

## Non Human 611

### Chapter 611 Vim – A Bed Begotten

Just a few more to go. Three, maybe four if I wanted to also build an extra.

Brushing off some dust from my sanding, I smiled as I appreciated my handiwork. This was one of the bigger beds I'd made so far, and I planned for this one to be mine. Or well, Renn's. I'd made the thing sturdy and stout, using twice as much wood as I had the others.

It was of course not in one piece at the moment, I would put it together in the bedroom, but I still could see its final form in my head just by looking at it. Every piece looked perfect. All of the pieces were thick and heavy, far more than typical. Perfect for me.

Honestly I had enjoyed making it. Not only did I enjoy working with my hands, building such stuff calmed me... but for most of it I had been getting assistance. From Renn. I had vastly enjoyed the few hours we had worked together, before she had gotten pulled away to go and participate in the funeral rites for Kass.

They weren't burying her yet. That was for later on, tomorrow morning... right now they were just having something of a wake. One that I myself didn't feel like I needed to be a part of, especially since I'd heard the son wasn't participating either.

He had chosen to spend a few days in isolation, fasting, as his way of honoring her memory. Not too normal, but also not something surprising for a potential priest to do either.

Honestly human deaths were something to be expected. Not only were they frail things, they simply didn't live long. Though... it was a tad odd someone so old and unhealthy had even been given

permission to join this expedition. Though I had thought it odd before, it was a tad disheartening to be given such proof so quickly.

"Hopefully it wasn't the lack of a decent bed..." I mumbled as I sighed and stood. I stepped away from the pieces of Renn's bed and glanced around at the other one's I'd made so far. I planned to carry them all into the dormitory building soon, before the night got too late, as so the outside elements didn't mess with them too much. It didn't seem like it was going to rain anytime soon, and it was growing warmer by the day... but it would be just my luck that we had a sudden cold snap or something and as such ruined all my work.

Plus there was no need to let them all sit out here for no reason. I'd be able to carry the pieces in and put them all together relatively easily. And earlier, in the morning and while Renn had helped me build some of them, several of our other members had gone into town to purchase the actual bedding supplies. They had purchased enough fine cloth and even some feathers as to make the mattresses for the beds. They'd not be perfect, but they'd do fine temporarily until we got better supplies from Telmik.

"Shouldn't be too long anyway," I said softly as I thought of the twins. Randle had mentioned they planned to arrive soon, and would do so not just with supplies but people. I was honestly a tad worried over who was going to show up... but I also knew that it likely didn't matter.

They'd likely be bringing me orders, or at least requests, once they did. So I'd not need to worry much about who was here and who wasn't...

I sighed as I brushed my hands off and glanced around. I still had a few I wanted to build... but maybe I should just take all the beds into the building now, while everyone else was busy in the church for the wake. Other than the lad, at least.

Choosing to do so, I went ahead and picked up a few of the larger pieces of Renn's bed. I decided to handle hers first, since maybe by doing so I'd get to avoid the teasing and whatnot by the others as they watched me put it together.

Plus I knew for a fact that Renn's bedroom was still mostly empty. Enough so that I'd have no problem taking all the pieces in and putting it together... unlike a few others who were likely not so.

It was a sad thought... but Renn really didn't own much. She had a small chest of personal items now, stuff she's accumulated over our journey... but it was a far cry from what a typical person had. Even in this era of serfdom. It was honestly a tad... depressing to know that my wife likely owned less than any other common farmer's wife.

I've given her a few things so far, and planned to give her more... such as the rings I wanted to make for her, but the truth of the matter was I'd not given her enough. And some of the few things I'd given her, such as her little nail box was starting to really wear down. I'd noticed it the other day as I helped her, and others, carry stuff into the building from the tents. Its little lid was barely holding on anymore, and not just because the tiny hinge had come undone. The very wood itself, that it was made of, was starting to warp. It had likely gotten damp or wet once or twice during our travels, just something that happened when living on the road.

Usually I'd not pay much mind at all to such a thing. One of her little decorative boxes or bags rips or breaks? Make a new one, or buy one. Some clothes wear down? Replace them. The pins she uses to keep her hat on firmly snap or get lost? Just make more.

