

Non Human 501

Chapter 501 To be an Owl

I was used to... just standing back. Behind everyone. At a distance.

To watch from afar, in the shadows, like the owl I was.

I was not just fine with it, I was happy with it. I liked my place in the world. It was comfortable on the rim. I was comfortable to... be whom and what I was.

Proud, even.

But I wasn't comfortable here and now. Nor was I proud.

"Vim...?" I whispered; my voice cracking as I tried to summon the courage to speak.

He didn't acknowledge me. He kept still... kneeling in front of the freshly made graves.

This wasn't a scene I hadn't seen before. I've not only watched Vim bury many people over these last few years... I've helped dig the graves myself on many occasions. I wasn't even too surprised to see a few tears leak from the man's eyes, though it was shocking at how many had fallen from them. But there was no denying this was different. You could feel it in the air. My feathers felt... heavy, as if soaked and burdened. But it wasn't raining. It wasn't even humid or damp, the weather was pretty nice. The setting sun was warm, the breeze gentle and kind.

Yet still I felt as if I was stuck in a bog. As if in a swamp, I was even finding it hard to breathe... almost as if...

"Vim," I said his name again, this time without any cracks in my voice. The protector of the Society shifted ever so slightly at my beckoning, and he turned his head just enough to glance back at me.

I held the single eye facing my way, and tried not to realize just how... serious of an expression he had on his face.

Wanting to say something, I found myself incapable. So instead I just... softly nodded, hoping he understood.

His hard gaze softened a little, and he turned away to face the graves once more. At first I thought he hadn't grasped my meaning, but he took in a deep breath and released it with a heavy sigh. "I know," he said.

My stiff wings relaxed a little, and thankfully I felt as if I could breathe easily again. Yet although no longer feeling crushed by something I couldn't explain, I now suddenly felt exhausted. As if I'd just flown half the world and back. But I hadn't. I'd not taken flight in three days.

Not since we'd found them.

Found them dead.

I looked away from Vim for a moment to study the graves we'd made for Rungle and Stumble. We were up on a hill, a very pretty one. We were on hard ground, since usually the lands this far north were cold, but there was a layer of very green grass and blue flowers all over. There were trees scattered around, and even they looked pretty. They all had these little pink flowers upon them. Sometimes when the wind blew strong enough they fell off, floating along in the wind until they landed in the grass nearby.

It was a gentle place. A place fitting to be buried in. Though kind of far from their home, a few miles away... I didn't argue with Vim's decision of choosing here instead of there. Their home had been nice too, but this was something else.

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This was a fitting place for such gentle people. For such good, honest, people.

I wonder where I'll get buried... and I wonder if Vim will kneel and weep at my grave too?

"I know," Vim whispered again as he stood. As he did, I readied myself... expecting the ground to shift, or the world to rumble, but instead nothing happened.

Studying the protector's back, I noticed the dirty hands and arms. He had rolled up his sleeves to dig the graves and prepare them, but they had fallen down about half way into it and he simply didn't care. He didn't look as dirty and stained as a typical man would from working in the fields, but at the same time I couldn't help but notice the dirt that clung to him. Vim got dirty often, and rarely seemed to care if and when he was, but right now it seemed... wrong for him to be so. I couldn't explain why I thought so, though.

He took another deep breath, and then with one final nod he turned away from the graves. He stepped upward a bit, which made me frown... until I realized why.

Vim stepped out of the small indent-like hole he had been in. For him it wasn't much of a step to exit it, but for me it would have been a large one. He stepped out of the hole, nodded gently at me and then kept on walking. He left me and the graves behind as he descended the hill... heading for what I assumed was their home. To likely check it for anything that needed to be dealt with, such as something from the Society.

I turned to follow him, to help him, but paused... as I found myself fixated on the hole he'd just left.

That hadn't been there before.

Vim making a hole wasn't weird. I'd seen him split the earth in two. I've seen cracks pop and emerge from beneath him, shooting off in random directions, many times. I've seen him shift and cause a whole new hill to form, or the side of a mountain to break off and collapse into itself.

So seeing a small indent from where he'd been kneeling, likely from his knees and feet, was not surprising at all... yet...

I hadn't heard the earth shift or move at all. I hadn't noticed until he left it. Yet it was deep. Deep enough that anyone who happened upon it would think it had been where a stump of a tree had been removed or something, maybe.

When'd he make it? Or had it simply become like that over the couple hours where he had knelt there...? Or had I simply not noticed him do it as he knelt, or stood, because I had been uneasy myself?

No matter... Vim's odd abilities and strength were not important right now. What was important were the two wonderful people we had just buried deep in this hill.

"Sorry," I whispered to the graves once more. We hadn't marked them. No crosses. Not even a small stack of rocks. I knew in a matter of months the grass and flowers around us would overtake the graves entirely, and make them not even noticeable. Vim hadn't said a word as we dug the graves and finished them, but I knew better than to argue with his methods.

The humans in this region saw us as spirits of the forests. They liked to use our bones and other parts for their weird medicines and spells. None of it was real, as far as I was aware, but their attempts were as real as death. Vim didn't want the graves of his friends to be disturbed.

No... they weren't just his friends.

It was too bad. I'd only met them a few times, but they had been such good people. I had respected them. Their decision to not properly join the Society, yet to aid it in their own way, had been very... thought provoking. I myself had found my own way in life, somewhat mimicking their own ideals in a way. And not just because Vim so obviously respected them either, I genuinely had found Rungle and his family to be the personification of how we non-humans were supposed to be.

Though maybe this was proof their way really wasn't the right way either. Since obviously they were here in the ground now, their lives taken early.

This world wasn't kind enough for those with gentle hearts to survive for long, was it?

"You were too good for this world," I whispered my final eulogy, and turned away.

Hurrying down the hill after Vim, I felt sorry for whoever had done this. Vim would eventually find them. He always did.

And although I too wished nothing but death and ill on those who had done this... I couldn't help but feel for them all the same.

Vim's wrath was not something you hoped to survive.

It was something you hoped ended quickly.

Chapter 502 Another Monarch Down

I wonder how he had so much strength in his body.

Flying just below the clouds, I kept a close eye on the monarch beneath me. It was about the size of one of those large whales out in the deep blue ocean to the west, but had four sets of huge legs that were each as thick and strong as a huge tree. Shaped like some kind of weird dog or cow, it was mostly flat from head to tail, and although it had fur it was so short that from a distance the monarch looked like it instead had leather or scales.

It did currently have a bunch of spikes all over its head and back, but those weren't natural. The bag that clung to my waist, no longer weighing me down much thanks to how it was almost empty, was the source of those spikes. I had flown up here with two of such bags, each carrying fifty huge spears. I was down to...

Glancing at the bag, I quickly counted the six remaining spears and then returned my attention to the battle below.

Vim had gotten the monarch onto its side. It roared defiantly, but honestly didn't look like it was putting up much of a fight. Vim had ran straight into it, jumping up into its side with such force it had not just tumbled over... it had rolled continuously down the mountain it had been resting upon. Vim of course had clung to the thing as it rolled down the mountainside, breaking each and every tree in its path as it did. I knew if anyone else would have clung to the thing as it rolled, they would have died instantly. If not from hitting all the trees and debris as it fell, but from the dozens of times the creature had rolled over and around during the fall. The fact Vim hadn't been squished was rather funny to me for some reason.

Although it was roaring in pain, I hadn't seen Vim do much damage to it yet. He had climbed up onto its side, and it looked as if he was getting ready to start digging into the thing's ribcage behind its second set of legs. Odds are that was where its heart was.

Still... it was a little annoying to see and hear it scream in pain finally. I'd been pestering the thing with these spears for nearly an hour now, and it hadn't done much more than wiggle and shake as it tried to dislodge them. It hadn't shrieked in pain or even really tried to do anything, even when I dug them deep into its body. I knew from the feel of it, as I pierced the spears into it, that on many occasions I had nicked major veins or hit important bones and organs. Half my body was covered in the thing's blood, and honestly I was glad that Vim had finally made it.

If the thing didn't even care about the nearly hundred spears being sunk into it, each as tall as me, then I wasn't sure how I'd deal with it myself. What kind of damage could I have possibly done to the thing beyond that? Maybe set it on fire, somehow? But how would I do so up here in these mountains?

A loud shriek of utter agony made me flinch, and I shifted my wing a tad as to get me flying away a bit. That shriek had hurt. The kind of hurt that left ringing in my ears. No need to have to endure that type of pain right now. I could put more distance between me and the thing, since Vim was handling it.

The Society's Protector wasn't even visible anymore. He had dug himself into the monarch's side, in a huge hole he'd made behind the thing's second left leg. The monarch was now moving around with great emotion, trying to right itself upward... though I wasn't sure what it planned to do after that. Even if it got back to its feet, how would it stop Vim? It had its huge legs, and thick body, but it didn't have much else. Even its huge head wasn't too dangerous, though it had countless teeth. The thing's head wasn't able to raise up past its own shoulders, thanks to how thick its body was. It was why I had been able to attack and pester it all this time without cause for concern, it had no way to attack or harm me as long as I kept myself out of the reach of its head. It didn't even really have a tail, not a proper one at least.

In fact now that I was getting a better look at it as it writhed to its feet, I found myself wondering what it was. All monarchs were a type of animal, in some form or shape. I had pegged this thing as a dog or cow, but...

Maybe not a dog or cow, but a bear... yes. Maybe some kind of bear.

Yes. A weird bear. A huge bear with four sets of fat and flat feet. That made more sense, now that I was seeing it try to curl around as to bite at its side. It couldn't do so, thanks to how stocky and sturdy it was, though.

A dead bear, now.

The monarch who had been flailing and roaring went still. For a few heartbeats the thing just... stood there. Half turned, looking like a dog chewing at a flea on its side, surrounded by broken trees and clusters of rocks and dirt. Then... as I angled my wings to bring myself back around towards the creature it went slump. It fell inward and onto itself, landing loudly as it crushed not just the stuff beneath it but its own body in the process.

