

## **Non Human 601**

Chapter 601 Renn – Rivonne

This was kind of exciting.

I'd been in many nice homes lately. The Society had many places that were not just fancy but unique. The Cathedral was older than me, or at least old enough to almost be, yet it still felt modern and well kept. And then of course there was Lumen with its fancy electricity and plumbing, amongst other things. So I was used to nice homes. Ever since joining the Society I now knew comfort... in ways I had never even known possible... So it was fun when I got to experience something new when it concerned such a thing as a dwelling or building.

This home was newer. Only a year or so old... and it was the home of someone who was considered one of the wealthiest humans in the whole region. And even I was able to see the truth in that statement.

I stood with Vim in what felt more like a reading room than an office, and in fact that might be just what it was... It was an average sized room, it had a few shelves and drawers, and it had a nice big blue rug covering the wooden floor. There were two couches and a few smaller chairs, though not really all sitting together. There was nothing in the room that could be seen or used as an actual desk, but there was a nice sized table sitting up against one of the walls in-between shelves. But it only had a few things on it and they were all decorative, and didn't have a chair before it, so it was likely not a desk at all. I stepped over to a large, comfortable looking, chair that was resting right near a tall window. One that overlooked a very pretty garden of freshly cut bushes and grass, and then a large field that ended at a stone wall where a stone road laid just beyond.

It was easy to tell that the garden would soon be full of flowers. The colorful kind. It was warm now, but it hadn't been warm long enough yet for them to bloom. But I could see the budding bulbs that were likely only a handful of days from starting to peel open and show themselves.

The garden, like this room and the whole house... was extravagant. Nothing was basic and simple. The floors were fancy stone or wood, and covered in neat rugs. The walls either had finely crafted shelves or furniture against them or tapestries and paintings. The ceilings had decorative light fixtures and even designs and scenes painted on them too. Even things as simple as small tables looked unique.

Beside the chair on both sides were little stand-like tables. They were fashioned more like a shelf than a plain table where they had four layers. One of them had a few books on it, while the other was empty. I kind of liked them, as odd as they looked. They were almost as tall as me, and although not large enough to put anything too big on them such as a large plate or pot they were more than big enough for books and other little items.

Though what were they made of...? They were golden in color, but... surely not actually gold, right...?

Kneeling down in front of one of them, I studied the little feet that held them up and realized... "Vim, are these gold?" I asked.

Vim didn't step over to me. He instead was studying a tapestry hanging near the door; it had the same motif found throughout the house and on the front gate of the property. A raven. "No. It's a form of gold-plating. They stretch gold really thin then wrap it around another metal, acting as a foil. Likely copper or something," Vim explained without even glancing at it.

Oh...? So it was gold, in a sense? Just not pure gold...?

I could see what Vim meant, though. On the back of the legs of the table you could see the thin line where, the foil as he called it, was secured in place. Still, even if only the outer layer... these were expensive weren't they? There was a lot of gold here, then...

Maybe Randle had understated just how wealthy this Rivonne was...

Reaching over, I hesitated as I wondered if I could touch it or not. I wanted to know what this so-called foil gold felt like, but wasn't sure if touching it near the creases would damage it or not.

I decided against it, and to have Vim make me some later. I stood up and away from the tables and chair and again looked around.

"Is it normal to be left alone?" I asked. We'd been kind of abandoned in this room by the one who had guided us here... though maybe it was because of how late it was. The world outside was getting darker, since the sun was setting. It was basically dinner time. In fact I could smell food, though it wasn't so strong to make me believe it had just been cooked. Odds are I was smelling the meal they had already cooked and ate before we had arrived.

Vim had not wanted to wait even a single night to come see this Rivonne. After seeing the box that held that heart Vim had remembered who they were. Or at least, remembered that he had known them. He hadn't gone into detail since we had hurried here, but from what little he had said about this family was they were kind of like those pirates in Lumen he had known. Though this one was not just friends of his, but also a friend of Lawrence's brother as well.

I was a tad shocked to hear that this family was related to Lawrence, and even more so for the man's brother to be the focal point. It was only recently I had even learned that Lawrence had a brother in the first place, from Lilly and later Merit. Lilly had mentioned he had been Vim's friend and Merit had said he had been amongst those who had supposedly gone against Light and Celine, though I wasn't sure if that was what had brought forth his death.

It was why this human family had ravens all over. Lawrence and his family were ravens.

Vim had been kind of quiet on our way here, after telling me about this family. The kind of quiet that told me something odd was happening... but at the same time, since Vim had been willing to bring me along to meet Rivonne I knew it wasn't likely anything too dangerous.

If he had planned to come here and kill them all he'd not have brought me, after all.

Glancing at Vim, who had yet to answer my question, I found him smiling softly at the tapestry. I stepped away from the chair and its gold plated tables as to stand beside him and look at the wall as well.

It was just a large raven looking bird, with outstretched wings and a decorative emblem behind it. Some kind of shield or something. Rather basic, compared to some of the other paintings and tapestries we'd passed on the way here. It was just a nicely woven raven design, nothing else about it really stood out.

"What was his name?" I asked softly.

"Bird. Just Bird," Vim said just as softly.

Bird...? So he was one of those types who didn't care much for names... yet his brother, Lawrence, wasn't? I wonder if they had been similar or not?

I honestly hadn't spent much time with Lawrence. Whenever I was in Lumen I was always focused on other things. Either the tasks at hand or those like Merit and Lamp. Maybe I should have spent more

time with the man, considering he was Vim's friend... though maybe I had misread them. Maybe it wasn't that Lawrence himself was Vim's friend but rather his brother had been, and thus Vim was attached to him a bit more than typical because of it.

"Was he..." I was about to ask more about him, but I heard the sound of footsteps on soft rugs. I turned, since Vim didn't, and greeted the woman who had come to deliver that box. Rivonne entered the room alone, but there was an older woman I didn't recognize behind her. She had nice clothes on, but instead of entering the room alongside Rivonne she simply went to closing the door instead.

"Lord Vim... it is my greatest pleasure to finally meet you," Rivonne spoke after the door closed shut, and did so with an apprehensive smile.

I shifted a little and glanced at Vim, who was still staring at the tapestry on the wall. "I'll be completely honest... I had forgotten about your family. Until I saw the box, that is. It's not often I get to meet the descendants of those who I genuinely called friends anymore, so... yes. It is indeed a pleasure to meet you," Vim spoke calmly as he turned and stepped towards the woman. I felt an itchy smile try to grow on my face as he went to shake the woman's hand. As he did so though, instead of just shaking it normally he actually bent forward and gently kissed the back of her hand.

Although I knew I probably should have been slightly annoyed to see him do so, I wasn't. Rivonne smiled in the kind of gentle way that told me she was completely used to such a greeting, which told me it was likely just something people of higher society did. "My name is Rivonne Ravensoft. My fourth-grandmother had been the last one to aid you and Lord Bird," Rivonne said.

Ravensoft...? Had they adopted the namesake in honor of Vim's friend, or...?

"She had Bird wrapped around her finger, you need not call him lord," Vim said as he released her hand.

Rivonne giggled ever so softly as I smirked. So there had been more to it than just friendship, huh? Figured.

She then turned to look at me and gave me a smile that I could tell, although was genuine, was also a bit faked. She had been completely genuine with Vim just now, so her suddenly acting a tad less so was all the more obvious. "We met a few weeks ago, didn't we? I apologize but I don't think I got your name..."

Before I could answer Vim went ahead and gestured lightly at me. "May I present to you my wife and love of my life, Renn," he said, introducing me.

Rivonne's eyes went wide as her shoulders also stiffened, and then she happily laughed as she stepped forward and nodded. "How terrible of me...! I had thought you just one of their workers or servants...!" Rivonne went red in the face as she laughed off her own embarrassment and she held a hand out to me, this time in a normal fashion and not palm down as she had with Vim. I took it, gently, as she sheepishly smiled at me. "I hope you'll forgive me... My family has always been in Lord Vim's service, and as such so too shall I be in yours, Renn is it?"

We shook hands in a rather dainty manner as I nodded carefully. "Um... it's okay. If anything the fact you saw me as such is a good thing, I try to blend in and all..." I said as I glanced over her shoulder and at Vim. He was smirking at me. He must have known she would have acted like this upon hearing who I was.

"Oh...! Of course! Yes... I get it, I do! To be perfectly honest I'm rather shocked...! I mean... it should be obvious you'd have family, Lord Vim, but I swear I don't think I've ever heard heads or tails of them! I wonder why...?" Rivonne wondered and asked as our hands separated.

"Probably because we're recently married," I said.

She blinked and then hurriedly looked over at Vim. "Goodness! Congratulations then! Wow...! If only the others still lived... they would have given anything to have met you!" Rivonne said.

Others...? Did she mean her family members, maybe?

"You mean that literally, don't you?" Vim asked, speaking up and causing Rivonne to stop herself from speaking. She had been about to say something more to me.

Instead Rivonne turned, as if to properly face him, and nodded. "Yes, Lord Vim... I regretfully inform you that I am indeed the last of my line. No other Ravensoft or any of our branch members exist anymore. I am the last."

I frowned, rather harshly, and was glad she wasn't facing me. She had not sounded too saddened over saying such a thing, but...

"I see... do not feel ashamed of being the last, Rivonne. There is great pride in being the end. People remember the last page of a book far more often than they do any other," Vim said.

My ear twitched beneath my hat, and my heart started to swell.

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I've missed his odd comments. The ones that he said so offhandedly that shook the heart to the core.

Rivonne only nodded to his statement, though she wore a very nice smile as she did so. Then after a moment she startled, as if suddenly remembering something, and then gestured to the nearby chairs and couches. "All the same, Lord Vim, though I am alone I plan to fulfill my duty. As before with my ancestors, you have my full support, I'm here and ready."

Vim frowned a bit as I went to sit on one of the couches. So that Vim could, and would, hopefully sit next to me and not apart. "Can I ask how you knew to... reach out? To us?" I asked as I did so.

Rivonne took my initiative and joined it. She too took a seat, across from me in the other couch. "My family has been passing down prophecies and stories since we were first founded. One of them was for me in particular. I was to come to Lord Vim's aid once I encountered a specific individual," she said.

My frown deepened as I glanced at Vim, and found him smiling. He stepped over to me, but didn't go straight to sitting down. Instead he rested an arm against the couch's backrest behind me and stayed standing. "See Renn? That's how one should speak of prophecies around me," he said proudly.

Oh...? Oh! I smirked and nodded. "Yes... so you know about all that as well? Really?" I asked. She did indeed speak of prophecies in the correct manner that Vim preferred. She had mentioned them, but hadn't revealed any finer details or even their importance. A normal person would have said what the prophecy was for, the danger it was foretelling, and maybe even the specifics... such as who she was supposed to have, or had, encountered.

Rivonne smiled proudly as she nodded. "That amongst other things."

Interesting...! I wonder if Ronaldo in Lumen, the pirate boy, had been taught similar things by his pirate warlord mother? I should have talked to him more... but I had felt bad about doing so. Less had fallen for the lad and I felt every moment I took from her, even just to talk, was rude.

The boy was human. Less's time with him was short. I didn't want to steal even a moment of it.

"Is that why you're here in SilverCreek...? Or was it just coincidence?" I asked.

Rivonne slowly shook her head. "I... would say both, in a way?" she answered.

I noted her tone. She had just tried to answer without doing so. Which meant if she answered that question too directly, it would have broken Vim's rule concerning prophecies.

"I'm told you're one of the founders of this town," Vim then said.

Rivonne glanced upward a bit, as to look at Vim and not me, and she nodded. "Yes. I alongside four other families basically settled this town. Though my uncle was the original one to being the process. He and others funded, and he even helped scout himself, the area years ago."

Huh... so this was actually a generational plan then? This whole city? Interesting.

"Were you the reason we were able to purchase the land then?" I asked.

Rivonne frowned and shook her head. "No... I in fact wasn't aware that Lord Vim was so involved in the Church of Songs until now! It's honestly too bad, if I or my family had known we could have been very helpful..." She actually sounded hurt, not over the fact we had kept it from her but over the fact that she had not been able to aid us more than she...

What? What was she going to do as to aid us anyway?

"Though that being said I did vote to allow it. Three of us did, only one voted against. The other didn't care, and chose to abstain. The main reason for it was actually the mercenaries. Two of the biggest groups here are surprisingly very religious, to the point we feared if they learned we denied the church authority or entrance it would cause a revolt," Rivonne said, basically confirming what Randle had assumed.

"And the heart...? Where did you get that?" Vim then asked, telling me that he found that a far bigger concern than anything else. I could tell from his tone that he had been waiting to ask about it.

"Ah, my grandfather happened upon it. As you know Lord Vim, Lord Bird's daughter had been a saint. She had left a few prophecies, and..." Rivonne shrugged lightly, knowing she didn't need to say more.

I glanced up at Vim, since I was shocked to hear not just confirmation that Bird had indeed been the father of this family, but had even sired a saint. Why did Vim never tell me these things...!?

Vim though didn't seem to notice my annoyance as he slowly nodded. "Well... thank you for keeping it safe for so long. You did well."

Rivonne beamed him a smile, one that was almost childlike, and I felt my heart hurt a little at the sight of it.

Wasn't this woman basically a family member...? Or at least, a Society member? In all technicalities she should be. Even if human, completely, she was... basically one who should have been born into the Society proper! She was the descendant of one of us, and even had a bloodline that could produce saints. Either of those should have qualified her... I wonder why she wasn't...

Maybe it had something to do with this Bird's antagonism with Light and Celine?

Vim then patted the chair and stepped around it, I found myself slightly forgiving him for his lack of telling me important details as he sat down right beside me. "Well... long story short then. My people are here to open a church and an orphanage," Vim told her.

Rivonne sat up a tad straighter and nodded, and I watched her put on a rather serious expression as she clasped her hands on her lap. "Well, I can do plenty to help with that! Although I am the last of my line, I am proud to say that my family's wealth and influence is still strong... maybe even stronger than ever. I can provide funding, people... I can also even influence the head council of lords. Two of the other families, although powerful, are very indebted to me. One is financially, and the other owes my family their lives. My father had saved them years ago and they've never forgotten it," Rivonne said, listing the things she could offer as I would list the types of drinks I liked.

She was both proud and happy to offer her services, it seemed. To the point I wondered if she'd be offended if we didn't use them.

It made me wonder just what had been told and taught to her, throughout her life, to make her so... loyal. She herself has obviously never met Vim, Bird, or any of us... right? Yet here she was, basically offering her whole life into Vim's service... after only a few minutes of talking.

Actually how did she even know for sure that Vim was Vim...? Maybe she had a painting of him somewhere or something. She had brightened up at the mere sight of him, after all...

"Vim, can I...?" I reached up to grab my hat, but stopped before actually taking it off. He glanced at me, and nodded gently.

"Just mind the door," he said.

Smiling softly I nodded and took my hat off. I had to undo a few pins to do so, but once it was off I sighed with relief. Honestly having to wear it all the time was really starting to annoy me.

"Oh my...! How adorable! I um... Is it rude to ask which line you hail from, Renn?" Rivonne then asked at the sight of my ears.

"I'm a cat. A jaguar, to be specific."

Rivonne frowned at that. "I've never heard of such a cat. No matter, your ears are beautiful! I'm sadly unmarked myself. My mother though had black feathers on her back, and others throughout the generations have had similar markings," Rivonne said.

Huh...! That meant that her family hadn't been purely human at all! Even more of a reason for them to have been in the Society... Or, maybe that meant occasionally the human members did in fact inherit non-human traits...? "Thanks... Don't feel too bad about not having anything, Vim doesn't either," I said with a flutter of an ear at him.

Rivonne frowned as she glanced at him, and then hummed a bit as she leaned back and pondered something. "Right... I suppose you don't have anything outwardly odd about you, do you Lord Vim? I'd never considered it before."

"How'd you know it was him anyway? You didn't hesitate at all to address him as Vim, how'd you know he wasn't an imposter or something?" I asked.

Rivonne grinned at me. "I have his painting. One of my family's heirlooms. It's of him and Lord Bird."

Vim nodded. "Was actually painted by Lughes' wife, Renn."

My ears twitched as I sat up a bit straighter. "I see!" How interesting...! Vim, as far as I was aware, typically destroyed such paintings of himself. That meant he had either trusted, or liked, this family enough to overlook that personal rule of his...

Rivonne nodded happily. "I've a few other things too, but the most telling way was Vim's comment on Lord Bird's relationship with my great-grandmother. Officially, on paper and what we tell the world, she had been married to a human. Only those in the family, or Vim himself, would know that she had in truth been Lord Bird's partner," Rivonne added.

Ah... the comment he had made about him being wrapped around her finger, was it? Maybe that was their little way of informing each other, and not just a random comment he had made.

I liked that. Maybe I should think of something similar for my own human friends, such as Lamp and Roslyn. A way for them to tell friend from foe and stuff... In case one day I had to meet their descendants without them having ever seen or met me before until that moment.

Rivonne then clapped, lightly, and smiled as she sat up a bit. "Please, let me go fetch refreshments! Unless of course you must be off in haste, Lord Vim...?" she then asked.

For a tiny moment I expect Vim to actually decide to leave, instead though... he simply gave her a gentle smile. "That'll be fine. Though I'll not take your whole night from you, I hope you'll forgive if we steal a few hours nonetheless," Vim said.

Rivonne stood with a tiny laugh. "Please! You can have all my hours, each and every one...! Ah... your hat, Lady Renn," Rivonne then pointed at her own head, to remind me.

"Hm...!" I nodded as I went to put it back on, though I didn't pin it since I knew I'd be able to take it off again once she was finished.

Rivonne then nodded happily and stepped away towards the door. "I shall be back promptly. I'll bring a nice sort of options, though I fear my kitchen is a tad unprepared at the moment! We don't get another shipment until next week, and I've had several meetings lately so my stores are a tad famished!" Rivonne happily spoke as she headed for the door, opened it, and then with a tiny bow she left after closing the door.

For a few seconds I listened, to make sure she left... and once her soft footsteps grew distant I sighed softly. "She called me Lady," I said happily.

Vim chuckled at me as he leaned back. "She did."

"You should have said she was a friend, Vim."

"Hadn't I...?" He frowned at me, as if upset I'd accuse him of something he had indeed done.

"You had, but not to this level... do you mind if I get to know her better? Ask questions and whatnot?"

He gently shrugged as he reached over and placed his hand on my back. I sat up a bit straighter at his touch, a bit surprised for him to do so. "Of course Renn. We won't know until we spend some time with her, of course, but her ancestors had been some of the most loyal people I've known. I in fact knew their great-ancestor, a long time ago, even before Bird showed up. They had been bats," he said.

I blinked at that, and felt a tad overwhelmed at the knowledge. "I see," I said softly.

He had a smile on his face, and had been talking with a gentle and happy tone... but I had heard it. Deep in his words, hidden from most if not all, had been sadness.

Vim had likely just thought of something terribly sad. Something that would have broken my heart if he said it aloud.

"Was this what you were expecting, then...?" I asked softly, to slightly change topics. For him.

Vim gently nodded. "Kind of. Now I have to use her help though, lest she feels insulted. It's a tad annoying on my part, but to be honest it's also not. We can use her in small ways that don't burden her while also helping you and the Society out, so everyone wins and is happy," he said.

I nodded at that. Yes, I had too obviously heard her great desire to be of help. And I understood it... she had been raised on prophecies, ones that foretold her assistance to us... and as such saw it as... What? Destiny?

"How many friends, or families, like them are there Vim?" I asked, while doing my best to not focus too deeply on his hand. It was now rubbing my back in a way that made me want to squirm.

"I wish I could say there used to be many... but the truth is there never was. Most are like Ronaldo and his line, people I knew and was friendly with but not really close with. Only a handful had ever been like this one, throughout my whole life," he said.

"Why'd you forget all about them, then...? You didn't remember them until you saw the box," I asked. Even for him, forgetting such loyal people was surprising. Especially since he so deeply valued loyalty.

Vim's hand on my back went still, and he sighed softly at me. "Because I'm a terrible person, Renn."

Hearing him say such a thing hurt. Not just because I knew his real meaning, but because I just made him admit such a thing aloud. It was I who had forced him to say it, and...