But I knew to Renn it wasn't that simple. Far from it, in fact.

Renn cherished the little things. Such as the feather she had gotten from Sap. Or that painting that Lughes had made before the chaos in Ruvindale. She had kept those things safe for a long time, though now they weren't even here but instead in the cavern...

Wonder if I really should make such a base here. My plan was, under the property I'd purchased the other day with Renn here in town, to build a bunker styled underground building. One I could keep well hidden, and store things of importance in... such as hearts, or stuff I'd bring here over the years for Renn and myself.

Right now though that was still a distant plan. I'd not even finalized the purchase of the land yet, I'd have to get more money to really do so... Rivonne had offered capital, but I had not wanted to get so deep into her graces so quickly. I wanted to save her aid for a day when we really needed it...

"When, not if..." I whispered as I walked into the dormitory and carried the first part of Renn's bed down the hall to her room. I found it open, the door ajar, but empty. I could tell by the quiet cold of the building that no one was here... or at least, not more than a single person. I could hear soft mumbling from upstairs, but it was a man's voice doing so. It was likely the old woman's son, Tristin... though if he was praying, mumbling to himself or talking to someone I couldn't tell.

I left the man alone and continued bringing in bed pieces. It didn't take me too long to bring in most the pieces and put them where they belonged, but occasionally I had to put the bed pieces out in the hallway in front of their intended destinations. Only a few rooms had left their doors open, and thus allowed me to step into them and place the pieces down accordingly. The rest had shut doors. And even though not locked, I was not authorized per long standing rules to enter such doors. I would need permission first, especially since no one's life relied on my doing so.

As I continued bringing in the beds, people started to show up. At first it was Merit, who huffed at me but said nothing as she ignored me completely as she headed to her room. Then it was Nessa, Oplar's mailroom girl... who was technically no longer working in a mailroom, so I knew I should probably stop dubbing her such. She thanked me for the bed, though did have to open her bedroom door for me to finish putting it in there for her.

The night arrived as I then went to putting the beds together. By the time I started doing so; nearly everyone was back from the church except Randle and his mute attendant. And because of this, my working speed dropped considerably. Where before it had only taken me a handful of minutes to put a bed together, it now took twice as long if not thrice... because people asked questions, offered deferring opinions on where to place them... and simply just chitchatted with and around me as I worked.

I didn't mind of course. I was far more than used to such a thing, since it was typical for members to raise questions or simply talk to me as I worked... but it was a tad odd to do it all the while Renn was missing.

Sometime after nightfall, as the moon began to shine through the windows... as I helped Randle put together his bed, the last one needing to be put together, I finally found myself unable to resist figuring out where she was. I could sense her, but only distantly.

"Where's Renn?" I asked Randle as I patted the end post of his bed. It was finally put together.

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"Oh...? You weren't told? Sap returned a few hours ago, she's in the church with her," Randle said.

I frowned at that. "What...?" I asked, a tad shocked. Sap was back? And had been for that long and no one had told me...?

Rude.

Randle nodded as he stepped back as Merit and Celine carried in a makeshift mattress. It, like nearly every other one made today, was just a large sewn up collection of clean and soft cloths and feathers. I helped them get it into the bed-frame, squishing it into it, and smiled once we got it tucked in firmly. It was a tad too firm for my taste, and I knew the one Renn had was the same, but it was still far better than nothing... and also better than the hammocks and simple blankets some of them had been sleeping on this whole time. And would be especially so once they all broke them in and put their own pillows and blankets down upon them to better soften them.

Though hopefully Renn would not complain too much over their smell... the cloths and feathers weren't too bad, but Renn had a picky nose. Hopefully I eliminated the smell soon enough for her...

"Thank you, Vim. Merit, Celine," Randle thanked us as I nodded and stepped out of the room, before anyone could ask me to move their beds again. A few had, after I'd already finished putting them together and helping handle the mattress, had come to ask me to move it again after realizing they didn't like it where it were. I figured it'd happen for a few days at least, until people settled... but right now...