By the time I flew down to the creature, Vim was already out of it. The man, like usual when fighting large monarch's such as this, was covered in the thing's dark blood. There was a bit of steam around him as he stepped away from the carcass, wiping his face free of blood as he did. I wasn't sure exactly where the steam came from, since I too had been drenched in the thing's blood and hadn't noticed any of it steaming upon me and I had even flown high up in the sky where it was far colder than here on the ground. Maybe it was simply because he had been inside the creature though; it might have been hotter in there.

Stolen story; please report.

"You okay?" Vim asked as he noticed me. He headed for me as I furled my wings inward, folding them up as I approached him.

"Yes. Are you?" I asked. It was hard to tell since he had such a thick layer of gunk all over him.

He nodded as he lifted his hand and showed off the monarch's heart. Even from beneath the gunk, and covered in blood, I could see the gray color radiating from it. "Thing wasn't that bad honestly, other than its size. I'm glad we fought it here though and not in a city or something," he said as he glanced around.

I nodded, agreeing with him. Not far from us, to our north, was the mountain it had tumbled down. You could see the path where it had done so, it went all the way up the mountain and wasn't small at all.

Although Vim seemed to have handled it easily, the price was still steep. At least, from the perspective of nature.

"We fought?" I quoted what he'd just said. "Hard to say I did much, Vim. I know you asked me to keep it here and occupied until you got to it, but I don't think I even tickled the thing," I said. One of the many spears I'd stabbed into the thing was nearby, broken in half from its rolling around.

Vim ignored me as he wiped more blood of his face. "I hear water over there, I'm going to wipe off," he said as he stepped around me.

I sighed and nodded as he left. I couldn't hear the water he spoke of but I knew what he was talking about. I had seen it from the skies; it was just a small stream. A larger river was nearby though.

"At least we don't have to clean this up," I said as I looked back to the monarch's corpse. It hadn't budged a feather. Like always once a monarch lost its heart they died, and stayed dead. I knew in just a few short days the huge body would begin to rapidly decompose. Not just the flesh either, but the bones too. And before even a full moon passed, the huge body would just... disappear. Leaving only the destruction it had left in its wake as proof of its existence.

Well, and a heart.

"Heart..."

Glancing down at my own chest, I realized I too needed to clean off. I'd wait until later though; we weren't far from one of our villages. Close enough that I'd be there before nightfall, and I'd be able to

properly clean up there. I didn't mind bathing in rivers, but I had no extra clothes so there was not much point.

I wasn't like Vim who didn't mind walking around naked or in stained clothes. I'd never understand how he walked around with blood soaked clothes, they got all hard and stiff even if you washed them a little.

"Sure you're okay Lilly?" Vim asked as he returned, not really looking much better. As I had figured his clothes were ruined.

"I am, Vim."

He nodded as he stopped next to me, to stare at the carcass alongside me. "It's an elephant," he said.

"A... what?" I asked.

He nodded again and gestured at it with the heart. "An elephant. Or well, that was its original form. It's bigger, got more legs, and is missing its snout for some reason, but that's what it is," he said.

Elephant...? "It's ugly whatever it is," I said.

He chuckled at that. "Most monarchs are. Or were...? I've begun to wonder if there aren't actually many left anymore," he said.

"This is like... the third we've dealt with in ten years," I said. Wasn't that a lot? Like... a real lot? These things were the creations of gods. Our ancestors. Things that had existed thousands of years ago. Growing up I had been told stories of them, monarch ancestors, and had thought them legends before joining the Society. Or well, before traveling around with Vim.

"Yes. Not many at all..." Vim though said, as if I'd just confirmed his statement for him.

Glancing at him, I couldn't help but wonder what to him was considered normal, then. If three in a decade was so few it was the same as them being extinct... what had it been like before? Back when the world had been ruled by them?

A part of me hoped I never had to find out.

"Ah well... let's get going," Vim said as he nodded and turned.

Watching him step away... leaving behind the corpse of a literal legend as if it was nothing more than a typical highway brigand, I was forced to once again realize Vim was just... different. And not in a way I understood.

He just, once again, proved he was special. Beyond understanding. Yet to him it was nothing at all. He was walking away, to return to his path of helping the Society, and would likely never again mention this incident to anyone ever again.

Not that I blamed him. Even if one did want fame or recognition... it wasn't as if anyone would believe him. An average looking man, killing a literal god? Barehanded of all things...?

Shaking my head at his audacity, I realized something odd as I went to follow him.

"You rolled down a mountain, fought that thing and even crawled into its belly... and you still somehow know the way back to the village?" I asked. I knew it was that way back, but only because I'd circled around this area while in the sky for hours. I knew this whole area like the back of my hand right now.

"Hm? Is it not this way?" Vim slowed a bit and glanced at me with a frown.

"It is... that's what I'm trying to say," I said with a grumble as I went to follow him.

He chuckled at me. "Why me being able to not get lost upsets you, I'll never understand."

Chapter 503 A Spire A Day

Landing onto the spire, I had to quickly grab one of the stone fixtures since the tile slates were smooth. The kind of smooth that made one slip even with day old rain on them.

Telmik had storms of course, but usually they came and went rather quickly. Judging by the chill in the air, and in my bones, this winter was being harsh to this town.

Or rather... was it still a town...?

Turning a bit, I looked out over Telmik. The Cathedral, or rather the spire I now stood on, was seemingly at the heart of it. Which was... weird to see, honestly.

This used to be just a small village. One that only took me a few short minutes to fly across in full. Now? Now it expanded nearly as far as the eye could see, even from up here. It was almost... daunting at how big the place had become.

What was bigger than a town? A town was bigger than a village, right...? What was bigger than a town? A city? A capital?

Honestly whatever was bigger than a town was still likely smaller than this place. There had to be tens of thousands of humans here, if not more... and the church itself, the Cathedral, had likewise grown beyond reason. The small church that used to house a few hundred at best now was big enough to be a village on its own. And what used to only be a couple towers and spires was now a forest of them. And a few of them, like the one I had just landed on, was so tall and big it was actually rather unbelievable. It was higher than pretty much any tree that I'd seen, and I knew most trees collapsed and fell over from their own weight when they reached such a height. Yet these spires didn't even sway a little bit, even during the harshest winds.

"Stupid place," I grumbled as I stopped caring about the ever growing city and made my way to my goal. A large, but plain, window. I had landed not at the top of the spire but a few dozen feet beneath the top, where there were real windows and not fake ones of simple mosaic colored glass.

It was surprisingly difficult to get one of the windows open, since I didn't want to break it. But I eventually got one open enough that I could slip into it. I felt a mix of relief and discomfort as I entered the spire, stepping into a small room. One that I barely fit in thanks to my wings.

There was a circular stairwell, one that didn't just lead down but higher up as well. I went to descend it, and as I did I noticed how thin it was. My wings brushed against the stone walls as I headed downward, making odd noises as they did.

The next floor was similar to the one I'd just left, but this one had no windows and had some boxes in it. I paid them no mind and kept going down.

"To think I used to find this fun," I complained as I tried to tuck my wings in even more. They couldn't be, and it wasn't as if them brushing against the stone actually hurt. I was far from so fragile that such a thing would hurt me, even my wings. But the feeling made me want to shiver, and the sound was even worse. Odds are I had used to enjoy entering and leaving via these spires, because back then I had been small enough to not notice how cramped these spaces were.

As I descended the stairwell got a bit bigger, as did the rooms. They even started to grow more complex too, to the point I eventually descended straight into what could only be someone's bedroom.

And it was occupied.

Slowing to a stop on the stairwell, I found myself staring at a woman. One who was lying on a small cot, snoring away while hugging a small pillow.

I didn't recognize the woman, but she was wearing the familiar robes of those who lived here. Here in the Cathedral that is, not in Telmik. Plus it was obvious she was a non-human. This room was covered by her scent, and there was no way it was a human stink. She smelled kind of like Merit did, which told me she was either some kind of fish or creature that would be found on a beach or something.

She didn't wake even as I stepped closer to her and the small cot she laid upon. The small room was likely half way up the spire, and large enough that if I wanted to I could probably extend a single wing in full... but not both at the same time. She had the cot set up opposing to the stairwell, a table... what looked like one of those ice chests that the Society made, and a few dirty plates and cups of dirty food resting next to it.

If this wasn't her bedroom, it was likely just a place of refuge. Somewhere she could sneak away, maybe.

Couldn't blame her honestly. I'd have done the same if I had been forced to live here.

Still... who was she? I didn't recognize her, or her smell, at all.

The woman kept snoring, even as I stared down at her as she slept... only a few steps from her. Which told me she was no predator at least. She was too... unguarded.

She was even holding the pillow as if it was some kind of toy or pet, and she a little kid. Even though she was obviously my age, or at least old enough to act so... well...

Well what? What was I thinking?

Nothing smart, at least. If Vim was here he'd simply scoff and say I was acting out. That I was upset and I was simply lashing out at anything and anyone, unjustifiably.

I mean... it'd be true, if he said so, but that didn't mean I wanted to accept it.

Sighing softly I turned away and continued my descent. There was no point in waking the woman, since I'd likely just scare her... or worse find she's one of those weird ones who get all friendly for no reason.

It didn't take me long to reach the main floor of the Cathedral. A large wooden door led me to a medium sized hallway... one that I had thought would have been distant from anything important, and thus empty... but it not only had people in it, it had the most important person here in it too.

"Guh..." I made a shameful noise upon seeing the glowing eyed Celine. I nearly ducked back through the door, to run back up the spire and fly away, but stopped myself.

This was why I was here, wasn't it? To see her...?

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I stared at her. She was down the hall, not far from where it turned and went left. She was talking with four other people, her church fellows. I didn't recognize any of them, but knew better than to find that odd. I really only knew a few of them, such as Randle.

Celine's glowing eyes glanced my way, and my wings shifted as I noticed her smile at me. She then said a few words to the group around her, and they all glanced my way too. They whispered amongst themselves a moment and then they all turned and walked away, leaving Celine alone... who after a moment started walking my way.

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Great. She had been waiting for me, hadn't she? That meant she had some kind of prophecy or something about this...

