

## Non Human 451

### Chapter 451 Vim – Return to the Smithy

Approaching Nebl's home, I accepted the bundle of flowers that Renn hurriedly pushed at me as she hurried forward.

Watching Renn run straight at Lilly, who stood up straighter and readied herself for impact, I couldn't help but smile as Renn ran into her arms.

The two hugged in greeting, and while I enjoyed the sight... I tried to remember the last time I'd seen Lilly hug someone like she was now with Renn.

I remembered seeing her do so with her children... but not in a long time. It was a sight I could only really remember when they were young. And although she lowered her guard around Windle, it wasn't often she displayed such affection openly. At least around me.

Glancing around as I approached the two women that were giggling their greetings, I wondered why none of the furnaces had smoke coming from them.

The smithy seemed quiet. I didn't see or hear anyone else, but at least nothing looked amiss. Plus with Lilly here, seemingly fine and calm, I knew that all was well.

"Gosh!" Lilly groaned at something Renn had said as I stepped up to them. Renn giggled as the two swayed a moment, hugging each other tightly.

I was a little jealous. Renn and I did hug sometimes, but it was rare and... usually not as intimate as that. Why was that?

"Hey Vim," Lilly smirked at me as she glanced at me from over Renn's shoulder.

"Lilly," I greeted her back as Renn's ears fluttered against Lilly's face. The owl flinched, but smirked as they smacked her.

"Okay... Renn, I love you but please let me go. I was heading to the restroom," Lilly said gently as she patted Renn's back.

Renn immediately released Lilly, nodding quickly as she stepped back. "Sorry!" she apologized.

Lilly didn't seem bothered as she sighed and nodded. "I'll be right back. Everyone's in the house, preparing lunch or something," Lilly said as she stepped away, heading for the door to the house.

Renn hurried to join her, and right as Lilly reached the door it opened. Lilly hurried out, so quickly that Renn had to side-step as to avoid being bumped into, and then the monkey ran into Renn's arms.

I sighed as I watched another emotional greeting, with noisy giggles and greetings with deep hugs.

Ignoring the two, I went to follow Lilly into the home. As I walked in, I began to smell the food being cooked. By the strong smell it was clear it wasn't ready just yet.

Lilly disappeared around a corner with a hurry, as I walked past that hallway and to another I turned down it until I found the living room. I found Nebl sitting at his chair near the fireplace, seemingly asleep, and heard clattering in the kitchen nearby. Pram and her husband Drandle were likely in there.

He was still a little thin... but he had regained some of his stoutness from before he had gotten trapped in the mine. His face no longer looked thin, his shoulders and arms were thicker, enough to make his shirt tight upon him, and he was cleaned up so well it was almost as if seeing a different person. My friend looked good, healthy, and much better than I had expected him to be.

Yet as wonderful as it was to see my friend healthy... I found myself far more concerned with something else.

Putting the bundle of flowers down in a corner, I slowly undid the heavier bags I carried as I stared at something very important near Nebl's chair. Within arm's reach of him.

A crib.

Once free of my bags, I smiled softly as I walked quietly over to the crib... and stared down at the sleeping child.

She looked like Lellip and Pram.

And looked healthy. Wonderfully healthy. She even had that tiny little tuft of hair that ran down their neck a little farther than typical. The only real vestige of their bloodline left.

How lovely. Renn was going to cry. More than she likely already was, at least.

"Is that them?" Pram's voice entered the room, and a moment later she did too. She paused at the doorway between the kitchen and living room, and sighed at the sight of me.

"Gosh Vim, don't scare me like that. Welcome," Pram greeted me comfortably as she shook her head at me, likely having startled at the sight of me near her crib.

"Sorry," I apologized quietly, as to not wake Nebl. He still slumbered, somehow, even with all the noise. Lellip and Renn weren't exactly being quiet.

Placing my hand on the crib, not to rock it or wake the child, I was about to turn to say something to Pram... but before I could, my arm was grabbed.

Bones creaked for a moment as I released the crib, and turned to frown at my friend who had sat up with great speed and purpose. His eyes, still half asleep, were cold. Frozen.

"Vim...?" Nebl blinked, waking up, as I smiled at my friend.

"Nebl."

He released my arm as he took a deep breath. He glanced around as Pram giggled at us, and I smirked at him.

My friend had woken, not recognized me in his half asleep state near his grandchild... and had acted appropriately.

Good thing it had been me to have done the deed. He would have broken Renn's arm had she been the one he had grabbed.

"Feh... brought her back did you?" Nebl asked as we heard Renn and Lellip enter the house, shutting the door behind them. They were chatting noisily.

While the two walked down the hallway, I turned to Pram.

"Congratulations Pram, well done," I told her.

She gave me a happy, lovely, smile as Renn and Lellip entered the room.

"Come see her!" Lellip dragged Renn into the room, and I had to step back and aside as the two hurried over to the crib.

Renn ignored everyone else in the room, not just me, and her eyes went wide while her ears went stiff... while she stepped up to the crib and stared down at the one sleeping in it.

While she fell in love with the baby, I went ahead and grabbed some of the stuff she carried for her. She absentmindedly allowed me to take her bags and heavy cloak, alongside her hat she had tied to her waist right before we arrived, and I went to add them to the pile of my own stuff nearby.

"Her name's Copper," Lellip told Renn.

Copper...?

I made no comment as Nebl chuckled. "Her eyes are dazzling; you'll see when she wakes."

I turned to find Nebl had stood as to join the two in basking in the child's presence.

He had always turned into a doting parent when they were born, hadn't he?

"Vim."

Turning, I found Lilly. She was standing in the hallway, staring at me.

Right.

I nodded, glanced again to Renn... deciding she would be fine. Plus even though I knew she too had stuff she wanted to say, and hear, from Lilly... I knew also she'd place that baby above all of that. She cherished such moments deeply.

"Guess I'll need to make a bit more, then," Pram mumbled as she turned and went back into the kitchen.

Stepping out of the room I followed Lilly to the front door. We left the house, and I shut the door behind me.

"How long have you been waiting?" I asked her.

"A little over a month," Lilly answered as we headed around the house. I had figured she'd want to talk alone, in private, but I hadn't expected her to take me to the smithy itself.

We entered the furnace room, and I found they were all cold except the main one. But it wasn't too hot, just burning enough to stay lit.

"She looks well," Lilly said as she went to sit on a chair. One that was strangely alone, away from any of the nearby tables or workstations.

Maybe she's been sitting in here when she wanted to be alone? The weather had been bad lately, what with us still being in winter, but the last couple days there'd been no rain.

"Renn, you mean?" I asked.

"Who else?"

I nodded at that. "She's fine."

"I'm to assume you're headed for Lumen. To chase down Light and the rest?" Lilly asked.

I nodded again. "We are."

"I followed them to the bridge. I stopped following them there since I think I was noticed. I came here after, since I knew you'd likely pass through here on your way after them too," Lilly said.

"Figured. Did you not confront them then?" I asked.

"No. They don't only have Less, but Martin is with them too," Lilly said.

I paused at that. "Who?" I asked.

"Martin, Vim. Celine's knight," Lilly said. Her voice a little stiff.

"No he isn't," I said.

Lilly didn't even flinch. "Yes he is, Vim."

My eyes narrowed as I heard and saw the truth upon Lilly. She wasn't kidding at all.

"I watched him die," I said.

"Then he has a twin. Or a son, maybe. He looks like, smells, and is named Martin. I don't know what else to say?" Lilly said with a shrug.

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Damn.

I sighed as I went to grab a chair. I dragged it over near Lilly and sat down across from her.

"It's possible, I guess. I didn't bury him, and I entrusted his body with them. With Celine. He could have been alive, or saved somehow with their powers and I just was never told," I said as I thought about it.

"Yeah... well... they have a couple others with them too, that I think are like Less and Martin. And Light isn't the only saint with them, by the way. There's at least two more," she said.

I nodded. "I figured that. We confronted the Chronicler, at least to a point, in Telmik. She spoke in a way that told me such a thing. They're operating under the knowledge of many prophecies. Maybe dozens. Too many for a single saint to have given them," I said.

"Mhm... I wasn't able to learn much while in Telmik, since I couldn't really talk to anyone. I spoke to Oplar, Randle and Hands. That was it."

"Hands too?" I asked. That was surprising, he hadn't mentioned Lilly. And I noted Lilly didn't include any of the humans she had undoubtedly spoken to.

"He wanted to ask me some questions about Light and her people. He supposedly fell for one of them, I guess," Lilly said with a shrug.

Ah... I smiled and nodded at that. "He did. A rat, supposedly. Funny, isn't it?"

"Not to me, Vim. That means he will be an enemy. I had not thought him to be one," Lilly said softly.

I waved that away. "For now they're not our enemies. Not yet, Lilly."

She huffed at me.

"We found your girl. Sap. She should be long home," I said.

Lilly shifted a little, as if bothered by my change in topic. She then glanced at the nearby door, the large ones, as if to confirm they were still closed. Once she was sure, she glanced back at me. "How uh... how'd the two act? How'd it go?" Lilly then asked.

"Hm...? What do you mean?"

"Sap and Renn."

"Ah. They hit it off instantly. Your daughter even gave Renn one of her feathers," I said with a smile.

Lilly's eyes opened wider a moment... showing off how big they actually were, then they returned to their more normal state... and she smiled.

"That's wonderful," she whispered softly.

I nodded. "Yes. They'll be good friends."

Lilly sighed as she sat back a little... nodding gently. "I'm... glad to hear that."

"How were your other children?" I asked.

She slowly shook her head. "Alive, at least."

It was my turn to nod gently, since I understood.

Her other children were even farther estranged than Sap was, and even she was an extreme.

"Before I left only Sap and Branch were missing. They should both be home by now," Lilly said.

"Hm. And so you plan to return home?" I asked. She had mentioned earlier she was about to leave.

"Well yes, since I had no idea what you were doing or where you were, Vim. Now you're here though, so I'll do whatever you need me to do," she said simply.

So... "Was there more then? Did anything else happen while you followed Light and the rest, or while you were in Telmik?" I asked. Why the need for privacy then?

Lilly shook her head. "Not really. I had some... interesting conversations with Randle and Oplar. Nebl too, surprisingly. He told me about what happened in the mine, why didn't you say anything Vim?" Lilly asked.

"What for? He was fine," I said.

She sighed at me. "He's become softer because of it. I asked him to make me a sword earlier, to see what he'd say and the stupid blacksmith went and agreed. He's been working on it over there," Lilly said with a nod to our right.

I followed her gaze and found one of the workbenches nearby, with a glimmer of steel upon it. It looked nearly finished already, with a pommel and everything.

"You're kidding," I said, unable to believe it.

Nebl.

Making a sword.

"Right? He and Lellip made it for me. I uh... feel bad now, to be honest. It's one of the reasons I haven't left yet, because now I feel responsible for it. I don't even know what came over me to ask for it, he just seemed so... obliging and accommodating all of a sudden, so..." Lilly shrugged as she smiled while staring at the nearby sword.

I sighed at that. "Hopefully it's not because he thinks we're about to wage war with the Society," I said.

"I don't know. We've talked about the vote, and Light and stuff... but to be honest Vim he doesn't seem to care. All he cares about is his family, and if they'll be safe or not. Like most members nowadays," Lilly said.

Right... "Did Light and the others not come here?" I asked. Supposedly they've been going around, like to Rapti and Kaley, so it'd be surprising if they didn't.

"One of them did. Someone named Perator. No idea who that is. They came to introduce themselves as they passed by on their way to Lumen, with a letter to Nebl from Light. He hasn't told me of its actual contents, he just says it was an introductory letter informing him that she's back," Lilly said.

Perator...? Another name I didn't recognize. Though I wasn't sure if that was better or worse than hearing a name I did, like Martin's.

Leaning forward, resting my elbows on my knees, I frowned at Lilly. "From what I can gather Lilly, from all I know at the moment... Light and the rest are scheming around prophecies. Or at least one major one. I don't know if what they're doing is truly enough to justify me doing anything about it, but it is upsetting me beyond reason," I told her honestly.

"Prophecies always upset you, Vim. Why's this instance bothering you more than normal?" she asked, like usual being astute.

I sighed. "Some of them are about Renn. I don't think they're very important, nor what they're acting around, but they know of them. And not just one or two, either," I said.

Lilly chuckled. "What? Are you going to make me go to war just because you're being a protective husband, Vim? I'll admit I won't mind the excuse, but that's going to make it hard to rally allies to us," she teased.

"Don't even start," I groaned as I reached up to rub my face.

"Hmph... so you didn't learn anything important enough to justify action while in Telmik? What about Crane? Did you find her?" Lilly asked.

"No. We visited Rapti, and met Meriah... oh," I realized I'd not told her yet. I sat up a little, making Lilly tilt her head at me. "Meriah found proof that the Chronicler, and Mapple, had been involved in the fox village being burnt. We don't have proof yet that they were the cause of it though. It may just be that they had a prophecy of it, or heard of it through their church connections, and they sent Mapple to find the people responsible. Meriah said most of the ones involved were dead before she found them," I told her.

Lilly's thin eyebrows narrowed. "That's... not uncommon, Vim. I mean they do run the church, not to mention their prophecies. Maybe they just had Mapple confirm what they knew, or something?" she said.

"Yes. But Meriah is utterly convinced it was nefarious in nature. To the point I had almost believed it myself when she was talking about it. I destroyed a house in Nevi on accident, and sunk a boat, because of it," I told her.

Lilly scoffed. "Meriah is a fanatic, Vim. She may not be the same type as the Celine and the rest, but she's cut of the same cloth. That shouldn't shock you," she said.

"All the same. It's proof. It's another piece on the scale of guilt, forcing me to consider the possibility they need culling," I said.

She was quiet for a long moment, and then I heard her clothes shift a little. She had just moved her little nubs a bit. "What do you want me to do Vim?" she asked.

How was I supposed to know what I wanted her to do, when I didn't know what I wanted to do myself?

"My plan is to confront Light. I'll make a decision once I do. Either way though... I plan to step down. As protector. Along the way here we met several members... and I heard from and about many others, who all firmly believe I'm not doing my job properly. Either they don't want my help at all, ever again, or they want to change how I provide my assistance and the rules concerning it. I've decided that if it's that bad, then it's time I do what's needed," I said.

Lilly was quiet for a moment, studying me with her knowing eyes... then after a moment reached up to scratch at the side of her neck. I knew she had tiny little feathers mixed into parts of her hair, ones barely visible. They likely itched sometimes.

"I don't think I'll fully leave the Society. But I think it's time I just... let it be. I'll help those who still want it and I'll always be here to help no matter who needs it... but I plan to stop traveling around like I do. Randle's been banished, as I think you know. My current plan is after the vote, and after I formally step down, I'll help him build his new orphanage and church. I sent him with resources to that new mining town near your home. He'll be taking a few members with him. I threw my hat into it because Renn really cares for Angie, the young bison who's become very involved in the orphanages. Plus it's near your home, so," I said with a shrug.

"You plan to stay as centralized as possible, without being at Telmik. To let anyone who needs you get you as soon as possible," Lilly said, understanding swiftly.

I nodded. "It's the best I can think of, for now. But that might all change once I confront Light, of course."

Lilly sighed gently, but nodded. "I suppose that's for the best... what then of the members who don't want you to step down? What of those who need your frequent visits? Like Lumen? They always need your help," Lilly asked.

"Then they'll have to actually request for it. I don't want to abandon anyone, Lilly. Not after all these years... but I must face reality. The world has changed. The Society has changed. I knew it would happen eventually... look at all the times I threatened to quit back in the beginning, for crying out loud. It's a miracle I lasted this long," I said.

Lilly smirked at that. "Please Vim. You can lie to everyone else, even yourself, but I know that those threats had been empty."

I shrugged.

"Still... Randle huh? I was actually proud of him, for standing up to Light like he had. I'll be okay with him making a nest nearby. My Crown actually works at a school where she lives. Maybe I can get her to go there with him, and be involved. It'd make me feel better knowing she was closer to me, and also amongst fellow non-humans," Lilly said.

Oh? "She does?" I asked.

She nodded. "The boy she had fallen for, the one who had died, had been one of the teachers... and..." Lilly went quiet for a moment, and then crossed her arms and pursed her lips. She suddenly looked very troubled. "I worry for her, Vim. You should have seen the state of her house! It was a mess, and gross! I don't think she'd even bathed in who knows how long when I found her... It's like she's given up!" Lilly's voice began to rise as it cracked, and she noticed it. She calmed down, forcefully, as she took a deep breath and sniffed.

Sitting still, I waited a moment to allow Lilly to regain control of her emotions. She had nearly just broke.

"The loss of a loved one is a deep wound, Lilly," I said gently.

I'd completely forgotten her daughter had recently endured such heartbreak. I had heard of it not long after meeting Renn. I had just missed the young owl on that visit, when I had been traveling with Lomi. She had visited her parents, a rarity for her, because the young man... the human man, she had fallen in love with had died. Though I couldn't remember how he had passed away.

"I know, Vim. I've seen it so many times... it's one of the reasons I wanted to hurry home. I fear for the girl. She's always been weak, Vim... most of them are. But I'd never seen any of my kids so frail. So... broken," she said as she uncrossed her arms as to gesture at me, as if I was one of the broken eggs she spoke of.

I nodded gently. "Yes. A mother's love can sometimes fix that," I said.

She sniffed again. "Should I hurry home then...? But what if I'm not good enough? I know I'm not the best mother, Vim, especially for those like her... but..."

My toes curled in my shoes, and I felt hurt. As if her words had cut me somehow.

"You're a better mother than you think, Lilly. But not even the greatest of a mother's love can stop such heartbreak. It is a pain one cannot comprehend, even by those who've experienced it before," I said.

She nodded softly. "I know. And I know that, too. It's a pain I don't know. And even if I did... there's no way it'd be hurting me as bad as her. Because she's not like me..." Lilly then smirked. "She's more like Renn, in that way. Maybe I should have Renn come home with me," she realized.

I smiled at that. "Somehow I agree. Renn's oddly understanding, in such ways at least."

She nodded again. "But that's neither there or here. Enough about my family drama. What do you want me to do, Vim?" she asked, changing the subject forcefully.

I didn't call her out on it, because I knew she had done it so blatantly for good reason.

She had been about to cry.

"You just asked me that," I said.

"And I'll ask again until I get an answer," she said with a tiny sniff.

"Right... well for right now, I want you to do me the favor of helping me train Renn for a few days," I said.

"Train her? In what?" Lilly asked with a frown.

"Combat. If it all goes horribly wrong during my confrontation with Light... I want to make sure she's fully prepared to Stand Tall," I said.

Lilly scoffed at that. "You don't need to train her for that, Vim. I may have just made fun of her for being emotionally similar to my wingless children, but she's not as frail as them. Not as weak minded."

"She'd love that praise... I think. And I agree with you. But I still want to err on the side of caution. I recently gave her that spear, and she's never wielded a spear in combat. I'd like to give her a little experience at least before it comes time to having to use it for real," I said.

Lilly nodded. "We can do that. It'll at least give me something to do. I've hunted a few times while here, as thanks for letting me stay here, but I'll be honest I'm very bored."

"I bet. Sorry you've not found the bloodshed you left home to find yet," I said as I stood.

Lilly laughed at me. "It's all good! I bet we'll find some eventually!" she said as I turned to greet the one hurrying towards the building.

Opening the door right as Renn reached it, she grinned happily at me. "Come on, you two! Food's ready!"

I sighed at her as Lilly chuckled and stood from her chair. "Reminds me of when my kids still talked to me," she teased.

Renn paused, frowning at that. "Your kids don't talk to you anymore Lilly? Really?" she asked worriedly.

"Oh they do, just not with such a huge smile. Speaking of that, I got a favor to ask Renn," Lilly said as she grabbed Renn by the arm, as to lead her back to the house.

Following the two, I closed the door to the smithy and shook my head as Lilly asked Renn to come home with her, when she could, as to try and stop her daughter from wasting away from heartbreak.

And of course, without hesitation, Renn dutifully agreed.

## Chapter 452 Renn – A Copper and A Cut

Copper was much heavier than Root had been. Even though smaller, thanks to a lack of wings.

"Yes, I know," I said gently to the young girl as she made noises at me. I was carrying her, following Lellip and Pram back to the house, and she was being rather vocal about letting me know how glad she was that we were doing so.

Copper of course couldn't speak yet, but it was obvious she was very aware of her surroundings. She had striking eyes, thus her namesake, and the way she looked around and studied things made it clear she was rather conscious of the world around her. She glanced ahead of us, of me, and reached out to point at the back of her older sister. She made little noises as she pointed at Lellip, as if trying to tell me to hurry up as to stay with her and her mother.

"How long does it take you to mature, Lellip? I've been told it takes many years longer for Lilly's children to become old enough to talk and walk than humans, is it the same for you?" I asked as we reached the house.

"It does take us a bit longer. My cousin had been the earliest. He had walked and talked in only a year," Lellip said.

"Cousin?" I asked as Pram opened the door to the house.

"Some of my siblings had married those not as pure in the blood, so their children had been more human," Pram explained as she stepped back, to let Lellip and I enter the house first.

I nodded gently, understanding what she meant, as I passed her. I followed Lellip to the front room, where she hurried off and left me behind for a moment as to go clean up. She and her mother had just planted the sunflowers that Vim and I had recently acquired in their nearby garden. I had held the baby while they had done so, so I didn't need to clean up, but they did. Both of them had dirt all over their hands and clothes. Pram didn't even join me in the living room, she had kept walking down the hallway. Likely to one of the bathrooms.

"They're dirty, I know," I told Copper, who noticed her sister's sudden departure. She made tiny noises while pointing at the nearby door, as if asking me why she had left us.

Still... So she too would take a bit longer than humans to mature. It made sense, I suppose, since we lived longer than humans. If one lived twice, or thrice or more, as long as a long-lived human... it only made sense we'd need a bit more time to grow, I reasoned.

But it made me wonder of myself. How long had it taken me to mature...? I remembered my youth, of course, but so much of it was what I considered a blur. I could remember nearly every day of it, but because of how dreary and painful those days had been I genuinely tried not to.

Plus I had not really been paying attention back then to myself. I had no mirrors back then, even when living with Witch. And I hadn't really cared for my reflection much, such as from ice or water... because it made me realize how different I was from Witch and the rest of her family. I had not liked addressing the fact I was not a human back then.

But now, today, when looking back on those memories... I found something rather serious I had to accept.

I don't think I had been fully grown even when I met the kids. In fact, I distinctly remember not having my first blood-cycle, what most humans called monthly sickness, until not long before I met Nory. And that had been... well...

