

## Non Human 581

### Chapter 581 Renn – A Mute and a Blush

"So... why can't he talk...?" I asked Lilly with a whisper.

She and I were sitting alone on the last wagon in the caravan. I held the reins, but only to give her a break. Ahead of us was the smaller wagon, one currently being driven by Nessa, Oplar's human assistant.

"His tongue has been cut out. How many times do you have to be told this Renn? What's wrong?" Lilly asked with a glance at me.

The man we were whispering about, Folz, was Randle's associate. He was several wagons ahead, likely sitting on the first wagon in the caravan alongside Randle. He was a half-blood, as Vim would call him, and although a seemingly gentle man... he was also what Lilly called a mute.

"I... don't know. It just does," I said honestly.

I wasn't sure why, but ever since we picked the man up yesterday at the village he'd been waiting for us in... I'd felt a little uneasy around him. There was something weird about the way he was so quiet. He would nod and shake his head when we spoke around him, or to him, but he of course didn't speak or make a sound. It just made me feel... uneasy, for some reason.

"I mean... I get it, I guess. He's a churchman, and an herbivore, so it's natural to find him strange... but for his lack of speech of all things? I thought you of all people would not be so bothered over it," Lilly said, sounding amused.

"Isn't it odd...? I wonder what's wrong with me..." I groaned.

"You're being normal for once, is what it is."

I wanted to argue, but couldn't. She was right, at least from her perspective. By all accounts I, as a pure-blooded predator, should feel this way about all of our normal members. Particularly the ones who were a part of the same church that hunted and burnt our people.

Yet... that wasn't me, was it? And I've known many people with disabilities, and never once had I been so off-put by them before. For instance for a long time I had been unable to speak with Lamp and her people, which in essence was the same thing wasn't it? After all it wasn't as if he wasn't able to communicate. He could hear, and as such could answer questions and stuff with gestures and even with writing... Which meant it wasn't his lack of speech... it was likely something else.

"Maybe he's got a heart or something," I wondered.

"Does he...? Shouldn't' you be able to tell?" Lilly asked.

I shrugged. "I thought so. Vim said I'd feel the tingle whenever near one... but he also said there would be some I'd not be able to sense, as they won't be able to sense mine either. If they're in the same bloodline, supposedly."

Lilly hummed. "It's so weird that the same bloodline would do that. You'd think it'd be the opposite. Wonder how that works."

"Don't know... think that's it...? But I hadn't felt this weird or bothered by Light or anything," I asked.

"I don't know, Renn. But I'm no fool. If something is bugging you about him, then it'd be wise to heed that feeling. I'll make sure to keep an eye on him for you," she said.

Smiling softly, I nodded. "Thanks... I'll let Merit know too."

"Could just be whatever he is, Renn. You're a cat. He might be something you find off-putting. For instance I get on edge near snakes, such as the ones at Twin Hills."

"You do...?" I asked, a tad surprised to hear so.

Lilly nodded with a frown. "Yeah...? I mean it's not so bad I hate them or anything, but it's noticeable. Vim says it's because they're the kind of snakes that eat baby owls, so it's just something from my bloodline. I know they're good people, but it's instinctual. Odds are he's just something that bothers you. Funny you finally found one after all this time," Lilly said.

Huh... "I'll ask Randle what he is later, then, to see if that's it or not," I decided.

Lilly yawned as she leaned back. The wagon made some creaking noises as she did, since it wasn't that well made. "Either way you better figure it out. You'll be basically living with these idiots for years, can't be on edge the whole time after all," she reminded me.

I sighed at that. "I know..."

"Same with your weird prophecies. Either accept them or ignore them like Vim does," she said, going back to the conversation she and I had been having earlier. I had sat with her originally to ask her what she thought of the fact I was supposed to have shown up a long time ago. I had been surprised to find out that Lilly had already known about it, or at least had put one and two together concerning it. But the conversation had drifted to Folz and how he bothers me before it could have finished.

"Hm... what do you think of them, Lilly?" I asked.

Lilly shrugged. "Prophecies are just... that? I can't count how many I've heard and dealt with. For crying out loud the whole reason I joined the Society is because Celine had shown up because of one, back when I was young. You're basically worrying over what the weather will be like tomorrow. It's silly," Lilly said.

"Rather I'm worrying about the weather tomorrow because I know it's going to storm, for a fact," I argued.

Lilly chuckled at me. "Right? But you get my point, don't you? You're stressing over something that honestly isn't something you can change. You might be strong, Renn, and now have a heart inside you... but you're still just a normal person. You can't change the past, can you?"

"No..." I admitted.

"Then...? What is it you want me to say? Would I have loved to have met you way back then...? Sure. Of course I would have enjoyed that. But it didn't happen. End of story."

I sighed but nodded. "Merit said much the same," I said.

"That just makes me want to change my opinion," she teased.

Shifting the reins I held, I huffed at her. "What do you think I should do about Vim? Should I tell him about them?" I asked.

"I wouldn't. He'd just get annoyed at best, and at worst might do something drastic. He hates such things, Renn," she warned.

"Right... but he already knows about it. He was the first to realize they had been acting on prophecies concerning me, before I did," I said.

"Because it was obvious...? But him knowing they saw prophecies concerning you is not the same as them knowing you were supposed to be here hundreds of years ago. And that you were meant to marry him and change his personality or whatever it is they think you were going to do. I'll be honest Renn, I'd keep it to yourself. Knowing Vim he might even... change his relation with you over it, if you're not careful. I know that sounds drastic, but it's a serious concern. Vim's like that."

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I groaned as I reached up to cover my face. I let the reins drop to my lap as I did, since they stunk. "Right...?" I said through my hands.

Lilly chuckled at me as she patted me on the back as if to reassure me. "I doubt he'd actually do so, Renn. Vim's odd but he's a man of pure dedication. If he vows something he'll see it through, damned all else."

"Doesn't change the fact that I really should tell him... now I find out there's some major disaster that's going to happen in a few years...? Vim really should know stuff like that, too," I said.

"Hm... honestly a lot of this stuff is a bit beyond me, Renn. I can't imagine being so twisted by fate like you are. Makes me kind of happy to be just a simple owl," Lilly said.

"You speak as if you're not involved...! If all goes wrong and Vim abandons me I'm going to lock myself up in your tree and never leave, making you listen to me cry forever," I warned.

She paused a moment, and then laughed at me. "That'd be horrible!"

"Wouldn't it...?" I said with a smile.

Lilly, like Merit, had a very... black and white view of such things. It was relieving in a way to hear their opinions, not just because I could trust them enough to talk to them about it but also with how grounded they were. I wanted to scream at how worrisome the knowledge I was hundreds of years late to join the Society made me. Yet to Lilly and Merit...? It was just something to sigh at and move on from. I wished I could be like them, and was trying hard to, but... well...

Obviously I wasn't doing very well at doing so.

After a bit I had to re-grab the reins, since the wagons in front of us started to slow a little. We were nearing a turn in the road, it seemed. Another cart, one with only two wheels, was turning the bend right now so we needed to stop as to not run into them.

This cart was being pulled by oxen, so I needed to tug a bit harder than I would for the horses for them to realize it was time to stop walking. The creatures were huge, and gentle, but a tad dumb. Lilly and others had mentioned they'd just... walk into the cart in front of us if we weren't careful. Almost made me think they should stay up front of the group just to avoid such an issue.

"Are these what Angie is, Lilly?" I asked as I thought about it.

"Huh...? Ah, not far off I think. To me they're all cows, but I'm told they're not."

"Wonder why she's small then," I wondered.

"Some of us just are. Look at Merit."

"Right..." I nodded as I watched the two-wheeled cart head towards us. It was being pulled by only a single horse, and looked only half full... were those pelts? Looked like it.

There were two men sitting on the driver's seat of the cart, and I was a little pleased to see how bored they looked. They weren't even staring at us oddly as they passed.

"Think we look normal...?" I whispered the question, since they were getting closer.

"Probably. We have more women amongst our group than typically seen amongst human travelers, but it's not so blatant now. Especially since Merit hides in the wagons all the time."

I perked up at that as the cart of two men rolled by. I turned to Lilly, glad that she brought such a thing up and for the opportunity to ask about it. "Speaking of that, does Merit sleep a lot? I'd not noticed before till lately, but it feels as if she spends more time sleeping than doing anything else," I asked.

She frowned at me for a moment and glanced ahead, at the other wagons ahead of us. "Well... maybe? She's probably just bored, Renn. I mean, I am too. I'd be even more bored if not for the fact I'm stressing out over seeing how many of my kids have ran off instead of waiting for me to return," she said.

Right... "Surely not," I said.

"You'd be surprised. I'm hoping at least Branches is still there... what with Lellip and all."

"Hm... she's excited. I heard her talking about him to Nessa earlier," I said. I had heard their conversation before I'd come to join Lilly back here.

Lilly sighed. "He better work out... otherwise I'll never hear the end of it from Nebl..."

Smirking at that, I nodded. He would indeed tease her, something fierce, and odds are so would Vim...

I turned and leaned off the edge of the seat a bit as to see behind us and to make sure the cart, and the two men on it, were leaving us behind and doing so without issue. They were. They were already out of earshot... at least for humans.

Upon turning back around, I found Merit approaching us. She approached the side of the wagon, and then I had to scoot over a bit as she climbed up next to me and sat down with a huff.

"Thought you were taking a nap?" I asked.

"I had been. Angie and Lellip woke me up, Angie's mother had been a quiet woman. I had been hoping she would have taken after her, obviously not. I'm glad we're almost there, though I know I'll just complain about something else once we are anyway," Merit complained.

"You knew her mother?" I asked.

Merit simply nodded.

"Was she tiny too?" I asked.

Merit glanced at me with a glare. "Considering they're taller than me, that's quite a statement."

Woops. I smirked a little softly as Lilly chuckled beside me. "If they're tiny that makes you tinier. Tiniest? Teeny tiny?" Lilly teased.

"I came here for refuge and get this...? You're lucky it's about to rain," Merit said with a huff.

Oh...? I glanced up, and sure enough found there were darker clouds heading our way. I couldn't smell the rain on the wind yet, though, which was odd.

"Why would it raining stop you from... what? Beating her up? Arguing with her?" I asked.

"If she shocks someone when they're wet it hurts them more. It's more effective, basically," Lilly told me.

"Really...? Why?"

"Has to do with electricity and how it flows. Another thing I got to teach you, I guess..." Merit said as she leaned against me, sighing as if tired. Probably was.

"Another?" Lilly asked.

"I've a growing list of things she has to teach me. Stuff like her shocking stuff, math, gymnastics..." I listed a few.

Lilly chuckled at me. "Gymnastics...? What's with that?"

"Gymnastics. At least a parrot can copy what someone says, stupid owl," Merit said.

"What's a parrot?" I asked.

Lilly's chuckling turned into real laughter. "She's worse than my kids!"

Worse...? "A type of bird that is known to repeat what it hears. I was basically saying she's so stupid she can't even do what a little bird-brained creature can do."

"A... bird that repeats what it hears...? Like sounds and stuff?"

"Yes. It can mimic words too. We actually have a few parrots in the Society... they visit Nasba and the rest occasionally, I've not seen them since my kingdom, though," Merit said.

"Ah, I forgot about them. They're not bad, for actual birdbrains," Lilly said.

Gosh! More members I've never even heard of! To think we were getting ready to double if not triple our numbers and I still haven't even met all the ones who were already here! I really did have so much to do, and so many people to see still. I felt as if I'd met so many of our members, but in truth I've only gone with Vim on a few routes since joining him. I bet I'd not even met close to half of our members yet... And I'll likely be spending the next few years here up north. It almost made me want to sigh and regret my decision to join Angie and Randle, but at the same time I felt it was needed.

Not just because I genuinely wanted to help, and also wanted to build a home... a proper one, for myself and Vim, I also really felt that it was needed for another reason. Or well, a couple reasons.

The first and obvious one was that I believed Vim really did need a break. Light would not have suggested it otherwise. My hope was that Vim would linger with me, if even for a few months at a time, once we were settled. And in that time period... if possible...

"What...? Why are you blushing all of a sudden?" Lilly asked as she reached over and took the reins from me, as if my wild thoughts were going to distract me and put us all in danger or something.

"No reason..." I mumbled as Merit sat up, sitting away from me.

"Probably thinking of Vim."

I was! But I wasn't going to admit it!

"I think she thinks of him more often when he's gone than when he's with her, which is saying something considering how much they flirt," Lilly teased.

"Gosh..." I mumbled. I couldn't even argue since I had been caught so blatantly!

"Want to make a bet, Lilly?" Merit then asked, leaning forward a bit as to look at her.

"Sure? About what?"

"Who will consummate their partnership first? Your son and Lellip or Renn and Vim?" Merit asked with a huge grin.

Gosh!

Chapter 582 Vim – White Lillies

The tail end of the elk herd hurried off, noisily running deeper into the forest nearby.

We hadn't stumbled upon them, they had stumbled on us. Liora and I had stood still for a bit as to watch the herd run past, and surprisingly it had taken a long moment for them to do so. There had been at

least a thousand of them in the group. It was mostly cows, the female elk, and their calves. A few were surprisingly young for this time of the year.

"I didn't realize deer were so big..." Liora whispered in awe as we watched the last few disappear into the thicket.

"Those were elk. A special kind of deer, bigger than normal ones," I said.

"Oh... do we eat those ones too?"

"We do. You've probably eaten quite a few of those in your lifetime," I said. Especially since she was the daughter of a wealthy family.

Liora hummed at that as I gently patted her back and stepped forward, to both let her know it was okay to move again and for her to join me.

We entered the small clearing, but didn't head in the way the elk had just done. Instead we headed a bit more north.

My plan was to round Ruvindale completely, as to avoid humans, so we needed to cross over the river it rested upon. It was a few hours away from here. There should also be a path, a dirt one, not far from here. We'd reach it shortly, though wouldn't follow it for long. We'd branch away once we neared the river.

A tiny hand grabbed my own as we neared the center of the small clearing, and I glanced down at the one who owned it. Liora was staring at the grass we were walking through, grass that had been partly flattened by the herd.