What were the odds she'd just be... standing there? Had I not just taken into account how big the church had grown?

"Welcome Lilly," Celine said as she reached me.

"Um.... Hey," I awkwardly responded, and wanted to pluck a feather. One of my healthy ones, so it hurt a tad. Why did I suddenly feel like a kid again?

Celine gave me a gentle, and knowing, smile as she nodded. "You look very good. I bet you're fully grown now, you're taller than Vim I think!" Celine said happily.

Huh...? Was I? Maybe my wings were, but I didn't think I myself was... No matter. "I was here a few years ago, you said the same thing," I said. Barring the thing about Vim.

"Had I...?" Celine tilted her head and frowned at me in a way that told me she didn't believe me. But that was fine. I knew she was so busy, so scatterbrained sometimes, that a small meeting with someone like me five or so years ago was not something worth remembering.

"Were you waiting for me...?" I asked, getting off that topic.

"Hm? Ah. Yes. But not because of a prophecy. Eyes saw you fly over, and he let me know. I took a bet that you'd land on the largest spire, you like doing that," Celine said with a point to the door I'd just come from.

"I see." That was better... maybe.

For a few moments there was a bit of silence between us, and it was rather alarming. The hallway was quiet... very quiet. Usually I heard whispers, voices and hymns, echoing all throughout this place. Yet here and now, I heard nothing. Not even the wind... which only further emphasized how big this place had become. We were likely far from anyone else at the moment.

"I'm glad you came, Lilly. Are you here to see someone specific? Or can we have a little conversation now?" Celine asked.

I flinched but nodded. "I'm here to see you," I admitted. So she knew. Of course she did.

She nodded but didn't smile. She gestured down the hallway, the opposite direction from whence she came. "My room isn't far. Shall we go there?" she offered.

I nodded as she stepped away. Without another word I went to following her. She led me down the hall, around some corners, up a stairwell... and into another hallway. One much smaller than the one we'd just left, though just as empty and quiet.

"I don't remember it being this quiet," I said. Was something going on maybe?

"We've made new places of worship and sectioned off the Cathedral a bit better. We did it originally to make it more homey, but now we do it because otherwise we'd have a bunch of random people just walking around our home," Celine said as she went to open her bedroom door. As she did, I noticed she unlocked it. With a key.

"You have to lock your rooms...?" I asked. They hadn't needed to do that before.

She sighed and nodded. "Yes. This section can't be accessed by anyone not a member, we had... an issue a few years ago," she said.

An issue...? "What kind?" I asked.

"The kind that Vim had to handle."

Oh.

Following her into her room, I paused before shutting the door... and glanced around.

Was this really her room? It was clean. There weren't boxes and books all over. I could actually see the floor, in its entirety!

"What the...? When'd you get... clean?" I asked as I finally shut the door. It was definitely her room, it smelled like her, but... when or how did this happen? Celine's room had always been full of clutter! Where'd it all go?

"This isn't me. I've regrettably grown too important. There are those amongst the Society, and the church, that don't much like the idea of me having a dirt room. They expect me to be prim and proper... and well..." Celine sighed as she gestured at the clean room, as if she was hurt and offended over it being so clean.

"They come in and clean it for you," I said nodding, that made so much sense!

"Yes. It's actually been annoying, but what do I do about it?" she said.

"Let them? This is good, now you won't fall and hurt yourself on accident. Or start a fire," I said. I was able to walk deeper into the room, and it felt weird to do so. Had it always been this big? I now noticed it wasn't just one large room, but several. She had extra rooms on either side, and... was that a balcony...? I genuinely didn't realize she had one. Though that might not be because of how messy her room used to be, but rather the fact I never really came in here because of its messiness.

"Hmph. Vim agrees with me at least," she grumbled.

"Huh...? Vim agrees? He wants your room to be messy too?" I asked, what for? He always complained about it.

"Because he's smart enough to know that forcing me to always be conscious of my room is very tiring! How am I supposed to relax when I'm always getting sighed at when people come in and find a book on the floor, or something?" Celine asked angrily as she led me to another room... one that had shelves of books, and two chairs sitting in its center.

Chairs opposing one another. As if...

She patted one of the chairs as she walked past it, and went to sit down in the other one.

"Do you... sit with people a lot and talk to them like this?" I asked. It wasn't weird for someone to have extra chairs in the room, but these were obvious in their nature and meaning. This was a room where two people sat and talked, a lot.

Wait...

"Well, no. Not usually. I'd have taken you elsewhere, but... well..." Celine smiled softly at me as I sat down. I had to unfold my wings a little as I did, else the back of the chair would get in the way.

"But? Oh... right. The reason I'm being banished," I said with a smile, glad to have it finally brought up.

Celine's soft smile remained, but her shoulder slumped. "Yes. Just as I now have to lock my bedroom door, so too will those like you be forced to leave here," she said softly.

Studying her, I wondered if what Vim had said was true. "You don't like it, yet allow it?" I asked. He had said she had wept and hated the plan, but had no choice in the manner.

They were going to banish anyone with obvious non-human traits, like myself. Since the humans were growing too numerous to hide from. Too many to keep at a distance. Which meant we'd get noticed, and thus our Society and its members would be as well.

"If I don't, then everyone will die Lilly."

Right... "So much for the mighty halls of Telmik," I said.

Lilly took my comment in stride, her glowing eyes held my own as she nodded. "Yes. Although we will continue to be a place of refuge for many, and support the Society for a long time... Telmik is indeed about to become one of the least safest places for our people, if it isn't already," Celine said.

"You surely had to have known this was going to happen, right? Why let it happen at all then?" I asked.

"I'd be happy to have that conversation with you Lilly of the Skies... but that's not what you're here for is it?"

I shifted a little, and didn't like how she had basically called me out. I had indeed been trying to steer the conversation away from the very reason I was here...

"Stop reading my mind," I warned.

Celine smirked at me. "I can't do that, Lilly, you know that."

No. I didn't. Though Vim did say she couldn't...

I sighed and reached over to brush an awry feather. It wasn't ready to fall out, but it would soon. "I figured since I'll be banished soon... I might as well come ask before I never get the chance again," I said.

Celine nodded, waiting patiently for me to say it.

"You already know don't you? Why not just answer for me?" I asked, a little upset over her oddness.

"Well, the issue is I'm not entirely sure what it is you wish to ask, Lilly. I can think of at least a dozen things you'd like to know, and I'd hate to just... answer one of the wrong ones, upsetting you in doing so."

My wings twitched, since that meant I likely did really want a lot of questions answered. But I was really here for only one. A singular one.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed it out and nodded. "Fine. I want to know what Vim won't tell me, or doesn't know himself," I said.

She tilted her head at me, waiting for the rest of the question.

"Are there any other owls? Anywhere?" I asked, hopeful.

Chapter 504 A New Roost

This place was unnatural. The kind of unnatural that made even the feathers stand up on edge.

"You'll be able to avoid most of this yourself, being able to fly and all," Vim said calmly.

"Mhm..." I nodded, and was thankful for that fact. This whole forest was somehow enraptured in darkness. Even though it was the middle of the day.

Yet as dark as it was, I was oddly able to see Vim rather clearly. As too could I see the trees all around us, and the shrubs and grass...

As if it wasn't actually dark at all, and it was just my eyes playing tricks on me.

"There's a monarch nearby. But it's lame. Unable to move. Stuck where it is. I'll show you where it is later," Vim said.

Huh...? "You left it alive?" I asked. If it wasn't able to move around, why let it live? Not like it could run away from him or anything.

"It's pregnant. I want to see what it gives birth to," he said.

"You're such an odd man, Vim," I said.

He chuckled at that but nodded.

Studying the protector's back as I followed him through this odd forest, one supposedly inhabited by a monarch which was pregnant, I wondered why here of all places was where he had decided to help me find a home.

I didn't mind the dark. I wasn't scared of it, like so many others... but this dark was unsettling even to me. Plus I didn't much like the idea of living near a monarch, even one unable to move around.

So why should I live here...?

Not that it mattered, I guess... it's not like I had much choice. Plus this was Vim's way of helping me, and I doubted he'd take me somewhere to settle that was... well... dangerous, I guess.

"Are there a lot of us, Vim?" I asked.

"A lot of who?"

"Those like me. Who now need new homes, what with us being banished from Telmik and such," I said.

"Ah. Yes. I've already dealt with most of them, and the few that are left are either dealing with the problem themselves or have others to help them. Most left Telmik or one of the branch locations years ago, having already known it was going to happen," he said.

"So I'm the outlier?" I asked, a little annoyed over that fact. Was it because I'd been the last to be told, or was I just a procrastinator?

"Not really. You've been traveling around with me so much lately we've just not had to worry about it."

Hmph. "Well at least I..." I started to speak, to defend my lack of effort on finding a new home, but went quiet as a... wall of light appeared in the distance.

Vim slowed a bit, turned and smiled as he gestured at it. "Your new home. Or well, I suppose I should say you're possible new home. You can always choose another place, Lilly" he said gently.

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I opened my wings and took off. The trees were high enough that I was able to fly under them, staying low to the ground, as I hurried to the wall of light... and entered it.

Immediately I felt the warm sunlight on my wings as I entered what could only be explained as a huge open field of light. There were still trees, and their canopy's were still thick and blocked out a lot of sunlight... but it was a genuine and literal night and day difference from the forest of darkness I'd just been in.

Flying upward, I went higher into the sky... and eventually flew up and past the trees themselves. I found myself staring out at a sea of green all around me, with mountains off in the distance. I spun around a bit, to get a better idea of where I was and how deeply we had traveled into this forest, and was pleasantly surprised to see we were basically dead center of it.

As I spun around, I hesitated and flapped backward a bit as I suddenly came face to face with something. A little shocked, I couldn't believe my eyes when I found a huge branch, covered in thick leaves, not far from me.

Stunned, I flew backwards quite a bit as to take in the sight of a huge tree. One that towered over all the other trees, rising higher than likely even the spires on the Cathedral in Telmik. It loomed above even me, who was high up above the forest trees.