Frowning down at Copper, who giggled up at me who was likely making an odd face, I begrudgingly admitted I needed to sort some memories.

I feel like it had taken me far longer to grow up than anyone else. By many fold. Surely that was wrong, right?

There was no way it had taken me hundreds of years to mature... right...?

If it did, would that mean it'd take that long for my children to do the same...? Or would it be worse for them, thanks to Vim? He had told me once his youth had not lasted long, but I had heard the truth between his little explanations of it. He had grown quickly because he had needed to. He had been born into war, basically.

Would my children grow quickly...? Would they take decades before even able to walk...? Or would they be more like the one I held now, like Root and Fly and Lomi, who matured but did so very slowly. Fly and Lomi both looked like young children, yet were old enough to be adults in terms the humans used.

And then there were those like Merit and Sharp. Those who were older than me, yet looked even younger than Fly and Lomi.

Our people were so odd, weren't they...? It was shame we were so few now. If anything the very fact I found it odd, and weird, was proof of how rare we were. If we were as numerous as the humans were,

neither I nor anyone else would have found the slow aging to be a problem. It wouldn't have even been a thought to worry about.

Copper made some noises at me, and I smiled down at her. She was beautiful. Particularly her eyes. They gleamed, but not in the way a saint's did. They weren't glowing... they were just pure. Pretty. Like little gems.

May you grow strong and healthy... slow or no.

"I'll take her. It's about time she ate," Pram returned, in a new dress and looking clean, as she held out her arms for Copper.

For the tiniest of moments, I didn't move. I held the little girl closer, almost not willing to part with her.

Then, right as I smiled and turned to hand her over, Copper giggled happily at the sight of her mother. She sounded so happy to be taken by her mother that I almost felt my heart break.

It was of course because my arms weren't as good as hers, but still...! Be nicer about it!

"Now, now, Renn. You'll get to hold her plenty," Pram teased me with a snicker as she stepped away.

"Was it that obvious...?" I grumbled as I watched her head over to one of the chairs, re-arranging some of the small circular pillows upon it before sitting down.

Pram giggled at me as she sat. "Do you like children that much, Renn? Maybe it's time you tried for one of your own, then?" she asked as she got comfortable, and then went to nursing her child.

I studied her as she did, and wondered if I'd need to do the same one day. Didn't that hurt a little? At least Copper didn't have sharp teeth like Root. Heck even the way she had shifted her dress, as to give the child easy access, looked uncomfortably itchy!

Actually... why didn't she wear other clothes? Something that wrapped around, like what they wore down south, instead of an actual shirt would have been better for her in this situation. It would have made it easier for her.

"I just... haven't really been around many of our own, before," I said gently, trying not to sound too weird as I did so.

"Hm... I suppose they are getting rarer nowadays, aren't they? A sad reality, I guess," Pram said with a frown.

"I promise if it works out for me, I'll let you see mine soon too, Renn," Lellip said happily as she walked back into the room. Unlike her mother she still wore her dirty clothes, though now had clean arms.

Smirking at that, I nodded. "I've not met Branches yet, but if he's even just a few feathers of his parents he'll be a good husband for you," I said.

She'd told me all about it as we planted the sunflowers. That she planned to go meet Lilly's firstborn son, Branches. The mercenary.

I wasn't entirely sure why she had such a desire all of a sudden, but I'd never disparage the idea. At all. In fact I looked forward to helping her do so. To the point that I almost considered taking her to the Owl's Nest myself, as Lilly and Vim went to Lumen.

Almost.

Pram sighed though. "You should give it a few years, Lellip. Before you hurry and rush into something like that," she said with a motherly tone.

"What? I don't want to hear it, you might have waited almost a hundred years to have me but I don't need to do that!" Lellip argued.

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"A hundred years? Really?" I asked. That long!?

A hundred years... and fifty after, for the next...?

Lilly wasn't too better, though she had more. She had eight now, with Root, but that too had been over hundreds of years.

Hopefully Vim and I didn't take a hundred for our first too...

Pram nodded at my question as Lellip stepped over to me, to point at her mother who was nursing. "And it's been nearly fifty since! Listen Renn, I know we all live a long time, but there has to be a limit. No wonder we're all fading away to history, we never have children! Humans have so many, some have over ten throughout their lives, yet so far she's had two. Two in as many centuries. Hmph!" Lellip said with a huff.

I smiled at that. "I agree with both of you. We should have more, but I also think rushing straight to children is a little silly. It'll take you time to even figure out if he's worth your life, won't it?" I asked her. Vim and I had become mates, as some would say, rather quickly in most of their eyes. And even we had taken over a year for us to get to that point.

"Is that why you're still not a mother? Though I guess Vim's even worse, then, being so old. Ugh... I couldn't imagine waiting hundreds of years to have a baby..." Lellip sighed at me, as if disappointed in me, as she stepped away and walked around the chair her mother sat at. She went to stare at the pile of bags next to the wall. Our bags. My spear was resting against the wall with them, which I figured was what she was actually staring at.

A little stunned, I felt my tail squirm as I quickly processed what she had just said.

If not for the fact I knew she hadn't meant anything cruel, I'd have been offended I think.

But...

She wasn't wrong...

"Don't let her give you any ideas, Renn. She's spent too much time with humans. We're not human, so we're not expected to act like them," Pram said gently.

"She's not wrong, Pram. It is the reason our numbers are so few..." I admitted as I too went to sit down. I sat across from the two, so I could keep an eye on Pram as she nursed.

Not because she was in danger or anything... but simply because I found it beautiful. I liked how nonchalant she was being about it, and the way Copper was so peacefully nursing. It made me jealous to see it, but at the same time happy.

Vim and the other men weren't in the house. Drandle, Pram's husband was off in the fields. We'd seen him at a distance as we planted the sunflowers. Nebl was likely with Vim, and Lilly. They had left for the smithy after we all ate, whereas we had gone to plant the flowers.

I knew that Vim was likely having a rather serious conversation with those two right now, but... well...

"You say such things mother, but you just a few days ago complained I'd not settled down yet," Lellip said as she picked at some dirt on her clothes absentmindedly while studying my spear.

I smiled at that. I did remember Pram making a few small comments such as that back when we had been here last time. Though they had been reserved, and not within Lellip's earshot. Since the entire

reason Nebl had gotten stuck in the mine in the first place was because of her relationship with one of the human miners who had also gotten stuck.

"Did you make this, Renn?" Lellip then asked with a look at me.

"The spear? No. It's Vim's," I said honestly.

She frowned at me. "Vim made this...?"

It was my turn to frown. "I um... I don't know, probably though," I said, lying.

I didn't know if Vim wanted anyone else to know who had actually made that weapon. Until I did, I'd not share it.

"Hm..." Lellip reached over, and I watched her pick the spear up. I noted that unlike me she hadn't startled at the thing's weightlessness.

"Yeah... he definitely did. What the hell is this made of..." she whispered as she stepped away from the wall and our luggage, as to turn the spear over and study it more closely.

Pram ignored her daughter, and shifted a little in her seat. "Congratulations by the way, Renn."

"Hm?" I focused on her, even though Lellip's studying of Vim's spear was making me nervous for some reason.

"For somehow catching the Protector's heart. I'll be honest, I don't really know what you see in him, but I'm happy for you two all the same."

I smiled at that. "Thank you. I'll be honest I'm not really sure how I got it either, but now that it's mine I'm not letting it go," I said.

Pram chuckled at that. "Very predator of you! I like to hear it!"

Grinning happily at that, I nodded. Yes. It likely was. But it was the truth.

He was mine now. I'd not give him up, to anyone or anything, at this point. Just like that tiny moment earlier, when Pram had went to take back her own daughter from me. I had nearly denied her request, because I had been so happy with her in my arms.

I had no choice but to admit, and accept, the fact that I was actually rather possessive. Far, far, more than I thought was even possible. To the point I needed to be more... careful, from now on.

If I almost didn't want to give up a baby, that wasn't even mine, and give them back to their mother... what then would I do if someone tried to take Vim from me now at this point...? Odds are I'd not be as prompt, or even able, to keep myself in check. Hopefully such a thing doesn't happen.

Unluckily Vim seemed to be rather well liked, at least among certain members of the Society. Like Merit and others. I used to worry that I'd lose him; to those who continuously tried to catch his eyes... now I needed to worry that I'd embarrass or insult him by acting wrongly instead. It almost made me want to sigh at myself in shame.

"Though that being said... other than Merit and Celine, has anyone ever even tried to woo him? It's not like he's very attractive," Pram then wondered a question.

I shifted a little. "There's been a few, yes. Even recently. I'll be honest I don't think he even realizes how many he could have had, since he doesn't even notice their affections half the time," I said.

Pram chuckled at that. "I bet...! You're right... he is the protector, after all. I bet that alone is enough to sway hearts. Hm..." Pram frowned in thought at that, as if she's never thought of it before today.

Likely hadn't. It did seem that our members were either those like her, people who never even considered his personal life, or like Merit... utterly fascinated with him. I wasn't really sure which was worse, to be honest.

Lellip seemed completely lost in thought, ignoring our conversation, as she went to untie the little cloth that was wrapped around the spear's pointed edges.

"Careful Lellip. It's very sharp," I warned her.

She paused a moment, frowned at me and then nodded. She took the cloth covering off, and I watched as she stared at the spear's tip... and then I started to stand when she actually reached up to touch it.

Before I could warn her, Lellip tapped the edge of the spear with a finger tip. She didn't even flinch as she lowered the spear, and then went to staring at the line of blood that quickly flowed from her finger.

"Lellip..." I groaned as I stood, to go and grab the spear from her. What was she thinking! She of all people should have been able to tell how sharp it was on mere sight alone!

"I'm okay. I barely tapped it..." she whispered as I stepped over to her. I didn't grab the spear from her, since I could tell by her grip and stance that she wasn't going to panic or anything. She frowned in a way that told me she was very used to such little nicks and cuts.

She returned her attention to the spear, and its sharp point. "Be careful with this, Rennalee," Lellip then whispered.

"Hm...?"

Lellip shifted a little, and glanced at me. She had an odd look on her face as she nodded. "Careful. I don't know what this is made of, or how he made it... but that is likely the sharpest blade I have ever seen."

I gulped, but nodded. "I figured... yes. I'll be sure to be careful," I said.

"What...? Did Vim bring something dangerous? Take it outside then, in case Copper knocks it over or something," Pram said from behind.

I turned, and nodded quickly. Right! I'd not even thought of that! She had a crib, and couldn't walk, but that didn't mean they didn't let her crawl around on her own occasionally! Maybe I should gather up our bags too, and take them all to my room. The one they let me stay in while here.

Would we be here long enough to justify such a thing, though?

Lellip sighed, a little oddly, as I glanced back at her. "Lellip?" I asked. Was something wrong...? Or well, something I didn't notice?

"This just makes me realize how much I don't know. I didn't even realize you could make something so sharp," she said softly.

Oh...!

Somewhat humbled, I reached over and patted her gently on the arm. "Could ask him to maybe teach you? He's become more open lately, he might just do it."

"Hmph," Pram made a noise behind me, and I knew it was because of what we were talking about.

She, like her father, hated weapons. As did Nebl.

Lellip though nodded. "I'd like that... especially now," she said.

Pram groaned again.

Glancing down at her hand, I pointed at it. "Should we tend that?" I asked.

"I will in a moment," Lellip said.

"What'd she do? Cut herself bad?" Pram asked from her chair.

"She did. It's a small cut on her fingertip," I said, explaining it.

"We use a type of glue on these. It works great, I'll go put some on in a minute," Lellip said, waving the injury away.

Glue...?

"Speaking of weapons, I'll be helping grandfather with Branches' stuff. You said you never met him before...? But you've met the others right? What are the men like? What about his father, Windle?" Lellip then asked, growing excited as she did.

Smiling at the girl who just seemingly abandoned the spear and all its interesting secrets, I nodded. "Windle I've met. I've not met any of the other sons, yet, but I've heard of them. One's a merchant, who travels around with one of his sisters. Windle though is nice...? He's a great father, and actually rather like Drandle to be honest," I said as I thought about it.

"Like dad...?" Lellip groaned at that.

"Don't you start again!" Pram warned.

Giggling at that, I reached over to grab the spear. Lellip let me take it, as I went to gather up a couple of the bags. "Let's put these away, I'll tell you all about Windle and their family as I do," I said.

Chapter 453 Vim – Cold Conversations Amongst Hot Flames

Pulling the furnace's bellow, I made sure to not do so too strongly. The room grew loud for a moment as the colder outside air rushed into the bottom airways of the nearby furnace. The massive pile of burning fuel grew rather bright thanks to the heat, and a loud hiss filled the room as the cold air was rapidly heated and fueled the fire of the blast furnace.

I released the leather coiled rope, knowing I only needed to feed the furnace once based off the sound of its flames.

"So... how are you going to properly set the armor, Nebl? Branches going to come here?" I asked as I watched the furnace for a moment. The heat it was radiating felt good. It was that very heat which had made me hang up the sunflowers to dry in here and not out in the sun or their greenery.

Other than the half dozen that Pram had tried to plant in their nearby garden, the ones Renn and I had uprooted in full, the sunflowers we'd gathered were now all hanging on a nearby rack. One that usually had leather work hanging from it, since it was quite literally a drying rack. There were enough hanging from it that I knew once dried properly I'd be able to make a few batches of different snacks. Not just for Renn, but everyone here. I'd roast some, salt others. I looked forward to it, since it turned out none of them had recognized them.

Which meant I'd gone all these years without ever bringing any here for anyone. I really was an ass.

Maybe I really have become neglectful... maybe I needed to sit down and confront the fact that possibly Light and the rest had a point. Maybe over the years I've become... even more distant than I used to be. Should be.

"Lellip will be going with Lilly, when it's time. To visit them and when she does she can make any adjustments needed," Nebl said from his nearby workbench, pulling me from my thoughts.

I frowned at that. "Lellip...?"

Turning to face him, I stepped over to him as I watched him nod and sigh. He put the sword down he had been working on, as to face me.

"My granddaughter has decided to go meet him," he said.

A little stunned, I did my best to not smirk and laugh. Nebl's descendant... Lellip... was going to go meet Lilly's son, and not just any son but the one who was a mercenary? The only son to have inherited his mother's backbone?

I should be shocked beyond belief, but the truth of it was right before me.

Nebl was making weapons and armor. And not for me.

That alone told me all I needed to know.

"Did... did Lilly ask for all this?" I asked. She had told me she had asked for a sword, but she had omitted that it hadn't been for her. And that it hadn't been all she had asked for.

Nebl shook his head. "She only asked for a sword for him. She worries for him, since the world is becoming dangerous. More dangerous than she can protect him from. Well... Lellip had been here with me, while we had been talking about it. I was doing my typical assessment, asking how tall he is and all that, and Lellip somehow just..." he shrugged, frowning in a way that told me he didn't believe it either, but knew better than to try and reason it.

"So she heard about him, found him interesting and now wants to go meet him," I said, quickly understanding.

Lellip wanted to meet him. To see if they would be compatible. And Nebl, being the overly doting grandparent... was now making a suitable set of armor and weapons for the man who might one day become his grandson.

He nodded. "I blame your girl, by the way."

"What...? Renn? We weren't even here," I said, defending her.

"You hadn't been, but ever since she came here she's been more interested in love. At first I thought it was just a remnant emotion from that lad in the mines, but it's too serious for that..." Nebl sighed as he crossed his mighty arms. "Honestly I should be happy. At least he's one of us, even if he's her child of all things."

"Should I take offense to that?" Lilly asked as she entered the smithy.

"I would," I said as I studied the door she had closed behind her.

She was alone...? Where was Renn?

Maybe with the rest of the monkeys then. Still fascinated with the baby.

Nebl scoffed at Lilly as she approached us, grabbing a chair as she did. She dragged it near Nebl and sat upon it.

"Would you really have, Vim?" Lilly asked with a small chuckle.

Shifting a little, I glanced to a nearby chair. I decided against grabbing it just yet and looked back at the two. "Honestly no. If I had a daughter vying for a man of my own nature I'd be against it too," I said.

Nebl laughed at that, heartily. "So he admits it!"

Lilly grinned happily as she nodded quickly. "I always figured he did."

My eye twitched since their reactions to my statement told me such a topic had been brought up before. Likely many times.

Just great.

"Hm... actually since this is being brought up and out in the open, I suppose I should say it..." Lilly then turned to look at Nebl... and the two stared each other in the eyes for a moment. I felt the air grow a tad colder, a hard thing to do in this hot smithy, as Lilly nodded to him. "Branches is my first born son. I raised him to be a soldier. To be able to protect himself in this world, and those he is meant to," she said sternly.

"And Lellip is my pride and joy. You know how many descendants I had, Lilly. She's not my last one, thank the gods, but she is the only one left that inherited the fire of the forge. Or will you try to claim your son's sword arm is more important than my daughter's hammer swinging one?" Nebl asked, just as sternly.

Feeling a little stuck, as if between two hard rocks, I smiled gently as I watched something I never imagined in a million years that I'd get to witness.

Bickering in-laws. Funny. Especially when one considered who they were.

"I'd never insult you or your family's lifestyle. My life has been saved many times by your work, Nebl... but if you think your daughter is too good for my son then you have another thing coming. How about she tries for one of the other ones? Trunk would suit her better, I think," Lilly said with a small shrug.

Nebl's head lowered, his eye twitching a bit as it did. "Sure are acting all high and mighty! Isn't this boy wingless? And just a mercenary? Not even the leader of them, or anything? Sounds like he's more like Windle than anything else," Nebl said.

Lilly flinched, opening her mouth as to say something... but nothing came out. She instead looked quickly over at me, with a look begging for support.

I smiled at her, since I could tell what had actually bothered her.

Normally one would have been offended over hearing their spouse being insulted, but instead Lilly had only heard one thing.

Wingless.

"Now Nebl... I'd not thought you the type to be so stern on the trait-less. And I'll have you know Lilly told him to not make much of a name for himself. So him not acting out and staying away from the world's attention is him fulfilling his duties as a son and member of the Society," I said.

"Yeah!" Lilly quickly nodded, uncrossing her arms as to shake her fists at Nebl. Acting like a child all of a sudden.

"That doesn't make it any better! I'm to just let my pride and joy go marry some random mercenary? Live a life like that? She'll die on some nameless battlefield, surrounded by people who don't know her or her skills? Feh!" Nebl's voice grew louder, but not harsher. He looked away from me, and even Lilly, and over to the furnace as if to distract himself.

"She'd not die! She'd live with us!" Lilly said.

"She'd die without the heat of a furnace to keep her warm!" Nebl shouted, slapping his knee with enough force that it would have broken a normal person's.

"Then we can just make one for her there too!" Lilly argued.

Frowning at the two, I realized that the two have likely been arguing like this for some time. Far longer than just a few days.

Though it was strangely adorable that Nebl was both trying to argue Lellip was perfect to be a wife, and more than good enough to go become one, while also trying to point out reasons she couldn't and shouldn't go.

As was it so with Lilly. She seemed oddly okay with the idea of taking Lellip with her to join her family... which I wasn't sure yet how that had come to be, or why.

It wouldn't have been that long ago that Lilly would have outright denied such a thing. Not because Lellip wasn't a good enough person or something... but for a rather simple fact.

Lellip was not an owl.

But...

Lately she's changed.

Not only had she invited Fly into her little nest, she's had a daughter fall in love with a human... who had sub-sequentially died. And now she was seemingly open to the idea of letting her firstborn son marry Nebl's granddaughter.

Her inclusion of Renn into her family was excusable and overlooked, thanks to her relationship with me, but this was beyond that.

"What does Lellip have to say about any of this, anyway?" I asked.

I'd not talked to Lellip yet. Renn and I had arrived this afternoon, I had sneaked away to get an update from Lilly, then we had dinner... and now we were out here. Nebl like always wanted to work off his dinner, so was working on Lilly's sword and armor. Or well, Branches'.

The two calmed down a bit, and Nebl coughed. "She's hoping you don't need Lilly's help for a bit. So she can hurry off to meet him," he said quietly.

Lilly nodded. "She won't shut up about it. I'm glad you're here, if anything so Renn can distract her for a bit."

Nebl chuckled at that. "Yes. My granddaughter may be a tad headstrong sometimes..."

"A tad? Don't boast how she inherited all that you are and then try and say she didn't inherit your bad traits too, you blockhead!" Lilly said.

"And I bet your son's only inherited your good traits too? Not a single bad one?" Nebl defended his bloodline as the two got louder again.

"Branches has always seemed like he had a good head on his shoulders," I said gently as I finally decided to just grab a chair. Odds are the two would be at this for years to come, so there was no point in trying to out-wait it or avoid it.

"Yeah you tell him!" Lilly happily said as I pulled a chair over.

"Is he at least of good build, Vim? I bet he's like her or Windle, all twig and no meat!" Nebl said with a point at Lilly.

I smiled at that. Pram's husband, Drandle, was a scrawny man too. I wonder if Nebl's always been bothered by that. I've never heard him complain about such a thing before.

"Last I saw he wasn't as bad as his father, and... wasn't that tall?" I said as I frowned and wondered when the last time I'd seen him was. Years ago, maybe five or ten? He was always out and about lately, so he was never at the Owl's Nest when I went there.

"He's about my height, I think..." Lilly frowned at me, as if she couldn't remember how tall he was either.

"Bah, will have a bunch of twigs for children, Lellip already inherited her mother's scrawniness...! I swear!" Nebl began to mumble complaints, odd complaints at that.

"Still... Renn will be overjoyed to hear about this," I said.

"Right? She was going on and on about trying to help people find mates before we separated. To be honest I'm surprised she'll get the chance to test her skills so soon," Lilly said.

"What's this now?" Nebl asked, calming down quickly.

"My wife has got it in her head that she needs to help our more lonelier members find romance. She's even got a list, growing quickly... most who have added their names themselves," I said. I didn't mention names, since I wasn't sure how much of it was meant to be private.

Nebi hummed at that. "So... you're saying she could possibly find Lellip someone else? Someone more suitable?" he asked, rather seriously.

Lilly stood from her chair, fast enough to make it wobble and nearly fall over. "You got a lot of nerve!" she shouted.

"I do! She deserves someone stout and firm, like an anvil! You owls are too fickle for such a life!" Nebi shouted back, though remained seated.

"He's stout as a tall tree! That boy's never broken; he stopped crying before he could even walk!" Lilly argued.

Shaking my head at the two, I felt pity for the two possible lovebirds.