She grabbed my hand more often than she realized, I think. Did so without realizing it, also. She did it when she was both tired, and when she was unsure of the world around her... and this was the latter of the two. She shouldn't be tired, since she had just rested for a few hours on my back.

"They were huge," she said as she pointed at a hoof print. A part of the grass was a tad muddy, implying there was a bit of underground water in the area. It was seeping upward, forming a small bubble under the grass.

"Bigger than me, yes," I said.

Liora glanced over at me, as if to judge if I was telling the truth or not. She frowned at me as she obviously realized I had been. "Are there lots of big animals?"

I nodded. "Many. There are even some as big as your home, or nearly so... especially out in the ocean," I said.

"I've read about those. Sailor stories, mom said."

"Some are. Others aren't, or are simply stories based on truth. Sailors like their tales," I said.

She hummed for a moment, and did so in a way that kind of reminded me of Renn.

I was glad we'd be seeing her soon. For many reasons. We were traveling slowly, of course, but slow and steady was still progress. I'd be back with her in a few weeks at this rate, as long as nothing odd happened.

"Vim," Liora tugged lightly on my hand, getting my attention. She looked up at me as I nodded. "Are there... a lot of people like me? In the Society?" she asked.

"Saints? Yes. To a degree. There's a handful of you now... which might not sound like a lot, but considering how rare you are that's quite a lot," I said.

"Why am I rare?"

"Your kind aren't born very often anymore. Or at least, hadn't been," I said, flinching softly.

The obvious reason there were so many saints lately was very blatant. The gods were active again.

"Why not?"

She sure does ask why a lot. Renn does too, but at least she didn't do so in such a childish way. "There's less divinity in the world. Plus in today's world you saint's aren't as appreciated. It's why your mother

had to hide you as she did, and why she asked us to take you in. You'd not be treated well by the general populace," I explained.

"What would they do to me?"

"Well..." I usually wouldn't be so honest with someone so young, but sometimes moments of honesty were needed. Especially for those like her. "Some would burn you alive. Claiming you to be a witch or something like it. Or some evil spirit, as they do my people. Others would kidnap you and use you to further their own goals and needs. Using you as a scapegoat or tool, claiming your prophecies for their own abuse and their own desires. Same with your powers, they'd force you to use them on display or something to make others obey and or even worship them. Or you. You'd effectively be a slave, or worse bred in hopes of more saints to be born. At best you'd actually be worshiped and revered, such as by the church, but then you'd be forced to play by their rules and faiths or else suffer their fury... and usually that ends terribly. Either way, you'd either be killed or contained as a prisoner by someone who doesn't have your well-being in mind."

Liora was quiet for a long moment, and I patiently waited for her next why. It took until we left the clearing before she found her voice again. "And... I'll not be treated like that? With you?"

"No. The only thing saints are asked to do in the Society is to keep safe, and to inform the Society of any important prophecies you might have. Throughout the years many saints have lived within the Society, living full and normal lives. Most don't even join the church, though many do," I said.

"Church...?"

"The Society has a couple major faiths within it. The main one is the Church of Songs, or the smaller convent the Singing Sisters. A lot of saints join them, or one of them, in one form or another. Most of

the reason is because it was originally founded by saints, Saint Celine being the main one, and as such saints are treated highly amongst them," I said.

"Is your wife a saint?"

I shook my head. "No. She's just a cute cat."

"But..." Liora was about to say something, but stopped herself. I felt her small hand squeeze my fingers, likely because she had just flinched and internally chastised herself.

She had been about to say something I didn't want to hear. A prophecy, or something like it.

I sighed softly, since I wasn't a fool. I could tell what she had been about to say. Since I knew of the likely prophecy she had been about to comment on. The one where my child would be a saint. Instead of complaining, I instead smiled at her. "Thanks."

She tilted her head at me, but then smiled and nodded. "Sorry. She has ears, right...? Does that mean she's actually a cat? Just in human form?" she asked, changing topics a little.

"Our kind are very similar to you. We have divinity within us, a form of it. The divinity comes from our ancestors, creatures created by the gods called monarchs. Renn, my wife, is the descendant of a large cat monarch. She shares the blood of a great beast and humans, yes," I said.

"Monarchs..." Liora whispered the word in a way that made my eye twitch.

She had recognized the word. And had not just heard it, but has said it before. Aloud.

Had... had I ever mentioned monarchs before her? I didn't remember doing so...

"In a certain sense, you are a monarch. You have a connection to divine power within you, which is what makes your eyes glow and gives you the powers you have," I said.

Liora hummed a bit as we rounded a very thick, and pointy, bush. "Can I take it out of me?"

"No. Even if it was possible it would just kill you. Creatures with divinity cannot survive that divinity being removed from them. Imagine it kind of like a soul. Once you take a soul out of a body, it stops working," I said, explaining it in a way that hopefully she understood.

"Are you one too?"

"I'm unique."

"Is that why I can't feel you?" she asked as she tugged on my hand, as if to test it.

"Yes. Are you... able to sense everyone?" I asked. Some saints could. And would explain why she'd say such a thing. Especially since she shouldn't have been able to sense anyone else back at her home, since no one else had been a saint or a monarch.

"Yeah...? You mean people, right? I can. There's two that way," she said as she pointed to our right.

I frowned as I slowed and glanced the direction she'd pointed.

I didn't sense, or see, anyone. "How far...?" I asked, a little shocked. Not just that she had sensed someone, but that they were out here. Though they were likely either just hunters, or people traveling on the dirt road we were near.

"Um... I don't know? A long way though, I can barely feel them," she said as she stared at the forest around us.

"Hm... interesting. That's another rare ability... how many more do you have?" I asked. Able to stop the rain, and now this...? She didn't seem strong at all, based on what I felt... yet obviously she was more than she appeared.

"I don't know?" she said, not realizing I hadn't been outright asking her for the answer.

"That's a good one to have though, will keep you safe if you focus on it," I said.

"Better than stopping the rain?" she asked.

"For survival, yes. Others would argue no, I suppose," I said.

She hummed at that, telling me she wasn't sure if she agreed or not.

A distant howl of an elk filled the air and Liora glanced around. The call was deep and sounded odd in the forest. She didn't seem too worried over it though, likely thanks to us having heard others earlier. "They must have settled and stopped running," I told her.

"You can tell by their cries?" she asked.

"Just a guess," I said.

"And you will..." Liora then went quiet as she turned to the right, once again looking in the direction where she said she had sensed people.

"What's wrong...?" I asked. She'd stopped walking.

"They're gone," she whispered.

Oh...? "The people?" I asked.

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She nodded and squinted, as if trying to see them... or rather, sense them. It seemed she wasn't able to do so.

"They're really gone! All of a sudden!" she said as she looked at me.

I frowned at her worry, since it was very pure. That wasn't just shock, it was genuine concern.

She was worried for the people who had just seemingly disappeared without reason. Because she knew, innately, what it meant for a person to no longer be sensed.

"Are you sure they didn't just... leave your range? That they've not just stepped beyond where you can sense them from?" I asked.

She quickly shook her head as she looked back in their direction. "They were getting closer... then all of a sudden...!" she tugged my hand as she gestured with her own hands, as if to display to me that they had just popped and disappeared like a bubble would.

"Well..." I wasn't sure what to say, since there really was only one answer to such a conundrum. If she had really sensed people, and they were indeed heading our way and not away from us... then there was only one reason as to why she'd suddenly stop sensing them.

"Ah... they're back," she said, calming down.

Oh...?

Liora visibly relaxed a little as she smiled and nodded. "They're back...! Though... now there are more? Four...? Five?" she hummed as she tilted her head, trying to tell the exact number.

Sheesh she was good. I was kind of glad she had such an ability, because it really would let her survive better in this world thanks to it. Though it might also get her in trouble too... since obviously she was a good person.

She had been about to ask me to go check on them. To find out what had happened. That was why she had originally tugged on my hand. To go check on two random people, to make sure they were okay.

Liora the saint was a kind-hearted girl. Too kind-hearted.

But that was why I was here with her. Holding her hand. Keeping her safe... even from herself.

"There's... a lot of them, all of a sudden. And they're leaving fast," Liora then said.

"Hm?"

Her lips pursed a little, as if frustrated. "A bunch of people showed up where the other two had been... then left. Here in a moment I won't be able to sense any of them anymore," she said.

Okay...? "Maybe the two had been waiting for their friends?" I suggested.

"They were heading towards us though. The others went the other way, after going to where the two were," she said as she looked at me. Her face did have worry on it, but luckily most of her emotions seemed to be simple curiosity. She was curious, it seemed.

"Does it bother you?" I asked.

"A little... but..." Liora then looked back in their direction, pondered for a moment... and then shook her head. "They're gone," she stated.

"Something obviously bothered you about it... what is it? If it's the fact there are people out here in the wilderness, don't be too alarmed. We're near a path, and not far from a large river. Humans stay close to those things when they venture out to hunt and forage, so it's odd but not as uncommon as you might think," I said.

"Well... I've only felt people disappear like that once before," she said softly.

"Yeah...?" I had an inkling to what she was about to say.

The young saint looked back at me, and with glowing eyes of sadness she nodded softly at me. "One of our maids died. In her sleep. It was like that."

"I see... and what do you think should be done, then?" I asked, to see what she'd say.

Liora blinked, and her eyes dimmed a bit as she went into thought... then she slowly shook her head. "We should avoid them... right? If they were attacked and killed, then... oh."

"Oh...?" I didn't like how she looked like she just remembered something. Something important.

"Um... is this a moment of life and death?" she asked as she looked back at me.

Great. "The knights...?" I asked.

"I... I think it might be. Is the path ahead a dirt one with white flower things on the side of it?" she asked.

White flowers...? "Maybe..." I didn't know, of course. I'd not been this way in years. But it was very likely.

"Then... this might be it. But..." Liara looked troubled, and I knew it was because things weren't adding up in her head. To her, at least.

In her prophecy, the one where we encounter a group of knights as she called them, Renn was with us. And of course Renn was not here.

"Well... let's say it is, for arguments sake. What should we do then?" I asked, to further see the kind of person she was.

The young saint perked up, blinked a few times in worry... and then stiffly grabbed my hand a bit tighter. "Um... avoid the road? Hide?"

Smiling softly at her, I reached over and patted her gently on her head. She didn't have her hood on, since we were alone in the forest, so I was able to ruffle her hair a bit. "Good call. But... in this case, since I'm here, why don't we verify it shall we?" I said.

"Verify...?" she asked worriedly as I stepped towards the direction she'd been focused on this whole time.

"If it's those knights or not," I said, as I gently tugged her by the hand to follow me.

She did so, but with a worried step. "But...!"

"Dangerous, yes. We'll not engage them... we're just going to see if it's really what you think it is."

"Why though? They might hurt us, and...!" Liora didn't seem to really like the idea, and I was glad she didn't.

She was young, but not stupid. And not only was she not stupid, she seemingly had the self-preservation instincts necessary for a saint too. It meant, as long as no one corrupted her or made her weird, she'd be someone I could safely and comfortably allow into the Society... and also maybe even at Renn's side.

I'd been considering what I was going to do with the girl this whole time... weighing my options, and hers, as we walked and talked. And honestly, I was still unsure of what to do with her... but at the same time, I knew I had to make a choice.

Her options were limited. There was Telmik, of course, but also now Lumen... what with Light and her people there. The problem with there though was that Liora was not one of us, not a non-human, she was a human. That... changed a few things. To a point.

Then there were places that were a tad of a stretch to consider, such as the Keep or the Crypt. Either places far and devoid of people, or a location with another saint such as Narli. Although really any of them would work... I needed to consider what was best for the girl herself, and that was beyond just one's survival.

Where would she be happy...? And where would she get to live as normal a life as possible?

The Keep and the Crypt were places she'd be safe at... as much as a human saint can be, of course, but would she be happy? Only the Keep had humans, and they were such devout believers in their faiths that Liora might feel uncomfortable there. They might not treat her as a person, but a religious artifact almost. The other saints who had lived there before had all complained, if only a little, over such a thing. They had felt not truly at home there because of how everyone else treated them.

Telmik would be the same. But it had far more humans. Enough to grant her the best option of a normal lifestyle... Since Lumen would be a place full of constant chaos, what with all the new members showing up. And she being the only human saint there might cause issues, if history was anything to go by. Though I knew Light and the rest there would at least keep her safe, and also treat her fairly...

For now though my plan was to take her to Renn. I didn't want to have to take Liora to Lumen at the moment, that would take a long time at this pace, and I knew she'd be safe with Randle and Renn... and whoever else was there. There was even the possible option of taking her to Renn's human friend, Elaine. Though that was far down on my list of current options at the moment, it was still an option.

And I was trying to ignore the idea, but I kind of liked the idea of having a few saints close to Renn... particularly one not already corrupted by Light and her people. That extra layer of security, especially right now with the gods threatening her and me, might prove crucial...

"Are you sure...?" Liora then asked worriedly as we passed some trees.

"Yes. All will be well; in fact I plan to not even confront the knights... I just want to see them from a distance, to confirm is all," I said. Although I'd have no trouble facing a group of knights, I wasn't so foolish as to risk Liora in such a way. Armored men would likely have bows, maybe even crossbows. I'd not risk her in such a foolish way.

"Seems risky..." she whispered.

"It is. To a point. Still sense them?" I asked.

"No. They're still gone," she said.

Well... the road should be near. "This way where they were?" I asked, confirming.

Liora only nodded as we walked between some trees, and sure enough I saw the forest thin a little in the distance and a path become visible.

As we neared the path, I stayed on alert... and noticed the beginnings of little white lilies begin to pop up.

"Ah...!" Liora finally noticed one as we passed a small group of them, and I decided to slow down a bit and become a bit more cautious. If they were indeed the flowers that Liora had seen in her prophecy, and this the road, then it was undoubtedly here that we were meant to run into the group of knights...

"Sense anyone?" I asked, since I didn't. We were moments from reaching the dirt path and stepping onto it.

"No..." she whispered.

We stepped onto the path, and Liora worriedly glanced around as I looked southward. A few hundred feet away were bodies on the path. Lying motionless.