The singular tree was massive. Too massive. Unnaturally massive. How had it taken me this long to notice it...? Almost as if I had not been able to see it until just now, somehow... the thing was unmistakably the biggest tree I'd ever seen. Even bigger than those massive trees along the coast up north, the ones Vim said were the tallest species of trees.

I flew around the tree a couple times, to take in its grandeur... and then after I calmed down I went ahead and flew back down into the clearing. I found Vim waiting for me, standing patiently in the center of the huge field of light.

"Vim...!" I couldn't help it, I grew emotional as I landed next to him and turned to look up at the massive tree. It was dead center in the huge field, as if the very heart of this whole forest.

"Neat huh? I figured we could build you a tree-house on it," he said happily as he pointed up at the huge trunk. It was large enough that we'd not just be able to build upon it, and around it, but even into it. It'd not notice at all a house being carved out of it, that was how big it was.

"It's perfect..." I whispered.

"Mhm. A huge owl used to live here too. A monarch. Was a snarky thing, kind of like you," he said happily.

I found my already fascinated self grow even more interested as I turned to look at him. "An owl!? Really?" I asked. Why was this the first time I was hearing about it! That was likely my very own ancestor!

He nodded with a frown. "Really. I regrettably had to kill it... the thing ate people like you wouldn't believe, in fact if you dig around you'll likely find bones and stuff of them, they had once littered this whole area," he said as he glanced around. I figured as much. Vim basically never allowed monarchs to live, unless he had a reason to do so. But still! To think I'd be living where my, potential, ancestor had once nested...

Blinking a pair of suddenly blurry eyes, I took a deep breath and realized I liked the smell of this place. It was a little damp, likely thanks to how far north we were, but it wasn't the smell of snow. I smelled the trees particularly, the forest itself, and it was... soothing. Calming. I wasn't bothered by it at all.

The surrounding wall of darkness all around us was odd, but it was the same as a huge gate. No humans, even non-humans, would dare to venture into it. They'd see it as something dangerous, something unnatural, and would thus avoid it. Then the massive area of light gave one plenty of space, to either build a home or farmland... not to mention I'd be able to easily fly here no matter the weather or my condition thanks to the huge tree as a landmark... something that no one else, no one who didn't have the ability to fly like I did, would be able to use against me. Not to mention thanks to the forest all around me, even as weird as it was, there would be plenty of food and game for me to hunt.

For a home I could not ask for a better location. It was secluded, protected, and had plenty of resources for anything I needed. Plus as he just said, if we made my home up in the tree... that'd just be another layer of security. Even a non-human would find it difficult to scale this tree, at least not without me hearing and noticing them do so!

This place was perfect. Which told me just how well he knew me, and that fact made me so utterly happy I couldn't properly explain it.

Looking around again, at my new home, I felt my eyes well with tears... and before I could do anything or say anything I spun around and hurried over to Vim.

Giving him a huge hug, I vowed once again to always help him. For anything and everything. I'd put up with all the Society, all its issues and headaches, for this man. He was worth it.

Chapter 505 An Owl's Duties

Stepping over to the circle of blood and all the weird, nasty, stuff within it... I wondered if this stuff actually worked or not.

Vim didn't seem to think so. But Celine and those like her did. So it was hard to tell.

All of the bodies had already been taken from the circle, and were currently being dealt with. Vim and the rest were burying them, and dealing with whatever it is they did to the survivors of the cult we captured.

I myself didn't care much for torture. I could do it, if I had to, but I didn't like the idea of it. It was one thing to kill someone in a battle, or for principle and stuff... but to hurt someone just to hurt them? Seemed like something only the humans did.

Though... they likely deserved any suffering they received.

I sighed as I stared at one part of the circle, where some organs still laid. Some kind of intestines and maybe a heart.

They had taken the bodies to bury, but we'd burn the rest once they were all done checking the building. I was never sure why some people thought hearts were important, and needed to be buried with the bodies, while other people didn't find such a thing important. I'd ask Vim later about that, he'd know more of it.

Still... what had that one cultist said? The one Vim had torn apart?

I glanced over to the corner of the building. Not far from the weird cross wrapped in chains was a dead man. A priest of the Epoch Cult. He looked... weird, and not just because he was dead and had been literally torn in half.

Had he skinned himself...? It sure looked like it. He looked like he had no skin, and was all muscle and stuff. It gave him a really... scary look. Maybe not so much in appearance, but purpose.

For a human to have endured such a thing as remove all their skin, and keep on acting normal afterward, either meant they were far stronger than they looked or just outright mad. Wouldn't that hurt? Like, a lot? Even a breeze, or the robes and clothes you wore, would hurt wouldn't it?

And why did they do it? Because supposedly their gods heard their pain?

Made no sense. Vim and I have met many monarchs. I don't think any of them, even the ones who spoke, ever cared at all about the suffering or plights of anything at all. Human, non-human, or even other monarchs.

Though maybe gods did hear such things? How was I to know? Monarchs although the servants of gods, were not servants themselves... so...

"Lilly, we'd like to burn this place now."

I turned to face the speaker. The broad shouldered man looked tired, the kind of tired that came from emotions and not physical stress.

"Okay," I said simply. There was no point in looking around any longer. This place, like all the other Epoch cultist circles I've seen, was the same. A place of blood and death. Of suffering and torment. And no gods to speak of. Neither theirs, or anyone else's.

Feflo nodded gently at me. He waited until I stepped over to him before he got out of the way and stepped out of the building. I noted the way he studied me as I walked past, and I wondered for a small moment if I'd be able to put up with him or not.

Although better than most of our kind, Feflo was a warrior with a backbone, he was still... well...

Like the rest.

He was sad. Upset. He looked like he was about to weep. And the oddest part was, like so many others in the Society, he wasn't just weeping for those who had been tortured and sacrificed by the Epoch Cultists... but for the cultists too.

He felt regret and shame for having to kill people. Even those who wished not just death upon our kind, but death in the cruelest way.

It made no sense to me. And was why I'd never be able to mate with him, not even just to have children.

What if my children ended up being so... weird? I'd not be able to bear it.

"We're going to set it alight now!" Feflo shouted, to let everyone else know. I glanced around, noticed the few who had gathered as to watch the burning of the Epoch Church, and looked for Vim.

Like me he didn't care to watch the fires burn the filth. I wasn't sure if it was because he didn't find any solace in it as others did, or if he simply had better things to focus on... but... Ah. There he was. Over by Celine's people.

I wasn't in the mood to talk to those gray robed idiots, who I figured were as much cultists as those were being set aflame.

But...

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Glancing around again, I wondered how many more of such scenes I'd see. This was the sixth Epoch Church I'd been involved with, and although they were seemingly becoming rarer and not as common... I felt as if there were more than ever. This location had been a whole village, almost. Nearly a hundred people, not including those they had captured and enslaved.

That was no small number. At all.

Honestly I wished they'd all be gone and dealt with already. I hated the idea of humans torturing our kind, in hopes of summoning some ancient god that may or may not exist... it made me want to hate the humans more than I already did.

But it wasn't just humans who did this, was it?

One of the priests had been one of us. A man who had horns on the side of his head. Some kind of ram or something. Vim had killed him rather quickly, as if disgusted by him. Couldn't fault him. The humans, as cruel and diabolical as they are, did what they did out of reverence to their faith. A god they believed in... what purpose did a non-human have believing in a god that supposedly demanded the torture and sacrifice of our kind? It was ridiculous...

Though... we had a few members who were supposedly members of the Epoch faith. I'd not met any of them yet, and honestly hoped I never did. I'll never understand how Vim treated them, and protected them, as properly as he did the rest of us...

"Lilly."

I blinked at my name being spoken. It had been hard to hear, over the roar of the fire. The church was fully ablaze now. I turned and had to look down... and found a young girl. One whose name I didn't know.

She had large ears on the top of her head or rather... they had been large. They were now about half a hand long, but it was obvious they had at one time been far bigger. The ears had scarred tips which no longer had hair or fur growing from them. The scars were long since healed, but it was obvious they had once been cut off or bitten off.

"What is it?" I asked the girl. I knew I shouldn't assume her age, since like Merit there were those who seemed to never grow past childhood, but I wasn't sure. Something in her eyes made me think she was just a girl, and not like Merit at all.

"I wanted to thank you. For helping," she said gently as she lifted something up to me. I hesitated a moment at the sight of a feather. One that wasn't like my own, but instead a huge white one. It was as big, if not bigger than most of mine, but had that white and gray look to it that you found on the creatures far north. Where they lived in pure snow, always.

"I..." I hesitated a moment, but knew better than to turn down the small girl's heartfelt gesture. Vim had once chastised me for doing such a thing, and I knew why he had done it. For some, this was their way of finding closure. Their way of feeling useful.

They couldn't fight themselves, or fix the problem themselves, so they offered payment to those who could. It allowed them to feel involved. To feel connected.

Reaching out, I took the feather from her with care and nodded. "Thank you... it's very pretty, you don't see such a white feather often," I said.

"Right? My brother hunted a huge hawk once. It's... all I have left of him," she said, proud to tell me so.

My heart sank at the knowledge. This was that important...!? Should I give it back to her then?

But I couldn't. The girl was smiling proudly up at me, and thanks to the burning church nearby I could see the gleam of tears in her eyes. This had meant a lot to her, and so too did the act of giving it to me.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded and went to tuck the feather away. Into my jacket, to keep it safe. "I'll treasure it, thank you."

"Mhm...!" She gave me a hearty nod, and as she did I noticed the way her scarred ears danced. The way they tried to flicker and move, yet weren't able to do so much at all, made my heart hurt even more. The poor girl was like so many of our kind... deformed, through no reason or act of their own.

She then turned and ran off, hurrying over to a large group nearby. I watched her for a moment, hoping to see her run to a mother or father... but instead found her simply rejoining the group without much fanfare. She went to standing with the others, as to watch the church finish burning.

"All she has left of him..." I whispered as I reached up to touch my jacket, where the feather was hidden away.

"Her name is Ro'so. She's the last of her line."

I turned and found Vim. I relaxed a little at the sight of him, and the fact he was alone. None of the robed jerks were nearby.

