

Non Human 591

Chapter 591 Renn – Tents

"I can bring Branches here instead, Lellip..." Lilly said softly.

"No... that's rude. I'll come, it's fine," Lellip said, speaking a tad stiffer than I'd likely ever heard her do so before.

Standing awkwardly near the front flap of the tent, I glanced at Lilly who glanced at me.

She looked worried. Not really hurt, or sad, just... concerned. And I understood why.

Lellip was upset.

She and Lilly were planning on leaving tomorrow morning. To go back home. To the Owl's Nest. Now that we were situated, and safe, Lilly felt it was time they could do so. And... well...

"I promise to visit the moment I can, Lellip," I said gently, hoping to calm her a little.

Lellip was busy packing a small crate. She wasn't going to take everything of hers to the Owl's Nest, but they were going to take several boxes worth. I wasn't entirely sure how they planned to get them all through the dark-forest, but knew better than to worry too much over it. I was sure Lilly had methods.

"I know... it's okay, Renn. I'll be fine," Lellip said softly as she turned to look at me.

My ear twitched at the sight of the girl's eyes. They weren't watery... but they were full of sadness.

She had thought I would have gone with her. To Lilly's home. To go with her, and meet Branches, with her together. As if I was some kind of... support or something.

Yet I wasn't going to. I was going to stay here, in SilverCreek, to help continue setting up our new home.

"It would only take me a few days to get him and bring him here, you know? And he can come here; he's fully capable of blending in and..." Lilly again tried to offer an alternative, but Lellip quickly shook her head and returned her focus to packing.

"I want to meet him in his comfort zone. At his home..." she said.

Gosh, I got where she was coming from but...

Wanting to sigh a little, I wondered why Lellip was being so... odd about this. She was basically throwing a small fit, acting like a child who wasn't getting her way, but yet at the same time wasn't willing to bend or adjust even a little bit with the rest of us.

Lilly was more than happy to bring Branches here. Yet to Lellip that was wrong. The wrong way to do it, for whatever reason...

Though maybe I did understand that perspective...

We'd set up camp on our parcel of land we'd purchased here in town. We basically had set up an enclosed circle of tents, all surrounding one bigger tent in the middle. Everyone got their own private tent, and then the communal tent in the middle where we all ate and hung out when not working. The tents had been propped up and set in a way that blocked sight into the encampment. We had hung material up between the tents, to form a makeshift wall as well. We were also behind the rundown building, away from the nearby road which ran alongside our property and the river nearby. It was private enough that I didn't even need to wear my hat while out and about, as long as I stayed in the encampment. Yet although it was private, hidden from prying eyes outside, it was still... well...

Not a real home. Not a real location. Not yet, at least.

"I... suppose you could wait until Renn..." Lilly brought up another idea, sounding a little un-confident as she did.

"No... I'll go now. I'm sorry, you two, for... acting up. Grandfather would have forced me to clean out the furnace if I had acted like this back home. I'm sorry..." Lellip then turned around and bowed her head at Lilly and I, and my tail squirmed as I felt horrible.

She sounded sincere, but I knew that was just her maturity speaking.

Maybe I should just go with them...? I could just go for a few days, maybe, and then come back...?

Glancing at Lilly, I found her softly smiling. She nodded gently and then gestured at me. "Mind giving us a moment, Renn?" she asked.

Oh...? "Of course."

I wasted no time. I stepped away, walking out of Lellip's tent and out into the middle clearing. I wasted no time in walking away, since I knew they both knew I could hear them full well... but I knew it wouldn't matter.

I could go to the other side of the encampment and still hear them talking, even whispering... a sad fact thanks to the tents being just tents in the end. Even if nice ones made of thick leather.

No one was around outside, even though the sun was high and warm. I heard snoring from Krass's tent, the old nun, and heard chatter in the main center tent. I also could smell tea being boiled.

Walking over to the center tent, I paused a moment before its entrance. The flaps were shut, not tied up and open like they usually were during the middle of the day.

I could hear Merit inside, alongside Angie and Nessa. I knew Randle and the two other men in our group, Folz his associate and Tristin the human, were in town. They had gone to purchase some supplies, and to check out the town.

We had a lot to do. It had taken us a whole day just to set up camp, mostly because Randle had wanted us to clean up the area first. We had cut some patches of taller grass, and gathered up rocks and other things too as to better make our camp area cleaner. Merit had complained over it, but I understood the meaning of it. We could be in these tents for a long time, maybe even months, so... every little bit made a difference.

The first goal was a place to comfortably live. Homes, basically. Randle's plan was to build a large building, one we could all live in comfortably, but there had been a few complaints over that. Mostly from Merit and Angie, but I wasn't really sure if I agreed with their complaints.

They basically didn't want to live in the same building that Randle was going to hear confessions and such in... and he planned to do those things the moment he could.

We've already had people visit. Yesterday six people, in three groups, had showed up to speak to Randle. To either speak of faith, or to find out if there was anything they could do to help us set up camp. I wasn't entirely sure how common such a thing was, but many in the group had not been surprised at all.

It made sense, I guess... if people really were devout, of course they'd come to help the one who came to preach their faith. But all the same it had shocked me, and worried me a little.

I didn't like the idea of random people just... walking up to our camp without purpose or reason. Yet it was to be expected, I guess...

"I want you feeling safe, and happy, Lellip. This won't go well otherwise."

My ears fluttered as I realized I'd just focused on the tent I'd just left. I shook my head, to stop myself from hearing the rest, and entered the center tent.

Focus Renn. That's private. Very private.

Think of other things...

Such as this land. It was nice land. Far nicer than I had ever expected it to be. It was mostly fields of grass, with scattered trees here and there. Plus it was on the river, on one side, and ran deeper northward until it hit the edge of a forest. One that by the looks of it had no other property markers upon it. From memory I had seen parcels in that direction, but hadn't seen any names or titles written upon them, which Randle had told me meant no one had purchased them yet. I had suggested to him we purchase a few more parcels, to back up into the forest, but he didn't seem too interested in the idea.

But it was fine. This place was huge. We could build dozens of very large buildings on it with room to spare... and it was flatter than I had expected too. There were a few hills here and there, but most of our land was flat. The kind that would make it very easy to build on... once we finally did, at least.

Perfect land for what we wanted, and needed, to do with it.

The large tent I entered made me smile. I liked how big it was, and how open it were. It was nearly big enough to be a building all on its own. There were already many tables, chairs, and even dressers and trunks too. There were two large pillars supporting the tent, in the center of it, that Lilly had helped fell and put up. I was glad she was here, because even though Randle had known how to do it... he was of course one arm short from being capable of such things. And although Merit was strong, she was tiny, so it had been left to me, Lellip and Lilly.

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It turned out Randle's associate, Folz the mute, was a weaker man. Not too surprising, since it turned out he was a half-blood. A mix, and not of different bloodlines... but of one of us and a human. He was half human.

Knowing such a thing made me feel a bit bad for feeling so off around him. I still kind of felt... odd concerning him. As if I should be on guard near him or something, though I knew I didn't need to be. If Randle trusted him, I knew I could too.

Still...

"What're you frowning over?" Merit asked as I walked over to the table she sat at. She was alone, Angie and Nessa were standing a few tables away near the center of the tent. Where a small cook station had been built, with a fireplace and a makeshift oven. They were fussing over a pot, that I could tell now was the source of boiling tea. Were they burning it? Maybe I should go help.

"Lellip's kind of upset," I said.

"She'll be fine. I heard it all. She's just upset because she thought she'd have you with her the whole time. She likely feels safe with you, and now doesn't feel as safe as she did. She'll get over it though, she knows Lilly isn't a threat," Merit said simply.

"Gosh is it really just that...?" I asked. How sad! No wonder Lilly had asked for a moment alone... she was going to tell, and likely promise, Lellip that nothing would happen to her. That she would be safe, no matter what happened.

I was humbled, of course, that Lellip felt such a thing concerning me... but it also made me feel bad for Lilly. Lilly really didn't deserve such distrust...

"It's the Society's fault. They all think Lilly's some bloodthirsty monster. She is, but not for that kind of blood," Merit said with a small smirk.

"Merit..." I groaned at her. No wonder Lellip had such hesitations! Especially since she's likely heard Merit say such things during our whole trip!

"Want some tea, Renn!?" Nessa shouted at me, to which I turned and nodded to her. She gave me a happy grin and a thumbs up as she returned her attention to their pot.

"They're burning it," Merit said simply.

"I can smell that. It's fine."

"No it's not. We'll have funding problems, Renn. We can use credit with the higher authorities here, but not the smaller shops. Not yet, at least, not until they realize who we are and what we are. Until then we'll need to be mindful of our supplies and how fast we go through them," Merit said.

Oh... right...

"Gosh..." I groaned as I realized how right Merit was. We actually had brought a lot of money with us, thanks to Vim, but I knew from personal experience how fast money could be spent and disappear when not careful.

"We don't have real money problems, of course, but we'll always have to wait for funds being in a town without any real bank or connection to the Society. So... just be mindful," Merit added.

I nodded and sighed. "Which is why Randle took over securing supplies," I said. I had offered this morning to go, since I had kind of wanted to check the town again, but he had been rather adamant that he and his group go instead. He must have worried I would have spent money needlessly.

Granted I probably would have, to be honest, so he was right to have done so.

"Randle likes such tasks. He's always been a miser."

"Miser...?" I asked.

"He's tight with money," Nessa said as she and Angie walked over, carrying the pot and some cups.

Oh. I nodded softly as I watched them place the stuff on the table Merit sat at, and then they both sat down with her.

"Won't he get busy...? Too busy for such things? Yesterday he had a bunch of people show up already, and we just got here," I asked.

"He'll spend a week or so letting anyone come to talk to him, but he'll eventually make it clear they should only come during certain days of the week. At least until the church is built," Merit said as she reached out to grab one of the empty cups that had been placed on the table. I smiled softly as I watched her basically crawl up onto the table as to reach it.

"I'm told once the temple is made others are to show up to help him, too," Nessa said.

"Temple...?" I asked. I had not heard it called that before.

"Just another term for a church. The old word, for this region," Merit said as she grunted, still trying to reach for her cup. Little Angie reached over, grabbed it, and then pushed it closer to Merit's hand. Merit huffed as she got her hand upon it, then while still stretched out as far as possible she tapped the cup against the table... hinting she wanted it filled up with tea.

Nessa obliged. She opened the pot's lid, then with a ladle she went ahead and filled Merit's cup up.

Without a thank you Merit sat back and sighed as she took a drink of her, likely very hot, tea.

"It's hot..." Nessa warned, but Merit didn't care or hesitate. She took a drink.

"It is," Merit then agreed, licking her lips.

"Is Lellip okay, Renn? She sounded a bit upset earlier," Nessa then asked, seemingly not bothered by Merit's attitude or neglect for her own safety. Nessa shouldn't have known Merit, but maybe she did...?"

"She'll be okay. She just thought I was going to go with her, is all," I said.

Nessa frowned at me, and I could read the hundreds of questions on her mind, but she didn't ask any of them. Angie ignored us all as she went to readying tea for all of us, filling the cups one after another.

"They plan to leave in the morning... at least, last I heard," I said. I had a few moments ago overheard Lellip and Lilly agree to do so, but I was trying to ignore the fact that I had.

Come on, Renn... stop prying.

Maybe I should just wear my hat around here. Even if it was safe to not do so. It didn't block much, not anymore, but it did block a little bit of the world around me...

"I'll be honest I'm glad we're not going with them. I'm so tired of sitting on that stupid wagon," Nessa said with a sigh.

Angie nodded in agreement as Merit took another drink. I stepped closer to the table as Angie turned to offer me one of the now full cups of tea.

It was still really warm, so I didn't take a drink right away as Merit had done. Not because I would get hurt drinking it, but because I could smell that it was... well... The tea was diluted. They had burnt it, I hadn't been mistaken. Odds are it'd just taste like stale boiled water.

"I'm glad to finally be here too... though I think I had underestimated how much work it was to build a new home," I said as I glanced around our empty tent. It was big, which was nice, but its large openness made it all the more apparent how we'd just begun.

We had to ready the land. Then we had to build a foundation. Randle wanted to also start small gardens, not so much for food but just in general. Then we needed to build the buildings, fences, a barn for the horses and oxen, and so very much more...

This was going to take months. Months and months, years maybe even!

Although I was more than glad to be here, and not regretting my choice to join them all here... I had to admit that I had simply bitten off more than I had thought it would have been.

Merit chuckled at me. "You don't know anything yet, Renn. But you will."

Great.

"By the way, Renn, did you happen to see an orphanage on the city map thing?" Angie then asked.

Oh. "No. I hadn't. And I hadn't really seen anything that might be like it while walking around the other day either," I said. I had tried to mimic Vim yesterday, and had spent some time just... walking around the area. I had even walked around outside of the town proper, up and down the river and around some of the nearby forests. I still hadn't gone to check out the mine, but I figured I'd ask Merit to join me to do that... just in case.

All I'd really accomplished on doing so was find myself kind of disappointed in the town, yet also excited all the same. It was growing, seemingly very fast, but it was still small. Outside of a few shops there wasn't much to do here.

"It seems half the town's population are mercenaries. I can't imagine they'd have a bunch of kids to worry about," Nessa said.

"On the contrary, that means there will be a lot of orphans. Maybe not yet, but they'll pop up, just watch," Merit said.

Angie frowned in worry over Merit's comment, and Nessa looked as if she doubted Merit.

"I did hear though that prostitution is illegal here. Some people were complaining about it," I said. I'd overheard some men the other day say so.

"That doesn't mean there'll be less orphans, Renn, just that the ones who do it will be even sneakier about it. They might even just drown or abort the children outright instead, out of fear of being caught," Merit said.

"Sheesh..." Nessa whispered as she went to take a drink of her tea finally. It must have cooled down enough for she didn't flinch or hesitate to drink it.

"Why would it be illegal here? Isn't that something the religious towns do...? This place isn't religious yet, is it?" Angie asked.

"It's probably just whoever rules the town. Humans are controlling, in weird ways," Merit said.

I nodded softly at that. It was true; it might not have anything to do with religious reasons or morals but instead pure control or monetary reasons.

"Personally I'm fine with it... might make it easier for me to find someone then," Nessa said with a small smirk.

"Give up on Tristain already?" Merit asked.

"Tristin," I corrected her. Had she added the stain part to his name on purpose or had that been an actual mistake?

Merit shrugged me off as Nessa grumbled and went to focusing on her tea. "He's ignoring me," she mumbled.

Was he...? I hadn't noticed... though I guess I had been busy, and today I'd been focused on Lellip and Lilly instead.

"Tristin wants to become a priest. Might want to choose someone else," Angie said.

The rest of the group glanced at the young bison, and I sheepishly smiled as Nessa glanced at me with worry. "Really!?" she asked me.

How would I know!? "I uh..."

"Would explain why he's here. To learn from Randle," Merit added.

Nessa fell forward, wrapping her head with her hands on the table with a groan. "I've been trying to flirt with him this whole time...!" she whined into her arms.

"Yeah, it's been gross," Angie said.

Actually I had found it adorable. Nessa had indeed been trying, but she hadn't been doing very well at it. She was... well... a coward, I think. She locked up and got all weird when he got too close to her. As if she couldn't think around him.

Would explain why she still was unwed, to be honest. Nessa was, like her sisters and mother, beautiful. Plus she had a great head on her shoulders, thanks to Oplar's teachings and upbringing. There was honestly no reason for her to be unmarried...

"Thought I lucked out and found one already..." Nessa mumbled in her arms.

"You'll be fine. Especially once you walk around with your nun robes on. Mercenaries go crazy over women like you," Merit said.

"Can we go back to talking about burnt tea?" Angie asked with a dull tone as she took a sip of hers.

We laughed at her, I especially since we had actually not even started talking about it!

Chapter 592 Vim – Ruvindal's Stink

Ruvindale smelled a little.

It was not too much of a surprise, really. The city was partly on a large river and a lake that it merged into, one they fished heavily, and they had a large section of the city dedicated to farm animals such as pigs and whatnot. So it always stunk, in a way, as did most human settlements... but it was worse than usual right now. Likely thanks to the hot and humid day.

Which was maybe why I couldn't smell paints anymore.

"Are we going to buy the horse here?" Liora asked quietly.

"No... I just wanted to check on something, is all," I said as I studied the Sleepy Artist. Or at least, the building that it had once been.

Someone else owned it now. And they had rebuilt it. I and Renn had set it on fire last time we were here, as to destroy any potential evidence of our Society, but it of course was a stone building. One very well built, so it wasn't too surprising to see that it still stood and was mostly intact. Most of the outside looked as it did before I had set it on fire, but there were a few differences. It seemed it was not a shop anymore, but instead a home. All signage was gone, and the heavy wooden front door was now a thinner one. A cheaper one. And the large window in the front where there used to be displayed paintings was now replaced by a solid brick wall. Whoever had done it had likely done it in haste; the bricks were clashing with the rest of the building. Likely just a temporary measure, maybe done to keep the elements and riff-raff out since the window had likely broken during the fires.

I could hear people within it, but only to a point. A small family by the sounds of it. I heard a young child amongst adults.

"Hm..." Liora made a small noise as she reached up to mess with her wimple. I glanced at her for a moment to make sure all was well, and once I confirmed she was just itching at her hair under the covering I returned to studying the building that I had visited for decades.

Honestly I should be used to this by now. And in a way, I was... but it still hurt all the same.

The Sleepy Artist was gone. Forever. And the only survivor, Crane, was someone I'd not met since the failure that brought it ruin... and likely didn't want to meet ever again.

I wonder where she was, anyway. I'd not seen or heard of her in a long while. Likely involved in the church stuff...

All the same. There was no point lingering here now.

Walking away from the building, I wondered if I should look into its new owners or not.

Odds are the city had simply condemned it and sold it off at auction. Why wouldn't they? No point in allowing a building to go unused... but...

Had the Society not owned it? A part of me wanted to say it should have had ownership of the deed, but odds are it had simply been in Lughes' name. And he had been deemed a criminal, with his lack of paying taxes. Thus confiscated.

Maybe it was better to just leave it be.

Liora kept pace with me as we headed deeper into the town. I didn't know where I could actually purchase any horses, but the innkeeper this morning had given me a few ideas on where to get one. He had mentioned a transportation company in the north of the city that commonly had auctions selling horses and wagons, so he suggested I go there first.

We had thankfully arrived at Ruvindale in the early morning fog. We had no trouble getting to an inn, and getting a room, without any issues. And now, after checking on the Sleepy Artist, it was time for us

to handle the few things that needed attention. I planned to get us a horse, for Liora, and I also wanted to verify the actual town and location we were headed to. My hope was the town wasn't too far away, and also was well known enough by now that it'd not be too difficult to learn about.

"You okay, Liora?" I asked as we rounded a corner, leaving the road that the Sleepy Artist was on.

"Hm? Yeah?" the young saint glanced up at me and nodded. I could see the faint glowing behind her veil, but I knew the glow was so dim that only I could do so. No human would be able to notice it.

I had made her a face covering, mimicking the wimple and head coverings of nuns and other religious women of this region's faithful. Beneath the thin veils that covered her face was another layer of darker cloth, one that she could see through but helped further hide her glowing eyes. It was working out here in the daytime, but I knew once the sun began to set it would likely grow less effective.

But I didn't plan on keeping her out too long. She needed rest. Our journey so far had been uneventful, but the poor girl was still adapting to her new lifestyle. She still had plenty of blisters, and even had a cramp in her leg this morning. One that had been bad enough to make her cry.

She was a mature girl, and had the makings of a strong one, but in the end she still was just a young child. So I needed to be mindful...

"Is the town we're heading to like this?" she asked as she rubbed her nose through her veil.

"Smelly? I don't know. It's supposedly a mining town... so it might be, in its own way," I said.

"Hmm..." she didn't seem to like the sound of that.

"Smells like this fade after a little time. For instance your home, Nevi, stinks too. It's not as bad thanks to being on the sea, thus getting the coastal winds and stuff, but it smells like rotting fish when one first arrives. It takes a day or two to stop noticing it," I said.

"Really...?" Liora sounded shock to hear so.

"Yes... One day when you return there you'll see what I mean," I said.

The young saint was quiet for a good moment, and then her hand found my own. I glanced at her as I accepted her hand, as to make sure I didn't hurt her on accident as I took it, and found her staring down at the ground. "I'll get to go back...?" Liora asked quietly.

"Why couldn't you? You will need to be mindful of how and when, but you're not banished from there. We have members there, Rapti for instance. If they can be there why can't you?" I asked. If anything from the sounds of it the Society's presence there was going to grow deeper... from my very short conversation with Karma it seemed that Light and the rest had plans with Nevi. Though to what length I didn't know. Hadn't wanted to know, honestly. Odds are they just planned on using it as a hub for the ships that would be returning from the other continent, since Vorli was seemingly being abandoned en-mass.

"I thought you said I'll never meet mother again...?" Liora asked with a soft voice. One that I bet wouldn't have been heard well enough to understand by a human.

"I never said that," I said.

"Yes you did. To mother," she said.

Oh. "I had said that to her as to verify her willingness of handing you over to us. To see if she really meant what she said. Think of it like a test," I said.

"But...!" Liora stopped walking, so I did too.

We were still in the district of noble houses and shops, so I wasn't too concerned over us doing so... but I didn't want to linger too long in these streets.

Liora looked like a young nun right now, but I didn't. I mean, I'd never be able to look like such a thing, but I more so right now didn't look like someone who would be associated with such a person. I looked more like a mercenary right now than a fellow churchman or something. So I didn't want to stand out anymore than I needed to, yet...

Staring down at the young saint's veil, I smiled softly as I gave her hand an ever-tiny squeeze. "Rapti plans on integrating your mother into the Society, Liora. In time she may be able to join you, or you her, if all works out well. We have... rules, on how this works, regrettably. And they must be adhered. But you and your mother are not permanently separated, Liora. We're not that cruel. If you two can be reunited without issue then you will be," I said simply.