I didn't see any knights, nor anyone else at all, but I knew better than to think that meant there was no one here and that we weren't in any danger. Yet...

"Vim...!" Liora finally noticed the bodies, pointing at them. Her tiny hand squeezed mine in worry at the sight of them, and I wondered if... well...

Had innocent people died in place of us, maybe...?

Since we had not been here on the path at the right moment, had they fell prey and victim to those supposed knights...?

I couldn't see too far, maybe half a mile at most, thanks to the path winding through the forest... but I couldn't see or hear anyone else around us. No horses, no smell of metal... in fact I couldn't even smell blood.

Maybe they weren't dead...? Some kind of trap, maybe? But Liora claimed she couldn't sense them anymore... and I didn't doubt her. Though a child, she was still a saint. And such abilities were beyond the realm of man. They could no more trick her than a god could me.

"Vim...?" Liora whispered my name, and I decided to confirm it. I nodded gently and stepped towards the bodies, bringing her with me.

She didn't seem to want to join me at first, but eventually complied. Liora stayed a bit back behind me, though kept our hands firmly locked, as we neared the pair of bodies... and I confirmed that not only were they dead, but they had died to sharp weapons.

"Spears, maybe," I said as I studied the two. I'd stopped a dozen feet away, as to not force Liora up close to them. She had retreated behind me, grabbing at my cloak and pants as she studied them too.

"Dead...?" she asked worriedly.

"Yes," I said. One had a huge pool of blood beneath them... which was odd. I could smell the blood now, but I hadn't earlier. The other though hadn't bled much, but was just as much dead. I could see the stabbed through throat from here, thanks to the way he was laying.

"Do... do you know them?" Liora asked.

"No. They look like typical hunters, or something," I said. They both wore run down leather clothes, thick boots and had beards. The odd part was neither looked looted, not far from the dead man with a hole in his throat was a bundle of pelts and furs from foxes and other creatures they'd been carrying.

"Mhm..." Liora made a sad noise, and I knew it was because she didn't like what was happening... but I was glad to have confirmed it.

"Were these two in your dream, Liora?" I asked.

"Huh...! Uh... um... no. I don't think so. The knights who attack us have armor of blue," she said.

Blue...?

Glancing away from the bodies I searched around for any signs of others. I saw nothing... other than the distant sound of birds in the trees, the sound of the white lilies swaying in the wind, and Liora's worried breathing and heartbeat... I didn't sense or see anyone or anything.

Strange.

"Are these the flowers... is this the path you saw, Liora?" I asked her gently.

She only nodded.

Great. Just great.

I could see how it had happened... if Liora and I had just been a tad quicker, it would have been us here on the path when the knights came looking for trouble. In fact I had even planned to have us follow the

path for a few hours, just to make it easier for the girl since traversing through a forest wasn't easy. Even one as calm as this one.

But... instead of us, others had died...

Why?

After all, even if we had been the ones attacked by the group... it wasn't as if it would have changed anything. I would have slaughtered them as easily as I did any human, knight or no. And I would have done so without allowing Liora to get hurt... or at least, I would have done everything in my power to do so.

Which meant these men died for no reason. It wasn't as if they had died to spare us, or something... so... why?

"What happened, Vim...? Or... what's supposed to happen? Should we stay here? What if they come back?" she asked, finding her questions once more.

"Yes. Let us go," I agreed. Though a distant part of me wished to avenge these men, who were likely innocent and had only suffered because Liora and I had not been there to take the brunt of it, I also didn't want to risk Liora anymore than I already was.

Gently guiding Liora off the path, heading north once again... I sighed softly as I wondered what fate was playing at now.

Liora had seen us getting attacked by them. With Renn in tow.

Instead we circumvented it, by mere chance. If Liora had not noticed them at a distance, and I had not allowed my curiosity to get the better of me, I wouldn't have even ever confirmed it either. We'd have never known.

"They are pretty..." Liora whispered as we walked past some of the flowers, sounding sad as she did.

"I have a friend named after them. Though slightly spelled a tad differently," I said.

Liora perked up at that as she glanced at me, and I went ahead and told her about the dutiful owl who had soared beautifully.

Such a story was a great distraction from what had just happened... not just for the young girl, but for me as well.

Chapter 583 Renn – SilverCreek

My heart was beating a little quickly, and I hoped Randle couldn't hear it.

"Randle is it...? I'll be honest I was really shocked to see the Church of Song's letter on my desk the other day," Haggio, an older pot-bellied man, said with a chuckle as he sat down in front of us.

Randle and I had already shaken the man's hand and had introduced ourselves. We had only waited a few minutes for this so-called Seneschal. I had not known the word, or title, and Randle had told me before we had arrived at his house that he was basically a steward. An official appointed by the nobles and wealthy merchants to oversee the town in and for their interests... though if he himself was a noble or not I couldn't tell.

Though he did look like one. And not just because of his fine clothes, and this really nice home. The man was... well...

Fat. The kind of fat that told me he's likely not had to work very hard for a long time.

"I apologize if it felt too sudden and forced," Randle said simply, sounding as calm as a lazy goat.

"Nonsense...! My associates were actually very excited to hear of your interest, and even more gracious for your offer!" Haggio said as he leaned forward and onto his desk. I noted the way his flabby arms rolled a bit with pressure on them. Didn't that hurt?

"I'm honored. I... hope you don't take offense, but would you mind telling me about the property my brother purchased?" Randle asked, still sounding calm. He of course didn't mean his actual brother, but instead his apprentice. A fellow man of the cloth.

I glanced at the priest, and wondered why I was surprised to hear him act so... well... like he was. Randle wasn't just old; he's been in a high position of power within the church for a very long time. Maybe even as long as I've been alive. I shouldn't be as shocked as I was to see him act as natural here and now as he was; it was likely second nature to him.

"Oh, of course! I actually have the property maps here..." Haggio quickly stood and stepped to the side of his desk, to a small dresser looking shelf nearby. He pulled out a large roll of paper from it and went to laying it flat onto his desk before us. The sight of them was a shock to me, since I had never seen a map like this outside of the Society before.

I stood, as to study it, but Randle stayed seated. He only leaned forward a bit as to look upon it. I wasn't tall enough to do that, so I didn't feel too bad for standing up to do so. It wasn't as nice as the ones Hands made, but it was obviously meant for a different purpose. It was the city, but only the city, it didn't show the finer details.

"Here," Haggio pointed at a part of the map over in the lower corner. A place where thin lines were drawn in squares and other odd shapes. "To be honest, right now it's a tad far from the town proper... but in time it will not be. Though I suppose that is how you church folk operate, isn't it?" Haggio said as he traced the property we, the Society, had purchased.

The map was of the whole town... even the distant mine that was actually several miles away to the north. Though it was not detailed that far out, for the inner-city it was. It looked like the whole city was built around the river that passed around it, with a port built as its center, somewhat like Ruvindale was. There was a market, shops, and then a lot of homes. The city looked to be more homes right now than anything else, and surprisingly there were as many large homes as there were small ones. It seemed it being a town full of wealthy nobles was true, based off the size of some of the properties.

And ours was just as big as those... Though our little parcel simply said Church of Songs, not attributed as a house or a manor, nor did it have a family name upon it like many of the spaces around ours did.

I was relieved to not see any name I recognized, such as Primdoll.

It was... "Seems big," I said softly, aloud, on accident.

"One of the larger parcels, yes! But so are all the other properties nearby. Half have been sectioned into businesses, the other half are expected to be manors or estates..." Haggio went to sit back down as he spoke, and as he did he suddenly sounded a tad tired. As if standing for just those few moments had been difficult for him.

Maybe something was wrong with him? Maybe his weight was not a matter of laziness, but a consequence of an ailment?

"I see it rounds the river," Randle mentioned.

It did. The southern part of the parcel was on the river. The plot of land was actually a really elongated square, and if it was drawn to scale then...

Studying some of the inner-city buildings, ones Randle and I had just walked past to get here, I concluded our land was actually far bigger than I had first assumed. We had passed restaurants, smiths, and more... and they all would have fit with room to spare on our parcel, as long as the map was accurate.

"Right now the only building on the property is an abandoned shack. It uh... will likely need to be outright demolished, to be honest..." Haggio then said, sounding a tad worried as he did.

"That is fine. We will be building our own in short order," Randle said swiftly.

Haggo visibly relaxed at that, which told me he had been worrying over it.

Honestly, maybe we should be too?

We had no home. No where to stay... right? What were we going to do? Stay at inns? But...

What of Lilly...? Though I guess maybe she'll return home now...

We'd arrived yesterday, but it had been too late to visit this man. So we had simply camped outside of town a bit, on the main road. To avoid any unnecessary issues. Lilly hadn't outright said what she planned to do, but I expected her and Lellip to leave any moment and head home.

I was going to miss them, and also miss out on seeing Lellip meet Branches... I had been hoping he would have been here, in this town where he had been working, but it seemed he wasn't. Lilly had gone into town last night to see if he was here, and he hadn't been, which meant he was still at the Owl's Nest.

"I apologize, Father Randle, but my conversation with your fellow had been... rather short. May I ask if you will need to hire craftsmen? Builders?" Haggo asked as I went to sit back down. I'd memorized the map well enough I didn't need to see it anymore.

"We might in the future, yes. I hope there are some reputable guilds here...?" Randle asked, sounding interested.

He had told me before we had entered town that he'd say such things. He had said we would likely not use those outside the Society, but we had to keep our options open... in case we did need to.

Haggo leaned forward again, leaning onto the map that was still laid before him without much caution. "We do...! I regret to say we're still working on getting our ironworks up and running, the only ones capable of producing anything of quality at the moment are focused entirely on the mines and aren't available for hire, but that will change soon. But for woodwork, general labor and whatnot we have several options amongst the reputable houses," Haggo said happily.

Houses...? Not guilds? Or maybe those were the same things here. Or maybe he was just saying the guilds were owned by houses and families of note-worth, or trust, such as those he represented.

"Would you be so kind as to write up a formal letter of introduction for me, to those you'd recommend? It might be months before I need to visit them, but it will undoubtedly come," Randle asked.

"Of course! I'll do so today and have it to you before supper tomorrow!" Haggo happily agreed, smiling as he did. Well, at least he had good teeth.

"Thank you. I'm sure we'll be a bother for you often, I hope you'll forgive us all the same," Randle said.

Was he ending the conversation already...? I had expected this to last a long time! Weren't we doing something really serious? Very important? We were buying a huge parcel of land to build a church! The only church in town!

"Pay it no heed, Father Randle. In truth, me and my associates are ecstatic that you have arrived. We had actually planned to reach out ourselves soon, in fact," Haggio said with a small wave, as if Randle's apologies were not worth speaking.

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"You were?" I asked, a tad surprised to hear so.

Haggio glanced at me with comfortable ease. If he was shocked I'd spoken, or would speak at all in general, he didn't show it. "Yes. You see many of the mercenary bands who have settled here, those my associates employ, are mostly devout themselves. Many of them even have their own chaplains and priests that travel with them, and the largest of the bunch has even put in a request for a place of worship. None of the households, none of the investors of this town, have any knowledge of such a venture. Opening a mine? A tavern? A shipping port...? We can do so any day of the week, but a church..." Haggio huffed as he shook his head. "Far beyond our purview," he said.

Huh... he used words like Vim did.

"I suppose it'd be prudent for me to ask for an invitation to those representatives as well, then," Randle said smoothly.

Haggio chuckled as he nodded. "Done and done! Honestly you showing up is a relief... mercenaries are an odd lot. Many think coin is all it takes to control them, but it's not true in the slightest. They deal in pride and desire as much as cold metal and blood... but well, needed they are, for the moment at least."

I blinked as I realized I had likely just heard something I probably shouldn't have.

"All children are needed until they need a thump on the head. Such is our purpose," Randle said.

Haggo laughed, making his body jiggle a little as he did. "Such truth!"

I didn't find it as funny, but it was likely because I didn't understand. Were they saying the mercenaries needed discipline...? Or were they just making light talk, as to be kind?

Haggo then ended his laughter, and he frowned as he realized something. "Ah, my apologies Father. Let me get the deed right away," he said as he stood.

Randle nodded gently as the large man rounded his desk and headed to the other side of the room. I leaned back a bit, as to see around the head of the chair I sat upon, and watched the man pull out a book from another shelf.

This was what we were here for. Not just to introduce ourselves to the town's leadership, but this item. This... deed.

"Signed and stamped by the three lord of the town, and will be signed by myself as well once you do so yourself," Haggo said as he returned to us. He placed the book down opened to a certain page onto the desk, onto the map, and then went to rummaging in a drawer behind the desk. He procured an inkpot and a pen, placing them beside the open book.

Randle stood, finally, and stepped up to the desk. I stayed seated, but leaned a bit as to watch the moment. I'd not just heard of deeds before, from Vim and others, but I'd seen one too. The one for the house that Merit had purchased for Lilly to stay in at Lumen... but that one had just been a sheet of paper. A fancy one, true, but just a piece of paper nonetheless. I hadn't realized they could also just be pages in a book!

"Renn," Randle said my name, and I frowned as I wondered if I wasn't supposed to watch or something... then I realized he was telling me to join him.

Warily standing up, I stepped over to his side and glanced at him and wondered what he wanted. Was I supposed to watch or something? Say something...?

Then Randle handed me the pen, which he'd already dipped into the ink.

"Huh...?" I carefully took it, and made sure to hold it in a way that didn't allow any ink to spill. Not only was it expensive, the book and the map was right beneath me.

"Sign here, sister," Haggo gently pointed at the bottom of the right page, where a decorated line waited. One beneath a bunch of words and other signatures.

Glancing at Randle, I felt my tail squirm under my pants as I realized he was serious. He wasn't even looking at me, he now looked bored again.

Great. I wasn't sure what Randle was planning, but it's not like I could go against it... plus it wasn't as if I would get in trouble for this, since the Society had already purchased it. Anything I owned was the Society's anyway.

With a small inward sigh I went ahead and signed the book. I did so with the same method that I'd done in Telmik long ago, the one I used to request funds and sign letters within the Society. Not my pass code, but my signature.