With parents like these, what use were enemies?

Though... at least it was being done with love... I guess?

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While the two argued with each other, about why their children were suited perfectly for one another, I turned and glanced at the nearby furnaces. The only one lit at the moment was the big one, the main blast furnace, and it roared in its odd silence over in its corner of the room.

Maybe I should make something while I'm here.

Actually... maybe it was time Renn had a new set of clothes? Lellip and Nebl had made the current leather set she wore now, and although it was still usable there was no denying it was starting to show its wear. A few of the little hooks I've had to remove completely, since they had started to rip off... not to mention her broken sword.

She had my spear now, but one couldn't always have that on them. A small sidearm, such as the hand-and-a-half sword I'd made her last time was perfect for scenarios where carrying a spear was either impossible or detrimental. Such as in tight corridors, or something.

"Vim!"

I flinched and turned, to frown at Lilly who had stepped closer to me. She pointed at Nebl as if he was a terrible fiend. "Do something about this idiot!" she complained with a strained voice.

What had I missed...? "If you two are this bad now, I fear the wedding," I said.

They both stuttered at that, and Lilly actually reached over to grab my shoulder. She gripped it tightly as she stepped around me and my chair, as if to put me between her and Nebl... as if he some beast. Even though he looked utterly harmless, what with the pure desperation on his face over my comment.

"She's taking my granddaughter from me, Vim!" Nebl said helplessly, looking defeated all of a sudden.

"You say that as if it's already said and done. They've not even met yet," I said.

"Who wouldn't fall for my lovely spark!?" Nebl cried out.

"And who's to say you're not stealing my son! He's my favorite one you know!" Lilly cried back.

Ah...

Feeling exhausted all of a sudden, I shook my head at the two. "A mother really shouldn't say such things, Lilly, even if true," I said.

"But Vim...!"

"Aye, makes you look bad!" Nebl teased her.

"You're not any better Nebl. Do you know how many times you've told me how you wished your other children had the same passion for the forge as Lellip does? That's the same thing Lilly's guilty of," I said.

Nebl shifted wildly, waving his hands around. "But... Vim!" he argued.

"If anything you two should be weeping in joy. Your families may have your differences, but I could think of no better mixture than yours. A firm, unyielding tree... and the mighty fires of the forge. In one sense one cannot exist without the other, why not look at it that way?" I suggested.

"In that sense I'm throwing my son into the flames, Vim," Lilly mumbled worriedly as she squeezed my shoulder.

"Tis' a fitting description!" Nebl agreed happily.

Lilly genuinely growled at Nebl, loudly enough to make him go stiff and still for a moment. I ignored it though as I reached up to pat her hand on my shoulder, gently.

"Would you rather he fall for a human like your one daughter, Lilly?" I asked her with as much kindness as I could.

Her grip on my shoulder tightened, her nails slightly digging into me as it did. "No..." she whispered.

Glancing to Nebl, I raised an eyebrow at him... waiting for his response.

He shifted on his chair, and after a moment begrudgingly nodded. "No... I had been okay with it, out of kindness, but now I hope it doesn't happen again. It had broken her heart, rather deeply, when the lad got buried. Thus why I ran in. But reality is if it hadn't have happened then, it would have only a handful of years later. If not the mines, then a harsh winter, or a disease or festering wound. Humans don't even live long enough anymore to need sturdy houses for crying out loud," Nebl said.

Hm...? "You talk as if humans used to live longer," I said.

"Hadn't they...? At least longer than they do now," he said with a shrug.

"They had. Though it's not like they had lived much longer. Though the ones that usually live the longest are the disgusting ones, like the saints," Lilly said with a sigh as she finally released my shoulder and stepped back to her chair.

"Saints don't count," I said.

"Why not? They're human," Nebl asked.

"Because they're wrong. Duh," Lilly answered simply.

I nodded, glad Lilly understood.

Nebi huffed at us. "Says a pair of the ones most wrong in this world. It's as if the two of ya' never even look in the mirror," he said with a shake of his head.

"Actually I just did. A few days ago," I said, remembering the moment with Renn.

I had even stripped naked for her, at her request. Though odd, I had enjoyed her flushed face as she studied our reflections.

"You did...? Why?" Nebi asked, surprised.

"Probably something to do with Renn. Don't question his oddness Nebi, you'll not understand it. I told you she's made him weird," Lilly answered before I could say anything more.

"Rude," I said.

"Hmph... well, better than the alternatives I suppose. So? When are you leaving then? There's a snowstorm coming, I can feel it in my bones. If you don't leave in the next couple days the peaks will be unpassable," Nebi warned.

"Impassable," I corrected him.

Nebi ignored me as he glanced at Lilly, obviously because he didn't expect a straight answer from me in this moment.

She shrugged at him. "Whenever he's ready to go? Though he's kindly told me earlier that he might not end up going to war with Light and the rest... so I might be going home sooner than I thought," Lilly said with a sigh.

"Oh...?" Nebi perked up at that, but strangely didn't do so with joy. Instead...

"Is that regret...? Why do you feel regret over hearing that, Nebi? Because your precious spark might be taken soon?" I asked, wondering what was wrong.

"Hm...? Oh... yes. That's sad too. In a way. But no... I'll be honest Vim, I've been waiting a long time for this to happen. Ever since they told me we weren't trusted enough to build their churches, I've been expecting this to come to pass. It was inevitable," he said with a shrug.

"They... told you that centuries ago. You're just now bringing that up?" Lilly asked angrily.

"Yeah?" Nebi frowned at her in a way that told me he didn't see her utter disgust that was plain on her face.

She sighed deeply and looked at me with a look of pure regret. "I'm letting that into my bloodline, Vim?" she asked.

"You'll be getting a damned good armorer and craftswoman. I'd be jealous if I didn't already have Renn," I said.

"Oh? So she's been putting what I've taught her to use has she? Good!" Nebl grinned happily at my words, and I realized he had slightly misunderstood.

I hadn't it meant it that way. But there was no point in correcting him if he actually felt that happy over it.

Lilly sighed, gesturing behind her to the door. To the exit. "Speaking of your wife, I have a question if you'll answer it," she said.

Gesturing for her to go ahead and ask it, I noted the cooler atmosphere. And not because people were getting upset or anything. It was time to work the bellows again.

It was cooling already...? Maybe before leaving I should take a look at it. That was too soon. It should take hours before it became noticeably cooler.

"Is she a monarch, Vim?"

I blinked and turned back to face Lilly... finding both her and Nebl apprehensively waiting for my answer.

"No? First off monarchs cannot be human in shape. Secondly she has no heart. Why are you asking such a thing so seriously?" I asked, a little disturbed she had done so. Lilly of all people should know fully well that Renn was not something so special. Not in that way, at least.

Lilly glanced at Nebl, and I noticed the look they exchanged. It told me a lot.

They hadn't believed me.

"You two can't be serious. She's not. Even if she was, do you actually think I'd want to be with a monarch...?" I shivered a little. "See that? The mere thought of it made me nauseous," I said.

The two didn't laugh, and in fact seemed to grow more concerned. Nebl even squinted at me, studying me for some reason.

I held their gazes, waiting for whatever weird reasoning they had to ask such a thing. I mean really? Renn? A monarch? Such a question coming from someone else, I'd understand. But these two?

"Then... have you given her a heart?" Lilly asked carefully with a glance at Nebl.

Ah. Was that it? They thought I'd given her a heart. "No. I've considered it, or am considering it I should say. But no, she has no heart," I said.

I calmed down a little, having realized that was all this was. They just were making assumptions, though why they were acting so strange about it was odd.

"Then why doesn't she have a scent anymore?" Nebl asked.

"Because of me...? Things I touch, for extended periods, lose their scents. It's just something I do. And in case you haven't noticed, she and I have been together for a couple years now," I said with a small smile.

"Is that really all it is...?" Nebl asked Lilly.

She shrugged at him. "It might be, Nebl."

"Trust me, if my wife was something as unique as a monarch or a saint I'd know. She's got some odd traits for a non-human, being so human in appearance but so strong is one example. But she's no more special than you two," I said. If anything she was likely not as strong as Nebl, physically, and not as swift as Lilly. So it wasn't even like she was an outlier when it came to such things.

"So uh... since you seem willing to talk about it, what else do you change?" Lilly asked.

"Change?"

She gestured stiffly at me. "People. Bodies? Items? Other than smells, what else do you do?" she asked.

Oh...

"Truthfully I don't know. I hadn't even realized my whole smell thing would work on people in the first place, to be honest. She's the first I've ever noticed it affect," I said.

"Why hasn't it worked on me...? We spent years together, traveling. Half the time when I was young I even rode your shoulders while we traveled, or slept on your back. Or is it only if you're intimate?" Lilly asked.

Nebl frowned as he crossed his arms, apprehensively waiting for my answer.

"I... don't know, Lilly. Maybe it's a subconscious thing I do? You're likely right; it's probably a matter of intimacy. Are we sure you didn't lose your smell at any point while we traveled? I can still smell Renn, as she can smell herself, so you'd not notice unless someone pointed it out," I asked.

"Wait... have you two...?" Nebl pointed at me, looking a little bothered.

"Hm? No. He phrased that weird, but no. And I'd think someone would have noticed, Vim. Back then a lot more members had been more... well... like us. More astute. Plus more vocal, to say the least. Someone would have pointed it out," Lilly said.

I shrugged at that. "Possibly. So why are you two even asking this...? Even if she was a monarch, why would it matter?" I asked, hoping to get off the topic a bit.

Especially since I knew Lilly was moments from outing me. I'd not actually confirmed it, but I had no doubt that she and Renn had talked in depth about my... certain failures. I wasn't in the mood for them to be brought up here and now.

Nebl sighed. "My letter, Vim. From Light."

Oh...? "I thought you said you weren't told its details," I said with a glance at Lilly.

"I hadn't been. But I heard from Oplar something similar to what I expect was told to him. Plus we've been talking about it. Before you got here. I figured I'd just ask while we had a moment alone, and I know Nebl wants to hear the answer too, so," Lilly said with a shrug.

Nebl gestured at me. "Light claims she is..." then he paused a moment, frowned and glanced at Lilly. "Wait... will he get upset if I tell him?"

"I don't know what you want to tell him, but if it's what I overheard then I'd recommend not saying it directly," Lilly said, rather seriously.

"Wait a moment..." I groaned as I realized, rather abruptly what was happening.

Nebl nodded. "Light claims she is special, Vim. In a rather unique way, and I had not believed it. I mean... she is neat, and although I myself don't find her very attractive I can see why you'd fall for her. But although a rarity, likely one of the last of her kind, I had not considered her to be special beyond those

simple things. She's a true predator, and she caught your eye. So, I just wanted to know if I had maybe missed something, and..." Nebl began to slightly ramble, and I knew it was because he was trying to speak around what was actually biting at the tip of his tongue.

My eyes twitched as I glared at him, and then turned to glare at Lilly. She sat up straighter, her eyes narrowing at me, though she said nothing.

I see.

So Light was telling people that Renn was special.

And not just in general.

Reaching up, I covered my eyes as I squeezed my head with my hand. I squeezed hard enough to make my bones creak, nearly even crack, as my mind went numb.

Further proof.

First there had been Celine's letter to her.

But that could have been reasoned away, by our love. Celine might have just foresaw my wife, and had wanted to leave her a letter. Celine had been like that.

After that, or well before that, Narli had made a few odd comments too. As had Berri. They had not said it, knowing me better than most... but I had seen it. I had heard it in the way they had acted with Renn. They had known of her before she arrived. Narli had undoubtedly had prophecies about her. I too had reasoned them away, just a simple normal ones that saints sometimes had about those they encountered.

Then the little comments from that human saint, that Elaine. I'd not heard all the prophecies she had, on purpose I avoided them, but I had heard and knew enough. She had several about Renn, and quite a few had been rather momentous. One had even been about saving the world, supposedly. Not to even mention her original saint friend, Witch, that she had spent so much time with so long ago.

The Chronicler's little quips and mannerisms back at the Cathedral had been telling too, but I had been able to somewhat ignore them. Since I knew she herself hadn't received any prophecies concerning Renn. She had only been parroting and relying on information given to her by other, real, saints. But reality was... where there was smoke, there was fire.

And now this.

Nebl cleared his throat, rather worriedly. "Um... I didn't say anything too bad, did I?" he whispered.

"You said enough," Lilly flatly said.

He groaned, but it was I that wanted to weep.

I had no choice but to accept the fact that my Rennalee was involved. The world, fate, was tugging at her. I didn't know yet if it had been all along, or if it was because I'd chosen her as my wife, but there was no denying the obvious. Not anymore. Not even my way of forcefully doing so, thanks to my rules.

Should I... just ask for the letter?

Should I read it?

Maybe I should just confront it.

Whatever it was, whatever it led to... maybe I had to. Needed to.

And maybe doing so through that letter, instead of from the saint herself, I might be able to control myself.

Maybe reading Light's letter to Nebl, would grant me the mercy to spare her life.

But...

Lowering my hand, I ignored the feeling of something hot run down the side of my face. Leaking from the corner of my eye I felt the wetness slide down my face. Though similar to a tear... it tinged with a familiar pain that told me it wasn't one.

"Vim..." Lilly whispered at the sight, as Nebl flinched upon seeing it too.

Ignoring the blood that ran down my cheek, to my chin, I shifted a little and debated just leaving. Getting up and walking out of the smithy.

To end this conversation here and now. To end these thoughts.

It was what I usually did when confronted with such things. If I didn't just outright destroy the source of such discomfort, I ran from it. Sometimes that meant killing the people daring to speak of it in front of me. Other times that just meant walking away from a situation, or person, for good.

But I couldn't do such a thing here. Because even if I did, they'd just confront me again. If not Nebl and Lilly, then someone else. Even if I kept doing it, avoiding the confrontation... Inevitably it'd just be Renn doing it, not them.

Plus doing so was rude. Because out of anyone in this world...

Glancing at the two people I considered friends, actual friends, I took a small breath and smiled at them. They looked worried, but not for their lives.

They knew better than to talk of prophecies with me. They knew better than to say certain things. That was why they had brought it up gently, without doing so directly... as to both play by my rules but also confront the reality we had to face. Whether I liked it or not.

Just like their earlier conversations about their children. They both were upset over the idea, but at the same time knew it was far better a result than anything else they could get today. And that was a form of compassion. Of friendship. Of love.

Because they loved me, they knew it needed to be asked. Even if it meant daring my wrath or disappointment.

They couldn't comprehend how I saw such a thing. How much I cherished such loyalty. It was those same traits of love and loyalty that had drawn me to Renn.

I didn't deserve such loyalty.

Last time I'd received such pure loyalty I had betrayed it.

So...

Coughing, I shifted a little in my chair as I felt the bloodstained tear start to dry on my face from the smithy's heat.

Nodding carefully, I decided to just... talk about it.

To not run away. To not destroy them in pure rage as I recoiled in disgust.

Instead I'll... be careful. And face this properly. As not just the protector of the Society, but as her husband.

As *Vim Vitae*.

Their son.

Time to Stand Tall.

"Tell me of the letter, Nebl. Before I realize I'm breaking my own rules," I said gently.

Chapter 454 Renn – A Prophecy Begun

Peeking into the smithy, I tried to be quiet as I searched for Lilly.

Nebl and Vim were inside. Nebl was sitting at one of his workbenches, and Vim was in front of one of the forges. He had something inside the fire, and was standing there while watching it with a lazy look on his face.

I smiled at him, and wondered what he was making. Maybe he was helping Nebl with the armor and sword that Lilly had requested for her son?

No matter. Lilly wasn't here. And as much as I'd love to go in and watch the two work, and talk with them, I decided against it as I stepped away.

Staying quiet, I frowned as I tried to smell the air. It was a little difficult to make out any specific smell, thanks to the furnaces, but I could smell her. I just couldn't smell where she was.

If not in the house... and not in the smithy with Vim and Nebl...

Stepping away from the smithy, I made my way around towards where there were large warehouses. Ones filled with ores, lumber and such. I didn't go into them, since I figured there was no need to, and instead rounded them and stepped a little into the forest that lay just behind them.

It didn't take long for me to notice Lilly's smell becoming a little stronger, and I smiled as I eventually found her. She was sitting on a small wooden chair, one that looked old, while scrubbing a boot with a thick cloth.

"Lilly," I greeted the owl as I approached, who paused in her scrubbing of her shoe and looked up at me.

She smiled at the sight of me. "Renn. What is it? Isn't it dinner time?" she asked.

I nodded. It was. Lellip and her family were making food as we spoke. Lilly of course would be invited, and she'd eat with us as she had the last few times, so I knew she wasn't asking why I was here and not eating dinner. She was asking why I wasn't helping them make said dinner, since she knew I liked to do so. "They're making it now. I figured I'd come tug your ear for a moment, if I can."

"Just don't tug hard," she said as she went back to scrubbing her shoe.

Smiling gently, I walked closer and paused a few steps from where I'd intended to.

Whatever she was cleaning her boot with stunk. Enough so that I didn't want to get any closer.

"Lellip's told me of her plans to meet your son," I said.

She nodded. "I'll be honest I'm not... really sure what to think of it yet. But I've decided to hope for the best. I've been worried lately that he'd fall for a human, like his sister, so this might be a blessing in disguise," she said as she focused on the heel of her boot. She scrubbed hard at it, which I wasn't really sure why she was doing so. I didn't even see any stains or anything on it... so maybe whatever she was cleaning it with wasn't for stains, but something else?

"Lellip is a wonderful girl, Lilly. She'd make a great daughter for you, and wife for him," I said.

Lilly sighed. "I know, Renn. I do. She's better than most too, thicker in the blood and not as spineless... but I still worry. I always do. How could I not?" she asked.

Well... I suppose that was true. "Is he a good man? Your son?" I asked.

"Branches is my pride and joy. He is stronger than his siblings... or well, the other ones. Leaf was stronger, and I expect Root to be as well. Plus he's not tainted like the others are," she said.

"Tainted?" Did she mean he wasn't thin in the blood or something...?

"By the humans and their ideals. As you know, once our children come of age we send them out of the nest. To find their own way in the world. Part of our growing process. Branches chose to become a mercenary. And he did a damned good job of it. Plus he did it, and proved himself, to not be foolhardy too. He removed himself when he started drawing too much attention, and since then has been living properly without causing a scene. He's not just strong; he has a good head on his shoulders. Though I think he's grown a little odd lately, Lellip will hopefully set him right."

"Odd?" I asked as I stepped away a few steps, as to look at one of the nearby trees. It too looked really old, and had moss on it that was odd for some reason to me. Was it sick?

"He's lonely. I don't know if he's realized it yet or not, but he is. That's his father's side in him. But oh well."

I smiled at that, finding it cute. She didn't like that he was lonely... yet at the same time, she still worried and loved him so deeply she was trying to help him fix it. Was that why she was okay with Lellip...? Because she was hoping that her son would find happiness with her?

"You're a better mother than you think, Lilly. What of your other children...? I know Crown recently lost the human she loved, but what of the others?" I asked as I reached out to touch the moss that looked funny. I picked a tiny piece of it off the tree, to see it closer and smell it.

It smelled normal. Maybe it just looked odd because it was something I'd never seen before?

"Well..."

For a moment I studied the moss in my fingers, but after a few heartbeats without an answer I turned around to glance at Lilly.

Her shoulders had slumped, and she was looking down at her shoe with an odd look of defeat. She wasn't scrubbing it anymore either.

"Lilly?" I asked. Was she okay?

She sighed and nodded. "I've failed my other children, I think."

Dropping the moss, since it was now not important on any level, I stepped over to her as she shook her head.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Lilly shifted her boot in her hands, then glanced up and smiled at me. "What would you do Renn, if your children voted against Vim?" she asked.

Oh.

My ears fluttered a little stronger as I tried to comprehend what she just asked.

Did... did she mean that her children planned to vote against Vim in the upcoming vote?

And I had to consider what I'd do if my own children did such a thing...?

"Right...? I've not told anyone yet, I mean... how could I? It's so embarrassing...!" Lilly dropped her shoe, it landed rather harshly near her feet... telling me how heavy it was. I ignored it though since I watched Lilly reach up to cover her face. She cupped her face with her hands, groaning as if in pain.

Stepping forward, I wanted to whine alongside her, as if I felt the same pain she did. I placed my hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "Lilly..." I whispered her name, since I wasn't really sure what else to say.

She had told me before that several of her children didn't get along with her and Windle. She hadn't ever really gone into much detail, but this was why. She felt shame over such a thing, even though I wasn't sure if she should or not.

Yes it was horrible that she and her children didn't... really get along... but...

Lilly took a deep breath, letting it out sharply. I hoped she didn't start crying, because I had no idea how to handle her if she started. Lilly, crying? Over this? It was hard to believe.

"Vim would say it's their right to choose their own paths..." I whispered.

"Don't you dare start talking like him, Renn!" Lilly said as she looked up from her hands, as to glare at me. I startled, but not because she had shouted at me. Instead it was because she was indeed crying. Her eyes, her larger than usual eyes, were red and gleaming with tears.

Oh boy.

"I... I'm sorry. You're right. If Vim had said that to me in this situation, I'd have bit his ear off," I said with a nod.

Her glare turned into an odd smile. "Right? They're my children, damn it! How are they so different than me?"

"What's Windle say about it?" I asked. He was more like them, wasn't he?

"The fool is upset over it too, but is too scared to confront them over it. They all promised to keep the peace until I got back... but something tells me when I go home they'll all be gone. What will I do then...? Go see them? To do what? Argue with them? Gods..." Lilly groaned as she took another deep breath. She held it in for a moment, before letting it out with a hiss through her teeth.

I nodded slowly, since I understood where she was coming from. If I had been in her position... and several of my children were planning on going against their father, and thus me too, in such a way...

Though... no? Right? Vim wasn't their father.

I shifted a little, my tail squirming wildly as I tried to better understand. She was upset, obviously, but something told me this was just... something a long time coming. She and Vim have both told me that some of their children were... well... Not like her. Or me. They were like Windle, or those at Lumen and the Bell Church. They were the types to distance themselves from those like us, because they found us to be dangerous.

"Did... did you see Sap? Before you got home?" I asked.

"No. Thank you by the way, for getting her for me. Vim's able to track her down easily but it's a pain for me, without my wings," she said gently.

My heart squirmed in my chest. "From what I had gathered while talking to her... you need not fear losing her, Lilly," I said.

Lilly blinked at me a few times, and then gave me a lovely smile. "I hope you're right, Renn."

I nodded. I was sure I was.

"And I suppose I'll have Branches. And Root, for now at least."