Before I could say or do anything I heard voices. Coming down the hallway, I heard Rivonne talking with other women... and the sound of what could only be some kind of cart. I turned to look at the door, though Vim didn't, as I apprehensively waited for the noises to arrive.

Sure enough the door opened and the older woman from earlier joined by a younger girl maybe Celine's age pushed in a large cart littered with drinks and food.

I grinned at the plates and cups upon the cart as it was wheeled in. "Short on stock you said," I teased. There were things on it that even I'd never seen before!

Excitedly standing, as to both help them set up a table and to sneak a few bites, I wasted no time in becoming Rivonne's friend.

To not just find out more of my husband's past, a past he randomly forgets without meaning to, but... to also hopefully set up for a better future.

For everyone.

It was the least I could do, since... like Vim, I too had failed the past. In ways I couldn't explain or even imagine.

So it was time for us to be better.

Or at least, try to.

To do what the world has been expecting us to, since before I'd even been born. To do what Vim's parents had expected of him.

To Stand Tall.

Chapter 602 Vim – A Foundation's Beginning

I sighed as I stepped onto the foundation of the building that Renn and the rest had been working on before I arrived.

The morning sun was struggling to get through some clouds, but they weren't the kind that foretold storms or rain. I could tell by afternoon the skies would be clear and it'd be warm again, which was good... since I planned to spend all day working on this building.

In typical Society fashion they had properly marked and planned their foundations. Little sticks, used as flags, marked not only the building's planned area but also where they'd dig for plumbing and even garden expansions. Randle had obviously overseen it, since out of everyone here only he would have done it as well as it looked... though I guess I probably shouldn't rule Merit out. Although ever since her kingdom fell and she's become something of a lazy recluse, it wasn't proper to judge her in that way anymore. Now she was here. With Renn... fulfilling some desire of the heart, and even possibly a prophecy. For all I knew this fine work had been done by her and not the now one-armed priest...

I stepped over to what would be the building's entrance... and watched the little flag-sticks head toward the road nearby. They planned on making a nice sized entryway, though judging by the other markers

along it they also planned to make tall walls alongside it. Though if they'd be actual walls, or just fences or bushes, I didn't know yet.

Honestly I wasn't surprised that they were building a church first. Even if it wasn't going to be the permanent one they'd use. This was my second day here, and I'd already seen two visitors. One last night came to give Randle a donation, some noble who just returned to town yesterday. He had arrived shortly after Renn and I had left to go see Rivonne. And then there had been another visitor, arriving just before dawn. I had spoken to the man, a hunter, who had come to pray. He was to set out on a month long hunt and had a terrible dream that he would be eaten by a bear, so had come to pray for his soul.

Two in basically a full day's worth of hours since my arrival.

And these last few days of visitors, as far as I've been told, had been slow. Randle had, wisely, gone to inform the local populace that they were officially here but had requested only emergency visits until the church proper had been built, opened, and ordained. It of course didn't keep everyone away, but I'd been told it had made the daily visitor count go from dozens to single digits, which was good.

I honestly wasn't worried too much about any of our members being seen or caught... the encampment they had made was good enough to keep prying eyes out. Unless of course someone just brazenly walked in through the entrance tent, which in theory could happen at any location so it wasn't something I worried about more than usual. But I did worry over how much I'd be able to get done before I had to leave again.

There was a lot to do here. They needed multiple buildings built, paths and walkways, drainage and plumbing, if possible a very nice fence or wall, access needed to be built to the river for a myriad of reasons and that included a potential dock, and then I needed to worry now about... well...

"Prophecies within prophecies," I mumbled as I stopped checking out the foundation.

Rivonne, obviously guided and taught well by her elders, knew better than to speak of any real details concerning any prophecies in front of me... but I had, of course, read between the lines.

She was here out of duty. And that duty was related to something her saintly ancestor had foretold. And it was related to me, which in turn meant it was related to Renn... because there were no prophecies that could outright and only see me as their focus. Odds are the saint, Bird's daughter, had simply misunderstood or had not noticed or recognized Renn or someone else here that had been in it or involved in it.

Then there was Liora...

I reached up to rub my eyes. I of course didn't have a headache, or feel unwell or tired, but by my parents did I wish I felt so. If I did at least then I could justify this terrible gut wrenching worry that was gnawing at me so deeply it made my spine want to...

"That's not a good sigh."

"I hadn't sighed yet," I said, keeping my eyes closed as I listened to Randle who approached. The priest was, surprisingly, not wearing his robes. I had noted him out of the corner of my eye a few minutes ago, but honestly hadn't expected him to actually walk over. I had simply seen him step out of the encampment for a moment to stretch.

Randle chuckled as he stepped over a small flag-stick and up to me. "That had been a sigh all the same, is all well?" he asked.

No. But I didn't want to talk about it with him of all people. "I'm just trying to figure out how much I can do before I need to leave, is all," I said.

Randle frowned at me. "Typically you do not fret over such things at all, no? Why this time?" he asked.

"This is why I just had the thought I didn't want to talk to you about it," I grumbled.

Randle paused, and then he grinned and chuckled again. This time he did so with a bit more humor. "Fascinating!"

I kept the sigh inside he so desperately seemed intent on drawing from me, and glanced the man up and down. I was glad to see he seemed to actually be doing pretty good. He was wearing normal, though plain and older, clothes... he looked healthy and the smile on his face seemed very genuine. Compared to the somewhat sullen and downcast man I'd seen in Telmik, this was basically for him a night and day difference in temperament. I was glad to see it. And it seemed he wasn't fidgeting with his missing arm anymore. Though last night during dinner I had noticed him intend to use his former arm to pick up a cup. Unlike before in Telmik though, after his accident, he had not grown frustrated and had simply swapped hands without even blinking.

One would of course expect someone to adapt and grow comfortable with their new normal, especially after so many months, but... this was a man who was hundreds of years old. Half a millennia or more. Habits were hard to fix for one so old... I knew that well, better than anyone.

Randle happily stopped chuckling and he reached up to rub his chin. He of course didn't do so because he needed to shave or something, he was someone who hadn't grown facial hair his whole life as far as I was aware, but he acted as if he had stubble. "Do you already have requests Vim?" he asked.

I knew he didn't speak of the ones I had here. He was continuing off my statement of me having to leave. "A few... nothing too pressing, of course, but I expect them to come. Can't have nearly two thousand new members basically show up out of the blue and not cause trouble," I said.

The priest nodded. "Isn't that the truth...? You know last night, once I finally got back into bed, I spent a few moments praying about such a thing. I've come to realize I feel relief over not having to worry or stress about such things anymore. It's wrong of me, but..."

I smirked at that. "Well, in a sense you didn't have much choice. So is it wrong to feel so when it's forced upon you?" I asked, referring to his banishment.

Randle frowned at me. "But that argument fails when it was I who initiated the cause of it," he pointed out.

"I'd argue you take it a step further, and so blame the root cause. But that's just me," I said.

Randle sighed but only did so to hide his soft smile. "And then one can only take it another step, and find a different cause. And do so again and again until the dawn of creation."

"Alas," I gestured lightly at my own feet.

Randle at first didn't seem to catch my meaning, for he glanced down and frowned... but then his face contorted into an odd look. One mixed with annoyance and shock. "Vim...!" he chuckled again, his humor winning out over his disdain for me and my obvious blasphemy.

I'd basically just said all faults began with me, at my feet, and thus should be laid before me. It was funny that Randle not only figured it out but found it humorous enough to chuckle, even if in distaste.

"Only you could say such a thing in jest, yet also be completely serious!" Randle said.

"Right?" It had been a good one. It was too bad Renn hadn't been here to witness it...

I glanced away from the priest and to the encampment nearby. I couldn't see anyone, but I both heard people talking lightly and saw the morning fire being started. Its gray smoke was rising from the center of the tents. Odds are breakfast and morning tea were being readied.

Knowing Renn she was in the middle of all the commotion. I felt her at this distance, rather easily, but I couldn't tell if she was still in her tent or in the center one... thanks to the positioning of the tents themselves. Her tent was between me and the center tent.

She was so close... yet so far.

Per my request, Renn had invited young Liora into her tent. With Oplar here, Sap and so many more, tent space was now becoming a concern. Another reason for me to hurry and build more buildings. But it wasn't just a matter of not wanting the human saint to have to sleep with someone we didn't really trust or know, but instead my desire to keep both Renn and Liora safe.

Renn keeping the young human close would help protect her. The closer they got, the more likely Liora would have dreams concerning Renn's upcoming future... which would give me chances to hopefully deter any unpleasant surprises.

So for now she and Liora were roommates. Which meant I was basically homeless. I didn't mind, of course, I only needed a few hours of sleep every so often anyway. But it wasn't a matter of my needing sleep that was bothering me...

I had been looking forward to just being with her. Up close.

But maybe it was for the best. Even whispering here was not enough to keep one's words safe and private. Too many had far too good of hearing for such a thing.

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"I take it the meeting went well?" Randle then asked.

For a tiny moment I wasn't sure what he meant. The ship I just saved, maybe? But no, he meant the one Renn and I had last night. With Rivonne.

"Yes. They're a human family, old friends. Do you remember Bird? Lawrence's brother? They had been very close," I said. There was no reason to hide it, especially since Rivonne planned to visit Renn and vice-versa... and supposedly on a constant basis.

"Wow... that was... what, a hundred and some years ago? Quite a surprise they still remember, or that you do," Randle noted.

I nodded. "Yes. She plans to visit Renn, and to help when and where she can. She's basically offered all of her resources and status to our cause, or at least... to this one. Not so much the Society. She's one of the main founders of this city, so I'm sure you can use her well," I said.

"Oh my... a surprise benefactor. I'd question the odds of it, but considering you and Renn I shall not," he said with a nod.

I scoffed at him. "Don't get me started. Keep an eye on her for me, though, and Renn too while you're at it. The woman, this Rivonne, and Renn hit it off... but she sees herself as a servant to Renn I fear. Renn won't like that once it becomes an issue," I said.

Randle slowly nodded. "Yes... human is she? They can become quiet... odd, when they think we're special in such a way," he agreed.

"Particularly Renn. Humans have a hard enough time to differentiate us from themselves as it is, let alone one associated with me," I said. It was why Rivonne saw Renn as someone to basically worship... It wasn't just the fact that Renn was my wife, it was the human misunderstanding and thinking that Renn was more like me than not.

"Hm... is this the first human she's had to deal with such fascinations?" Randle asked.

I pondered that for a moment and decided to shake my head. "She's dealt with a few similar types... and Rivonne might not end up that bad once they spend more time together. Renn's good at making people feel friendly and lower their guard, after all," I said.

"All the same..." Randle nodded, saying nothing more as he basically agreed to keep an eye on something that concerned me. He of all people, one who spent nearly his whole life enraptured by faith and surrounded by it, knew best how to handle such people and situations. At least amongst the group here.

I shifted and noted the sky was emptying of clouds. There wasn't much wind down here, but up there it must be a bit stronger than usual. Plus it was getting warmer.

It'd be good weather to work. I think I'll start with the church itself... then work on the irrigation and drainage systems...

"By the way Vim... I know you hate speaking of it, but I must."

"Hm?" I ignored him for a moment as I studied the way the surrounding field rolled ever so slightly towards the river. There were two.... Three, maybe, hills between here and the river. That would help both section off the buildings and keep them more private, and also make me have to really plan the water system lest there would be flooding or clogging.

"Liora. Can we talk about her?" he asked.

Ah. The real reason for our morning visit then. "Within reason. Go ahead," I said as I kept studying the land around me. honestly even with the few hills it was good... flat enough to do what I needed, but not so flat that I'd have a hard time directing water flow.

"I am to take it the story she's telling is the true one? That you picked her up in Nevi, unbeknownst to anyone else?" he asked.

I nodded slowly, keeping my eyes off him. "Yes. Rapti and Kaley know, as you likely heard, but yes otherwise no one else knows of her. I decided to bring her here since I didn't want to side-track to Telmik just yet, I figured she'd be safe enough here for now. Plus, much to my chagrin, she's had prophecies concerning Renn... so..." I shrugged lightly.

"So you brought her here, in hopes of either tackling them head on or outright subverting them through other means. Well... I can't say I'm upset with you. Even if basically excommunicated, I'm still an acting reverend. I'd never turn aside a child, let alone one blessed by our gods," he said.

"That's fine, I'll just be upset with myself enough for both of us," I said.

He chuckled at me again and nodded. "Yes, more than enough for two I'm sure. That being said, another question."

I shifted ever so slightly and nodded at him. What next...? Sap maybe? The shark, or whatever she was, that Oplar had decided to dump on them? Maybe instead he had another request completely unrelated to our fellows...?

"I never meant to pry... as you know I'm very against such intrusions. But I've overheard something that I'd like to confirm, if able," Randle said, speaking calmly.

"You can ask it, Randle. I get it. I was just thinking myself that your little living arrangement has made it... difficult to have private conversations, so I understand," I said.

Randle gave me an odd smirk. "Ah, but for different reasons are we concerned I'm sure. But yes... I overheard your wife and the others mention a few things. Namely possibly more members showing up...? Namely a saint or two...?" he asked.

My first instinct was to frown, since I wasn't sure what he meant... but I realized he had likely overheard Renn talk of Narli. Or at least, hint at her. Maybe while talking to Liora last night... I had overheard the two whisper for a time after dark in their tent. "It's possible... Though I expect no one else to really show up until this place is more suitable," I said.

Honestly I wasn't sure if Berri and her family could really move here and live here... Unlike Renn, or even those like Tundra who also wanted to come here, they couldn't really safely hide their features. The large pointy horns were not something one could just cover with a hat or face-mask. Even if I built a properly secluded area, something that could let them roam freely without worry or intrusion, it was still too... well... human. But the same could be said about Lumen or Telmik lately...

"I see... so I've somehow gotten myself involved in something far more important than I expected, have I...? And here I thought I'd just settle down and pass my last years quietly," he said with a small smile. He didn't seem too bothered, or upset, over the idea at all.

"If you start yapping about fate and whatnot I'll bury you under this church I'm about to raise," I warned... lightly.

Randle chuckled at me and shook his head. "No, no. I'll just think it, not say it."

Good. Maybe...

"Though, I do have a tiny request if you'd hear it."

"Amongst the building and whatnot?" I asked. He'd asked for my help while here to at least finish the church, not that he had really needed to ask.

He nodded slowly... and then turned to gesture at the tents. I glanced at them, but didn't see any reason for him to have done so. "My companion, Krass, is... near her end," he said.

Hm...? I nodded slowly as I waited for him to continue. I had noticed the old human woman had been... surprisingly old for this venture. She was likely in her late seventies, maybe in the eighties. For this era, for a human, that was not the age one undertook something like this without caution. At least, not typically. I had figured she come along because her son, or grandson or whatever he was, had come here as well. Tristan or something.

Randle sighed as he gently shook his head. "I had wanted to bring others, but she had been incessant. Tristin, her adopted son, wanted to come and she didn't want to part with him. Her last family and all. Well... I fear the trip here had not been kind to her," he said softly.

"What would you like me to do, Randle...? Humans at that age can fall ill from a cold wind, it's not something I can really change," I said. I wasn't going to comment that if the trip here had signed her

death warrant than Randle and the rest were partly to blame. They shouldn't have let her join them if her health had been that at risk.

He slowly shook his head. "No, no... I don't expect you to be able to cure her or anything, no. Instead... I was wondering if you'd be willing to ask Renn a favor for me," he said.

I shifted and frowned rather deeply. "Hm...? Something you'd not ask her yourself...?" I asked. I myself have seen Randle and Renn talk calmly, and openly, even since before we had arrived here. There was no reason for me to expect him incapable of giving her a request himself. Nor did I think he was like the so many others who thought they couldn't speak or interact with her without first asking me for permission... In Randle's case you'd think he'd be the exact opposite, asking her instead of me first and foremost.

"Well, in truth it's a request for you. Because you're the one who will have to give. Renn wouldn't hesitate to agree, I expect," he said.

My frown deepened. "Out with it. You've lost an arm yet are twice as windy, what is wrong with you?" I asked. He used to be so abrupt and short with me! Yet here he was chatting on and on...

The priest smirked at that and nodded. "I'd like to ask Renn to paint her. I heard from Merit that she's rather skilled in such a thing, and... I'd like to honor her memory with such a gift. For the boy, and the rest of us. Not all of us have the memory that your wife was blessed with," he said.

Oh... "Why ask me...? Renn wouldn't hesitate at all to agree to such a thing," I said. In fact Renn would be so humbled by it she'd likely cry.

"Because I fear it must happen soon. Else it'll be too late. And so, in a sense, I'm asking to steal your precious time together," he said.

Ah.

I blinked as I realized what Randle was actually asking, and saying. He was basically asking for permission to cut my time short with Renn, while I was here, even shorter. Because it would take her hours, likely a few a day for an untold number of days, to finish such a painting. And that meant my time, which was already being cut short thanks to circumstances... even shorter.

"You're more than welcome to ask it of her, Randle. Think no more of it. But when she ends up painting more and more, and I end up having to build a whole extra building just for the paintings, you can then beg me for forgiveness as I complain about it," I said.

Randle smiled and nodded. "I've no doubt. Though hopefully she'll not paint anymore heresy motifs. I heard Merit bragging that she was going to hang up one of her pictures, one of the Epoch Cross, on the first wall we put up. I shiver to think how I'm going to handle that," Randle said.

I couldn't help it, I laughed. "I bet she will!" Oh my! I'd nearly forgotten all about that...! Renn had indeed painted an Epoch Cross... though not knowingly...! So Renn and Merit had brought those paintings then, had she...? That meant they also had the one of Rungle and Stumble, too...?

"You laugh, but it will be quite a hassle Vim. No one here likely remembers that cross, so it's not like anyone will notice... but to hang such evil in the house of our gods..." Randle sighed as he shook his head and shivered, as if he had just felt a chill run down his spine. Likely had.

"I'll mention it to Renn..." I said as I contained my own amusement. Although I didn't want to force my own opinion on such a thing, I also didn't want Merit to just hang such a thing up all willy-nilly. Last thing we needed was for someone to recognize the cross and then do something foolish upon seeing it...

"Do so gently. I do think Merit had said it mostly in jest, but one never knows with her," Randle said.

"Eh, she doesn't mean it. You know her, Randle, she's lost many close friends to those lunatics. She'd not do so with true ill intent, just..." I wasn't sure how to properly phrase it, since in fact Merit would do it maliciously. In her own way, at least.

"No matter. Now that I got all the heavy stuff out of the way, may I ask your thoughts on the blueprint so far?" Randle then switched topics, likely because he didn't want to keep talking about Merit and her obvious disdain and lack of faith.

I decided to oblige him, since it'd help me get started on my work quicker... and to also distract myself.

Renn was going to ignore me today. Again. Within reason, at least. I had heard her laughter a few moments ago, before I myself had laughed. She was enjoying her morning, her breakfast likely, with who she considered friends and family. Though I was not amongst them.

Which was fine.

I liked hearing her so happy. I loved seeing her so content and... just excited and happy with her life. It brought me great pleasure and made me feel content to know, in Renn's eyes at least, all was right with the world.

I knew she had problems to address. Things she wanted to talk to me about... but I was sure they'd be things we could handle. Kind of like Randle's little worries. Stuff that might annoy me, or take time to handle, but nothing that would ruin this moment or happiness... at least for now.

My problems though...? Completely different story.

So... for now I'd let her be. Let her live. And just do what I always did.

Help in the little ways I could and knew how.

Chapter 603 Renn – A Noisy, Sweaty, Conversation

Liora snored when she slept.

Not too strongly... but to me, it was loud. Loud enough that sometimes I ended up putting my pillow over my head, as to try and block it out a bit.

Right now though I had no plan to bury my ears in soft feathers and cloth... Instead I slowly snuck out of my tent, and out into the calm dark.

Our encampment was dead quiet. A few tents had snoring, the worst coming from Oplar's tent at the moment. I glanced around, to check and make sure all the tents really were dark and found they were.

No one was awake, it seemed. No candles or fires were lit. Or if someone was awake, they were awake while lying in bed and staying dead quiet.