Once done I glanced at Randle, and he nodded and took the pen back from me. A part of me had expected, and hoped, he'd sign it too... but he didn't. He simply put the thing down next to the inkpot.

"And..." Haggio grabbed the book and turned it around. He too grabbed the pen, dipped it carefully into the inkpot and signed it as well in a different spot. Once done he put the book aside and then grabbed a small scroll. One rolled up, with a pretty ribbon on it. "Your deed, Sister," he said to me as he held it out to me.

I took it carefully, and was a tad disappointed. So we didn't get to keep the book...?

The scroll was small, and made of nice paper, but I could tell it was likely the same as the one I'd seen before. The one Merit had gotten in Lumen.

"Congratulations. Welcome to SilverCreek," Haggio said as he smiled and nodded at us.

SilverCreek...? Was that the name of this place?

How unoriginal.

"Thanks..." I said, unsure what else to say.

"Yes. Thank you, Haggio. I look forward to a lively relationship with you and this city," Randle said smoothly, holding out his only hand.

The large man took it kindly, shaking it with a heavy nod. "Indeed, Father. Feel free to visit anytime for any reason, for you and your cloth my door is always open," he said.

With a few more kind farewells, Randle and I left the large man's home. I packed away the scroll, the deed, safely into one of my monarch leather bags as we did so.

"That seemed... oddly easy," I said quietly once we were a bit away from the house, heading towards the south of the town. We would need to leave the town, to go to our camp outside of it to get everyone and take them to our parcel of land.

"Why wouldn't it be? We're representatives of one of the most powerful churches in the world, and not only are we in good standing we paid very well for the land. If anything it should have gone even smoother," Randle said as we stepped onto a stone path.

This town was actually rather busy, or at least it felt like it. Plus it was not as small as it had first seemed, too. It wasn't as big as Ruvindale... but it wasn't far off from it, from what I had seen so far.

"Just how much did it cost us, anyway?" I asked. I'd not heard or seen any hint of the amount during that meeting.

"Sixty four gold Penk," he said."

I nearly stumbled. "What!?"

Randle glanced at me, and chuckled at what was likely my shocked face. "A lot, huh? Well, there's a reason for it."

"Please tell!" That was a crazy sum! That would have bought all the paintings in the Sleepy Artist and then some!

Plus it was a tad odd to hear a familiar currency again. It'd been a long time since I'd heard of Penks. It kind of made me feel as if I was home or something, since it was the currency of the north.

"We did not really purchase the ground, we invested in the city. Basically we bribed the lords of this town, the ones who run and own the mine and the land, for the right to place our roots down and begin to proselytize their people," Randle said.

"That still seems like a huge sum to me... is land really that expensive...? We'd bought a nice home in Lumen for a little more than one," I said. I wasn't sure if it had actually been the equivalent of a single gold Penk, but it had been a single gold Lumen Mark.

"It probably wouldn't have even been a dozen Penk had we bought it normally... but if we had done that, the lords of this town would have been able to instigate their desires onto us. They'd have wanted bribes via taxes, or tithes. I do not want to deal with that. I basically paid such a huge sum to be left alone," Randle explained.

Oh... right... "Because of who we are," I said, understanding what he meant.

He nodded.

"Why'd you make me sign it, by the way?" I asked. Was it because he wasn't good at signing with his remaining hand maybe?

"I've not officially been denounced or excommunicated, but I basically have been. I can't be signing such important documents anymore. Not legally at least," Randle said simply.

"But I can...? I'm not actually a Sister, or whatever," I said.

"They don't know that," he said.

Well... "You sure...? I'm still dressed like a mercenary," I said.

"And as you saw he did not find it odd at all. This is a town of mercenaries, plus you were with me. He either thought you were dressed like that on purpose to hide yourself, since we had been traveling on

the road, or just assumed you were one of the warrior-priestesses that the northmen have stories about. Or he simply didn't notice your attire, having lived amongst mercenaries for so long and it now normal in his eyes. He had not found you odd at all."

Well... "Warrior-priestesses...?" I asked, focusing on the most important thing he had said.

Randle chuckled at me. "Ask Vim about them. They do exist, though we don't admit it. And they're not as used anymore, but back during the wars they had been a legitimate division."

Huh...? He was basically saying there had been warrior sisters, right?

So... someone like... Lilly? But of the cloth...?

I smirked at that, since I liked the sound of it.

"I'll ask Vim," I said, agreeing.

"Please do. Also, I'm to assume you remember where our parcel is?" he asked.

"Hm? Yeah?" I nodded.

"Good. I don't. If they operate with any level of efficiency, which they seem to do, there should be markers on it for us to know but in the off chance there isn't I'll rely on you to find our land and its borders," he said.

"Sure...?" I worriedly nodded. Now I wish I had paid just a tad bit more attention to that map.

Randle sighed. "A lot to do. At least the town seems healthy," he said as we neared the market. It was noisy.

"Let's hurry, I can smell them all readying for lunch and my stomach hates it," I complained. I could smell the fireplaces and ovens being lit and readied. Which meant soon I'd smell all the delicious food... and I'd not be able to enjoy in any of it, since we'd soon be very busy. We needed to take all our wagons and people to our land, and then likely set up camp or something. A lot of work before I could eat anything warm and tasty.

Randle must have agreed for he picked up the pace.

Chapter 584 A Piece of a Prophecy

Just where was I going wrong?

I stood before a mess. Scattered snow was littered on what could only be a destroyed home... though it looked odd, even as it were. I'd seen a lot of burnt down and destroyed buildings in my life, and countless more in my dreams... but this one seemed odd... almost as if it hadn't been a home at all that had once been standing here, but instead some kind of other structure. It almost looked like a giant pile of just a collection of wood and leaves... maybe this hadn't been a normal home, but something built up in the trees? There were plenty of fallen trees around too, and they were both huge enough and in great enough number for it to have made sense...

Plus she was some kind of great hunter cat... Cats were often climbing trees, weren't they? Maybe it was part of their nature...

"Celine... The bodies are definitely as you described. One of them even had fur or something like it all over their bodies, we think."

I turned to watch one of my sisters walk over to me as to give me an update. She looked cold, wearing multiple layers of clothing and an extra cloak even. "Any sign of who did this yet?" I asked.

Sister Freya shook her head. "No... Hyacinth thinks there are signs of strange tracks all around, but she and the others haven't confirmed it yet."

"What kind of strange tracks?" I asked. If it was something simple, like hoof prints, or footprints from armored knights or something it should have been obvious to tell... Which meant her inability to figure it out yet meant it was something uncommon.

Frey gave me an odd look. "She said it looks as if something huge was dragged all around... like a giant tree."

Dragged...? "Show me," I said.

My fellow sister nodded and gestured back the way she came. Off to another section was a small group of us, Hyacinth and her older sister amongst them, but Freya didn't lead me to them... instead she took

me around some of the collapsed home and to the edge of the area. Where the shorter grass met with the thick kind.

Sure enough... we found a weird groove in the earth. I frowned at what I could only explain as maybe a strange water-way system or something like it... since it was rounded, and deep, and had the obvious tell-tale markings of being forced into formation by something more than natural weather. The problem was there was no water in it... just snow and some debris... and...

"It almost looks kind of like what a snake leaves behind in sand," I said as I thought of the snake monarch that I had gone to meet a few months ago.

"Huh...? A snake...?" Freya didn't seem to agree, but as I followed the strange indent in the earth it became more obvious. The strange half-dug hole started to weave and shift, the same way a snake would move... though... "It'd have to have been huge, Celine..." Freya whispered as she finally realized I was one to something.

"Yes. A monarch," I said.

That was the only thing that made sense!

I stepped away from Freya and the odd mark and walked over to Hyacinth. She and the rest were near another similar groove, though this one had mounds of dirt all around it, implying something chaotic had happened in the area. Her group went quiet as I approached and the young girl turned and stood upright upon my approach. "Do you think it could have been a snake?" I asked her.

The girl with freshly transplanted eyes blinked at me... and then she slowly frowned as she nodded. "Actually... yes. Yes, I could see how a large snake could leave such grooves in the earth, yes," she said.

Damn!

I turned away and walked off, before she or anyone else could say anything to disturb me. I heard their worried whispers as they all huddled behind me, Freya's voice joining them as she hurried over, but I ignored them all.

Another failure...! And one that I desperately needed to not be, at that!

I tried to remain calm as I walked around a large fallen tree and all its broken branches. As I did I neared another small group, this time not of church-women but knights. Martin turned to look at me, but I ignored him blatantly enough that he didn't even think about coming over to ask if all was well.

Because nothing was well. Nothing was going well at all.

We were far in the north. Farther than I'd ever been, and likely farther than I'd ever go ever again. This place was a strange land, where not just humans... but even our kind, non-humans, rarely if never ventured. It was a place where oddities still lived. A place where the very earth, the weather and environment, was as deadly if not more so than not. The sheer cold we were feeling up here, even nearly in the beginning of summer, was a sign of this place's harshness. Odds are this whole area was under countless feet of snow during the winter. That fact only furthered the assumption that they had all lived up in the trees, off the ground... as to stay above the snow.

One would think a snake would never venture to such a cold place... but this had to have been a monarch. And maybe even one of the more powerful ones.

I couldn't imagine anything else threatening these people. I couldn't comprehend of any other existence that this Goddess could fear...

But obviously something had happened. And I had been too late.

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Why though...? Why show me dreams of my meeting her here, only for this to happen...? Why not instead show me of this disaster, as so I could potentially have kept it from happening in the first place...?

Maybe she was still around. Or just nearby... but how did I verify it, and how did I risk it? There was a large group of us here, nearly fifty of us, but about half that number were those like Hyacinth. Young women I'd not risk foolishly. Couldn't. They weren't just frail things, they were important... and had duties and prophecies to fulfill themselves. Which meant if I wanted to expand a search party in this region, I'd have to do so in groups and it'd bring great risks. Not only did I risk their lives from dangers, but getting lost or sick out here were also factors to consider. To say nothing of how much time I was willing to sacrifice here... In just two months I had a prophecy to fulfill down south, and it'd take me nearly a month just to get there from here...

I sighed as I kicked a small broken branch. It dislodged some stale snow as it did.

Many prophecies have ended in failures. More than I wanted to admit... but this was one of the ones that I could not have afforded to end this way.

We had needed her. Desperately. Without her, when the time came for me to meet the god slayer I'd be doing so alone. Which meant I'd be unable to convince him... and would then have to rely on chance and time. Neither were my friends.

Reaching up, I scratched heavily at the top of my head. Where parts of fur met normal hair.

What to do...?

"Celine."

I huffed as I turned to face Martin. "What? Leave me alone I'm fuming," I said.

Martin, my stoic knight protector, was as calm as he was strong. Even for as young a man he was, I felt comfortable and safe near him... as did many of us. He nodded gently at my words, though seemed not to care about them. "We're here to find someone, no...? Well... did we find them?"

"Of course we didn't. Or did you not notice the utter lack of life all around us?" I asked, snipping a little at him.

Martin didn't even flinch as he held my gaze and nodded. "So what do you want us to do...? The one here was important, weren't they...? You've been anxious the whole way. What do you need us to do?" he asked.

I want you to turn back time, so that I could come here sooner and prevent this failure from happening!

But I couldn't shout that. Even if I wanted to.

"Please get a few of your men and search the surrounding area. Leave a few here to protect us, though... just in case whatever had attacked this home returns," I said.

Martin slowly nodded... and then turned away. Without a word he went to both obey and to give orders to the rest of his knights. I knew not a one would complain or question, they'd just obey. But... that was the problem, wasn't it?

If the problems of this world could be solved simply by strong soldiers who obeyed without question, then there would be no need for anything else. They were useful, sure, but their usefulness only went so far.

They'd not find her. Because it wasn't meant to be. But I had to try anyway. They had to try.

As Martin left me, I sighed and looked back at the pile of rubble. Every so often I could see the hints of life. Of what one would call human touches. Some kind of cloth was stuck in a bundle of sticks to my right. A shoe or something was lying half torn to my left. Up on top of the pile, as if placed atop it on purpose, was some kind of thick drape... maybe a rug or curtain that had gotten tangled up there somehow.

All of the man-made stuff told me this was definitely the right spot... not to mention I'd seen it before in my dreams. Several times. I recognized the forest around me. The smell in the air. The cold chill that never left. I recognized enough of this place to know we weren't in the wrong location.

We had just been late.

"There's no way she's dead..." I whispered as I looked along the tree-line... as if I'd randomly just see her standing there beyond the horizon.

She would be a tad shorter than me, but would have big ears on her head. Similar to the other foxes and cats, but distinct enough to tell her apart from them. They'd be dark, a near black, but she'd have golden eyes. Pupils that shone, even in the dark... and most importantly, she'd speak with a voice that made one shiver. Or at least, would make me shiver.

In the back of my mind I could also imagine her smell. It was distinct... but, not too surprisingly, it was the same scent of this whole forest. It was so similar in fact that I knew I'd not be able to find her on smell alone, and neither would anyone else. Which was a tad odd, but not. Many of us smelled of our birth, of our homelands. Martin even smelled like the house he had been born in, not the village or mountain... just the house.

She had to be alive. Had to be nearby... I've had other prophecies about her just recently. There was no way this destroyed place, which looked months if not even years old, was something that recent.

At the bare minimum if I couldn't find her, I needed to ensure she at least wasn't here. I needed to ensure her body wasn't in the rubble.

Although finding her dead corpse would be gut wrenching, and turn so many of my plans upside down... it would at least give me a better and more grounded idea of our future...

"Celine...!"

Freya hurried over and I grew a tad excited, but the swell of emotion only lasted half a moment. She slowed and huffed in a way as she got close that I knew she'd not found her. "What is it?" I asked.

"They found a piece of skin. It was definitely a snake, or something like it. Come look, it's a huge piece of white scales," she said with a point back where she came from.

I perked up at the find, and found myself growing excited once more. Yes it confirmed a snake monarch had likely attacked this place, thus the destruction... but it also meant we now had a lead. I had people who could, with this piece of skin, track down and possibly find the snake or at least learn more about it... and that knowledge could then lead us to her. To fix this mistake. To stop this failure from becoming permanent.