I smiled at that. "Why for now? She seems to take after you quite a bit," I said.

"Leaf had too. Didn't make a difference," Lilly stated.

The heart which had been squirming broke, and my eyes became blurry.

Grabbing my shirt, I did everything I could to not start crying. Lilly was already getting herself under control, if you could even claim she had started crying in the first place. By the looks of it she had simply gotten a few moments of watery eyes, not much else. So I shouldn't be worse than her, who was experiencing such grief here and now.

I didn't want to hear that one's child, even one who so heavily inherited your traits, chose to go against you. To either abandon you, or flee from your guidance.

What if that happened to me too...? I'd not be able to endure that.

Plus...

Unlike Lilly, whose husband had her side no matter what, would mine...?

Vim's belief. His ethos. His loyalty to free-will... would that not be used against me in such a scenario? Would he not choose to support the child, even if they wanted to run away and denounce us?

Just as he had for the Society, for those who had left us before and went to the other continent.

Windle, even with his timid traits, still stood by Lilly through everything. She had just said he agreed with her, and was upset with their kids growing distant from them... Would Vim do the same for me?

No. He'd support them. And because of that I'd likely feel betrayed. By not just my children, but the man who was supposed to be on my side no matter what.

"Renn...? Oh, don't cry. Please. Vim will hear it and he'll come over here, then I'll have to tell him why and..." Lilly actually stood, reaching out to pat me on the shoulder as I had just done for her in support.

I sniffed and shook my head. "Sorry. I'm... I don't know what to say, Lilly. I have no idea how to help you, or..." I tried to explain, and felt like I was doing a good job of keeping myself under control. Tears leaked from my eyes, but I didn't start weeping or anything like I wanted to.

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

Lilly sighed at me, grabbed me with both hands and squeezed. I smiled at her as she hesitated, and then found enough confidence to lean forward and wrap me in a hug. A proper one.

Returning the hug, I had to shift my hands a little since I had felt the little wing nubs under her shirt. I dedicated their place to memory, so I didn't accidentally touch them again in the future. I didn't know if they hurt her or not.

"It's okay Renn. It will be. I'll figure it out."

"Mhm. I'll help. Anyway I can," I promised.

"Was one of the reasons I was hoping you'd be there when the parliament was summoned," she said with a small chuckle.

"Hm? To help you?" I asked.

"To meet them. You're... like me. Yet you don't scare them. They don't walk on eggshells around you... I was hoping to either learn how, or use you as a way to talk with them," she said.

Oh...?

Did... Does that mean her children were scared of her...? Like how some of our weaker members were her and I...?

Poor, poor Lilly.

I squeezed her a little tighter. "We'll figure it out, I'll make sure Vim doesn't keep us in Lumen long," I said.

"Mhm..." Lilly nodded, and I smiled at the feeling of her hair brushing against my own and my head. She had feathers in her hair, though they were hard to make out sometimes. They were tiny little things, and smooth and thin. They made her hair feel like she had ribbons of silk in her hair.

We hugged each other for a long moment, as my tears in my eyes dried up, and she finally released me. I held onto her a few moments longer than she did, which made her sigh at me as I released her.

"Even if they're disagreeing with you... they still went home, right?" I said.

She nodded. "Yes. I suppose there is some consolation in that," she admitted.

I nodded back.

She was strong. And in more ways than just one.

How many mothers could have such... familial discord, and not want to rush home? She likely wanted to fly home as fast as she could right now. Yet she wasn't. She was here. Waiting to be of use to Vim.

I wonder what he had done to deserve such loyalty from her.

He's told me of a few things... but...

"Are you pregnant, Renn?" Lilly then asked.

I blinked and sniffed, and shook my head. "No? Why?" Did she think that was why I had cried just now...?

Lilly glanced me up and down, and I too looked down alongside her. Was... was I gaining weight or something...? Before leaving Telmik I had studied myself rather closely in the mirror, both dressed and naked, and hadn't seen anything that hinted such a thing!

"Light. She had a prophecy about you," Lilly then said.

My ears went still as I hurriedly looked up into her eyes. "Oh...?"

She nodded and sighed at me. "Vim said I could tell you. So I'm going to. Since I know he probably won't," she said.

"Okay...?"

Lilly gestured lightly at me as she went to sit back down on the rickety looking chair. She picked up her boot as she did, and the cloth she'd been using, and went to wipe it again. "Light saw a prophecy that you'd have a daughter. One that would be a saint," she said.

My heart felt like it missed a beat, but I ignored it as my mind went numb. A daughter...?

Grabbing my shirt again, I did my best to not start crying once more.

I knew now that the prophecies saint's had could be wrong. That they could be... misinterpreted.

But usually they came true, even if only in part.

I was going to have a daughter...?

"Well that's the exact opposite of Vim's reaction."

Startling, I took a small breath and tried to stop the huge grin on my face from making me seem any weirder than it likely already did. "When'd you tell Vim this?" I asked. Then I gestured at her. "Actually, when'd you find out? Who told you?" I asked further.

Was this why she was so emotional over her own children? Or just happenstance?

"Nebl was told it. I overheard it too, though. While in Telmik. It's not the only prophecy concerning you, Renn, but it's the only one I know of," Lilly said as she went to wiping her shoe with a little more focus. She now looked as she had when I first walked up. As if she hadn't just nearly cried.

"Why'd they tell Nebl such a thing...?" I asked.

"To get him on their side. They were basically telling him that you, and thus Vim, will be on their side too in the future. Thanks to your child. So he should join up with them now, before it's too late," Lilly explained.

Frowning at that, I shook my head. "That makes no sense. If such a thing was destined, and inevitable, why even tell anyone? Why make such a big deal of it?" I asked.

"Exactly. It means there's something they're not telling. Something that is forcing their hand. That was Vim's assessment... after of course breaking the chair he had been sitting in," she chuckled.

Oh! Right! "So when'd you tell him? And he actually let you tell him? And he's not angry at you?" I asked.

"He asked us to. I think he... realized he needed to know. That if he didn't put aside his own rules for a moment he might lose either you or us and so he did what a man should do. I'm rather proud of him, you should be too," Lilly said with a smile.

I noted in that smile was genuine pride and love. Although I was happy that someone could love and cherish Vim so strongly, other than me, it also forced me to realize... once again, that if Vim had been a somewhat slightly different man this would all be quite different.

I'd be but one wife of many, had Vim been the type to allow such a thing.

Would I have though? Since I don't know if I would have been okay with that myself.

"I'm not sure the exact prophecy Renn, Nebl just explained it like that. That you are going to have a daughter, who will be a saint, and thus you will join them through her. Which will make Vim join them too. At least, that's what their letter implied," Lilly said.

I nodded slowly, since I was still trying to wrap my tail around it.

A daughter. But...

"Vim didn't look disturbed. Or angry. Just now," I said gently, as I thought of his expression from earlier. I had thought he had looked lazy, or bored. Not the kind of expression he should have after hearing something as momentous as this.

"It's been a day Renn," Lilly said.

A day...? "He learned a day ago? And didn't say anything to me? None of you did?" I asked.

"You were distracted, Renn. You've not left that baby's side, or Lellip's, since showing up. What do you expect him to do?"

Tell me!?! I guess? "I don't know..." I grumbled.

Gosh... I needed to sit. But I didn't want to. I wanted to pace. Back and forth.

I started doing so.

"Even if... even if I had a saint, or well a daughter that was a saint, why would that mean I'd take their side? I'm upset with them. I mean, I'm upset with Vim too, but I'm more angry at them than I am him," I reasoned.

"Who's to know, Renn? They're saints. I uh... I'm sorry about that by the way. Not sure what to say concerning that..." Lilly said, sounding rather serious as she did.

I nodded gently, and decided not to tell her I'd not be bothered by it at all.

I mean a daughter...? By Vim's parents that would be just wonderful. Beyond wonderful. So what if she was a little special...? If anything that was wonderful too. That meant she'd be able to help people, and...

Taking a deep breath, I forcefully calmed down. I had been about to start crying again.

"Vim should have come and told me," I said.

"He should have. But don't get too upset with him, Renn. He asked us to tell you. That alone is pretty special, I think."

I nodded at that. It was. Vim's normal self, his typical self, would have been to avoid such a thing. To neither ask of it, hear it, or share it. He hated prophecies that much.

The fact he had been willing to hear it, and then thusly okay them telling me it too...

That explained why I hadn't heard until now, though. Nebl likely had decided to let Lilly tell me it, and she had obviously waited until we were alone. She'd not share such a secret around others, it wasn't like her to do so.

"He had been willing to let me talk to The Chronicler. Although it really disturbed him, and he panicked over it, he had allowed it," I said as I remembered his look back in Telmik. While he had searched for the

cause of that little monarch's death, I had spent time with her. He had not liked it, at all, but he had not stopped it. Even though I would have been more than willing to abide him if he had simply asked me not to.

Lilly shrugged at that. "He's Vim, Renn. That's the kind of man he is."

Yes. He was.

"Should I... be happy, Lilly?" I asked.

"About having a daughter? Of course. Now the saint thing...? And you joining them in the future...? That I don't know. Hopefully you and Vim can find a way to stop all that, whatever it is."

I nodded. "Right."

"Still... Vim say's you're not pregnant, it's funny watching him squirm in denial," Lilly said with a smirk.

Smirking back, I was about to tell her why I found that funny... but then stopped myself.

"Wait..." I hesitated, as Lilly tilted her head at me while she waited for me to continue. But I didn't. Not right away.

Looking down, I quickly heard our conversation again in my mind. The things she's said. Then I went farther back and remembered the stuff The Chronicler had said, and Vim too. While in the under catacombs near the tombs, after confronting The Chronicler when we got there.

"What is it? You okay?" Lilly asked.

I slowly nodded. "Yeah... um... I'm going to go talk to Vim," I said as I turned.

"Okay. Can I watch?" she asked.

Hesitating a moment, I nodded. "Just... give me a moment alone with him. Then you can come watch and listen," I said.

She giggled at that and waved me off. "Go on then, I'll join you soon."

Nodding, I hurried back to the smithy. My mind whirled, making me feel a little lightheaded, as I entered the smithy and got Vim's attention.

He had been hammering something on an anvil. He frowned at me as I waved him to come join me.

Vim's frown deepened, then he glanced down at what he'd been working on. "Nebl," he then said.

Nebl turned from his workbench, from some metal and leather piece he'd been working on, realized what was wrong and then nodded. He got up and went over to Vim, and the two didn't say a word as Nebl took over for Vim, and went to hammering the thing Vim had been working on.

A little humbled by the silent understanding they shared, I stepped back outside and waited for Vim. He stepped out of the smithy calmly, smiled at me and glanced around. "What's wrong Renn? You look like you need a kiss."

I blinked, and my cloudy mind instantly became clear as I smiled at him. "I do?" He nodded, but didn't give one to me. I sighed a little and gesture for him to step away with me. "Can we talk, Vim?"

"Of course."

He followed me away from the smithy, and the house. We stepped a bit into the trees, away from everyone and everything, and I glanced around to see if Lilly had followed us yet or not. I had asked her for a few moments alone, and I knew she'd give it, but I wasn't sure how many moments I'd get.

"This about the prophecy?" Vim asked.

I nodded quickly. "Yes."

Vim took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay," he said, as if consigning himself to his fate.

"I'll not beat you up over it, Vim. but I want to know something. Their prophecy, Light's... they think I'm pregnant," I said.

"They do," he confirmed.

"You noticed it. Back at the Cathedral," I said. I had found it odd, but had not realized how serious he had been. How serious they had been.

"I had. It's kind of telling when you think about it, and notice how they say certain things," Vim said simply.

I gulped and nodded, and was kind of glad he was talking so seriously to me. He didn't even look annoyed or bothered, he still had that slight smile from before when he had mentioned I looked like I needed a kiss.

"But I'm not," I said simply.

"I'd hope not. I'll be honest Renn, I'm all for free-will, but you cheating on me will break my heart," he said.

I grinned at that and waved his comment aside. "I'd never cheat on you, Vim. I'd tease you about it, but never do so. No... I uh..." I hesitated, even though didn't need to. Vim seemed more than fine and willing to talk about this... so...

"You might have been though," Vim then said.

"Hm?"

He nodded and gestured very stiffly at me. Or rather, at my belly. "Although I really only attempted it once, the thought and desire had... has been there, for some time. If fate had been different, if certain circumstances had gone differently... you may very well be pregnant as we speak, here and now," he said.

My eyes narrowed at him. "Don't look so happy over that!" I shouted.

His smile didn't die, but it did flinch. "I didn't mean it that way. I'm just saying... their prophecy is wrong. But it could have been right. I'm glad we were able to throw them for a loop, is all."

Wanting to growl at him, I decided not to as I took a deep breath and nodded.

Yes. I understood what he was saying.

Had things... played out a little differently, there was in fact a good chance I'd be pregnant. After all we'd been together for years now. In reality the fact it wasn't a sure thing was a strange miracle. As if...

"Do you not want kids, Vim?" I asked.

"Of course I do. Rather, I want your kids. I'd like to see your children, and see how you raise them," he said.

My face got hot over that. How lovely.

"Lilly said they said she'll be a saint," I said softly.

"Mhm... so they say. It's not... an impossibility, to be honest. In a way," he said.

"Why? Because I'm not a human?" I asked.

"And because of who... and what I am, too," he said simply.

Right...

Shifting, I glanced around us at the trees we were half-hidden in. Lilly still wasn't around, as far as I could tell. Maybe she was being nice and giving me more than the few moments I had asked for.

While I looked around, I noted the odd moss again. I pointed at it, both to distract my wildly beating heart and to give me time to ponder my next few questions. "Vim, why's that moss look funny?" I asked.

"Because it does. It's a type of fungi. The moss itself isn't hurting the trees, but it means the trees here are diseased. That moss grows on trees that are sick, basically this forest is dying," Vim said.

My heart sunk at that. How terrible...! This was their home! Plus it was a pretty forest, it really was!

Vim reached out, gently tapping my cheek. He did so to get my attention back on him, so I glared at him.

"I'm not sure yet Renn, if their schemes are really centered on you. But... I'm going to plan as if they are," he said softly.

"Why does my having a saint for a daughter... make all this happen? If anything they should be happy over it, right? Why then risk your ire? Why make this vote happen? Why do any of this, and get those like Randle banished and stuff?" I asked.

"I don't know Renn. Not yet. But we're going to find out."

I sighed and nodded... and then Lilly appeared from above.

Startling, I yelped as I glanced up at the owl who was hanging upside down from a branch. She had wrapped her legs around a thick branch, and was a few feet above Vim's head.

"Lilly!" I shouted at her, and wondered how the heck she had got there without me noticing!

Had she been there this whole time...? Maybe I hadn't noticed because of how fast my heart was beating, and how wild my mind was. It felt like it was going every-which way!

She giggled at me. "Kiss her already, you idiot," she said, reaching out and slapping Vim in the head as she did.

Vim glared at her, then turned to look at me.

I stood up straight and smiled, and accepted the kiss.

Chapter 455 Vim – Renn's Schemes

Renn dodged one of Lilly's fast combos, and then yelped as she hurriedly lifted her sword to block a heavy foot. Lilly's boot hit the side of Renn's sword, pushing it into Renn's side and then sending Renn off her feet and into the air.

The blow had been a hard one, but Renn had properly saw it and prepared for it. Not only had she blocked it, she had rolled with its momentum. She didn't fall upon landing, but skidded on her feet and regained her posture within a few heartbeats.

I smiled at my wife as she readied herself, right as Lilly rushed forward to strike at her again. Lilly, like always, was fast. Too fast. There was a reason she preferred the thin and long rapiers over broadswords, even though she had the strength to use nearly anything she wanted.

She liked to stab. And did so with such speed and in such quick succession that few if any could survive her onslaught. Renn was fast too, more so thanks to both her good eyesight and spatial awareness, but also thanks to her quick mind. Renn rarely, if ever, fell for the same trick twice. So each time Lilly attacked, she had to do so at a different angle than before. With different move-sets and combos, or else Renn would simply block them effortlessly and slip in her own counter-attack.

With crossed arms, I stood a few dozen feet from the two as their swords clanged and they grunted. They exchanged a few blows, and then separated a moment, only to repeat the process. Occasionally Lilly, or Renn, would get a small hit in here or there, but so far neither seemed gaining ground over the other.

Though I think that was on purpose. On several occasions Lilly had been able to end the duel, but had chosen not to.

She seemed to be enjoying this. A lot.

It made me feel sorry for her. How many have actually fought like this with her before...? Not many I knew of, and few if any had done so with a smile on their face. And with her children having left the nest, it was likely Lilly hadn't had this kind of exercise in years. Because I no longer sparred with her anymore. Maybe I'd been doing her a disservice.

"Jeez, Vim..." Lellip whispered next to me. She flinched each time the swords clanged loudly on impact, or when one of them grunted from a connecting blow.

Glancing at the young monkey, I noted the leather she wore. It was not the leather one used for the furnaces and smithy, but instead like the set of leathers that Lilly and Renn now had on.

She hadn't asked, or said it yet, but it seemed Lellip had planned to ask to join us. Not just to watch and see what it was like, but to actually partake in the sparring. To be taught how to wield the very things she now forged.

Something told me watching Lilly and Renn had doused that very fragile, and new, desire rather quickly.

I decided to teach her myself. Though I'd do it after Lilly and Renn were done. I didn't doubt Lilly's ability to keep them both safe while they sparred, but I wanted to be sure.

Accidents happened often. And even though both of them had dulled weapons, made with the intent to be used in this way, there was no denying their lethality. Especially while in their hands.

"Scary thing is she's only been training occasionally. I think it has something to do with the way her mind works," I said.

Lellip sighed as Lilly and Renn separated, giving each other a moment to breathe as Renn rolled her shoulder. She must have sprained it from that kick earlier, or rather the blocking of it.

"Do humans fight like this?" Lellip asked.

"No. Humans don't have the stamina. They can get this fast, and I've even met plenty that have the reflexes to match, but they don't match up because their bodies can't sustain it. If you found a human capable of fighting either of them on par, as long as Lilly and Renn last long enough they're guaranteed to win. For most it's a matter of minutes," I said.

Lellip hummed at that as Lilly glanced my way. "The humans are scary because of their numbers. They might not last long, but they don't need to. They just need enough to surround you and wear you down," she said, speaking a little loudly as she did.

"Is that exhaustion I hear, Lilly?" I asked, teasing her.

She grinned and shook her head at me, as Renn's ears fluttered happily.

I chuckled at the two as Lilly attacked Renn again, most likely to hide her embarrassment.

Maybe she was getting old. Actually old. They've only been at it for an hour or so.

Sighing gently at them, I glanced at Lellip again. I smiled at her, happy that she had taken an interest in Branch.

"I hear you're going to test a branch," I said lightly to her.

Lellip stood up a little straighter, then glanced at me. "Um... was that a joke?"

"Hm...? Had I heard wrong?" I asked, a little sad at the prospect of doing so.

"No... I just didn't want to confront your statement yet," she said as she looked away from me, as to watch Renn get grabbed by Lilly. Lilly tossed Renn over her shoulder, flinging her into some of the taller grass nearby.

I watched my wife for a moment as she rolled to her feet, and was glad to see she looked fine. She hadn't released her sword as she was thrown, though had kept it safely positioned as she rolled. And her tail seemed fine too.

It wasn't as frail as it looked, but I always worried for such traits on our members.

Lellip then cleared her throat, an odd sound from her. I glanced at her, and found her twiddling her fingers. "You know him well?" she asked.

"Better than most I guess, yes," I said. Though I'd not seen him in many years, I had helped Lilly train him and prepare him for the world. Plus I had, as I had promised his mother, kept an eye on him as much as I could. I had visited him even without him knowing sometimes, just to make sure he was well.

Expecting Lellip to ask a bunch of questions, I was a little surprised she went quiet instead. I debated just... talking about the lad, but decided it was likely because she wanted to wait until we were alone.

Talking about her possible husband-to-be in front of her mother-in-law was likely odd, so I couldn't blame her.

It made me wonder what I would have done, or how I would have acted, around Renn's parents. At least, had they still been alive... and not utter disgraces.

"Are you angry, Vim?"

I blinked, and turned to glance at the young monkey. She shifted a little at my look, but held my gaze.

"No...? Not really. Why?" I asked.

"Hm..." she frowned, looking away and back at the two grunting women who were now struggling. Renn had gotten lucky and grabbed Lilly's wrist, the one that she held her weapon with, and so they were both trying to get control over the other. Renn was trying to pry Lilly's weapon away, or at least make it useless with positioning, and Lilly was trying to squirm around and do the same to Renn who was a tad too focused on her task.

Another sign that Lilly was taking this easy. At least, to a point. She genuinely was struggling with Renn, which spoke highly of Renn's strength, but at the same time Lilly was not just... well...

Outright attacking Renn. Lilly's go-to during such duress was to pluck the eyes, or jab the throat, of her attacker with her free hand. She'd not done anything like it to Renn, even though it would have ended their little stalemate immediately.

Renn not realizing it, or maybe not really fearing such damage in such a scenario, was likely just a lack of experience. Most of Renn's actual combat experience, which was more than most people in the first place, was not the type to require such methods. Her fights were abrupt, brutal ones. Mostly with humans.

Actually other than the encounter she had in the sewers, and the few sparring matches she's had... has Renn fought many of her own kind before...?

She had mentioned once she used to spar with her siblings often. Her sisters. Though I never pressed on such memories because she always looked depressed when speaking of them.

Lellip oohed and awed, clapping lightly as Lilly finally turned the tables on Renn. She spun Renn around, pinning Renn's own sword arm behind her back, and then pushed her to the ground.

Renn landed a little harshly, with a loud oomph, and then groaned in defeat as Lilly huffed and released her. The owl stepped away from Renn, who remained lying on her stomach, and grinned in victory over at me and Lellip.

"Your turn Lellip. Rush at her, she's tired, you'll win," I said with a small gesture.

"Wha...!?" Lellip startled, her head swiveling between me and Lilly.

Lilly's grin turned into an odd smirk, one that told me she would have been utterly happy for Lellip to have tried it.

"I had meant the one on the ground," I said, before either did anything.

Lellip calmed a little, realizing I'd been joking, as Renn slowly sat up. She did so stiffly, as if hurt, and turned to look over at us. Since she was pushing herself upward, her unruly hair dangled a little and blocked most of her face from sight.

She sure did look good like that. It was too bad she planned to get it cut before we left.

A part of me wished to mention to her not to. Since I liked it that way. But I'd never say it. Not aloud, not directly, at least.