Looking up to the sky, I smiled at the bright moon. It was right overhead, and was full and really lit up. It made the world around me rather bright, so bright I doubted even old Klass needed a lamp to see around right now.

I enjoyed such a sky. I couldn't count how many thousands of time's I'd lay on the ground staring up at such a moon and stars, or walking under it. From back before I'd joined the Society. But such things weren't why I was sneaking away right now...

Quietly making my way out of the encampment, I made sure to secure the entrance tent as well as I could after leaving it. Usually it was tied from the other side, as to try and keep people from just walking in, but I couldn't seal it in such a way from outside. Not like one could a normal door, at least. But I didn't plan to be gone too long, nor did I plan to go too far...

Looking around, I spent a moment to stare at the distant town. It was dark around the edges, such as the noble's district and nicer home areas, but in the center and near the river it was lit up. There were torches and lamps aplenty, and even from here I could hear the sounds of people. Odds are most of the sounds and lights I was seeing were from the morning shift of the mine. They were getting ready to work, like usual they were up very early... about this time of night, a few hours before sunrise. They'd work to about noon and then another crew would take over, who would then swap with this crew again tomorrow night.

I myself didn't want to imagine such a life. The work was hard and not safe at all... not only did I personally know those who have suffered from accidents related to mines, in Nebl and his family, but I'd also seen and heard of others here in town who had also been hurt in the mine. They've not had any large collapses or anything, but there has been plenty of accidents and a few deaths it seemed.

Honestly I kind of wanted to go see what the hubbub was about. It was lit up enough, and noisy enough, that there was likely a busy restaurant or something right now... and although not really hungry, I'd have likely enjoyed going to see it... maybe even partake in it.

But that glowing town and all its interesting things was not my focus.

Turning away from the town, and our encampment of tents, I headed for the nearby construction area. The one that Vim, Oplar, and even Randle had been busy at throughout most of the day.

From here, a few feet from the encampment, I could see the beginnings of a building. There were now a few walls and support beams up, where before had been nothing but open field. I could also see the stacks of lumber, tables and other things that Vim and the rest have been using and building to help aid them in the construction of the church... and still working away, in the dead of night, was my husband.

Right now he was digging. A fair bit away from the construction area, over near one of the biggest hills on our property. He looked a little silly at this angle, since he was about half buried and as such I could only see his top half... and the shovel that occasionally flung upward, sending dirt into the air as it did.

Picking up my pace, I smiled happily as I wondered if I should offer to help or not. I planned to, of course, but I wasn't sure if I'd be able to safely dig in the dark. The moon was bright and overhead, and as such I could see clearly... but he wasn't just digging he was doing so in a hole. A hole that was likely dark...

It didn't take me long to walk up to Vim's... hole. It wasn't really a hole, but rather a ditch. Now that I was up close I could see it ran all the way towards the church, or rather where the church would be.

"Making tunnels, Vim?" I asked with a grin as I heard his shovel dig into the dirt... but not move from it. He paused in his digging as he glanced up from his hole at me, and for the tiniest of moments... I debated jumping in with him.

"Feels like it, to be honest," Vim said as he sighed and stood up straight. As he did he left the shovel he'd been using in dug into the ground, and he brushed his hands off as he smiled up at me. As he did, I found myself really studying him. And not only because it wasn't often that I got a chance to look down upon him as I was now.

He didn't have a shirt on. I knew it was not because he was sweaty, or would get sweaty, but instead so he'd not get anything too dirty and ruined... But even without a layer of sweat I still found myself rather impressed... at least I was, until I saw something weird.

"Vim... what's that?" I asked upon seeing the strange discoloration on his chest.

"Hm?" He frowned at me and glanced downward, but not at himself. He instead looked around his tunnel-hole thing, as if expecting a creature or object to have suddenly appeared or something.

"On your chest... Vim is that a bruise?" I asked. I couldn't believe it! It had to be a bruise, since that was what it looked like... but it was terrible! It took up nearly half his chest, from his right side to the middle of his left chest and was such a deep and dark color I knew it was likely blue and purple if not entirely black! I'd never seen such a bad bruise on him before. Even after the events in Lumen, or when he had dealt with Landi's monarch or that god Stance he hadn't had such bad bruising! Or at least, not ones that had lasted days after the fact!

Had a tree fallen on him or something...?

"Ah... yes. It is," Vim stopped looking around and looked back up at me with a frown as he nodded, as if he was disappointed that something more interesting hadn't happened.

"And... just where or how did you get that? Did you get that fighting the monarch?" I asked. He hadn't even commented on the monarch he'd fought, to save the ship, so I had thought it had gone perfectly fine! Obviously not if half his upper body was black and blue! There was no doubt with such bruising that he had been hurt rather badly inside... who knows how many bones or organs had been hurt for him to get so discolored!

"Hm... in a way, yes..." Vim answered a little oddly, even though I had expected him to not answer directly. I debated kicking some dirt and grass at him, since our different positions with me up above him would have made it easy to do so... but instead I just knelt down near the edge of his tunnel-hole. Not too close, since I didn't want to fall in and ruin my clothes, but close enough to look him in the eye.

"Vim..." I groaned at him... which made him give me a soft smile as he stepped forward towards me. There must have been a pile of dirt or something near the edge, for Vim ended up getting a bit taller and raising upward as he did so, to the point he was nearly eye-level with me once he was standing up against the side of the hole.

"Before you get me to break and spill all my secrets, is everything okay? I figured you'd be asleep by now," he asked.

I glared at him for a moment, since he had sounded so utterly sincere and worried for me that it almost made me forget about the bruise entirely. Especially since now that he was closer, I could smell him all of a sudden. It was his typical, barely noticeable, scent... one that didn't have a hint of stink or sweat, let alone anything else, but it was still his... and it was the first time I'd genuinely noticed it in some time. Plus here and now during this moment...

Gosh...! "I can smell you now, why is it I can't smell you sweat?" I asked.

He blinked and glanced down at himself. He brushed a hand along his chest, running it down his side as he did and pulled it away and shook his head. "No sweat to smell...?" he said after confirming he had none.

"I've felt you sweat before, so I know it's possible... why is it sometimes you do and sometimes you don't?" I asked.

"Actually, that's a good question... considering until I met you I had thought I had lost the ability to sweat at all," he said.

I blinked at that. "Huh...?"

"Before that Renn, at least comment on if everything is okay or not... I of course know it is, but..." Vim said with a gentle nod past me, likely meaning to imply the tents I'd just left and the people sleeping within them.

"Ah, yes... all is well, Vim. Everyone's sleeping, at least I think they are," I said. He never changes does he...? At least, not in certain ways. He was always worried and on guard for our people, even when he knew deep down all was well.

"Thank you. And what I meant by that is my body works in a way where it, usually, shouldn't sweat. Because if I'm sweating it means I'm strained... and in that scenario my body should be adjusting itself, as to make it not so," he said.

Absorbing his words, I hummed for a moment as I reached out and touched his forehead. He allowed me, of course, and I found the feeling of cool and clean skin... in fact I didn't even feel any dirty or anything, which was odd since he's been digging for hours. Maybe in his hair?

As I went to ruffle his hair, to feel for any clumps of dirt, I found myself really enjoying the moment. "You mean sweating under strain as in physical exhaustion, right...? But what about... you know, other stuff? What about being scared or something? Emotions?" I asked.

"Well... that's my real meaning. Yes, when I sweat it's typically not because of something physical but something deeper. Emotional, as you call it. That's what I mean... until I met you I thought myself beyond such things," he said, speaking calmly as I messed with his hair. I liked how smooth and cool it felt. Although Vim himself had been working hard, he and his body weren't too hot. His hair felt the kind of cold that a blanket had when left alone for a few nights, the kind of cool that was great when you wrapped yourself around it.

"Do I make you nervous Vim...?" I asked, teasing him a little. I knew I did on occasion, but not in the usual way. Usually when I made him uneasy it was because my flirting was more effective than he expected, or more often when my questioning went in directions he feared more than anyone could comprehend.

"Should I be nervous now?" he asked back.

My hand went still, while still tangled in his hair, and I groaned as I glared down at him. "Remember my list...?" I warned.

"Dirt and hole, sure... but it's not technically a well?" he suggested with a grin.

I flicked him on the forehead and pulled my hand away from him. He was dangerous to touch right now, it seemed. "As much as I love your seeming willingness, it falls flat when I know you know I'll say no... and when I know this is just your way to make me forget about the obvious," I said as I pointed down at his chest.

Vim huffed at me. "Wasn't my intention Renn. I told you, I plan to tell you... a lot, while I'm here. It's just... hard," he said as he stepped forward.

I leaned back as Vim suddenly climbed up out of the trench-hole. He did so right in front of where I'd been kneeling, and as such nearly bumped into me as he did. If I had not paused and knelt down a bit away from the edge he'd likely have pushed me over. And because of that, for a brief moment, my heart began to thump like crazy... until he stepped aside and stood up next to me.

For a few heartbeats, as I calmed myself, I remained kneeled down... and then I finally stood up next to him. I didn't try to hide my sudden shock from him, since I knew he likely could hear my heartbeat... since it was the dead of night and so quiet, but I did try to keep my flushed face from being seen as I glanced around on purpose.

I'd just expected him to push me down and kiss me or something, just now. After all, up here would have been fine. Especially since the smell of dirt hadn't lingered on him at all.

"You okay...?" Vim asked gently, obviously because of my still hard thumping heart.

"Mhm... So? Why are you digging such a weird trench thing?" I asked, using his own tactic to my benefit.

Vim chuckled at me and pointed the other way, towards the river which I could hear distantly. "I plan to make an underground sewage system. It'll pour out into the river," he said.

"Oh... That deep?" I asked. It was deep enough that if I got into the hole I'd likely not be able to see over the edges of it.

"Deeper actually. This is just the first layer."

Huh... it was too bad I was so fixated and busy on everyone else... I'd have loved to do this all with Vim and learn it...

Maybe I should spend a day or two with him instead of everyone else... I mean everyone here except Sap and Oplar would be here living with me for the foreseeable future so... maybe it'd be fine...

"And the church...? How's that going?" I asked.

Vim reached over and patted me on the lower back, directing me to join him in walking. I did so and glanced at the way he put himself between me and the trench as he did. "We'll be done with at least the basics in a week or so. I'll be focusing most of my attention on the foundation for now, stuff like this drainage system and a basement and freezer too," Vim said as he basically ignored the fact he had just put himself between me and my accidentally falling into the hole.

Always so observant over the littlest of things... even during such moments as this.

"I thought I heard Oplar say you were only a couple days from finishing it," I said. I'd overheard her happily say so during dinner. She was glad that the church would be done before she left.

"It will be, in the sense you can start using it and whatnot. I meant the additions as well, I'll be building a kitchen and some extra rooms to it too," he said.

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Ah... so he meant the church itself would be done, but not the whole building which would be all those other additions.

"Did the trees we cut down work fine?" I asked.

"Yes they are and will. Though I plan to build a storehouse as to put some fresh timber in it to dry and cure. For the real buildings later," he said.

Right... Oplar had mentioned that too. "So I'll not get to enjoy the tent much longer then," I said.

Vim chuckled at me as we neared the foundation of the church. It smelled like wood here, freshly cut and sawdust. "Actually I've been meaning to ask, and I guess this is a good time to do so... what's the plan, Renn?" he asked.

"For?"

"Your home...?"

Oh... "You're asking if I want it built here, or elsewhere," I said as I understood. Merit had already brought it up too.

He nodded.

I sighed softly as I glanced at the nearest piece of church. Vim and I came to a stop, stepping a few dozen feet from his trench, and I crossed my arms. "I didn't want to be too far from everyone... but if I don't require it, it'll cause problems, won't it?" I said.

"Yes... particularly if you want certain people to be able to move here and or visit you, such as those like Narli or Sap," Vim said.

Another sigh filled my lungs and left as I shook my head. "What do I do then, Vim...? What do you suggest?" I asked.

"Personally...? I think you should make two homes," he said.

"Two...?" Did he mean to say he wanted me to go back to his idea of making multiple locations where we could stay at? I glanced at him as he stepped away and over to a table. One that didn't just have tools, such as hammers and saws, but also had cups and a jug of what I assumed was water on it. He went to pouring some of the water into one of the cups, but he didn't drink it. He instead stepped over and offered it to me.

I took it, though did so not because I was thirsty. It's been a while since Vim fed me, or... what? Refreshed me...?

Pondering the word for a moment, I decided to ask him about it. "You just gave me water, Vim," I said.

"Yeah...?"

"So... would I say you just fed me? Watered me? Refreshed me?" I asked as I went ahead and took a sip.

Vim chuckled at me. "Well in proper usage watered wouldn't work, because you'd have to be unconscious or something. In this case I'd say I slaked your thirst," he answered.

Slaked...? So like quenched or satisfied, I guess... "But is that really the same? I mean, you fed me... but you didn't nourish me, at least not in that way," I pointed out.

Vim nodded. "True... but that's just the way it is, I guess."

I hummed as I took another drink, and realized on the second gulp that the water was actually pretty cool and fresh. Probably thanks to the cold night. "So...? What do you mean by two homes?" I asked, going back to topic.

"I mean what it sounds like. Let's build you a home here, a real one or maybe one like the mansio or other buildings throughout the Society. Then let's also build you a more permanent and proper one elsewhere, once this place is set up and safe enough for you and I to leave it be. Personally I think we should build it somewhere... private. So that those like Sap and Narli can visit you without worry, if not even live with you even," he suggested.

"Thus kind of defeating the whole point of me being here in the first place..." I said with a sigh.

"Not really, Renn. It will take a year or two at least to properly set this place up in full. That will give you plenty of time to settle down a bit and enjoy your friends and family. Plus as I said I'm not outright saying to not still build a home here. You easily could. Just wanted to know what your plans are," he said.

"I want to make a home, even if just a place I only visit once every so often," I said as I stared down at the cup in my hands. It was half empty now, maybe I had been thirsty and just hadn't noticed it.

Vim slowly nodded at that. "I understand perfectly. Or well... to be honest I don't. Not really. But I understand it will make you happy," he said.

"You... don't understand? How so?"

"I've not had a home, not a real one, since my parents died Renn. I don't have that desire as you do."

For a small moment I thought of his supposed homes. Such as that cavern, the one with crystals, that he had made... I was going to accuse him of lying, if only in part, but realized the truth of it.

He's forgotten those places. Without a care. Because to him they weren't homes, they were just... places to store stuff. To rest at, if needed.

Places of purpose, not homes.

"I hope I change that one day, Vim," I said softly.

He smiled at me. "So do I. And not to ruin this lovely moment... I'd like to say a few things. I think I'm ready," he said with a nod.

"Oh...? Okay...?" I nodded too and stood up a bit straighter. I wonder what he wanted to say...? I figured it was about this place, the people here, or maybe the ship and those he saved... but...

Vim pointed at his chest, and for a tiny moment I forgot why he was doing so... and then saw his bruises again. "A man named Havoc gave me these. As I pulled him into the depths and took his life," he said.

I gulped a suddenly dry mouth. "A man..." I whispered. Not a monarch.

Vim slowly nodded. "A god. Or at least, a god as you'd likely know one as. Like Stance," he said.

My grip on the cup tightened, but thankfully I didn't spill or break it. "So... not a monarch...?" I asked.

"There had been a monarch, yes. But it became irrelevant once I dealt with Havoc... and... well..." Shifting ever so slightly, I wished I had not hidden my tail. It was squirming like mad beneath my pants. Still, I patiently waited for Vim to find his words... and after a few moments he nodded and found it. "He had come to speak to me. To... make me an offer," he said.

My eyes narrowed, and Vim became a bit darker... though I wasn't sure if it was because my mind was in a haze as it tried to understand all he was saying or if clouds had suddenly moved overhead. I didn't care to check, as I nodded slowly. "An offer...? Of...?" I asked, and didn't like how my voice sounded distant. As if it hadn't even been me who had spoken.

"Your life, Renn."

I blinked, and after spending a few moments to study his serious expression... I slowly shook my head. "I don't understand."

Vim took in a deep breath, which made his bruised chest stick out a bit more as he nodded. "Havoc threatened your life. You. As to get me to agree to something... something I... well..." he went quiet, and my heart nearly thumped up out of my throat as I held myself back from throwing the cup at him.

"Vim...!" I groaned, don't shut up now!

He flinched and nodded again. "He revealed there are a lot more of them alive than I thought. Gods, I mean... and they figured something out. They figured out how to do something they've been trying to do since before I was even born. And well... he threatened your life, in exchange for my help. In a way. And... well..."

I dropped the cup as I groaned and reached up to both grab my hat and pull it off and to cover my eyes.

By his parents! What was he saying...!

"I know...! I know! I'm trying my best here, Renn!"

"Why's your best tip-toeing around such dire things, Vim...! What do you mean!" I groaned at him as I shook my hat a bit in the air, as if to shake away his stupidity.

Vim gestured lightly around us and... I threw my hat at him as he shrugged. He caught it, and I went to pick up and then throw the cup at him too. Before I could though I noticed his look.

Standing in front of me, not far from the table of tools... was a man who looked lost.

The sight of him being so... unsure of himself made me hesitate. Because it told me how serious he was being.

Vim didn't get lost. Even when actually lost, he was calm. Stoic. Even-headed... yet...

"I know, Renn... I know... I um... well..." Vim began to stumble with his words as he gently grabbed my hat with both of his hands, kneading it between them as if for comfort. "Well..."

"So...? What happened? Am I going to die?" I asked as I found myself strangely calming down. But I wasn't calm. In fact I was rather upset.

He should not have waited this long to tell me this...! This is one of those things he should have said right away!

"What...? Why are you going to die?" he asked, sounding worried now. Which was funny, since I had thought him worried before... now I realized he hadn't been worried just stressed and anxious.

"You didn't agree, right? So am I going to die now?" I asked, raising my voice.

For a few longer seconds than was likely necessary... Vim only stared at me, and then he smiled.

"What...? You just automatically assume I'd never agree to anything a god said or offered?" he asked.

"Well... duh? You hate them. So much so it's confusing. Or... are you saying you did...?" I asked, suddenly very concerned. What if he had agreed? What then...? Then... why would he have a huge bruise from an attack from a god...?

Vim took in a deep breath and sighed it out as he shook his head. "No... I killed him. But...!" he didn't get to finish as I bent down and finally picked up the cup, only to finally throw it at him. It missed, went wide and hit the table and bounced off and into the grass. At least it hadn't broken.

"Vim!"

"I know! Just... Let me say it...!" he said as he raised a hand as I stepped forward. I felt like hitting him.

I stopped a step or so away from him, close enough I could whack him but no closer... and waited.

He nodded down at me and sighed. He obviously was not afraid of my, likely inevitable assault, but I didn't care. Even if I broke bones I was going to make him realize how stupid he was being!

"Havoc threatened your life... basically he said he and another god noticed you during my fight with Stance. And as such threatened you to get me to do something for them, for him, which I didn't agree to... that I'd never agree to. I chose to kill him instead for..."

"What was it?" I asked, interrupting him.

Vim flinched. "Renn..."

"Vim, if my life is on the line don't I deserve to know...? Where's your so called ethos at? Your pride? Plus I'm your wife! It's not even like I'm just some random person or something!" I said, squeezing my hands into fists as I drew closer. As I stepped closer my tail found its way out of my pants. I ignored the feeling of my pants actually slipping down a bit off my waist, since my tail had squirmed out of them in such a way that dislodged them. The feeling of my tail now free to twitch and squirm wildly without being bothered actually made me calm down a bit.

"Yes... of course, you're right. I just..." Vim took in a deep breath, shifted my hat in his hands again... and nodded. "If I tell you, I have to tell you more. So much more..." he whispered after a moment.

"Maybe you should, Vim," I said.

His eyes narrowed... and he slowly nodded. "I know."

"So?"

He coughed, but not because he had to clear his throat. "Their method of seeing you... of realizing who you are, and who and what you are to me, is something all gods can do. Within reason," he said.

My ears fluttered as my shoulders slowly slouched and I leaned back. "Okay...?" I gave him permission to continue.

