughter, one who appeared a little older than Fly to me, was in the house too but I'd not seen her for a good time. I couldn't hear her, surprisingly, but I knew why. This house had several floors beneath it. Basements, something akin to the Armadillo's had in the south. I'd not been down there, but the entrance was in the next room over.

Her husband, and mine, and another younger son were elsewhere. The only request the family had of Vim was for him to check on their boat docked on the nearby ocean. They used it to not just fish, but catch the hard-shelled stuff that was found in deeper waters, supposedly.

I had been interested in that boat, of course, but the moment I had seen the two babies my attention had gotten focused entirely by them.

They were adorable. I wasn't sure yet just what this family was, since Vim had only said they were a type of rodent, but they all had these little gray whiskers that sprouted from their cheeks near their noses. The twins had tiny little ones, and it made them adorable beyond belief.

Sniffing ever so quietly, as to not seem weird, I did my best to keep my eyes from growing too watery.

Who would have thought I'd have been able to meet, and hold, another baby of our kind so soon...?

Hundreds of years I've gone without ever meeting one. Yet here, not long after meeting Root, I now met not one but two others!

Unlike Root though they had no names... and were as fragile as the humans they mostly looked like. Other than their little whiskers.

"So you just... wait until they pick something up?" I asked Bowl as she walked back into the room. Although the babies slept, Bowl didn't seem to worry over our light talking. They must sleep soundly.

"I know it's odd, but it's been my family's custom forever. It's a fine practice though! It has to be something they actually pick up on purpose, not just by grabbing. It's more like, the first thing they'll pick up with real intent, rather than just whatever they touch," Bowl said as she explained her families naming process.

Thus her name. Bowl.

Her husband had been Broom. Their son Line. As in, fish line.

"What if they pick up the same thing?" I asked as Bowl placed a small plate of what looked like bread on the table nearby. Although I did kind of want a snack, I was far more concerned with continuously rocking the crib I sat next to.

"Don't tell anyone, but I make sure that won't happen. Plus I'll make sure it won't be something stupid and ugly, like a boot or a hat," Bowl said with a happy grin. Her whiskers flickered a little as she smiled, telling me they were more than just plain old odd hairs growing in a strange place.

"Ah..." I nodded gently at that, and wondered why she had been okay with her son's name. Line...? It seemed... well...

I decided not to think too deeply on it as Bowl sat down across from me in a chair and happily smiled at me. "Does your family have a similar custom? For naming?" she asked politely.

It was the type of question that under normal circumstances would be completely... understandable. And in fact, something I'd be happy to talk about.

But...

"Honestly I don't know... but I think they do, yes. Vim had been named on purpose for a certain reason, so maybe we do?" I said as I thought about it.

Vim Vitae... he had said outright to me before that his parents had picked the name on purpose. To represent his great strength. His fortitude. His life.

So maybe there was a rhyme or reason for it. Did that mean we'd be using the same method for our own children's names...?

What would that have made me then...? If not cat, or something, maybe my strongest trait...? What was it? My memory, maybe?

"Oh... I had not thought about that. You're Vim's aren't you...? Hm... such an odd mate..." Bowl spoke quietly as she pondered something, and broke me from my thoughts.

Was he really that odd...? Honestly other than his strangeness about certain things, such as gods or his past, he seemed like a rather normal man to me. Calm. Easygoing. Gentle.

Even to those who didn't deserve it.

Glancing at the babies, I found myself smiling again and my eyes watering. By the dead gods they were beautiful.

Vim's not said it, aloud, but I knew this was how he saw all of us. Even the ones older, and who had children themselves. He saw them as... little bundles of hope. Life. Joy. Love.

It was why he forgave them for so much, because he saw them all like young little children who didn't know any better.

Yet it was also why he punished them so harshly when they did step too far out of line. Like Tim.

In the world of animals, it wasn't uncommon for a parent to outright kill and eat a baby that got too far out of line. A harsh cruelty that nature enforced, to ensure the longevity and continued existence of the rest of the children. Like cutting a diseased limb off a tree to save the rest of it.