Following Freya back to the other side of the area, I prayed this somehow ended well... otherwise I wasn't sure what we were going to do.

We needed Rennalee. Needed her more than we needed anyone else... even Vim, the god slayer.

Because without her he might as well not show up either. He'd be that useless.

He'd just be another Martin. Another great warrior, incapable of doing more than swinging a sword.

And that only did so much. Only saved so many lives.

Just like my prophecies. Like any of our prophecies.

You could be shown the end of the world, but if you didn't have the tools or capability... there was no point in having the knowledge. You wouldn't be able to stop it from happening.

"Found another!" another sister shouted nearby, and I glanced over to see her lift up a huge chunk of what looked like not just a very pale piece of flesh... but one that was even see-through. Even from here I could see what they meant by skin of the snake.

"Gather them up... and keep searching!" I shouted as I went to join them.

Maybe we could salvage this prophecy yet!

Chapter 585 A Young Cat's Eavesdropping

It wasn't often we got visitors. Or rather, it wasn't often that Witch got any... it's not like I ever did, or ever would.

Staying quiet, I bent down a bit more as to angle my ears better at the crack in the wall. To hear just a bit better of the conversation Witch was having with the two women.

"They were asking about you, Lady Witch," the oldest said worriedly.

"In what way?" Witch asked, sounding a bit more calm than I had expected one to be upon hearing such news.

The two women were unknown to me, but not Witch. It seemed they were from the nearby human village... one that I myself had never been to, but have heard about in detail. Supposedly Witch was on very good terms with the village, since she had shown up here in the middle of a famine and had helped them all survive it. They saw her with what Witch had called reverence... and it seemed she had not been lying. The women were addressing her as Lady, and the older one who had just spoken had also bent and bowed upon entering the house.

"They said they were looking for a woman of insight. One to help them with some quest or problem they have... they spoke to nearly everyone in the village, even the children," the older woman said with a hushed voice, as if these people were nearby as we spoke. They weren't though; no one had followed them... I had made sure of that.

"A peculiar thing to look for. Not a medicine woman, or a healer, but one of insight?" Witch said with a hum, still not sounding too bothered by the whole ordeal.

"Very peculiar! We don't think anyone in the village told them of you, or where you live Lady Witch, but one can't be sure... especially with the children. Tiny minds are always making mistakes," the younger one said.

I smiled softly at her words, since they were so neat. Tiny minds...? I of course understood the meaning, children were indeed smaller than adults... What a way to phrase it!

"Ah, but one can't blame a child for what they don't understand. If one of them revealed anything, or even if one of you did, it is all well and fine. Either they are here with a genuine need for help, or they're here with bad intentions... and as such will find me anyway. At least they will if they search hard enough, it's not like I'm very far from you and there's even a clear path half the way here!" Witch said with a small laugh, still again showing she didn't mind much.

Which was so confusing to me! Witch, although had strange powers and was very smart in ways I couldn't comprehend... was actually rather weak. To the point it was concerning. There were times her lack of ability made me question her oddness, just this morning I had to help her free the axe she had gotten firmly lodged into a piece of firewood! I'd have laughed at how easily I had tugged it free if not for how badly I had seen her struggle trying to do so herself just moments beforehand!

Witch has made it clear that most humans, if not all of them, were weak like her... but I was having a hard time believing it. My family had, although looked down on humans to a crazy degree, had also claimed they had killed many of us. That they were a threat if not handled properly. I couldn't imagine anyone in my family, my uncle and father especially, claiming that humans were a threat of any kind if they were as weak in general as they were seeming to be. Their pride alone would have not allowed it...

"But Lady Witch...!" the older woman made an odd noise as she cried out in worry, and my ears fluttered because of it. That had been quite a crack in her voice just now! As if she'd just gotten hurt or something...!

Yet as interested as I was, I leaned back from the crack a bit... since I'd just made some noise thanks to my ears.

I squinted at my own knees and focused on staying quiet, even to the point of holding my breath... as I heard them continue talking.

"It's all well. I thank you, really, for worrying about me... but the world cannot be controlled. Fate always finds its mark, no matter what we will or wish of it. That being said, I've not seen or heard of any visitors lately other than you two. When did they arrive?" Witch asked. As she did I heard the sound of wooden cups being taken from a cupboard. Was she going to serve them drinks...?

"Yesterday, Lady Witch. We all wanted to come warn you last night, but wanted to wait until they left. As to make sure no one was followed here," the younger woman said.

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I felt my ear itch as it wanted to flutter again, but I didn't let it. I didn't want them to hear me or notice me.

It was... strangely humbling to hear them so concerned for Witch. To the point they even thought that far ahead.

Maybe this was why she was content with living here, so close to that village? And also willing to use her abilities for their benefit? She occasionally went down the mountain to help them, or villagers came up here requesting aid. Only a dozen or so nights ago she had left for nearly a whole day, since one of the older men had gotten hurt while cutting down a tree.

I wonder why some humans were... more open to those like us. While others were indifferent, and even more were hostile. What was the difference between them all, I wonder? And what was the separation between someone like me and Witch?

Right now, the reason I was hiding, was not just something I had wanted to do... Witch herself had told me to hide the moment I had warned her that people were coming. She herself has made it clear that the people here, the humans in the nearby village, would likely not welcome me as readily as they did her. Even if she vouched for me, she feared the possibility of them choosing violence or hatred over acceptance.

Was it just because I had ears on the top of my head...? My tail, maybe? If not for those, and maybe my sharp teeth and nails, I'd likely look like any other human. Within reason, at least.

I mean, Witch had glowing eyes... that was pretty startling. Even my own family had not had such things, and they were as non-human as one could get!

"Thank you, Lady," the old woman's voice pulled me from my thoughts as I leaned a bit closer to the crack in the wall. Sure enough, I saw steaming cups being handed to the two women by Witch... but I couldn't see much more from this angle.

Drinks. For visitors. Something Witch has said was something to be expected, and also a form of pride. For not just those receiving the warm welcome, but the one giving it. She had once told me that there were people who went through great lengths to take good care of their guests... to the point they'd even endanger their own lives and livelihoods to do so. She had told me of a culture to the east where one would take food from their own child just to feed a visitor, and it was seen as something proper.

A part of me liked such tradition. It was a kind gesture; kind of like saying you had no plans to harm the visitor or something. After all why would you offer something as precious as food and drinks to someone

you hated? I couldn't ever imagine any of my family members doing such a thing, so to me it was... well...

Something to hope I could one day do myself. To not just be in a position where I could offer someone food and drink, but have someone wanting and willing to visit me in the first place.

Though I suppose first I'd need a place where they could visit. Even if they had a reason, without a location... a home, then there was no point.

"So, tell me what they looked like. Did they have names? Banners or crests, or strange appearances?" Witch asked as she then went to sit with them.

My ears fluttered again as I leaned closer once more to the crack... as to keep listening. Not just to the conversation, but also to the way Witch was handling it.

She sounded so calm, so... normal... as if the knowledge that strange people were on the hunt for her was nothing to even think twice about... Yet she still kept on asking questions, and did so in a way that didn't just sound calm and indifferent but seemingly kept the people she spoke to calm as well.

It kind of made me feel as if it was being done on purpose. As if by keeping calm herself, or at least pretending to be... she was able to keep everyone else calm too.

Still...

Shifting a little, I felt my tail bump into the shelf nearby. I turned a bit and glared at the jars of pickled food.

There wasn't much room in here. It was not a very small storage room, but it was full of stuff. Food and other things... so there really wasn't much room for me.

Taking in a small breath, I made sure not to sigh it out too loudly. Witch and the two visitors were now deep in a conversation, while drinking what Witch called honeyed tea, and as such likely wouldn't hear me... but I didn't want to risk it.

Wonder how long I'll be stuck hiding in here. Sometimes visitors from the village stayed the night, since humans weren't able to safely traverse the forests at night. And it would be night in only a few short hours...

Oh well. I'll just take this a lesson. Next time I'll hide elsewhere. Or at least do so in a way that didn't make me so uncomfortable.

After all I was kneeling under a rack of dried meat. I could probably stand up if I squeezed between the rack and the shelf by the door, but there were pots and pans hanging on the wall near it. If I bumped into them even humans would hear such a thing, so I was avoiding them.

I was fine. I would be. I was used to staying still for a long time. Did it all the time when I needed to hunt... but...

Glancing up at the dried meat strips, I squinted at them as I heard Witch ask her guests if they were hungry.

Which only made me hungrier.

Hopefully they left before my stomach started making noise too.

Chapter 586 To Make A Choice

Walking down the hallway, I paused for a moment to make sure I hadn't misheard.

Yes. That was Freya... talking to... Was that Eyes?

Rounding the corner, I took the few more needed steps to reach the room from where the voices originated. Sure enough I found Eyes and Freya, the two standing together near a table. They were both so focused on whatever they were working on that I had not even been noticed, which for both of them was quite odd. Not only was Freya one of the most observant people I knew, Eyes too was not someone who you could typically sneak up upon.

Still, neither noticed me as I watched them for a moment. They were happily studying whatever was on the table, it looked like some kind of... was that glass...? It looked like an oddly shaped glass bowl, but there didn't seem to be any hole or entrance to it. Maybe it was meant to hold something? As if to display it...? But there didn't seem to be anything inside it...

I studied it and them as they happily chatted excitedly about it for a few moments before stepping away.

Although I was interested in what they were doing, I wasn't so rude as to interrupt what was obviously a good moment between them. Ever since Eyes had joined he's been busy, focusing on bettering our living

conditions and the troubles we so desperately need handled... it was time he had something good happen in his life. And Freya likewise could use a good anchor, and a husband would be perfect for it. I'd been worrying about her running off one day, maybe her settling down and having a child or something would fix that.

Though it was odd... I don't think I've had a dream of their relationship, or any hint of it... Or maybe I have, and I simply hadn't noticed? I've actually had quite a few with Freya and Eyes in them, though not because they were the center-points of the prophecies themselves.

I hummed as I thought of many of our members, especially the newer ones lately, and wondered if I'd noticed any of them in my recent prophecies. Such as with children, or something to imply they would marry and propagate.

There were a few I could think of off the top of my head, most notably the Goddess and Vim of course... Or even my own child, but it was a tad shocking to realize I could only think of a handful at best.

Was that something I should be concerned over...? Or was it just something the gods had not deemed important, and thus didn't allow prophecies to focus on such aspects of life...? Even though it was such an important part of it?

Maybe the gods had not seen romance and having children as something of value. Or maybe they simply saw it as something so natural, so expected, that there was no point in wasting time or resources to foresee them. After all, all the ones I could think of were not from outright prophecies but coincidence. Such as Vim and his children. The only reason I knew of them was because I saw or heard of them in far more important prophecies... Basically things I witnessed or learned on accident while observing something far more important and serious, such as the end of the world or something.

"Speaking of that, I wonder what their names are..." I wondered. I knew his, Vim, and I knew Rennalee's, but I didn't seem to recall any of their children's names. Maybe I've written them down in one of my journals and simply have forgotten about it...

I should verify that. Knowing the name of their children might come in handy later.

"Lady Saint!"

Recognizing Morta's voice, I slowed again, and came to a stop once I saw the older woman hurry over to me. She had to take a moment to catch her breath, and for a tiny moment I feared her next words... but knew better than to actually panic. Morta was a lovely woman, but also the kind to panic even over the tiniest of things. Just a few days ago she had panicked over us changing the drapes in the common eating room, she had thought us changing the colors of mere window curtains was a sign of bad tidings.

"Morta," I greeted her as she took in a deep breath and calmed a bit.

She smiled and nodded. "Lady Celine... You have a visitor!" she said excitedly.

Oh...? I felt my heart flutter. It felt as if it was about to fly out of my throat as I glanced past her and down the hallway which she just came from. It did indeed lead to the entrance of the church!

"Who is it...!?" I asked, suddenly even more excited than she was.

"A young man! One of us, for sure, though I've not been able to verify he's a member yet," Morta said, her own excitement growing... though likely not because the moment was that exciting, even for her, but rather because of my sudden burst of excitement. She was simply feeding off of it.

Wouldn't be able to anymore. My whole body slumped and my shoulders suddenly felt very heavy as I sighed. "Oh... I see."

A young man? That would be neither Vim nor Rennalee. Rather, I suppose an older woman such as Morta might call Vim a young man but she had made a comment that he was for sure one of us. Vim didn't look at all like a non-human on first appearance. Not even on second or third glances either.

Morta obviously noticed my change in demeanor. She gave me a worried look and glanced around. "Lady Celine...? Is something the matter? Is his arrival a bad thing...?" she asked quickly, concerned.

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"No... no Morta, I just mistook this moment for another one. And..." I stopped talking as Martin rounded the corner nearby. He walked over to me, and I gestured lightly at Morta. "She's telling me of our new visitor," I told him, hoping to spark some insight from him.

"Yes. A whale of some kind, he was sent here by Berri. He's come to ask Eyes for help," Martin said, telling me more.

Oh...? "I just saw Eyes that way," I said.

"Ah! I'll go grab him!" Morta immediately took initiative and stepped away. Although I had not meant to send her, or imply she should do it, I went ahead and allowed her to go. Honestly now that I felt so utterly disappointed I almost didn't want to even get too involved in it. Though I knew I would, and soon I'd go see this whale. Until I saw him, and confirmed I didn't know him from a prophecy, I'd not let him leave.

"You looked upset just now. What's wrong?" Martin asked as Morta hurried down the hall I'd just come from, as to get Eyes.

"I mistook the moment for another. Should I be concerned over this new visitor?" I asked.

"Not sure... he's come to join the Society, and wants his family to join as well... but he wants help in building something. A pathway or road or something, I'm not sure," Martin said.

A... road...? That explained why he was here for Eyes, then. Berri must have told him to seek Eyes out here.

"Wonder where Berri found him... is she back too?" I asked.

"No. He arrived alone."

Hm...