He nodded. Stiffly. "Which means whether I want to admit it or not, no matter what, the other gods will eventually know who you are. Either way, inevitably, if they don't already," he said quickly.

"So...? They already knew about me, you said so yourself," I said.

"Ah. Woops. I uh... no. They hadn't. Part of his deal was he was going to help hide you from them, basically. His threat was to keep your existence a secret, in essence keeping you alive by not alerting the other gods who are you to me."

I frowned at him. "You're saying if any god at all learns that I'm... what, your wife, then I am going to die?" I asked.

Vim only nodded.

"Why...?" I whispered.

"Isn't it obvious, Renn...?"

I blinked at him, but didn't answer... because I knew why.

"Because I love you," he said though, as if not realizing I had understood.

I gulped, and suddenly wished I hadn't thrown the cup at him. "So... I'm doomed...? Is that what you're saying?" I asked.

"No. Of course not. You're still alive, aren't you?" he said.

"Until these gods learn of me, you mean," I said.

He shook his head. "No. I'll not let that happen."

For a long moment I just stared at the man who didn't seem to realize what he was saying... or realize how wildly crazy he was sounding even if he did.

I mean really... he was basically saying there were a bunch of gods, and that if they found out about my existence then I was going to die. All... because he loved me. As if it was everything they desired, just to harm and kill something he cherished. Yet those same gods, or at least one or two of them, had been willing to work a deal over my life for... what? He hadn't said what yet, had he...?

And I thought I had been about to go crazy over all the prophecies...! He was acting even crazier!

But he wasn't crazy, was he?

"Celine and the others foresaw me. Years before I showed up. I was supposed to be with you hundreds of years ago," I said.

Vim blinked... and then blinked again as he suddenly frowned. "Gosh... really?"

I studied his frown and felt... strangely relieved to see how genuine and shocked it was.

That was not the frown of him hiding something behind it. He hadn't lied just now to me. He hadn't known. And now he was glaring at me with a slightly upset look, having realized I had just brought up a very important prophecy.

"Sorry... for saying it like that," I said, apologizing. I had done it because I took advantage of the moment. He was in slight duress, obviously, so I figured if I said it now I'd be able to get a genuine reaction out of him. And I had.

"Um... if I accept, will you accept mine too...?" he asked.

"No... Maybe," I back stepped from my first decision, since it had instantly made him flinch and close his eyes in pain.

Vim opened his eyes, and for a long moment we went to staring at each other again. He now looked tired... and...

Smiling softly I reached out and sure enough as I placed my hand on his chest... I felt sweat.

"Imagine that," I teased as I felt his sweat. I planned to sniff it in a moment, to see if I could smell anything different or not. Even from only half an arm's length away I couldn't, so I doubted it but I wanted to test anyway.

Really wasn't fair that he didn't stink even when he was supposed to. Why wasn't I like that yet?

With my hand on his chest, Vim deeply sighed at me... and was about to say something, but he was interrupted. This time not by me.

"I'm going back to bed."

I jumped, nearly, and pulled my hand away from Vim as I turned to watch Angie step away. Merit was standing where the young bison had just been, and was shaking her head at me with a weird look. "I warned her that you two would start flirting, or worse," she said to me.

"Merit...! Angie...?" I groaned as I realized now why Vim had stopped going into detail mid-way through our conversation. That hadn't been him failing to find his courage to tell me, but rather the opposite. He had been fully ready to have the conversation, in full. It was just... we suddenly had company and he hadn't wanted to say certain things in front of them...

Merit giggled at me as she turned to watch Angie leave. The young bison yawned as she headed back to camp, alone. Luckily, if it was lucky at all, it seemed only they were here or had been here... I didn't see or hear anyone else nearby.

"Well, we had been noisy Renn..." Vim said gently as he reached over and gently patted my back.

I snarled at him and slapped his chest and side, right on the darkest spot of his bruise. He of course didn't even flinch, but it had made a nice loud sound that echoed in the night so it made me feel better. Huffing at him, and myself, I stormed away from him and towards Merit.

She had a huge grin on her face as I approached. "Sorry, I was curious and Angie tried stopping me then we both ended up coming here and..." Merit began to ramble off a half-hearted apology and excuse, but I knew better than to actually grow upset with her. Odds are half the camp, if not practically all of it, was up and about now... and had likely heard half our conversation in full. I especially had been loud near the end.

Not that it mattered. Merit and Angie might not tell everyone all they'd heard but they'd still tease me over it. They'd tell everyone how I'd teased Vim over his sweat and stuff and who knows what else... I mean, I had to even pull up my pants since they started to slide down thanks to my tail slipping free! I could only imagine how it had looked!

"I'm going to go bury my head into my pillow now," I said, leaving Vim behind as Merit hurried to keep up... and I lifted my hands to sniff at them as I did.

Of course to make my embarrassment worse I found Vim didn't stink at all. Nothing more than his usual smell at least.

It was one thing for gods to want me dead... but to go through all that and not even get something to tease him about...?

Not fair.

Not at all.

Chapter 605 Vim – To Build, Again

The wood up north was the good kind. The type that made working with it easy. Plus it smelled good, as so I kept being told by everyone.

Oplar snickered as Nessa walked out of earshot. The young human woman, Oplar's mailroom attendant from Telmik, who I wasn't really sure why was here to be honest, had come over to deliver some drinks and while doing so had made a loud mention on the nice smell of freshly sawed and cut wood. Considering Oplar had made the comment first thing this morning, and so did Sap when I had gone back to camp to have breakfast with Renn... I was starting to both see a pattern, and connect the dots.

I think I had overheard a few other mentions of smells and such during breakfast too, though hadn't paid any attention to them... and considering Renn had groaned and hid her face with a blush at Sap's comment this morning, I could only assume that everyone was teasing us. Or well, teasing Renn if but through me.

Was it because of her comment last night over the fact I didn't sweat much even when working laboriously...? Or had she maybe said or done something else, I wonder?

"Maybe I'm getting old, Vim," Oplar then said as she handed me some nails.

"Hm?" I didn't glance at her to see what she meant as I readied one of the nails to be hammered. We were finishing up the main roof supports and brackets, and honestly I was glad we were making such good progress. I'd told Renn it might take a few weeks to really finish up but I might not need even that long at this pace, even with Oplar leaving soon and me thus going to be down a helping hand.

It did help though that I was only building more basic structures. I was going to add plumbing and such later and as such was building with it all in mind, but right now I was just making basic wooden buildings. The type that could be put up quickly and then retrofitted or even torn down in full to be replaced with more proper ones later. I basically wanted to give everyone here actual housing and a safe area to relax, with doors and such, before I left. Even if I couldn't give them complete comfort I wanted them at least out of the tents.

"I hadn't woken at all. I missed out on it all," she said.

Missed out on....? Oh... she was just continuing the teasing. Really, how long was it going to continue? They've all been at it since the morning, and it was the middle of the day now. If it was this bad for me, I could only imagine how bad Renn was having it.

"Well, she had been loud but not that loud. Plus we had been way over here," I said as I went to hammer in another nail.

"Yet that little bison heard it and woke up and got to enjoy it! And she doesn't even appreciate the finer things in life!" Oplar complained.

Yes, that was amusing. For someone who seemed to so utterly detest romance in all its forms she sure did seem to have a knack at witnessing every ounce of it...

Readying another nail, I paused a small moment before hammering it in. I was outside of the building in a sense, since it wasn't fully finished, but I was on the northern side of one of the walls. From here I couldn't see the encampment, but for a tiny moment I heard Renn's voice on the wind. It was distant, and barely audible, which told me I had just picked it up on chance and not because she had shouted or called for help or anything.

When had my ears become so in-tuned to her voice, I wonder? It wasn't even just her voice either... this morning when she had crawled out of bed I had heard her tail shuffle and brush past her tent's opening as she left it. Such a sound should have been something I shouldn't have noticed or even heard in the first place from way over here, yet I had.

"So um... speaking of oddities..."

I hammered the nail in real quick before Oplar could say something that made me accidentally break the thing we'd been working on for hours. I made sure I did it well, and didn't crack the timber, and then turned and nodded at her so she could continue.

Oplar gave me an odd smile for a moment as she shrugged. "She told you then. About the prophecies," she said.

"About how she was supposed to have been here a long time ago...? Yes. I kind of figured that was the case. But it's not a surprise they were wrong; they all also think she's currently pregnant too. They always get the finer details wrong," I said. We'd not spoken more about it since last night, and I personally hoped that such a streak would continue.

Her odd smile faltered a bit as she quickly nodded... and then looked away from me and shook her head. "She uh... didn't go into much detail, did she?"

Detail...? "She'd been about to I think, but considering the circumstances..." I said with a shrug. Honestly it could have gone either way. She could have gone into great detail, or could have just kept flirting with me instead.

"Well uh... since it's the past and you know of it now, can I say something?" she asked.

"I'd prefer you not to, but..." I said as I readied another nail.

"But...?"

Hammering the nail, I sighed as I nodded. "I'm learning that what I want is neither what I get nor what is needed... so go ahead," I said as I turned again to face her.

Oplar stood up a bit straighter, and I noticed her grip a tiny bushel of nails a bit too tight in her left hand. I didn't see her flinch or anything over it, but I kept an eye on it anyway. The nails had been purchased from a metalworker here in town, and some of them had rust and other gunk on them... last thing I needed was for her to get a bad infection.

"Well...! She's really been stressed over it, you know... I just... wanted to make sure you didn't just brush it off, like you always do stuff like this, so..." Oplar began to ramble a bit, and I suddenly felt a bit bad.

So she hadn't been about to talk of the prophecies in detail, but instead something else... Particularly something of concern over the one I loved, and she loved too. And I had made her feel uncomfortable as she did so.

"Just how bad...?" I asked carefully. Renn had seemed odd about it, but she had been acting her typical odd self last night. The kind of odd that I found cute, but normal for her. But her bringing up something that truly troubled her, especially during such moments, was common for her...

"Well... from what I hear...? Enough to throw up and whatnot over it. A lot," Oplar said with a whisper.

Great...

"It's no secret, Vim. I mean, to you it was... everyone who knew was either sworn to secrecy or knew better than to speak of it... But it's actually a surprise it took this long for her to figure it out, or hear of it, truth be told."

"Who told her...?" I asked. Light...? But she hadn't seemed that bothered back then in Lumen... she had been upset, and it had been an idea in her head and mine even from before then that such a thing had been possible... but she hadn't been so disturbed by it that she had thrown up or anything as far as I was aware.

"In theory Celine and the rest did. She found their hidden journals and prophecies in Telmik," Oplar said.

What...? "How?" I asked. As far as I was aware Celine had hidden her private journals and whatnot before her death deep in the underground library, the archives... likely behind walls and shelves. Ones

that haven't been moved in decades. The only way I could imagine Renn finding them was if she had help from...

Oplar frowned and shrugged. "Don't know? I wasn't there."

I sighed as I realized who had likely done it. "Merit. Merit was with her," I said.

"Merit...? Not to short the tiny thing, but why would Merit know where such things were hidden Vim? She's only visited Telmik a handful of times and most of those times were with her leaving in a huff. I highly doubt Celine or any of her crew would have told or showed her where they were," Oplar said.

"Yes, but Merit is... unique. Her skin lets her feel things most of us don't, such as changes in the air. If anyone could find a hidden room in those underground tunnels it's her," I said.

"Oh...? Like she has tiny hairs or something? Never noticed," Oplar said.

I chose not to comment on that as I gestured at the wall we were working above and on. "So my wife learned something she likely shouldn't have... she seems fine to me. I've only been here a few days now but..." I stopped talking as I realized she had said earlier that she had something very important to talk to me about... Was that it maybe? Just the fact that there had been prophecies concerning her from way back when...?

If so that was very pleasing to hear. Though it was sad that my lovely wife was fretting and stressing over something that I personally didn't care much at all about, at least it was not something truly dire.

"But...? But what?" Oplar asked.

I shook my head. "If that's all it is then I'm glad. I'll try to talk to her and see her through it, but it's nothing to stress over too deeply. The past is the past," I said.

Oplar huffed at me. "Easy for you to say Vim... my parents died over similar mistakes, so I don't see it as something so easily put aside."

I frowned at her. "They were killed over misread prophecies... This is about ones that never even came to be... How is that similar, Oplar?" I asked.

She nodded stiffly at me. "Exactly, Vim. They had prophecies concerning her, and stuff she was supposed to do... now they're making new plans and schemes based off those failed ones. If you're not careful... if we're all not careful, we'll all end up with the same fate again," she warned.

Ah. So she wasn't saying that they had foreseen Renn's death or something but instead she was simply worried that we were going to allow similar accidents to happen again.

"I had figured you'd know better, what with me being the one involved. I'll not allow them to get her killed or any of you over such stupid things again, Oplar. That's why I'm stepping down, so I can go against their prophecies if I need to," I said. One of the reasons at least.

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

Oplar studied me for moment, though I couldn't tell what it was she was inspecting. Maybe she thought I was being cocky? Stupid? Too indifferent, as many say...?

Before I could say anything, she sighed and nodded gently at me. As she did I noted her grip on the nails lessened, to the point one almost slipped out of her hand and to the ground. She caught it though. "I know, Vim... you promised me after all. As you have many of us... but this is more than just you now, isn't it...? It's her. And those around her. I mean, look at this place Vim... You have Merit here, the disenfranchised queen. Randle, even! A man I'd never have expected to ever step away from the church! And now what... A member of Lilly's flock...? And not just any of them either, but the one who took most after that wild bird...? Do you not realize what's happening here...?" Oplar asked with a gesture behind her, though in truth the encampment was to her right not behind her. But I got her meaning.

"And you, sending your human here. What's with that by the way...? The shark slave I understand, but the human?" I asked.

"What...? You find it weird? Or does it bother you?" she asked, suddenly defensive.

"Hm? Not at all. I'm not one to really trust humans too much concerning certain things, but having more people around Renn to keep her safe is always welcomed. And even that wasn't a factor, I'd not turn you or yours away ever Oplar you know that," I said.

She smiled and nodded, as if glad to hear it said even if it hadn't needed to be. "Good... and the reason, or well reasons, are simple. First, she's looking for a mate. Like I am. And it hasn't been going well in Telmik, and I'm not sure why. My hope is a change of scenery can help her there. Not to mention Renn. She seems to find a way to gravitate such things around her, in case you haven't noticed," Oplar said.

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

Oplar shrugged lightly at me. "First there is you? A man who has gone hundreds of years without showing a hint of affection for anyone and now you go around telling people you're married and flirt in the middle of the night so greatly it wakes up the whole camp? Then there's Lellip and Lilly's son... Silti and Link? And now I hear about Less? And Hands...? Hands, Vim! That man never leaves his workshop and suddenly he's in a relationship? Excuse me?" Oplar's voice began to rise in both tone and volume as she spoke, as she once again squeezed the nails rather loudly in her grip.

"Please Oplar... most of those are pure happenstance..." I said. My falling for Renn shouldn't be included in such a thing... and Silti wrapping Link around her finger...? That too was not something Renn should be credited for. Silti only even went to Telmik because she couldn't stand living in a village where she had gone through something traumatic. Her falling quickly into a new relationship was actually pretty expected for one such as her. Plus how would you even connect Renn to that relationship...? Link is partly afraid of Renn and as such they barely even spoke to one another. And Lellip and Branches...? I wasn't sure how Renn could be attributed to that either, since that had happened while Renn and I hadn't even been amongst them. They had figured that out all on their own. Same with Less and Ronaldo... that had happened before Renn and I even got to Lumen... Same with Hands and his rat.

None of them were directly related to Renn... at least as far as I was aware. I suppose one could argue that their connections only happened because of Renn showing up and causing the world to become chaotic enough for them to have the opportunity to... but that was such a wild stretch...

"Please, Vim. What used to take years for someone to do is suddenly happening seemingly overnight...? Can't you see it?" Oplar asked.

"You're also ignoring the fact that most of these are being caused by the commotion. We've had an influx of basically new members, depending on how you look at it, and that has caused a stir in the Society. So such relationships sprouting from that stir is natural. It's just a byproduct," I reasoned.

Oplar actually rolled her eyes at me, rather flamboyantly too. "Keep telling yourself that. And as more and more relationships suddenly start sprouting up, I'll just keep telling you I told you so again... and again... and again," Oplar said as she chuckled and handed me the nails she'd been holding this whole time. It was more than I really needed at the moment, but I still accepted them... because it seemed she had decided to take a break.

"And let me guess, when it's your turn is when I'll hear it the most huh?" I asked as she stepped away.

"Ha! As if I'd ever give anyone credit for that. When it does happen it's all mine! Also I'm going to take a break, I need to talk to Nessa about something before she and the others go into town," she said.

They were going into town...? No matter. "Sure, sure..." I said as I went to pocket the nails. I went back to hammering, to finish the part I'd been working on, now that I didn't have a chance to risk accidentally breaking anything thanks to emotions or something worse.

As I returned to work... I spent some time pondering Oplar's words. Not just about them, but their hidden meaning... I thought of the things she had likely wanted to say, but hadn't done so. The stuff in-between the lines.

Renn was stressing over prophecies. Concerning her supposed early arrival... to what? The Society? Me? No matter... if it was something disturbing her that deeply then I needed to talk to her about it. Really talk about it, too.

Oplar, like many others, was also worried that those same prophecies... or even new ones, were going to endanger us. All of us. As, like Oplar parents, had been so terribly affected by them it was obvious as to why she'd worry over such a thing... but there was only so much I could do about that.

Help Renn with her own issues...? Sure. Even if it meant dealing with prophecies. I'd find a way to help her, if I could... but the stuff concerning everyone's newfound love and whatnot...? Yeah. I was going to mind my own business there. Let Renn enjoy all that. Never did I try to involve myself in such things and I didn't plan on doing so now. It was one thing to suggest to someone, or inform them, of Renn's plan to set up some kind of matchmaking service... but it was another entirely to actually do anything more than that. At least for me.

And that was all before I even confronted the fact that I needed to address the god situation... because whether I or anyone else liked it or not, they were going to show themselves. It might happen at any moment, it might take years and years, but it would happen...

"If only Miss Beak was still alive..." I whispered as I finished hammering the last nail for the moment. I studied my work a bit, and then turned as to go grab another beam as to get started on the rest of the rafters... and found a tiny woman studying the work I'd just done.

Frowning at Merit, I wondered when she had snuck up on me... it seemed she was alone, I didn't sense Renn nearby or hear or see anyone else... but when had it happened? I had been slightly lost in thought, but to think it had been that bad...

"So... who's Miss Beak?" Merit asked.

Just great!

"What is it...? I'll make your mud pit later," I said. Really, what was wrong with me? I've become so careless as of late.

For a tiny moment I thought Merit was going to let me ignore her question, and my foolish mistake, but then she turned to glare at me. "I'll just go ask Renn if you won't tell me," she stated.

My eye twitched and I heard the nails in my hand crunch.

Both Merit and I looked down, and I sighed as I opened my hand to find a mangled mess of nails... ones that were now all bent and askew, if not even entirely stuck to one another from the pressure of my squeeze.

"Sorry," Merit apologized, rather sincerely, but I knew better than to accept it. Because there was no need to. It wasn't her fault, it was mine.

"Miss Beak had been one of my few friends. From... well..." I found the words hard to say for a moment, but realized that faltering here wouldn't just be an insult to Merit... it'd also be a terrible one to Miss Beak.

She had been my friend. One of the best ones I'd ever had. I shouldn't be ashamed of such a thing, and as such shouldn't hide it. It was insulting to do so.

I nodded as I looked away from the crumpled nails to the tiny fish. "She had been a firstborn monarch. A giant flamingo. She had been my friend for more years than I can count. Many more longer than the Society has existed," I told her.

Merit shifted as her face contorted oddly... as if suddenly upset, she looked like I'd just told her something very bad... but after a moment her face returned to normal and she gave me a gentle nod. "I... see. Is she the one you would visit near my kingdom?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Huh... and she's gone now?" she asked.

I nodded again. "Died a little while ago."

"Did Renn get to meet her?"

A tiny smile planted itself on my face as I nodded. "Yes. Though only for a few short hours. But she did."

Merit hummed at that.