"But... she gave you everything...!" she said.

I frowned at her. "Have you not foreseen it...? I had thought you had, thus your..." I stopped talking as I realized something rather worrying.

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She was shocked. Genuinely. To hear this.

That meant she had not seen her and her mother in the future, in her dreams and prophecies.

Which was alarming to me... because as far as I was aware Liora had not wept or panicked over leaving her mother behind. I had thought, and obviously wrongly assumed, that Liora had foreseen what had and will happen. That we'd verify the mother was trustworthy, and then invite her into the Society. Even to the point of giving her back authority and ownership of all she had handed over. Then she could either keep her businesses, running them herself, or relinquish them and return to her daughter. Reuniting the two had been a goal from the beginning. One Rapti and I had talked in length about.

Yet here was the little saint... seemingly shocked and confused to hear such a thing...

Which meant...

"I... I..." Liora hesitated as she shifted and tilted her head, likely going through her own memories of her dreams as she stuttered.

Great. That meant something must happen.

Just wonderful. I should have brought this up earlier, then. If this girl's mother ends up dying for some sad reason...

"Have you not foreseen you and your mother together again? Not once?" I asked.

"I... don't think so. No," she said softly.

Weird. "Well... before either of us panic over that, let us be sound of reason and remain calm," I said gently.

"I'm not panicking," she said simply.

Yes. She wasn't. She was shocked, but not about to burst into tears or anything... and it seemed she did at least comprehend the meaning of the moment and conversation, based off her tone. She realized that her not foreseeing her reuniting with her mother and my saying it should be guaranteed, was conflicting and thus meant something terrible.

"I promise to address this once I can. Right now though there is nothing you or I can do about it. Do know though, that the original plan was to be for her to join you eventually. At whatever location you end up settling in. It might be months, or even a few years from now, but it was meant to happen," I said.

"Mother thought otherwise. She... thinks we'll never see each other ever again," Liora said.

I nodded. "Yes. We make those like her think such a thing; believe it firmly, for multiple reasons. To test them, to protect you and others, and so forth. It's a tradition from hundreds of years of trial and error," I said.

"To make sure that both I'm safe, and so is she," she said, understanding.

"Yes. Basically."

Liora stared up at me for a moment, and then gently sighed and nodded. "Okay..." she said simply, and then returned to walking.

I joined her, glad that she had not started crying or anything, but...

Studying the way she walked beside me for a moment, I found myself feeling regretful.

Since we'd left the inn and had been walking around, Liora has had a bit of a pip to her step. She had been enjoying the sights, and the new experience of a new place. Even with the discomfort of having to wear the wimple I'd made her she had been enjoying herself.

Now though that excitement was gone. She now was walking with her head lowered, her shoulders slumped... her hand slightly limp in my own.

I held back a sigh as I looked away from her, and hoped that Rapti could handle any issues that arose before I could or needed to handle them.

If the mother did die or something before she could return to Liora, or she her, then it'd be on me. I had been the one to make sure that Liora joined alone without anyone else, since it was the commonly expected rule to be had for saints.

It existed for the saint. To protect them. Since usually saints were abused, or worse, by those they considered or called family. Usually it kept them safe. And the Society safe too. It was such an expected thing that even Rapti had immediately agreed to the method I'd chosen, since it was just... something we did. After all we didn't really know about the girl's mother, or her family. We had only base rumors and knowledge to go off of. So... we needed time to investigate. To verify. To make sure that by allowing them into the Society we didn't just shoot ourselves in the foot by bringing in people who would harm us in the end.

There were similar rules for non-humans too. I couldn't count how many times only a few families, or even only a single individual, joined the Society while the rest of their whole village didn't. It was why I had lingered here in Ruvindale a few years ago, to check to make sure Renn was someone we could actually accept and...

"Vim...?"

Glancing down, I found the young saint still had her head hung low. She was staring at the stone path we trod upon, not the fancy homes we were passing by that she had been so interested in moments ago.

"Yeah?"

"I'm hungry."

I smirked and nodded. "Then we'll grab a bite to eat... hopefully after we get a horse," I said.

"Can you eat horses?" she asked.

"You can. Most don't, what with them being far more useful alive than for food. Some claim they're tasty while others say they don't taste much like anything at all," I said.

"So like all food," she pointed out.

I chuckled and nodded. "Yes. Like all food, there are those who like it and those who don't. Speaking of that, any food you'd like to eat? We can't eat at a restaurant, for obvious reasons, but we can probably order something to go if we ask nicely," I said. Rather as long as I gave a nice tip, one big enough to make whoever I asked not care about the few coins they'd waste on a basket or box they'd lose by giving it to us in such a way.

"I like apples," she said.

Apples...? That wasn't a full meal, but that was good to know. I'll make sure to get some for our trip; those would be good snacks for her.

"How about something a tad heavier? Meat maybe?"

"Hm..." Liora hummed as she pondered my suggestion as we walked. We passed a few people as we started entering a busier part of town, where shops started to become more frequent, but none seemed to give us much attention.

Maybe my worry for my appearance was a bit overblown. We were far enough north that they might just think I'm some general laborer or something, wearing leather clothes instead of on one of the more comfortable types.

It was too bad Renn wasn't here... We'd just appear as a typical family if she had been with us.

"How about horse?" Liora then suggested.

I flinched at that. "We'd be hard pressed to find such meat here; they value horses too much for other uses. Likely only eating them once they die," I said. I suppose her saying such a thing was my fault for having spoken about it. Usually a human, one born and raised here in this region, would have never asked such a thing. But she of course had been sheltered...

Honestly it was kind of interesting how similar she was to non-humans. Being a saint of course made her more like us than not, but it was still usually something human saints had difficulties with. There was a reason back during the wars I had been forced to eliminate so many of them, and not just because of my distaste for them. Many had seen non-humans as demons or the enemy, claiming non-humans were

demons and whatnot. Such a thought process was actually pretty common amongst humans. At least the ones not born amongst us, that is.

"That's likely it," I said with a small point to a distant building. It was a little busy, with people coming and going from it. The large building was at the end of the road we were on, and it had a large two storied barn-looking building attached to it. One that was obviously being used as a warehouse of some kind. There were two large wagons before it, both being loaded with crates.

As we approached I slowed our pace a little, so I could study the building and the people around it. Most were workers, dressed lightly as they worked hard labor. I wasn't too surprised to see well-dressed men and women amongst them, talking or writing in ledgers. A few were obviously either nobles themselves, or at least the representatives or employees of one. Odds are one of them would be who I'd end up having to talk to.

I sighed softly as I glanced down at the young saint still holding my hand. Her face was of course hidden by her veil and wimple, but I could tell by her stance that she was studying the building with interest. Odds are, being the daughter of a merchant noble, she has known of such places since her birth. Yet this might be the first time she's ever actually seen one.

Usually I'd do this alone. As to not draw attention. But unlike Renn I couldn't leave this girl alone, at least not for long.

Saints drew attention. In ways beyond the normal, not just because of their glowing eyes. Some people just... felt them. As if called to them by instinct. It was why they usually couldn't live in large cities. They drew trouble simply by existing, as monarchs did.

Their divinity called out to the creatures that lacked it. Even if subconsciously. So even just leaving her alone back at the inn was dangerous, in a way.

Yet at the same time it was dangerous for her to mingle with people. If by accident her face coverings fell off, I'd be forced to do unspeakable things as to keep her safe.

I'd do those deeds without hesitation. Have many times. But...

Sometimes by saving and protecting people with such methods, all I did was cause more harm than good. We'd lost many members throughout the years because they had witnessed my brutality. Seeing me as more threat and danger than the things I was trying to protect them from.

In a way the portion of the Society that wanted to vote against me, to change how I was to be the protector, had the same feelings. Just... not as direct...

Clearing my throat, and my mind, I gently got Liora's attention by shaking her hand ever so gently with my own.

"Ready?" I asked her.

She glanced up and nodded without hesitation, rather firmly. "I'll negotiate!" she offered.

"Oh...?" I found myself smirking at her as I decided to let her go ahead and try. She was like Renn in odd ways, wasn't she? "Your mother taught you how to haggle did she?"

Liora nodded, again confident. "Yeah!"

"Then let's see it. Careful though, if you don't do well enough it'll cut into your snack budget," I warned.

"I have a budget...?" Liora mumbled as we headed for the building, to purchase a horse for our venture.

And surprisingly we got one. Liora got it for a fair price, too...

I'd never tell her it was because the woman we had purchased it from had obviously been a very devout woman herself, and as such had likely taken a liking to Liora, though.

Little victories were as important as a full belly sometimes.

Chapter 593 Renn – Rivonne's Greeting

Wiping my hands off with a cloth, I studied the two figures staring at our encampment from the distant road.

"They've been standing there for a while now," Nessa said softly. She and I stood in the encampment still, and was staring at the distant figures between a small opening in our tent-wall.

Hm...

They had a small cart. One that was enclosed, the type that was for people to ride and not products or goods. A small mule pulled it, and was lazily being petted by a taller man. His companion, a finely dressed woman, stood a small distance from the cart and was staring at us.

Maybe one of Randle's visitors...? Maybe she was waiting for others to show up, or was just seeing if we were accepting guests or not... Or she could just be interested in us, or they were having cart troubles.

Either way I needed to handle it. Nessa said they'd been there for some time now, and I believed her. I had heard the mule some time ago, even before I had started cleaning the mess from our lunch.

"I'll go see what they want. Would you mind letting Merit know if I don't come back soon or if something happens?" I asked Nessa as I put the cloth I'd been using down onto a nearby table. Merit was asleep right now, having lain down after lunch to take a nap. But at the moment she was the only one I could really rely on for such things, since Randle was gone. As was Lellip and Lilly.

"Sure. Want me to come with you?" Nessa asked.

I shook my head as I went to grab my hat. I'd made it a habit to wear it more often lately, but I had taken it off as I cleaned the pots and dishes and stuff. I found it on a nearby bench, fastened it to my head and headed out of the encampment.

As I left I wondered if I should have grabbed my sword or Vim's spear... but decided against it. Odds are they were just Randle's visitors. He's been getting a lot lately, almost a dozen a day, though I didn't recognize this one or remember her or the man she was with visiting.

Was she a noble maybe...? As I approached I realized their cart had some kind of image carved into the side of it. A... symbol of a bird? Was that a raven maybe?

Usually I'd let Randle or one of his people deal with this, but they had left a little before lunch to go to Haggo's office. He wanted to put up notices in town, little flyers, that told the residents who we were and when to expect the church to formally open. Basically he was going to officially declare that the Church of Songs had arrived, but was not officially open for sermons yet until the church was built.

I was glad for it, since he said it would make most of our daily visitors less likely to show up. Once an official notice was known, people would only show up when it was dire, he had explained. Something to do with human traditions or something.

Though it was slightly odd he needed official permission from Haggo, or at least those he represented, first before he could do so... Since there were places in town, such as at the town-center and also at the marketplace and a few of the places where one could eat that had these boards one could post notices to. Such as to hire employees or something. I'd studied one the other day, as to get an idea of what this city was doing and needed and found out that most of the notices were mundane stuff. People looking for certain individuals, such as a lost child, or a logging group looking for a new member to fell trees. Stuff that the Animalia Guild would have handled for people in Lumen, basically. I wasn't sure why one needed permission just to post a piece of paper on a community board.

Either way I was looking forward to it.

Walking across the field of grass, I glanced to my right as I watched a field mouse run off. It disappeared into a nearby hole, and I frowned at it.

Was that what I've been hearing underneath the ground as I slept lately...? I had been hearing dirt moving and crunching lately these last few nights, as if something was digging right beneath my head. I'd mentioned it to Merit and she had said it was likely moles...

Though that might have been a mole and not a mouse. I hadn't gotten too good a look at it... Was this whole area full of them maybe...?

Focusing back on the woman and the man as I approached them, I watched the man step away from the mule and step up next to her. He had a short sword that hung on his waist, but he didn't grab at its handle or anything on my approach... but now that I was closer, I could tell the two were likely not really related. Plus he had that look in his eyes. The kind that people in general, men or no, usually didn't have.

He was definitely a mercenary, or something like it. I didn't see any armband or insignia on him, but I knew from Lilly explaining it before she and Lellip had left that the mercenaries that were here were all settling down. They were becoming employees and stuff of companies and noble houses, and as such abandoning their mercenary associations. Even still she had been kind enough to sit down and draw for me the more common mercenary emblems that I should be on the lookout for, such as Branches' old band the Silken Band. So that I could recognize them.

The woman however was definitely not just some common mercenary or town-woman. She was dressed in lighter clothing, since it had started to get warm finally, but the stuff had brighter colors and additions to them. Her shirt, though some kind of cloth, had cleanly sewed on patches of leather and fur here and there. Such as at her wrists, or on her elbows. But the patches weren't improper or misplaced, and had mirroring matching parts as to imply they had been added on purpose with skill. Implying it was something very well made. Something expensive. It was something Vim would have gotten me, or made for me. Something you rarely saw even in a large and wealthy town like Lumen. So it was something that I knew no common towns-person would wear. Plus her shoes and pants were nice too. This town had mostly brick roads already, but not on the outskirts like we were. So usually those who came here had dirty shoes, if not even muddy ones since it had rained a few times since our arrival. She though had flawlessly clean shoes, and the edge of her dress's skirt was just as clean. It all told me that she'd ridden the cart here.

She was a noble, or something like it. Which only made my assumption of the man being some kind of mercenary all the more likely... he was her guard, not her husband or partner. And it was obvious. Especially with the way he was standing just behind her. That was not how a husband stood, but a servant or guard.

"Hello, can I help you?" I asked as I stepped off the field of grass and onto the dirt road. It was a packed road, not just a common path, but it still wasn't made of stone in this section yet.

The woman and man studied me for a moment, so I slowed a bit until I came to a stop a few feet from them.

Why weren't they saying anything...?

Feeling a little awkward, I wondered if maybe I'd done something wrong. Randle and the rest have been talking to people nonstop since we got here, and from all I've heard and seen so far the people here were friendly and welcoming. Not a one had been rude or even odd... what were the chances I'd be the first one to receive animosity? Maybe it was just fate...

"Henry," the woman then spoke, turning to glance at her companion. He nodded gently at his name being spoken and then stepped back and away from her. I watched him go over to their cart, open the small latch door that led into it, and then he reached in and grabbed a box.

What's this...?

Standing up a little straighter as the man walked back over to me, and then offered me the small box... I wondered if this was maybe a donation or something.

I'd not seen it myself, but I had overheard a few people giving Randle a few alms or tithes. From what he's said most of them had been simple coins, while others had given food or something they had made. To him, and the rest of our group, such things were so common that no one had found it odd or interesting... so...

Glancing down at the small box being offered to me, I decided to just carefully accept it. I found it was a little heavier than it had seemed, but not so much that it was worrisome. I didn't feel anything inside the box shift or move, or make noise, as I gently shifted it in my hands... but I could tell there was something inside of it.

Plus it was fancy. The thing had little designs and images carved into it. On first glance it seemed most were just simple settings, such as a starry night, but I'd need to examine it a tad closer to really find out... Was that a raven...? Yes. It was. A large raven was carved into the whole scene on top of the box; somehow merging its wings into what I assumed was the night sky. It was neat.

"My name is Rivonne. When your protector shows up, please let me know."

Looking up, quickly, I found myself a little shocked as I watched the woman nod at me and then turn away.

"Wait...!" I stepped forward, to stop her, but she didn't seem to listen or care. Her guard, or whatever he was, turned with her and went to helping her get into the cart. He helped her step up into it, and she disappeared into it.

I wasted no time. I hurried forward, ignored the side-glance I got from Henry as I did, and looked into the cart. "Wait, please," I said to the woman.

The woman, Rivonne, huffed a little as she sat down and relaxed in her cart. She turned and nodded at me. "As I said, please let me know when he shows up. You obviously know who I speak, yes?"

"Vim..." I whispered his name, and she nodded back at me.

"I live in the north of town. He'll know how to find me."

"Excuse me," Henry stepped forward, and I had to step back as to let him shut the tiny little door that secured the side of the cart and closed her in. I could still see her, since the cart didn't have a window or a full cover on top, but only partly.

"Rivonne," I said her name as I realized she'd not speak to me any longer. She had said what she wanted, given me what she felt needed, and was ready to leave.

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She nodded. "Let Vim the Protector know, once you can. Thank you."

Stepping back some more as Henry went to grab the reins of the mule; he made a clicking sound with his tongue and got it to start walking. The cart slowly lurched forward and then began to roll away, leaving me behind.

Sighing softly as I watched it slowly leave, I looked again down at the box I held.

Wait...

Frowning, I shifted a little as I...

"Oh boy..." I groaned as I realized I was indeed feeling it.

It was faint. Almost unnoticeable... but I could feel it. Ever so slightly.

The box was making my fingers tingle.

Glancing around, I found I was alone. The cart was now heading back into town, and I was standing alone on the path. So I decided to just... let it be.

She had obviously been very literal. She didn't want to speak to me, only for me to deliver a message. To Vim.

Did he know her...? She had seemed human to me. I had not felt tingly around her, and I hadn't smelled any non-human scents either. I had not once thought, until now, that she could have possibly been one of us... maybe she had been...?

But if she had been, wouldn't she have been in the Society...? Yet she spoke as if she wasn't a member. After all, why would another member need to act so? They could just summon Vim on their own... and...

I groaned as I turned and hurried back to our encampment.

Once back I found Merit waiting for me. She yawned at me as I stepped over to her, and I was a little glad that no one else was around at the moment as I showed her the box. "I uh... think we might have a problem," I said.

"We always do. What is it now?" Merit asked with a groan, though not because she was upset to hear we had a problem but instead because she was still half-asleep.

"Do you know a Rivonne...? She said her name is Rivonne. His was Henry. Then they gave me this box, told me to let them know once Vim shows up, and then they just left," I said.

Merit seemed to snap awake with a blink as she focused on me and the box I held. "Rivonne..." she asked.

I nodded. Had she heard of them before?

She slowly shook her head. "Doesn't ring a bell. Randle would be a better one to ask concerning members... What's the box?" she asked.

"Well..." I hesitated as I glanced around. I could hear Nessa in the center tent. The one I'd just been in with her. By the sounds of it she had picked up where I'd left off, cleaning the few remaining pots. Folz was here too, the mute, but he was in his tent. I could hear him scribbling in a book.

Randle was gone, and he had taken Krass the old woman and her son Tristin. Angie though should be...

Ah. There. She emerged from her tent, the one near my own and Merit's on the south side of the encampment. She was carrying a basket of clothes and heading to the center tent. Likely to do laundry.

"I think it might be a heart," I whispered to Merit once I was sure no one was watching or listening to us.

Merit's eyes narrowed at me. "You're kidding..."

"Well... at least that's what I think it is. The box is making my hands and fingers tingle," I said. I couldn't outright feel it, but...

"Sure you're not just allergic to whatever the thing is made of...? No matter, open it and find out," Merit said.

"But what if I'm supposed to give it to Vim and..." I started to argue but Merit didn't care. She huffed at me and grabbed the box from my hand and went to open it.

I groaned, but didn't stop her, as she found the lid and briskly popped it open.

Leaning forward, Merit and I studied the inside of the small box... and found a cloth. A thick black one, which...

"It's a heart," I said before Merit got the cloth unwrapped enough to reveal it. now with the lid off, I felt it clearly.

A small white orb came into view. One that was glowing very familiarly, and also... kind of small. Not as small as the one I'd eaten in Lumen, the small many-tailed monarchs' heart from Telmik, but not much bigger.

"Huh... so it is," Merit sounded impressed as she stared at it.

"What are you doing?" Angie asked from nearby the center tent's entrance. She still held her basket and was staring at us.

"Not sure yet," I said back, a little worried the girl would come over to see. I trusted Angie, of course, but the fewer who knew about the heart the better.

Merit sighed as she went to folding the cloth back over the heart. "Well, this just proves whoever it is knows who and what we are. Are they still out there?" Merit asked as she went to closing the box back up.

"No... she just said to let her know when Vim shows up. She was rather adamant about it, then just left," I said.

"Did you not mention you were his wife?" Merit asked.

"No... should I have?" I asked. Maybe that would have worked...?

Merit though shook her head. "Good. Keep such a thing a secret. We don't know if they're an enemy yet or not... hm... should we bury it?" Merit went to glancing around, mumbling as she did.

I sighed at my little friend as Angie walked over. She no longer carried her basket, having deposited it into the center tent. "What happened?" Angie asked.

"A weird person visited, gave me this box and told me to let her know when Vim shows up," I said.

"What is it...?" Angie asked, interested.

"A dangerous object. I'll bury it, Renn, give me a second..." Merit said as she stepped away, making Angie frown at her.

"I don't get to know, or I don't want to know?" she asked me.

"Both, I think," I admitted.

Angie simply nodded. "Fair enough. I'm going to wash some clothes, do you have any you want me to wash for you while I'm at it?" she asked.

A tad humbled by her offer, and her readiness to simply ignore or overlook what just happened, I simply shook my head. "Thank you, but no... I'll clean my own later," I said.

"I'm good at it you know? I did it for my whole family all the time," she said. She looked and sounded as if she wanted to convince me.

I smiled at that and nodded. "I've no doubt, Angie. Maybe next time. I really only have a little to do, and I plan to do it later when I clean my leather armor and stuff too," I said. It was time I did maintenance on the gear Lellip and the rest had made me, anyway. Plus, I didn't want to admit it but I was slowly becoming like Vim.

The stuff I touched stopped smelling. I'd been sleeping in my tent for well over half a month now and it was rather obvious. My own tent had no smell at all. And I didn't mean it in a way that I simply didn't notice it because it was my own smell. My tent genuinely didn't smell like anything. Not even of cloth or leather, as all the other ones did. Or the grass beneath it, either.