"Was she... here? Did we just save her?" I asked. I hadn't seen her amongst those pulled from those cages, but I had been occupied.

"No. But she and her family had been attacked by those here. She's one of the few survivors of the village," Vim explained.

Ah... right.

I sighed as I looked back to the burning church. It was making the air smoky, enough to bother me. "Why'd she thank me, Vim...? Why me and none of you?" I asked. Vim and Feflo hadn't been the only ones who had hunted with me. There had been nearly ten of us.

"You're a striking figure, Lilly. With your huge wings. And you the only woman amongst us," he said.

I frowned at that. "So... she chose to thank me with her special feather, just because I had been the only woman?" I asked.

"That and... well... I'm me, Lilly."

"You? You're the protector. If anyone should have been given the feather it should have been you," I said.

"That's just it. It's my job to do this. Expected of me."

My frown deepened. "All the more reason to thank you...?" I said.

He smirked gently at me. "It's my job to protect them, Lilly. To protect all of you," he said softly.

"You did...?" I said with a gesture to the burning church.

Vim's eyes hardened a little, and then they softened again... which made me realize what he meant. Or rather, what he really meant.

He spoke not of those here and now. Watching the fire burn away their enemies and fears... but instead those in the new grave site nearby.

Those graves are the ones he had failed. That we had all failed.

"No, Lilly," Vim whispered as one of the church's walls fell inward, causing a loud rush of fire and smoke to bellow out from it. No one was close enough to be bothered, but one of the groups watching it nearby shifted and murmured at it all the same. My own eyes had glanced at it, to make sure all was well, before looking back at Vim... and I found him staring at the fire too. Though unlike everyone else who was staring at it in relief... he was staring at it in shame. "No... I didn't."

Chapter 506 To Rest A Wing

"Who is that...?" I asked Asel, trying to ignore my thumping head.

"My son. Abel. The boy's become a little adventurer, running around everywhere ever since he read the book Vim gave him," Asel said with a sigh.

Squinting up at Asef, I wondered if I even wanted to know which book he spoke of. If it was so thrilling it made children run around and be as noisy as this, then likely not.

"I'll tell him to quiet down. You though need to get some sleep. You're still healing," Asef said as he stood from the seat next to my bed.

"Mhm..." I groaned and nodded... and before I even recognized the sound of the bedroom door shutting, I fell back into slumber.

My dreams were odd ones. I dreamt I was back at home. Finishing up a part of the roof of a new section of my house. Then I dreamt I was lost in a huge storm, flying above a dangerous ocean.

Then came the dreams of blood and death.

Then followed dreams of me and Vim. Ones of us walking, likely heading to some Society village or something. I felt an odd sense of urgency... as if I needed to hurry, but Vim was walking so slow and...

"Idiot Vim..." I grumbled as I woke up, and was glad to find my head no longer felt like it was going to split open.

Too bad I couldn't say the same for the rest of my body.

"Well, I am an idiot sometimes, yes."

Blinking blurry eyes, I turned my head and frowned at the protector who was sitting next to my bed. "So it's your fault..." I groaned. He was why I had been dreaming those stupid dreams about us walking somewhere. And why I had been so frustrated. He had likely been talking to me in my sleep.

"What's that now?" he asked.

I ignored him as I tried to sit up... and instantly regretted doing so. I lay back down, glad that my wings were spread out behind me enough to not hurt as I did.

"You're hurt pretty bad, Lilly. Don't expect to just get up and fly off like it's nothing," Vim warned.

"I need to pee."

He chuckled at me. "Would you like me to help you to the bathroom, or do you want to use this nifty little device Asel has for you?"

"If I'm forced to use that bucket again I'll dump it on your head," I promised.

Vim found that funny as he went to removing my blankets. I didn't worry over him seeing my mostly bare body as he helped me up, and with gentle surety he helped carry me over to one of the three doors of this room. He helped me into the bathroom, but left me alone to finish my own business. Not that I cared, I was in too much pain to care much about anything at the moment.

Well... I cared about using that stupid bucket, I guess.

"I'm done," I said, and grabbed onto Vim's shoulder as he helped me back to the bed.

"You're healing well, Lilly," he noted as I laid back down.

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"Doesn't feel like it," I groaned. "I think I'm still peeing blood," I said.

"Likely are. But you'll be okay, you're in good hands," he said.

"I'm not being held up by you anymore, Vim," I told him as I relaxed a bit. It felt good to lie here... almost too good. Had Vim switched out the sheets and blankets while I'd been in the restroom...? They felt a little too clean and dry. And... yes. He had. There was a pile of blankets over near the door.

He really was kind.

"I meant Asel's," he said with a chuckle as he sat back down on the chair next to the bed.

"I hate that priest," I groaned. I honestly didn't. Asel was a very good man, and was indeed the only reason I was still alive. But he kept praying over me as I slept and it was giving me weird dreams.

"Odds are you hate everyone right now. Part of being in immense pain. Which by the way, I can help with. If you drink this it'll help ease the pain and let you sleep better, if you'd like," Vim offered.

I turned my head to see what he spoke of, and found a pitcher on the table nearby. There was a cup with a spoon resting upon it. "Can I gulp the whole thing down?"

He chuckled at me. "There's just water in it. The medicine is a powder, which I or Asel will mix for you. Last thing I need is for you to overdose.

Over what...? No matter. "I'd like some, yes," I said. If Asel had offered I'd likely have turned it down, but Vim offering it made me feel safe enough to take it.

He helped me sit up, and as I did I noticed how limp my wings were. They remained lying on the bed on both sides of me, as if limp.

Once I was up he went to filling the cup, and then used the spoon to drop some powder into it from a bag on the table. He stirred the stuff in the cup for a moment before handing it to me.

Taking the cup, I didn't drink it right away. I smelled its contents, and was a tad surprised to not smell anything... weird. I just smelled the water. At least it was cool.

"This will help me sleep?" I asked.

He nodded. "Will knock you out rather quickly. So if you got anything you want to say or ask, do it now."

"Will you be around? When I wake up?" I asked. He hadn't been here before I'd fallen asleep earlier.

Vim nodded slowly. "I'll be around for a few days, yes. You were really the only one hurt, Lilly. Feflo and the rest are already escorting the others back home. You did your job flawlessly," he said.

Oh. Right. I probably should have inquired about them too, I guess. "Kind of bums me out to know I'm the only one who got hurt," I said.

He smirked at that. "Want me to hurt myself?"

"Why, so you can heal all quickly? Stupid," I scoffed at him and then took a drink.

Gulping the whole cup down, I coughed and realized the stuff likely tasted nasty. It was hard to tell, but it felt like I now had blood in my mouth. Was my nose plugged up? It was. I just now noticed.

"Am I sick?" I asked as I handed him back the cup.

"You have a small fever, yes. But that's because you're healing. Lay back down," he said as he helped me do so.

Once my head was back on the pillow, I sighed in relief... and realized I could slip off into slumber at any moment.

"Well?" Vim asked.

"I'm sleepy," I admitted.

"Look it. Go on then, I'll be here when you wake I promise."

"Mhm..." I mumbled an answer, and then remembered something. Something I'd been wanting to ask him. "Hey Vim..."

"Hm?" I heard him, but didn't see him. My eyes were already shutting.

"Celine said there are some owls up north. She saw them once. I'd like... to go find them..."

I felt Vim's gentle hand pat my head, ruffling my hair and feathers as he did. "We will, once you're healed. Promise. Go on now, sleep and rest up."

Although I already knew I was safe here at the Crypt... I still found myself succumbing to a gentle and deep sleep. One without weird dreams or nightmares, as I had before. In the back of my mind, as if on a tip of a feather, I knew the reason. It was because Vim was here. I felt safe now. Secure. Protected.

It kind of annoyed me he was able to make me feel so, just with his mere presence... but I'd keep such a complaint to myself. For now, at least.

Chapter 507 A Coward's Feather

My heart was thumping so hard and fast, it worried me a little.

Flying above the large rock formation, I kept my eyes on the two figures in the distance. Their shape was clear and obvious to me, especially the way their legs dangled a bit underneath them as they flew.

They were like me. If not owls, at least bird-people with wings on their backs and not where their arms should be.

Celine had not lied. Honestly I was surprised, even if I shouldn't be.

Still... why were they flying so oddly...?

I picked up the pace a little and flapped my wings a bit harder, as to catch up to them. The two were likely a mile or so ahead of me, and although I'd only been following them for a few minutes now I couldn't help but feel as if neither had noticed me.

Maybe they hadn't...? I was following behind them, but... I mean...

I glanced around, and hated how clear the sky was. There were a few clouds here and there, but they were small and the kind you could see through. No storms. No thick white ones that made you soaked when you flew through them... just a clear summer day as far as the eye could see.

They really should have noticed me by now. Unless they were stupid or something, or thought I was just some bird.

Or... maybe they just thought I was one of them? After all Celine had said multiple owls. Plural. Maybe it was a whole village?

Still...

I glanced down and behind me, but knew there was no reason to. I didn't see Vim at all, since I'd flown too far away from him.

Hopefully he doesn't get upset with me for flying off...

"Focus," I chastised myself as I looked ahead... and found I was catching up to one of them.

Flying higher up into the sky, I watched the way the woman's long hair danced behind her back as she flew. Did my hair look like that as I flied too? I didn't let it grow that long, but it wasn't short either...

"Hurry up!" A man's voice drew my attention to the other one. A bit farther ahead, flying almost as high as I was, was the man. His wings were darker than mine, but it was now clear that they were what I had assumed, and hoped, they were.

They were like me.

Owls.

Smiling at them, I took a deep breath as I flew faster. I flew over and above the woman, and lowered enough to shout at her. To begin my introductions, and start the dialogue between us. I'd done it many times over the years, having traveled with Vim as we met people who didn't belong to the Society. I knew how to do it. How to do it right and...

"No!" she screamed and startled upon noticing me above her. Her wings snapped open, forcing her downward and for her to tumble as if to dart downward. It happened so fast I almost wasn't able to react to it, as I too turned and altered my own flight path as I watched her swoop down to the ground.