I sighed at myself as I stepped away from Merit and headed for the closest table. Next to it was a large wooden bucket, one I'd been tossing refuse in. I dropped the clump of nails into it.

"Not going to save them...? You could just melt them and make them again, can't you?" Merit asked as she stepped over to join me. Maybe she was here to help? What with Oplar taking a break?

If so I wonder why Renn hadn't joined her... I know she was having fun with the others, and did indeed have other things to do and handle... but it would have been nice to work alongside her again after so long.

"Will be quicker and easier to just go buy more. Plus I think we have enough to finish thrice over as it is, for now, so it's fine," I said.

"Speaking of finishing, when you're done with this one what are you going to make next?" she asked.

"Well, Randle wants to make a communal area. Basically he wants a real kitchen, a storeroom and whatnot. He thinks we should build that first before a building to sleep in, since it would then open up the main tent for other uses if we needed it," I said. Were we done talking about Miss Beak then? Thank goodness.

"Sounds stupid. Why not just build a large building with lots of rooms first?" she asked.

"Actually that's my plan. After the church is done I plan to make a large building over there, one with enough rooms for everyone. That's where I'll also make the proper kitchen and whatnot. The rooms might not be very big though," I said.

"Better than having to hear people snore all night. Any basements in your plans?" she asked.

Basements...? "Yes. Though not right away. I'll need bricks for a proper one, the ground here is firm but more dirt than rock so I'd want a bit more support just to be sure. Wood alone will just let the basement

flood when it storms or snows, not a problem right now but it would be a big one later on," I said. Especially here in the north. I don't think some of the people here realized just how cold it was going to get during the real winter... it was why the mine here had taken so long to get really going, during the winter months they were basically unable to work in it at full capacity. It was warm enough in the mine to work, but it was impossible for them to come and go from it.

"Right... and why is it you'd wish a giant monarch was here, then? I'm not even sure how we're going to hide the tiny saint let alone a giant monster," Merit asked.

I sighed at her. "I didn't feel the need for Miss Beak to be here, per say... I just could have used her help," I said. Was I actually going to have to explain this...? Odds are even if I got out of it here and now, Renn would just come and bring it up later once Merit told her about it...

"How so...?" Merit asked, unwilling to let it be.

This is what I get for speaking about things carelessly. Not just here and now, but even last night with Renn. I had noticed Merit and Angie's approach of course, last night when Renn and I had been talking, but hadn't realized just how well Merit had been able to hear us even from a distance. She had undoubtedly overheard what I'd said about the gods... About Havoc and his threat. Though if others had heard, or if anyone has said anything to anyone else, I'd not heard yet.

"She used to help me track down and hunt gods and monarchs... before the Society. I could have used her help, basically," I decided to sum it all up as well as I could without wanting to rip my own tongue out in the process.

Merit shifted a little as she glared at me. "I see... and now you need such assistance again...? Or rather, it would be useful to have it?" she asked.

I nodded slowly.

"It's so bad you need the help of something... of someone like that?" she asked further.

I nodded again. I knew what she was asking, really asking. She was asking if she could help somehow. But... this was not something that I could be aided by with mere strength or numbers. Even Miss Beak would have only helped me in small ways, such as sensing divinity and flying around at great speed and height. No one alive today could do that for me... not safely at least.

Merit sighed, rather harshly, and shook her head at me... and then she slightly stretched her jaw, making it pop a bit, and she nodded. "Fine. I see. Later on you can tell me more... next time Renn gets you to open up about it, that is," she said as she stepped away.

Watching her leave, I realized she had not come to help but to verify something... maybe even the very thing we had just spoken about. To see if we, if Renn, was in danger.

"That's a hard ask, Merit," I said as she walked away.

"Not as hard as you think, Vim. Last night proved it," Merit said without looking back at me.

Wasn't that the truth...

Chapter 606 Renn – Letter To Do

"You've said before that ghosts aren't real, Vim... so what is it you think?" I asked as I lowered Sharp's letter.

Vim didn't answer right away. He scraped another chunk off the wood piece he was working on, and then sighed. "Honestly? At any other moment I'd just consider it something to deal with later... but right now?" Vim shook his head as he stepped back from the large log he'd been shaving, as he called it, and stepped over to me.

I sat up a bit straighter with his approach, for a small moment I was glad to be his focus. He hadn't been ignoring me of course, ever since I sat down here on a log to talk to him about my letters, but this was one of the first times he's actually even looked my way. He's been too focused on his work, though I couldn't fault him for it... a lot of those here were excitedly waiting for him to finish this next building, a place where we'd be able to sleep.

We were alone at the moment at the construction area in the late afternoon of the day. I had come to talk to him about my letters, because Sap planned on leaving at dusk, and was going to deliver a letter for me. Or well, several letters. I had written ones not just for Lellip but several members of the parliament, even one for Root. Of course the main reason I was dealing with letters at all was because I needed to respond to Lilly's letter, but I had wanted to talk to Vim about it and others first before doing so.

"You mean... the god stuff," I said as I studied his eyes. They were a tad heavy, though I didn't think he seemed tired or anything.

Vim nodded as he brushed his hands off on his pants. "Their descriptions are odd, and make me think of divine abilities. There's nothing in the natural order to explain their problems, at least none that I know of. Now to what degree is there divine intervention? Is it a monarch? A god causing ruckus in an effort to draw me away from you? Or is it all just simple group psychosis? I want to believe it's nothing worth concerning myself over, but... that's not the case."

"Psychosis...?" I asked.

Vim smiled at me and pointed at his head. "Basically a form of insanity. Some might call it mass hysteria, but they're not passing out or having any physical symptoms so technically that'd be the wrong term to use. Occasionally there are times that large groups can all believe in something, even if it's not real, and they believe in it so strongly they hallucinate or mistake what they're actually seeing for something else. Though usually it's not dozens of people but a small group at best... like a small family or something," he explained.

"Are you... saying they're all imagining it? Even those like Sharp?" I asked as I lifted her letter to show it off to him.

His smile faltered a little. "Yeah... doesn't sound very believable does it?" he said with a sigh.

"And it's not just her, but Abel and the rest...? They might be very religious Vim but I had felt they were all very grounded and wise people. I can't see them mistaking a gust of wind or something for a ghost so readily," I said. Most of the people in these letters, claiming they too have seen this supposed ghost, were people as old if not older than me. People who were well respected in the community.

"I know. But..." Vim glanced around for a moment, and then looked back to me once he confirmed we were still alone. "Back during the wars... the real ones, my enemies focused more on distracting me than they did anything else. Such a tactic would be very up their alley," he explained.

My eyes narrowed and my ears under my hat shifted wildly, to the point I felt one of my pins dislodge from the movement. "For what purpose Vim...? To get to me? Why would they need to go to such lengths? And if that was the case, why didn't they just kill me earlier before you showed up? These letters are from months ago," I said. Two and a half to be exact.

Vim sighed as he nodded. "Thus the conundrum. Personally, and I don't honestly know if this is a conclusion reached by reason or mere hope... I think they want to keep you alive," he said.

"Huh...?"

He gestured lightly at me with a frown. "If they killed you... yes, I'd be devastated. But all that would do is enrage me further. I'm already enraged by their mere existence. It makes no sense. They'd only do it to spite me, which yes... a god would do, but not if they have alternative goals. Havoc claimed they..."  
Vim suddenly shut his mouth, his eyes went a tad wide... and he groaned as he covered his face.

Uh oh... he had just been about to bring up something he had obviously not wanted me to hear! "Vim..." I groaned at him. Not so much for keeping secrets, again, but to fail so spectacularly at doing so. Usually he wasn't so careless! We hadn't even been yelling at each other, or flirting or anything!

"I know...!" he groaned.

For a small moment Vim seemed to squirm a bit as he squeezed his face, loud enough that I heard skin even tear. Although still a bit upset he was still trying so hard to keep secrets from me, I couldn't help but enjoy the sight and moment all the more. He was growing so comfortable with me that he wasn't even aware half the time of what he was saying!

I gave him some time to collect himself and went ahead and returned my focus to my letters. I put aside the one from Sharp and returned to the one from Lilly, the main reason I was here to talk to him about them.

Her letter was short and sweet, telling me basically of the status of not just Lellip and Branches... but the rest of her children. Fly included. She was glad they were all still there, to the point it was an utter shock, but at the same time there were new concerns now. Such as Branches and his brothers getting into arguments, or Crown looking as if she was going to waste away and die in her sleep at any moment.

She asked me to visit as soon as I safely could... and asked me to tell Vim, when I saw him, to visit and check on her too. Though she did say it was not urgent, at least.

"Renn."

I blinked and looked up from Lilly's letter and smiled at my dearest friend. He had stepped forward another step, and was now close enough that my tail could reach him if I was able to let it free out here.

Vim looked tired all of a sudden, the kind that made me worry that the heavy eyes I'd noticed early and dismissed had indeed been because of exhaustion and not something else.

"Have you gotten any sleep recently, Vim?" I asked. As far as I was aware he hadn't, but...

He blinked, as if startled I'd interrupt his train of thought... then he smiled gently at me. "Not really. But I am fine. I'm not tired anymore, in fact I've been feeling rather good physically," he said.

"Bruises and all?"

"Yeah. To be honest my body gets... better, when it's wounded. I know that sounds odd, but it's just how I was made," he said.

"I'll withhold the offer to wound you occasionally then for now... but only if you agree to do something for me," I said, teasing him as I did.

He frowned and nodded. "Hm?"

"Take a nap, please," I said.

His frown turned back into a smile. "With you...?"

"I mean... If that's what it takes, I guess?" I said. I had not meant it that way, but I'd not mind it. Especially since it was nice and warm lately, since I was sure he'd not sleep during the night with the rest of us but instead sometime in the day when no one was using my tent. Typically taking a nap under a hot sun was annoying, but inside my tent it would feel good... especially if we left open the front flap or side window flap things for a breeze.

He gave me a smirk and nodded. "Okay... and going back to the less important topic, I think the gods are trying to do something. And that something most likely includes me, in one form or another. I... can't explain it properly yet, at least I mean... I can try but..." Vim began to hesitate and he flinched, and I debated which action to take.

Do I take it easy on him? Let him grow comfortable enough to tell me on his own...? Or do I stand my ground and get upset, again, and force him to speak of it? I knew Vim well enough to know he sometimes wanted both from me, but...

Before I could make a decision however, Vim sighed and with a small scratch at the back of his head he nodded. "They need me for something. And I think... I think they've been waiting. For a moment like this. To get me to agree to it," he said.

Studying his eyes... and how heavy they looked again, I wondered just what it was these gods wanted from him. It was obviously something he didn't want to do, but... was that because if he did it something bad would happen... or was it simply his hatred and spite that kept him from agreeing? "You think that they'll keep me alive, possibly, as to threaten my life in hopes of forcing your hand," I said as I understood.

He nodded.

For a tiny moment my head itched, rather the base of my ears... and then I realized I had crumpled Lilly's letter a little. I spent a moment to flatten it a bit on my thigh, as to try and stop it from getting even more damaged. I wanted to keep it. I had been saving many of the letters I've been getting, since each were so precious to me, and this was the first one from Lilly I'd ever gotten... so... It was special.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

"Basically Renn... Your life is in danger, but I think at the same time it won't be. Because they'll want to use you against me. As to get what they want from me," he said after a moment.

I breathed in, and held my breath for a moment... and then sighed it out. "Which you won't give them or do, even if my life is threatened. So in the end my life is in danger, right?" I asked.

He nodded slowly.

"What is it Vim...? What is it they want from you?" I asked softly.

Vim held my gaze... and after a few heartbeats he slowly shook his head. "Something I can't give, Renn," he whispered.

Although hearing such a thing kind of hurt, not so much that he'd sacrifice me for it... but the fact he still hadn't outright said what it was... I went ahead and decided to be a little underhanded as to see what he'd say. Before I could say it though, I had to take a small breath and collect my nerve... and then...

"What of Nory?" I asked.

He didn't move for a moment. Not even a blink... and then his eyes narrowed. "I too have considered that. I... don't know," he said with a deep tone. Something akin to a whisper, but... not. It had been deep enough to almost be a growl. I'd actually never heard his voice like that before, it was a tad surprising.

"Well... it's something to consider deeper then, isn't it," I whispered. I now kind of felt bad for bringing it up, since he suddenly looked hurt. The kind of hurt he rarely showed, if ever... since it wasn't a physical pain but something much deeper. In fact it might be the only pain he even registered anymore, considering.

"It is... and... I'm trying Renn. I really, really am," he said softly.

"I know... want to switch topics for a bit?" I offered.

He blinked a few times and then nodded. "Please."

Smiling softly, I decided to take it easy on him as I lifted Lilly's letter. "Should I invite Crown now, or wait until we're more settled? Sap says she doesn't have wings, and is very good at living amongst humans but..."

Vim frowned as he leaned back a bit, shifting his weight as he studied me and the letter. "Did Lilly ask you to summon her?" he asked.

"No... but nearly half the letter is her showing concern for her. And based off what Sap has said, Lilly's underplaying Crown's state," I said.

He nodded. "Yes... she's not doing well at all, supposedly. Well... that's up to you Renn. As you know I try to stay out of personal affairs, and although the girl is obviously distressed this is a personal matter. Not one I typically get involved with..." Vim spoke calmly, almost uncaringly, and I was about to say something to argue against his statement but he raised a hand and gently smiled at me and continued. "That being said, Lilly had also asked me for help concerning her too. And, usually, I'd argue Crown spending time with her family would be the best medicine... but she's already been there what, months now?" he asked.

"Three and then some," I said, basing it off what Sap had told me.

He nodded again. "A long time, but not... I don't know. A part of me says to let her just... heal slowly. She's not like Lilly, she's more like Windle and her other ancestors. Fainthearted, soft inside. She might be like that for years, Renn. However... coming here might give her something to do. Sap had said she's just been curling up in her bed, not even getting out of it to eat... being here might at least make her active. And activity helps, it really does. It's one of the reasons we all had left Tosh at Lumen, and not somewhere more quiet and safe such as the Crypt or something. Activity helps the brain and soul," he said.

I nodded quickly, glad to hear his line of thought matched not just my own but Sap's as well. "Yes...! I think if she came here, it might do her good too. Plus we could always just send her back after a bit if it doesn't work out, couldn't we?" I asked.

"Right... are you asking me to go get her? She has no wings, it'll take her a few days to get here," he said.

Ah... "Actually Sap said she'd be willing to bring her back, and then just fly home again after. That or Lilly would, she said," I told him.

He slowly nodded. "Well... that's up to you Renn. You'll have a free tent with Sap and Oplar leaving, so she'll have privacy. And we're far enough from town that you won't have to worry over her causing an issue with the humans or anything..." he said as he glanced at the nearby encampment of tents we all lived in currently. Since it was about to be sundown there were now smoke stacks coming from it, people were readying to make dinner.

"Then I'll invite her. She might not come right away anyway," I said as I decided to do so, now that I basically had his permission.

"Hm... She likes children too, and we now have several. So that might help too," he said.

"But she has Root there, doesn't she?" I said. Root was so adorable I couldn't imagine not being cheery around her, just by mere presence alone.

"A baby is indeed a good healing object... but Crown likes to teach. Which would actually be useful, since you now have two kids here who need such guidance," he said.

I nodded slowly. Liora and Celine both. Right now Randle and the old human woman, Krass, were taking turns spending a few hours a day teaching them. I had joined in a few of the lessons myself out of interest. They taught basic things, such as the local laws and Society rules, but also more detailed topics too. Celine for instance couldn't read, and as such was being taught how to do so. Angie was a kid too, at least I considered her as one, but as far as I was aware she hadn't joined the lessons nor planned to.

Having someone here to take over their education would be very helpful. "Plus it'd really give her something to focus on!" I said excitedly.

"Quite... Also, has Randle brought up his request with you yet?" he asked.

My happy heart, excited at the prospect of both meeting another member of my family and also helping Lilly and her parliament out... settled down a bit at the mention of something that was sad. "Yes... he has. At least, I hope we're speaking of the same thing and you're not bringing up another entirely. You mean my painting of her, yes?"

He nodded.

Good. Or well, as good as it could be, I guess... "Then yes. He has. I guess Folz can make paint, and as such has been getting the resources needed. I've been told in a few days I should be able to have enough to start painting," I said.

"Folz... you know I've not dealt with him much. Not since he lost his tongue, at least," Vim said

Oh! Glad for the opportunity, I smiled as I got up off the log and brushed my bum off. As I did I also tugged at my pants as to free my tail a little, to let it shift under them. I couldn't bring it out until I got back into the encampment, and it was itchy at the moment. "I've been actually planning to talk to you about him," I said.

"Hm...? Did he do something?" he asked, suddenly a bit more focused on me. Though if he was focused on what I'd just said, or my rear, I couldn't tell.

"No... not really. I just wanted to let you know I feel odd around him."

"Odd...? How so?" he asked.

I gestured lightly with a shrug. "I don't know...! That's just it. Lilly and Merit think I'm just unnerved by his lack of talking. And I just can't believe it myself, but I can't imagine what else it could be. I feel... on guard, I guess, near him," I said.

He frowned at that and crossed his arms. "Odd. He's harmless... he's been around for a long time, and I've never heard anyone ever complain about him. As in... no one at all, ever. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't ignore your instincts. Do you feel in danger around him? Or if others are near him?" he asked.

Others...? "You mean... do I feel uneasy when he's near someone else...?" I asked as I thought of it.

"Yeah? Such as Merit, or something?"

I frowned as I thought of the last few weeks and shook my head. "I don't think so... the feeling arrives even when we're alone... like the other day I'd woken up early and went into the main tent to get a drink. He had been in there, praying silently, and we didn't even look at one another yet I still felt weird. The hairs on my tail even stood up a bit when I realized he was in there as I entered," I said.

Vim smirked at me. "Do you fancy him maybe?"

What...? I couldn't believe his question, or the rather real smirk on his face he wore as he made it. That hadn't been him teasing me, at least not in full. He was genuinely asking me such a thing. "No...! Not at all! He gives me the creeps, Vim, why would I feel attracted to him?" I asked, a bit offended he'd even think such a thing.

The wry smirk slowly died as he nodded at me. "I see... well, I guess I can talk to him if you'd like?"

"I... I don't know. He seems fine around me. It's probably just me being weird. Maybe I really don't like the fact that he doesn't talk that much...? You know, when Frett had took her vow of silence I had felt really weird back then too. It had upset me," I said.

Vim gave me an odd, almost knowing, look. "Right... you had, hadn't you? Maybe that's really all it is? Maybe I should not speak for a few months to see if it bothers you too," he said.

"Huh...? Don't you dare!" I nearly shouted at him. What a terrible idea! I knew he could likely do it with ease, too, which made it only all the more terrifying a thought!

Vim though smiled at me, and said nothing. My heart fluttered as I realized he was going to tease me now... and I nearly panicked as I growled at him.

"Vim, don't!" I said as I stepped towards him.

For a few heavy heartbeats, he said nothing... and I felt a terrible whine start to claw its way up my throat, as I realized he'd likely tease me by going silent for a few hours or days, but instead he ended his teasing abruptly and nodded. "Either way... you told this to anyone else? Merit and Lilly you said?" he asked.

A huge wave of relief washed through me, running all the way down my tail as I nodded. Thank goodness he hadn't teased me too long over that, I think I would have actually cried over it. Our little talks were so few and far in-between lately as it was! "Yes... I've not told anyone else, since I don't want to be rude," I said.

"Right... well, I'll talk to him a bit just to see if I can figure it out. It might very well just be the fact he doesn't talk. You might not have noticed, Renn, but your senses have become very astute. They had been good even before you absorbed any hearts, and now they're far better than ever. It might sound silly, but him not talking might make your instincts go wonky and raise flags because they expect him to.

It's like when I sneak up on you, and you jump and yelp so strongly. It's not that you're a jumpy person, at all, it's just when your senses are tricked your whole body goes into a defensive mode. Maybe that's what's happening, or at least a type of it," he reasoned.

My tail curled and coiled beneath my pants along my thigh as I smiled at him. I loved it when he talked about things like this, since it showed just how well he knew me. "Even though I still hear him normally? I hear him breathing, and walking and stuff. He's not silent like you. He simply doesn't talk."