I'd been wanting to ask Merit if she noticed too, but was slightly scared of doing so. It was... nice to know I was becoming like Vim, somehow, but at the same time it was strange. Concerning.

I could smell Vim, and my own self, so why was it I didn't smell the stuff around us? It was confusing.

"Okay... how about Merit? She stinks sometimes, surely she has some," Angie said with a gesture to the small fish who was... now missing. Where'd she gone, I wonder?

"I uh... don't know. Maybe," I said softly. Merit did sometimes have a small smell to her, but I'd not say it was so bad as that...

"Hmph... Merit! Got any dirty clothes!?" Angie then asked, turning to face the rest of the encampment and shouting as she did.

"Yes!" Merit's voice came back from the other side of the encampment, and I frowned at that. Was she in the tent we'd given Lilly...?

"Knew it. I'll just go grab them, then," Angie said and hurried off towards Merit's tent, unabashed and unafraid to the point she just went straight into it.

Shaking my head gently at Angie, I wondered if she just didn't fear Merit or if she didn't comprehend who and what Merit was just yet. "Maybe it's just her nature..." I whispered as I went to round the main tent, to find Merit. It was funny that only a little while ago Angie had asked me to introduce her to Merit. That she had been anxious and cautious of her. Now they were acting like old friends.

Sure enough I found her walking out of Lilly's tent while brushing her hands off. "Hidden," she said happily to me as she noticed me.

"Why her tent?" I asked.

"No one's using it, so won't be bothered by its proximity."

Oh... right. Vim has brought up that a heart caused problems if near people... "It'd have been fine in my tent though?" I said.

"No. It wouldn't have. What if I slept in there or someone else? You might be fine, but not us," Merit said simply as she glanced around. "Did Angie get my dirty clothes?"

"Um... yes. I think she did," I said. We were not able to see Merit's tent from this side of the encampment, since we were on the other side of the center tent.

"Good. I'm glad we have someone who likes doing such menial tasks. I don't."

Menial...? "Part of her motherly nature, I think," I said happily.

"Motherly...?" Merit mumbled the word as she then yawned. A mighty one.

"You think we should just let it be, Merit?" I asked.

"Yes. Let Randle know, but no one else. If you see them again though let me know right away," Merit said between another yawn.

I nodded as I watched Merit yawn some more. I'd not realized her back teeth were pointy... not even mine were like that.

"I'm going back to bed then. Hopefully she didn't take my bedding too..." Merit said as she stepped away.

Smirking at that, I nodded. "If she did you can sleep in my bed," I said.

She gave me a gentle wave as she seemingly agreed, and per her usual self... disappeared around the center tent and went out of my sight without much care or worry.

Sighing softly at her, who was similar to Vim in a way, I wondered if Merit's calm reaction to the heart should be my own too.

I felt as if what had just happened was a big deal... or at least should have been. Instead it seemed it was just another day.

Maybe it was normal. Vim did know people outside of the Society, after all... even though as odd and strange as it were for him to do so. Such as those pirates in Lumen, or even monarchs such as Miss Beak... he'd mentioned there were others like them too occasionally though never mentioned them by name or told me where they were.

If this Rivonne was not a member of the Society... I wonder who and what she was to Vim. A friend like Ronaldo? Maybe someone he owed a debt to? Had he perchance saved her or her ancestors once, and they just somehow remembered and kept tabs on him the whole time because of it...? I'd considered that before, while traveling with Vim. On occasion we did encounter and even help random people... what if they actually took the time to remember us and seek us out, when able? Vim always seemed to believe such a thing couldn't happen, since humans died too quickly, but obviously it didn't always go that way...

No matter. If there was no immediate threat then I should just treat it as Merit had. With simple caution, but otherwise no worry. I'll speak to Randle about it later, hopefully he might have some insight...

Glancing upward, I smiled softly at the familiar sky. The sun was high overhead; there were a few white clouds... and a small breeze flowing along the river, carrying the sent of not just a warm day but the nearby forest.

A forest not too unlike the one I'd grown up in... and had lived in for hundreds of years.

We weren't too far from the Owl's Nest. Which in turn was not too far from Ruvindale or where Nory and I had lived for decades. So, in a way, I felt almost as if I was home.

"At least I will be once we get out of these tents..." I mumbled with a sigh as I went to rejoin Nessa, to return to the boring day I was having. The fun was over, it seemed.

Chapter 594 Vim – A Visitor on the Wing

"Why do they croak?" Liora asked another question about the many frogs around us.

"Well, for many reasons..." I said as I slowly spun the fish over the fire. It was one of the last I'd caught, and honestly I wasn't sure if it'd get eaten or not.

Liora didn't eat much. Or rather, I had become a tad too accustomed to feeding Renn who ate far more than she should. I'd caught four decent sized fish, and even with me eating far more than my fair share I still had two left...

"Such as?" Liora asked from a few feet from me and my fire. She was kneeling down near a large log, one that had a few big frogs upon it. They, like the hundreds all around us that we could hear, were noisily croaking at each other.

They weren't too big, not full-blown toads, but there were many. Honestly I was glad we weren't going to spend the night here. Though the sounds could be calming and soothing, to a point, I knew the many amphibians being here meant there was an abundant food supply. Odds are once the sun started to set and night came in this place would become inundated with bugs of all kinds. I'd be fine in such a place, but the young saint would likely not be... I wasn't sure yet, I'd not seen her reaction to bugs yet.

We had set up camp not far from the lake where I'd gotten these fish, but we were still far enough from the water that there shouldn't be so many of them. But the ground wasn't very soft, surprisingly, so I knew it wasn't because of underground water or that this place flooded at night or something. Odds are they either had all gathered here for food, or a more... different reason.

Right now though their chorus was a neat little distraction for my small traveling companion. Something to not be too bothered over, if even thankful for.

"Mating calls, for one. Then a few of them are also being territorial, or warning each other about dangers... such as us. While some might just be doing it because their neighbors are doing it, or because they feel like it. Maybe to them it is like singing or humming, a fun pastime," I said as I explained the frogs even further. As I did I glanced over to the horse, and was glad to see it still lazily grazing nearby. It was a younger horse, so I had been worried it would have been a tad unruly, but it was actually very calm. Liora had named it Horeshoe, since it had just recently gotten new shoes.

"Mating calls..." Liora whispered my first answer as she kept studying the ones on the log.

"Want some more, Liora?" I asked as I studied the way the fish on the stick was cooking. It was nearly done.

"Hm..." she hummed in thought but didn't answer. I didn't blame her, I figured I'd end up wasting some... but it was still too bad.

I didn't like being wasteful. Mother had always told me to be careful with the world around me, and not just because of my strength. It was not hard at all to destroy fragile ecosystems... and I've destroyed so many over the years that it really...

Amongst the chorus of croaks, I heard something different. Not a frog, or a splash of water from the nearby lake, but... something from the sky?

At first I thought it was just a large bird flying nearby. Or one maybe swooping down as to grab one of the many frogs around us... but instead it grew louder, and heavier.

Looking upward, I frowned as I watched a huge pair of wings approach. The kind that didn't exist in the natural nature anymore.

"Huh...!" Liora shot upward, shocked, and hurried over. She nearly tripped into the fire as she did, and I had to reach over and gently grab her shoulder as to make sure she didn't do anything foolish.

"All's well, Liora... she's a friend," I said as Sap landed a few dozen feet away from us.

With her arrival many of the frogs around us began to hop away in a hurry. The chorus of croaks ended, for now, as Sap folded up her wings and smiled at us.

"Hey Vim!" she greeted us as she started walking over, and I noted she carried a small bag at her waist... but otherwise looked normal. The same as ever.

"Sap," I greeted the daughter of my friend and glanced down to the young saint who had gone to hiding behind me. She had grabbed at my pants, rather firmly, and was staring at Sap from behind me... as if scared of her.

Not a surprise really. Not only had Sap arrived unannounced, she was odd. Especially for a human. What with her huge wings... and even more so especially for a saint.

"Vim...! She's...!" Liora whispered worriedly as Sap approached.

"A friend. Liora, meet Sap. She's my wife's good friend, and also the daughter of Lilly, the one I told you about. As you can see, she's a beautiful owl," I said gently as I pulled the stick with the fish I was cooking off the fire. And pointed it at her.

"Lilly...?" Liora whispered the name, recognizing it thanks to my having told her all about her a few days ago.

"Beautiful...? Please!" Sap seemed to blush a little as she stepped past Horshoe, who basically ignored her, and into our small temporary camp. "Hello, little saint! As he said, my name is Sap... it's a pleasure to meet you!" Sap introduced herself, rather well and happily, and it made me frown a little.

Sap usually hated humans, and other people in general... maybe she was in a good mood?

"Mhm... Liora... My name's Liora, it's um..." Liora slowly released my pants, and with my hand still on her shoulder and back she stepped around me as to greet Sap. "It's nice to meet you," she said, gathering her nerve.

Sap smiled and nodded. "It is! In fact it's thanks to you that I found you! So thanks for that, otherwise I'd have flown right past you two."

Right. Just as Liora sensed Sap, so too had she sensed Liora... "Why were you flying this way anyway?" I asked. We were east of the Owl's Nest, heading to SilverCreek where Renn was. An odd route for Sap to be flying in, if at all.

"Mother returned home, and she asked me to deliver a message to Renn," Sap said as she held out a hand to the young saint.

Liora hesitated for but a moment, and then stepped forward and took it. I smiled as I watched the two shake hands. "Your wings are pretty," Liora said.

"Oh...? I've been needing to clean them, actually, they're so ruffled right now..." Sap said as she glanced behind her, opening her left wing a little as to look at it.

They of course looked fine, but I could tell Sap hadn't been humble just now. She had been serious.

"So Lilly's already home?" I asked... trying not to recognize the strange feeling of relief that was washing through me.

Sap nodded. "Came home yesterday. With my brother's new wife," she said with a smirk of amusement.

Oh. Right. "Lellip, yes," I said, glad to hear it. I'd forgotten all about her, and pretty much everything else, simply over hearing that all was... at least, since likely a few days ago, well and good. Lilly had likely left Renn, with Lellip in tow, only a handful of days ago at best. She'd not have traveled slowly, even with Lellip in tow.

And such knowledge was so relieving it almost made me want to sit down and just... breathe. But I ignored it, bottled it away, and kept my focus.

"We'll see. Branches is actually grounded, so it's going a tad oddly," Sap said with a sigh.

Grounded...? "What happened?" I asked as Liora stepped a bit closer to Sap, as to look closer at her wings.

"We've been having issues... are you going to eat that?" Sap asked with a point to my hand.

Glancing downward, I frowned at the fish meat I'd forgotten about. I went ahead and handed it to her, and she wasted no time in eating them.

Good. Now I can cook the other one too without feeling wasteful.

Deciding to do that I went to ready the next stick of fish meat. As I did I noted the frogs around us had started to croak again, but were now far away. Only a few sounded closer than a few dozen feet now. Sap had scared them all off.

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"Willing to talk about them?" I asked, doing my best to be kind. We weren't alone after all, we had an inquisitive young saint who was staring at Sap's wings with huge glowing eyes.

"Hm? It's just my family being their stupid selves, Vim. Trunk and Branches got into a fight, one that I and father had to intervene in. Branches is now grounded, or had been until mother returned. She came back yesterday, though I'm not sure what she's going to do about it. You should have seen Trunk and Seed, they were absolutely furious that mother brought a wife back for him. Basically they think he doesn't have the right to her, since it's the same as giving him a prize for his actions," Sap said.

Jeez... "Is Trunk okay...?" I asked.

Sap chuckled between her bites as she nodded. "A few broken bones, but it's his pride that's hurt the most. To be honest he was in the wrong, even Seed knows it, she actually laughed at him over it. But you know how my family is," Sap said.

"Do they all have wings like you...?" Liora spoke up, causing Sap to startle as if she'd forgotten all about her.

"Um... my youngest sibling does, yes," Sap said gently, and I could tell she was now a tad on edge. Her earlier attitude had likely just been her joy in finding us.

"Well, I trust Lilly and Windle will keep things peaceful. Branches should be punished if he really hurt his brother, but that doesn't mean they should punish Lellip over it," I said.

"Hm... all the same, I'm glad to get out of the house. It's gotten so stuffy. By the way why hadn't you told me I had a new sibling...? Really rude, Vim," Sap said as I put a new stick of fish meat onto the fire. They sizzled as they began to cook.

"You know how your mother likes to keep it a surprise," I said. She must mean when Renn and I had found her up north a few months ago.

"Yet they told Branches about Lellip...? Why does he get to know such things yet I don't? They've always favored him..." Sap complained as she extended her wings a little, as if to let Liora get a better look at them. The young saint perked up, smiling as she stepped closer.

Had they...?

I frowned as I wondered if I'd ever noticed such favoritism before. I likely had... or maybe for sure I had...? I knew that Lilly has always liked Sap a lot, and also Branches, but had it always been that obvious? I tried not to get too involved in such things.

"And Renn didn't return with them as to see it all happen. She'll be mighty disappointed," I said.

Sap chuckled at that. "Thus my going to see her. I've never seen this silver place but brother says it's not far. I think we're not far from it...?" Sap said.

"Three or so days at our pace, yes," I said.

"Hm... mind if I join you? I'll be honest I'm not too excited about going home, maybe a few days away from that stuffy tree will do me good," Sap asked.

Liora glanced at me, and I noticed her happy and expectant look as she did. "Of course Sap, you're always welcome. I take it then the letter is of not too dire of importance?" I asked.

"Not really. She just wanted to let Renn know they made it, and wanted to let Renn know that if she sees you first to tell you to visit before leaving the region, which I can tell you now I suppose," Sap said.

Maybe in case Lellip doesn't fit in and has to leave. So that I could pick her up and take her elsewhere, or home.

Hopefully that doesn't happen... It'd make me very happy if Lellip and Branches got together. Not only would it keep the families close, it would make Renn happy too.

"How'd uh... how'd it go? Between them?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh, Lellip and my brother? I'm not sure... I stayed out of it. She seems cute, I guess...? I like that she's of thick blood and hardy stuff. She seemed skittish at first, but yelled at Branches. That was good," she said.

"Lellip yelled at him...?" I asked. Great. Lellip was a kind girl, as far as I was concerned, so that didn't bode well.

"He was grounded, Vim. Not allowed to leave his room. She yelled at him to join her for lunch," she said.

Oh. "She made him leave his room," I said.

"Yep. Mother gave him permission, and that's why Trunk was throwing a fit."

I nodded as I slowly spun the stick. To the owl family, grounded was as it sounded. You weren't allowed to spread your wings. No fun. No leaving the house. In some cases they didn't even let you eat or drink anything. In a certain perspective it was a harsher punishment than one expected. Sometimes one had to go weeks without food.

It's been a long time since I'd heard of them do such a thing, though. "What had they even been fighting over?" I asked.

"Crown. Trunk was badmouthing her."

"What for...?" I asked. Trunk and Crown were more alike than not... They, alongside Seed, were the children that Lilly worried over. The ones more likely to dissociate themselves from the parliament than not.

"Crown's being weird. She's all sad and depressed. Trunk basically said what we were all thinking, though he did it kind of rudely. Branches took offense to it, and it escalated from there," Sap said.

"What'd he say...?" Crown was depressed over that human she had loved, wasn't she? The one that died?

Sap lightly shrugged as she picked off the last piece of fish from her stick. She was about to toss it into her mouth, but paused as she glanced down at Liora. Sap then offered it to the saint, but Liora softly smiled and shook her head. "I'm full, thank you."

The owl gently nodded and ate the last piece, and I wondered if maybe Crown was the real reason for Lilly's letter. It seemed Sap didn't know the full contents, based on the way she wasn't minding it much.

"How's Crown doing, then?" I asked.

"Badly... I uh..." Sap glanced at Liora again, swallowed, then looked back at me. "She's lost weight," is all she said on the matter.

Odds are she had wanted to say more, but didn't wish to in front of the girl. Though if it was something private, or something she felt a child shouldn't hear, I couldn't tell. I'd ask again later once we had a moment alone, such as when Liora slept or something.

Still... weight loss...?

Crown, like all owls I've ever known, had been scrawny. So... that meant it was likely worse than Sap was hinting at.

Poor Lilly. Poor Crown, too. Maybe we should have brought back a partner not for Branches but her instead... Unlike many in the Society, Crown would have been easy to have found such a mate for. She was more like Windle than not, and thus would not have had the same issues that those like Lilly or her son Branches had.

"Well... hopefully she'll get better now that she's at home," I said.

"Actually she plans on going back with mom in a few months. To stay with your wife," Sap said.

Ah... yes Lilly had mentioned she had hoped Crown would. She was hoping being near Renn, and being busy by helping Randle and the rest out, would be good for her. Probably would be. Renn ate so much that just by being near Renn she'd gain some weight.

I smirked at the thought. "I'm sure Renn would love that."

"Hm... I'd say I'm jealous, but honestly I think that'd be too much for me. A city of humans...? Ugh," Sap shivered a bit as she thought of it.

Yes. I agreed, to a point. "We'll see how long Renn can last," I said.

"You don't like humans?" Liora asked Sap.

I heard Sap's wings ruffle a little in movement as I focused on the fish I was cooking. It was about done. "Not very much, no. Hard to hide amongst them with my wings, after all," she told the saint.

Liora made a soft sound as she realized what Sap meant, and I heard the saint nod knowingly. "Worse than my eyes, huh," she said.

"Hm... I'd think hiding glowing eyes would be hard too, wouldn't it?" Sap asked.

"Rather it's uncomfortable. Vim makes me wear face covering stuff," she complained.

"Hm. Mother once told me when she was young and traveling with Vim she had to once paint her wings. She said she debated dropping Vim on his head from a very high mountain because of it," Sap said.

Wait what...? Oh... maybe she meant when we had painted them white. To make her seem like an angel... She had been smiling and had enjoyed that, though, from what I remembered... Particularly the way the humans had knelt and bowed in front of her in worship.

Still, that was a good memory. One I'd not remembered in over a hundred years. We had saved quite a few of our members and had not had to spill any blood to do so. Renn would like that story, if she hasn't already heard it from Lilly.

"Would dropping him on his head even fix anything?" Liora asked.

Sap laughed at that and glanced at me. "I like this one much better than the last!"

Liora glanced at me a little worriedly, but I paid it no heed. "The last saint Sap met was very rude. And annoying. And grouchy. Here, want this one too?" I asked her as I stopped cooking the fish and held it out to her.

Sap took it without a word or even acknowledging me as she focused on little Liora. "I've only met three, including you, you're as rare as I am nowadays little girl," Sap said.

"You're rare...? That's sad, I think more people should have wings. Is it fun flying? Are they heavy? And are you almost naked because you're hot like I am or is it because you can't find shirts that fit you?" Liora asked, showcasing both how comfortable she now felt with Sap and per usual how inquisitive she was. She was like Renn with her questions, but with the childish unfiltered layer slathered all on top it.

Sap laughed at her as she took a bite of the fish I'd just given her. "One question at a time! Let's see..."

As Sap went ahead and answered what felt like a hundred questions from the young saint... I found myself growing a little anxious.

Renn was okay. At least, she had been a few days ago.

Which meant I had time.

I had expected as much. I had no doubt the gods would eventually try to go after Renn... but I also expected them to try and threaten me again first before doing so. Especially if there was something odd going on, as I suspected.

No matter. I didn't know where they were at the moment, and as far as I was aware had no way of finding them... since after all I'd not found even a hint of them in hundreds of years. So I needed to wait for them... and well...

Staying by Renn's side, the only person they really could threaten me with, was my best opportunity for such a thing.

Hopefully Renn would forgive me for using her in such a way. She had once volunteered to be bait before, back in Lumen... but this was different. And it was I who was doing the trap setting this time, not her. So... well...

Hopefully she'd forgive me, since I'd not forgive myself.

Hopefully.

Chapter 595 Renn – A Loud Visitor in the Night

Waking up, I found myself sitting up and with my feet on the floor before I even realized what I was doing.

My heart thumped heavily as I heard things. Things I shouldn't hear in the dead middle of the night, let alone in the center of our encampment. Stuff that had pulled me from a happy dream, one where Vim and...

I blinked blurry, half asleep, eyes as an unsettling noise made my ears flutter. I heard metal clanging. Whispers of voices. The popping of a recently lit fire and...

Standing up from my cot, I found Vim's spear in my hand before I even realized it. Stepping towards my tent's exit flap, I reached out to grab it and open it... to fling it open and rush out. To catch whoever was outside off-guard and unaware. To kill them before they could do anything to any of my friends and family. Before they even got the chance to...

But right as I grabbed hold of the tent, my heart understood what my mind was still trying to believe as it finished waking up.

I recognized that voice.

Breathing out a deep sigh of utter relief as I heard Oplar's loud whispers, as she spoke to someone I didn't know... I groaned as I realized I almost charged out to attack a dear friend. A family member, even.

The deep rush of relief made me lean on the spear. The metal was very cool in the warm night, and made me realize that I had a layer of sweat now all over my body... and not because it was warm.

Slowly putting the spear back down near my bed, where I'd been leaving it lately, I relaxed a little as I went to get dressed. I wore only a light shirt and shorts lately to bed, and although I knew Oplar wouldn't mind if I went to talk to her like this... I didn't know who was with her. It sounded like a young girl, but...

Getting dressed, I even put my hat on. Just in case it wasn't a member.

By the time I finished and stepped out of my tent, I realized it was likely only a few hours until the morning. The sky was still dark and full of stars but the world had that eerie silence to it that only came before it woke up.

Walking to the center tent, which was slightly glowing thanks to the fire and lanterns lit inside, I realized I was the only one awake. At least, other than Oplar and her fellow. The tents I walked passed, such as Merit's and Randle's, were quiet and dark.

Merit sleeping through the noise was odd, but I knew it was likely because unlike myself she had realized who it was instantly. She had likely woken, heard it was Oplar, and then went back to sleep. I had simply... panicked, I guess...