"I found it!"

I turned and watched the young daughter return. She carried some kind of wooden thing in her hands, which kind of looked...

"Ah. Yes. That did break didn't it?" Bowl said as the girl grinned and nodded.

"Yeah. I'm glad I found it before Vim left, now he can fix it for me!" she said as she placed the object on a table nearby.

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"What is it?" I asked. It kind of looked like some kind of instrument, maybe. Like that musical tool that I had seen, and heard, that night in Lumen. When Vim had taken me on a small date, and out to eat. A human woman had played it, making wonderful notes and melodies as she did.

"A guitar! Vim made it for me, but my stupid brother broke it a couple years ago!" Glass said, a little loudly.

Glancing at the crib, I noted the still slumbering babies within. They hadn't been bothered at all by their sister's loud voice.

Maybe it was a trait of theirs. Or were... all babies sometimes this calm? I couldn't count how many times I'd heard mothers shout angrily at others when they had woken their slumbering babies over the years. So I had not thought them so capable of deep slumber.

Hadn't they been quiet when Root slept...? I think they had been. She seemed to have woken sometimes, though never loudly like most human children did.

Maybe this pair of twins slept so deeply had something to do with whatever they were.

"Honestly I was kind of hoping you'd not find it in time..." Bowl said with a sigh.

"Aw, Momma! But it's so fun! Plus our new little whiskers haven't heard it yet! I bet they'll love it!" Glass said happily as she stepped over to the crib.

I smiled at her as she stared down at her new siblings. Seeing her next to them made it more obvious that she was older than she seemed. Maybe she wasn't as young as I had thought...

"Are you older, Glass?" I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

"Hm...? Yea? I'm about thirty, right Momma?" Glass asked her mom.

"Regretfully..." Bowl said with a sigh.

"Oh shush Momma! It's not like how it was back when you were young, it's not fair!" Glass said as she stepped away from the crib, complaining.

"Not like what?" I asked. What'd she mean?

Glass turned to look at me, and crossed her arms. "Momma was already married and had children by the time she was my age. She's upset I've not left the den yet," she explained.

I blinked at that and frowned. Really...? But the son had not seemed that old either...! Maybe they had other children that were no longer here, and were now out living on their own?

"It wasn't easy for me back then either, you know? There had been all the wars, and I had even gotten separated from my whole family... yet even with all that chaos I still found my mate," Bowl said, and I noticed the way she spoke. The tone of her voice told me this was not something new they had talked about, but likely something often brought up.

Glass grumbled as her whiskers twitched. "I've tried Momma...! I've even gone with Papa when he goes to those docks, or Nevi, multiple times!" Glass said.

Really...? How did they hide their whiskers I wonder? Hopefully they didn't pluck them or anything.

"You're not looking in the right places, I told you that," Bowl said with a sigh.

"Yet she never tells me where these supposed places full of potential mates are, Renn, really!" Glass said to me, including me suddenly in their little argument.

Although I found it adorable, I also found it very heartbreaking... so I had kind of hoped to have been left out of it. Yet since I had been given an opportunity, I went ahead and took it.

"Well... I mean, I do travel around with Vim a lot you know? If you really do want to find a partner, I might be able to help if you'd like," I offered.

"What...!" Glass startled, and even Bowl perked up.

"Could you really? Even for this mess of whiskers?" Bowl asked.

I smiled gently. Mess...? She was adorable, but I knew she wasn't likely talking about her physical appearance. "Even if I can't... there's also the vote coming up, as we talked about. Supposedly a bunch of us will be gathering then," I said.

Glass stepped forward, her eyes going wide and her whiskers stiff. "So... during this vote, maybe I can meet someone?" Glass asked softly.

"Oh...? Yes. I suppose so, that would be a good opportunity. I'm told a lot of our members will be there, maybe more than ever at one place in a long time," I said, kind of liking the idea for her. I tried not to make it too obvious though, since her mother was looking at us with a weird look.

"Momma we gotta go!" Glass said as she hurriedly looked to her mother and stepped towards her.