Oh well. Maybe another time...

Lilly helped Renn to her feet, and then went to talking to her about grappling. Lilly pointed out that she had put herself in a dangerous position earlier, where Lilly could have really hurt her easily. Renn nodded with wide eyes, soaking up the information as I turned my attention back to the young monkey.

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"Do you know what a mercenary is, Lellip?" I asked her.

"Hm...? Yeah? A soldier right? Or well, a soldier for hire. Mom says they don't just fight in wars though, they also can end up doing simple stuff like guard duty and whatnot," she said.

I nodded. "Pram's right. Half the time they're not fighting but doing labor or something. Not like there's wars all the time," I said.

Lellip grinned at that. "Mom's hoping he'll come here. To work the smithy with us," she said.

Oh...?

I glanced at Lilly, who was still deep in conversation with Renn, and wondered what to think of that.

Branches... here?

I mean, it wasn't impossible. The lad had the mindset for it, and it's not like he couldn't be taught how to work the forge and stuff. But...

"You... don't think it's possible...?" Lellip asked softly.

"Don't see why it wouldn't be. His mother won't ever admit it, but he inherited a love struck side from his father," I said.

"What's that mean?" Lellip asked.

I shrugged. "Basically he can be a type of romantic. He's not just some hotheaded warrior or whatever. In fact he doesn't really even care much for the thrill of battle, lately he himself rarely even fights, he commands," I said.

"Branch isn't a mercenary anymore, Vim."

Frowning at Lilly as she and Renn walked over, I wondered what the heck she meant. "He's not?" I asked. Didn't he just recently join the Silken Band...?

Lilly smiled softly at me. "Vim's, like usual, not paying attention. Branch left the Silken Band a couple years ago. He's now just a guard at a mining town. He stepped down, Vim, because he had been drawing attention. He did it to keep the peace," she said.

Oh...? "See, Lellip? He has a much better head on his shoulders than his mother. You have nothing to worry about," I said, happy to hear such a thing. I had been meaning to check and see how much renown he'd been gathering. To tell him to be careful with drawing eyes in such a way.

Renn laughed softly as Lilly glowered at me.

"Is it hard? Being a mercenary?" Lellip asked.

I didn't get to answer. "It is. Because you have to obey orders of idiots. I never knew how my son put up with their stupid plans and failures," Lilly said with a sigh.

"Oh... right. Humans," Lellip nodded, as if understanding what Lilly meant completely.

Lilly tapped her rapier against her thigh, nodding seriously. "It pains me to admit it, but Vim's right. I would have never been able to put up with half the things he does. Even now he's working at some mining village, protecting some noble's assets. Could you imagine taking orders from those snobby things?" Lilly said.

"I've never met a noble...!" Lellip stepped forward, becoming overtly excited at the conversation.

While I watched the two talk about Branches, the humans and the world he lived in, I felt myself being stared at. I glanced over Lellip's head, and found Renn grinning gently at me a few steps away.

Oh?

Her right ear flicked a little, and I nodded. I stepped back and away from Lilly and her future daughter-in-law as they got into a heated discussion about some noble that once asked to buy Lilly from me. Although it was a story I'd heard many times, I noted that Lilly told it with far more gusto than she ever had before.

Renn and I didn't step too far away, just enough to talk lowly without bothering the two. She pointed at them with her blunt sword, smiling happily as she did. "Look, they're already getting along," she whispered.

"Does it really surprise you...? Lilly's known their family for centuries."

"It does when you consider what's going on. Did a noble really try to buy Lilly?" she asked.

"On more than one occasion."

Renn frowned at that, finding it interesting.

Smiling gently at her eyes, that were stuck on Lilly and Lellip, I did my best to ignore the way her hair clung to her face and how messy it was. She had tied it back a bit before starting her sparring match, but in the scuffles some of it had come undone.

If I focused too much on it she'd get it cut tonight. If she noticed my eyes get distracted by it like that.

It was odd. But that was the way she was. She wanted me to look at her, not her hair. Even though that was her too, wasn't it...?

"Don't be jealous, Renn. You've gotten offers too," I said.

Renn finally stopped looking at the two, and looked at me. I smirked in victory as Renn's brow furrowed at me. "What...? When?"

"A noble in Lumen. Thraxton. He asked me if he could have you," I said.

For a tiny moment Renn tilted her head, looking almost as if she didn't understand what I was saying... and then in the next she broke out into a mighty grin. "Him!?! Really?" she asked happily, speaking loudly.

I nodded. "Really."

Well, he hadn't asked to purchase her. Only permission to try and court her. To me it was the same though, since that was how he operated. He wanted things, and offered everything and anything he had in return for them. At least, with me. With those like Brandy he was far more shrewd.

Renn though must have not only found such a thing wonderful, but maybe even knew of who I spoke of. She reached up with her free hand, to cover her mouth as she giggled happily. Usually she'd not hide her giggles in such a way, but I knew it was because she was trying to not be too noisy and distract the two nearby still in their conversation.

"You know who I'm talking about?" I asked.

She nodded, happily. "Yeah! The king? Or whatever he is? He's the one who tipped me when I was working at the bank. How neat!"

No it wasn't. Not anymore.

Renn continued to grin, and her tail began to squirm a little in pure joy. It was the kind of sight that made me want to reach out and touch her. She suddenly looked delectable.

But...

Glancing at the noisy monkey, who was now asking Lilly about her home. The dark forest, the Owl's Nest, I silently thanked them.

Their presence kept me in check.

For now, at least.

"Vim?"

Meeting Renn's eyes, I frowned at her frown. "Hm? What's wrong?" I asked. She had been bliss itself moments ago, what happened?

"Are you... actually upset? Lellip noticed it too. Is it the prophecy? I've been trying not to bring it up," she asked.

"You just did," I said stiffly.

Her frown turned into a tiny smirk. "So it is the prophecy," she stated.

I sighed, since she was right.

It was.

"Sorry," I apologized.

"You should be. But it's okay. I know that's the kind of man you are. I can put up with it," she said with a gentle enough smile to tell me she meant what she said, and wasn't being cynical.

"How long has it been? Since we last talked about it?" I asked.

"Last night. Before dinner."

Right. She was right, of course. She had not brought it up until now. Renn was being... gentle with me about it, at least.

Taking a small breath, I sighed again and nodded. "What do you want me to say, Renn...? I thought I was doing good by not trying to rebel against it," I said.

"Rebel...?" she asked softly.

Shoot. I shifted and flinched, since I knew I had walked into that. "Usually when I hear prophecies concerning me... I try to break them. It's just my hubris, but it's what I usually do," I said.

Renn's face immediately contorted into a terrible frown. One that broke my heart. "Break it...?" she whispered, and I heard the heartbreak about to slither up from the depths of her soul.

I lifted a hand, to gently stop her from misunderstanding. "I'm not going to do anything like that, Renn. I just meant in general. I have no plans to try and... break your prophecy. At least, not in that way."

"In what way then?"

We turned, to find Lilly and Lellip. Lellip was standing behind Lilly, peering at us from behind her as if worried to be noticed.

Lilly looked upset.

"Well?" Renn then said.

Looking back at her, I frowned... and then realized what they meant.

"I mean the aspect of Light and the rest messing with you. I want to break that part," I clarified.

Renn's ears fluttered as she glared at me, and Lilly sighed. "All I can say, Lellip, is my son won't disappoint you like this at least," she said.

Lellip flinched, as if shocked to be spoken to and about during such a moment, as Renn nodded hurriedly and looked over to the young bride-to-be. "Yeah. You'd be hard pressed to find someone as infuriating as him, I think," she added.

What the hell...? Was I really that bad? Was what I had said that bad, too? Shouldn't they want me to break Light's schemes?

Before I could say anything, Lellip coughed and glanced at me. "Couldn't you maybe... fix the Society? With your daughter...?" she asked.

Going still, I barely noticed Lilly and Renn flinch. They both glanced at me, worriedly, and I realized this was something they'd already brought up. Somewhere without me being able to hear.

Wish they had kept such thoughts to themselves.

"Renn..." I groaned at my own bride-to-be, or rather... mother-to-be of my children.

At least I hoped this supposed daughter was going to be mine.

"What! It's true, isn't it? You told me to find a solution, maybe this is it!" Renn defended herself, and Lellip and Lilly in extension, rather quickly.

"Throwing a daughter at them as if some sacrifice is far from a solution," I said, my own voice growing louder as to join hers in volume.

"Who said to do that!" Renn asked.

"What else are you implying, then?" I asked back.

Renn's cheeks puffed up a bit, as she made an odd noise at me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lilly's huge smirk, she was obviously enjoying this.

"Are they arguing or flirting...? They look like they're about to kiss," Lellip then asked.

Renn's face went red, and she actually took a step back. Based off the way she now looked utterly ashamed I could tell she hadn't realized how close she had been getting to me. While she had been yelling she had drawn closer.

"Here I thought she was going to stab him," Lilly said with a huff.

"Honestly it could have gone either way," I said. I too had noticed the way she had shifted her sword a little, as to point it my direction. As if in ready for a lunge.

"Jeez...!" Renn grumbled as she squeezed the hilt of her sword. I noted the sound the leather handle made under her grip.

She really was strong. Was she getting stronger...? Or...

Gesturing lightly at Renn, Lilly sighed at me. "You can get upset Vim, but it's a legitimate idea. If they think your daughter is going to be someone important to them, maybe some leader of their church or something, I don't see why you can't use that to your advantage. You could even take over the church that way, even. Would save us all a lot of headaches if you did so," Lilly said.

I reached up to cover my eyes, as to not glare at the owl to the point it killed her.

"Should we give them space?" Lellip asked with a whisper.

"And miss out? Be brave, Lellip, it's worth it," Lilly said back, not with a whisper.

Renn groaned, loudly enough for both of us, as I smiled at her. She had a smile on her face, she was just embarrassed.

I loved that smile. It was wonderful. Almost as delectable as that earlier one.

How many women could squirm in front of me like this, while talking about these things...? We weren't just talking of prophecies... we were talking about one of momentous design.

A daughter. My own daughter. One destined to be a saint. One that Light and the rest, possibly Celine too, were planning their schemes around.

I should be tearing everything down over this. Furious. Disgusted.

Yet instead I wanted to smile and squirm just like she was, full of anticipation and joy.

"Is that what you're scheming then, Renn? To make your daughter the next leader of the Society?" I asked, deciding to once again just confront my fears.

Renn's ears twitched wildly, her tail coiled... and while staring me in the eyes... without any hesitation...

She nodded.

O' Mother, have mercy.

Chapter 456 Renn – Lilly's Training and Teasing

Lilly lifted Vim's spear, gawking at it in her hand.

"Renn..." she groaned at me, and I shifted a little as I watched her study the thing.

Either she knew what it was, or was able to tell by sight and touch how special it was. I was anxious to hear which it were.

After a few heavy moments, Lilly lifted the spear with both hands... as if to proffer it to someone. With reverence. She didn't though; she simply lifted it and studied it with her keen eyes.

"Vim gave it to me before we left Telmik," I told her.

It was interesting that some members didn't see anything odd with it, beyond it being a weapon, while others like her and Lellip stood awestruck with the thing.

"Celine once asked me if I knew where it was," Lilly then whispered as she ran her left hand along the shaft, as if to search for the best place to grab it at.

"Celine did...?" I asked, a little surprised.

She nodded. "Before she realized I didn't like her. I had been younger. It'd only been a decade or two since joining the Society. Back then I didn't really understand what she meant, but as the years went by it made sense. This is it, isn't it? The one he used to kill gods?" Lilly asked with a hushed voice.

A shiver ran down my tail as I nodded. "I think so, yes," I whispered back.

We were alone, in the little meadow where we sparred and trained. So there was really no need for us to whisper, but I knew better than to not feel the same... desire for secrecy as Lilly had.

Lilly shook her head as she lowered the spear, until it touched the ground. Tip downward. She slowly, carefully, slid the tip of the spear into the soft grass, and I watched her shiver as it sunk in.

"By the dead gods Renn, it's sharp," she said, her voice thick with respect for the weapon.

I nodded. "That's why I don't want to train with it. It's why Vim's making us new ones," I said. He was doing it right now, with Nebl and Lellip.

They had already finished Lilly's request. A full set of leather armor, and metal armor, alongside a few weapons had been made for Branches. Vim had also made Lilly a new sword, and leg armor... though nothing else. I wasn't sure why she only wanted armor on her lower half, but I assumed it was because she used to have wings. If she was flying up in the sky, as her daughter Sap had done, I could see why they would want to protect their legs. They did dangle as they flew.

"Yes. I'm glad you don't want to either. This would kill me if it got me," Lilly said as she lifted the spear. Lilly sighed as she shook her head. "This is... a relic. I can see why Celine wanted it now," she said as she gingerly let go of it, and we watched it slide a tiny bit more into the ground as it settled... and then remained there.

I shifted, unsure of what to say. What was she staring at it so strongly for...? Wouldn't any spear do that?

"Kind of expected it to just... keep sinking, sliding and slicing ever downward," Lilly said.

"I'd hope not, how would we get it then if it did?" I asked. I hadn't even thought of doing such a thing, or testing it that way. Lilly was odd sometimes.

She hummed as she crossed her arms, staring at the spear.

Then before I could say anything she grabbed it, spun a little... and threw the spear.

I startled, a little shocked, and then I heard the sound of bark and wood. I turned, and... found the spear lodged into a tree.

Really lodged in.

"Huh," Lilly frowned as we hurried over to the tree she'd just speared. It was one of the old, moss covered ones. It was many times thicker than us, and the spear had gone so deep only a couple hands worth of it was sticking out... and coming out the other end, was the tip of the spear.

It was undamaged. Not a roll on the blade, or even a stain from sap or anything. I kind of didn't like the way it loomed in the air, not far from my head thanks to its position.

"I kind of expected it to go right through. But this is still amazing. I barely tossed it," Lilly said as she tapped the thing with a fingernail.

I groaned at her. "Barely? You startled me."

"Hm... sorry," Lilly apologized as she grabbed the spear... and then we both watched in awe at how easily it slid out as she pulled it.

The thing barely made a sound as it came out, and I shivered a little at it since it felt almost unnatural. "That seemed a tad too easy," I said.

"Yeah. Especially since it had stopped. There was no resistance at all... that means it should have kept going, and into the next tree," Lilly said with a hum.

I sighed at it, and her. "Well... it's as you said. A relic," I said.

"Yeah, but I had just used a word I heard before. I'm not sure what that actually means, you know?" she said.

Oh...? "You were supposed to. I was going to ask what that meant myself," I said.

She smirked at me as she spun the spear a bit, and righted it upward so the point went towards the sky and not the ground. I was a little glad it was no longer pointed in a direction that could result in harm, even if accidental harm.

"You think Vim made this?" she asked.

I blinked at that, and shifted a little.

Lellip had asked that too. Or at least, hinted at it.

Should I tell her the truth...? Unlike Lellip, Lilly was someone he trusted.

Deciding against it, for now, I simply shrugged, and didn't answer vocally. I didn't trust my voice well enough to do so.

People saw through me, rather easily. Thanks to my ears and tail. So I decided to start just... not answering, like how Vim does, to hide things. I wasn't sure if it actually worked or not, but I didn't know what else to do.

It was Vim's fault. He's the one who kept giving me secrets. I usually wasn't a very secretive person.

"Wonder how he did it. What even is this...? It feels like his steel, but it's not. It almost feels malleable, like as if it's silver or something, but it's obviously not," she said as she went to grab it with both hand again. I watched her try to bend, or break the spear. I stepped back a bit, as Lilly actually put all her strength into it. So much strength in fact, veins popped out on her neck and temples.

The longer she tried, the lower she began to crouch. She bent forward a little, as if about to push it against her thigh and knee. She didn't though, as she kept trying to bend it.

A little shocked at the obvious display of exertion; I barely glanced at the spear itself as Lilly put her all into trying to bend the spear. After a few long heavy moments, she eventually gave up with a great huff. She stood back up straighter, and started to breathe very heavily as she shook her head.

"Damnable thing," she cursed.

That was sweat on her brow...!

"What would you have done if you broke it?" I asked, smiling as I did.

"Asked you to beg him forgiveness for me. I figured I wouldn't have been able to though, I could somehow tell. Whew... here, before I get any more weird ideas," she then handed it off to me.

I took it, and as I did I noticed the thin layer of sweat on it.

She really had gave it her all, hadn't she?

"I'm sure he's told you all about it, but just in case... make sure Light and the others don't get that, Renn. Don't even let them know you have it. Who knows what they'd do with that thing, if they got a hold of it," she warned.

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I nodded, rather seriously. "I know. I've thought of that already. I'll keep it safe," I promised.

"Hmph. It makes me wonder what else you'll get over the years. You really do make me jealous, you know?" Lilly said, pouting a little.

Although I smiled at that, my heart still hurt from those words. That hadn't been said entirely in jest.

It was hard to understand why Lilly sometimes acted as if she was unhappy. When I knew she really wasn't. She loved Windle. She loved her children, even if they were at odds with each other at the moment. She had a wonderful home, a beautiful newborn... she had so much to be thankful for, yet still she made comments like that sometimes.

Those tiny little hints of emotion that slipped out of her sometimes made me wonder if she liked Vim more than even she admitted. Or if maybe she was just... happy for me, but slightly jealous at the same time. Maybe I just read too much into it.

"Have I told you how much I love you, Lilly?" I asked gently.

Lilly shifted, frowning gently at me. "You have. Actually a little too much, to be honest. I think you bring it up more than my own children do," she said.

Though she sounded annoyed, and looked it, I could still tell she wasn't bothered by it. She had a smile hidden behind that frown.

And again with a comment that made my heart hurt. Her children didn't tell her they love her?

"Well I love you. And I've been meaning to ask, if Lellip joins your family... that makes her my family too, right?" I asked.

"Yeah...? By marriage. I know, it's weird. I've been trying not to think too much about how I'll soon be related to them. I used to tease them, saying they stink and stuff, now I'll probably end up having grandchildren with their smell. What am I going to do, tell my own kids they stink?" she wondered.

I laughed at that. "They don't smell that bad, Lilly!" I said. Lellip and her family did have a tiny faint scent that was noticeable and odd. One that didn't really bother me or anything, but it was unique enough that I noticed it occasionally and had to remind myself what it was.

"Hmph. You know I wish I could remember what you smelled like. I wonder if I had thought you had stunk too," she said with a wave at me.

My ears fluttered as I wondered about that. "I can smell myself still. I've been told by some people that I smell like the forest. A wet forest," I said.

"Yeah... that's what I think it was. I might not have been too bothered by it then, maybe? I mean I hadn't killed you on sight, so that should mean something," Lilly said with a grin.

"Right..." I groaned at that. Both over the fact that such a thing meant I probably had stunk a little, and that her saying such a thing meant it had been a good possibility that I could have died at her hands back then. She must have considered it, rather heavily.

"Before you lost your scent... how did others act around you? Those like Lellip. Or the lesser folk?" she asked.

"Lesser folk?"

"Prey. The herbivores. The ones without blood lust," she specified.

Huh... herb-a-what? I'll have to ask Vim what that means later. It was probably one of his words anyway. I got the idea of it, though; based off what she was saying and how she was saying it.

"People are more at ease around me now. It's true. I don't want to admit it, but it's a fact. Back before I lost my smell... there had been several people that acted stiff around me, or even outright avoided me. Liina for example, before I lost my smell she didn't even come near me or acknowledge me. Now she talks to me, and before I had left Lumen last time she had even sat down next to me to have lunch together," I said, happily remembering the memory.

I hadn't noticed my lack of smell until long after we left Lumen, of course. But today I now knew the truth. My smell had gone during Lumen. It was why my last days at Lumen, and thereafter such as my trip south with Hera, had been slightly easier going when it concerned other members. They had felt more at ease with me, thanks to my lack of smell.

It was likely also why at the Armadillo's I'd been invited to join their family, to become a wife to their half-blood son. I don't think they would have done that had I still smelled like a predator and put them on edge, since they were all like Hera. Like those who shied away from people like Lilly and I.

"Hm... I wonder if that means we are all like that. Does that mean if we found a way to eliminate my smell, people wouldn't be so bothered by me too?" Lilly asked.

Hesitating a moment, I squeezed the now dry spear as my mind hesitated.

Was it possible...?

"I... I don't know. That's a good question. We should ask Vim," I said softly. If it was true, that meant there was a chance to ease tensions amongst our members. Not just with those like Lilly, but even those like Fly...!

Lilly grinned at me. "Careful Renn. You have to get all intimate with him, right? To lose your smell? Sure you want me to do that?" she asked.

My face grew hot. "You know we've not done anything yet! You keep saying that in front of people, it makes it really embarrassing for me you know!" I complained. She was the only one who knew we'd not gotten to that point yet. Although I loved that she kept it a secret, validating my trust, it sure did seem like she enjoyed teasing me with it!

She laughed at me as she nodded and then stepped away. She walked over to the large flat rock we used as something of a table and bench, and went to grab her sword.

I sighed and went to follow suit. We had come here to train again, after all.

Putting the spear down, I picked up my own sword. It, like the one Vim had made me last time we were here, was dull. As was Lilly's.

Though I wasn't sure if calling Lilly's sword dull was apt.

"Anyway... you ready?" Lilly asked as she drew her sword. It was an odd thing they called a rapier. It was like a really long needle.

"Hm. Later on will you tell me what it feels like to give birth?" I asked, since we were kind of talking about such things anyway.

"It hurts," she answered.

"Well... yeah. But I mean what else?" I asked. That's all anyone ever said about it.

Lilly shrugged. "What else do you want to hear? You feel all weird, it hurts a lot, and then you feel lightheaded and then you get better. I was bedridden with Seed though, for weeks afterward. I almost died. She's the only one I had problems with," Lilly said.

Oh... I hadn't wanted to hear that. "Almost died?" I asked as I lifted my sword, to get ready and spar with her.

She nodded. "I kept bleeding. Luckily Vim showed up, otherwise I might have bled to death," she said as she too raised her sword. Unlike me who did so at an angle, Lilly lifted it upward and pointed it at me. It was a weird stance, which although now I knew not to underestimate... still looked a little silly.

"Vim helped you?" I asked. I'd known he knew how to do such things, but hadn't realized he was so adept at medical stuff.

"He's the one who taught Tosh and the others how to be surgeons. Back during the wars. You should know by now that he knows everything," she said.

I frowned at that.

Everything...? Maybe. Maybe not.