I wasn't sure why, but I'd definitely been on guard more lately than not. I'd blame the fact that Vim wasn't here, but the reality is I'd been feeling slightly... off even from before we'd separated again. Back in Lumen, even while he slept right next to me, I had been a tad... too aware of our surroundings.

Maybe it was just the fact I was hearing things better? Would I have jumped up and readied for battle as quickly back before I absorbed the heart...? I wasn't sure.

Entering the center tent, I smiled at the sight of my bear friend sitting at one of the tables. She had her back to me, and was currently talking to the girl sitting across from her... who was in the middle of eating soup or something like it. The cook-place still had a fire going, but the real light source was from a couple lanterns that they'd lit up that were hanging off the poles that supported the tent.

There was a pile of bags near the entrance to the tent, which I didn't recognize... which told me that they were Oplar's and the person who was with her. But the amount of bags seemed a tad odd. Oplar usually traveled like Vim did, with only a single bag... were there more here maybe? Maybe they were

using one of the empty tents? If so I hope they hadn't picked the one that Merit had hidden that heart under...

The girl sitting with Oplar noticed me as I approached and Oplar turned around and grinned at the sight of me. "Renn!" she hurriedly got up, and before I knew it I was wrapped in a huge hug.

Enjoying the moment, I relaxed a little as I returned the hug and gave her a small squeeze. "Oplar. I'm glad to see you," I said, and meant it deeply.

Although a tad upset I had been so startled by her sudden appearance, in reality I was very happy to see her. Not only was her presence unexpected, and a pleasant surprise, it was relieving that the worst had not come to pass.

Ever since getting here I'd been worried about something bad happening... Especially since a few days ago that weird woman had shown up and gave us that box with a heart in it, amongst other things...

"Let me look at ya...!" Oplar released me, then while basically holding me up by my arms she pushed me back a bit and looked me up and down. "Yer' belly's still flat!" she said loudly.

I wryly smirked at her. "I know. No baby yet, no," I said. Although I was kind of happy when people did this, it was also starting to become a little hurtful too.

Yes. I know I wasn't pregnant yet. Please stop reminding me.

Also I knew that Vim had wanted me to keep it a secret, but I couldn't help it. I liked Oplar, and didn't want to lie to her. Plus, I knew that even though she loved gossip she'd never share such information with anyone... though the unknown person sitting nearby on the other hand...

"Eh, give it time. Vim will eventually not be able to contain himself and just ravish you... or you him, so no worries!" Oplar teased me, and I found myself smirking even more upon hearing one of Kaley's words. She had said something similar too...

"Maybe. How've you been? Was your trip south fun?" I asked. Last time I saw her had been in Telmik. When she had left to go finish delivering the invitations to the vote next winter. The one we'd have about Vim and his role as protector.

"Rather eventful, actually. I have quite a few letters for you. Before that though, come meet..." Oplar paused a bit, and then grinned. "Your new friend! Guess her name," she said as she pulled me towards the table she had just been sitting at.

My... new friend...? And Oplar wanted me to guess her name...?

I frowned softly as I was taken over to the table, and the girl who sat at it sat up straighter upon my focus of her. She had a mouthful still, one she quickly chewed and swallowed as she gave me a shy smile. "Um... hello," she greeted me, and I could tell that she had not said her name on purpose. She knew Oplar wanted to play a small game and was playing along... which told me she was long used to Oplar... and so, maybe she was not as young as she appeared.

She looked younger than Lellip, but not as young as Merit or Sharp. Though I knew that wasn't a very good indicator of her actual age, of course. She was kind of scrawny, and dressed in typical traveling clothes. She had slightly unkempt hair that reached her shoulders, which was a dull brown in color...

Oddly my first instinct was to say she was definitely one of us. Her eyes were just a tad too blue, and her teeth a bit too sharp. Plus when she touched her bowl or spoon I heard a familiar sound. One I'd not heard since my time at the Crypt with Sharp.

She had rough skin. The kind of abrasive skin that was not from age or wear but something else...

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Plus, now that I was near her, I noticed a rather obvious scent. One that made it clear, at least within reason, what she was.

She smelled of the sea. "Hello. My name is Renn... I'm going to assume you're named something I'd know, otherwise she'd not tease us so..." I introduced myself and hummed for a moment, and then went ahead and gestured lightly at her. "You're either named the same as me, or someone I know. Is your name Oplar too?" I asked.

Oplar snickered. "You're the first to assume it's me she's named alike," she said.

"So you're not?" I asked the girl.

The sea-smelling girl gave me a kind smile as she shook her head. "I'd tell you, but she gets upset when I do. She likes to hear people guess," she said with a small gesture at Oplar with her spoon.

"She likes such things, yes. If not Oplar... and not Renn?" I asked, since I didn't yet get a confirmation if she was or not. The girl shook her head, telling me it wasn't, so I went ahead and guessed another.

"Merit, maybe? Sharp...? Would make sense with your skin and all," I said.

Oplar chuckled at me as she sat back down at the table across from the girl. "How'd you know she has skin like Sharp already?" she asked me.

The girl also seemed shocked that I'd known. She frowned unsurely at me, as if I'd just revealed a secret that I wasn't supposed to know. "So it's neither of those...?" I asked.

She shook her head.

Hm... "Vim?"

Oplar then laughed. Loudly. I flinched as she tried to cover her face and mouth, as to muffle her laughs, but I knew it was likely too late. She had just been noisy enough that I doubted even Krass the old woman had slept through it. "Vim...!" Oplar's muffled laughs and voice teased me as I groaned and glanced at the girl in question, who was now smiling at me.

"My name is Celine. It's nice to meet you Renn, I heard a lot about you from your husband," she said as she stood a bit and extended her hand out to me.

Oh...? She didn't seem to be a saint. I took her hand, verified she wasn't, and nodded. "Celine... you met Vim recently?" I asked. Maybe she was from the other continent...? Was she then a new arrival...? Had

she been on the ship that Vim had gone to save, then? If so why wasn't Vim here too...? I didn't smell or sense him at all! Maybe he was in town or something?

Growing a tad excited over the idea that Vim was here, I barely noticed her rough hand that I shook. Barely. "Yes... a few weeks ago. We ran into him in the south," she said.

Our hands separated as I frowned... and realized what that meant.

He wasn't here.

Feeling defeated all of a sudden, as if I'd just been given sad news, I decided to join the two at the table. I sat next to Oplar, who was still happily snickering away, and nodded at Celine. "Are you from the other continent then?" I asked.

Celine blinked at me and then quickly shook her head. "No...? You mean the ship and those people? No."

Oh...? I glanced at Oplar who was starting to calm down. She huffed and breathed deeply, and sounded almost as if she was in pain as she did so. Did she laugh so much, and so hard, that it had hurt? "We met some of them on our way to Telmik, and traveled the rest of the way with them. Vim saved the ship, they're all fine, as I assume that's what you're really asking," she said to me.

Thank goodness...! "That's wonderful," I said.

Oplar smiled and nodded. "So it is. I found Celine in the south; she's a new member like you Renn. Fresh and new!" Oplar said with a gesture at her.

A... new... "You are...?" I asked, a little shocked to hear so. That meant she was the... third? New member I've ever met. Fly and Wool of course being the two before her.

Celine nodded quickly. "She bought me," she said simply.

"Bought...?" I mumbled the word as I heard a tent open elsewhere. I reached up to take my hat off, since now with confirmation she was one of us and a member I didn't need to worry about it. My ears fluttered a little as I heard footsteps heading our way, and judging by how soft and small they sounded it was Merit.

"So you do have ears...!"

Looking back at Celine, I found her happily smiling at me. I nodded gently as I made them flutter her way. "I do. Did none of the other members have any? From the other continent...?" I asked her and Oplar. A few amongst Light had similar traits to me, so I had kind of expected it.

"Not like you... but a few had feathers, or other things. Yours are much cuter!" Celine said happily.

I smiled happily at that compliment as Merit entered the tent.

Glancing at my friend, I watched her approach with a scowl. One... I was surprised to find directed my way.

"Merit...?" I greeted my friend a little cautiously as she huffed at me and glanced at Oplar... who was grinning happily at us.

"I'd yell at her, but it's to be expected of her. You Renn however, should know better. Why poke the bear in the middle of the night? Are you stupid?" Merit asked.

Oh. She was upset with me since I'd made Oplar noisy and for waking her up.

"Sorry..." I apologized, since it was in fact my fault. Oplar was noisy, and she and Celine had been making noises... but hadn't been so loud as to actually wake everyone. Not until I had walked into the tent at least.

"And this tiny bundle of vehemence is Merit. Say hello, Celine," Oplar said happily, ignoring Merit's comment and complaint completely.

"Um! Hello...!" Celine greeted Merit, but did so with a half-hushed voice.

Merit glanced at the girl... and then sighed. "More trouble, is it?" she asked as she glanced around and then looked to the center of the tent, where the cook-place was. "Any left?" she asked.

"A whole pot full. This girl was hungry, but even when hungry she basically doesn't eat anything. I'm glad we're finally here, now Renn can eat all her leftovers," Oplar said with a point at me.

"Hey," I said, but smiled anyway. This girl didn't eat much, did she? It had felt as if she hadn't taken a bite since I'd greeted her... I had thought it was simply because of our conversation but maybe it was for another reason.

"Hmph. And did I hear you right? She bought you, as in literally?" Merit asked as she stepped away from us and headed for the cook-place nearby.

"Oh. Um... yes. She did," Celine said.

"As in... really?" I asked the two.

Oplar nodded at me. "Aye. Purchased her for six hundred Renk I did!" Oplar happily boasted, as if she was talking about a piece of furniture she had gotten a good deal on.

Six hundred Renk...? What...? That was only twelve Penk at the current market rate. Silver ones, not gold ones. That was basically what we spent on a few days worth of supplies here. Hardly a lot.

"I'm going to need to hear a bit more to that story..." I said carefully. Oplar was one to joke and tease, but it didn't seem like she was doing so right now. Enjoying herself? Sure. But that smirk was not one that told me she was lying or fooling around, but instead amused at watching my reaction. Kind of like how she had looked when I had been guessing Celine's name.

"I was being sold as a slave. I was caught stealing," Celine said simply as she went to take another bite of her soup.

Wanting to groan at that, I glanced at Oplar with a side-glance... and found her gentle smile as she nodded. That was indeed the story.

Just great. Just why were so many of us carrying such heavy pasts...?

"I assume you mean in the nation south of Telmik," Merit said as she returned. She had her own bowl of soup now, and she went to sit down next to Celine... who sat up a bit straighter as she did.

"Aye. That's also where we met Vim. He'd been on some quest set to him by Martin," Oplar said.

"Martin...? He left Lumen?" I asked.

"Ah, no. The older. The father, not the son," Oplar corrected.

Oh...?

"An insufferable man, but better than the son I think. At least he can defend someone," Merit said as she went to noisily eating. She seemed half asleep still.

"Anyway, Vim said he had a few things to handle then would head back this way. Honestly I'm surprised he's not here already, we got a bit sidetracked what with us running into Tressi's group," Oplar said. Ah! Nasba's cousin! Merit had mentioned her back in Lumen! She had even given Vim a letter to deliver to her.

Merit's head shot upward, and my ears fluttered as I watched her focus a little more seriously on our conversation. "You met Tressi?" Oplar asked.

"Aye. She's looking forward to seeing Nasba. Plans to head that way as soon as she can and everyone's settled. She wants to introduce her child to the rest of the ducks," Oplar said.

"Child...?" Merit mumbled as she frowned in thought.

"A cute little girl. She's fascinated with Vim, by the way, so get ready for that Renn."

"Huh...?" I sat up a bit straighter as I found myself to be unexpectedly on guard. What'd she mean by that!?

Merit chuckled as she went back to eating. "Good luck with that."

Gah!

Chapter 596 Vim – An Unwelcome Prophecy

"She's snoring," Sap said softly, sounding amused as we walked beside Horseshoe.

I glanced at the source of the quiet noises, though couldn't see her face. Liora was lying down forward on Horseshoe, in the saddle, sleeping away. It was a little after sundown, and since it had been rather warm today it was now starting to get a bit chilly. The kind that made the young saint cover herself with not just her cloak, but a firm blanket too. It hid her from view, since she had covered herself with it, but it wasn't thick enough to block her soft snoring.

Although I walked right next to the horse as to make sure the girl would stay safe as she slept, I didn't really need to. I had secured her to the saddle once she started mentioning she had wanted to take a nap. And the horse, though young, was continuing to prove itself to be a very calm creature. The kind of calm that made it perfectly easy to trust the young sleep upon it as she slept.

"She sleeps a lot, Vim... is it a saint thing, or a human thing?" Sap asked, her voice quiet.

"Both. For now. As she gets older and better settles she'll slowly become less human. For now though she likely needs more sleep, food and all else than a typical human girl her age would need," I said.

Sap hummed as she nodded, understanding. "Root seems to sleep a lot too. I don't remember the others sleeping as much when babies; father says it's because of her wings. Her flapping them all day tires her out faster than those without."

I smirked at the owl that had wings herself. "He's right, to a point," I said. Honestly the extra energy used up by the wings should be counter-balanced by the mere fact that Root was so thick-blooded compared to her more humanoid siblings... but I let it be.

Sap sighed as she stopped leaning forward as to look at Liora. "A lot of kids lately..." she mumbled.

"Hm...? Root, Fly, this one and...?" I asked, wondering who else she was speaking of.

"Just them...? That's a lot," Sap said with a matter of fact tone.

Ah... right. To her, a loner who went years and years without ever seeing another person, three children in a short few months was likely a lot...

"Does it make you feel like having any yourself?" I asked.

Sap tilted her head at me. "Me...? Hm..."

Oh...? She was actually considering it. Interesting.

"Maybe... but not right now. Especially after hearing all the drama between everyone," she said.

"Drama?"

Sap gestured lightly at me. "I mean, like my family... and what my mother said was happening in the Society. By the sounds of it, trying to find a mate would be as annoying as molting. Don't know if I want to have to deal with that," she said.

I smiled softly at her statement, but deep down was a tad sad to hear such a thing. She was basically saying that, thanks to her family's drama and all the drama she's heard from her mother concerning the Society, it was too difficult to find a partner... and thus was not going to even try.

That made me feel like a failure, in part since it was my fault the Society wasn't in a better position. "Well... I can't disagree that it'd be difficult... but a lot of people have shown up, and more will continue doing so, you might find it won't be as difficult as you think here shortly with them all arriving," I said.

"Hm...? Oh you mean the ones coming back from the other lands...? Aren't they all a bunch of church-folk?"

"Not all of them, no. I'd say about half are, but the other half will be more like you than you'd think. People thick in the blood and whatnot," I said. "A few even had wings, though I don't think I saw an owl..." I added as I thought of Tressi's group. What had they been, actually...? Some kind of smaller birds, I think...

Sap hummed as she pondered my words, and then she shrugged. "Maybe. We'll see," is all she said about it.

That was probably the best I'd get, likely... "Could ask Renn to look for you, too. That's part of the reason she's helping settle this new location, she plans and hopes to make a place for people to meet. Like an inn for people looking for partners," I said.

"What, a marketplace of love?" Sap asked, amused.

"Something like that. I'll be honest I'm a tad worried it'll end up like..." I went quiet as I realized I had completely forgotten about that temple in the east, until now.

"Like what?" Sap asked, interested.

I sighed as I nodded. I'll need to let Renn know, she's going to be upset that I'd forgotten until now. "A long time ago there was a small village, a temple, to the east. Near the Crypt. It was a place where people could go to... well... mate. Not to find partners, but to have children. It was basically what Renn wants to make, just minus the love aspect," I said.

Sap chuckled at that. "Odds are that'd work better than Renn's idea," she said.

"Maybe. We honestly don't have as many members anymore who view life in such a way. A consequence of so many finding faith," I said.

"I don't have faith and I'm not someone who'd do that," Sap said, sounding offended.

"Didn't mean it like that, Sap. Was just saying," I said.

She studied me for a moment, and then smiled. "I say that, but honestly I'd probably not be too against it. Especially if I can't find anyone half-decent," she said.

See? "Weirdly I'd not be too surprised if Renn would be okay with it too," I said.

"Huh...? Even though she has you?"

I frowned at her for a moment, before I realize she had misunderstood me. "I meant she'd be okay running a place meant for such a thing. Not that she'd partake herself," I explained.

Sap nodded. "Right... I can see that. She's kind of like mother in that way, isn't she? Old school."

Rather she was not the type to stop, or judge, someone for wanting a child even if not in a more traditional way. Even if she found it odd, herself.

A small snore drew my attention, and I watched Liora shift ever so slightly. For a tiny moment I expected her to wake, even if partially, but she just went back to snoring.

I was glad she was getting rest, and doing it in a way that still allowed us to travel. We were still a couple days away from SilverCreek, the town where Renn was, and it was starting to really grate on me.

I wanted to see Renn. To make sure she was okay. And...

"So, Vim..."

I blinked and glanced the other way, to the winged lady next to me. "Hm?"

Sap gave me an odd smile as she clasped her hands before her, as if to start twiddling her thumbs. "Mother says Renn's caught up in bad stuff. Dangerous stuff," she said quietly.

Frowning at that, I slowly nodded. "Yes... sadly, yes. She has."

"Can I do anything? For her? To help?"

Oh...?

Studying the owl, I found her staring apprehensively at me in a way that was very unlike her mother... yet at the same time, just like her. She bore a look of utter willingness, while at the same time being a tad shy and hesitant all the same. It made her seem younger than she was, and...

"Thank you, Sap... I appreciate the offer," I said gently, humbled.

"I'm not offering to help you, Vim...!" Sap said with a smile.

Right... "I know. Still, thank you. I... honestly don't know what to do about it. The danger she is in is something that I'm not even sure I can protect her from... or if anything can protect her at all. But I'm thankful to know I can rely on you all the same, if needed."

"It's that bad...? Mother just said she was getting involved in prophecies and stuff," Sap asked, sounding worried.

"It is... I might one day send her to your nest for safekeeping. If I do, I'd ask you to linger on those branches during such a time, if you'd be willing. As to aid your mother and father in protecting her too," I said.

"Hm...? Sure. Not sure how any harm could come to her there, with mother protecting her, honestly, but sure," Sap said.

Sadly a lot of harm could come to her. Rather easily too...

I sighed softly as I tried to not think too deeply about the gods or their threats. "Honestly it'd make me feel a lot better if she'd abandon this silly town and stay with you or me... but I just can't bring myself to tell her such a thing," I said.

Sap didn't say anything as we walked, and I realized I had likely said something a tad out of character. But I wasn't lying.

I'd been avoiding the fact, but the truth was... I didn't want to be involved in Randle's new location. Helping him set it up? Sure. I did that all the time. But staying there afterward...? Not to mention that meant Renn would linger there without me, when I had to leave...

"So your rules even extend to your own life, Vim?" Sap asked.

"Of course they do...? Kind of the whole point of them," I said, assuming she meant my rule of free-will.

Sap hummed at me. "Mother has always said it'd easier to break the sky than it is your rules."

"My rules are very easy to break, thank you very much," I said, defending myself.

She chuckled at me. "You know what I mean!"

I nodded. "Also..."

Then, I felt it.

Stopping, I turned and watched Liora twitch. A different kind than before. One that was just... a tad off. As if she had just sneezed, or something. Yet she hadn't. In fact, she had gone completely quiet.

"Vim...?" Sap kept walking for a few steps, but eventually came to a stop too. The horse, Horseshoe, proved again how dutiful and smart he was as he came to a stop as well. Even though no one held his reins. His ears fluttered as I felt divine power come... and then go.

Then Liora sat up and the blanket slid off her, falling to the ground.

Sap fluttered her wings for a moment as she went to pick the blanket up. Before she could even get her hand on it, I watched Liora's glowing eyes... go out, as if she had just blinked the glow away... then it returned with ever more power than before.

She was having a prophecy.

By the time Sap picked the blanket up and stood back up, the prophecy was over. Liora's eyes returned to their normal glow... and she blinked as she found herself awake.

"Hm..." she frowned at herself as she then yawned, stretching her arms in the process.

Whatever dream it had been... must not have been too bad. She looked upset, but more so over the fact of being awoken than anything else.

"You didn't sleep long, Liora," Sap said gently as she went to brushing off the blanket. It likely hadn't gotten too dirty, since we were walking upon short grass, but it was kind of her to do so all the same. It proved she'd be a good mother, once she decided to become one.

Liora breathed in after her yawn, and was about to say something but another yawn attacked her. She made an odd noise as she yawned again.

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Once done she reached up and rubbed her eyes. "I had a dream..." Liora said softly.

Sap tilted her head at her, but then realization dawned on her. "Oh! A prophecy...!? Really? Just now?" Sap's wings fluttered as she stepped closer to Horseshoe, both to return the blanket to Liora and because she was now fully interested.

"Careful," I warned the two.

Sap flinched, her wings squeezing shut as she did... and then she glanced at me and glared.

I ignored the very Lilly-like look and stepped forward, to step up to the horse as well. "As you know, Liora. As we've talked about, only tell me if..." I started to tell her, in hopes of stopping her from absentmindedly talking about something I didn't want to hear.

"But it's about you, Vim," Liora then said, cutting me off.

"If... what? Me?" I asked, caught off guard.

She nodded and frowned at me. "It was... definitely," the young saint said with a nod.

"I assume with Renn...? Or..." I felt my knee pop as I shifted.

Liora frowned at me and shook her head. "No...? Just you and your mother."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sap frown. She knew, as many did, that my parents were dead. Gone. Forever.

So... "Me and who's mother...?" I asked, and didn't like the dry mouth I suddenly had. Maybe she had misspoken in her tiredness. Maybe she had meant to say her mother, or maybe...

The young saint's frown deepened as she turned a bit to face me. "Your mother...? At least that's what you called her? You called her mother and then..." Liora lifted her hands, to be to gesture something... but I stopped paying attention.