Was she... was she falling...!?

Yes. She was. I wasn't sure how or why, but it seemed her seeing me flying above her had scared her enough to lose self-control over her own wings.

Panicking I folded my wings and darted after her. I fell more than flew, and nearly caught up with her thanks to the fact she kept trying to re-open and re-situate her wings. Before she hit the ground, they opened wide and she floated more than flied as she landed on a small hill.

Flapping my wings, I too slowed my descent as I grimaced at the way she fell to her knees. Her left wing looked like it was stiff, and wasn't curling the way it should. She had hurt herself.

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Just great. Vim was going to yell at me, and I'd deserve it! Hurting someone on our first meeting was so hard to overcome when inviting people into the Society... to say the least of me finding a mate amongst them!

"Verna!"

I flapped upward a bit as the man flew past me in a rush. He didn't even land next to the collapsed woman and instead picked her up, scooping her into his arms as he flew back into the sky.

Watching them fly off, I groaned as I slowly lowered to the hill they'd just been on.

I didn't pursue, since I knew I had screwed up. I had startled the woman which had been uncalled for. I wasn't sure why she had panicked as desperately as she had, but it didn't matter. Because of me she had gotten hurt.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed it out as I glanced down at a couple feathers stuck in the grass nearby. One was even pointing upward, since it had fallen tip first.

They weren't like mine. They had darker browns and different patterns... but they were definitely my kind of feathers. Owl feathers, without any doubt.

Bending down to pick one up, I bit my tongue, I decided to wait for Vim.

I'll let him be the next to attempt first contact. Since obviously I had done something wrong.

But... what was I supposed to have done? I had simply flown up next to her. Above her a little, sure, but I had only done that for my own safety... though maybe that was my fault. Maybe I should have flown up to her on her side, instead. Or maybe not done so at all, and had simply waited until they landed safely...

"At least he seemed to have a backbone," I said with a frown as I thought of the man. He had flown right for her, and had picked her up without hesitation. I glanced up into the sky, and saw them on the distant horizon. They were sailing towards a mountain, one covered in dense trees. Likely their home.

Though, maybe not a real one. If he had been like Vim he wouldn't have ran at all, but would have confronted me before the woman could have gotten hurt.

"Well...?"

I startled, and spun around. The feather I had been holding crunched a bit as I squeezed it in shock, as I watched Vim walk up the hill towards me.

"Vim!" I shouted at him, shocked he was here. He must have ran! I'd known for a long time he could run fast, but gosh sometimes he was something else!

"Did you get in a fight with them or something? I saw the one tumble," he asked as he glanced around, likely noticing the feathers all over.

I sighed and nodded. "I scared her, I think. She lost her balance and fell, and barely got her bearings back before hitting the ground. I'm... not sure how I did it, but I did," I told him the truth.

"Hm... I warned you, Lilly, they might not be like you. They might be more like... well..." Vim gestured lightly at the world around us, and I knew his meaning.

"But I didn't do anything! I didn't even get the chance to say hello or anything, she panicked at the mere sight of me!" I shouted as I pointed with her feather off into the sky.

Vim laughed at me.

"Don't laugh! This is serious!" I shouted some more. Why was he laughing! He knew why we were here, and why this was so important for me!

He slowly nodded. "Okay... you can be scary, Lilly, but not in appearance. You're too adorable to be frightening. Odds are they are... well..." he went quiet again, as he once again shrugged and gestured at the world.

"Cowards," I spat.

Vim gave me a gentle smile as he reached over and patted my shoulder. Oddly thanks to him doing so, I realized I felt hot all of a sudden. I was angry. Upset.

Though was I more upset with myself, or them, I couldn't tell yet.

"Let's go meet them. And hold your disgust and don't dismiss them just yet, Lilly. I myself have fled on many occasions during battle, as to find victory in other forms," he said.

"Feh. Did you scream, lose feathers and almost crash and die in the process?" I asked as I tossed aside the now broken feather. I had crushed it even more thanks to my anger.

"Well, no. But I've lost a shoe once or twice," he said.

I smirked at that and nodded. "How cowardly."

"It is!" he agreed as he stepped down the hill, heading for the distant mountain.

I joined him, choosing this time to do so entirely on foot.

"They could have also been kids, Lilly. And who knows? Maybe you'll get lucky and their warrior or something will rush out to meet us any moment," he said.

I scoffed at that. Now that was a fantasy if I ever heard one. "I only need one of them to have a spine, Vim," I said.

He glanced at me, but nodded. "So you say."

So I do say. I only needed one.

A single man. One with a backbone.

One I could put up with, at the least.

Chapter 508 Windle's Poem

My house really was well built. There was a storm approaching, and there was a fierce wind blowing thanks to it. Yet as strong as it was... I barely heard it. Even though I heard things hit the house, and windows occasionally, I didn't hear much more than a gentle whine instead of a loud roar like usually would hear during such a moment.

Vim really was good at building homes. It made me wonder if he's always been good at it, or if he simply had grown to be a master at it thanks to how many he's had to build over the years.

Though I had helped. With his guidance I had helped build half this house. Especially the inner rooms and stairwell.

Looking away from the large pot I was stirring, I glanced through the open window to the room and hallway nearby. That hallway led to other rooms, and the stairs that led to the floors above and below.

The bottom floor was just storage, but this floor and the one above had rooms... several bathrooms, and even two large rooms for leisure. Vim called them living rooms.

A big home. Too big for just me.

"My fault though, isn't it...?" I whispered as I returned my attention to the simmering pot.

It's been several months since I had last seen any of the owls Vim and I had encountered out east. Vim had been able to calm them down, rather easily, and even got the whole village to join the Society with

only a single visit. And a whole village it was. Almost fifty people lived in their quiet little village at the top of their mountain, hidden away from the rest of the world. Forty odd people, each one with wings just like me. Each one an owl. Each one as thick, if not thicker, in the blood than I was.

By all counts they were good additions to the Society. They seemed to be good, mild mannered people. They'd not cause issues, and in fact would likely just stay to themselves in their village. Considering it's been years since the last full village of non-humans had joined the Society, it was nothing but good news... but I couldn't help myself as I felt everything but happy.

I had spent two months in that village. Trying my best. There had been fourteen eligible men in that village, and I'd neither chosen a single one... nor been chosen by one either.

"Stupid...!" I cursed myself as I stirred the pot even harder. Why was I so blasted stupid?

They had been cowards, sure. Spineless birds unable to even look me in the eye! Yet still, even with that taken into account... why didn't a single one of them even try? Was I that ugly, or something? I mean sure, my wings were lighter in color than theirs but...

Feeling horrible, and angry, and a bunch more emotions I didn't want to name... I flinched when I heard something hit the door.

The front door.

Frowning at it, I hesitated a moment and wondered if a huge branch had just fallen off the tree or something. That had been quite a bang, and I wasn't sure what could have... Then I heard it again, this time multiple times.

Oh. That was Vim.

I stopped stirring the pot and hurried out of the kitchen. I went to the front door, and couldn't help but smile and toss aside all my terrible thoughts as I opened the door... to a whirlwind.

Vim quickly entered my home, and I had to pull the door shut with a bit of force thanks to how wild the winds were outside. My front door was built recessed into the building a bit, for this very reason, yet it seemed the storm was strong enough to not care at all about such a thing.

"Welcome, Vim!" I greeted the protector as he went to taking off his cloak. Although it was one of those thick and heavy ones, it must not have done him much good. He looked soaked. Which meant he had traversed through the storm to get to me, since although windy it wasn't raining here just yet.

"Quite a storm. I'm glad to see and hear the house is doing well," he said as he glanced around.

I grinned at that and nodded. "I'm cooking dinner! You're just in time!"

Vim smiled at that as he went to take off his shoes and socks... which were, like the rest of him, soaked.

"Why not go dry off Vim? I left some clothes for you in the room down the hall, near the stairs," I offered.

"Hm? I have clothes here?" he asked with a frown at me.

I nodded, a little happy to tell him so. "I snuck one of your bags a few months ago, one full of clothes. So that I could have some for you if you ever needed them," I said.

Vim was silent for a moment, but then he smiled and nodded. "Thank you. I'll do that, don't want to ruin our hard work after all," he said as he stood and headed for the hallway.

I scoffed at him. "Please, a little water won't hurt this place," I said. Most of the wood we had made this house out of was the type that wouldn't even notice water.

"All the same. I'll dry off and get changed," he said as he headed for the room at the end.

I watched him head down the hallway for a moment, and then hesitated.

Wait... wasn't I just depressed? Enough so that I almost was on the verge of tears...?

Yet here I was, happy and giddy...

But was that because he was here, or the simple fact that for the first time in my life I had a visitor? A real one, at my home?

My wings fluttered as I pondered my emotions and I headed back into the kitchen. Unlike all the other homes and buildings I'd been to, this one had raised archways on every door and entryway. So that I didn't need to duck or lower my wings just to go from one room to another. I hadn't even thought of it originally, but Vim had, and I was glad he had done so.

Like always he was... strangely observant. He seemed to always be so gentle and kind, even when it wasn't noticed or would be.

Going back to stirring, I frowned as I wondered why I found his gentleness attractive, yet not the gentleness of others.

Really, why was that? I seemed to love it when Vim did something small and kind for me... but the moment someone else did something similar, I felt offended and sickened by it.

Like those owls. One of them, a younger man named Windle, had given his mother a birthday gift while I'd been there. A poem. One he had sung in front of the whole village.

The others had found it amazing, had clapped for him and praised him... but me? I had immediately decided he'd never be worthy of being my mate then and there.

Plus his wings had been ugly. Almost as light and brown as mine.

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"Hm. Smells good," Vim said as he entered the kitchen.

I glanced at him, and tried not to notice the way his hair was slightly pulled back. He had dried off, but not fully... and so he had brushed his hair backward, and it had remained that way. It looked good.

"Would you set the table?" I asked, and looked away from him. Really, Lilly! Why was I being so weird lately?

I knew better than to actual desire Vim. Not only did I see him as something of a father, or maybe older brother... I knew better than to mistake his gentle kindness for anything other than what it was. Merit was proof of that. Celine too.