But it was relieving to hear that he'd be able to help me if there were complications, at least. I'd been thinking about it lately, ever since hearing of the prophecy. Since I'd been told by my elders, my mother and grandmother, that we had lost many siblings and ancestors to childbirth. I'd always thought it was a family trait, but as I've lived I had heard and seen many similar instances throughout humans too. Complications during childbirth were more common than most likely thought.

Though it was a little surprising to hear he had so much experience in such moments. Even though it shouldn't be. Vim's lived a very long time, and he's been the Society's Protector for hundreds of years. There was no doubt he's had to help many a births and the aftereffects from them.

"How many children do you think he's witnessed being born?" I asked as I thought about it. It was my turn to be jealous. What I'd give to hold hundreds, if not thousands, of babies. Especially children of our kind.

"His own or in general?" she asked.

"Um... both...?"

She smirked at me, telling me she had just been teasing me. "Probably hundreds if not thousands, Renn. He's old. Didn't you notice the way he spoke of your daughter the other day? He spoke of her as if it wasn't even his. That wasn't him trying to act indifferent, that was his age speaking. He's too old for his own good," she said.

"I had noticed..." I groaned. I had been hoping it had just been him trying to not outright admit and accept the prophecy. That it had been his attempt to 'break' it without actually doing so.

Lilly lowered her stance a little, making me do the same to my own. She gestured lightly at me. "Don't be worried, Renn. Vim won't let anything happen to you. Or your baby... or any of your family, for that matter. He's called the protector, but trust me he's more protective than you think," she said.

Smiling gently at her strangely comforting demeanor, I nodded. "I know. But you can't blame me for wondering, can you? Plus Vim hates talking about such things, you saw how he got," I said.

"Actually he's doing way better than I ever expected. I know to you he's likely acting stiff still, but I've genuinely never seen him so open. Gah! See? I'm jealous again!" Lilly complained as she got back in her stance.

My tail went stiff as I realized I'll now need to block more seriously. She was upset with me now.

"Go easy on me," I asked kindly.

Lilly then grinned, and relaxed a little... but then she frowned. "By the way, do you have a plan yet?" she asked.

Hesitating a moment, I shrugged. "For what?" Hadn't we already talked about possibly using my daughter as a way to fix the Society? To take it back from those like Light and the rest, who wanted to use it in ways that caused chaos and headaches? We'd not only talked about it in depth together, but had even talked about it with Lellip after we told Vim the idea. He had left after kissing me yesterday, to go busy himself, so over dinner we had all discussed it without him. I had been surprised to hear Nebl and Pram give some rather good ideas concerning it, ones that I might in fact try to implement if Vim allowed.

"For Merit," she said, startling me.

My eyebrows met as my face scrunched up. "No... I know. I don't know what I'm going to say to her." I should by now. We were only a couple weeks from seeing her.

"Tease her. If you're too gentle and kind about it, she'll just cry and shock everyone to death. Better yet be mean about it. Maybe it'll kick her little butt into gear and get her over it better," Lilly said.

Although she sounded harsh, I knew better than to think Lilly was being genuinely mean to Merit. Lilly was one of Merit's few friends, like Nasba. And for Lilly that meant a lot, since unlike Merit who seemed to have multiple friends... Lilly didn't. Other than me, from what I could tell so far, Merit was Lilly's only other friend.

"Nasba said the same. Or rather... she also told me to have a son. To give Merit a son, as an apology," I said with a groan.

Lilly paused a moment... her eyes going wide. "Why hadn't I thought of that...?" she mumbled.

"Not you too!" I shouted. She seemed lost in thought. To the point her long needle-sword's tip lowered almost to her thigh. I groaned at her. "Lilly!"

Lilly snapped out of it, raising her sword back up to position. "Right. We'll talk about it later. Come on, let's get this over with or we'll talk the day away and get no work done."

Then she rushed forward and attacked.

Chapter 457 Vim – Trust, Hearts, and Homes

"Don't trust me anymore, do you?" Nebl asked as I lifted myself out of the hidden compartment beneath his smithy.

"Hardly, Nebl," I scoffed as I clambered out of the hole. Once out, I glanced back down into the dark compartment I'd just come from. It had no stairs or ladder into it, on purpose, but it was actually deeper than it looked. It was big enough that not only could I fit comfortably in it, so too could Nebl, but it was too deep for anyone but me to actually dare without proper preparation. Such as with a rope or something.

The only thing that had been down there was now in my hand. The small orb had a faint purple glow, and was a slight bit heavier than its fellows.

Nebl went to sealing the hole back up, first putting down the iron grate that sat in hardened cement blocks. The grate wasn't really to cover it, but to ensure if anyone did find it or fall into it somehow

they'd get caught by it. Plus it made the hole kind of look like an old abandoned well, which was what we hoped it to be interpreted as if ever found.

I helped Nebl finish resealing the hole, putting back the layers of flooring that hid it. Once done, I handed Nebl the monarch's heart as I went to push one of the larger ore crates over the hole. It was half full, but it slid back into its slot near the other crates rather smoothly.

Sighing as I brushed my hands clean of soot and dirt, I glanced around for one of the brooms as to sweep up. Moving the crate had revealed a nice layer of dust and soot, which had been hidden under and behind it for decades.

"Society is splitting. Votes being called. Prophecies, and now you're gathering up all the hearts? What are you planning, Vim?" Nebl asked as he studied the orb in his hand. It looked comically tiny in it. It was one of the smaller ones, even though a tad heavier than usual.

"The only planning I'm doing is contingencies. I'm taking it so that if Light does come here, to further try and sway you and your family to her side, she won't notice it. Regrettably the girl is just as powerful as her mother had been, so even with it buried that deep and with the monarch leather lining the walls it might have been noticed," I said.

Nebl hummed at that as I procured one of the long thin brooms they used to clean up the soot. I went to sweeping, having to do so around Nebl because he stood still as he stared at the orb intently.

While I swept, I wondered if he was actually offended. I was taking it for his own sake, for his family. To protect them. To make sure they'd not become collateral damage somehow. But maybe he saw it a different way.

Wanting to sigh, I kept it in as I kept sweeping. "I'd not have left it here all this time had I not trusted you, Nebl. Plus if I had lost faith in you, I'd have taken it back without you knowing," I said, hoping to let my friend know his worries were baseless.

"Fancy words. Tell me... do you have more? On you?" he asked.

I noted the way he was trying not to smile. He had liked what I had said. "More? Hearts?" I asked.

He nodded. "I've had an idea for a long time, about putting a bunch together into a boiling furnace. Something really hot and liquid," he said.

My eye twitched. "And why would you want to do that?"

"To see if they explode or something. You, and so many others, tell me they're basically condensed energy. Yet no matter how I mess with them, there's no proof of it. No static, no conductivity, they're not magnetic or even able to get hot! Nothing! Figured a bunch of them bundled together and getting really hot might do something, maybe even get them to explode," he said.

"Don't be giving anyone else strange ideas like that. And it wouldn't work. They're indifferent to any outside variables. Heat, cold, pressure. Nothing bothers them," I said.

"Hm..."

Once I finished cleaning enough of the loose soot up for my liking, I put aside the broom and took the heart back from Nebl.

Staring into the darker ob, I tried to remember where I'd gotten it. "Which one was this?" I asked him. Maybe he remembered. I bet he had asked about it when I had brought it, as to hide it here.

"Some monarch in the west. One you had trouble luring from its nest," he said.

Ah! The one that Jelti's mother had helped with. How fascinating, I'd just talked with Renn about it not too long ago. She'd like this, then. I'll make sure to let her see it before we move on.

Nebl had been about to say something, but one of the outer doors to the smithy opened. Nebl turned, startling a moment, but I didn't. I head in the footsteps that it was Lilly.

She didn't take long to find us in the rear room of the smithy, where the ores were stored. "There's a snowstorm brewing. What are you two doing in..." Lilly started to ask, then went quiet as she saw what was in my hand.

Nebl sighed softly.

Lilly's eyes narrowed at it. "What are you scheming now? Don't we have enough schemes to deal with right now?" she asked, sounding a little angry.

"Why does everyone always think I'm scheming? Do I really seem like someone who does such things?" I asked, starting to feel offended. It felt like everyone lately has been accusing me of such things, but was it really warranted...? Well maybe.

"Because you do? Though if your schemes actually go into fruition or not is another matter," Nebl said as he stepped back a bit, to over to a nearby workbench. Not to start working on anything, but just so he could sit down in its chair.

I ignored him as I glanced at Lilly. "Snowstorm you said?" I asked.

She nodded, a little absentmindedly while still staring at the heart. "Yeah. I can smell it. Can't see it yet, but you'll be feeling it soon," she said.

Great. I had planned to have us leave in a few days, now that we'd finished making all the stuff. We'd made Lilly's son a full set of armor and weapons, a new set of leather armor and clothes for myself, Renn and Lilly, and I'd even helped Nebl out with a few of the little projects he'd been working on here at his home.

Renn had gotten a moment to rest. She's spent plenty of time with the baby, and the family, plus she got several days worth of training in with Lilly. It had been a good visit, but now it was time we moved on. Especially since I was itching to confront Light.

I wanted to get it over with now. I was tired of talking about it, or well... I was tired of talking about the prophecies, really.

More particularly a single one. One that made my wife so happy she hadn't even be able to really get any sleep. She was on cloud nine.

And of course I wanted to be happy for her. To share in her joy... but well...

Damn these things. Damn those who made them.

"We going to leave even if it's storming, Vim? How will she fare over the passes? Or will we round them? If it's a short one, it'd be faster just to wait for it to come and go than go that far south," Lilly asked, not noticing my internal discord.

"She'll be fine. We'll be careful, plus she's more accustomed to the cold than you think," I said. I worried for her, like I did all our members... and even more so because I loved her, but the reality was Renn was far from fragile.

Lilly sighed at me. "I'm not saying that, Vim. She's pregnant isn't she?"

My eye twitched as I glanced at her, and found her grinning at me.

"What? She is? I thought she said she wasn't yet," Nebl spoke up, not realizing that Lilly was just trying to tease me.

"Lilly's just getting me back for all the years I've teased her and Windle. Renn's not pregnant. Yet," I said.

"Yet," Lilly noted with a tiny giggle.

Nebl scoffed at us. "I'm too old for such jokes."

I'd thought I was too, but honestly I was enjoying it. Though I'd not admit it aloud.

"Speaking of children, I've heard of your little scheme, Vim," Lilly then said.

"Hm more schemes? Or is this just more teasing?" Nebl asked.

"Not sure. What do you mean, Lilly?" I asked.

She gestured behind her, to the hallway she'd just come from. "Renn. She asked me of about the town you're sending Randle to. Turns out it's the same one my son's at, or had been at, working for a noble. You're going to set up some kind of headquarters there, aren't you? An orphanage, and a home for Renn?" she asked.

Home for Renn...? I tried not to let my thoughts show on my face as I shifted a little and shrugged. "I thought we had talked about this already? Yes. Randle and Angie want to open a new orphanage. Away from the Church of Songs. I've promised to help them, yes. I figured doing so near you, up north, was better for them. It's a better climate, and the Nation of the Blind can be a buffer for them if the world becomes chaotic," I said.

"What's this...? You making a home without me?" Nebl asked.

I sighed at him. "I don't... well..." I hesitated, since I knew how Renn had likely come to such a conclusion.

She knew I had wanted to make several locations for her. And she wasn't wrong... if it worked out, and Randle and the rest set up camp there properly, a place there for Renn would be great. Or at least, nearby it. It was centralized, near Lilly and her saint friend, plus all the others around there. Like Twin Hills. Plus, thanks to being far enough north it allowed you to travel easily to the Summit or Lumen, and from there to the other locations, rounding this mountain range here. While also a quick access from the western coast.

It'd work. A little too well, honestly.

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"He hadn't known. Must have been a secret. Woops," Lilly said lightly to Nebl.

"His own fault. He gives her utter freedom, a wife shouldn't be so free roaming," Nebl said with a huff.

"Excuse me?" Lilly took offense to that, and I sighed too. I wasn't in the mood to listen to them argue again, since it was all centered around their children's future marriage.

"Do you have a problem with it, Lilly? If Randle sets up an orphanage near you?" I asked.

"Hm...? No? I told you before, I'm okay with it. That's a human thing. It won't bother me in any... well..." she went quiet a moment as she pondered it. Then she nodded. "Like I mentioned, I plan to get Crown involved. Renn agrees with me. I've told her how bad Crown is, and she thinks getting Crown involved, setting up the location with everyone, will be best for her. She said I should come with Windle to visit too while it happens. Plus I'd like her to be near Renn, I think."

Ah... how lovely, Renn. To so readily come to the same conclusion I had. Unlike me though, she was able to outright tell people her thoughts and ideas, and even try to influence others to them.

Well done, Rennalee.

"Wait, wait..." Nebl stood up from his seat, waving at us to calm down.

I glanced around, wondering if maybe someone had come into the smithy without me noticing. No one had, far as I could tell.

"What? Still lost? Maybe you are getting too old," Lilly teased.

"Shut it. No... you're making an actual location, Vim?" Nebl asked.

I nodded. Hadn't we talked about this before...? Well, we had. But I hadn't outright said I'd be staying there with Renn. Not like this. Though I hadn't planned to do such a thing either. Renn did, it seemed, though. "I guess? This is only under the condition I can't handle this drama with Light here soon. A lot could change, either way, once I do. For now though the plan is to step down after confronting Light and handling a few things, then heading north after winter with Randle and the rest to set it up," I said.

Nebl frowned, rather heavily, and suddenly went into deep thought. He turned away, and slowly walked past Lilly... then me...

Turning, I watched him head into the hallway, leaving us behind as he went to the main section of the smithy.

"Uh... Vim? Is he okay?" Lilly asked with a whisper.

"I'm not sure. I think so. Had I said something weird?" I asked her.

She shrugged lightly at me.

I turned, deciding to follow my friend. Hopefully I'd not hurt him somehow, or offended him. Was he upset that I had not told him right away my plans? I had basically done so the other day, the first day we'd arrived here. We had even talked about everything that led up to this point, and what could come after... even that damned prophecy...

Lilly hurried to follow, and we found Nebl near the exit of the smithy. He wasn't leaving though, and instead pulling something out of a box near the door. It was a piece of wood, looked like a cut piece of firewood though was likely not intended to be used for such a thing. It was likely going to become something he'd craft.

He turned, and stepped over to me and showed it off.

Looking down at the piece of cut wood, I frowned at the darkened blotches.

Rot.

Fungal rot.

"Disease," I said, recognizing it. It was likely the same stuff that Renn had noticed earlier. Half the trees around this area had thick, smelly, moss growing on them. Because they were decaying inside and rotting inward out.

"Noticed it not long after you two left. And lo' and behold, Light had too. She mentioned in her letter we should move to Lumen, that she'd make a place for us on the outskirts, because our home was going to rot away within a year," he said.

Oh.

Oh...

I groaned as I reached out to grab the piece of wood. I did so a little briskly, and a tad too strongly. My fingers sunk into the rotting wood as I picked it up.

"I'm so sorry Nebl. I had noticed the moss and the sickness, but didn't think it was anything but typical blight," I said. I had just thought it was something that came and went occasionally, like all forest had.

"Hm. Was meaning to talk to you about it. Was hoping you could stop it, what with your desire to go against prophecies and all. But maybe this is how it's meant to be?" Nebl said.

"Wait... you're not saying..." Lilly noticed immediately what Nebl was hinting at, and I almost didn't want to do the same.

He nodded. "Forest is dying. The Society no longer needs my furnace or anvil. And now my granddaughter plans to go off and marry into another forest? I say the world is speaking rather loudly and clearly. It is time," he said simply.

I sighed at him. "You're reading far too much into this."

"One monkey is already too much; you think I'll let the rest of you into my forest?" Lilly asked, speaking up a little as she did.

"Who says I'd want to live near you too? Figured Vim would let me know where to go," Nebl said stiffly, sounding strangely not offended by Lilly's comment.

"Nebl..." I groaned.

"What? If the forest dies, no lumber. No wood. No charcoal. And then no mine either, because the humans won't be pulling out ores without fuel! No point staying here then, is there?" Nebl asked angrily, as if more upset with me than he was with Lilly's comments.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head at him.

He was serious. As a heart-attack.

Abandoning a home? That he's had for hundreds of years? He raised not just one generation here, but several... and possibly soon to be another with Lellip. So many years of sweat and memories... to just, give it up?

"Vim."

I blinked, glancing at my two friends... and realized what was wrong. I looked down, at the piece of wood in my hands, and found I had squeezed it so hard it had shattered. I only held a small clump of it; the rest was littering the floor.

"Sorry," I apologized, for both the mess and ignoring them.

They both sighed at me, but I knew they weren't too offended. They, like Renn, knew me. They knew what I was like, and that I didn't mean anything rude by it. Not intentionally, at least.

"It's not just because of the disease, Vim... I don't want my family associated with the chaos. Right now they're just trying to get me to wear their banner, but how long can I go without agreeing to it? How long until their gentle offers of honeyed words become veiled threats? And then actual ones?" Nebl asked.

"I'll be honest I'm not sure how far they'll take it. Randle outright attacked Light, and they didn't kill him. They didn't even banish him from the Society proper, just the Cathedral and their church. Hardly the act of someone truly intent on ending us all," Lilly said.

"What...? Then what's with all your talk of war and bloodshed?" Nebl asked.

I glanced at Lilly, wondering what she had said before we had shown up. Lilly had said such things to Nebl? She usually was vocal about her feelings and thoughts, but usually she kept her more... bloodshed ones to herself, per Nebl's term.

"It's what I think we should do. We should just destroy them all, so we can finally have peace and quiet for once. But even I know that there's more to it than that. Light is like Celine... I hated Celine, for many reasons, but one can't deny the fact she built a society of our kind in a world full of turmoil, and did it rather well," Lilly said.

"Okay, now I know something's wrong. You hearing this, Vim?" Nebl asked.

"I am. That's Windle talking," I said as I went to put away the wood I'd just destroyed, and then clean it up.

"Don't go telling him that," Lilly said.

I smiled at that. "Let me confront Light, Nebl. After I do I will know more, enough to make decisions and then act on them. Either way I'll return here and see if we can deal with the rot... though if it's as everywhere as it seems, short of burning the whole place down and re-growing the forest, there won't be much we can do," I said.

"Won't be able to stay here if that happens then, anyway. Forests return with a vengeance after a fire, but it could take years. Too long. Hm... I'll have the family start preparing, just in case either way," Nebl said with a nod.

"I'm not helping you carry all this ore north," Lilly said simply.

"I'll just get your son to help me," Nebl teased.

Lilly made an odd noise, a mix of a groan and a hiss, which made Nebl chuckle in victory.

Sighing gently, I wondered why so many things were happening at the same time. It wasn't just one or two things, but many.

As if the world was trying to distract me. From the thing I should be focusing on.

Brushing my hand against my thigh, as to clean it of wood scraps from the log I'd just accidentally crushed, I glanced again down at the orb in my hand.

I felt as if it was mocking me.

So I squeezed it.

While Nebl and Lilly argued over where he was going to move to, and who Branch was going to live with, I continued trying for a moment to breaking the monarch's heart.

Although I was upset and angry, I didn't put my all into it. I didn't want to endanger my two friends, or their families nearby, so I kept my full strength at bay.

Yet I still squeezed with enough force that had I been holding anything else, it would have shattered as easily as that rotted chunk of wood just now had done... but...

"Vim?"

After a tiny moment, I stopped trying to break the heart... which wasn't showing any signs of stress, and glanced up... to find my wife.

Frowning at Renn, I glanced around and wondered when she had snuck in. Lellip was standing a few feet away, near her grandfather and soon to be mother-in-law, and all of them were looking at me with looks of concern.

I shifted, and suddenly felt a little ashamed. Had I been so invested in breaking the heart that I had not noticed them all? Had they been talking to me? How long had I been trying? For both Renn and Lellip to be here it must have at least been a couple minutes...

And now there was this odd silence in the air. One that made me cringe.

"Were you... trying to break it, Vim?" Nebl asked softly, breaking the awkward silence finally.

Slowly nodding, I gestured with the heart and then held it out to Renn. She took it, a little excitedly. "I had been, yes," I said.

"Is that uh... possible?" Lilly asked. "I thought it wasn't. Thus why you hide them, or feed them to other monarchs," she added.

"It's not supposed to be, no," I said, as I thought of the heart I'd cracked down south. The one that Renn had given Landi.

Renn studied the dark heart, smiling happily at it as Lellip drew closer.

"That's a heart...?" Lellip whispered, in awe. Her expression told me this was the first time she'd ever seen one. Which meant Nebl had kept his promise all these years and never shown anyone else any I'd had him hold for me throughout the years.

"It's tinier than the other ones," Renn noted as she let Lellip take it. The young monkey was shocked at the thing's lack of weight, but only because she's never held one before. Otherwise she'd be surprised at how heavy it was instead.

Though... Tinier...? Right. Renn hadn't gotten to see the small one I'd taken from that little monarch back in Telmik, had she? It was in my bag, the one on my waist. I had put it there moments after Hands had given it to me, and he had done so in secret. Renn hadn't been around when I had gotten it, and I don't think I'd pulled it out since.

I'll show it to her later.

While a new conversation arose, centered on the heart and my odd attempt at breaking it, I decided to try again later.

Away from everyone else.

Maybe if I actually tried with all my strength, something would happen. I'd not tried again since I had cracked Landi's, out of fear of what'd happen...

But eventually I'll need to simply attempt it. Had that just been a fluke? Was I getting stronger? Or had that heart we'd given Landi been broken already, and I had simply enlarged the crack that was already there?

Sometimes I ignored things for far too long, didn't I?

Just another one of my many flaws, I guess...

"Vim!"

Blinking, I nodded as Renn turned to look at me. She had the heart again, and was smirking mischievously at me. "You're going to carry me through the snow, are you?" she asked.

Huh...? I glanced behind her, to the onlookers, and found them smiling gently at us. I had obviously missed a few changes in conversation, somehow. Hadn't they just been talking about the heart?

"Or you can carry me, if you'd like," I said.

Renn startled, and then she and others laughed... though I noted she was the only one who did so in a way that told me she had liked the idea. The rest had thought it purely a joke, Renn had seen it otherwise.

Smiling at that, I decided to put aside the heart and all the chaos for a moment. For tonight, at least.

We'd be leaving soon. Maybe even in the morning. So... it was only right I appreciated these moments.

There was a chance they'd soon be hard to come by, after all.

Chapter 458 Renn – Vim's Leap of Faith

I was now glad for the scarf that Vim had made me.