Raising a hand to quiet her, and the world, I closed my eyes and quickly forced myself to think rationally.

She had to be misunderstanding something. Who did I call mother? Was there anyone in the Society who I called such a thing...? As title or moniker? Maybe a joke...? Maybe someone who recently gave birth in that moment in the future, who I teased by calling mother...? Or...

"Um..." I heard Liora's voice, but didn't want to.

Again saints bring me nothing but headaches...

"Liora... Vim's parents are dead. Are you sure?" Sap asked, her gentle voice calming my heart that was about to thump in anger.

Lowering my hand, I kept my cool as I watched Liora frown at Sap... and then consider her words. She spent a moment to ponder, and then slowly shook her head. "No...? Maybe not...? But he did call her mother, definitely, and she..."

"Stop!"

The horse was the one to flinch this time. I stepped forward, to save Liora if she fell, but hadn't needed to. Sap had done it for me, she had reached up and grabbed Liora off the horse as Horseshoe bucked and ran forward.

I groaned inwardly as I watched the horse run a few hundred yards off, then slow down and come to a stop. In the process the blanket and a few other little things had fallen off him, but thankfully Liora was fine. She was now in Sap's protective arms.

"Vim...!" Sap yelled at me, rightfully so, and then went to put Liora down.

"Are you okay, Liora?" I asked as I stepped closer. I had shouted, a tad too loudly, and so this was all my fault.

"Um... I think so? You're really fast, Sap, I didn't even realize what was happening and was already in your arms before I could blink!" Liora praised Sap with a huge grin, as if what had just happened had been fun.

Sap sighed with a soft smile at the young girl, and then turned to look at me. "Really Vim, you should know better."

Yes. I should. "I'm sorry... you two okay?" I asked the two again.

"Yes, Vim. As is the horse... I think," Sap said as we all looked to it. It was staring at us from where it had stopped, as if wondering why we were no longer walking beside it.

While Sap and Liora studied the horse, and it us, I instead studied the little saint.

Was this a scheme...? A ploy...?

I'd not think that Liora herself would do such a thing... not at all. The girl was gentle hearted, and a tad too honest for her own good. But... she could easily be led astray by things she didn't understand... such as a prophecy that she didn't fully comprehend...

Many saints did such a thing. They interpreted what they saw in one way, and one way only. Their own views. They could not comprehend what they didn't know. It was why so many were gotten wrong. Because they simply couldn't understand what they were seeing half the time. Not necessarily because they were stupid or anything, but simply because they lacked a certain skill set or even a proper education. It was like when I had to teach someone of this era how electricity worked. It was harder than it sounded, especially for...

"Liora," I got the saint's attention as I stopped myself from thinking too deeply about insignificant things. I knew the only reason I was doing so was to avoid the issue ahead of me. I was basically running away.

I couldn't do that.

Not today.

Not now.

Not until they were all safe.

The saint turned around to look at me as I stepped forward and knelt down next to her. She was tall enough to meet me eye to eye while I was on a knee, so I stayed there.

Without her even realizing it, she reached out and grabbed Sap's hand. The owl allowed her to take it, and even stepped closer to her... as if to support and protect her. Even from me. I glanced upward, and met the glare that was staring down at me. It told me all I needed to know.

She had a lot more of Lilly in her than she realized.

Looking back to the saint, I breathed in a bit to steady myself... and then nodded. "I need to know this. Tell me what you saw, please."

Liora at first looked offended, as if hurt that I'd say such a thing after yelling at her over it... but in typical young-girl fashion she simply sighed and nodded. "Promise not to yell again?" she asked.

I nodded. "I vow it."

"Hm..." she hummed as she studied me, and then nodded again. "Okay... we were in a house. One that was warm, because it was snowing outside so a lot of the fireplaces were burning. You were being yelled at, by Renn, from the other room... something about a broken bed," Liora started.

Sap chuckled at that, but I ignored her.

"Then the front door opens... and this lady walks in. You get weird, and say mother to her. The lady frowns as she looks around, and then..."

"What does she look like?" I asked, interrupting her.

Liora blinked, but then focused. "Um..." she looks up at Sap, and points at her. "About her height. She has a lot of hair, all tied up and stuff with ribbons and bows..."

The world went still. Distant... as my eyes unfocused. "What did she say? Do?" I asked, my voice sounded... empty.

"She..." Liora started to say... but then went quiet.

I blinked, bringing the world back into focus... and found Liora staring at me oddly. She startled, as if being caught at doing something bad, and then quickly spoke. "She said you screwed up!" Liora yelled, and then nodded quickly... as if I was interrogating her and she was doing all she could to attest she spoke truth.

I... screwed up...?

"That's all she said...?" I asked, feeling a bit relieved.

"And then she..." Liora lifted a hand, and with almost uncanny accuracy swiped in the air... in a familiar motion that couldn't be made up by anyone who hadn't seen it before. "And then I woke up."

"Huh...? What's that?" Sap asked as my eyes narrowed.

"You woke up...? How so?" I asked. That was a short prophecy... unless she was omitting something that might be one of the shortest prophecies I'd ever...

"Well... something really bright blinded me. Then I thought I got this weird feeling, as if I was getting hurt all over but it also tickled, but then before it got worse I was awake, and..."

She died.

Looking down, I clenched my hand onto my knee... squeezing it so I would not break anything around me.

Liora just dreamt of her death.

My mother showed up. Said I had screwed up, and then... what?

Killed everyone around me? Or killed me, and in doing so killed everyone else too?

No... I needed to first question her existence in the first place. My mother was dead. I had seen her death. Held her in my arms as she faded. True death. The kind that not even gods returned from. So... What?

A copycat? Maybe a god took her form, as to get close to me and catch me unawares...? I'd seen gods take other forms before, but never had I seen one do such a thing as that... but... it could be possible. Was, possible, possibly...

Though even if one did such a thing... would it even work...? Could I be caught unaware so easily...? One would not only have to take my mother's form, they'd have to perfectly mimic her mannerisms... and then of course her power. It was so unique. So obvious. I'd recognize a fake in a fraction of a moment... right?

But...

My mind went numb... until I squeezed a tad bit too hard, and broke something.

"Uh... did he just...?" Liora's voice became audible again as my mind started to work once more. As it did I felt the pain of a busted knee.

"I think he did, yes," Sap said softly, sounding unsure of herself as she did.

"Was there anyone else there, Liora? Did you recognize or see anything else that stood out to you?" I asked.

Liora stood up a bit straight and she frowned as she shook her head. "It was a nice house...! I think it was bigger than any I've ever been in, and like I said it was snowing... the snow was even up to the windows! And..." She pondered for a moment then nodded. "I think Renn was cooking something. I think I smelled food. And I think there were other people there too, but I don't remember seeing or hearing them," she said.

"Then she shows up..." I said, continuing her story.

"Then your mother shows up, says you screwed up and... I woke up," Liora said with a frown and a head-shake.

"Isn't your mom dead, Vim?" Sap asked gently.

"Yes. Very dead."

"You... you called her mother, I'm sure of it!" Liora said defensively.

"I don't doubt you, Liora. That's not what I'm saying... just... let me ponder this a moment..." I said with a small smile to her.

"Also you hurt your knee," Liora said with a point to it.

"It'll heal."

The young saint didn't seem to believe me as I again pondered the possibilities.

A god showing up, pretending to be my mother... to attack me while off-guard.

Or she completely misinterpreted the event, and I had said a different word and mother was just what Liora had heard and understood. Was the word mother in another language...? I spent a few moments to consider all the languages I knew, and searched for one amongst them... and honestly didn't find any. A few were possibly close to it, but... not enough to feel exact.

Maybe she had viewed the past somehow...? But if so why was Renn in it? Or maybe she had mistaken another's voice for Renn's... after all, she's never actually met Renn before. She's only seen and heard Renn in prophecies, not in real life...

But...

What if...?

"Vim...?"

Taking in a deep breath I slowly stood. My knee made noises, popping and cracking, as I did but I ignored it. "I need to... think about this. Thank you, Liora, for telling me. I'm sorry for startling you and the horse earlier," I said gently as I reached over and patted her gently on the head.

"Mhm..." Liora didn't say anything. She simply nodded and accepted my thanks and apologies as I glanced down the road. The horse was still there, but now grazing. At least it hadn't ran off.

"Come on, let's grab Horse before he runs off again," Sap said as she tugged Liora away.

"Horseshoe! You keep forgetting the rest!" Liora said with a laugh.

"Does it matter...?"

"That's his name! He's a horse, calling him that is mean!"

"Yet calling him horseshoe isn't? That's something he wears right? A shoe?" Sap teased the young saint, talking lightly as they left me behind.

Watching them go, I found them going blurry again... as I pondered hard and deep.

She had to be mistaken.

Surely.

Somehow.

But...

I could probably have asked her to describe my mother better, but I hadn't needed to. The mere mention of a lot of hair, which was braided and covered in bows and ribbons, had been enough. In all my many years, I could count on two hands the number of women I knew who did such a thing... and my mother had been the most dutiful of it. I had used to complain when she had made me braid her hair every morning, I had found it silly that she had made me do it by hand when she could just snap her fingers and have it done in the blink of an eye, not to mention it would have been done far better than I ever could have done so.

She usually had dozens of such bows and, what she called pretty little hair crowns, in her hair. Plus her saying I had screwed up was also something very like her. And it of course could have meant anything... I screwed up all the time, and have done so terribly on many occasions... So...

Was it really her...?

Or...

Rolling a shoulder, I glanced upward... at the sky.

I felt no one. Nothing. Or well, I felt two things. Three if I was being very specific. I felt Liora. Her divine connection to something that shouldn't exist. I felt Sap, the heart gently throbbing inside of her. And I felt the horse, which was now huffing at the pair who was disturbing it from its grazing.

Around us I felt more life. Trees. Small animals. Maybe a large deer or something like it behind us, a few hundred feet away.

But other than them...

I felt no one else.

No monarchs. No gods. No divine power.

But that didn't mean such power wasn't here. If it was weak enough, or distant enough, even I couldn't feel it. That didn't mean there wasn't foul play at work, however. Not to mention, whether I wanted to admit it or not... the gods had obviously found a way to hide their divinity from me. Per havoc's existence, and what he said about them hiding from me all this time. That meant I had to entertain the idea that there was a possibility that they had found a way to keep me from sensing them... but if so, what had been the purpose? "A fake prophecy, maybe...?" I wondered.

As far as I was aware the only gods who could do such a thing were ones who had made the original bloodline. Just as a god could not modify a monarch that wasn't theirs, beyond outwardly. They could kill other creations, and affect them with spells and abilities, but could not take control over them. Could not modify them on a molecular or spiritual level... not unless they had been the original creators. It was why some gods had fallen to other monarchs, because they had been made by superior gods. Ones more powerful than they, and thus unable to handle them...

So... was one of them alive, still...? One of the originals?

"Usually I'd say that's impossible..." I whispered as I thought of the three gods who I knew for sure had made the bloodlines of saints.

They were all dead. At least, so I believed...

But what if, like Havoc...

No... if I was willing to believe that possibility... why too couldn't I believe my parents, my mother, was also alive...?

"Because then..." I went quiet as my heart began to hurt. The kind of hurt that made me angry.

Surely not. There had to be a different solution to this puzzle. I needed to think rationally.

Especially now. If anything just to ensure I didn't accidentally kill those around me.

There'd be time for death later. Once I got my hands around the source of all this discord.

Sooner or later... I would, after all. I always did...

Somehow.

Chapter 597 Renn – To Fell A Tree

I huffed as I lowered the axe to the ground.

Oplar chuckled at me as she stepped over to study my work. "You're getting the hang of it," she said.

Was I...? I glanced to the tree I'd been chopping, and honestly I didn't see any difference from the half chopped tree before me and the ones I'd first done this morning.

"Make sure to hit it here the next few swings, then it's time for the wedge... So then you can ensure it falls that way," Oplar again described the next steps, which I fully understood... at least in theory.

I got it, I did. You chopped originally at the side where you wanted it to fall, and did so at an angle... then you chopped the other side, in as straight a line as you could, and then pushed in a metal block-like wedge into the thinner cut you made as to ensure it fell the way you wanted. It was basically a method to use the tree's own weight against it. It made sense to me, but...

"I don't really get yet how much space to leave in the center," I said. One needed to make sure they didn't cut too deeply, or too much, since you needed the tree to remain standing as you worked on it. And that space of needed untouched tree was still something I was trying to figure out. Some of the trees I'd watched Oplar fall had barely more than a finger's width in the middle, between the two cuts, while others had as much as my foot in width. And it didn't seem to be because of the tree's size either.

"Just something you pick up over time. Go on, finish this one up," Oplar said as she stepped back to let me do so.

Taking a deep breath, both to steady myself and to sigh it out at her indifference... I went ahead and obeyed.

Reading the axe, I aimed it for only a moment and then swung. I chopped three more times, getting the depth Oplar likely had wanted... then glanced over at her. She nodded, and so I went to pick up the wedge and slide it into the cut along the side we didn't want the tree to fall in. The thing was basically just a large metal block triangle.

Once I pushed it in far enough I stepped back and readied the axe once more, this time blunt side front. To hammer, not chop.

"Ready," I said loudly. I knew Oplar had already stepped back and out of the way, and she was the only one around, but she has drilled into me the importance of warning others of when I was about to fell a tree... so once I heard her shout ready back, I went ahead and hammered.

It took only two swings for me to hear a crack. A loud one. So I hurried back and away, keeping an eye on the tree as it slowly tipped forward and began to fell. Once I confirmed it wasn't falling anywhere in my or Oplar's direction, I calmed down a bit and slowed as to watch it fall to the ground.

It landed loudly, as all the other trees we'd fallen had, and did so without much fanfare. Some branches broke, but not many, and it eventually came to a rest on the ground without anymore commotion.

Sighing at the sight, I smiled and nodded to Oplar. "I did it," I said proudly.

"Aye. Your strength makes it easy. You just need to do it a few hundred more times and you'll master it real quick, me thinks," she said.

"Surely we won't need that many!" I said. We'd already fallen twenty-three!

"You'd be surprised..." Oplar said with a sigh.

Wow! I glanced around us, at the many trees still standing and the fallen ones mixed amongst them. "Aren't we only going to get twenty-five right now, though?" I asked. That had been the original plan, I'd thought.

"Aye. That should be enough for the foundation and whatnot... honestly I'm not much of a craftsman. But Randle is. He's built hundreds of churches and buildings like them, if he says twenty-five is what we need and is enough for now I believe it," she said.

How so though...? It wasn't like Randle was here measuring the trees we were cutting... he had just asked us to fell ones that were wider than Oplar could get her arms around, and about two stories tall, but that had all he'd really given us for guidance. Maybe one just knew what to expect when turning trees into lumber and materials for building...? Maybe it was such a consistent tree to pieces of wood conversion that one could easily guesstimate such a thing?

Ah well... I guess it didn't really matter. At least we were finally going to begin the process of building the first building, even if it was just a place to pray. I didn't mind the tents too much, since it was growing warmer, but I was starting to get annoyed over the lack of a bath. Once every few days we all bathed in these large wooden tubs that Randle had purchased, but it wasn't enough for me. I wanted to soak in hot water, for more than just a few minutes... Though I knew that was only because I was spoiled now, after having spent so much time at locations that had such amenities. It was actually kind of odd to

consider how I used to live without such luxuries... there had been times where I bathed in rivers and at lakes for years, back when I had lived alone.

So I was glad to finally start building on our land. And so too was I glad that Oplar had decided to stick around for a short time as to help us do so.

She and I were a couple hours away from SilverCreek, and thus my new home. We were a bit deeper into the forest than Oplar had originally wanted to go, but the first section of trees we'd examined had been a tad thin and too new for her liking. So we had ventured deeper into the forest a bit north of SilverCreek, not far from a mountain that loomed overhead. With the one I'd just felled, we now only needed two more and we'd be done... at least for today.

After we were done chopping them down, we planned to come back tomorrow to clean them all. To chop the limbs off and ready them for transportation, which then we'd use a wagon and we'd bring others to help us too. Right now Oplar and I were simply cutting them down, nothing more.

I reached up and wiped at my brow, and was a tad surprised to not feel any sweat upon it after doing so. I felt slightly exhausted, but I knew a majority of what I was feeling was not true exhaustion but instead worry. When we had first started in the morning, as Oplar felled her first few trees, I'd been worried a little for her safety. She was as boisterous when chopping down trees as she was when gossiping. But that had proven to be a needless worry.

"Which one do you think we should do next? I'm thinking that one," Oplar pointed with her own axe at a nearby tree. One with high limbs.

At first glance it looked fine. The width and height were similar to the one I'd just fallen and the all rest... but...

"There're nests on that one, Oplar," I said with a gesture up at them.

She followed my point and frowned. "Ah... so there is. Okay... but really, Renn, all trees have life in them. On them. You can't avoid such things," she said as she started studying others for potential felling.

"I know... but I'd rather not see a bunch of baby animals fall out and die just because I chopped one tree instead of another," I said.

"Yes, yes, my bleeding heart predator who doesn't flinch at killing men but weeps over tiny hatchlings..." Oplar said with a sigh.

I smiled at the way she teased me, only for her to point at another. "That one then. I don't see no nests, not even a hole or worm!" she said as she picked the next one.

"Sure," I agreed and started for it alongside her. We walked slowly as Oplar placed her axe on her shoulder, and sighed a little.

"It's too bad I can't linger, Renn... I suggest when it's time to get more wood, you bring someone else along with you. You're a tough little cat, for sure, but it's better to be safe than sorry," she said.

"I know. I'll make sure to bring someone, I promise," I said. I'd bring Merit, I think, something told me she knew a lot more about building and stuff than she let on.

"Not that you might need to. The moment Vim shows up it'll be for naught!" Oplar said with a laugh.

"Surely not even he can do all of it that quickly," I said.

"You'd be surprised! I've watched Vim build entire villages, aye whole villages, in mere days. When he really gets going with a fire under him, he's actually very good at it..." Oplar said as she scratched at her chin, as if seeing it happen here and now before her. She spoke as if in awe.

"I've seen him work, yes... and I admit he does so well, but I've still not seen that myself," I said. I wouldn't, and couldn't, lie. I knew Vim was good with his hands. I've watched him fix and build many things over the years, and he always did so swiftly and with rather amazing skill... but I've never seen him actually build a whole house, let alone a whole village...

Honestly I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. A part of me wanted to say it was a good thing, since it meant no one had needed new homes or anything, but at the same time...

"Aye, well, it shouldn't be too long till' he shows up. As I said, I'm shocked he isn't here already," Oplar said as we neared our next tree.

"Probably got sidetracked again," I said as I glanced up it... to both confirm there weren't any bird nests or anything on it, and also to start checking which direction would be the best to send it. It looked, thanks to how many more limbs were on one side than the other, that the best way would be to send it in the direction we were standing...

"He does so a lot, yes. Tressi and the rest were actually a tad surprised he had not gone with them... supposedly Raccoon had foreseen him with them, cooking, in one of her prophecies. They reasoned it would be another time, another venture... maybe when they all go to Lumen or something," Oplar said.

"Raccoon?" I asked.

"One of the saints. Her actual name is Raccooni. It sounds silly, but a lot of us used to be named in similar ways back then. In fact it used to be tradition to share names with our ancestral bonds... I think it ended because we now all try to blend in with humans, so don't risk it. It likely came back into fashion on the other continent, what without humans there and all," Oplar reasoned.

Oh...! "Like Hands...!" I found that very interesting, and it made me wonder if Hands will now regret falling for a rat instead.

"Ah, hadn't thought of that... he fell for that rat girl, hadn't he? Ah well, she's cute at least," she said as she began to step away from me, as to round the tree.

I followed her as I nodded. "I never got to meet her... I should have, though? I wonder why I hadn't?" I wondered. She'd been at Lumen hadn't she...?

"Hm? Why would you have?" Oplar asked.

"Wasn't she at Lumen? I was just there."

"Ah..." Oplar shook her head. "She's not at Lumen. She and a few others stopped at another location near the plateau, north of Bell Church. She's not at Lumen," Oplar said.

Oh... that made sense... "Where's that?" I asked. I didn't recognize such a location... the map of the Society in my mind didn't have any locations in that area, did it?

"One of the places they've been hiding from us. Like that church near Vorli that Vim went to. It's a place they made after Light and the rest landed years ago," Oplar said.

"Wait... years ago...?" I was very shocked to hear this. Did Oplar mean...? "Are you saying Light and the rest came back years ago?"

"Yeah...? Didn't you know? They returned like six years ago, supposedly," Oplar said with a frown as she lowered her axe to the ground. It thumped on the grass near her feet hard enough to make my tail twitch.

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"No... I hadn't known. No one had said that," I said, slightly offended to find out so late like this.

Oplar shrugged. "I hadn't either, until a few months ago. They said it was for a reason, but who knows what it could have been."

A reason...? A prophecy, then, maybe. Still...!

"I don't like all the secrets..." I said with a huff as I turned to study the tree before us once more.

"I'd usually agree, but such secrets give birth to some juicy gossip!" Oplar said.

Yes but they also sowed doubt and ruined trust...

Keeping such thoughts to myself I pointed at the tree. "I think it should be felled that way," I said with a point towards the direction we just came from.

"Why's that?"

"That side has all the big branches. So it'll be heavy on that side," I reasoned.

Oplar happily nodded. "Aye. Good, good... see? You're getting it."

Somehow I doubted that. "When I inevitably drop one on myself, I'll let Vim know you're the one who taught me everything I know as he pulls it off me," I said.

Oplar nearly dropped her axe as she laughed. "I bet ye' will!" she shouted between her laughs.

Smiling at her loud laughter, I began to wish she could indeed stay longer.

She claimed she had letters to deliver. Important ones. Ones that could only give her a few days with us before she had to run off as to deliver them... and it was too bad.