Vim slowly nodded. "Yes. Because it's expected. You expect people to talk, or hum, even if only occasionally. And over the course of days, weeks and whatnot, and yet you still don't hear it...? Basically it's a combination of your acute senses and your stellar memory. You remember each and every detail, and as such every moment that goes by that you expect to hear him speak and yet don't only adds up over and over again... until it piles up into such a streak that it unnerves you, since it makes no sense instinctively," he reasoned some more.

"Seems like a stretch Vim," I said.

"Yes. My money is still on you fancying him. And if so that's funny, considering I've been told on good authority by many people that he's ugly," Vim said with a smirk.

Gah! I nearly threw my letters at him as I huffed and stepped away. "I'm going to go finish writing my letters!" I shouted. Although I honestly didn't want to leave yet, since I was utterly enjoying our conversation and time together, it was about to be dusk. Sap would be leaving any moment, and I needed to get her the letter for Lilly before she did.

"Don't go writing one to him now," Vim teased as I left.

Chapter 607 Vim – A Plank A Day

Rivonne was visiting.

Or well, she was visiting Renn. Not me.

Up on a filler beam, I laid another long piece of wood over it and into the small groove I'd cut for it earlier. It, like the many hundreds I'd been laying and installing all day, were what would eventually make the second sub-floor of this dormitory-esque building I was constructing.

From up here, thanks to the second floor walls not being fully up yet, I could see the nearby encampment. I was keeping an eye on it even as I worked, since they had a visitor. Rivonne had thankfully left her small guard group outside of the tents, they all were stationed near the small palanquin she'd rode here on, but they were still near enough I felt the need to keep an eye on them.

Sap had left last night, and Oplar had left this morning. So the only person that was in any real danger, since the human woman knew of Renn and myself, was Liora... what with her glowing eyes. But I had fashioned her a better face-mask on arriving here, a black cloth that she could wear that covered enough of her glow that she'd be fine as long as she wasn't careless. She didn't like it too much, since she had to wear a nun's headdress alongside it, as to not make the face covering weird, but she at least understood the reason for it and the need.

So, by all counts... all was well. Rivonne was in the encampment, likely hanging out with Renn and the others, and no one was in any real danger. Sap had been the only one really to be concerned over, what with her huge wings, and she was gone. But...

Finishing up the plank, I sighed and thumped my little mallet hammer thing against a knee. "Do you think I let my love for her endanger her?" I asked.

"Of course...? But that's for anyone, Vim. And it's not just her. Your compassion for every member is a dangerous risk, always has been. You're too kind to be firm with people, but that's what many like about you," Randle said from below.

Frowning at him, I wondered if he was praising me or insulting me. Probably both at once. He had always complained that I had not acted properly back during the wars, giving people too much freedom... too much rope to hang themselves, as he had called it.

And yet he, and those like him... like Celine and the others, had all complained and imposed rules upon me to keep me from doing anything too drastic half the time. It was akin to being accused of acting like a dictator, yet at the same time being chastised for not ruling with more authority.

"What do you think of her?" I asked as I went to grab another plank. There was a small stack nearby, the few left needed to finish this section of this room.

"A typical human enamored by our divinity. She's not a threat, no more than any of our human companions. But it is concerning how she treats Renn... her treating you like some kind of god or deity, as foolish as it is at least makes sense. But Renn...?" Randle hummed beneath me, though I couldn't see him. I was in the process of making the subfloor, but the ceiling was already finished for the first floor. So although there was thin enough wood between us that I could hear him easily enough, and he me, I couldn't outright see the man as he worked below. He was applying a type of lacquer, a mix of certain oils and liquor, to the walls and floors below. It was something he could easily do with one arm with a brush.

"Better to be revered, I guess," I said simply as I went to slide the next plank into place. I had built most of this building using joinery techniques, but I still used nails here and there to solidify the structure. Especially since I knew it might need to stand for a few years, and it might receive heavy foot traffic too.

Honestly it was going well. My original goal had been a few buildings, and at least a refreshing well water source from the river that also carried off refuse before I had to leave... but at this rate I'd have all that done in no time. In which case I might be able to build the enclosure too, the walls and fences to give those here some privacy.

"Says you," Randle said.

Yes. Says me.

After I finished a few more planks, I sighed as I glanced again at the encampment. Rivonne's group was still there, on the road, and the tents all looked fine. And I knew they likely would be, no matter how many times I glanced at them in worry.

Honestly I felt foolish. Here I was, worrying over a bunch of humans... when in reality I should be worrying over far more important things.

Usually at this point I'd be on track to hunt the gods down... No matter the lengths I had to go through. So this lack of urgency on my part was kind of new for me. And it obviously was starting to make me uncomfortable.

But there wasn't much I could really do about it. Until I found a way to track down the gods that were left, there really wasn't much I could do. At least, not unless I was willing to do something drastic...

I sighed, and as I did I brought the mallet down onto a nail... and promptly shattered the plank on impact, splitting it into several pieces.

Groaning at myself, and the many shards of wood I'd now have to clean up, I tossed the mallet aside and went reached up to rub my face.

Maybe I should take Renn's offer of a nap now.

"What'd you break?" Randle asked from below.

"My dignity."

I heard a scoff, then a chuckle. A real one. It sounded... odd coming from him. I still wasn't entirely sure what to think of the man who had changed so readily. He was still the same stoic, religiously devout man I had known... but now he felt... well... more normal, I guess. More open and less angry, maybe.

"You know I've actually been doing good. I've only ruined a few things so far," I said as I gathered up the broken pieces.

"Yes, I'm sure. Though by the end I'm sure you'll still waste a whole house worth of materials all the same," he said.

I didn't want to admit that I've likely already reached half that in value in stuff broken, so instead changed topics. "Speaking of resources... are we going to be getting any shipments anytime soon?" I asked.

"Yes actually. The Twins have a scheduled stop next month, and we should start getting a monthly one from various sources," Randle said.

The twins...? Interesting. "That's good, I don't think Renn's met them yet," I said. She'd like them, they were neat.

Randle chuckled. "She already did. They met her for a moment in Telmik," he said.

Ah... darn, I missed it. "She's been rather active lately without me. Makes me jealous," I said. I used to always be there when she met new people, and experienced new things... so I usually got to enjoy such things, yet lately we'd been apart. In fact, we'd been separated so much lately it was actually a little annoying.

"To be honest I'm quite surprised we're not busier yet. I expected more people to start showing up by now," Randle said.

"Like who...?"

"Anyone? Whether you like it or not, Vim, many in the Society see her as a source of salvation. Of no doubt thanks to the long years of prophecies and schemes by Celine and her ilk. So many will latch onto her, even if not with good intentions," he said.

I crushed some of the wood chips I held. "You've become very bold around me, Randle," I said.

"You'd not harm a one armed priest, would you?" he asked with a taunting tone.

"I once killed a monk. He was blind, had no feet or hands, and had taken a very real vow of peace. In fact he was so old and scrawny that when I had crushed his skull it had felt the same as crushing a dried out apple," I said as I returned to gathering up the last bit of wood pieces.

For a moment there was silence... and then I heard Randle cough. "And why would you do that?" he asked finally.

"Because he angered me," I said simply. It wasn't the truth, but it wasn't far off from it. Close enough that I could use it as a threat at least.

"I see. Well, then I shall simply bet on your wrath not out-weighting your wife's good-will. Harming me would make her rather upset I'd think, especially if you didn't have just cause," he said.

"The fact you're right only makes it worse," I said as I headed for the stairwell. I had a large barrel in the center of the building for trash and refuse, but it was downstairs. It might be time to bring one up to this floor too.

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Reaching the first floor, I walked down the half finished hallway to the center room. I passed the room Randle was working in, and found him brushing the oil stuff all over a wall. He looked bored, but content... he also didn't even noticed I was staring at him.

I stepped away and tossed the broken plank, and all its pieces, into the trash barrel and sighed. I decided to take more planks up, since I'd likely end up breaking a few more as I worked, and also because there weren't many left upstairs anyway.

By the time I returned to the second floor and placed the planks down, adding them to the pile of others, I noticed a figure approaching us from the encampment. I frowned at the young shark heading our way, and wondered what to think of her.

"What do you think of our shark, Randle?" I asked. The girl was still only half way here, we had a few moments before she was within earshot.

"Celine...? A nice girl, though rough around the edges," he said. I knew he didn't mean her skin by rough, but her personality.

"And Angie? The two of you have been associating for a while now, yeah? How's that going?" I asked.

"The hardheaded bison is like her mother. Stoic and proud. But I fear she has unresolved trauma. Though if it's to do with her parents deaths, or something else, I can't say," he said.

Trauma...? I considered the girl for a moment, trying to see if I could see what he saw... but really all I could think of when I thought of Angie was when she was with Renn. The young girl usually spoke with a soft voice, acting as Randle described. Stoic... but occasionally one could see a smile and whatnot that Renn got out of her. Even a giggle or two. From my perspective, in the little I've seen and interacted with I had not really seen anything too badly hinting over trauma. She had been sad over her family's deaths, of course, but... true trauma?

Had Renn ever mentioned Angie's supposed trauma...? Couldn't remember so off the top of my head. I'll need to ask her about it later...

"Hello...?" Celine asked a little hesitantly as she approached the building. It seemed she hadn't noticed me from this angle, which was a tad odd. I had thought her to be a tad more aware of her surroundings than that...

"Inside, young one," Randle said a little loudly.

Celine picked up her pace and left my line of sight as she rounded the building as to get to one of the entrances. I listened as I went ahead and returned to building the subfloor as the young girl entered the building and found Randle.

"How are you Celine?" I heard Randle ask with his calm tone, the kind he always had when speaking to either children or those who confessed to him.

"Ah...! Um... good, I think..." Celine answered a tad sheepishly, which made me frown. She had seemed skittish at first with me and Oplar, back when we first met, but since my arrival here I had only seen the girl act calm and happy. She was happy to run around and help people, such as with little chores or tasks... I'd even found her fishing with Renn when I had arrived the other day.

"What is that stuff?" I heard the young girl ask the priest.

"A type of coating. Makes the wood nicer and easier to live with. Typically it's something you'd put on before you put the building together, but we don't want anyone to see us do so," he explained both its purpose and why he was applying it now.

"I see... a Society secret," she said, understanding.

"Basically, yes. It's also something I can do with only one arm, as well," Randle said, trying to keep the conversation light and easy going.

Celine made a small noise, a tiny laugh, as I laid the plank down in its spot... but I paused before hammering it into place. I waited a few moments to see what the young girl wanted before making myself known. I didn't think she knew I was here yet.

"You're doing a lot better than the other people I knew without arms," Celine said.

"People adapt, yes. Not everyone can grow them back."

"Grow...? You mean there are people who can grow their arms back?" Celine asked, sounding surprised.

"Yes indeed. In fact you know one yourself."

"Oh... the protector... right. Where is he? Wasn't he building out here too?" she asked as I heard her steps. I heard her check nearby rooms, as if to find me.

I was about to knock on the floor, to tease and startle her, but before I could Randle spoke up. "He's around here somewhere... was there something I could do for you, Celine?" he asked.

I frowned at his comment, and the fact he had obviously said it in a certain way on purpose.

Randle couldn't lie. His faith would not allow it. So he had basically just said I was here, without actually saying so, on purpose.

I decided to let it be, and stayed quiet as I heard Celine walk back to Randle. I was glad to hear that none of the boards squeaked or complained under her feet, it meant so far the place was being built well and without any major issues.

"I um... well..." Celine spoke softly, and I realized that she likely had looked like she needed something. Thus Randle's words. He had seen what I heard.

Was it concern...? Worry? It sure did sound like it. Maybe she was just sad that Oplar had left. The two had seemed to be rather close.

"Go ahead, child. Only I and the godly will hear it, I promise," Randle said.

I rolled my eyes.

"Ah! Right... um..." Celine hesitated again for a moment, and then I heard a deep gulp as she found her nerve. "We're... not human, right? We're all like Sap was? Is?" she asked him.

Oh...? Right... Oplar had mentioned the girl had not known what she was, before being found, hadn't she?

"That is correct," Randle answered calmly.

"And... neither is Liora... even though she is, in a way," Celine continued.

"Yes. Like us she has been blessed with divinity. Just in her own way," Randle said.

"Right...! And... Renn. She's uh... also like us, but different," Celine then said.

Different...?

"In a sorts," Randle answered without missing a beat.

"So uh... what does everyone mean by gods...?"

Ah. I calmed down a little as I realized what was likely wrong. She'd been overhearing all the little whispers and the teasing concerning Renn and I, thanks to her little outburst the other night. The girl was just trying to figure out the way the world worked. Not a surprise considering her upbringing and life until now. Although I didn't know her full story, it wasn't hard to imagine it. She had grown up in one of the most worn-down and impoverished places on the planet right now, and had done so barely if that. Odds are, just as she had not known what she really was, she also had no real understanding or knowledge of faith and its sources.

"Well... that's a heavy question. One that isn't answered very easily, nor swiftly. But to sum it up, when one usually speaks of gods they mean the beings that created us. The ones who had been here in the beginning, and gave birth to our bloodlines. Our creators and Lords," Randle said, answering the way nearly any priest would.

"So... they're real," Celine said.

Randle chuckled. "Many say they don't exist. We, the Society, are lucky to have records and memories far older than anything the humans possess... and we have, at least what we consider verifiable proof, of such records that tell of our gods and their words. Plus many of us have witnessed miracles and even seen or interacted with those who were created by the gods' very hands. We call those creatures monarchs, and it is they who are our true ancestors," Randle said.

"But... Renn isn't one, right?" Celine then asked.

I tilted my head and frowned at that question. Of all things for her to ask after hearing such a thing, it was that...?

Randle must have stepped towards the girl for I heard his robe shift... and then I heard his hushed voice, telling me he had likely knelt down in front of the girl. "I suppose you likely overheard such a whisper. Or maybe from Rivonne...?" he asked quietly.

Celine didn't answer audibly, but I heard her hair shift and her shirt rub her rough skin as she nodded.

"I see... well, in truth that is a point of great contention," he then said.

"Content...?" Celine sounded annoyed he had used a word she hadn't known.

"Debate. There are many who would laugh upon hearing such a question, while there are others who would grow very serious over it. If you'll accept my humble opinion... I'll say simply, Renn is special in her own way... but no. She is not a goddess. To be a god one would need their abilities. Their divinity and power. And although capable of odd things, I do not think she is capable of such things," Randle said.

"Hm..." Celine hummed at that, and then sighed. "So it's just more teasing then," she decided.

Randle chuckled and I heard him nod. "Yes. As you've no doubt noticed, many people enjoy teasing her. It's because of how difficult it is to tease the protector, and also a combination of their enjoyment. They like her, and like to see her reaction when teased," he explained.

"Right! She does get all red in the face," Celine agreed.

"Doesn't she?"

The two laughed at each other, and I bit back a sigh. I knew if I made too much noise Celine would likely hear me, she was thick in the blood... though maybe a tad too young to really use her abilities yet. It was a tad odd she still hadn't noticed I was up here. Usually sea-faring bloodlines were rather capable. Like Merit or Sharp.

"Is there anything else I can offer my humble opinion on, young Celine?" Randle then asked as I heard him dip his brush into the pot of oil lacquer.

"Hm... No. For now that's fine. Thank you," Celine said.

"Of course. If you'd like, later we can talk more of our gods. You'd be shocked to hear of some of their stories," Randle offered.

"Sure...! I'll invite Angie too!" Celine then stepped loudly as she hurried out of the building. "Bye bye!"

Randle chuckled as he bid her farewell, and I had to lean back a bit as to make sure she didn't see me as she ran back towards the encampment. Unlike when she had walked over here, she now ran with a bit of urgency.

I sighed as I watched her run off excitedly, looking younger than she likely was.

"Well that was not the question I had expected," Randle said lightly.

"You think?" I said as I stood up. Celine was now far enough that even if she did turn around and see me, she'd likely just think I had returned from wherever I'd been.

"If I would have known that was her question, I'd not have hinted for you to remain silent. I had expected something else," Randle said.

"Like what...?" I asked. To be honest I had expected something very different too.

"Something more personal. But no matter, it'll likely happen later. So? What's your opinion then?" he asked.

Happen later...? Wonder what he meant. "Of what?" I asked as I went to resume hammering planks into the floor.

"Of people calling Renn a goddess, of course."

Another plank broke.

## Chapter 608 Renn – A Home and a Name

I grinned happily at my room.

Or well, what would be my room in a few days.

It was at the end of the first floor's east hallway, near the back exit door. It wasn't that big honestly, in fact once a bed was put in it there would likely only be room for a few small chests or a dresser and not much else. Maybe a small desk and chair in the corner, too, but definitely nothing more than that. There was also a small window, though right now only had wooden shutters on both sides and no glass panes. Supposedly those kinds of things would be added later.

Vim had said the reason he'd chosen this one for us was for security reasons. He felt better with either he or I being the first door facing and near the exit. The front doors of the building, the dormitory as Vim called it, were ones reinforced by metal and locks. Plus they were just down the hallway from my room as well, with a storeroom and then the kitchens between us.

Across from my room was another storeroom, and to the right of it was the second stairwell. The first was located at the other end of the building, in the other hallway on the other side. Likewise on the first floor, there was another room on that side. Or well, three more rooms. Instead of storerooms. Randle had the one that mirrored my own on that side, Krass the old lady who found it difficult to climb stairs had the room across from him, and then a third that for now was to remain empty. It was to be the room we'd let our visitors stay, such as if Sap or Oplar were to return.

There were two more floors above us, though the third was half the size as the first two. Up there were plenty more rooms, some of them even twice as spacious as my own. It was actually a rather large building, reminding me of some of the homes at the Weaver's Hut, though of course it was... plain. There was still no furniture in it, at all, so it was kind of empty and cold feeling.

But I knew that would change soon. People were already shuttling goods from their tents to here, and Vim and the rest were building beds and other things as well. In a few days this would be where we all lived, not the tents, and... to a certain point I was kind of disappointed.

I had grown to enjoy the tent encampment. Snores and all.

"Smells good at least!" Celine said as she stepped over and peeked her head into my room.

Grinning at her, I nodded. "Right?" I said. It smelled of freshly cut wood and... whatever they had put all over the floors and walls. Some kind of oil. It gave the wood a nice shine but also made it smell nice, at least for now.

Celine turned and noticed someone down the hall and ran off. I heard her say something to Angie, who grumbled at her, and I chuckled as I stepped out of my room and glanced down the hallway.

Angie was heading upstairs, and Celine was in tow. The two were carrying baskets, which told me that Celine had grabbed one from Angie as to help her. I hadn't realized when it happened, but it seemed the two had become friends.

Which was a good thing... but...

Walking down the hallway, I slowed as I neared the room next to the kitchens. Or at least, what would be the kitchens. We still didn't have anything in it, other than a few brick ovens.

Inside the room that only had a single table... sat a little girl. Young Liora was frowning as she read a book that Randle had given her. It wasn't their bible, but it did seem to be some kind of religious text... I'd taken a peak at it earlier; the page I'd seen had been about some holy law that dealt with a royal's fealty.

The young saint was fully engrossed in the book, not even noticing me as I stepped into the room... and I wondered if I should worry for her or not.

She got along with everyone here, as far as I could tell... but she definitely hadn't gotten close to Angie or Celine as well as I would have liked her to. And I couldn't even say it was because of Angie being her typical self, or Celine being unsure of herself either... I had noticed on many occasions both of them try to talk and hang out with Liora but the young saint never seemed too invested in doing so herself.

Almost as if... she didn't want to be their friends. Which was so strange to me, since the young saint was so friendly and talkative with me and everyone else.

I'd not asked yet, but I had a terrible worry that the reason Liora was being slightly distant to Angie and Celine... was for a specific reason. One not associated with just being a child, or something.

Hopefully it had nothing to do with a prophecy...

"Liora," I said her name gently as I patted her back. She looked up from the book and frowned at me.

"Yeah?" she asked. I noticed she placed a finger on the middle of a page, to keep track of where she'd just stopped.