The wind was blowing roughly, and on that wind was not just snow but ice. It actually hurt a little, so I kept my head lowered and angled downward as to keep the stuff from hitting what little bit of my face was revealed to the world.

Although wearing my new set of clothes and leather made a few days ago, it wasn't as heavy-duty as the set from before. Vim decided to not make it as thick since soon winter would be over, and he didn't want us to stand out as much as before. This new set had less hooks and the leather was fashioned in a way that on first glance made it look like something a traveler would wear and not a mercenary.

But it still kept me warm, as did the fox wrapped around my neck and face. The hood was just as thick and heavy as the last one too, which helped... though I occasionally had to reach up to reset it. Even with it tied and latched, the wind sometimes blew strong enough to force it back behind my head.

Walking behind Vim, I followed the trail he left in the snow. It wasn't packed too heavily, only reaching our ankles, but it was fresh. Fresh enough that it flung everywhere, to the point it hid his footsteps within moments if I didn't keep pace with him.

Lilly was behind me, following close enough that if my tail hadn't been wrapped safely and warmly under my clothes and jacket she'd be able to reach out and grab it.

We'd been traveling through this storm for a few hours now, and I wasn't entirely sure where we were... but I had a strange assumption that we weren't far from that bridge that Vim and I had broken on our last trip through here.

This storm was why he had waited last time. We had let it pass before venturing these mountains. But now both the importance of our urgency, and Vim's trust in my abilities, kept us from doing such a thing again. Honestly I was a little sad that we'd not stayed at Lellip's home longer, since I had utterly enjoyed spending time with them... and getting to experience and see Lilly and the rest interacting with each other. But I understood our duty.

We needed to confront Light. And every day we lingered only made it more serious and risked greater problems.

I wasn't entirely sure what to expect, or even what I wanted from, confronting Light... but I hoped it ended well.

I wanted the Society to not split. I wanted Vim to remain the protector. I wanted to keep traveling around, visiting everyone.

The thought of all the newborns, all the relationships, all the people I've yet to meet and encounter made me want to weep. Hopefully I wouldn't lose access to such wonderful things. It made life so wondrous, so absolutely beautiful, to visit someone and be welcomed with a smile. To then be shown a new face, or to be asked for help... especially when it came to romance. Like Lellip wanting to go meet Branches.

It were those things I had joined the Society for. What I had wanted, and needed, all my life. To lose them now...

Then I walked into a wall.

I stumbled a bit, stepping back and away from what I'd just walked into, but I was grabbed from behind and steadied.

"Careful," Lilly said gently from behind, telling me she had been the one to steady me.

Glancing behind me, I smiled gently at the woman who had a thick cloth wrapped around her face. To the point I couldn't even see her eyes. Looking back ahead, I glared at Vim who had his back to us. Had he at least glanced back to make sure I was fine, after having walked into him?

About to grumble at him, to tease him for not being gentle with me, I stopped myself as I realized why he had stopped walking.

Stepping forward, Lilly and I joined Vim near the large crack in the world. I scanned the huge ravine, the canyon was white like I had remembered it... but I didn't see any of the remains of the bridge Vim and I had broken last time we'd been here.

In fact it wasn't the same location, I think. I didn't recognize any of the rocks or trees around here, though that might be because of the storm.

Enjoying the sight for a moment, I noticed the storm had softened a little. I glanced around with ease, and didn't flinch from the impact of cold ice. The wind had died down enough that some of the snow falling was doing so normally, and lazily. The stuff fluttered down like feathers, and not in a rage.

I watched the countless snowflakes falling into the canyon for a moment, and was glad I'd walked into Vim. Otherwise I might have just... walked right over the ledge without realizing it, since I had been lost in thought.

Though it was pretty, now that the wind wasn't that bad. Hopefully it stayed like this for a while, it was nice.

As if the world was going to be kind to us for a moment, as we faced this hurdle before us.

"So... what now? No bridge, Vim. Because of someone," I said lightly.

"Hm? She says that as if you broke it, Vim," Lilly noted.

Had we not told her? "Because he had? He broke it last time we came through here," I said.

Lilly sighed. "Of course he did."

Vim gestured at the huge canyon before us. "This isn't even where the bridge was. That's farther north of us," he said.

"So... what are we going to do then?" I asked, ignoring his lame attempt at avoiding responsibility.

"Hm? Vim can just leap across, can't he?" Lilly asked.

I tilted my head at her, a little shocked to realize she was right.

He could. Very likely.

"What about us though...? I can't jump that far. Are you saying you can, Lilly?" I asked. It was a huge gap, if it was flat open space it'd take me hundreds of steps to get across it.

"Huh...?" Lilly turned to look at me, sounding odd as if I'd just said something stupid.

"She means this. Don't bite your tongue, Renn," Vim said as he then reached over and grabbed me.

A little startled as I was picked up, I shifted a bit as I felt Vim's strong arms firmly grab me. He held me as if I was an injured person, in a cradle in his arms, and then he stepped back a few steps... away from the canyon.

"Wait...!" I felt my heart flutter as I realized what was about to happen.

"Don't bite your tongue," he said again, and I clenched my teeth even though I wanted to shout at him... as he then rushed forward and jumped.

The harsh wind returned, and I winced and closed my eyes as cold air and freezing snow rushed past and slapped into me. I felt weightless for a moment, as if I'd just been thrown, and then a few heartbeats later... we landed.

My whole body jolted as Vim landed, and I heard and felt his feet skid in both snow and ice, then we came to a stop.

Blinking wildly up at the bright sky above, I found my thoughts again as Vim smiled down at me.

"You okay?" he asked.

"You... jumped," I whispered.

He nodded. "Let me go get Lilly," he said as he lowered me. My feet found steady ground, but I felt a little less so as I stepped away from him and the canyon.

"Vim..." I groaned at him as he glanced me up and down, likely to confirm I really was okay. Once he seemed sure I was he stepped away and jumped back over the gap.

I watched him with wide eyes as he flew across, and landed on the other side. He disappeared into the forest upon landing, having jumped a little away from Lilly. He emerged, said a few things to Lilly and then picked her up the same way he had done me.

Taking a few deep breaths, I wondered if I should be offended or not as I watched them leap over to my side.

Although the gap was huge, it didn't take long for Vim to go from one side to the other. If I blinked while he jumped, I'd likely miss it, as he landed a few dozen feet from me.

He skidded a bit, as he had with me, and then put Lilly down once all was well.

"Makes me miss my wings," Lilly said off-handedly as she reached up to re-adjust the cloth covering her face. It had dislodged in the jump. She then checked her bags and items on her, to make sure nothing had been lost.

I groaned at that, since it hurt to hear it. I did my best to not dwell on it as I checked my own self up and down. To make sure all my stuff was still on me.

I still had my spear. The sword, which was now sharp. My bags were all here... I still had my fox scarf...

"Everyone good?" Vim asked.

"Seems so," Lilly said.

"I'm not...!" I groaned after I finished checking my stuff.

"Hm?" they both turned, frowning at me. Or well, Vim did. I wasn't sure if Lilly was thanks to her face-covering cloth.

I pointed at the huge canyon that Vim just leapt over. "Why did you make me go through that last time, if you could just do that? We didn't have to break the bridge, then!" I shouted at him.

Vim stood up a little straighter, then turned to look at the gap... and then smiled lightly at me. "Renn, it's not as wide a divide. It's not even half as big. I hadn't been able to jump across the section we'd gone to last time. That's why we came here this time, where it's not as wide," he said.

I calmed down a little, mostly thanks to his smirk. He was amused at my outburst.

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

"Isn't it...?" I asked as I stepped a little closer to the cliff. I studied the gap, the crack that separated this side of the mountain from that one.

"Can't tell...? Even with your memory?" Vim asked.

Wanting to grumble, I had no choice but to admit he was right. The bridge I had crossed, before it had broken, had definitely been longer than this section's gap was. Maybe even by twice the length.

"Never really thought about how far you can jump and how far you can't. How much farther than this could you successfully leap, Vim?" Lilly asked as she too studied the canyon.

"Not much more than this. It's why I fell into the trees just now, before getting you. I had worried if I didn't jump with that much strength I'd miss," he said.

Oh? So that had not been on purpose.

Interesting... "Still..." I grumbled, wanting to complain more... even if I knew it wasn't founded.

"Is it the fact you didn't jump with her originally, or the fact you broke the bridge that she's upset with?" Lilly asked him.

"Could be either, really," he answered.

Huffing at them, I gestured at the gap. "How far could you jump, Lilly?" I asked.

"Hm? Not far. I'm not built for that. I'm built for flying," she said simply.

Right...

"Don't even try it," Vim warned me.

"I'd not actually try...! I was just wondering. I've never really tried to jump something like this, so was just wondering if I could do it too," I said.

"Doubt it, Renn. Vim's the oddity," Lilly said.

I knew that, of course, but...

"My uncle could have," I said as I looked again at the gap.

I'd seen him do so. Or well, he had jumped something similar. From one cliff to another.

"The monarch? I've no doubt," Vim said.

"What's this...? You had a monarch for an uncle, Renn?" Lilly asked.

"Didn't I tell you? My great-uncle had been a giant cat," I said. In fact I did remember telling her about him...

"You had called him a great one, and that he was more non-human than the rest of you. That doesn't really outright tell me he had been a monarch," Lilly said simply.

Oh. Right...

I nodded. "He'd been a monarch. In fact I have his heart. Or well, it's not on me, but I have it safe somewhere," I said. I glanced at Vim as I spoke, wondering if he wanted me to tell Lilly about his little crystal home he hid away from everyone. He trusted her, far more than I or anyone else really knew or understood, but I wasn't sure just how far that trust went.

"Supposedly my family had a great owl in our ancestry too. One so big no tree was big enough for it to perch upon. Vim says otherwise, though," Lilly said with a gesture at him.

"Hm?" I glanced at Vim, wondering what that meant.

"The tree at their home, that giant one? An owl used to live there. Her ancestor. She doesn't believe me though, for some reason," Vim says.

"It had to have been bigger than that!" Lilly argued.

I smiled at her, and her strange seriousness of her comment. She didn't just believe it, she was willing to argue over it.

"Did you slay that owl, Vim?" I asked gently.

"Yes. The whole floor of the forest around that tree had been littered with human bones. Humans were its favorite meal. I couldn't let such a creature be," he said.

Oh...

Lilly seemed to perk up a little at that. "Now that I believe," she said happily.

Sighing gently at her strange pride over her ancestor's cruelty, I decided to let it be. I stepped away from the canyon's cliff. "Speaking of monarchs... You've seen many, right Lilly?" I asked her.

She tilted her head at me. "I guess...?"

I ignored Vim's look, as Lilly and I went to walk side-by-side while we headed deeper into the forest. The wind still had not picked back up, so I was going to use the opportunity to have a casual conversation while I could.

"How many were able to talk? That you know of?" I asked her.

"Talk...? Oh. As in reason? Hm..." Lilly went quiet for a moment, and I heard Vim sigh behind us. He was now walking behind us, following dutifully.

Glancing over my shoulder, I smiled gently at him. He looked bored.

"Maybe a few? Most monarchs I've seen were from a distance. As I watched Vim kill them. But yeah, at least a couple could talk for sure," Lilly said, shrugging as she did.

I hummed at that. "So most are basic creatures then. Kind of like the little one at the Cathedral," I said.

She nodded. "Think so? Why?"

"Was just wondering. As you know Witch and I had hunted a few, but only my uncle and the snake that ate my family had been able to talk. Could yours talk? Your owl?" I asked her.

"I don't know... had it been able to talk, Vim?" Lilly asked as she turned to look at him.

"Yes. It had been rather smart, actually. It had tried to reason with me," he said.

"Reason with you? How so?" Lilly asked.

"It tried to bribe me. It offered knowledge, loyalty and whatnot if I spared its life. Once it realized who I was, at least. Before then it had been very cocky and abhorrent," he said.

"Realized who you were," Lilly said with a happy laugh, as if she really enjoyed such a thing.

I though noted it for a different reason.

I've heard now, from monarchs and saints alike, that Vim was known. Elaine had said they called him the Great One.

An odd term to use, considering to me that term meant something else. My family had called monarchs Great Ones, as had Witch.

Personally I interpreted that as them simply calling Vim a monarch, since they didn't know any better. But...

"Did monarchs use to have societies, Vim? Like we do?" I asked.

Lilly slowed a bit thanks to my question, as we both turned to wait for his answer.

"An odd question, Renn. Yes. A few did. A few had built whole nations and kingdoms. Remember the egg at the Weaver's? Her husband had been a part of such a system. Non-humans and humans had been slaves to those great monarchs. Some were brutal beasts, who saw those like us as food. Others saw us the same as their creators, as servants or toys. Monarchs could be, or rather can be, as varied as we can. Some are smart. Some can even be gentle and understanding... but just as we can be cruel and evil, so too can they. My mother would say their great cruelty comes from their great strength and their births," he said.

"Your mother...?" Lilly whispered, as she came to a stop.

I paused with her as Vim walked up to us, stopping as well. We paused beneath a huge tree, as Vim gestured lightly at us. "Basically mother reasoned their brutality on their upbringing. Between their great sizes, and powers, and their belief in being higher beings... thanks to how they had come to be, they believed themselves to be destined rulers. That they belonged on top of the world, above everyone else. You see the same thing amongst our kind often, so it's believable. Look at all the non-humans we had culled Lilly, those who saw humans as play things or even our fellows as beneath them," Vim said.

I glanced at Lilly, to confirm what he was saying... but Lilly still had that cloth covering her face. She nodded though. "Yeah. I guess it makes sense?" she said.

Did it...? "You're saying power corrupts, basically," I said. I've heard such things before, and not just from him.

He nodded. "Basically."

"Your mother believed that? Really?" Lilly asked.

"I suppose. My mother had rather firm beliefs, even though she taught many perspectives. Even the ones she didn't agree with," he said.

"You talk as if she had been religious," Lilly said with a small laugh.

Vim shifted, and I immediately noticed the uncomfortable look on his face.

"She had been...?" I asked, very surprised to learn so.

"You're kidding!?" Lilly was as shocked as I was, it seemed.

Vim's eyes narrowed a bit at us. "And why is that so surprising?" he asked, as if offended.

Lilly shifted, glancing at me in a way that told me she had clearly noticed his tone. I nodded and took the brunt of it, for her. "You, Vim. You make it surprising. I'd... well, I guess we all thought it'd be otherwise. What with how much you detest religion," I said.

He sighed as he crossed his arms, looking visibly bothered. "I don't detest it. I simply don't agree with how it's used by people. If you must know my mother had been more devout than anyone. But she had not allowed her faith to blind her, like Celine and the rest," he said.

"Hm..." Lilly hummed at that, as my mind whirled.

His mother had been religious...! Yet, for as much as he hates religion... he seemed to be defending her rather fiercely! If we pushed or teased about it, I could tell he'd get actually upset. It seemed it was a touchy subject.

How fascinating. It told me so much, and made so much sense too.

He had told me how his mother had instilled in him the idea of right and wrong. The memory of those scales he had given her, held by her statue beneath the Cathedral, became more understandable too.

Vim's entire understanding of right and wrong stemmed from his mother, then. Or at least, the foundations of it all.

"What of your father?" I asked, wanting to learn more but also trying to not be too rude about it as I did.

Vim then startled, and gave me a really odd look... as he then reached up to brush off some snow that had landed on his cheek. "I... don't know," he said softly.

A little worried of the look on his face, I wondered if I should say something or not as Lilly reached over and lightly grabbed my sleeve as to get my attention.

Glancing at her, she leaned closer and whispered. "What were their names?" she asked.

"I don't know. I only knew them as mother and father," Vim answered before I could, seemingly still lost in thought.

He was likely searching his memories thoroughly, to figure out if he knew if his father had been religious or not.

I wasn't sure how he could not outright know, especially since he knew so well about his mother's beliefs. But... this was Vim we were talking about. Odds are he had simply never really thought about it before.

Lilly released my sleeve and sighed, in a way that told me she regretted asking. Odds are she'd have a slight grimace on her face, if I could see it.

"Your uh... parents. They taught you well, huh?" Lilly then asked, sounding a little rushed as she did. She was likely blaming herself for Vim's current oddness and was trying to get him over it.

"Yes. Why?" Vim asked as he glanced at her.

She shifted, and I noticed the way her hands clenched up. As if she was a child being glared at by her father, Lilly suddenly looked worried. "You once told me you had been raised to be a general. A warrior. So it was your parents who did that?" she asked.

Oh! He had told me that once too!

Vim nodded. "Yes."

"You said they wanted you to be a teacher," I said.

He smiled and nodded. "I know. To them it had been the same thing. Or well... one in the same. Odd, I know, but that's how it was."

Huh... maybe it was not that they wanted him to be both, but each had their own wants for him. Maybe his mother had wanted him to be a teacher, and his father a general and they had simply agreed to raise him to be both...?

Or maybe to them, their society back then, a general was a teacher and vice-versa? It had been a long time ago, after all...

"Basically they wanted me to lead. To teach and guide and..." Vim started to explain, in a little more detail, but the wind started to pick up. He shut an eye as we were buffeted by a gust full of cold snow. I lowered my head deeper into my fox scarf, as to cover as much of my face as possible as the gust blew.

After it passed, the loud roars of distant gusts heading our way could be heard. The snow all around us started to dance, in every direction. The storm had returned.

He sighed. "Let's go. Let's get off this peak before dark," he said as he stepped between Lilly and I, walking past us as to take the lead.

Lilly groaned. "Stupid wind!" she cursed as she turned to follow.

I nodded, agreeing with her. Yes. Now that he had used it as an excuse to end the conversation, we'd not get the rest out of him anytime soon. Even if we could hold such a conversation over the loud wind and elements.

Maybe another time. Piece by piece, as I've been doing all this time.

He was getting better, after all. Opening up far more than usual, and without as much hesitation. He had not just spoken of his parents, revealing more than before, but had done it while we weren't alone. With another nearby, Lilly. And from what she's told me, he's never once spoken about his parents in front of her before. Not in hundreds of years.

So it was only a matter of time.

Though who knew how long it'd take to hear more from him, thanks to the chaos that awaited us at our next destination.

Following Vim and Lilly, we headed deeper into the forest... away from the large gorge we'd just leapt over. Towards Lumen, and the chaos that beckoned.

#### Chapter 459 Vim – A Cold Pass's Thoughts

The large bridge, the one from the era previous, was rather empty. Though only of people. The wind was surprisingly not as wild at the moment as it had been earlier, but there was a good layer of sleet and snow all over the place. Many of the trees weren't green anymore, but white from snow.

I was standing near the edge of bridge, since I was waiting for Lilly and Renn. They were both in the nearby cluster of trees, out of sight.

We had already crossed the bridge, since we had hurried across it. The thing wasn't too bad; thanks to the lighter wind than usual for this time of the year, but it was no pleasant crossing. Between the wind and the cold it was too rough to talk or anything while traversing it.

Thanks to the cloudy skies, and the snow falling, I couldn't see Lumen in the distance or any of the nearby villages either. I had been hoping to, and still did. I'd been wondering if the damage from those massive creatures had still been visible from a distance and above like this.

Maybe I'd be able to see it as we descended the mountain, once we got under and away from these storm flurries.

"Almost there," I whispered to the snow falling around me.

Two days. At most. And I'd be there. Before Light and the rest of her group.

A do or die moment, I guess.

I've had many of those, more than I could count, but this one felt a tad worrisome. I'd always known the Society, this little project of non-humans, would eventually fail or fall apart... but I'd honestly not thought it'd happen this way. I had thought it'd either go out with a bang, or with a quiet whimper. Not with me stepping away from it intentionally, in this way, without bloodshed.

Though I suppose there could still be bloodshed...

Taking a deep breath of the chill air, I breathed it out with such a huff that I should have made it hazy. But my body had already long adapted to the cold.

Renn wanted me to be angry at them. At Light.

Yet she also wanted me to find a way to not cause drama. To keep myself as protector, and keep the Society intact.

Lilly, although originally claimed she wanted me to simply go to war with them... was now saying the opposite too. I had originally thought it because of Renn's influence, but now I knew the real reason. It was because of her family. Her children. She's not said it aloud yet, at least to me, but I knew why she'd become a little more... understanding concerning the situation.

She worried if she took a stand against Light, alongside us, that she'd then lose her children. Because they'd choose Light and the Church, the Society, over her. Over us.

I couldn't blame Lilly if she decided to take their side too, against me, if it came to that. Children were that important.

"Children..."

I shifted, crunching frozen dirt and gravel, and tried to not think of the prophecy concerning Renn.

Hopefully that too was just a misunderstanding. Or some fluke, or scheme...

I wanted to deny its existence, but... how could I? What kind of evil bastard would I be to deny a life to be born like that? Especially a special one, Renn's daughter, for crying out loud...

To ruin that prophecy... would mean to ensure she never had a child. At least, my child. Doing such a thing would no doubt ruin our relationship. Renn was able to overlook a lot of my faults, but that would be something she'd never forgive me for. And I could understand why, of course.

What kind of man, a husband and partner, would think such a thing? There was no excuse valid enough to justify such thoughts.

My mother would be so ashamed of me for thinking such a thing. I couldn't even imagine the things she'd do in her fury. Whatever tribulation she cooked up as to punish me for such thoughts would have likely been worse than anything I'd endured so far in my life to date. That was how bad such a thought was.

Yet I couldn't help myself.

I hated prophecies. Beyond reason. And did so even more purely for those that concerned me.

Though in theory, the prophecy concerning Renn's daughter wasn't necessarily mine. I was simply associated by default, but that was just an assumption. No one has outright said it was to be my child yet, had they...?

Groaning a little, I reached up to rub my face. I wiped some snow off, pretending to care about it, as I tried to push aside the terrible thoughts.

"You okay Vim?"

I turned to find Renn. She had a happy smile on her face, half hidden by the fox scarf I had gotten for her while we had stayed at Nebl's. It was a tad smaller than I had wanted, but it seemed to be working for her.

Lilly wasn't in sight, yet, so I simply nodded. "Yes. You two ready to continue?" I asked.

Renn glanced behind her and right as she did Lilly emerged from the forest. "Yep. Are we going to stop at the Clothed Woman first? Like last time?" Renn asked happily.

Oh. "No. She moved locations, Renn."

Renn paused a moment, and gave me a frown as Lilly walked over. "What's this? That crazy woman moved somewhere else?" Lilly asked, having obviously overheard.

I nodded. "Last time I came through here, to pick up Fly, I stopped and checked on her and a few others nearby. She told me she was going to head north before winter started, as to avoid Light. Brandy told her about Light and the rest coming to Lumen," I explained.