I liked having my friends nearby. But I also liked it that they all had important things to do. I knew what it felt like, now, to have such duties. To have things that you needed to accomplish, and people that relied on you to do so. It felt... good.

I used to be jealous of those like her. Envious beyond measure. Now I felt, almost, that I was equal to her. Almost.

"Not to change topics too much... but can I ask something, Oplar?" I asked, since I felt now was a good time. I'd been meaning to ask this whole time while we were alone, but I'd been letting her direct the topics mostly. She had spent all morning, and most this afternoon, telling me of all the gossip she's encountered lately. Such as Landi giving up her nation, a ghost or something like it at the Crypt, and of course the rumor going around that I was pregnant and as such was why Vim wanted to step down. To be a dad. It was the cutest, and nicest, rumor I'd ever heard concerning him or me. Especially since it was actually kind of correct.

Vim might not be willing to admit it, not even to himself, but it was obvious. Part of the reason he wanted to step down was to... be with me. And that wasn't just me believing in a silly wife's hope or happiness. It was so obvious even Merit had noticed.

"Hm?" Oplar smiled at me as she stopped laughing, waiting for my question, and I realized I had allowed my mind to wander a little.

"Celine. The uh... new one," I added, feeling silly as I did. Another Celine. At least she wasn't a saint. "Can I ask why you want to leave her here? Not that I mind, of course, she seems like a good girl and all, but..."

"But this place isn't up and running yet and as such is kind of messy? Yeah, I know... but you see she's... well..." Oplar went quiet for a moment, and then seemed to decide something internally. She nodded, but not at me... at herself. "She's like us, Renn," she then said.

"Us...?"

She nodded again. "A thick-blooded predator. But also one who... is different. I don't think she'd be too welcomed in Lumen, or any of the churches. Kind of like your little Fly bird, which by the way why isn't she here...? Is it because she can't blend in with humans?" Oplar asked.

Gosh...! "Yes... Lilly adopted her, thankfully," I said.

"Wait... what? Lilly did?"

I nodded.

"Oh... she was an owl then...? I thought she was some weak small bird," Oplar said with a smile.

I slowly shook my head. "Nope? She's a robin, or at least so she believes," I said. Fly had told me such a thing last time I'd seen her, before Vim and I left the Owl's Nest a few months ago. I wasn't entirely sure how she had come to such a conclusion, but I didn't feel like there was any reason to doubt her.

"Well, still... quite an odd thing to happen... but then of course she's also letting Lellip into her flock too...? Maybe she's old and sickly or something..." Oplar mumbled as she tapped the butt end of her axe with a thumb.

Gosh why did everyone always act so shocked to hear of Lilly's recent actions...! They were all acting as if it was impossible for the owl to have a kind bone in her body, or something!

"Still, I get what you're saying Oplar... But are you sure she shouldn't go somewhere without many humans? We're not even up and running yet and we already get visitors nearly every day," I said. We had actually not been getting as many as before, now that Randle had posted notices throughout the town telling people to basically wait until the church was built, but we still got a few on occasion.

"I'd agree if she was raised by one of our own, Renn, but she hadn't been. She didn't even know she wasn't human until I told her. So she's perfectly capable of blending in amongst humans, she considered herself one until not too long ago," Oplar said.

Ah... right... I nodded gently as I realized Oplar, of course, was perfectly correct. I'd not heard her full story yet, since I'd been busy and hadn't wanted to pry since she seemed to not want to really talk about it, but I had heard enough to get the gist of it. She had been raised by people who had not really been her parents, they had died in the recent plague... the one sourced by Landi's monarch, and had not known at all who or what she was until Oplar had found her. And Oplar had not found her in a normal state, either.

The poor girl had been a slave. Or at least, had been about to become one. She had gotten caught stealing food and was being sold in a town in the south, Oplar just happened to be walking by her as she was being bidden on by onlookers. I'd feel terrible for the poor girl if not for the utter luck she had displayed in being seen, noticed, and purchased by Oplar during such a terrible moment.

"How much had she been anyway?" I asked, interested. She had mentioned the night she had arrived six hundred Renk, but surely that had been a joke. It was such a small sum for a person, especially someone like her...

"Celine...? Just a few coins. Converting it to the local currency... six hundred or so Renk maybe?" Oplar said as she pondered it.

Hearing that made me sad and made me regret asking. "So you hadn't been joking... Why so little...? She's adorable, I'd think a cute young girl would go for more," I asked. It was kind of depressing to think, but it was the truth. There were more than enough weird and cruel people who would happily pay and abuse such a pretty girl.

"The south isn't doing too well, thanks to the plague and wars that just ravaged the lands. In a healthy economy she would have been pricey, but down there starving young girls are as common as rocks upon the road. Basically she, like most slaves down there right now, is more trouble than she's worth. To be honest I was kind of surprised other people were even bidding on her in the first place," she said.

Wow... it was such a different world compared to here. It was so strange that only a thousand or so miles could make such a difference in lifestyle... and even more so how crazy it was to think that the people there had no clue how we lived up here, and vice-versa.

"I'm glad you saved her. That was good of you, Oplar," I said.

The bear gave me a wry grin as she shrugged. "Eh, it's what we're supposed to do... anyway, I'm hoping you'll keep an eye on her. At least while you're here and all. I had kind of hoped to see if I could make her my successor, since it doesn't look like I'll be having children any time soon, but the girl seems to not like traveling much. She's the type that wants to sow seeds and settle, which I can't fault or blame, so I'll abandon the idea," Oplar said.

A little fascinated to hear such things, I nodded gently as I watched Oplar step up to the tree. It seemed she was going to chop this one.

So Oplar has been looking for someone to take over her position, has she...? First I'd heard of this. And... it was sad to hear her speak so plainly about the fact she didn't think she'd be having any children anytime soon. She had not said that just in a matter-of-fact way, but also in a defeated kind of tone. As if she'd simply accepted the fact and was now having to live with it.

That was very sad to hear... maybe I should start trying to help people find partners even sooner than I planned...? I was going to wait to really try until I got everything here handled, and a building built, but...

Oplar swung her axe, and my ear fluttered as a piece of bark flew off and hit a nearby tree. She easily pulled the axe free and then went to swing some more at the tree.

Her swings were heavy, but sure. They sunk deep into the tree but slipped out of it as if she'd not cut too deeply. Each swing showed me just how strong Oplar really was, and it kind of worried me a little.

Why was someone so strong so afraid of confrontation...? She was likely not far off in strength to me, even as I was now with the heart inside of me... which meant she was very strong indeed. Plus she had stamina. Like me she wasn't sweating, but unlike myself she had chopped twice as many trees as I had... and I knew if I kept doing this long enough to match her in number, I'd be sweating by then.

After a few swings Oplar stopped and stepped back to study her work so far. She huffed at the sight and then pointed at a spot with her axe. "I cut too deep there," she said.

I frowned as I studied the spot, and couldn't really tell at all. It looked fine to me.

Maybe I just wasn't cut out to be a logger.

"Also, I wanted to give the girl a chance to adapt first," Oplar then said as she went to aim her axe once more.

"Hm...?"

Oplar nodded as she swung the axe. It chopped a large chunk out of the tree and she shifted her stance as to strike at a slightly different angle this time. Before she did though, she spoke up again. "The world's getting noisy again. And with all the folk from the other continent returning, the Society is becoming chaotic. I worried if I took her to Telmik or Lumen we'd just end up losing her," Oplar said, then swung her axe once more.

"Lose her... because we've become busy?" I asked, trying to understand.

Oplar swung once more then stopped. She stepped back, admiring her work and nodded. "That and the type of busy. All the people coming back are basically members of the church. If not outright members of the Church of Songs, they at least abide and live amongst those that do... and well, she's a pagan, Renn. And more importantly she's basically a human pagan. I worried if I took her to where those like Light will be in control we'll end up losing her. I want to give her a bit of time to adjust and learn herself before forcing her into such a situation," Oplar explained, speaking evenly as she did.

I slowly nodded as I understood what she was saying. She was basically saying that Celine, though like me and her and thick in the blood... was actually anything but. She was in essence a human. One who had grown up down south, far south, where there was a different style of thought. A different religion, and everything. And Oplar worried if she left such a young girl, who was still learning and adapting to the new world around her and her own self... then we'd lose her. Either she'd run off, or grow to hate the Society and its members because she failed to assimilate into it properly.

Vim once had the same worry for me, in a way... it was one of the reasons he had tried so hard to find me a place to stay and call home way back in the beginning. Though I think part of it had been his instinctual desire to separate himself from me, as to avoid falling in love with me.

"And although we'll be making a church, I'm here as are others who will be separate enough from it to not cause issues," I said, understanding Oplar's idea.

She nodded. "My hope, at least. We'll see. If not I'll just take her to Lumen or something. I think she'll need to live amongst humans, she thinks too much like they do. Between her predator blood and mentality she'll never be able to live anywhere like Tor's village or the Bell Church... so," Oplar shrugged lightly as she sighed.

Right... "Do you think such... environments will get worse with the rest of Light's people showing up? What with their percentage of the Society basically tripling?" I asked.

"I've no doubt. I've already had a few people worry over it. Like the Armadillo's or the Camels... but they should be fine. It's not like they ever really mingle with any of us anyway," Oplar said.

Well... that might be true, but what if that was the very reason they didn't mingle with us? Because they already felt ostracized?

I tapped the handle of my axe and frowned. "Was the Society split back in the day like this, Oplar? To the point that there were entire groups that basically didn't associate with one another?" I asked a question I already knew the answer to.

"Yeah...? Even excluding all of the idiots who left to the other island we still had many who kept to themselves. But I mean... Isn't that any society, Renn? If it's not faith, it's politics. If not that then it's culture, or bloodlines. I mean we even have members that are just outright racist, so what do you expect?" Oplar said.

"We do...?" I knew we had plenty who had great aversion to others, but wasn't that more so from instincts than anything else? From things they really couldn't control? Such as why I, before losing my smell, had made people feel off-put and uneasy? That wasn't really outright because of simple unjust hatred, it was something... deeper.

She smirked at me. "Oh, come no Renn... you and I both escorted one of them ourselves!"

"Wait... Ah," I slowly nodded as I realized who, or rather which group, she spoke of. She meant Sillti's people. Those who lived at the Summit... guinea pigs, as Vim called them. "Sillti's people."

Oplar nodded. "I mean they're not so bad we can't coexist, or aren't friendly to visitors... but there's a reason no one else has ever tried to live there with them, you know," she said with a smile.

Right... The Summit was actually a rather reclusive village, and was nice to boot, with a lot more members than nearly every other location... even if they didn't like predators like myself, they should indeed still have others living amongst them. Because it was not just a safe place to go live at, but also a place one could be comfortable at too. Yet they didn't. So... it was simply because they didn't want anyone else to live amongst them, then...? Or maybe they would just make anyone who tried so uncomfortable and unwelcomed that they didn't want to anyway?

"And it was even worse back then..." I mumbled as I thought of some of the books I'd read in the Telmik Archives not too long ago. Not only had I read prophecies concerning such things, I had also read plain old journals and stories written by people who had witnessed such events. The Society had been rather chaotic back in the beginning. Sometimes so bad that Vim had to step in, and did so not gently.

"Aye... to a point. Most of those types never agreed to join the Society. My own family, extended, were amongst them. My mother had a whole village she left behind to join the Society, you know," Oplar said, sounding proud as she did so.

"Really...!?"

Oplar grinned and nodded... and I realized I was about to hear all about it.

Which I did, even as we finished chopping down the last couple trees and then headed back to camp.

Chapter 598 Vim – Horseshoe's Accident

Well... I supposed this kind of thing did happen.

Shifting a little, I frowned down at the dead horse... and tried to ignore the soft whimpering from behind me.

Sap and Liora were a few dozen feet away, near the small creek we had been walking along. The young saint was upset over the horse dying, though not just because she was a young child who just watched something akin to a pet fall and die right in front of her. Her reasons were a bit... unique.

Glancing behind me, I studied the distant figures. Sap was kneeled before the saint and her wings were unfolded a little, since she was a tad uneasy. She didn't seem to like the sound of Liora's weeping, her face was wrought with worry... though she knew Liora was of course fine and healthy, just sad. The look on her face reminded me of the times Lilly and I had happened upon children who were hurt, or lost. Such as those whose villages had been devastated, and we had been too late to save them. It seemed Sap had inherited Lilly's innate care and concern for the young. Rather deeply, too. I was glad she had, it was a good trait to inherit.

Liora was sitting on a small log. One covered in moss. She was wiping at her face with a cloth as she regained control over herself, and was mumbling quiet words to Sap. The owl was obviously trying to relieve the young girl, to let her know all was well, but I didn't put any effort in hearing the actual conversation. The reason I didn't try to hear them was because I had heard enough.

The young saint blamed herself. Thus her emotions.

She felt as if she should have foreseen the horse taking a tumble as we crossed the creek. So felt responsible for the creature's death.

It was a silly notion, of course. The horse had simple stumbled, and had not done so while I was near it... and so nothing and no one had been able to save it. Horseshoe had landed harshly, not just breaking both front legs... but also cracking the side of its head open on a sharp rock in the process. The kind of crack that resulted in its swift death... from shock more than blood-loss, I'd wager. I hadn't even been given the time to consider putting it out of its misery myself, it had died that quickly.

Liora hadn't been near, or on the horse, when it had happened. I was thankful for that, since such a fall would have undoubtedly hurt the girl as well... but it was also likely the reason the girl had not foreseen the casualty. She herself had not been harmed in anyway, nor had Sap who had been the one guiding the horse. The only one harmed here and now, other than the young saint's heart, was the horse. Thus Liora's lack of having a prophecy concerning the creature.

I sighed softly as I looked away from the two and back to the horse.

I'd already removed our bags, but hadn't messed with the saddle or anything attached to the horse. There was no point... even if they were expensive. They were just cumbersome things for us at the moment. Too cumbersome, since I now had several more bags to carry.

"So close too..." I whispered as I looked upward.

We were rounding a mountain. One that Sap was very confident that was just north of SilverCreek. We were so close to Renn I could almost taste her, which made the horse's death feel even more needless than it did.

"Sorry," I whispered as I stepped away. I wasn't going to bury the creature, there was no point. Even if I did a bear or something would just dig it up, unless I buried it far deeper than I wanted to deal with right now.

It really was too bad. The horse had been young and stout, and also calm and smart. Even when I had scared it the thing had calmed down quickly and settled, instead of running off. I would have liked to have kept it, so it was... regretful. But accidents happened. Always have and always will.

Approaching the pair, I noted Liora was no longer crying. She was still sniffing, and had a frown, but at least wasn't weeping anymore. "Want me to carry you, Liora?" I asked gently.

She shook her head with a sniff.

Glancing at Sap for conformation, the owl nodded softly at me. She stood, and as such gently got Liora up off the log and onto her feet as well.

"I'm sorry, Vim..." Liora whispered with her head hung low.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Liora. Your powers are not things you can control with such finesse. And accidents happen, no matter how much any of us try to prevent them. They are a part of life," I said.

"Still..." she mumbled.

"Come, come. Let Horseshoe return to the forest, as all things do," Sap said as she patted the young saint's back and guided the girl along the stream, away from the area. At least this time she had gotten the horse's name right.

Liora nodded gently and with a last glance to the dead horse, then sniffed again and looked away as she began to walk alongside Sap.

I joined them, but kept back a tad. The young saint had went ahead and grabbed Sap's hand, so I figured it was fine to let Sap take the brunt of the burden of being there for her.

Which was odd to do, in a certain sense. Sap was so much like Lilly it was startling, yet here she was... showing such gentle concern for the young human. A saint, even.

Though I suppose Lilly has also shown such care over the years. Even as she sneered or sighed, she had generally been rather calm and kind to those who were young or infirm.

As we left the dead horse behind, and Sap and Liora began to talk about other things, likely to just not have it be quiet as we walked, I found my thoughts drifting to Renn.

She was good with children. She always got very happy when we weren't somewhere that had children, to the point that sometimes she didn't want to leave them behind. Such as Lilly's new child, Root, when we had been there not too long ago Renn had basically spent every waking moment with the girl.

And it wasn't just babies she enjoyed either. She had a very good relationship with those like Angie and Tundra, those who were not outright children but also not grown adults just yet... I knew many found Renn's compatibility with children to be expected, as if it was obvious she'd be good with them, but I knew better.

Her few experiences with children before joining the Society had been ones of heartbreak. Her youngest sister had been someone she had loved, but had felt as if she had failed all the same. Someone she believed she should have cherished more, and also saved. And then of course there was the two human children, Lujic and Ginny... although the boy had grown to old age, she had felt she had failed both of them equally. She had failed the girl, since she had died while young, and had failed the boy for not being there for him more than she had been.

Then there was Nory... one who she ended up living with until her death in old age.

To many that likely made one seem accustomed with children. But I knew the truth. I knew Renn better than that.

She was scared of loving people. Or loving children. She and I had not really talked much about our own, such as the one prophesized to come, but I knew it was something we needed to speak of. One of Renn's deepest fears, something that showed itself in her nightmares even, was a child's death. She feared losing someone young, either because of her own failures or because of her inability to keep them safe. Sourced by what she deemed her past failures.

Such fears have not shown themselves often lately, since Renn's become so much more comfortable in both herself and her position in the Society... but I knew deep down they still existed.

It was why she sometimes kept a distance from the children she so utterly adored during our visits. Such as when she had intentionally kept herself busy at the Smithy, as to keep herself from falling in love with Copper. She had actually worried if she had not been careful she would have abandoned all else, just to stay and watch over the girl...

Was it her bloodline maybe...? Bigger cats did typically raise their children on their own, and were known to be fierce protectors of them... but was it to the point that it would influence her that strongly? After all most animals treated their young with the same fervent loyalty. Most mammals, at least.

Likely Renn's simple desire to care and love children was sourced from her same desire to have a family. To have a home, and a place to belong. A lot of people found great meaning in raising their descendants, after all... to the point many saw it as their greatest feats or most important duties in life. Maybe for Renn it was the same. To her a child was... well...

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Yet to me...?

Stepping over a large twig, I frowned as I realized that I once again needed to address such a thing. Such a future.

I was to have children.

Of course I was excited over the idea... but was I as Renn was? Did I see it as something hugely momentous...?

Regrettably I wasn't sure if I did.

I knew elation. I knew joy and pride. I felt it each and every time I tore a god apart.

Did... would I feel the same thing upon seeing my child's birth...?

Would I feel as accomplished? Would I feel the same rush and thrill...? Or would I simply see another soul to protect...? Another person that I now needed to pay attention to, and tend to, and nothing more?

Taking in a deep breath, I sighed it out softly enough that neither Sap or Liora noticed. I was now in a bad mood.

Maybe I was a bad man. Or maybe the reality of having children has simply not settled in me yet.

I'd known many who changed once they held their child for the first time. Lilly had changed. Even Celine had changed a little, and Light hadn't even been her actual daughter. And she had known of her existence since nearly her own!

Maybe I would too. Once I saw Renn's belly swell. Once I heard their first cry.

But...

Glancing around, I took a small moment to leave my thoughts and examine our surroundings. I felt, again, for any source of divinity... at least, a source not coming from the two in front of me.

I felt none. The world was quiet. Calm. The afternoon sun was even warm, the kind of warm that made it feel nice and good... not too hot, and not too cold. There was even a gentle breeze.

All was right in the world, at least for the moment.

"No children. Not until they're all gone," I whispered, vowing it.

Renn would not be happy with me... but I couldn't allow it.

I had been able to grab Havoc. Even with his threat looming over me. Even with the knowledge it would cost me Renn.

But...

Could I do the same with a child?

What if this daughter, this saint... this Nory... was threatened alongside Renn?

Could I still step forward and grab my enemies...? Or would I hesitate? Cower? Give in?

I almost didn't want to even think of it, but I had to. Had to.

Because if I didn't... I'd be caught unawares.... And I couldn't have that. The world couldn't have that.

Yet, did that mean I didn't truly love Renn...?

That was not possible. I genuinely loved that woman. Even in the midst of battle I thought of Renn's smile. Even now I was doing all I could to just... run off, and abandon Sap and Liora, and run to her arms. It was actually difficult since I knew Sap could just fly the rest of the way, carrying Liora as she did. Though I knew Sap would never do such a thing unless it was an emergency. No matter how much she's softened up to the young girl, something like that was likely too much for her.

Still... I could be holding Renn in just a handful of minutes. I could get there that fast.

But if I did it'd open up fate to do what she did best... and I couldn't risk that.

Last thing I needed was for Liora, or Sap, to get hurt or die. Either event would cause me great grief and trouble. In more ways than one...

So I simply stayed calm. Collected. And walked at what felt like a snail's pace.

Yet that desire, that deep itch to run off to see Renn if but a few moments sooner... proved that I did love her. I had not felt this way about anyone before, at least not for as much as I could remember.

There had been plenty of times I'd ran in a hurry to see someone. But usually it was because I felt fear. Or sorrow. Because I knew they needed help, and I was being too slow to deliver it. And I'd hurried, with great effort, over hate. Many times.

I'd even hurried out of lust, though I'd not done that in many years.

This feeling though was far different. It was... simpler, yet more complex. I wanted to see Renn... and not just to make sure she was okay, to touch her, or kiss her, or do anything else.... I genuinely just wanted to see her. To just... see her smile. To hear her voice. To watch her ears and tail twitch and sway as she greeted me, or laughed over some joke I half-heartedly made up on the spot upon seeing her.

Yes... this was definitely love. Or at least, it was what I considered it to be.

Yet this love had not stayed my hand. It had not stopped me from risking her life, and the whole Society, over Havoc's threat.

But something told me if I wasn't careful...

"Vim."

I looked up and found I was only a few feet behind Sap and Liora now. They had slowed a bit and were turned, facing me, though still walking forward.

Was something wrong? I glanced around real quick, just to make sure nothing was amiss, and then returned my attention to them. "Sup' Sap?" I asked.