I loved that girl, but honestly it was so hard to rely on her. You sent her to do one thing that should be quick and easy and she ended up being gone for months. She always seemed to get side-tracked, such as with this new visitor. She should have been back over a month ago, yet still she was out and about... Though I suppose I couldn't really complain since she was doing good things with her time and skills, at least.

"By the way..."

Frowning at Martin, more so over my own thoughts than him, I watched him glance around for half a moment before continuing. Which wasn't usual for him, he was usually so acutely aware of our surroundings that half the time he never needed to verify anything.

For a few moments I waited still, and yet he didn't speak up... so I frowned deeper at him. "What is it?" I asked.

Martin's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Your most recent prophecy... the one concerning fire in the sky?"

"Yeah...?" We already had our meeting about it yesterday morning... it wasn't typical he brought up such prophecies again after such meetings, unless of course we or he were getting ready to go handle them... and that prophecy was not something we needed to worry about for now. It'd be many years before we had to concern ourselves over half the world burning.

"We all trust you. We'd not be here otherwise... let alone be supporting you as we do..." Martin then said.

My frown furrowed even deeper. "Okay...?" Where was he going with this?

The young knight, who honestly I probably should stop thinking of as young, shifted ever so slightly as he gently sighed. "Some of your more recent prophecies... they've been... well, missing a few things," he then said.

Oh. "You've noticed," I said softly.

"Hard not to. It's a shock no one else has, really."

"Rather they're smart enough to not bring it up," I said. I knew for a fact many have noticed, such as Freya and some of her sisters.

A tiny smirk etched its way onto Martin's face as he nodded. "Correct. That being said... I'm sure it's safe to assume the thing you've been omitting, or rather the person, is all the same individual...?" he asked.

"For the most part," I said.

"Is it the one you keep sending people out to find...?"

I nodded.

"And yet we've been unsuccessful," he noted.

"You think?" I said a bit too sarcastically. I shouldn't be so snippy with him, he was such a loyal man. He didn't deserve such a thing.

Martin though didn't seem to even notice or mind my tone as he nodded again. "Why not tell me, Celine? Tell me more, so I can help you. Maybe the reason we've failed to find this... woman you are searching for is because of your hesitance to give us more information about her. If you can't trust them, how about giving me a shot at it?" he offered.

My heavy heart melted a little, and for a tiny moment I found myself liking the boy more than I already did. I was used to such undying loyalty, a lot of my fellow sisters or church members had such fealty... but this man was not a church member. He wasn't even religious. He was just... loyal to a fault.

"If I told you, it could cause issues," I warned him.

"But failing to find her will cause even worse ones, will it not?"

Gods he was right...!

I took a deep breath and sighed it out... and then heard people approach. I turned and watched Eyes, Freya and Morta all head our way.

"Fine... I'll consider it. We'll talk more later," I said simply, deciding to actually do so.

Martin simply nodded as I went to join the group and go meet this whale. I had many things to ponder and worry about, but I knew better than to ignore the immediate. Sometimes even the smallest and simplest thing was important enough to change history.

But that didn't mean I didn't think of Martin's offer while doing so.

Especially since it was such a heavy decision.

If I agreed to it, I'd have to tell him what it would cost him. To know. Because to properly find her, before it was too late, meant he'd have to know the consequences and what he could and couldn't do afterward... not to mention something even more personal.

If I did this I'd also have to tell him something that would possibly ruin his future. And it was a glorious future. To sacrifice it so...

But I suppose that was our life. To sacrifice.

We'll all have to sacrifice something, by the end. Even the Goddess and the God Slayer would... and if not even they could avoid it, then I wasn't sure if there was any point in us mere mortals hoping for a better outcome.

For now at least.

Chapter 587 Heart-Breaker

I had no words.

Nor did she.

"Come on, little one!" Witch happily called her child towards her, and the young girl made tiny noises as she giggled and laughed while trying to walk towards her mother.

I held my breath as the small child stumbled across the yard, leaving her father's protective grasp as she did. The small girl, so tiny she could fit in a basket, wobbled hopelessly as she headed for Witch who was kneeling only a step or so away from Fredlo. I completely forgot how to breathe for a moment as I stayed utterly focused on the young girl... ready to pounce forward to save her if she fell. We were in the front garden, not far from the house, and as such this place was relatively safe... the grass was soft and warm, the ground not too hard, and I'd long picked up and removed any sharp stones or sticks... But humans in general were so frail, and Witch's child was probably the frailest thing I'd ever known. So it worried me, greatly, to see her left to her own wobbly feet... as if about to fall at any moment...! But she didn't, Witch's daughter made it to her mother with a happy giggle as Witch picked the girl up and spun her around a bit, praising her for walking so well.

Squirming a bit as I watched Witch and the child laugh, I tried to remember any instance of me and my own mother having such a moment. It didn't take me long to figure out that I'd never had such a moment... and had also not seen such a moment between my parents and my siblings either. Which was very disheartening, and not just because I hadn't found any... but rather also at how quickly I had scanned my memories.

There had been a lot of them. Years and years, an almost untold number... yet not once had I ever seen my mother smile like Witch was now. Nor did I remember any of my siblings, or me myself, giggle and laugh in the way her daughter was doing either.

Suddenly the very happy and blissful moment was... ruined, as my chest began to actually hurt.

I blinked a bit and glanced downward, as if expecting to find a terrible wound or something. Of course there wasn't one, and I did know what the feeling inside me was... but did I want to admit it? Did I want to confront it...?

Not really. Because it made me feel ungrateful.

Yes my past was... not as good as it could have been. But look at me now.

Smiling again, I looked back to the happy family and found Witch and Fredlo standing close. They were whispering about something while their daughter made bubbly noises while grabbing at her mother's hair.

When would she start speaking, I wonder...? Sometimes every so often I thought I heard a word, or at least an attempt at one, but so far hadn't heard a word spoken just yet from her. Witch and Fredlo didn't seem worried at all over it, but it concerned me. How long had it taken me to speak, I wonder? I felt as if I could remember nearly all of my childhood, but... some things were also blurry...

"Rennalee."

My ears stood upward as I looked back to them, since my eyes had drifted downward again. My chest still kind of felt heavy, though it wasn't hurting as much anymore.

"Hm?" I smiled at the two as Fredlo went ahead and took the young girl from Witch. She didn't want to be taken, though, and clung to Witch's hair with a firm grip. One that made Witch flinch a bit as she tugged her hair free, and then headed my way.

"She's stronger than she looks. I might want to cut my hair shorter for a while until she grows out of that phase," Witch said with a smile as she stepped over to me.

I shifted ever so slightly as I nodded and thought of my own hair. It was long right now too, very long. Not as long as it used to be, before I had started living with Witch, but not far off from it. "Maybe name her hair-grabber?" I suggested.

Witch gave me a look. "Your naming sense is so weird, Renn."

Was it...? I had thought it would have both worked and been cute. "Why is it you wait so long to name your children anyway?" I asked. It was kind of upsetting they hadn't picked a name yet. It was why I kept offering suggestions. It even kept me up at night sometimes, as I just continued to think of all the possible names one could give her.

"It's just a tradition. We wait until her coming of age to give her a proper name. We'll probably pick a nickname or two for her shortly, no... not hair-grabber. Or toe-nibbler either," she said, referring to the name I had suggested last night.

I smirked at that. "It sounds cute though."

Witch huffed at me and crossed her arms. "By the way... want to try again?" she asked.

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My lips pursed and my tail went stiff as I glanced at Fredlo. He had headed over to the table nearby, as to go sit down at it with the girl.

"But..." I whispered as I thought of her screams a few days ago.

"She can't be scared of you forever, Rennalee," Witch said.

Says who...?

"She's so happy right now... what if I make her cry again?" I asked worriedly. She was giggling up a storm while sitting on her father's knee!

"That's why this is the perfect time to try again! Just go on up and sit with her, give her a gentle smile and it'll all be okay," Witch suggested.

I wanted to groan as Witch grabbed me by the arm and tugged me towards her family.

Great. Here we go again...

As Witch pulled me over to Fredlo and her daughter, I quickly collected myself and tried to put on an even face. I didn't let my fast beating heart of worry bother me, or at least tried not to let it do so, as I stepped over to them... right as the young girl turned and looked at us.

She saw her mother first... and as such broke out in a happy grin. She made some of her noises as she reached out for her mother, grabbing at the air as if saying she wanted to grab at her mother's hair again... and I had an idea because of it.

Grabbing my own hair, I smiled as the idea gave me hope. Maybe this would work...!

Stepping forward, I put forth some thick locks of my hair forward towards the girl. I offered them, as if like a peace-offering, and smiled. "Hey there toe-nibbler...!" I said as I did so... and flinched as the girl immediately looked over at me and went still.

Her tiny little eyeballs went wide, to the point that they basically went all white like her mother's nearly, and then she took in a deep breath...

And released a cry as she quickly went to swinging her arms and legs around, as if to bat me away with them.

I instantly stepped back and groaned as Witch giggled at me and Fredlo went to calming the girl down. "There, there," he said calmly as he turned her away from me, so she couldn't see me anymore. Like his wife, Fredlo had a small grin on his face. He too found it utterly amusing that their daughter seemingly was terrified of me.

"I just wonder what it is...!" Witch said loudly as she laughed. "Maybe it's your teeth? Or ears...? She looked you straight in the eyes though just now, as if she hadn't even noticed anything else... wonder what she finds so terrifying?" Witch wondered as she went ahead and stepped forward to take the girl from Fredlo.

Her screaming began to diminish now that she was in her mother's arms, but Witch began to turned and sway... as if to lull her into sleep, but in doing so she nearly allowed the girl to lock eyes with me again. I stepped back and away before it could happen, as to not re-trigger the child's tantrum.

Gosh! I knew the girl really didn't mean anything by it, as Witch and Fredlo so obviously believed... but it just...

I fought back tears as I bit back a whine and stepped back a bit. "I'm... going to go catch some fish..." I said, and then turned and hurried off before either the girl could see me again or Witch and Fredlo could tease me over it as they had the other day.

Hurrying off around the house, as to grab some of my fishing supplies that I stored in the shed behind it... I continued to fight back the tears that kept wanting to take over my eyes. They were thick and heavy, the kind that I knew would make me even sob once they really got going.

Some disciple I was...! Witch saw me as family, as I did her, but how could I be such a thing if I couldn't even look her daughter in the eye without making her scream in terror? Maybe I was far uglier and scarier than I thought...!

What if the girl never got over her fear of me...? What if she always acted so? It would...

Grabbing a fishing pole, I barely paid enough attention to grab some bait too before running off towards the nearby lake. I'd spend the rest of the day catching fish, both so I could give the child some time to calm down and become happy again... and also for my own heart to heal from its terrible shuddering pain it was currently enduring.

What if I never got to hold her? What if she grew up before I could convince her I wasn't scary? She was growing up so fast... so humanly fast. She hadn't inherited her mother's abilities. Didn't have the glowing eyes. Didn't have the powers. She was as human as Fredlo, and even he was already starting to age! His belly was growing bigger by the day it seemed!

That meant in no time at all the girl would grow. It felt like only yesterday she had never left her crib, unless to suckle or be carried around. And now she was out here learning to walk... that meant I'd blink, teary eyes likely, and then she'd be my height... and then I'd blink again and...

Sniffing as I cried and ran, I decided next time to wear a hat. Maybe it was my ears!

And if that didn't work, I'd not smile next time. And if that didn't work... I'd wear a mask! I could make one, I think, surely...

One way or another I'll figure it out. I had to.

Otherwise...

Nearing the lake, I slowed as I went to wiping my face of tears. There was no real reason to hide them, no one was around and I knew Witch and Fredlo wouldn't follow, but I also planned to look at the lake's surface in a moment. I was going to again try and find the source of the young girl's terror... for the eleventh time.

Walking up to the edge of the lake, I ignored the small dock that Witch and I had built years ago and instead just stepped onto the bank. My shoes sunk a tiny bit into fresh mud, the summer sun had softened it a lot, and I glared at my own blurry reflection.

I guess I did look kind of scary... what with the wild hair and ears... but it was hard to see anything better in the water's reflection alone, especially since it was so clear.

While staring at myself, a new and better name idea came to mind. One I'd likely not share or suggest to anyone else, even though very fitting.

"Heart-breaker."

Chapter 588 A Misplaced Hope

Wiping my eyes, I glared at the thin white cloth which was now stained with tears.

Really. I was so strong in front of him. I kept my composure, no matter what he said or did... yet the moment he left...?

I became such a mess.

Sniffing, I had to wipe my face again as more tears came. I could tell by the feel of the small cloth that I'd need to replace it soon at this rate. Which was annoying, since that meant I'd need to do laundry tomorrow. I only had a few clean ones left.

Really, why was Vim so... well... like he was? Did he not know how terribly embarrassing it would be for me to have someone else wash my clothes and for them to find a bunch of tear-stained washcloths? He likely had no idea how many rumors that could spread from such an event... Though it was not as if Vim even knew how deeply I was bothered by his constant refusal to join the Society. Not really, at least.

Sniffing again, I sighed and shook my head. So stupid... so utterly...

"I take it Vim said no once again, did he?"

Burning eyes narrowed as I turned ever so slightly... to glare at the young man entering the room. Randle walked with a confident gait, the kind that made him seem kind of cocky. I was glad to see it, since it gave me a good excuse to scoff at him. "Why anyone would think otherwise is beyond me," I said.

Randle walked deeper into the room, passing chairs and pews as he did. "Well... I think everyone would...? It's rather obvious everyone knows you expect him to eventually join, as in it's a matter of when and not if," Randle said.

I scoffed again. "Then none of you have been paying attention."

He hummed for a moment as he finally reached the pew I sat upon. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed him glance at the chair that sat across from me, likely because he figured that Vim had been sitting in it as we talked. But Vim hadn't been. Vim... rarely if ever actually sat and spoke to me. He intentionally always did his best to keep a distance between us, and not just between me and him personally... he did it to keep a distance from himself and the Society as a whole. It was why even though he liked Lilly, to the point he seemed to always concern himself with her, that he still kept a distance from her. He had asked of her this visit but had not gone to see her, unless he had done so before leaving. Lilly would be upset with him if he had actually left without doing so...