Sneaking out of the dormitory, a little too easily, I smiled as I headed for the church building. It was bigger than the dormitory, but not by much. Plus it really only had one floor. The upper section of it was just a few small rooms for storage, nothing more. Plus it really didn't have any big windows, and wasn't very decorative either. I'd fashioned it in a simple manner, per Randle's request, and as such it looked more like a big barn than anything else. I knew eventually he'd build, or would ask others, to build religious motifs and maybe even a large cross to place atop it... but for now it was as is.

Entering the church, I frowned at the odd smell of candles. Ones with odd scents. I stepped deeper into the church as I heard Renn hum thoughtfully as I glanced around. There were hundreds of candles littered all over, on the windowsills, on tables and shelves... even on the floor. Not a one as lit anymore, but their scent still strongly lingered from having been lit earlier. Likely during the wake.

"You know I always am surprised at how fast it happens, yet I guess Vim and I had been much the same in our own way," Renn said, speaking lightly to Sap.

The two were sitting at one of the few tables in the church, not far from the back of it where the podium was. The place still was relatively empty, since I'd not made any pews or anything yet. Sap chuckled at Renn as the two glanced at me on my approach. "You say that as if it happens overnight. It's not over yet, you know," she said to Renn's statement.

"I assume then Lellip has benevolently accepted Branches?" I asked as I walked over to the two.

Sap grinned as Renn happily stood and nodded at me. "Isn't it great!?" Renn asked.

Yes. It honestly was.

"I'm glad. Especially since I was wondering how I'd overlook the fact that Nebl would have ripped the lad's head off had he broke her heart, and neither I nor Lilly would have been able to disagree with such an action," I said.

Sap laughed. "Now I want to meet that man even more! Lellip has bragged a lot about him, the smith that not even a mountain could eat!" Sap said.

What a way to put it. "He's a good man," I said as I glanced at Renn. She had stepped towards me and hadn't sat back down. She looked... apprehensive. "Hm?" I smiled at her to let her know she can go ahead and say whatever was on her mind. Was it about Lellip? Lilly? The wake they just partook in?

"Can I go back home with her, Vim? For a few days at least?" she asked without hesitation.

Ah... I nodded softly. "Of course, Renn. Hopefully this is just to celebrate their new budding relationship...?" I asked with a glance to Sap.

The winged owl's grin slowly died as she softly shook her head. "It's actually because of my sister," she said simply.

Great. "Not getting better is she?" I asked.

"If she had wings Vim, I'd bet by now they'd be listless and mangy and unable to keep her aloft. That's how bad it is," Sap said softly.

I sighed at that. "Depression is a hell of a drug," I said.

"Drug?" Renn asked.

"So you plan to go back in hopes of... what? Cheering her up?" I asked her, ignoring her questioning look.

Renn nodded. "Lilly wants me to bring her here. To give her something to do. Since she really likes the kids and the church stuff," Renn said.

Right... Lilly's daughter, Crown, has been for the last couple decades working at one of the abbeys north of Telmik. Though more on the orphanage side than not. We still didn't have such a program set up here, and likely wouldn't for a few years, but... we did have plenty of kids, considering.

"Plus it'd let me and mother keep an eye on her. Mother plans to come and... linger, as she calls it," Sap added. I could tell she planned to do the same.

Figured. "You owls usually do raise your children from a distance, but I hope she doesn't neglect Root," I said... and immediately felt bad for doing so. Neither Sap nor Renn seemed to notice much my statement as they nodded and agreed with me, but I felt like kicking myself.

Usually I didn't share such personal opinions so readily... not even to Renn, let alone in earshot of others...

Feeling a bit bad, I coughed and cleared my throat. "So? If you left tonight I bet the two of you could get there rather quick," I said. Did Sap plan on flying there with Renn? She'd likely be able to do it if Renn didn't take any large bags or anything.

"See? I told you he'd suggest it," Renn said with a huge grin.

Ah. I'd been seen through. Sap grinned back and nodded a little worriedly. "I don't mind trying, Renn... but it's not as easy as you think," she warned.

"But I'll pretend to be as light as a feather, promise!" Renn argued.

"She is actually pretty light. You'll be a little surprised when you go to pick her up," I said. Renn, being such a thick-blooded predator, was deceptively deceiving concerning her weight. It was why when she showed excess strength it was so shocking, because in theory her weight and mass shouldn't allow her to be so explosive in power.

"Did he just call me fat?" Renn asked Sap.