She smirked at me, and lifted her hand which was holding Liora's. "When we get closer do you want to go on ahead? We'll probably arrive while it's still daylight, so I might need to stay back anyway until later," she asked.

What...? Had I been speaking aloud or something...? "I figured I'd do so when we got to the city itself, yes," I said.

"You sure...? Liora said she's okay with staying with me for a bit. You could probably get there in an hour or so if you hurried from here," Sap suggested.

Yes. I know... but that was likely still several miles of distance. I didn't want to risk the two. "I'll wait until we're closer," I said.

Sap frowned at me but nodded as she glanced down to Liora. "See...? He's very protective," she said to her.

Oh...? The two must have been talking about this before, while I'd been lost in thought. "It's too bad, I'd have liked to fly," Liora said in return.

Ah... so their plan had indeed been to have Sap carry Liora and fly the rest of the way. It was the better option. Especially now that we didn't need to worry about the horse, and were close enough that we didn't need to worry over Liora getting sick from being in the sky too long.

"If you wish to carry her for a short bit you can. But let's not fly the whole way there, lest you get seen," I said.

Liora perked up that and smiled happily up at Sap, who nodded down with a grin. "Then next clearing we get to, okay?" Sap agreed.

"Yeah!"

I sighed at the two. Sap offering to carry the girl was another testament to the owl. It was one thing to do so during emergencies... but to just do so for fun? Sap must really like the girl.

Maybe I'd misread Sap all this time... I had thought her a very solitary creature... yet here she was, easily becoming friends with a human saint of all things. She had been very open and comfortable with Renn too, hadn't she...? Though one could argue that had been thanks to Renn being seen as a family member and all...

Wonder how she treated Fly...?

I flinched as I realized I had not actually asked about the young robin. We'd mentioned her in passing conversation a few times, but I hadn't actually inquired about her well-being.

"Speaking of flying... how is Fly, Sap?" I asked, and I felt a tad guilty.

"Hm? Oh! She's doing great. She's been trying to seduce Bark, but it's not going well. I think he's one of those weird men that don't like women," Sap said with a laugh.

"Kaley says those men are useless," Liora noted.

Sap laughed even more. "Maybe they are!"

"Uh... so she's doing good, at least, right...?" I asked. Was seducing someone doing good...?

Sap giggled as she nodded at me. "Yes. She helps take care of Root a lot, and recently my father's been teaching her how to do math and stuff. She likes numbers, it seems," she said.

Really...? That was good to hear. If she wasn't just being trusted with Root, but was being accepted and taught as if an actual child by Windle then all was well.

How relieving. Renn would be utterly overjoyed to hear this news, she'd likely tear up over it too.

"Fly...? You mean an actual person?" Liora then asked.

"Yep...! She's not much older than you, actually," Sap said.

"Yet is already seducing men...?" Liora whispered.

"She's a tad older than you, Liora," I said. Though to a degree I agreed with her slight confusion. Fly was still a bit too young in my perspective to try and seduce someone like Bark who was nearing the end of his first century of life.

Though Sap could be slightly over-exaggerating Fly's actions, and just using a word she deemed suitable for them.

But at the same time... Fly was also one who would not surprise me to be doing such a thing... Being so thick-blooded, and having been raised in the environment she had been born in.

Ah well... still, Bark was rejecting her was he? I wonder if Sap's accusation had weight, or if she was just... again looking at it from her odd perspective. Bark might just be rejecting Fly's advances simply because of their age-gap or something like it, and not something such as that.

"It's why I'm glad to have found you two, that tree has become so noisy!" Sap said happily.

"It must be a big tree to hold all of you," Liora said, noting the way Sap always called her home a tree.

"Oh, but it is!" Sap happily went to describe, in detail, the massive tree she and her family called home.

Following the two in silence, I smiled softly and found myself... relaxed and happy.

I was about to return to the one I loved, and she was fine. Healthy. Alive. And everyone around her... if but with a few problems, were likewise doing okay.

For now all was right in the world. The people I cared for were happy, and alive. And for they would be, for the foreseeable future.

For now, at least.

Not including Horseshoe, of course.

Chapter 599 Renn – A Lucky Fish

A day of rest.

I understood the meaning of it. From both a religious aspect, and not. It was a day to not overexert yourself. To slow down. To appreciate life and all it had, and whatnot.

But why did we have to stop all we were doing when we so desperately needed to get things done...?

And why was fishing not considered work...? There were people who genuinely did this for a living, yet it was okay to fish during the day of rest?

Oh well. At least it gave me a chance to get to know Celine better.

She and I were on the bank of the larger river that SilverCreek rested upon... though we were north of the town itself, about a mile or so up the river to where not even a road or path was. The road we'd taken to get here had curved and headed northward about a quarter mile back, though I wasn't really sure as to where it went.

"The fish are different here. They're fatter," Celine said as she held the second fish she's caught today. It was squirming in her grip, but considering how weakly it was doing it she needed to put it back into the bucket soon.

I was standing a bit away from her and the bucket, and was about to sit down. I had just helped her pull that fish in, since she had struggled a little to get it up and out of the water.

"We have bigger rivers, and bigger lakes. Probably helps them get bigger than in your homeland," I said. There had of course been rivers down south, Vim and I had even sailed on one with Roslyn and her people, but they weren't like the ones up here in the north. Up here there were some that were so wide and deep they were nearly lakes themselves.

Celine hummed and then finally put the fish back into the bucket. It plopped in, rather loudly, and I was glad to see it start to swim around a bit afterward. It, like the few others in the bucket, needed to stay alive until we got back to the camp. They tasted better that way.

After wiping her hands off on her pants Celine went to pick up her fishing pole. It, like the one I used, was something that Randle had brought from Telmik. They were... in all honesty probably some of the nicest fishing poles I'd ever seen, let alone used. I especially liked how they had these little spikes on the end of them that could allow us to stick them into the ground easily, as to not have to hold them all the time.

I had mine in my hand however, since I liked having something to do. Plus it really should be time I caught another... Maybe I shouldn't sit down...? No. There was a chance I'd not get a bite for some time, so I may as well.

"So um... Renn."

Glancing at our newest member as I sat down, I smiled and nodded at her. "Yeah?"

Celine shifted as readied to toss her line into the river. She hesitated a moment, and then went ahead and tossed it out. The line plunked into the river a bit downstream from my own, and she sighed in relief. More than a few times she's accidentally gotten our lines tangled, or got her hook stuck on the tall grass that grew on the banks of the river. "You're married, right?" she asked.

"Yep. To Vim," I said as I studied the way she stiffly tried to sit down. She seemed... unsure of herself. Originally I had thought it was because we were alone, since Oplar who had been with us in the beginning had decided to head into town with Nessa instead of fishing with us. Yet now I think the poor girl was just... the way she was. She had never fished before, until now, and her lack of experience was

only amplified in the way she seemed hesitant in everything she did. As if she was afraid of drawing attention to herself, or something.

It was an odd trait for a predator, that supposedly she was... but I was glad she was at least not as bad as Tundra. I had expected her to be, in a way, what with Oplar feeling she'd not be able to live anywhere else in the Society... so it was a pleasant surprise to find that this Celine was not someone I needed to really worry over. Though I did need to keep an eye on her for other reasons.

She had rough skin. Kind of like Sharp, though not nearly as bad. It was rough enough that if any human accidentally bumped into her they'd notice, and likely cause issues. So I needed to make sure nothing like that happened.

"A lot of us are, right? Members I mean?" Celine then asked as she finally sat fully, still holding the fishing pole as she did.

"Hm... I'd say a good amount are, yes. But for every person who has a mate there are probably two more who don't," I said. "Though a portion of those people don't have one not because they never had, but rather because they had lost their partners," I added after a moment, as I thought of those like Nasba.

"Hm... Oplar said it's hard to find a man... for those like us," Celine said.

My ear twitched under my hat as I kept a smile from creeping onto my face. "To a degree... but there are also plenty of men who have trouble too. For instance Lellip who just left before you got here," I said as I pointed upward to the sky, as if Lellip was up there. "She's gone to see Branches. Lilly's son. He's been looking for a wife for a long time, supposedly," I said.

"So... does one need to put their name in that hat or something?" Celine asked.

The smile I'd been trying to hide squirmed its way onto my face, forming a smirk. "In a way. Do you want to find someone, Celine?" I asked. The girl was actually pretty young, though it seemed neither she nor Oplar had actually known her real age. She seemed closer to Angie or Fly's age than not, but maybe she was older than she appeared...? Like Sharp and Merit, she was an ocean creature supposedly. And both Sharp and Merit were smaller than the rest of us, maybe Celine was the same?

"Not yet... I was just wondering how that all worked... So um... if I don't want to, is that going to be a problem then?" Celine then asked.

Oh... my smirk died a little as I realized I had been completely misunderstanding her. "You're worried you'll get in trouble for not wanting to find a partner...?" I asked, a tad hurt to hear so.

Celine's face scrunched up a little as she nodded, seemingly worried over my answer.

Great. Likely thanks to Oplar, and some of the conversations we've all been having lately... such as with everyone teasing me or Nessa, she seemed to have gotten the wrong impression. Did she think that we forced people into marriages or something? "Of course you won't. The Society doesn't enforce such things at all. You don't have to find anyone, or do such a thing, if you don't want to. I mean look at Angie, she throws a fit if someone even hints at such things!" I said, trying to make the heavy air a bit lighter.

Celine smiled and nodded, knowing full well what I meant. Not too long ago before we had come here to the river she had been with me and Oplar when Nessa had expressed her displeasure of embarrassing herself. She had told Oplar all about how she had tried to seduce Krass's son, and had failed spectacularly because he wanted to become some kind of priest that vowed celibacy. Oplar had teased her mightily over it, to the point that Angie had thrown a piece of bread at her.

"I was just wondering... is all... Oplar said you were making a place where people came to mate, so..."
Celine shrugged gently, as I put one and two together.

"You thought you were being brought here to be given to someone...?" I chuckled a little at the absurd idea. "I'd never let that happen, Celine! Nor would Vim, for sure. You need not worry about such a thing at all!"

Celine's smile softened so much it became an obviously real one as her shoulders gently relaxed.
"Okay..." she said gently.

Really...! What had Oplar been saying this whole time to make this poor girl think such a thing! Maybe Oplar complained more about her lack of finding a suitable mate than I realized...? Or maybe there had been weird rumors concerning me and my plans here...?

"Now that you don't need to worry over being forced into a marriage, do you want to still find someone anyway?" I asked.

Celine's smile turned thin. "No thanks."

I chuckled at her and wondered if that had been a youthful answer or a real one. Maybe she wasn't as young as I'd first assumed, but had just gotten some weird ideas all the same. "Okay. You and Angie will get along great, then!"

"She does seem nice," Celine said gently.

I was about to tell her how highly I thought of Angie, but my fishing pole jerked a tad. I firmed my grip on it and stood up... and then once I verified something had indeed latched onto the hook at the end of my line I went ahead and tugged.

Stepping backward as I pulled the fish out of the water, I started to grin as something big plopped out of the river. It felt heavy, even to me, and might even be the biggest one we'd caught yet...! But, before I could really enjoy the sight of my catch... or properly get it onto the bank and into my hands, I stepped up against something.

Spinning around, I let out a hiss of a yelp as I sent the fishing pole out at the thing, or rather person, who I had back stepped into... and watched as my fishing pole smacked Vim right in the face.

Stunned, I watched Vim look upward. He didn't pay any heed to the small red mark on the side of his face from the pole as he reached out and stepped forward... and then grabbed the fish from the air.

He sighed at me as he shifted the fish around as to hold it by the tail end. "I can't believe the line hadn't snapped just now, considering how hard you had just tugged on it," he said with a smile.

"Vim...!" I shouted at him as my heart began to thump again. Had it completely stopped in that moment! I think it might have...!

Taking a deep breath, I sighed it out as I reached up to touch my chest. I wore my thicker over shirt, but not my leather clothes... so I could feel my heart thumping through it. It was hot and beating hard...

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"Sorry..." Vim apologized, his smile softening as he did.

Taking another deep breath... I glanced around and found he was alone. Celine had stood up, looking at us with an odd expression, but we were otherwise still alone... on the bank of the river a mile or so from the village proper.

"You startled me," I said. I can't believe I had not noticed him! We were on a grassy bank, but there were plenty of sticks and rocks around that I really should have noticed... I'd even been slightly on guard, as I'd been ever since Vim had left...

"I did. I'm sorry," he apologized again as he went to remove the hook from the fish's mouth. I didn't like how calmly he did so, or with how much ease he accomplished in doing so. Not because I wasn't as proficient... but because it was kind of upsetting he was even able to take his eyes off me right now. I wouldn't have been able to do the same thing.

"Um... You're bleeding," I said as I watched a tiny trickle of blood start to roll down the side of his face.

"Hm?" Vim frowned but didn't seem to care. He stayed focus on the fish, and the hook he now held with his other hand.

I sighed at him, and myself, and reached up to wipe the drop of blood. It was coming from right above his right eyebrow, but seemed to have only been a little bit of blood. A single wipe of my finger had been enough to stop it.

His blood was oddly cold. Maybe because mine was hot right now...? Not only had I been sitting in the warm sun all day, I was now heated. Thanks to nearly being startled to death.

Rubbing his blood between my fingers I went ahead and handed him the fishing pole. He took it, and I took the fish, as he tied up the line and hook so that it wouldn't snag on anything... or anyone.

"Biggest one yet," I said happily as I held the fish up with both hands. It was as thick as my thigh! Maybe Vim had brought me good luck?

"Sap will be happy. She likes fish," Vim said.

"Huh...?" I tilted my head at him.

He nodded gently as he turned to look at Celine nearby. I heard the young predator startle at being looked at. "Hello Celine. I'm glad to see you made it here," Vim said, greeting her and ignoring me.

I huffed at him and decided to put my fish away before I smacked him with it. The fishing pole had somehow survived my doing so, but I doubted a fish would.

"Um... yeah. Oplar and I got here a few days ago," Celine said, sounding a little unsure of herself again as she did. Was she off-put by Vim...? Or was she just baffled by our interaction?

Putting the big fish into the bucket, I frowned as I realized we likely needed to leave now. The fish was too big for it... especially with the other fish in it too. It would suffocate and die rather quickly since it couldn't swim at all.

Oh well. "Why don't we go back to camp, Celine? The bucket's full now," I said.

"Uh... sure...!"

I nodded as Celine went to pull in her line. She did so a tad quicker than needed, as if self-conscious. I decided to keep an eye on her, but ended up looking back at Vim instead.

He looked okay. His clothes were not ones I'd seen before... but they were at least intact, and didn't seem dirty. He did have a over-coat on though that looked a tad too stuffy in today's heat. It had a hood and everything, though it wasn't covering his head at the moment.

And, except for the thin bloodstain on his face I'd just given him, he looked... healthy. I didn't see any obvious wounds or anything...

Though there was something a bit off about him...

His eyes. They were staring into my own... but that wasn't too surprising. He stared at me a lot, even when we hadn't been separated for a long time and it was the first time he was seeing me since. Now there was...

Was that sadness...? He had a gentle smile on his face, but he also looked a tad sad. Was it because I had smacked him with the pole...? Surely not, right? I mean yes it had likely hurt, but this was Vim we were talking about. He had basically ignored it, completely.

Plus he'd not kissed me or anything.

When he had left Lumen, when we had separated last, he had kissed me... rather forcefully too. I had honestly expected a similar greeting to happen to accompany it...

Maybe something sad had happened...?

"I heard you saved everyone, again," I said gently, hoping to figure out what was bothering him.

He blinked, and then nodded. "Yes. The ship, and all aboard, are fine. Most of them should be not far from Telmik by now," he said.

"Celine and Oplar ran into Tressi and the rest. They're at Telmik now," I said with a gesture to the girl who was tying up her fishing line to her pole. She paused a moment and glanced at us, with wide-eyes, but went back to focusing on her fishing pole instead of joining the conversation.

Maybe she really was like Angie?

"That's good to hear. How long have you been here?" he asked as he stepped towards me, and the bucket I still stood next to.

Oh...? Was he finally going to kiss me? Maybe while Celine was distracted? She had gotten her hook stuck on her sleeve and...

"In SilverCreek or here fishing?" I asked quietly, teasing him a little. I had known his real question.

His smile softened as he nodded. "Both...? I count what... five in there?" he asked as he glanced down at the bucket.

"Six." About as many seconds he had to rectify his poor greeting or...

"Hm..." he then reached out with his free hand. He still held the fishing pole, and for a tiny moment I forgot about everything... the world, Celine as she mumbled under her breath in complaint since she had torn her sleeve freeing the hook, and...

Vim gently laid his hand on my right shoulder, and with an odd sense of seriousness... he gave it a squeeze and nodded at me. "I'm glad you're okay," he whispered.

Huh...?

My hat shifted upon my head as my ears fluttered harshly. I studied Vim's odd expression, one of strange relief and worry... and realized something indeed was wrong.

Him forgetting to kiss me was upsetting, but forgivable. He was still Vim, no matter how much I softened him... but this?

This was not him forgetting to kiss me... this was him acting funny. Strange. Even for him.

Usually by now he'd smirk at me and make a joke. Or offer me a snack or gift he had brought back with him... or maybe turn his attention to more pressing matters, such as Celine who had been struggling with the hook just now.

Instead he was... staring at me as if he was about to cry...

"Vim...?" I whispered his name, and feared whatever was making him act so. Vim was usually such a stoic man, even when burdened and in grief... even as he cried, he typically didn't show such emotion as this! Whatever was bothering him was likely something very concerning... something that might break my heart, or freeze it in terror, depending on what it was...

He only nodded at me, and then after another small squeeze on my shoulder he leaned forward. I blinked in surprise at first, but then closed my eyes as he gently gave me a small kiss. More of a peck than anything else. At least it was on the lips.

"You look good. And who did this?" he asked as his hand left my shoulder and grabbed the large braid that had been resting upon it.

I smiled softly, a little embarrassed to have been caught already. "Merit," I said. I'd asked her to teach me different ways to braid my hair, since I had only known a few. Since then she's been the one doing it for me, seemingly finding it fun to do so.

"Really...? It looks good on you," he praised it, and I found myself enjoying that more than his kiss.

"Thanks... I'd compliment you too, but you look the same as usual... though I guess I could compliment that stain of blood...?" I said as I smirked at it. It had stopped bleeding, but a tiny bit had dripped since I'd wiped at it. The stain was now almost to his chin.

"It'd be fitting the thing you'd compliment is something you had a hand in making," he said... and as he did, his typical smile returned to his face. That strange concern no longer visible, as if it'd never existed in the first place.

"Right...!" I chuckled at that, glad he got my meaning.

For a small moment... all was perfect. Vim was once again standing right next to me, he was smiling again... and I was calm.

"Um..."

I turned, alongside Vim, and found Celine stepping over to us. She had an uneasy smile on her face as she nodded gently. "Ready," she said with a nod.

"Is your arm okay?" I asked.

"Oh! Um, yes. It just got my sleeve," Celine said as she lifted the arm in question. Sure enough, thanks to how bad the rip was on her sleeve, I could see her bare skin and how it was untouched.

"How've you been, Celine? Was your trip with Oplar eventful?" Vim asked.

Celine again startled at being addressed by him, and her smile turned into a sheepish one. "Yes... I mean, it was but it wasn't! We had no trouble, I just... experienced a lot, so..." Celine began to ramble a bit, and I realized something I should have earlier.

She was uneasy around men...!

Feeling a little stupid, I mentally kicked myself as the obvious made sense. Celine had been acting a tad uneasy around me lately, but it was now very obvious her earlier clumsiness had simply been her trying to make a good impression. Her now though? She almost looked on edge! It reminded me of Ursula, what with the way her eyes wouldn't meet Vim's and the way she jolted as if shocked by Merit anytime he even glanced at her.

That also explained her concern from earlier over being forced into a marriage...! It wasn't that she was like Angie, at least not in that way... She was more like Ursula.

Maybe this was why Oplar had chosen to bring her here... where most of the men were going to be like Randle and Krass's son, people of the cloth who would not be imposing...

Why hadn't Oplar said anything...? Or maybe it was obvious and I was simply slow to notice...

"I'm glad to hear so. I apologize for not escorting you myself," Vim said.

Celine simply nodded, shyly, and I went ahead and cleared my throat. "Carry the bucket, would you Vim?" I asked with a point to it.

"Mhm," he nodded as he bent down and picked it up.

Usually this would be when I'd put some distance between me and him. Typically I'd grab Celine's arm and drag her ahead, as to walk ahead of Vim and keep her focus on me... but...

"Did you see our camp, Vim? What'd you think of it?" I asked as I did just that, grabbing Celine's arm as I stepped forward as to head back home. But I didn't just outright ignore Vim... I couldn't help it, I wanted to talk to him. Even if I was going to do so while walking ahead of him. Before I did though I took Celine's fishing pole as to hand it off to him. He accepted it, carrying both of ours and the bucket as he followed.

"No. I've not seen it yet," he said.

Oh...? I glanced behind us and found him following dutifully. So he had come straight to me...? And had likely done so thanks to the heart inside of me... For some reason I liked that a lot.

"We got a really big piece of land! We've just started making the foundation for the church-building Randle wants to make. Oplar and I chopped down a bunch of trees the other day for it," I began to tell him of all we've been doing... all the while doing my best to let Celine feel as comfortable as possible.

Maybe once she realized Vim had only eyes for me she'd relax around him.

"Wait...!" I stopped walking, causing Celine to nearly stumble in shock as I did. I spun around, still holding Celine's arm as I did and made her groan and then laugh at me.

Vim smirked at me as he kept walking, though only until he was a few steps away from us.

"Sap's here!?" I asked, realizing he had mentioned her earlier.

"Indeed she is. I plan to go get her after verifying it's safe to do so... maybe after nightfall," Vim said.