Renn groaned as Lilly nodded. "Makes sense. They are like fire and water," Lilly said.

"North where, Vim?" Renn asked, sounding a little upset. Likely at me, for not telling her sooner.

"I'm not sure yet. She told me she'd let me know once she found a suitable home. I'll probably get a letter from her in a year or two once she settles down somewhere. She's done such things before," I said.

Lilly nodded. "Yeah. She's an odd one, Renn. And honestly not worth your worry. She's a cultist."

Renn glanced at her friend, and I noted the look of pain in her eyes as she did. She hadn't liked hearing Lilly speak bad of someone she considered a friend.

I kept my own thoughts to myself, and gestured for the two to join me back on our path. We headed away from the bridge we'd just crossed, towards the path that lead around the mountain pass and down the other side of the mountain. The one that led to Lumen.

"You know Vim, we really need to work on your communication skills," Renn said to me as we began down the path.

"How so?" I asked. I assumed she meant my lack of informing her of important details of our members, especially those she had an interest in, but I wanted to verify what she meant first.

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"You waited to tell me about Herra. Lamp. And now this? What else are you forgetting?" she asked, sounding a little upset.

"Vim only really cares when it's a matter of life and death. He's always been that way," Lilly said.

That didn't feel like she was defending me, but rather stating aloud how she found my lack of care a negative trait too.

"We've been busy..." I said lightly.

"A poor excuse Vim, really," Lilly said.

Renn nodded, glad that Lilly agreed.

I sighed at them. "And for some things, like Herra's death, I had assumed you had known already. Informed by Oplar for example," I said.

"I love the bear, and she is usually one for gossip, but lately our time together has been short. Too short to share such things, Vim," Renn pointed out.

"How come she gets the pass, thanks to being busy, but I don't?" I asked.

"She and I don't spend nearly every waking moment together, obviously!" Renn said.

Well that was true...

Lilly chuckled. "You're not going to win this one Vim. Especially since we've all had similar complaints over the years. Maybe you'll finally start listening now though, what with it coming from her," she said.

"I've been trying to be better," I said.

Renn stepped closer to me and nodded. "You have been! Just a little more and you'll be perfect," she said, excited.

"I'm not already perfect?" I asked.

She scoffed and laughed at me, making me smile in return.

A small gust of snow blew past, putting a pause on our conversation for a bit. We walked in silence for a mile or so, until we entered a more heavily forested section of the path. One that was dense enough to block more of the wind and snow. Between the forest, and our descent, the storm eased up enough for words to be exchanged again.

Lilly and Renn went to talking about Merit and Lumen, which I tried to ignore.

I'd forgotten about Merit.

There was nothing to worry about, I believed... Merit had sent letters to Lilly, telling Lilly that Renn was to be trusted and to watch over her. But this was Merit we were talking about. She was an odd one.

She'd not harm Renn, but she'd not hesitate to shock me with all her might once we met again.

I'd deserve it, I guess...

Lumen was starting to look like some dangerous dungeon or something, what with all the possible threats and traps within it.

Even if I ignored Light and the rest, I knew it'd be a mess. They were now likely fully involved with Thraxton and the rest of the merchant guilds, setting up the new nation-state. I'd heard a little of the news of it, they had officially declared their sovereignty and independence, and had invited dignitaries and whatnot... but I was honestly not paying as much attention to it as I should. And not just because we had so much drama already happening in the Society.

What they were doing was their own venture. They voted to do it. They could handle it... until they needed my help, at least. Then I'd handle it.

Or well...

"What are you thinking, Vim?"

I glanced to my right, and found Lilly. But she hadn't been the one to ask me that, so I turned and found Renn on my left.

Frowning at the two, who were both close enough to lock arms with me, I wondered what they were doing. The wind and snow had died down a bit more, so they weren't drawing near for warmth at least.

Probably some kind of joke or something.

"Just contemplating the headache I'm soon to endure. All the drama in Lumen," I said.

"Like what?" Lilly asked.

My frown deepened. Didn't she know full well...? "Well... Light. The Society. Their stupid schemes of making a new nation-state. I'll likely have to deal with Thraxton too, he's annoying. I hate dealing with kings. Plus, thanks to the previous chaos, I'll have to properly check the town and the ports. The boats too, and those humans Renn's gotten us involved with..." I said, starting the long list of things I'd soon have to deal with.

Renn groaned a little. "You saying it aloud like that makes me feel like I'm part of the problem..." she said.

"How so?" Lilly asked her.

"Most of those are my fault. It feels like, at least," Renn admitted.

"Are they?" Lilly asked me.

I shrugged. "She's likely trying to say that Light's schemes are somehow her fault, since she's involved in them. The nation-state shouldn't be attributed to her, but one could argue the rest of the chaos is. Renn's the one that got noticed by Fly and those other non-humans back then, and thus started the whole fiasco. Plus she's the one who invited Lamp and those pirates to the Society, too... though I had invited the pirate boy," I said.

"Pirate boy...? Pirates? What's all this now?" Lilly asked, sounding amused.

Glancing at Renn, I was a little surprised to see her sheepishly smile at me from behind her scarf. She hadn't told Lilly about them yet?

"Just humans we got involved with. You know how she is about them," I said for her.

"Ah. Humans. I love you Renn, but I'll never understand your fascination with them," Lilly said, sounding no longer interested.

"I can't help it..." Renn groaned.

Reaching over, I patted Renn gently on the shoulder. Her leather armor was not as thick as the last set, but still a tad heavier than a woman would usually wear.

She locked eyes with me for a moment, and I was glad to see her relax a little upon doing so. I wanted to tell her a secret, one that would likely shock her, but knew I couldn't. Not here and now, and especially not in front of Lilly.

I decided to do so the next chance I got. Which shouldn't be too long from now, since Lilly wouldn't be able to join us into Lumen.

Remembering such a thing, I frowned as I slowed a bit. They both noticed, and slowed to a pause as well.

Glancing around, I realized where we were.

"Vim?" Renn asked.

I nodded. "Mind doing me a favor, Lilly?" I asked her.

"Hm? What's up?" Lilly tilted her head at me, and reached up to take off the face covering she'd been wearing to protect herself from the chill of the air.

Her hair was a slight mess as she revealed it all, and I pointed farther down the path we were taking. "Not far from here is a bend. If I remember correctly from our last trip this way, the old path isn't really visible anymore. But there used to be a path here that led back up the other side of the mountain, heading towards that big plateau nearby," I explained.

Lilly slowly nodded. "I know where the plateau is. I used to fly over it a lot."

I nodded. I figured. Thus why I was about to ask her this favor. Out of everyone she was likely the only one really able to do it.

"Do you then also know where those waterfalls are? The ones that look like they're pouring from both sides when viewed from above?" I asked.

Lilly perked up. "I do! Used to wonder how that happened, since there's no river up there for them to sprout from!" she said happily.

Good. "Near those waterfalls, on the side that overlooks the limestone quarry in the distance, is a cave. One that you can only get to if you climb down from the top. It can't be seen from above, or below, thanks to how it recesses into the cliff face. If you'd be willing, while Renn and I go confront Light, I'd like you to get the item I left in that cavern for me," I said.

Renn stepped closer. "Wait what? She's not going to come with us to face Light?"

Lilly slowly shook her head. "I can't go into Lumen, Renn. I'm banished from there. The whole city, to boot," she said.

I nodded. "If it all goes sideways it won't matter. But until it does we still must play by the rules," I said.

Renn didn't like the sound of that. Her heavy hood shifted, thanks to her ears.

Looking back to Lilly, I gestured lightly at her. "You'll need to take a torch with you. It's a dark cave. You'll know it's the right one if the inside of it is full of square blocks, as if someone cut them all to shape. At the end of the cave, you'll find two very large blocks that have a gap between them. You'll understand what I mean when you see it. Slide your sword into the gap and wiggle it around until it catches the item inside. It might take a few tries, but you should be able to drag it out," I said.

Lilly frowned at that. "Something a normal person can actually get? Really Vim? here I thought you'd say I needed to break or move the blocks," she said with a smirk.

"Right?" Renn agreed.

"I actually hid this one with the intention of allowing another to grab it, if necessary. It's that type of thing. Anyway it should be a leather binder, with a bunch of flaps inside. They'll look like odd strips of paper," I said.

"A book, you mean?" Lilly asked with a grin.

"Well... it could look like one, I suppose," I admitted. It would, to someone who didn't know what they were looking at. It did look like a really odd leather bound book, with odd papers within its binding, I suppose.

"What is it?" Renn asked, sounding excited.

"The flaps are skin. The skin of a god," I said.

The two then went still... and groaned at me. They both shook their head, almost in sync with each other. "Shouldn't have asked," they both said together.

Chapter 460 Renn – Lumen's Walls

Shifting a little, I tried not to smirk too much as Vim slowly stood.

Clinging to his back, there was a small moment of pure bliss as Vim took a deep breath and sighed. I enjoyed the feeling of his chest as he did so, and the way his whole body got a tad bit tighter in the process.

"Feel fine?" Vim asked as he tilted his head back a bit, as if to look at me. I leaned forward, so we could just barely meet eyes. "Yeah!" I said.

In truth it was a tad cumbersome. Since we had a few bags. Not as much as we had before reaching Telmik, but we still had more than normal. Vim had situated most of them on his sides and in his front, but I also had a few tied to my own back and waist.

They didn't completely ruin the feeling of riding on his back, but I did wish we didn't need to carry them at this moment. It was so rare that Vim let me be so clingy to him, outside of the bed, so I wanted to enjoy it fully.

Even if it was only for a few moments.

"So, like I said. I'll climb it quickly. Just keep your head down, don't bite your tongue, and keep hold of me. If for some reason you slip I'll catch you," Vim once again said, giving me warnings and tips as we both stared up the massive wall of white.

We were in front of one of Lumen's massive walls. Where the forest was really thick, and not near any roads or entrances. No gates or towers were on this section, seemingly because it was not a place they seemed to think would be attacked. Not far behind us was a massive section of heavily wooded rocks, the type that no person or horse could easily traverse. Even bears would avoid them, so it made sense that the humans figured it not a place to worry about.

"I had been looking forward to going through the gates again, Vim," I said lightly.

"I know. But like I said, I don't want Light and the rest to know we're here yet. Art of surprise and all that," he said.

I nodded, and sighed a little as I brushed my cheek against his hair and ear. I liked the feel of our faces touching, especially since it was a rather new sensation.

If what I was doing bothered Vim, he didn't let it show as he studied the wall before us. It was actually quite a feat to be able to claim he could scale the wall, and do so with me on his back. It was made of those huge white blocks most of Lumen was made from, and though they were essentially giant bricks... they were rather smooth. Too smooth to climb, even though some parts showed age and wear with cracks and broken pieces.

"You know Vim..." I tried not to get too distracted by the feel of his cheek on mine as I thought of something.

"Hm?"

"You're strong," I said.

"Well... yes?" he tilted his head a bit, enough to separated our cheeks. I glared at him, but knew he had not done it on purpose. He had simply glanced at me.

"I mean, you're strong in the sense that you shouldn't be. And not just because of your abilities. You don't ever train. You don't run, you don't work out, even when you spar with me you don't even ever break a sweat. How is that?" I asked.

"Oh. Yes. You're not the first to notice. I'm lucky, I don't need to keep my body in shape," he said as he nodded, understanding what I meant.

"How? Is it something I could do too?" I asked.

"You've not changed much at all, Renn. You don't need to worry about that. But no, there isn't. I was made this way," he said.

Right... "Your parents," I said.

He nodded.

Shifting my knees a little, I tried not to let him notice my sudden interest. Just in case he tried to suddenly leap up the wall, as to keep us from having this conversation.

"What about... that thing Lilly mentioned once?" I asked.

"What thing?"

"Muscle memory. When we started to spar at the smithy, she said she was glad for it. That she had been worried she'd been getting rusty, having not done so in a long time. Don't you suffer the same? Even if your body doesn't need to keep in shape, what about that stuff?" I asked.

He chuckled at me. "That is true. Muscle memory only can compensate so much. But you're forgetting something," he said.

"I am...?"

"How much experience do you think I have, Renn? In fighting? Or waging war? Honestly?" he asked.

Hesitating... I wasn't sure how to answer that.

Experience...? Vim likely had more than I could imagine. Even what little history I knew of him told me how long he's been alive and how most of that life has been rife with war. Possibly even thousands of years worth.

Even just the years he's spent with the Society...! I could only imagine how many battles, and chaotic events like the monsters he had faced here in Lumen, had happened just in these last few hundred years alone!

"Exactly. Even if I did suffer such... degradation, it'd take a lot longer for me to suffer it compared to a normal person. Hell, even compared to a non-human. Even if my nerves and reflexes did lessen without use, I can't imagine it happening. I've simply been in too many situations and have too many experiences. To me fighting, man or monster, is normal. As normal as you eating a snack," he said.

I grinned at him. "Can we get one? Before confronting Light?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. In fact I plan to not confront her right away. I want to examine the city for a moment, and then sneak you into the company and put you next to Merit," he said.

My grin slowly faded. "I'd love to see Merit first... but why are we doing it that way?" I asked.

"Because I worry. I agreed to let you meet Light, Renn. To confront her with me. But that doesn't mean I'll be foolish. We don't know what they are planning, the extent they're willing to go, or their numbers. We also don't even know who we can trust. Merit right now is the only person in these walls I trust. At least with your life," he said.

Taking a deep breath, I went ahead and squeezed him. With not just my arms, but my legs too.

"I love you, Vim," I said happily

"Hm...?" he didn't seem to really understand why I'd say such a thing here and now, but it was fine.

After all he'd just simply once again proved to me why he was everything I wanted and needed. And had done so effortlessly, without even realizing it.

I wanted to kiss his cheek, but before I could he nodded and looked up the wall. He stepped forward, and I stiffened a little as I realized we were about to climb it.

"I'll stop at the top, if there's no one around. So we can look at the city from up there for a moment," he said.

"Okay..." I felt oddly anxious as I nodded.

I wonder what this was going to feel like. Like the jump from earlier? When he had leapt over that canyon? Or will it feel like that weird weightless feeling when we had flown on Miss Beak's back?

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"Take a breath. Don't bite your tongue. Ready?" Vim asked, patting my arm around his neck as he did.

I nodded. "Ready." And I did so, and focused as to not bite my tongue as he warned. He kept warning that same thing, so I knew that meant it was a big possibility. Vim only warned out of experience, which meant others he'd done this with had bit their tongues before.

"Here I go."

Then he jumped.

For a tiny moment I squeezed up, closing my eyes and clinging to him, as the world got suddenly very heavy. I had to actually hold on with far more strength than I expected, thanks to the force pushing down upon us... upon me, as we flew up into the air.

Then the feeling of heaviness abruptly ended, and I had to cling to him for a different reason. He had jumped up and into the wall, hitting it hard enough to dig his fingers and hands into the stone. It kept us from falling back down, but also nearly sent me flying off his back. I had went from falling down, to feeling like I was being flung upwards since he had came to an abrupt stop.

"You okay?" Vim asked as he clung to the wall for a moment.

A little stunned, I glanced around a bit and then nodded. We were already half way up the wall!

Then he jumped again. I'm not sure how he did it, since I had thought only his hands and fingers had been in the wall, but we went flying upwards once more. This time there was no abrupt stop, but instead a strange graceful one... as we flew over the side of the rampart walls and onto the wall itself.

Vim landed rather gently, as if we'd not just jumped many dozens of feet into the air, and we both hurriedly looked around.

The wall was smaller than I had thought it would have been. The section we had landed on had these huge bricks on the outer rims, blocking most of the world from sight. This both hid us, and made it feel a little claustrophobic. I sat up a bit on Vim's back, as to look up and down the wall... and found no one in sight.

There was a large tower down one side, but it had a door and no windows. If anyone was in it, I couldn't tell. The other way also had a tower, but it was far away and before you reached the tower the wall diverted in different directions. Though I couldn't see where or how, thanks to how tall the sides of the walls were.

"Doesn't look like anyone's here," I said.

"Nope. Figured," Vim said as he stepped over to the other side of the wall. He grabbed the top of one of the upper rampart ledges, and lifted us up. Half a moment later he was half-sitting and half-kneeling on the wall's edge, and we were overlooking Lumen in its entirety.

A little stunned at the sight, I had to blink a few times... since it was so bright.

Lumen had always been bright. Since most of its bricks were those white ones, but now it had the added affect of snow layering it. Then it also seemed like nearly every chimney was leaking gray smoke, which only further made the sun overhead gleam off the city.

"Looks fine...?" I said as I scanned the city. I looked for anything familiar, like the Animalia Guild or the ports, but strangely couldn't find them. Likely because I'd never seen the city from this angle, and also because we were on basically the opposite side of the city.

"Oddly it does. There's where that giant creature had sprouted from beneath. Looks like it's all patched up already. Humans really do work fast when they want to," Vim said as he pointed to a section of the city in the distance.

I followed his point, but wasn't really able to tell if he was right or not. All I saw were buildings covered in snow, surrounded by haze from the fireplaces and stuff.

"Where's the Society?" I asked.

Vim pointed the other way, not far from the great expansive ocean in the distance.

I studied the spot he had pointed at for a moment, and after a bit recognized the building. It was a tad bigger than the others near it, and although was also covered in snow and haze from chimneys it also had some green upon it.

"It's a good thing it's not near any of these walls and towers. Otherwise people would see our members on the roof," I said.

"Humans don't have good eyesight anyway. You ready? I'm going to drop down unless you want to study the city longer," he asked.

For a small moment I debated telling him to wait, since this was likely a scene I'd not see again for a long time. And not just because we might soon be leaving Lumen for good.

How often would I be overlooking such a huge city like this...?

Taking a small breath, I nodded. "I'm ready. I'll remember it well enough and paint it someday," I said.

"Hm..." Vim grunted at that and slid forward, he dangled his legs over the ledge and I squeezed him tighter. I could feel the solid stone beneath me, thanks to one of the bags. The way he was sitting on the ledge made me feel as if it was me who was doing so.

"You're... just going to slide off, aren't you?" I asked worriedly.

"Yep. I'll land there, away from buildings. Looks like some kind of work area. I'll fall slowly, since I'll grab the wall not long before we land," he said.

"Grab the wall...?" I asked, wondering what that meant, but didn't get an answer. Vim simply slipped forward, and suddenly we were falling.

I grimaced, since we had fallen so close to the wall that my shoulder and one of my bags scrapped against it for a moment. But Vim spun a bit, and then I heard what his grabbing the wall had meant. He had genuinely grabbed it, and dug a few fingers into it... even as we fell.

There was a loud scrapping sound, as if two heavy stones were rubbing against each other, as we slid down the wall. Vim kept a few fingers in the wall, and used his foot and knee as guidance, and before I knew it...

We were on the ground.

My body felt stiff, almost painfully so, as Vim stepped away from the wall and we looked around. It seemed we were behind some kind of workshop, as Vim had thought. There were large tables and benches around, all littered with metal and leather stuff. Though I couldn't tell what they were making from the bits and pieces around us.

My ears fluttered beneath my hat as I heard the sound of stones and rocks bouncing around us. I turned a bit, as Vim started walking, and saw the source. Dozens of tiny pieces of white rocks were clattering around near the wall. He had damaged the wall... but how badly? I glanced up, to try and find the spots where Vim had basically clawed into, but wasn't able to pinpoint them.

Vim didn't give me time to figure it out. Before I could even get off his back he hurried around the workshop, stepping between buildings. We passed through a couple rather small, and smelly, alleys... and eventually stepped out into a familiar styled road. One with the white brick.

It wasn't a main road, and instead looked like one of those smaller housing districts. There didn't seem to be anyone around our immediate area, but I heard voices and activity nearby. Especially in the buildings.

The noisiness of the city had returned.

Vim patted my arm, letting me know it was time to release him. I did so, a little slowly since I didn't want to, and found my footing.

For a few moments I adjusted the bags I carried, as Vim did the same. He even took one of the ones I carried, letting me not feel as stuffy as I also adjusted my clothes a bit. They had shifted during his climbing and falling.

"Is that how you used to bring down castles, Vim?" I asked as I got my tail situated.

"Huh...? Oh. Kind of. Funny," he seemed to find my question humorous, but I had actually meant it rather seriously.

I had heard before that during the wars he had actually participated in sieges and brought down a few castles and towns. I wonder if that had been how he had done so.

Once we were done, or rather once I was done, I nodded to Vim and we began to walk deeper into the city. I wasn't sure at all where we were, but knew that as long as I headed towards the ports I'd eventually find my way if I had to.

As we walked, my heart started to beat even faster. Even more so than it had during our little wall climbing event just now.

"Renn...?" Vim seemed to notice, and I smiled at him.

"I feel nervous," I told him honestly.

He slowed a bit, and nodded. "Right..." he said, understanding.

Taking a deep breath, I gestured lightly at the city around us. We were starting to see people, having neared a major road. "It's been so long...! And there's so much I need to do, and so many people to talk to...!" I said.

"Hm... do your best to be prompt about it. I'll confront Light after handing you off to Merit. Depending on how it goes... I might be coming back to pick you up, as to run away," Vim said.

"We won't be running, Vim. We'll be simply moving on," I corrected him.

He smiled and nodded.

"Plus... try your best to not let that happen, please. Really," I said as I reached over to grab his hand.

He nodded again, and his smile softened... and then died down. "I know, Renn. I know."

Gulping a little, I nodded again at him. We've had plenty of talks about this... about what was about to happen. So I knew there didn't need to be anything more said about it. And I knew he's also had such conversations without me too. With Lilly, Nebl and everyone else.

I knew Vim was taking this seriously. He's been rather... focused these last few days. A little too much so, in fact.

He was anxious too. Even if he wouldn't ever admit it.

"Even if it goes badly... can I still meet her, Vim?" I asked.

"Hm...? Yes. If she's still alive, at least."

"Bah! Vim!" I smacked him with my free hand, trying hard to not laugh at his comment. Especially since it hadn't been a joke at all!

He sighed and nodded, then pulled me closer to him. Our shoulders and arms bumped into each other, and I smiled at the way we were now walking arm-in-arm.

"Be careful here, Renn. I know many here are those you consider friends... and yes; we might end up not having to separate or go to war with the Society... but please, all the same, be careful. We have enemies here," he said gently.

I nodded gravely. "Right. Okay. I promise... to not get kidnapped again," I said, trying to be serious but also not burst into tears at the same time.

"Good. Because if it happens again this town won't even have the rubble to rebuild with."