Vim didn't mate or get into relationships with any of our members. None of them, as far as I was aware. And if he did, I doubted it was for anything more than a single night. A moment in his long life.

But...

Maybe he'd be willing...? I mean all I wanted was a child. So just a few nights was all it'd take, right? Surely? Then afterward we could just... go back to being normal? How we are?

Surely he'd understand, right? After all, it's not like I hadn't tried...! I've spent years looking! It was why I participated in all the stuff we've been doing! Going all over, helping all the members... fighting against

the Epoch cultists, and in those wars... the entire reason I did those things was to search for a mate. To find someone worth picking, amongst the thousands of idiots and spineless cowards...

I'd even waited until I found that village of owls!

So it wasn't as if Vim couldn't say I hadn't tried. It wasn't as if he could argue I'd not done good enough, could he...?

Yes. He could.

Because the fact was the only reason I was alone was because I wasn't willing to overlook the most simplest of things.

I sighed, and felt my wings droop a little to the floor. I felt like shit again, even though I didn't want to.

I was alone and unmated because I was a jerk. Unable to look past any of the men's lack of backbone... because I expected a man to be as strong, mentally and physically, as I was if not more so. Yet that wasn't a good requirement at all. It had nothing to do with the man's character, or his personality. Nothing to do with his looks, even... as so many women seemed to care about...

Which was likely why I found myself attracted to Vim so often, lately. The blasted fool was basically everything I wanted, just... in a weird human form. It was too bad he was ugly... or maybe it was a good thing? If he had more non-human traits, I'd likely not be able to keep myself from trying to snatch him up.

Though maybe I should just do that anyway. After all it's not like he'd hurt me over it, would he? He was too kind for that.

But would I be okay with losing his friendship over it? Would I be okay with losing my place in the Society over it? And if children did come from it, would I be able to look them in the eye one day when they asked about their father? And the failures of their mother...?

No. I wouldn't be.

Glancing at the nearby shelf, where bottles of liquor rested... I wondered if it was possible to get Vim drunk or not.

But that too would be a problem wouldn't it? Even if it was possible.

Maybe it should be me that gets drunk, and then I'd be able to pretend I didn't remember anything I said or did afterward. Would that work?

"Were you planning on opening this? This jug of juice?" Vim asked from the other side of the kitchen. I turned to nod at him, feeling terrible inside.

What kind of friend was I, to think such things?

He nodded back and went to gathering it up, and some cups, for us. If he noticed at all my weird thoughts and emotions, he didn't let it show. Like always.

Maybe I should just ask him. Just... bring it up casually. And if he turns me down, just take it in stride. We were realist, weren't we? He was like me when it came to such things, wasn't he? Maybe he'd just... frown and shake his head and then go on talking about whatever else we were meant to talk about...

"I hope you don't mind if I stick around for a day or two, until the storm passes," Vim said casually.

Gosh... the thought of him saying that for another reason made my heart hurt.

"I'd be okay with that too..." I whispered as I heard him set the table.

"Okay with what?" Vim asked, not realizing what I meant.

I coughed and shook my head, staying focused on the pot of stew. "Of course you can stay, Vim. Anytime and always. So? What are you doing here, Vim? I know you'd visit just to visit, but I also know how busy you are right now," I said, both to distract him and myself.

"Ah... I've come to deliver a letter. One that I've honestly debated not giving you, and then I have another letter that I've been excited to give you," he said with a smirk as I stopped stirring the pot and went to pick it up.

I carried the pot over to the dinner table as Vim reached into a pocket and pulled two half-crumpled letters out of it. I knew he'd not have allowed them to crumple up on his journey here, but instead had likely done so when he had put them in his pocket as he had gotten changed a few moments ago, so I took no offense. I took both the letters from him as he went to distribute the contents of the pot into our dishes so we could get to eating. He must be hungry.

Celine's letter was obvious. And was likely the one that he didn't want to give me. That made sense. It was likely a request for aid, either to help someone or deliver something to someone in a precarious spot. They often used me as a courier since I could fly around, unlike everyone else. But the other...?

"Who's is this?" I asked as I put Celine's letter down onto the table and went to opening the odd smelling one instead. It was a plain brown, and didn't have any marks or stamps on it to tell me who it belonged to.

Vim didn't answer; he just stared at me as I opened the letter... and flinched at the pretty handwriting.

"O' Lilly of the Skies..." I read aloud the beginning of the letter, and went still as I realized who it was from.

I knew of only one man who would write in poems. Only one who would do that as way to express his love and affection.

"What the hell is this?" I asked, unable to believe it as I stopped reading halfway. It was a giant poem about how one's heart belonged in the claws of another, while soaring through the sky. It was disgusting.

"A... man's attempt of romance?" Vim said with a smirk.

"Is this from who I think it is!?" I asked, a little peeved over Vim's smirk. Why'd he look like he was having so much fun!?

"Windle. Yes. The man whose mother you insulted, during her birthday."

"I didn't insult her!" I shouted.

"You kind of had, you called her son a songbird without festivals, if I remember correctly," he said as he thought about it.

I had! But I had said that to Vim, no one else!

"They heard me...?" I groaned as I realized what had happened. I had said it to him as we left the owl's village, and I had likely shouted it.

He nodded simply.

Taking deep breaths I looked back at the letter... and groaned. "Why of all of them is it him? Why him? Why Vim?" I asked both him and myself.

"He noticed that even though you didn't like it... you listened intently to the whole thing, without blinking once. You're fault, Lilly. You're also adorable, as I've told you," Vim said as he went to sit down, ready to eat. He didn't though, like always Vim was a gentleman. He would wait until I too sat down and took the first bite before he'd start eating.

"But...!" I couldn't comprehend what was happening as I shook my head and went back to reading the letter.

I finished the poem, feeling sick as I did. The end of it was single sentence, and finished it up perfectly.

"Would you join me in the skies?" he asked.

"Usually hawks are the ones who do courtship dances in the air. You owls usually do gift giving, dances on the ground and stuff. But I can see the appeal of it," Vim said lightly.

"Don't joke around!" I shouted at him.

Vim smiled at me and shrugged. "Well? That's what you wanted isn't it? For one of them to step up and ask?" he asked.

Yes! It was! But...!

Why him of all people! He had been a coward! Tall and skinny! Weak! The man had huge wings, but his arms had been thinner than mine...! And when I had scoffed and teased him over his singing and poem he had actually gotten red in the face and hung his head in shame! Shame! A man shouldn't do that!

Should he...?

Starting to pace, I groaned as my head started to hurt. Should I be furious? Should I fly over there and rip his head off? Or should I just toss this letter into the fire? The cook stove was still burning nearby, with a few coals, I could just... toss it into there and...

"Considering you were just contemplating attacking me, why are you so flustered all of a sudden? He'd likely be a lot easier to push down and have your way with than I ever would be," Vim said.

I stopped walking and turned to look at Vim, who had a smirk on his face. I felt my own face go hot, and I quickly covered myself with my wings so I could groan in embarrassment.

So he had known! Of course he had!

Vim laughed.

Chapter 509 Grounded

This storm was one of rain, but no wind.

Not that it mattered.

Sitting on a small stump, I just... listened to the rain all around me. I listened to it falling into puddles. Hitting the shoddy tent above me. hitting the bucket nearby, and the other bucket that was turned upside down not far from it. I heard it hitting the field, the trees... the leaves and branches...

I heard it all, and didn't care at all.

If anything I only hoped it'd just... keep raining. Forever. And just wash me away.

Not like I'd be able to escape such a flood anymore, anyway.

Leaning back, I rested against the huge tree... in a way I'd never done before.

I had no wings to get in the way anymore, so I had found it easier to sit and lay down lately. It was a weird solace to abide in, but it was something.

And something was better than nothing.

Right?

Closing my eyes, I felt the drops of rain that fell past the tent covering me fall upon my face. A few were heavy, too heavy even for this storm. I knew if I opened my eyes and looked up, I'd see that the tent had started to rip and tear. It'd not be long until it just... fell apart, likely. In fact if the storm ever gathered up enough strength to form winds and gusts, it'd likely not last the night.

Also something that didn't matter anymore.

I knew if I was still with Tosh and the rest I'd be getting yelled at. That I was still too weak to risk this. That if I wasn't careful I'd get sick, or worse.

But who cared? Who cares?

I was now grounded. Stuck on the ground. I may as well be sick, always, now.

Without my wings, without being able to fly... I was basically sick as it was. Deformed. Broken.

What use was a bird without her wings...? What use at all?

"Lilly of the Skies," I scoffed the name everyone had given me throughout the wars. Though I'd not heard it lately. Not since losing my wings.

Was it them trying to be nice, or was it their way of taunting me?

I heard the sounds first. Opening my eyes, I turned just in time to watch a gust of wind hit me. I flinched, and instinctively went to raise a wing to cover myself and shield me from its onslaught... but of course, such a thing didn't work. Instead the world became noisy as I heard something snap, and then moments later I was being rained upon in full.

My tent had just flown off.

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I followed it in the air for a moment, and then watched it land a few dozen wing beats away. It rolled a bit until it clumped up and stopped in a bundle of a mess.

"Figures," I said.

Looking upward, I glared at the bottom of my home. The red and black wood and paint looked almost like it was mocking me.

It looked tiny from down here. Even though I knew it was huge. Too big for just myself.

Too big for a single person.

I glared at it for a long moment before I looked back down at my hands. The bloody blotches along my palms, and one of my missing fingernails, infuriated me. And not just because the wounds hurt.

I couldn't even get inside my own home.

To think I used to call myself strong! To think I used to look down on all the others, thinking them weak!

I couldn't even climb a tree without my wings. I was no better, no stronger, than any of them. Just as incapable... just as feeble.

"Gods..." I groaned as I clenched my fists, which only hurt even more. I focused on the pain as I scrunched up... all while the rain continued to fall.