"Gosh say so earlier! Let's hurry!" I said as I turned back around and picked up my pace.

Celine joined me, keeping pace, as we left Vim behind and hurried home... so I could then go see Lilly's daughter. To not just see a friend, or rather family member, I've not seen in some time... but also to hear all the details I had missed out on! I had to find out if Lellip and Branches were doing well!

"You're more excited over this Sap than you are your husband," Celine said with a laugh.

"Well duh!"

Chapter 600 Vim – Shilly-Shallying

Well, the city was at least promising.

Heading back to the camp, alone, I wondered just how rich the veins and resource deposits this whole town had sprung up for were. It seemed they'd been mining them for a few years now, but hadn't even gone more than a few hundred feet into the nearby mountain yet. For humans to be so slow in mining was not unnatural, since it had likely taken the first couple years just to set up the mine and town proper, but having so many powerful and wealthy humans move here off only a few years worth of results was... startling. It meant the vein this city was founded on was likely one of those high density ones. Where in a single mine cart they found more gold and other precious materials than you did from dozens of similar carts from other mines.

Plus it was outside any real jurisdiction. Which was why the founders, and the elite, were being so meticulous with who they allowed into the town and whatnot. It wasn't just the fact that the powerful in the city didn't want to share their wealth; they simply didn't want it stolen. If any of the local lords, such as the ones who ruled Ruvindale, tried to take over they'd kick all the current players out and replace them with their own families and nobles. They'd go so far as to slaughter people if they needed to. I'd seen it happen many times.

But who was brave enough to try and strong-arm a place full of ex-mercenaries and knights?

That was what this town was full of. Former soldiers and mercenaries. And not just the grunts either, there were people here that commanded thousands of others. Leaders and generals, commanders of entire mercenary bands that didn't just speak for entire armies but had the respect and recognition that came with such power. They weren't just figureheads or something, but genuinely known and even to a point feared individuals. The kind that usually didn't gather all together as they were doing here...

Combine those people with wealth, the truly wealthy, such as the nobles and merchants who have set up camp here... and you got a very powerful force. One that only showed up a few times per generation.

"I'm surprised they allowed us in," I whispered.

Usually such people didn't like outside influences... and the Church of Songs was probably the greatest influence outside of gold or a sword there was on the planet, currently.

The Church of Songs was not some slouch. Although in my perspective, from the Society's standpoint, we were few in number and barely hanging on... the truth of the matter was the exact opposite. The Church of Songs basically ruled the Nation of the Blind, and all its wealth and millions of inhabitants. It was the biggest, wealthiest, and most powerful nation on this side of the planet... and honestly was not usually one to be trifled with. Even this far north outside of its borders. And none of that included my or any of the Society's influence or power, that was simply what the human-side of the church had at its disposal.

So in theory they could have accepted the church, welcoming it even, as to try and not pick a fight it wouldn't win... but something told me it was something else.

But what, I wonder? I'd only spoken to Randle for a short while, just to confirm what I had already heard and seen from Renn, but it seemed we hadn't been approached yet by any of the lords of this town. Nothing beyond the original contract of purchase for the land we were using, at least.

It was a tad concerning. By all counts this town was healthy and growing rapidly. As long as the mine didn't suddenly run out of gold, or some foreign power invade and take over... this place would in the blink of an eye become another Ruvindale. Likely larger, even. A multi-hundred thousand city, one of a handful in this whole region.

The reason I knew so, and believed it to be inevitable, was a simple fact.

This town was overflowing with gold. I'd checked the local hiring post in town; an entire guild had been built to manage it, and had found that even a simple miner at the mine got a share of the profits. Every miner shared equally one-tenth of the mine's monthly gold output. Granted that one-tenth was likely being shared by hundreds of people in a pool, it was still a mighty sum. And judging by the oddly high prices of some of the goods here, such as a simple meal or drink, and how nearly everyone was paying them with a smile...

They were making more than any had before. Most of them, at least. Which was saying something since most of the people here were former mercenaries. Such people usually made quite a bit more than a typical layman in today's era. It was why so many who were capable were drawn to the life, it paid well. So for them to be acting so... carelessly with their money...

It was to a point it was worrying almost.

Humans got weird when they were doing good. When everyone, or basically everyone, was flush with money and had few to no troubles... it didn't always go as happily as one might think.

"Just like in Lumen," I whispered as the stone path I was on turned into a dirt one. I'd reached what was considered SilverCreek's current city-limits.

Though not properly paved, it wasn't desolate or empty. Estates were already built around me, or being built, and many were the kind that were nicer than they should be. It was a little surprising to see nice brick buildings, even some brick walls and fences around the property lines already. Most didn't seem too occupied yet, based off the way few if any had any lights visible in any of their windows... not even candle light, but I knew it would only be a handful of years before this whole area became a city-block proper. One that would be reminiscent of Ruvindale's noble district, and if it continued to expand and grow it'd eventually look like the kind of neighborhoods you'd find even in Lumen.

Our encampment was about a block away from here, past where any already built residences were, and as such was kind of alone at the moment. The nearest building to our land was actually not even a proper home or business, but a large warehouse. One that as far as I could tell was rarely used at the moment. It was likely something built to house the materials for the future resident of that plot of land, be it a home or a business.

I knew without a doubt that when the time came I left, and returned a few years later, like I always did any place I went to... this whole area would be different. Instead of fields of lush grass and trees I'd find cobblestone roads, multi-floored mansions and buildings, alleys and shops... even decorations, likely. The towns built during such economic booms usually were wasteful in their early days. Odds are this place would build statues, fancy buildings and roads and so forth... at least until the money dried up.

Because it always did.

Still, all things considered I was glad to find the place healthy and lively. I had honestly been expecting more of a squalor, or maybe a smaller town with only a few hundred residents. Instead I'd found a healthy, upbeat town that wasn't too far off in population to the town near Twin Hills, Bordu.

Although I was still unsure of those who ruled over this city, since I still didn't know yet if it was the mercenaries or the noble families who actually called the shots, I at least didn't feel like my people were in danger here. No more than they were any other human settlement, at least.

The only way this place would become dangerous for Renn and the rest, is if the mine disappeared or some outside force tried to take it all over. Either of those things, which were both possible at any moment, could be foreseen and avoided by anyone with half a head on their shoulders... so I didn't need to worry over anyone here, at the moment.

But right now as it was, this was not a place I could bring the others to.

Berri and her family had expressed a desire to move here. As did Tundra, that young wolf girl. I'd not be comfortable bringing them, or those like them, here... at least not first without taking some rather insane precautions.

Which meant I'd need to sit with Renn and talk to her about this... amongst other things...

I sighed as I finally saw our encampment. It was still a ways away, but the huge center tent was big enough to stand out even on the horizon. It actually didn't draw too much attention here in SilverCreek, so I'd heard by just talking to random people, because when the other mercenary groups had first arrived they too had used similar tents. It was the kind one built to allow dozens of people in comfortably. A mercenary group would use such a tent for either a mess-hall, or a meeting room. We...? We used it for all of that and more.

Smiling at the fresh memory of Renn showing me around the camp, particularly where she slept, I found myself... feeling very content. Happy, even.

Which was a surprise, since I'd kind of been ignored by her.

Not long after she had shown me around the tent, and I had spent some time to talk to everyone... such as Randle and Merit, Renn had demanded that I take her straight to Sap. I of course had no problem with that, especially since after confirming our little camp was so isolated that there was no reason to force Sap to endure solitude out in the forest alone. So I had taken her and Merit to go and pick up Sap, and Liora... who I had intentionally kept mum about to Renn. I had enjoyed surprising her with the young saint, though realized I likely made a mistake bringing her here all the same.

Liora had wasted no time on getting on Renn's good side. Before they'd even exchanged names the young saint had bounded forward and proudly asked to touch her ears, without any hesitation or even any shame. The fact it had worked so well, and had made Renn basically melt for the girl made me a tad annoyed.

Renn should have more pride than that...! Why was it a tiny little saint such as her got to so gleefully touch what I still to this day struggle to?

But no matter. After getting Sap and Liora we came back to camp, and since then I'd not seen or spoken to Renn once. I had left them all in capable hands and had went to examine the town... not just to check it as I usually did any location I visited, but also to see if I could feel or find any divinity.

I hadn't, which was only partly a relief.

"The sound of the other shoe," I said as I stepped ever so slightly harder as I got closer to our camp.

I was expecting it. On guard for it... yet there didn't seem to be any sign of it.

Renn was fine. As was everyone else. And as far as I could tell Renn was her typical upbeat self... if she had any issues at all during my absence, they hadn't been important enough to even note. If anything she seemed to be in such a good mood it was...

"Spoke too soon..." I mumbled as I watched Renn leave the encampment and head my way.

Although glad to see her finally focus on me, I had no choice but to admit I now felt anxious. She looked like she was hurrying, though she hadn't broken out into a run she was walking at a quick pace in my direction. Plus she did so alone, and I didn't see anyone watching her leave from the encampment... which meant she had likely snuck away once she noticed I was returning...

How had she noticed so quickly, I wonder? There had been a slight hill in the way, blocking me from sight, until just a few moments ago. Either she'd been on the lookout for me at just the right moment, or her senses were getting sharper...

All the same, even with her quick approach making me worry for what was about to be said or done... I still found myself smiling.

By my parents she looked good. She was of course hiding her ears and tail here, even though the camp was isolated it wasn't so far away from the town that she could risk doing anything but. Plus I'd been told that they occasionally got visitors, such as mercenaries coming to pray and confess to Randle.

I slowed my pace as I stepped off the road and waited for Renn to reach me. Usually I'd keep walking, as to meet her in the middle, but the fact she was hurrying a little told me she wanted to speak to me in

private... so I didn't want to go any closer to our encampment than needed. A few of the members there, such as Merit and Sap, had the kind of hearing that if we were too close our words would carry on the wind and be picked up by them.

Plus I'd really like to spend some time alone with her, even if but for a moment.

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

She slowed as she got near and gave me the smile only I ever got. A happy, but calm smile. The kind someone could only genuinely wear when utterly content in life. One that told me my earlier worry had not been as justified. Maybe she just wanted a moment alone and...

"Vim, I'm upset!" she said, though with a grin, as she came to a stop a couple steps from me.

My eye twitched, since I kind of had been hoping she'd just run up into my arms... "How can I cure you of such an ailment?" I asked.

Renn's grin twitched, as if to mimic my eye doing so a moment ago, and I noted her hat shifted ever so slightly. In a way that told me she hadn't pinned it down, her ears had likely fluttered in the way they did when I said such odd things and had moved it ever so slightly. "Why'd you say it all formally like that?" she asked.

"I've been traveling with a very educated little girl; she's rubbed off on me. What's wrong, Renn? Your smile makes me question the validity of your statement," I asked.

Her smile tried to hide itself, but all Renn accomplish was make herself look even cuter as she gave me a glare. "Who gave you permission to leave without me?" she asked.

I frowned at her as I crossed my arms. "You were enthralled by your... friends," I said. I'd almost said family, and even though it was probably how she saw them... in theory only Sap was a family member. For her at least... For now, at least.

"So...? There were things I wanted to talk about," she said, crossing her own arms as she raised her chin at me.

She of course was not actually upset with me. Even an idiot could see that... but at the same time, there was a hint of legitimacy in her anger. I could see it in her eyes. Though if she was upset with me for having left without inviting her to see the town, or upset at herself for not being able to choose between her own desires and wants I couldn't tell.

"Hm... well, I'd invite you to eat dinner in town... but I think both of us would get in trouble if we did that," I said.

Renn's hat shifted again as she finally lost her smile and frowned for the first time since this afternoon when I had startled her by the river. "Yes... I'd turn you down if you offered, and I think a few people would be upset with you too. Randle wants to talk to you, he asked me to make sure you didn't leave town before you got a chance to talk privately," she said.

I nodded. I had expected it... and honestly expected far more than just a request from Randle. People usually had a request or two even on a good day, let alone those at a brand new location... "That's actually something I wanted to talk to you about," I said gently.

This time I heard her pants shift as her tail squirmed beneath them. "What...? Don't tell me you have to leave already...?" Renn's frown turned into a real one, a deep and furrowed one that made my heart feel anxious. She suddenly looked as if I'd just told her that her tail was ugly.

"No...! No. I actually hope to stick around for a bit... I saw your work so far, the foundation of it, I think I'll help you build at least a building or two before leaving again," I said quickly. By my parents for a moment there she looked as if I'd just broken her heart!

Renn blinked a few times and then gave me a toothy grin. "Oh, good...!"

Yes... it was... I didn't hide the breath of relief as I nodded. "So... What are you really upset about?" I asked.

Her smile twitched as this time both her pants and her hat shifted and she actually leered at me and leaned back a bit. "Is... is it that easy to tell?" she asked worriedly.

"You pried yourself away from not just all your friends, and Sap who is basically a family member, but also a young saint who I have no doubt has been waiting her whole life to see you... just to come talk to little old me. I know you love me Renn, but I also know what you love more than anything and you'd not step away from it just to talk to me a few hours earlier than you usually would," I said.

I had expected Renn to give me a lovely smile... since I'd just blatantly spoken, and proven, just how well I knew her... yet instead I found her face shifting into one of sadness. Her whole demeanor changed before my eyes, and I knew if they weren't hidden her ears and tail would be drooping right now.

"Renn...?" I asked worriedly. Had what I said hurt her somehow...? I had not meant any ill-will behind the words, and I had thought she knew me more than well enough to know that. I actually adored the fact she was friendly with so many, varied, people. It brought me great joy and pride to know my wife was capable of being so loved, and loving so strongly others. It made me feel...

"I'm okay... I just... I know you didn't mean anything by it, but I just felt terrible. You're right, Vim... I do prioritize others over you sometimes, I'm sorry."

"Renn I hadn't meant that..." I said quickly before she could continue, she had been about to.

She nodded gently at me. "I know. I know. I... to be honest Vim, there's a lot we need to talk about... so much of it is so important too, so yes... I shouldn't be ignoring you. I should have pulled you aside right away and... I didn't..." Renn spoke calmly, but I could hear and see her emotions plainly. She was looking downward, as if at my feet, and had gone to twirling her fingers together... as she did I noted one of her longer and thicker braids of hair slide off her shoulder and around behind her. I studied the thick braid, and wondered why she was letting her hair get so long. The last time I'd seen it this long had been when I had first seen her, way back when she had joined the Society in Ruvindale...

"All's well, Renn. I hadn't meant that statement to bother you... After all this time you should know full well how much I enjoy the way you cherish your relationships with those we call friends," I said.

Renn again nodded, and this time did so with a smile. "I know... And here we are wasting our precious moments, again," she said as her smile turned into a smirk.

"Stop wasting them then."

She reached up and scratched at her nose as she tried to hide her smirk. "Putting me on the spot here..." she mumbled as she scratched her nose.

"So what's the plan with the cot...?" I asked.

Renn startled, as I figured she would. Her eyes went wide as her hat shifted so much it nearly revealed a tuft of her left ear, and she began to panic. "Wha...! Wait...!" she immediately realized what I meant, and groaned as she reached up to adjust her hat. "You're right...! It's too small for both of us...!" she said as she realized it.

I nodded with a smirk. Now she looked angry and flustered for a better reason. When she had showed me her tent earlier, I had noticed her cot was just a one person bed. Something made with wood as to not have to sleep on the ground. Not too surprising, at all, considering their current living arrangements... but that meant we'd not really be able to sleep together. At least not in the same bed. It was just too flimsy and small for me, let alone both of us at once.

Renn seemed rather bothered by this revelation, since she couldn't seem to get her hat back on straight. My smirk grew as I stepped forward and reached up and grabbed the hat. I settled it for her, making sure to not bother her ears as I did. "Honestly, as much as it upsets me to say... I would like to ask a favor, concerning the whole sleeping arrangement thing," I said.

"Yes, I'm more than happy to sleep on the ground. It's what we do when traveling half the time anyway, I'll just lay against you more than usual," she said before I could explain.

I frowned a bit as I leaned back away from her so I could study her serious expression. That hadn't been her teasing or joking, not even flirting, she was being serious.

"I see... well, I was going to suggest something a tad different," I said.

"Hm...?"

"Liora," I said.

For a tiny moment Renn's face contorted into annoyance... and then as she understood my meaning she calmed down and nodded. "You want her to sleep with me. To keep her safe," she said without any hesitation.

I nodded, glad she understood. "Yes. It's not that I don't trust anyone else... Such as Merit and even Randle, but Randle... well..."

"Is down an arm, yes," Renn nodded, understanding perfectly.

"And Merit doesn't like sleeping with people. She also... doesn't care much for saints. Though she'd never not protect the girl just because of her past grievances, I don't want to make her uncomfortable when..." I went to explain why I'd not ask Merit as well, and Renn happily smiled and patted me on the chest to stop me.

"Say no more, Vim. Yes. I'll happily keep her close. Plus Merit's tent is next to mine, and she's always tagging along with me everywhere, so she'll basically be protecting the girl too," Renn said, interrupting me.

I smiled at my lovely wife who so readily agreed to something that most would either find utterly unappealing... or terribly frightening.

Most people didn't want anything to do with saints, let alone be responsible for their well-being. To say no least to one who was basically just a child.

"Thank you... That doesn't mean I can't sleep in your tent still, with you, but I'll probably just rest when you two aren't in there."

"You're starting to make me think you found her on purpose, just for this," Renn said with a smirk.

"Please," I scoffed at the idea.

She giggled at me and nodded. "I forgive you. Either way. In exchange though... while you're here, please give me some time. I... really do have things I want to talk about, Vim," she said, and did so a little quietly.

I focused on her eyes, and the way they had softened a little... and I wondered just what it was that was biting at the tip of her tail. A part of me hoped it wasn't too serious, since she hadn't brought it up yet... but...

There was something telling me that her lack of saying it, here and now, was not because it wasn't important enough... but rather because she was scared to say it. Hesitant. As if... what? Afraid of what I'd hear?

"Well... if it's any consolation, I too have something very important to talk about. But you're going to have to give me time to build up my courage to say it," I said.

Renn happily nodded at me. "I'm used to that, Vim. Take your time."

No... I can't. Couldn't. Even if I wanted to.

For a small moment nothing was said between us... and I wondered why I didn't feel more anxious. I should, I knew I should be. I mean...

I blinked and realized I'd not breathed in some time. Not since I'd just spoken. I took in a small breath, which made her eye's narrow a little... as she expectantly waited for me to say something. Yet I didn't. Because I was afraid to.

Because the moment I said it aloud... I needed to say more than just those words.

I couldn't just tell her that I had met another god. I couldn't just tell her I had killed him, either.

I needed to tell her the truth. I owed it to her.

The whole truth.

The saddest part wasn't even that her life was in danger. But...

Hey Renn, love of my life; I was willing to sacrifice you. I chose my anger and vengeance over your life. Without any real hesitation, is that okay with you?

I looked away from Renn's gentle gaze and looked around the world for a moment. To both distract me from my own disgusting self and to make sure all was well.

It was. There was now a little bit of smoke coming from our encampment, but it was obviously just for cooking. It was nearing dinner time.

How was it I could face literal gods without flinching yet couldn't just say a few words when it mattered...?

"So...? How was the town?"

I blinked and looked back down at my wife, and found her patiently smiling at me. Like usual... she was the one who had made a move first. To pardon me. To give me time. To accept me, and all my failures.

Shifting ever so slightly, I nodded in thanks to her. "It's a nice town, Renn. I'm still concerned over a few things, but so far so good. I think as long as nothing too odd happens, you and the rest will be safe here for some time to come," I said.

She nodded. "Yes. That's been everyone else's... ah! Actually there is something concerning, another thing I should have brought up a lot sooner!" she said as she suddenly remembered something.

"This is... different than the other stuff you need to speak to me about...?" I asked worriedly.

She nodded quickly, and turned and pointed at the encampment. "Let's go back. I have a heart for you."

My eyes narrowed as I frowned at her. "Excuse me...?" Was this her odd attempt at a joke?

"Someone named Rivonne came and gave it to me. She gave me a box with a heart in it, and told me to tell you the moment you got here to go see her. She's supposedly one of the ruling lords of the town," Renn said, speaking quickly as she did.

Rivonne...?

Renn grabbed my wrist and went to tugging me to join her. I did so, while scrounging through my thoughts and memories in search of the name.

It sounded familiar, but I didn't remember it... and the familiarity I felt might just be because I knew I should know the name, and thus expected myself to do so. Yet I didn't. Rivonne didn't ring any bells at all.

"Rivonne...?" I asked as we headed for the camp.

"Yeah. A noblewoman. Not much older than me, I mean... how I look, you know? Randle and a few others have inquired about her in town and she's one of the three main families that started the mine. She's from some powerful noble family from the Nation of the Blind, though her family line hasn't lived there for some time I guess," Renn began to tell me all she seemingly knew of this Rivonne... and I still couldn't remember the name at all.

"If they're from there, shouldn't Randle know who they are?" I asked. Randle might not be a part of the church proper anymore, but he had basically been running the church for the last few hundred years. And unlike most he was very, very, particular about knowing anything and everything about the nation the Church of Songs led. If this Rivonne was from the Nation of the Blind, even if just her ancestry, then Randle really should know all about her.

"He doesn't. But he said that was likely her first name, not her last name and he really only knows the last names of the nobles and royals anymore in Telmik. This way, Merit buried it in the tent Sap's using," Renn said as we entered the encampment.

Right... that made sense. And Merit had buried it...? I'll need to thank her later for keeping it a distance from Renn, I'd not said anything yet but she had already fully absorbed the heart I'd given her in Lumen. If she spent too long near another right now there was a chance she'd absorb it too.

As we headed for one of the tents Renn slowed a bit as she turned to give me an odd grin. One that made me brace myself, since I knew something terrifying was about to come from her pretty lips.

"While I dig it up, you can tell me all about Fressi and why she's going around telling people she's going to steal you from me!"