Bowl sighed, her whiskers dancing as she reached up and cupped her cheek. "I don't know... Telmik is so far, dear."

"But Momma...!" Glass groaned worriedly, her whiskers dancing wildly as she did.

Gosh their whiskers were cute...! And Glass was too! She was acting so adorable, even if her mother looked as if she now had a headache.

So many of our members were so adorable and such lovely people. Why was it so hard for them to find love, I wonder? She had just admitted she had been willing to even consider humans, and it was just so hard to imagine her not being able to catch the eye of someone. Even if there were plenty who would run, or attack, our kind on sight... there were also plenty more who would calm down after the initial panic, or not even panic at all. There were thousands of humans in the Society alone that proved such a thing.

"What would your father think? And we have the babies too," Bowl said, and even I could hear where this was going.

"But...!" Glass inched closer, clasping her hands as she raised them. As if to plead.

"Plus it'd be during the winter...? Gosh, it'd be so cold."

Glass's face scrunched up, and I noted the way her hands fell to her sides and her shoulders slumped.

Had she given up that easily...?

"Um... I'd be willing to come pick her up, if you'd like. I can bring her back afterward too," I offered.

After all we weren't far from Nevi. A few days, so Vim had said. That meant we were only a couple weeks from Telmik, even if we had to travel during the harsh winter. It'd not be that bad, or take that long.

"What...!" Glass spun, her eyes going wide at me.

I nodded carefully, and made sure to note the look on her mother's face behind her. She didn't look too upset over the idea, and in fact her frown looked more contemplative than anything.

"Hm... I mean, you'd be with Vim too, so..." Bowl obviously connected the dots as Glass spun back around to face her mother.

"Yeah! I'd be with Vim!" Glass shouted happily, as if to further convince her mother.

"But how long would you be gone...? I don't know, Glass. We'd have to talk with your father about it," Bowl said.

"Okay! Please!" Glass quickly nodded, and I wondered if maybe I should start offering to help guide others to Telmik before the vote. How many were like her, that likely wanted to go but couldn't...?

After all those whiskers, even if not outright crazily noticeable, made them still very obviously inhuman. They'd not be able to easily travel long distances, I'd think.

Not safely anyway.

"We can talk about it once they get back," I suggested. Maybe Vim's presence, and his typical cool calmness as he spoke, would be helpful in a moment like this.

"I mean... that'd be swell of you Renn, but Telmik..." Bowl sighed as she thought about it.

Glass made an odd whine of a noise as she glanced at me. She perked up as our eyes met, and I nodded at her without saying anything.

Her whiskers danced wildly as her eyes lit up and she nodded back. She had understood what I just meant.

I'd help her. One way or another.

I'm sure Vim would too.

Especially since, much to my chagrin, he had decided to step down anyway.

That meant he could now... be a little more selfish. A little more open with himself, and his own desires.

Which meant he could bend his rules a little more. For me, especially.

Really... I should bring up my idea to make a place for our members to meet, as to find partners and friends. It has seemed lately that such a thing was desperately needed.

Why hadn't anyone done it before...? Maybe someone had, and it had failed. Vim hadn't mentioned it though.

"Could take Line too! He'll need a wife soon, too!" Glass then said.

"He's already got one, dear."

Glass startled, and spun to face her mother. "What! Since when?"

"A couple months ago. He met some fisherman's daughter, while he and your father were sailing. Why do you think he's been sneaking off so much lately?" Bowl asked with a mischievous grin.

"You're kidding! That snotty whiskered brat found someone before I did?" Glass didn't like that at all.

And it seemed, the twins didn't either. The two woke, a little loudly. Maybe because of how loudly Glass had just shouted, since I had not slowed the rocking at all.

While Bowl and Glass went to pick the children up, as to soothe and quiet them, I smiled at the family. I was jealous.

"Don't you even suggest it. They don't even have names yet," Bowl then said to her older daughter.

"Ha!" Glass snorted a laugh, having been caught at the thought, which made me laugh too.