"Not going to pick a room?" I asked. As far as I was aware she'd not done so yet.

The young saint frowned and then shook her head. "I'll just pick one after everyone else."

I see... maybe it wasn't that she wasn't happy; rather she just valued different things. Some people were like that. Look at Vim, for crying out loud. That man wouldn't even choose a room if not for his desire to share one with me.

"Is it interesting?" I asked with a gesture to the book.

Liora hummed as she looked back at it. "Not really," she said honestly.

"Oh...?" Yet she had been so focused earlier on reading it!

"But I need to read this one before I can read the next. So Randle says," she said.

Ah... "Like to read do you? I do too, I just get distracted a lot," I said.

She smiled at that and nodded. "I'm looking for something, but yes I do like to read."

"Looking for something...?" I asked. In... religious texts? Stuff that Randle had brought from Telmik...?

"Yeah... it's... well..." Liora was about to answer, but frowned and went quiet... and I realized why as Vim walked into the room.

I turned to glare at him. "Liora was about to tell me something important," I said to him.

He raised an eyebrow at me, then smiled. "I see. I'll leave you be then. After you hear it though, would you like to join me?" he asked.

"Join...? Did you put a bed in our room already?" I asked.

"Gah!" A loud, annoyed voice, yelled at me as Angie walked past the room and to the exit. Celine quickly followed after her, giggling as she did.

"Sorry Angie," I apologized. I surprisingly hadn't noticed she was there. I had been too focused on Vim, I guess... or maybe Vim had simply made this place too well, not a single board squeaked when walked upon. Not a one.

Vim sighed at me. "To town. I need to go speak to this... Hobbler?" he said with a frown.

Hobbler...? Just who was he...? Oh. "Haggo. The city commissioner person," I said, correcting him. Randle had called him a seneschal, but Rivonne had told me that title was outdated nowadays and most just used commissioner or mayor.

He frowned and nodded. "Yeah, him."

You might be reading a stolen copy. Visit Royal Road for the authentic version.

"How you get names mixed up so badly, I'll never understand... yes I'll join you. Please wait for me," I said.

He nodded and then with a small smile and wave to Liora he stepped back out of the room and headed for the exit. I heard him and Angie and Celine get to talking as I turned back to the young saint and smiled at her smile.

"Can you believe that? Hobbler. And he probably just got told the proper name a few moments ago by someone else," I said. Randle, likely.

Liora smiled and nodded. "He does seem bad with names. He got my mother's name wrong the other day, but I know he doesn't mean any ill will by it," she said.

Oh...? I'll need to remind Vim then for her. Liora might not mind, but I did. "Just correct him when he makes such a mistake. He'll fix it," I said.

Liora shrugged, telling me she honestly didn't mind much... and then she pointed again at the book. "I'm looking for a name," she said.

"A... name?" In old religious books?

"Of a certain god. One that I need to know about," she said, her voice going softer as she did.

I frowned at that. "And... you kept that from Vim because you know he doesn't like talking about religion...?" I asked her.

She frowned back and shook her head. "Because it's from a prophecy. He hates those."

Oh gosh...

I glanced around, letting my ears flutter and move and relying on them more than my eyes. I heard people walking and talking upstairs... but no one seemed to be in any of the rooms nearby or down the hallway. Once I confirmed that, I leaned forward a bit as to whisper better with her. "What do you mean?" I asked softly.

Liora's glowing eyes blinked at me. "I've been meaning to talk to you about it... but I can't remember the name. But I know it's one that I find in one of these books, so I've been looking for it," she said.

"From a prophecy," I furthered her to continue.

"Yeah... it doesn't happen soon, I don't think... but I've learned now that such things aren't always right. I thought it'd happen when I was older, almost old enough to see you eye to eye... but maybe not anymore," she said, speaking so low some of her words actually meshed together in a slight slur. She wasn't used to whispering so lowly it seemed, but I understood her well enough so it was fine.

She had likely come to such a conclusion thanks to recent events. She'd told me about the prophecy she had foreseen of us encountering knights on the way here. She was... rather upset that I had not been with her at the time. She didn't like how it had come to pass with such a glaring flaw, and I agreed with her. It meant that once again fate had other plans for me, and I had failed to fulfill them. I had been meant to be with Vim when he encountered Liora... not half a country away.

"Why do you need to remember the name of a god...?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"Because they show up. Vim calls her mother, but he and Sap got all weird about it and now I'm doubting that I'm remembering it right... so I figured I'd verify it by finding her name and..." Liora's whispering got better, to the point she didn't even slur or roll her words anymore, but I lost focus.

Feeling suddenly very light headed, I groaned and closed my eyes.

She foresaw Vim's mother!? Showing up!?

That was... that...!

"Um..."

I opened my eyes and found a worried Liora. Her glowing eyes were fluttering, like a candle would in the wind, and I quickly controlled my own unease. "I'm okay... I uh... so you told Vim this? Already?" I asked. Sap too...? Maybe she had brought it up as they came here together.

She nodded, rather stiffly. "I think I shouldn't have, should I not have...? It's why I wanted to find out more, and..."

I reached over and gently patted the young girl on the back. "It's okay. I'm glad you did, even if Vim isn't. He's... touchy about such stuff. You uh... you mind telling me it in detail?" I asked as I went ahead and sat on the bench next to her, but did so facing away from her. I faced the nearby doorway, the one that led to the empty kitchen, instead of the table.

Liora leaned closer and nodded. "I was with you... though not in this building. We were in a home of some kind, talking about some kind of lizard and a broken bed. Then someone knocked on the door, the place got really warm... oh, right, it was snowing too. There was snow stacked even above the windows," she said, speaking quickly as she did.

I bit the inside of my cheek as I nodded and waited for her to continue.

"Then the door opened really loudly...! And Vim hurries into the room, and gets all weird and calls her mother... and then she sighs and says he screwed up, then I wake up after a bright light blinds me. I've had the prophecy twice now, though the first time I had it was with Vim and Sap while I was on Horseshoe," Liora said.

Horseshoe...? "I uh... I'm a tad confused..." I said honestly.

She sighed at me. "Vim and Sap were too. That's why I'm trying to figure it out... I think I heard her name, her real name, but I can't remember it. I think Vim said it after he said mother, but I can't really remember it right. I asked Randle to tell me the names of the gods and he gave me these books, he says they're stories written by other saints. Ones that speak of them all, all the gods we know," she said.

Gosh...! "I uh... I see..." I felt a little sweaty all of a sudden. Just what the heck was happening! First Vim returns, claiming the gods showed back up again and now wanted to kill me as to get him to do something... and now this? What did this mean...?

Was his mother still alive...? Surely not, right...? I mean... we've not honestly talked too much about it, but he's made it very clear that he believes they're dead, right? He even had that gravestone for them back at the Crypt!

But maybe that was all sentimental. Maybe they were alive, and he simply saw them as dead. Viewed them as dead, because of the implications or...

"Renn...?" Liora said my name with a sad, worried voice... and I realized I was being ungrateful. I'd just ignored her because I was so shocked.

"I'm... okay. Thank you, Liora for telling me... is that all of that prophecy?" I asked.

She nodded quickly.

"Have you... had more? Like that?"

"You mean about us...? Yes. A few. I've been meaning to talk to you about them, but most aren't that serious so..." she said with a shrug.

Not that serious...? I think she needed to re-assess how she viewed certain things... Vim's mother showing up was stupidly serious in my opinion.

"Did... did you tell Randle the reason you wanted to know about all the gods and their names?" I asked carefully. I heard someone coming down the stairs near my room, so I knew in half a moment we'd not be able to talk privately.

"Yes... he asked, and I was hoping he'd just know her name for me. He didn't."

Of course he didn't. Great. Now I needed to go talk to Randle...

Wait...

Vim had once said he didn't know their names. That he had only known his parents as mother and father.

Had he... lied to me? Liora just said he said her name, or at least she thinks he did, but...

"Why do you want to know her name so badly?" I asked as my head began to swirl.

She frowned at me and shrugged. "I'm not sure... I just feel like it's very important."

Yes... it very well might be... "I uh... I'll help. You search for it. Later," I said.

"Oh...? Okay!" Liora brightened up at that, not just with a smile but her eyes too. They glowed a tad stronger as she grinned.

I nodded and very gently bumped the girl with an elbow. "Thanks for telling me... um... please don't tell anyone else, okay? Not until we talk more?" I asked.

"Sure...? No problem."

"Thanks... I'll be back in a bit, Vim will leave without me if I don't go now," I said.

"Ah. He wouldn't ever do that. He'd wait until the world froze over for you," Liora said with such certainty that I paused mid-step.

"Hm...?" Why would she phrase it like that...?

She nodded and gave me a very warm smile. One that... honestly didn't fit her young age. "I'm jealous. I know you know how precious it is, but I don't think anyone else does. He's so loyal it's almost sickening, like really strong honey!" she said.

I smiled at that and nodded. "Yes... I know, right? By the way now I want honey, thanks for that," I said.

She giggled as I stepped out of the room, and as I did I had to pause as Nessa walked by. "Oops, pardon me Renn," she said as she hurried past and hurried to the exit. She like the rest had been shuttling her stuff to her new room.

Following her out of the dormitory, I found Vim not too far away. He was over near one of the work tables.

I hurried over to him, and with every step I took towards him a thousand new questions filled my head. I groaned inwardly as he turned to smile at me, in the same sweet way that Liora had just hinted at, and I felt like squeezing his head as hard as I could. "Vim," I said as I approached.

"Hm?"

"We uh... need to talk," I said.

His smile softened a little, and he glanced at the house. "Uh... please don't tell me she had another prophecy, or something," he said. It was rather obvious why he'd come to such a conclusion, since I knew he likely could see my stress and concern on my face.

"In a way," I said.

He inhaled deeply, and held it in for a moment as we held our gazes... and then breathed it out and nodded. "Okay."

"You sure?" I asked.

"Yeah... I got a feeling what it's about, so... yeah."

"Don't look so excited," I said softly, hoping to ease the seriousness of the moment.

"Says you?" he teased back.

I grinned as he and I stepped away, to both head into SilverCreek... and to talk privately.

Chapter 609 Vim – Properties, Prophecies

"You sure can keep your calm, Vim," Renn said as we walked through SilverCreek.

"How so?" I asked. What was there to not be calm about? The city was lively, peaceful... its inhabitants calm and a few were even friendly, waving at us as we walked past because they recognized Renn for one reason or another.

A part of me worried over such a thing, but I knew better than to actually act on such a worry or get too stressed out over it. Part of the process of settling somewhere and safely blending in for our people was just that, making friends and being well liked among the village and whatnot.

"She prophesied your mother showing up, and you just... frowned and nodded? Aren't you at least a little worried?" Renn asked.

"Of course I am. But I know better than to think what she saw is what will happen. She likely misunderstood something, and as such the truth is not as dire as it is being presented as," I explained.

"So... you think Liora misunderstood what she saw?" Renn asked.

I nodded. "Very obviously. My mother is gone, Renn. Without any doubt," I said. I would admit, if but for a tiny moment, I had wondered otherwise... but that moment was long gone and would never return.

"What do you think it means then? Do you think you just called someone mother, is someone named such a thing? Do we know someone you'd call mother?" she asked, her quick mind going where mine did as well back when I first heard Liora's prophecy.

"That's my assumption. She likely saw something in the future, maybe even a decade or two from now. It's not too unlikely that at that moment someone is near us who has recently given birth, or might possibly even be outright named such a thing," I said.

"Then... why the bright light? And what about her saying you screwed up?" Renn asks.

"I don't know Renn. My first and obvious assumption is Liora simply dies. Which means this visitor is not a friendly one. And me screwing up is not too unheard of, as much as no one else seems to believe," I said.

Renn scoffed a laugh. "Please, Vim. I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you right now," she said.

"Ill humored, but my joke isn't too far from the truth. I likely have, or will, make a mistake... and thus we will get attacked by whoever this individual is because of it," I said. We rounded a small road and stepped onto an even smaller one. One that was too small for carts or wagons.

"Rather ill fitting, I'd say. It made me laugh," Renn corrected.

I sighed and nodded. "And honestly, there's another possible explanation. One I don't want to admit... but..."

"But...?" Renn stopped walking, as to frown and wait for my answer. She likely knew this Haggo and his office was just around the bend, and had stopped walking as to force me to answer. She knew I'd stop talking about this once we got there.

"Based off her description, there's... a chance," I said quietly, deciding to just answer and get it over with.

"Description...? Oh... she described your mother to you? Or at least, this person who you called mother? Did she do it accurately?" Renn asked, her eyes lighting up a bit in excitement. It seemed she had not heard Liora's description of this person yet, based off the way she was reacting. That meant she had heard the rough version of the prophecy then had ran out to see me in worry before hearing the rest.

"Well... yes. She did," I answered truthfully.

Renn's frown deepened. "Then..."

"Then all it proves is the most likely, or rather only possible, culprit... if I really had addressed this individual Liora foresaw as mother, and she hadn't misunderstood or mistaken something... Well, they'd be a god," I said simply.

My wife's beautiful eyes narrowed a little as she absorbed my words, and then she glanced around for a moment. She hadn't needed to, we were alone on this small path. And most of the buildings around us were made of good brick and no windows were open and facing our way. And even if someone was listening in, our conversation likely sounded completely insane to them.

"Basically, a god likely took my mother's form. Maybe to... trick me, and get me to let my guard down. If even for a moment," I specified before Renn could ask the obvious.

"Is... is that possible?" she asked.

"Honestly, it might be. Gods can modify their bodies, and many did so or do so, but... to that level...? I'm not sure. Even if one of them took the shape of my mother, there's more to it than that. They'd have to mimic her voice, her little ticks and cues, the way she spoke and the words she used..." I slowly shook my head. "I find it hard to believe anyone, god or no, could possibly do that. I could see myself being stunned for a heartbeat or so at the sight of her, but then... then I'd likely burst into a rage, because I would know instinctively that it wasn't her," I said. There was no need to go into further detail as to why it would be obvious to me, beyond just her little traits that no one could feasibly mimic.

"So the only way it'd be possible, and work, is if it was someone who had known her well," Renn concluded.

I nodded... and almost regretted doing so, but it was too late to hide such things anymore. "Yes. Basically."

Renn stretched her jaw a little, as if to pop it or something, and then she gave me an odd look. "Just why did you bring Liora here, Vim? Why didn't you entrust her with Light or at Telmik?"

Hadn't we already touched on this topic...? "I'm hoping to keep her both safe, and to use her as an extra layer of security. For you and others," I said honestly.

Renn's eyes softened a little. "That's kind of cruel to her, Vim. She's stressing over her prophecies, she's just a little girl."

"A little girl poisoned by divinity... yes. It is cruel, but it is a life of hardship those bastards forced upon her. The best we can do is help her through it, and to do so she must also help us. Not that I'd force her to, of course, but..."

"But you'll hope she will all the same. Really, Vim, be gentler with her... she's..."

"What? A human? You of all people should know how even the most human saints are still a step away from them, as we are. In fact many saints are less human than some of our own people, particularly those thin in the blood... like Folz," I said.

I heard Renn's ears shuffle under her hat. "Fine... so how do you expect her to help us, anyway? By just alerting us to dangers or something?" she asked.

"Actually, I've already received the help I've been expecting," I said as I gestured for her to return to walking with me. A pair of men had started heading our way from the other side of the road, and I didn't want them to focus more on us than they needed to. If Renn and I stood here the whole time as they passed us by, they'd think we were a typical married pair in the middle of an argument... and thus would pay more attention to us since they'd find it amusing.

Renn and I returned to walking as she got a bit closer. "How so?" she asked quietly.

"The very prophecy that started this conversation," I said.

She gave me an odd look. "Explain."

"Well, as I said... there are only a few possible explanations for her dream. First is she simply misunderstood... but that possibility becomes small and less likely when you take into account that she had described my mother nearly perfectly," I started.

"Perfectly..." Renn whispered, and I knew she would now rush back to ask Liora all about it later. I ignored that for a moment and continued.

"Secondly, my mother actually does return and show up. But I mean..." I smirked at the thought for a moment, at the mere absurdity of it. "Impossible," I said simply.

Renn stared hard at me, but remained silent. I too went quiet a moment as I nodded to the two men we walked past, as they both continued their own conversations about one of their sons. He had recently found a dog and brought it home.

"Third and, in my opinion, most likely... a god takes her persona and does so to catch me, us, unaware," I said.

"And that helps you...? By what? Warning us it happens?" she asked.

"That... yes. I basically," I said, and I wondered if I'd not have to actually explain why I saw it that way.

But after a few moments... I realized I was going to have to. Because Renn was looking at me oddly.

"Thus why you're not worrying too much, and not freaking out. You hate prophecies, but in this instance you like hearing of it... because it gives you what you want," she said, as if accusing me of doing something wrong.

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I frowned as I slowed to a stop again. The men were now far enough away I didn't need to worry over them, and no one else had entered our area. In fact we were now between two large buildings that had no windows near us, they were likely some kind of warehouses or shops and not homes. Renn stopped next to me as well, all the while giving me an odd look of worry. One full of questions.

"As I told you, Renn... the gods are up to something. They threatened your life, in an effort to get me to do something for them. Very unusual. Yet... I can't do what I'd normally do in this instance, so I'm forced to act on the defense," I explained, or at least tried to.

"What would you normally do, Vim?"

"I'd hunt them down. No matter how long it took, how far it took me, or how much destruction it wrought," I answered.

Her eyes shifted a little. "And you can't do that, because I'm here."

"You and the Society. I've not fully stepped down yet, and as such I am still obligated to my duties. Plus... I don't know where they are, Renn. Even if I was free to hunt them at this very moment, I'm not sure how I'd do so. If they've hidden themselves from me for this long, odds are nothing will change that," I said.

"Thus why you recently said you wished Miss Beak was around," she said softly.

"Does she not keep any secrets from you?" I asked, a tad miffed to verify what I had already expected.

Renn gave me a smile, a proud and pretty one. "Merit loves me far more than she loves you, which is saying something."

Honestly it was, considering.

I sighed softly. "Basically Renn... Liora has done exactly what I had been hoping she would, and she did it within a handful of days of me meeting her. She foresaw one of my enemies showing up. So... now I simply must wait for them to do so," I said.

"At the risk of all of us dying in the process," she said a little stiffly.

"I'd not let that happen."

"How can you say that, Vim? We're talking about literal gods."

Well... not literal, literally. "That moment of shock I spoke of? Of seeing my mother, alive? That gave this person, whoever or whatever it is, time to attack?"

"Yeah...?" Renn leered at me as I smiled.

"Won't happen now. Even if my mother herself, with all the little ways I could prove was her, showed herself in front of me... it'd not make a difference now. I'd destroy her without any hesitation, now," I said.

Renn sighed at me. "Hopefully your mother doesn't actually show up then."

I frowned at that. "Yes, that would be a tad hard to explain. But it'd not work, Renn. I can't harm my mother, not even if I wanted to. That's kind of how I'd prove if it was her or not in such a scenario," I said as I returned to walking.

"Huh?"

Before Renn could ask for more details we stepped out of the smaller path and onto a more normal road. One that was a little bit more busy, but not by much. I pointed at one of the buildings down the way, a three-storied brick house, and glanced at Renn. "That it?" I asked.

"Yes..." Renn sighed, rather heavily at me, after she answered.

"Rivonne said this Hugo is one of the shrewdest honest men she knows. Randle said he's a typical noble merchant, what's your opinion on him?" I asked.

"Shrewdest...?" Renn said the word softly as she hummed a moment. "He seems eager to please, but you can tell he's not really in charge. Rivonne said he represents her and the other families, the ones who really run the town. Why are we seeing him anyway? Can't we just have Rivonne handle stuff for us now?" she asked.

"Rivonne's the hammer. You only bring that out when the nail needs to be struck down fast and hard," I said.

"She'd laugh at that," Renn said happily.

Probably. I'd really not spent too much time with the woman. And although I remembered her ancestor, Bird's lover, I honestly couldn't remember much about her personality... not that even if I had that would mean much. Humans did occasionally inherit traits and personalities, but rarely so many generations apart.

As we neared the building, right as an older man walked out of it, I slowed a little and glanced at Renn to see if that was him or not. She gently smiled at me and shook her head upon noticing my look.