Weakness bothered me. But it wasn't being weak that truly upset me. It was being weak of the mind that infuriated me. Of the soul. To cower in the face of danger, especially when there was no danger at all. Like when people fled at the mere sight of me. Or wouldn't look me in the eye. Or when they'd pass out at the mere hint of violence. Such things told me how spineless they were. That they may as well be sheep, not people. If you couldn't even face your own death and fears, how were you any better than the cattle we ate? How were you any better than the bugs we crushed under foot?

It was one's willingness to stand up and face what feared them that separated us from the normal. I had no problem with people being scared... I just didn't like it when they allowed that fear to control them.

Which was exactly what I was doing right now.

I was too scared to try again.

Too scared to climb the tree once more. What if I slipped again? Especially during this storm? And this time what if I didn't just fall and bruise a few limbs? What if I climbed just to my house before falling?

A fall from that height, from my house, might not kill me... but it'd break everything. It'd break things enough that I'd die afterward, for sure. It'd lead to my death, at least. Because I was alone. And I'd have no one to help me. I'd wither away... either starving to death, or dying from the injuries that kept me here.

And that fact scared me. Terrified me. Enough to keep me down here... wallowing in the rain.

Which made me weak.

But I wasn't just weak... I was broken.

Maybe this was all on purpose. Like how Celine and the rest speak of their gods, saying everything had a grand purpose. That everything was by design.

Maybe I losing my wings was my penance. My price. For looking down all this time on everyone else, not just from the skies... but in life.

Or maybe I was just as weak as everyone else, and it took me being stuck on the ground to realize it.

This was what I got for turning Windle down, wasn't it?

I had spurned his affection. I had pushed him away. Found him unworthy.

And yet now it was I who was unworthy. No... I had always been the one who wasn't worth anything.

Not that it mattered. There was no chance any of them would choose me now, without my wings. Who would?

I wouldn't have chosen anyone who had lost theirs, after all...

Then, without warning, the rain stopped.

Or at least, it stopped falling upon me.

Confused a little, since I still heard and felt the storm all around me... I glanced up and before I even fully realized who was standing above me, holding out his cloak as to shield me from the storm, I began to weep.

"Come, Lilly of the Skies. Let's get you home," Vim said gently.

Standing up, I stepped right up and into him. I wrapped Vim in a hug, and clung to him as I cried.

Chapter 510 The Owl's Nest

I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Watching Merit walk through the wall of darkness, I frowned as she glanced around and studied my home.

She... was alone? Really? I waited patiently for someone else to join her. Vim, for instance. But no one else stepped beyond the wall of darkness.

Merit, the tiny fish, carried a small bag on her back and looked more like a lost child than she did a great adventurer. Yet she still strode right up to me, smirking proudly as she did. "I scared that bear away," she said with glee.

"I... I see..." I wasn't sure at all what to say to that. She had encountered that monarch's child? Really? I mean, it was a newborn, but still...!

I myself had only seen it twice. The first time after it had been born, after Vim had killed its mother. He had spent a few days nursing it and checking it, and then again I had seen it years later from afar. After I'd lost my wings, since I now needed to traverse the darkness to get here.

Merit ignored me for a moment as she looked around, and then frowned as she stared up at the huge tree in the center. "I thought your home was up there? In the tree? Not below it," she asked.

I shifted a little and gulped, and glanced behind me. To the small cottage not far from me. "I used to. I had Vim dismantle it for me, after I lost my wings," I said.

"Ah... right. Couldn't get to it no more huh? And even if you made stairs, that'd be a pain in the ass to climb them every single time wouldn't it?" Merit noted as she crossed her arms and nodded.

Wanting to say something snarky in return, such as the only reason she'd find it annoying would be because of her tiny legs, I decided to instead softly sigh and smile at her. "I'm kind of glad you haven't changed, Merit," I said in greeting.

So many others I've met since losing my wings have been... oddly gentle with me. Soft spoken, as if I was now maimed not just in the body but in the mind. As if I was pitiful. Yet here Merit was, making snide comments with ease. I kind of liked it.

It's been almost a year since I've lost my wings. I'll admit, maybe not to anyone but at least to myself and a certain few, that I was still not... adjusted to my new life. But I was better. I had even planned to leave the next time Vim came, to maybe go on a small trip with him just to give myself something to do.

"So? Are you going to invite me in and stuff? I'm thirsty," Merit asked as she stepped past me and headed for my house.

I smiled gently at her, feeling relieved at how frank she was being. Yes. I missed this. "You just get water. You should be happy with that, being a fish and all," I said.

"What? No tea? Well... better than alcohol at least. Vim said you've become a drunk," Merit said with a sigh.

"What!?" I startled at that. Vim had said that? Really!?

Merit smirked at me, in a way that told me she had just lied and teased me. I calmed down a bit, but my heart still thumped a little in shock. "I've been intentionally trying not to drink around him, thank you very much," I said with a groan.

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I fear I'll try to assault him if I do," I admitted as we entered my home.

Merit stumbled as she walked in, so badly that I instinctively reached out to grab her and help her keep her balance. I grabbed the small woman's arm, just as she went to laughing like mad. "What's with that!?" she shouted happily.

I felt my face go hot, and felt the back of my shoulder blades shift and move... in the way that would have made my wings flutter and shift annoyingly, had they still been there.

Vim had offered to remove the small nubs that remained, via surgery, but I didn't want him to. I wanted to keep them, as a reminder.

Releasing Merit as she regained her footing, she kept laughing and giggling at me as she shook her head and headed deeper into my house. She walked in as if this place wasn't my home, but hers. She took off her bag, dropping it randomly in the middle of the room as she looked around.

"Hm. Small, but not bad," Merit said as she finally stopped laughing.

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"What'd you think, I lived in squalor?" I asked. Granted my home was small, but it was nice. My home, on my request, was just two rooms. The main room, where I slept, cooked, and ate, and another room where I bathed and whatnot. Vim didn't like making such a small cottage for me, but I had convinced him to keep it simple.

I didn't want to feel like I was living in a huge empty home anymore. It made me feel stupid.

"Please. It's obvious Vim built this. Though it's interesting. You can always tell who he takes care of just off his handiwork," Merit said.

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

Merit pointed at my bed.

Staring at it, I couldn't see what she was trying to insinuate. I mean, it was likely she was just teasing me... but... what if she wasn't?

Merit sighed at me. "So? Were you serious just now?" she asked.

I was a little annoyed she'd just changed topics, but I figured I'd get the information out of her later. "About assaulting Vim? Yes," I admitted.

Merit stared up at me for a moment, and then sighed at me. "You think it'd actually work?" she asked.

"No? That's why I'm trying not to do it, obviously."

Merit slowly nodded. "I thought you didn't see him that way."

"I don't. That's the problem."

"Ah. So you're just being weird," Merit said, as if that made perfect sense.

Well... she wasn't wrong, probably.

Stepping deeper into my home I went to make some tea for my guest. I left the front door open, since the day was actually pretty nice.

"How about you? Haven't you ever thought about it?" I asked. She was more infatuated with him than I was, by a long shot.

"No? You must not actually love him, because if you did you'd not even think about it. Do you know what it would feel like to have him push you off and snarl at you? It'd shatter what little of my heart still exists," she said as she went to sit down at my table.

I hesitated a moment as I lit a fire, to boil water, and frowned.

Right... that would hurt, wouldn't it? It was one thing to be turned down, but for it to happen in such a way, in such a moment, likely hurt a lot.

"Before we get too enthralled by this wonderful conversation, I should probably tell you I'm here for a reason," Merit said.

I smiled at that, but not at her. I kept my back to her as I readied the tea. "I figured, Merit. I'm moping but I'm not so bad that even you have to come here to check on me."

Merit chuckled at that. "Funny. For the record I'd not come even if you were suicidal. Though I would come to your funeral," she said.

"Thanks," I said.

"I've come to let you know I'm heading south. I'm going to create a kingdom down near the whirlpools."

I blinked at that and turned, a little shocked to hear such a thing. "A kingdom...?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Why...? There's a bunch of wars going on. And they're going to get worse, so says Vim. Why build something that will just get swept up in war?" I asked.

"That's why I'm building it way down there. No wars down there, birdbrain. It's too desolate for armies to march across, let alone wage war in. I'll only have to deal with small bands of brigands at worst," Merit explained.

"Oh..." Right. It was that bad down there, yes. In some regions there was so little water, you could genuinely die from thirst if you wandered off in the wrong direction on accident. Nothing like up here, where there was so much rain and water it was almost annoying.

"I'm not inviting you, by the way. I'm just letting you know," Merit then said.

I smirked at that. "Figured. Either way, I wish you the best. Let me know if you ever need any help, I guess," I said. Wasn't sure what I could really do anymore, without my wings, but I could at least carry a sword or spear if I had to.

Merit stared at me for a moment, and then the tea kettle made noise to let me know the water was ready. I grabbed the little tin that had the nicer tea leaves in it and scooped some into the kettle as to let it seep.

"Actually... I had planned to invite you, Lilly. But Vim sent me with a request, if you'd like to hear it now," Merit then said.

"Hm?" I turned to look at her, and tried not to notice what she had just said. Honestly I'd probably go with her, if she really wanted me to. Didn't have much else going on, really.

"He sent me with a message. But..." Merit shifted a little in her seat, looking like a child as she squirmed.

"A message? Not a request?" I asked. Those were two different things, you know.

She sighed and nodded. "Oh shush. Listen I don't mind teasing you, but saying something that might actually hurt you is something even I won't do you know?"

Hurt me...? "I may be broken, Merit, but I'm not to the point a few words will do that much damage to me," I said as I took the kettle off the fire and went to stirring it. As I stirred I reached over to grab some

honey. I added just a small bit to the tea, and then after some more stirring I finished up and stepped over to the table.

My little friend sighed at me as I went to pour some of the tea into her cup first. "You sure you want to know now? Might ruin our little tea date," she said.

I scoffed at that. "Sure, sure. So? What does he want from this bird who can no longer fly?" I asked as I poured a cup for myself.

Merit grabbed the cup, but didn't take a drink. Instead she just held my gaze as she nodded at me. "He doesn't want anything, Lilly. He just wanted me to tell you about their deaths," she said.

Deaths...? "Who's...?"

"The owls."