"Honestly I don't know. Could be either yes or no," Sap said.

I sighed at the two. "If you do try, keep low and if you drop her do so either over water or grass. She's sturdy but if you drop her through trees, it'll blunt her fall but she'd likely break half her bones as she hits the branches," I warned. Realistically Renn would likely be able to survive a rather big distance of a fall; what with her not just being what she was but thanks to her heart... but that didn't mean I wanted them to risk it.

"You say that but mother always tells me dropping people into lakes and stuff is a surefire way to kill them," Sap noted.

"Because she's right. Water can become harder than land depending on velocity and stuff, but at lower altitudes it's safer because it can cushion more. In reality the best thing to land on from extreme height is snow, if you really had to choose," I said.

"That makes a lot of sense," Renn said.

"Honestly as long as she doesn't land on her head, or sharp rocks or gets punctured by trees and stuff... she'd likely survive nearly any fall, though wouldn't enjoy doing so," I said as I thought of it.

"Why are you talking as if I'm destined to fall anyway?" Renn asked with a huff.

"Sap's dropped people before," I said.

"It was one time...!" Sap groaned.

Renn grinned happily as Sap's wings fluttered in embarrassed annoyance. Which was funny to me, since we were talking about something that might endanger her life. Usually hearing such a thing would make one hesitant to agree, yet it seemed she found it even more appealing. My wife sure was odd.

"Well... I suppose this is fate then. I finally make us a bed suitable enough and you go on and abandon me," I said with a sigh.

Renn turned and blushed as she laughed at me. "Vim!"

"What...? Listen I love my sister, Renn, but she's not worth missing out on that you know?" Sap teased.

"Sap!" Renn then turned to laugh at her.

I enjoyed the moment for a moment, as the two giggled at each other, and then decided I should send a letter with Renn to Lilly and Windle. I knew I could just tell Renn and thus have her repeat it for me... but there was actually something I wanted to say to them that I wanted to keep secret. For now at least.

But if I did that Lilly might still just tell Renn its contents... but I suppose that was a risk I'd have to make...? Honestly it was becoming rather obvious that I wasn't doing too good a job at keeping secrets from her, even the ones I really needed to keep. But...

"I'm going to go write a letter real quick then, before you go," I said as I decided to do so.

"Okay. I'll come let the rest know that I'll be leaving in a second," Renn then said as she kept smirking at me.

"Yes, yes. Leave me alone to endure the brunt of the teasing as they all remind me of how hilariously timed it is that you leave the moment a bed is ready," I said as I stepped away.

The two returned to giggling, which I enjoyed and was almost so nice to hear that I didn't actually leave... but I did anyway.

"Who'd you drop, by the way?" Renn then asked as I left.

"Vim."

Chapter 612 Renn – Apples and Oranges

I didn't choose to leave in the morning just because I wanted to sleep with Vim.

Really.

Though I knew no one believed it.

Making Sap's bed along with her, I smiled happily at the way her wings fluttered a little expectantly as we both stared at the now made bed. "It's of course not as good as home... but it's also better than the hammock last time I was here," she noted.

"Just be thankful they don't stink too much. I had been worried when they all went into town to buy a bunch of cloth and stuff, but wherever they had gotten them from must have been pretty clean because none of it smells too bad," I said. We were in the guest room next to the one that Krass had been living in, where she had passed away... though it seemed Sap didn't mind such a thing at all.

"I'd been meaning to ask something, but have you figured out how you don't smell yet Renn?" Sap asked.

I smiled at that. "I don't. Vim still hasn't explained it," I said. He has only spoken around it, though he has mentioned a few times it was thanks to his so called abilities.

"Huh... how does that work? Can't be our hearts, right? I still stink, sometimes," she said softly as she lifted a wing to sniff it.

My smile squirmed as I watched her smell her own wing. She in fact did have a unique scent, just as Lilly and the rest of her family, but it was far from what I'd call a stink. They actually smelled like trees, and it was nice. "I really don't have any idea how it works... and Vim won't explain it either, so," I said with a shrug.

"Yet it's not because of intimacy... right? Hard to believe to be honest, can't imagine what else could cause it," Sap said.