We waited for the older, well dressed, man to step past us and onto the road. Then we both walked over to the front door, but we hadn't needed to knock on it. It re-opened, and a younger man smiled and nodded as he stepped back. "Come on in," he said.

Odds are he had seen us as he escorted the older man out. There were also windows on either side of the door, though they were stained and thick.

Stepping into the building, I nodded in thanks to the young man. "We're here to see Hugo," I said.

"Haggo. Really, Vim, you just heard me say his name earlier," Renn said with a sigh.

The young man gave us both a wry grin. "Of course... Please wait here, I'll alert him of your arrival... Mr...?"

"Rennalee. From the Church of Songs," Renn answered for me.

A knowing look appeared on his face, as if he suddenly recognized Renn because of hearing her name, and then stepped away without waiting for us to step into the room to the left where he had gestured for us to wait.

"Rennalee?" I asked.

"Remember Randle made me sign the deed? I used my full name," she said.

Made sense.

The small waiting room had a few chairs, some shelves... a nice big window too. Honestly it was nice, considering we were so far north. Usually human settlements up here were... well...

Renn sighed, so I glanced at her and found her touching the back of one of the chairs. I watched the way she focused on the way the well-cushioned thing squeezed under her fingers and how they sunk into it.

I smiled at the obvious jealousy on her face. It was true that most of our furniture at the moment was... basic. Especially the stuff they had brought with them from Telmik, or purchased recently here in town, but there really wasn't much we could do about it just yet. I was still focusing on just building the actual buildings, I didn't have time yet for such little details as comfy chairs or couches.

Though I did plan to make everyone real beds tomorrow... People were moving into the build we'd just finished, but were taking their hammocks and whatnot from their tents for bedding. So in reality the wooden building really wasn't much more comfortable than the tents, all things considered.

"Lord Rennalee...?" We turned as the young man returned. He gestured with a smile to follow him. "Mr. Haggio will see you now," he said.

I let Renn leave first, since it seemed she was being treated as the higher class person at the moment. I followed her, who followed the man, to the rear of the building. We were taken to another room, one that was surprisingly pretty plain in comparison to the rest of the place... and behind the desk within the room was a larger man. One who stood with a smile as we entered.

"Welcome! Welcome...! I'm sorry for making you wait, hopefully you didn't wait long!" the large man, this Haggio, greeted Renn with a huge smile as she stepped up to his desk and went to shake his hand. Judging by the smile on his face, and how little of it was forced or faked, it seemed he didn't just remember Renn... but did so favorably.

"Nope? It's good to see you Haggio," Renn said as their hands separated.

"Please, not half as good as it is to be of service to you, I'm sure! Just what can I do for you, Lady Renn?" Haggio asked as he glanced at me, but didn't actually greet or nod at me.

"Honestly, I'm not sure yet..." Renn then said as she glanced at me as she went to sit in one of the chairs in front of his desk. There were three angled towards it, with a couple more back a bit near the walls. It seemed this man sometimes had meetings with many people, it looked like.

"Haggio is it...? My name is Vim. I've been told by Rivonne that you're the one to talk to," I said as I stepped forward. I didn't extend my hand to shake his hand in greeting, as Renn had done, nor did I sit down.

The large bellied man gave me an odd frown as he glanced at Renn, then looked back at me. "I almost fear to ask the details," he said lightly.

I smiled lightly at the man, glad to confirm that not only did he really know and respect Rivonne... but at the same time did in fact slightly fear her. He had just now joked a little, but there had been a tinge of truth in his tone. "It's nothing too dire. I simply wished to purchase a few plots of land, is all," I said.

Haggo visibly relaxed, and I heard the tiniest sound of shuffling clothes as Renn's tail squirmed beneath her pants. "Oh my...! Of course, I'd be more than happy to help you with that... is uh... are you buying for yourself or are you representing another?" Haggo asked as he glanced at Renn. He did so in a way that made it obvious he was trying to figure out the connection between me and her.

"She'll be the deed owner, yes," I said.

"Ah, the church again! Was the land not enough then? I've heard you've already raised several buildings, some big ones too!" Haggo said happily as he smoothly stepped over to one of the few shelves in the room and grabbed some scrolls.

"In a way," I said. Honestly I had originally planned to have Rivonne buy the parcels and deal with it for me, but she warned me that by doing so would cause slight chaos amongst the other lords of the town. She already owned a large swath of parcels, many of which were being leased to others. She had offered to do it anyway, but had said it might cause grief for any who utilized the land she purchased since others would see it as her being greedier than she should be. They had all agreed to not buy anymore property a year ago, and had even written a contract over it.

Her willingness to break that contract, and as such make enemies of people she's long been business partners with, was very telling of her loyalty... but I wasn't so cruel as to abuse it. Not when I can just put it in Renn's name, and thus the church's and Society's.

"Can't say I'm too surprised... though I'll be perfectly honest, ever since it was revealed that the Church of Songs made their mark others have gone into motion. There had been only one property other than yours in that area purchased... and..." Haggo placed one of the scrolls down onto the table and unrolled it. Renn stood to join me as we watched Haggo point to the north of the map showing the property lines of the town. "As you can see, now there are seven," he said.

"Property around the church has and always is valuable," I said. Odds are the people who had purchased them all planned to open shops or similar businesses, as to benefit from the continuous flow of daily people the church brought.

"Aye, very. But as you can see this whole section is still available... though this part does extend deeply into the forest up north, odds are the city line won't ever really go much farther than that. Not when we have the east and south to expand to easily, to say no mention of the other side of the river eventually," Haggio explained.

"Funny, considering that's exactly what I'm interested in," I said as I studied some of the sections in the forest to the north of us. As he had said, none of them had been marked for purchase and in fact none around them had either.

Pointing at a few, I made my choice... which was easy, since I'd already scouted and found where I wanted anyway. I had in mind a certain section of the forest where I could not just build easily, but also build downward. I wanted to make an underground bunker, not just for myself but for those of our members who would need such safety.

"Tell me about these ones," I said, as I went to negotiate their purchase in Renn's name.

Haggio would see them as owned by the church, as would many others... such as Rivonne and whatnot...

But that was in fact not the plan at all.

These would be Renn's. In totality.

Or at least, that was the plan.

One of my better ones recently, I think.

Chapter 610 Renn – A Hole in the Night

"So is Vim going to make those benches?" Celine asked as I sat down at the table with her.

It was after dinner time. Celine was to my left, Angie to my right and Liora and Nessa sat across from us. The reason I sat between the two on this side was because Merit had been sitting in-between them a few moments ago. She had gotten up and left without saying much so I assumed she'd be returning eventually.

"Benches?" I asked.

"The ones you see in churches. The long ones," Celine said.

Ah. "Pews," Nessa said.

"Ya those. Randle's going to start opening the church soon right? Doesn't he need those?" Celine asked.

Actually he did... Vim and the others had finished the church first, before our dormitory, but it was still relatively empty. In fact other than a few chairs, a couple tables, and a podium, there wasn't anything else really in it...

"I'll ask Vim to make some, he's focused on the sewer thing right now," I said. Vim had already dug and readied what he called the groundwork for the piping system, but as of yet had not made any pipes. I wasn't really sure what was left for him to do without the pipes themselves, but he obviously still had more work to do since he kept digging trenches and holes. He planned to install the pipes the moment the shipment of supplies came from Telmik, since they were to bring such things for him, but he still seemed focused on finishing it all up before they arrived. Almost as if he expected the shipment to show up any day now.

"Honestly I'm glad, rather running water at least in the kitchen than a bunch of seats I'll never use," Angie said.

I smirked at her. "What would Randle say if he heard that?" I asked, teasing her.

Angie gave me a side-glance, the kind that told me she had absolutely zero care for what Randle would say about it.

You'd think she'd like him more than she did. She not only trusted him, at least as far as I could tell, but Randle was also one of the few if not one of the only ones who didn't ever flirt or say anything even slightly romantic. You'd think she'd like him for that alone.

"Personally I'd prefer beds," I said.

Angie sighed at me as Nessa giggled. "You would!" she shouted.

"I kind of like my rope thing," Celine said.

"Hammocks. They are neat, aren't they? I wish I had them back in the day, when I traveled and lived in forests. I could have put one up between trees all the time, would have been nice," I agreed.

"You lived in forests...? Like the ones around here?" Celine asked, interested.

"Yeah, actually I was born not too far from here! A few weeks north, and a bit to the east past some big mountains is where I'm from," I said.

The table was quiet for a moment, which made my left ear flutter in worry. Had I said something odd?

"Sounds cold," Angie then said.

"Ah... yes. Up there it snows more than not, actually," I said with a happy nod.

"Hm... I'm not sure I'll even be able to handle the cold here, so I'm sorry Renn but I think I'll pass on visiting," Celine said.

I smiled at that. "It's not that bad once you get used to it. Especially once we really get our rooms set up, so they're easy to keep warm," I said.

Celine sighed and leaned forward, crossing her arms and resting her head on them. "You say that as if you never have to go outside... but you do. All the time," she said worriedly.

"Not once we get proper homes built, with toilets and stuff," Nessa said.

"Yeah but how long will that take? It took Vim almost a month to build this place, and he said he'll not be here much longer," Celine said worriedly.

I frowned at that. Had he said so recently...? I knew he of course thought he'd get summoned anytime now, but I'd not heard him say he planned on leaving so myself.

"Renn."

I leaned back a little as to glance at the door. I found Merit standing at it, who gestured for me to come to her.

"Hm...?" I frowned as I glanced around, and realized I was the only one being summoned. I got up, stepped away from the table and walked over to the hallway. "Yeah?" I asked.

Merit gestured behind her. "Come on," she said.

Oh...? She had sounded a tad odd just now. Tired, maybe? Was she going to invite me to take a nap with her or something...?

I left the dining area behind, as those still there began to talk about our windows that Vim had recently installed. They were kind of basic, not able to be opened in any way, but were temporary.

"What's up?" I asked Merit as I followed her down the hallway towards my room.

"Krass passed away," Merit said as she turned as to step up the stairwell, heading upstairs.

"Huh...?"

I slowed to a stop as I watched my little friend walk up a few steps, then turn to look down at me. She frowned and nodded. "Her son found her a little bit ago. She passed in her sleep," she said.

What...? But I'd... just seen her... we all just had dinner a little bit ago... I did remember her making a small comment about going to her room to rest, but...

Glancing behind me, back down the hallway to where Krass's room was... I frowned even more. "So... why are we going upstairs?" I asked.

"Because we have another problem. A worse one," she said.

Great...!

"Is she still in her room?" I asked quietly as I followed Merit to the second floor.

"Yes. I'll send you to go get Vim in a moment. He and Randle can deal with her, and while they do you can help me deal with this."

With what...? What was more important than one of our people dying...?

She led me to her room, the one right above mine at the end of the western hallway... and she opened the door to it with a push.

I stepped up behind her, frowning in worry at what could possibly be so dire that it was more important than a death and...

"Merit..." I groaned as I stepped past her and into her room. Right in the center, near her hammock... was a hole.

"I know...! I tripped!" Merit complained with a tiny whine as she entered the room with me.

I sighed as I stared down at the floor and through it to the room below... at my room.

Just what had happened...? It was a hole straight down through not just the floorboards, but what looked like several layers of wood beams and planks. I hadn't even realized that Vim had made the building like this; it looked like there were several feet of wood beneath the floor we stood on...

Bending down, I frowned at the hole. It was about the size of my open hand, at least the surface of it was... and it got smaller until the other end, where it was likely smaller than my balled fist. And the oddest part was even though it had a bunch of tiny splinters and broken pieces upon it, the wood all around the edges looked... charred. As if they'd been burnt.

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"Did you burn a hole or something?" I asked.

"No... I fell."

Fell...?

I glanced back at my friend and found her looking away, with a tiny bit of red on her face she shrugged at me. "I tripped... fell and hit my elbow, and it hurt and I let loose some of my electricity... it caused a fire and made the hole bigger," she said.

Gosh... "How'd you even trip, Merit?" I asked as I looked around. Like my room she had barely nothing in here. Her hammock, a basket of dirt clothes, a few trunks and chests... but nothing was around the center of the room, around the hole, to have caused her to trip.

"Don't tell Vim..." Merit groaned.

Huh...? "We're going to have to, Merit... how are we going to fix this?" I asked. This wasn't just a single floorboard, it was many and also the boards beneath it too.

"Guh...!" she made a weird noise as she reached up and covered her face.

I chuckled at her as I looked back at the hole. Reaching into it, I ran my finger along one of the burnt edges... and found it to be very cold.

So this hadn't happened recently... when had it happened, I wonder? I think I would have heard her fall and do this, considering how hard of a fall it would have had to been... so it must have happened while I was out and about. In town with Vim earlier, maybe?

Well, I suppose it would have had to have happened today... I would have noticed such a hole last night, or this morning, otherwise...

Merit made some more noises as I tried to stick my arm all the way through it. I couldn't, but not because it wasn't long enough. The end of the hole, the bottom part that opened up to my room, was smaller than I had thought. I was only able to get some fingers through it.

I chuckled at her as I stood back up. "Vim's going to tease you horribly... he's going to say you did it on purpose," I said, smiling at the idea.

"Exactly...!" she groaned.

Ah... right... that was likely why she had not wanted him to know. Funny.

Honestly he'd not be too bothered. He'd likely only tease her because, like me, he knew it would be funny to point out the silly coincidence that of all ceilings she poked a hole into it was one that led to my... or rather our bedroom.

"If you really don't want to let Vim know, that's fine. I'll try to help you fix it... but honestly Merit it might just be better to let him do it, it's more than just a few boards or whatever," I said.

Merit didn't say anything, she just groaned at me.

Reaching over I patted her on the shoulder. "Come on... let's deal with this later and focus on Krass..."

She sniffed and nodded. "I'll go get Randle, you get Vim," she said.

"I promise not to tell him until after," I said.

"Mhm..." she nodded.

Leaving her room we headed back downstairs. We both went back towards the front of the building, where the hallway split and led to the entrance and down the other hallway where Krass's room was... and I noticed Tristin standing before it. He was standing up against the wall near her bedroom door, with his head resting on the wall... looking sullen.

Feeling bad, since I'd just basically ignored such an even to laugh with my friend... I glanced down at Merit who nodded up to me with a sigh. "Go find Vim," she said simply.

"Right..."

I left Merit behind, and as I did Randle entered the hallway. I felt a bit of relief as he joined Merit down the hall, without a glance or a word to me. Which meant he had already known and was already dealing with it.

Krass and Tristin were both members of Randle's group, they had worked for him back at Telmik... so I knew he was the best man to leave it to, but I still wondered if I should do more than just go get Vim. Should I go say something to the lad...?

Tristin was honestly a good kid. Other than the fact he ignored and tried to stay away from Nessa, since she had tried to flirt with him and catch his attention on our trip here... but that wasn't necessarily a bad mark on his character. He was just... or well, he wanted to be, a priest. One who forgo romance and stuff.

I left the dormitory and frowned at the idea of vowing off romance. A part of me understood it, I suppose... especially since I had basically lived that lifestyle myself for most of my life, before joining the Society, but...

"Ah..." I slowed as I realized I had done something terrible.

I was supposed to have painted her. Randle had wanted me to paint her, and her son... since he had known she'd be reaching the end of her life soon...

I'd not been able to. We'd not yet gotten the paints needed. Randle had planned to get them for me soon, but...

"How sad..." I whispered as I returned to walking. It was the dark of night and the sky had thick clouds, so I didn't need my hat, but it also made it so it took me a moment to find Vim.

Seeing some dirt fly up into the air in the distance, I smiled as I picked up my pace and hurried over to him.

"Vim...!" I called out to him as neared his trench that he was digging.

"You don't have your hat on, Renn," Vim said from his hole as he paused in his digging.

"I know, I forgot... at least until a few moments ago. We have a problem."

"What kind?" he asked with a sigh.

"Kraass. She passed away."

Vim turned to look up at me, and frowned. Had he not even looked at me until now...? How had he noticed I hadn't had my hat on then?

"How?" he asked, rather seriously.

"Merit said in her sleep. I've not... verified it myself, but..."

He nodded. "Merit wouldn't lie about something like that. Does anyone else know? Her boy? Randle?"

"They do..."

He sighed again and tapped his shovel with a thumb. "She's a devout member of the cloth... which means they'll want to lay her to rest properly. Also means they'll want to give her last rites and purify her, likely... so they'll likely wait a day or two to bury her. She passed in her sleep? So she's in her room?" he asked as he climbed out of his freshly dug hole.

I nodded as I stepped back from him. He had pulled up his shovel with him, likely because he knew he'd soon have to use it for another purpose. "She is."

Vim nodded slowly as he glanced over my shoulder, likely at the buildings nearby. "It's always something, isn't it?" he said.

"Seems so... honestly I feel a bit rude, but it's Merit's fault," I said.

"What do you mean...?"

"I'll tell you later," I said. Even though I wanted to tell him now, I had promised to wait. "Do you think this will cause issues...?" I asked.

"Not likely. Randle said they all expected this to happen. The boy might get depressed for awhile or might want to leave now, though. A lot of humans can't stay where their family die... it disturbs them," he said.

"Ah... me too. I'd not be able to live where someone I loved died either. I was barely able to last ten days with Nory," I said.

Vim slowly nodded at me, but didn't say anything. Likely because he didn't really have the same sentiments.

Vim was stronger than me in that way. Though I dared to think it wasn't because he was callus... rather I believed it was because of his age. I've lost a handful of people... he's lost thousands.

I could only imagine how few places he would be able to go to if he had the same issue as that. If he was so disturbed by deaths that he avoided certain places... well... I doubted there was really anywhere in the Society he'd be able to go then, realistically.

A sad thought, honestly.

"You okay, Renn?" Vim then asked.

"Hm...? Yes... I feel for her, but I'd really not spent much time with her. She busied herself with Randle, and stuff," I said. More often than not she had been in her tent, or room, even during the day. She had been older, and as such had rested a lot.

Vim slowly nodded, and I wondered if he had noticed my earlier thoughts and thus her concern. The ones about him likely being so used to death he simply wasn't bothered by it anymore. The thoughts had made me sad, since it told me of how harsh his life has been.

I'd thought of it before, but sometimes I forgot just how old he was... and as such just how many he's lost throughout his life. And unlike me, he has had relationships and lots of friends... so...

"And now you're crying...? Should I stop believing your own words, Renn?" he asked softly as he reached out. I closed my left eye as he brushed my cheek with a slightly dirty finger, replacing a tear-stain with dirt.

"No... I'm okay, really. I was just... thinking of something else. Something sad," I said.

I didn't want to outright say what had disturbed me, and not just because I didn't want to remind him of all the people he's lost over the years... it was also because I'd realized I was likely going to experience similar pains myself one day. Since now I was gaining a lot of friends too... Compared to before, before I joined the Society, I now had... so many... and one day, inevitably... they'd be gone.

Sniffing as more tears came, I smiled softly at the man who now looked genuinely worried for me. "I really am okay," I promised.

For now at least.

"Hm... want to dig holes with me? It's therapeutic you know?" he suggested.

"I like that word... and maybe I'll take you up on it, later," I said. It was one of his words that he had taught me.

"It sounds neat, doesn't it?" he said as he gently turned me around and guided me back towards the dormitory. He grabbed my hand as he did, and I spent a moment to enjoy the feeling of dirt between our fingers. Vim often enough times got dirty and whatnot, but rarely did he hold my hand when so... As such this was a new feeling for me.

"You know what sounds neater?" I asked.

Vim shifted the shovel in his other hand as to rest it on his shoulder. "And what's that?"

"Bed. Or a bed...? Or rather beds, since I think people would get upset with me if I'm the only one you make one for..." I said happily, both teasing him and making sure to let him know that everyone was expecting him to hurry up and make them.

He chuckled at me. "Yes... I plan to spend tomorrow making them, unless I get sidetracked. What with this ordeal," he said, implying Krass's death.

"Can I help?" I asked.

Vim nudged me ever so gently with his elbow as he nodded. "Of course, just keep your teasing to a reasonable amount as you do," he said.

"Not going to happen."