"Did anyone let Lilly know he was here?" I asked since it was on the mind.

"Not that I'm aware. She flew off earlier this afternoon, I don't know if she's returned yet," Randle said.

Darn. Although I knew full well that Lilly was not the one to collar him to us, she was still someone he thought highly of... and I liked using every available tool and option I had. Especially since there were so few of them. Next time I'll make sure the two get a chance to meet.

If there will even be a next time...

I sniffed again and Randle glanced at me because of it. "What was he here for this time?" he asked. I could tell he was interested, but was also just trying to fill the air. It was his way of trying to help me over my emotions.

"He came to tell me of a village of non-humans. One in the west, near that inland sea in the mountains. He said they're reclusive but might prove useful," I said.

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Randle frowned gently at that. "He... is recruiting for us now is he?"

I shook my head. "I actually know of the village he spoke of. Or well, I didn't know where it was until now but I knew of it. It's a place he's not able to easily enter, though I'm not entirely sure why. He likely hopes to connect us with one another since he can't do anything himself," I said, explaining it a bit.

"So you've had a dream about them?"

I nodded. "They one day cause problems with the Goddess. The kind that cause friction... or well..." I felt like crying again as I glared at nothing in particular. "That's what should happen, at least..." I finished.

Randle hummed at that... and then stepped closer. He went ahead and sat down next to me, in a proper way for one who wanted to be a reverend. He sat close enough to be kind and show his comfort with me, but far enough to not seem weird about it. "Has he said anything about her yet?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Not a pip."

"Would he...? I mean, if they had met already... would he have told anyone? Told you?" Randle then asked.

Blinking at that, I frowned in thought. "You mean... if they had somehow met beyond the Society, unbeknownst to us... would Vim keep it a secret?" I asked.

He nodded.

Yes. Verily so. Even if Rennalee, as I expected her to be, was someone who'd never abandon us on any level... there was no doubt in my mind that Vim would keep us all a secret from her. Just as he would keep her a secret from everyone else. As a way to protect her, in his own way. If he would do so because of ill-will was up to debate, but he'd undoubtedly do so all the same.

"Celine?" Randle asked, since I'd not answered yes.

I cleared my throat as I nodded. "Yes..." I sighed as I nodded again. "Yes... if he and her have already met, and have done so outside of the Society... then yes. There's a very good chance Vim would keep the Goddess a secret. Especially so if she doesn't know of us, or has her own worries to focus on at the moment," I said.

"Would he do so maliciously?" Randle asked.

A tiny flinch of a shiver ran down my spine as I quickly shook my head. "Not purely. Vim can be cruel, as far as I'm aware rather spectacularly too, but not in that form. However... he would keep us a secret from her intentionally, if he knew by knowing of us she'd feel a desire to rush to our aid. He'd do so not to spite us, or even her, but in his perspective to keep her safe. From us, mostly," I said, rationalizing it.

Randle was quiet for a moment, and I was kind of annoyed at how calm he was being at the moment. I suddenly felt like I needed to get up and start pacing... or rather running around. I can't believe I hadn't even thought of such a possibility...!

It made so much sense! Obviously!

We've been searching for Rennalee for almost thirty years! Not only have I myself gone to many locations, I've sent hundreds of people every which way all over the lands as well! And not just to random locations either, but to places where I've dreamt and prophesized, places that she should have been or at least left enough of a trail at to have led us to her!

The fact that all this time has passed and she's still not showed up or been found... by the gods dead and alive it made perfect sense...!

"They're already together...?" I whispered in shock.

"Is there... any way to confirm it?" he asked.

"I... I don't know," I said honestly. Other than just outright asking Vim about her the next time I saw him, I wasn't sure how I would go about proving it. It wasn't as if I or anyone could follow him in secret or anything... he was a god slayer. A being beyond us. Anyone who tried would simply get caught, then likely die. It was a waste of life.

"Something to consider, then," Randle said simply.

I nodded slowly... as my tears dried up, and I found myself both hopeful... and a tad angry.

If this was the case, if Vim and Rennalee were already together... why were we still struggling? Why were so many prophecies failing and so many of us dying or being lost? They should be helping...!

Containing my anger, I nodded again... and decided to find a way to prove it. I wasn't sure how I would, but I had time. It'd be months if not years before I saw Vim again... so I had time to find a way, a proper way, to figure it out.

At the very least it gave me hope, even if only a little of it... and honestly right now that was more than enough.

Chapter 589 A Growing Family

Not only were they older... there were more of them.

Staying behind the tree-line, I watched Witch and her family from a distance. There were a couple more children and now... another human family entirely? Or was that maybe her firstborn daughter and her family? It was hard to tell from here. But there were now more buildings, three more homes amongst maybe another half dozen smaller buildings that were obviously used for storage or latrines.

The sight of Witch and her family brought tears to my eyes. I had absolutely no words to describe just how... happy I was to see that they weren't just all still here, and all well, but doing so good too. Even from here I could see how healthy they were. The kids were running around, Fredlo was fatter than ever and seemingly growing bald but he had a huge smile on his face and... and...

"You're happier than I've ever seen you," I whispered as I watched Witch accept a basket of what looked to be clothes from one of the other women.

I'd known Witch for a long time. Longer than Fredlo, her husband... but in all the years I'd known her I don't think I'd ever seen her so blatantly happy. She had a huge grin even as she worked menially, doing laundry it seemed. Usually, back when it had been just me and her, she had complained when we had done such tasks. Witch was the type, or rather had been the type, to complain over doing the mundane and instead want to focus on what she had considered more important things. Like making medicine, or reading books.

Yet here she was... smiling happily as she joined others into the main house, carrying baskets as they did.

Leaning against the tree I was hiding behind, I smiled as I watched most of the family head into the main building. The original house, the one that I used to live in with Witch. It looked nearly as I remembered it from my last visit, minus a larger extension on the south side. Likely another bedroom or something like it.

They had also done some work on the general area of the place. There were larger farms to the west, where there was less tree coverage and near the front gardens were now gravel paths. And... was that some kind of well? It looked like it, though was hard to tell from this angle.

Honestly the place looked good. It had never been cluttered or unkempt when I had lived here with her, but we hadn't really done much to the surrounding area. Other than cleaning up fallen trees, or cleaning up after a heavy storm or snowfall, we hadn't done much. Now though it almost looked like the place was more like the beginnings of a large farmstead than anything else. If they added a few more buildings it would almost be populated enough to be a small mountain village, which was surprising. Had I really been gone so long that such a thing could happen? I mean sure, humans grew up fast... but didn't they also age and die quickly too? As to offset their quick growth? If so how was it they were multiplying so readily and...

Ah! There was Witch again! She emerged from her home, this time not carrying anything... and also without anyone else in tow. I frowned as she glanced around for a moment, and then without any hint of why she would do so... she started walking towards me.

I frowned at her approach, especially since it was so direct. She was walking straight at me, and there isn't anything really in-between us or along the way for her to be walking towards. No other buildings... no storehouses, not even a farm plot or...

Groaning as her glowing eyes narrowed and she smiled at me, I realized I'd been caught. Which should surprise me, considering I had been hiding in a deep cluster of trees, ones littered with bushes all around them. The kind of big bushes that even just a single one of them would have been enough to hide me from view if I hid behind one, and this area had many.

I had genuinely thought I would have been able to come and go without being noticed. Seemed I was wrong.

Standing up a bit, I sighed as I stepped around the tree I'd been using for cover as Witch drew closer.

"Going to make me walk through those bushes, Little Renn? In my nice new dress of all things?" Witch asked, a little loudly, as she got closer.

Suddenly I felt like a child again. I felt my tail coil, and my ears fluttered as I sheepishly stepped out of the bushes and out into the opening. "No... it is too pretty to ruin," I said softly as I finally studied it a bit better. It indeed looked brand new, freshly sewn even. I don't think I saw a single stain upon it, which was saying something. Even before she had children Witch had been slightly clumsy, and as such her clothes were usually not so new looking.

Witch gave me a huge smile as she drew closer and I felt a tad silly as I anxiously went still on her approach. She didn't seem to have the same hesitation as she stepped up to me and even wrapped me in a hug. "Look at you...! As scrawny and small as ever!" she said happily as she wrapped her arms around me.

A huge smile wormed its way onto my face as I squirmed in her embrace and went to return her hug. "Surely not...!" I said. I'd been gone for years! I wasn't sure how many, of course, but it had to have been at least a dozen or so!

Witch chuckled at me as we hugged... and although the moment felt absolutely wonderful... I realized something strangely startling.

She was thin.

For the smallest moment I focused on the feeling of her body, her arms around me and mine around hers... and I realized she was likely half the weight she had been when I had left.

My happy moment faltered as I leaned back a bit as to get a better look at her... and I found the normal, expected, face of my dear teacher... but I could see her cheekbones a bit easier now. She had indeed lost some weight, it seemed... But she didn't outright look any older, at least as far as I could tell... hopefully it was just something that happened sometimes and not a sign of something worse...

"How have you been, my curious cat?" she asked.

"Fine... I've been fine. How about you...? Are they all your children, Witch? There's so many now!" I said, hoping to steer the conversation away from me.

I didn't want to admit, at least not right away, that I'd basically spent this whole time away from her alone. I'd only spoken to three other people, all human travelers I had happened upon on forgotten paths and game trails. Basically simple hellos and whatnot as we passed one another, nothing more.

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"Most are, yes. Though not outright children, most are now grandchildren," she said as we separated a little, though she kept hold of me by my arms.

Grandchildren...! Maybe that one woman had indeed been her firstborn daughter then. "How's toe-nibbler doing?" I asked, excited to hear about her.

Witch's happy smile dimmed a little, as did her eyes as she squeezed my arms. "She passed away a few years ago. From old age," Witch said.

What...? "Old age...?" I asked, shocked to hear it.

Witch nodded.

"But..." I frowned as I looked back to the home. Hadn't I just seen Fredlo, her husband...? He had been much older, and balder, but...

"She... aged quickly, Renn. Even for a human. She died at thirty-three, but had looked older than me as she did."

Huh... "I... I see," I said, unsure of what else to say. I felt like I should cry, but to be honest I was more shocked to hear that such a thing was even possible. Was growing so old so quickly something that happened to humans, or something? I'd never heard of it before.

"It's all well, Rennalee. She had children, and they've had children. As you likely saw... my family, our family, has grown to nearly forty strong," she said with a small nod behind her.

I nodded at that. "I did see. Congratulations," I said. It made my heart swell to hear her include me in that statement.

"Mhm..." Witch nodded... and then squeezed my arms again. "You look good, Rennalee. Though a tad dirty, and I think a bit scrawnier than I remember. Have you been getting enough to eat?" she asked.

Did I really look that bad...? "I think so?" I said.

"Try to eat more, okay? I assume you're still catching game and fish? Make sure to catch a few more from now on, okay?" Witch fussed over me as she glanced me up and down, making me feel as if time had never come and gone. As if I'd never left, and was still in her tutelage.

"I will... I hope you don't mind I came to visit... did someone notice me? I had been trying to stay out of sight," I asked.

Witch shook her head. "No one had noticed. Though they likely have now, odds are some are watching us from windows and whatnot," she said without glancing back at the buildings.

"I'm sorry," I said. My ears and tail weren't covered or hidden, I hadn't felt as if I had needed to hide them since I had not expected to even be noticed let alone caught so blatantly.

"All is fine Rennalee... I'm just glad to see you again... though I fear I can't invite you in, or offer you a very needed bath and dinner!" Witch said with a laugh.

My tail twitched as my swelling heart thumped and almost burst. "I see..." I whispered. I had expected it of course... it was why I had originally left in the first place. Her children, some of them at least, had been terrified of me. To the point it had caused problems.

Witch's laugh slowed, then stopped... and then she gave me a sad smile. "I don't mean it that way, my lovely cat. Instead it's for a real reason," she then said.

"Real reason...?" What'd she mean?

Witch reached up and cupped the side of my face... and I suddenly had tears in my left eye. It was a tad shocking to feel and have happen, but the reason was obvious. Not only was it a very gentle gesture from her... it was the first time I'd been touched in such a way since I had left.

I kept the tears from welling too much, as to not let them leak, but I knew she had likely noticed all the same. "If you stay Rennalee, you'll get found. You'll be in danger. People arrive in a few days, the kind that... well..." Witch went quiet as she gave me a sad look, one that made me anxious.

"Are you in danger...?" I asked worriedly. If so I'd stay and protect her, and her family.

Witch shook her head. "No. If you're not here they will leave after a short visit, and there will be no harm or foul. But if you're here... well... let's just say it won't end as simply," she said.

I knew better than to ask for more information. Her dreams of the future were not things to doubt or things she liked talking about. Just as when we had hunted my uncle, or the other Great Ones, she had never really given more information than the bare minimum. It was just how she was. So I simply nodded, even though it hurt to do so.

"Okay... I'll make sure to leave then. Are you... sure you'll be okay?" I asked.

"Yes, my dear. We'll be fine. If you're worried, you can visit again in a few moons. You'll see."

"I can come back...?" I asked, a tad shocked to hear it.

"Why couldn't you? In fact I hope you do... next time don't stay away so long, if you keep disappearing for so long at a time I might end up forgetting all about you!" Witch said with a chuckle.

"Surely not...!" Witch could sometimes be forgetful, but never to that extent!

For a moment all was right with the world as we both giggled at the absurdity of the idea... and then once her laughter stopped and her expression softened... I realized it was time.

I was about to ask if I could stay if even for the night... even if I had to sleep outside away from everyone, as to keep the peace, but I knew better. She had said they'd be here in a few days... but had also said right from the get-go that I'd not be able to stay. Which meant even though these people were coming in a few days, it was still too risky to linger if even for more than a moment.

"I can visit again in a few moons?" I asked.

She nodded. "Of course. I'll make sure to have a new set of clothes ready for you then. Look at this, any more holes and tears and you'd be practically naked," she teased as she grabbed one of the holes in my front chest area. It was bad, but I had a thinner layer beneath it that hid all that it would have typically revealed so I'd not bothered fixing it yet.