My smile that had been happily growing flinched and I groaned at her. "I don't know what's worse, the fact that statement is so true or the fact all of you so readily believe we've not done anything yet," I complained. Everyone loved to tease me over the fact that Vim and I hadn't... consummated our relationship yet, and honestly it was my fault for telling everyone the truth but still... Yet lately I'd noticed how quickly people ended up believing others, or myself, when they first learned of it. You'd think usually people would be shocked and confused, as Merit had been, when learning of such a thing... right? Why did people find it so obviously believable that he and I were still...?

Sap chuckled at me. "It's Vim's fault, Renn. He's so odd that him being like that just... makes sense. Though in your case it definitely doesn't make sense. You're like mother, you're the type to just pounce on him and get it over with," Sap said.

"Lilly's like that?" I asked.

She nodded. "Father oddly doesn't care much for such things... so she has to sometimes be a tad forceful you know?"

No... I didn't. Or hadn't. "Do you see them as a loving couple?" I asked, glad to be given the opportunity to bring such a thing up without sounding weird.

Sap gave me an odd frown. "Mom and dad...? Hm..." she pondered it for a few moments, and then nodded. "Yeah...? I think so. They both really do love one another... Father worships the ground mother walks upon, of course, and mom adores his loyalty. To her his undying fealty is everything, at least per romance goes," she said.

Fealty... "How about you Sap...? What would be your uh... what would you like in a partner?" I asked. It was interesting to hear her opinion and how real and pure it was. I too had come to the same conclusion. That what Lilly truly liked about Windle was his, as Sap called it, loyalty.

"Me...? Well... honestly I'm not sure. Personally I'd rather just have a child than a mate, but I understand mom's perspective too."

"Perspective?" I asked. What'd she mean?

Sap's wings shifted a little as she gestured lightly at me. "Partners. When raising children, they're useful. Makes it easier to raise them, and protect them, and so forth. Plus if you had a partner you could keep having children easily and safely, while needing to find a new one each time might cause issues. I'd been considering that lately, what with Branch and whatnot," she said.

I softly smiled at the owl who seemed to be... so literal about it. She wasn't really thinking, or caring, about if she'd love this supposed partner... rather she was simply debating how much effort she wanted to put in to having multiple children. She wasn't speaking of a husband, or even really a partner. She was talking about someone who would simply help her father children, nothing more.

"Do they have to be an owl?" I asked her.

She blinked and then frowned worriedly. "I uh... I don't know..." she said honestly.

Oh...?

"I'd say yes, usually... but I mean... Branches is mating with a monkey? And she seems fine...? She's better than my sisters at least, barring Root of course... not sure how she'll turn out yet but I highly doubt she'll be anything like them," Sap said with a small chuckle.

Honestly I couldn't wait to meet these other siblings. Particularly the ones giving Lilly so much trouble... it'll be funny if they end up being just really normal people.

"Talking about pouncing on people without me?"

We both turned to look at the door, and we found Merit. The small fish had her nightgown on and was frowning at us.

"I've heard of your pounce and shock attack, I'm more than good without it thanks," Sap said with a laugh.

My smile returned as I grinned at Merit. "You do kind of pounce when you latch onto people and things, don't you?" I said as I thought of the few times I'd witnessed it.

Merit sighed at me. "You're lucky Angie's already asleep or she'd groan so loud it'd shake the whole building," she said.

Angie was already asleep...? It wasn't that late was it? It was a few hours after nightfall, but not the dead of night just yet... I could still hear conversations throughout the building, particularly at the dining room next to the kitchen.

"You look like you're about to be too..." Sap said what I was thinking.

Merit huffed at us. "I was planning to tease Renn and Vim by sneaking into their bed and waiting for them, but Vim's off doing something in his trenches. I now feel so sorry for Renn that I'll leave them be instead," Merit said.

My smile wobbled as my ears fluttered as Sap glanced at me. "He's off digging more holes...?" I asked.

"And here I thought we stayed another night so you could see the sunrise in the sky, and not because you actually wanted to share a bed with him!" Sap said, a little loudly, as she laughed.

I groaned as Merit grinned as well. "It's her fault, really. She ignores him so often on a normal day, let alone when you visit or something, so Vim just assumes she'll focus all her attention on us and doesn't think it's even possible for her to be waiting for him," Merit said.