"Mhm... I think I let things go when I don't have someone to fuss over me," I said sheepishly.

"I bet... but fear not, that will change. As all things do. Go on then, before I start getting too emotional to let you go," Witch then said as she released me.

Frowning at the sudden and forceful separation, I nodded as I stepped backward... and felt a chill.

I was cold all of a sudden.

Shivering ever so slightly, I glanced around and wondered if it had suddenly become winter or something. It hadn't, of course... it was still the tail end of summer... but I definitely without warning felt cold. To the point I now felt each and every hole in my clothes that she had spoken of. Was it the fact she had brought it up... or was I now feeling cold because I no longer had the warmth of another person's touch, I wonder?

No matter.

"Okay... goodbye, Witch. I'll see you in a bit," I said as I stepped away again.

Witch, with her glowing eyes, nodded at me. "Safe travels, Rennalee... make sure you eat a few more meals from now on, okay?" she said, once again.

Nodding as I stepped back into the dense forest... I giggled at her motherly affection as I left the area... only to stop a few dozen steps away. I turned around, looked over bushes and past trees... and found my dear friend and teacher still standing there. Still staring at me. With her glowing eyes.

Now though she had no smile. Just a sad frown... as if...

Waving gently at her one last time in goodbye, I watched her very stiff wave back... and I hurriedly turned and left as tears filled my eyes once again.

She looked tired all of a sudden. As if she had just done something very difficult... as if she'd just used her powers to kill a Great One, or heal an injured person.

Yet she hadn't... had she?

Hurrying away, I felt terrible for some unknown reason as I left Witch and her home behind.

Chapter 590 Vim – A Sweaty Ace

An early summer was here.

Liora sighed in relief as I took her overcoat from her, glad to be free of it finally.

"We'll avoid roads for the next few days," I said gently to her as she went to tugging back her hair, it was slightly sticking to her thanks to her sweat.

"Mhm..." Liora only nodded as I watched her pull her hair back into a small tail, tying it in a way to keep it from bothering her further. I had not even realized her hair was that long to where she could do such a thing... showed how much I was really paying attention to her.

Not that I could blame her for being annoyed over it... We'd recently been on a road, one near the river we were following, and there had been enough humans traversing it that I had not allowed Liora to take off her coat and hood... which, under the currently hot sun, had been very discomforting.

I should make her some sunglasses. I'll do that once we got to Renn...

"Here," I offered Liora a waterskin, which she accepted happily.

As the young saint drank deeply, likely emptying the thing completely, I wondered if I even knew which city Renn was at.

I had an idea, of course. I'd talked to Randle about it, back when the plan had first been made... but I didn't actually know where the city was. In fact I didn't even remember its name... Silver something, I think. There was no reason to worry, since I knew its general location and knew we'd not have much trouble finding it... but I also knew it would likely add a few days to our travel time if we didn't happen upon it, or hear of it from passerbys as we traveled.

"How much farther?" Liora asked.

"We're about half way there, I think," I said.

"That far still...?" the young saint sounded annoyed, but I couldn't blame her. This was slow going, and even I was starting to...

Stop. Your anxiety is from fear, don't let it exist.

"Vim...?" Liora, the little saint who was proving to be wise beyond her years, noticed my discomfort. I turned to smile down at her, and took the now empty waterskin from her.

"Feel better?" I asked her.

She blinked her glowing eyes and nodded. "Yes. It's hot wearing all that," she said with a glance at the clothes I held.

"Yes... I actually have a small idea, if you're willing to hear it," I said.

"Hm? Swim in the river? Yes, we should," she said as she glanced to the nearby hill. Over it, and beyond a few trees, was a smaller river. one that connected to the large one we'd been walking along earlier. The one that led to Ruvindale.

I smiled at her and nodded. "Right? If we had time I'd let you. Rather, I was wondering if you'd be willing to dare a city with me," I said.

"Dare...?" she didn't seem to understand as she glanced back at me.

"Ruvindale is about a day that way, along the path we'd just been on," I said with a point to it.

"I... thought we were avoiding people? Plus then I'd have to wear all that again, right?" Liora asked with a bit of disdain. Seemed she didn't want to be hot again.

"We do. We will. But I'm planning on getting us a horse. And if I buy some supplies, I can make you some stuff to hide your eyes. We'd be able to travel easily with them; we'd just have to be very careful in town until I made them. You'd have to be willing to try really hard to not be noticed, like how we left Nevi," I said.

"Oh... sure? I don't mind. I don't know how to ride a horse though," Liora said as she tugged at her side, lifting her shirt a bit. It clung to her in defiance.

The poor girl just wasn't used to exertion. She was struggling to walk alongside me as it was, let alone under such heat.

Oddly it wasn't even that hot. It actually felt very nice... this was likely the first warm day this region's had in months. Though a part of it might be the humidity that was bothering her...

"We'll worry about that later. You okay with trying, then?" I asked.

"Why even ask...?" Liora asked me.

I frowned down at the young saint who huffed, though not at me. She was still overheating. "It's your life at stake, Liora," I said gently.

"Hm..." she frowned as she pondered that, but then slowly shrugged and shook her head. "You'll protect me, won't you?"

"Of course. But there's always the risk. Always the chance," I said.

"I trust you."

The young saint didn't hesitate to say such a thing as she went to smelling herself. She frowned in a way that told me she was surprised, but not because she stunk. Instead she was shocked that she didn't, or didn't as badly as she had expected.

Hours of walking under this sun while dressed in clothes meant for storms would do that, usually, but she was a saint. She likely didn't realize that she was... more than she seemed.

"Then let us do so. It'll also let you rest in a real bed, if at least for a day," I said. Plus it'd let me actually find out where we were going.

"And buy new shoes," Liora said swiftly.

Ah. Yes. "Of course," I nodded gently, a little embarrassed to have forgotten.

The poor girl had bad blisters, and it turned out it was because the shoes she wore were just a tad too big for her. I had helped fix them a little, tightening them and stuffing them with torn up cloth from socks, but it hadn't helped much.

It was my fault, really. I had gone with Kaley to shop for the girl before leaving Nevi... but we hadn't bought shoes. We had thought the two pairs she had brought with her from her home had been good enough. My fault for thinking the girl's mother, being wealthy, would have bought the best and most suited. I had failed to realize just how sheltered the girl was, and had been, her whole life.

She hadn't even realized her shoes weren't well-fitted until too late. Because she had never walked enough to even notice or care if they had been or not.

"Want me to carry you?" I asked. Now that we were off the main path, and alone, it'd not be weird for me to do so.

"And get hot again? No. Not yet," she said.

I smirked at that. The way she had answered so promptly with an annoyed tone had made her sound like Renn.

"Let's go then. Walking might sound painful, but will cool you off," I said as I went to put her clothes into a bag. I didn't tuck them too deeply into the bag, just in case I needed to dig them out real quick.

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"How's that work...?" she mumbled as she joined me.

Keeping us somewhat in-lined with the nearby river, as to follow it to Ruvindale, I finished putting her stuff away and gently gestured at the saint. "By the way you don't stink," I said.

The young girl glanced at me, but didn't blush. She instead just frowned at me. "You sure...?" she asked, and went to smell herself once more.

"I'm sure," I said to the oddly mature girl. Renn would have blushed and laughed at me, as would most young girls...

"Wonder why?" she said.

"You're a saint. You're not normal," I said.

"Oh... really?"

I nodded. "In fact the only reason you're struggling so much on this journey is simply because you've never done anything like it. I bet by the time we get to our destination you'll not even notice the strain of walking anymore," I said. She likely hadn't noticed, but she was already doing a lot better. She had gone to asking for a break, or for me to carry her, every couple hours to only once or twice a day.

Odds are if her feet weren't covered in blisters, which were already healing quickly, she'd not even complain as much as she did.

"Hm..." Liora hummed a bit as she stopped messing with her own clothes and self, and instead glanced at me. I patiently waited, and wondered if she'd bring up the fact I didn't smell either... or that I wasn't sweating, even though still wearing the baggy overcoat and outer layer she had so angrily discarded.

Instead Liora pointed at my bag. The one on my right. "Can I have some of that bread?" she asked.

Well... that's not what Renn would have said, but it would have been the second thing on her list, so not far off. I obliged her and pulled out one of the loaves of bread I carried, handing it off to her to let her eat.

"We only have one more waterskin, so keep that in mind," I said.

"But there's water right over there," she said between two huge bites.

"It's not safe to just drink such water. Especially downstream of a big city," I said.

"Oh..." Liora must have known what I meant for she simply nodded with a small look of disgust.

"We can boil water if we need to, but not far from here is a small spring. One we can rest at and I'll boil water there for us," I said.

"You've been this way a lot?" she asked.

"Yes. Hundreds of times," I said. Thousands, actually.

"Are you... usually alone? Or with Renn?" she asked as she took another big bite.

"Lately I've been alone a lot, which is odd. But yes, usually I have someone with me. Renn's common now, but usually I have others... Either people joining me as they travel to and fro, or me escorting someone somewhere," I said.

"Are there a lot of people where we're going?"

I was long used to her countless questions. Especially since they reminded me of Renn. "There might be... and if not, there will be in time. Renn and the rest are building a new church, a new orphanage, it won't be long until there's dozens of people there I think," I said.

"Dozens...? Is that a lot?"

I nodded. "For us it is... though at the same time, it isn't. Remember I told you about the ships returning from across the ocean? A lot of people are coming back, and they're bringing a lot of friends and family who are new... at least to me," I said.

Liora was about to take another bite of her bread, but paused before she did. "I... don't have to go there do I? To sail?" she asked worriedly.

Oh...? She had just sounded, and looked, genuinely worried. More worried now than she had about entering a city and risking her life. I wonder why she... Oh. Right. Her mother's fate while sailing. Maybe she feared the ocean, or at least sailing it, because of that. "No. They're all coming here, no point going where they're all leaving from," I said calmly.

"Mhm...!" Liora quickly nodded at that, seemingly very glad to hear so.

I see. So it had been what I had expected. Not too surprising, but still a sad sorrowful all the same.

Sailing the sea was wonderful. It should not be feared... but I suppose it wasn't really the ocean she was fearing, was it...?

For a good while Liora ate in silence, and I found myself thinking of my own.

A lot of our members have suffered such attacks. Regrettably violence, of all forms, was common in this era. Though non-humans were notably killed on sight more often than not... there were plenty who were not so lucky. There were even quite a few men in the Society who have been victims of such crimes...

I'd never really sat down and considered it on paper, but I knew a good portion of the Society has either endured such torment... or knew those who had, such as their relatives or friends. So to most it was a constant threat, or at least one they had to consider when surviving in this world.

I of course didn't fear such a fate. Never had, and never will... Though I did always stay on guard over such things, and dealt with them when needed... but I did now need to worry over it for a new reason.

It wasn't just myself, or the pitiful members I protected, that I needed to worry over anymore. And soon, if the world permitted, I'd have another. Maybe even multiple new reasons to worry...

Children...

Taking a deep breath, I sighed it out as I boxed away the sudden and very raw worry and anger. It made me feel a tad weird, and this wasn't the right place to have such thoughts or emotions, so I bottled them away.

"Vim...?" Liora said my name, but I knew I had not missed something she had said. She had simply noticed my disgruntled feelings.

"How's the bread?" I asked.

"Tasty. None for you," she said as she quickly took another bite of it, she only had a few more bites left.

I chuckled at her. "All yours, Liora. I don't need to eat as much as you do, and not just because I'm not growing anymore," I said.

"Hm... right, you don't really eat or drink much do you?" she said, likely only just noticing.

Some birds flew past overhead, distracting the both of us for a moment. I noted the large flock had a bunch of fledglings in it. Rare for birds to nest during winter...

Actually owls do, don't they? Wonder if that's why Lilly's children are always born during winter...?

"You said we'd get a horse?" Liora then asked.

"Yes. I plan to, if I can find one. Regrettably it'll be the start of planting season, so it might be difficult," I said. I wasn't going to spend days searching for a horse when in that same timeframe we can reach our destination.

"Planting season..." Liora whispered as she took the last bite of her bread, and then went to wiping her hands free of crumbs.

"Feel better?" I asked.

"I will after I have another drink," she said as she held her hand out.

Gosh. One moment she's nothing like Renn, then the next she's just like her...

Handing her the last waterskin, I wondered again about my own daughter.

A daughter. Mine.

A saint, no less...

Nory.

Renn had cried over me suggesting the name...

Would she be like Renn, or me, I wonder...?

What had I even been like when young...?

Had I been a pain in the ass...? Probably... Miss Beak used to always say I had been patient, but foolish. Hotheaded.

A hotheaded Renn...

Somehow I liked the idea.

But before I could allow it to become reality...

I needed to hunt down and kill the rest of the gods.

All of them.

The world wasn't, and wouldn't be safe until they were all gone. And screw letting them return home. I'd sooner die than allow that to happen.

"Pfa..." Liora released a sigh of content relief as she stopped drinking from the waterskin. She had a happy grin on her face, seemingly no longer disgruntled by her sweat and the heat.

Smiling softly at the girl I reached over and patted the young saint's head, causing her to groan at me as I ruffled her hair. "Jeez...!" she moaned as she went to tying the waterskin close.

The girl didn't know it, but I'd not let anything harm her. With far more surety than she could believe... and not just because she was now a member of the Society.

She was special. In a way a normal saint couldn't, shouldn't be.

Because she had been unexpected. At just the right moment.

No one had foreseen her. And she had arrived right after the gods had basically declared war.

Fate was on my side. Again.

"Okay, okay...!" Liora complained as she reached up to try and dislodge my hand. I chuckled at her as I rubbed a little more, for good measure. In doing so her small pony-tail dangled and twirled, and she giggled as she groaned and pretended to fight me off.

If I was to wage war, I needed soldiers.

Not actual ones, of course. I needed no army in the field. No spear throwers. No axe bearers, or sword maidens. I needed no war machines. No monarchs.

Just... support. From the rear.

Insight.

The kind only given by those connected to those I hunted.

Stay healthy and strong, little Liora...

You're my new ace in the hole, after all.