Gosh!

"I was only going to talk, and stuff, with him, you know!" I said, trying to defend myself.

"And stuff...? What kind of stuff?" Merit asked as she leaned against the door's frame, crossing her arms as to smirk at me.

"A whole lot of stuff, I'm sure," Sap added.

"I'll wake up Angie," I threatened as I closed my eyes and covered my face. I was embarrassed, but also smiling and about to laugh. I covered my face in attempt to stave off the giggles.

Sap sighed at me. "You know Lellip basically forced herself into my brother's room after less than a week? Compared to this it's almost comical," Sap said.

"Lellip's too much like her grandfather... and Branches is too much like Windle, if what you're saying is true," Merit said.

I peered at Sap between my fingers. "What...? She did?" I asked.

Sap frowned and nodded at me. "She told me she didn't want to end up like you, so took initiative."

"Gah!" I stepped over to the bed and plopped down onto it, to bury my face into it and its thick blankets.

Merit laughed, rather harshly, and of course I heard every detail of it. My ears fluttered against the blankets, but didn't really sink into them thanks to their positioning.

Honestly I wanted to laugh too. Of course such a thing would happen, and of course she'd say such a thing...!

I couldn't fault her at all! She was right! But by Vim's parents it was so utterly humiliating it almost made me want to cry...!

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"Oh I can't wait to tell everyone that," Merit said between her laughs and snorts.

"Actually it is kind of funny, huh?" Sap agreed, and I could tell by her tone she just now realized why.

I almost wished I hadn't heard it... Gosh what will Vim say once he heard that...?

Still...

I squirmed a bit as I smiled in joy, knowing that Lellip's relationship really was working out. I was happy for her, utterly so.

And a tad jealous.

"So Branches is like his father, is he?" I asked with my face still buried in the blankets.

"Honestly I had always seen him more like mother... but maybe Merit has a point, and at least in that sense yes. He had seemed rather shocked after," Sap said.

Gosh how cute... I can't wait to meet him...

I sniffed as I pushed myself up off the bed and huffed. "I'll have you know Vim isn't as bad! He actually tried once, you know!" I said, defending him.

"And you dropped the ball, spectacularly," Merit noted.

"What's this now...?" Sap asked, obviously not knowing about the instance in that crystal cavern.

I flinched and sighed. "I missed an opportunity... my best chance, to be honest..." I admitted.

"What...? Why?" Sap asked, she didn't just sound in disbelief she actually was looking at me as if I was now something weird. Even her wings had unfolded a little, as if to ready herself to flap away as if I was something dangerous.

"It stunk..." I said softly as I looked away from her. Her look hurt.

"Stunk...? How? You two don't even have smells! And even if it did who cares? Doesn't it always stink anyway?" Sap said, doubtful, with a bunch of quick questions.

"I know...!" I groaned, answering all her questions at once as I covered my face again.

Merit sighed at us. "And she won't do anything tonight either, no matter how much she hints at it. She's scared of doing it near others, as if us listening in such a big deal."

"It is!" I shouted. It was so weird! Why would people want to listen in any way!

Sap laughed at me. "This is why I live alone."

"I'll remember this when you find your mate one day," I said, threatening her.

"Sure...? Odds are I'll just grab some random idiot and have my way with him anyway, so it's not a big deal," Sap said.

"Okay, that's a tad too much like Lilly," Merit said.

"Lilly likes Windle though?" I said.

"She hadn't before he gave up his wings for her. She'd been like that back then, wanting only a mate for one thing and nothing else," Merit said.

Sap nodded with a smile, confirming her words.

"Okay, if that's considered the normal, why is my and Vim's... oddness so odd then?" I asked.

"That's the exact opposite...?" Sap countered.

My tail flinched as Merit nodded. "Yeah that's apples and oranges."

"What's an orange?" Sap asked.

"Something tasty..." I said with a sigh. Apples were too though.

Speaking of tasty... I was kind of in the mood for something to snack on... maybe I'll go grab some as a way to lure Vim out of his holes and to bed...

"Hmph... speaking of all this stuff... Were you ever married, Merit?" Sap asked.

I blinked and glanced lightly at my friend who didn't show any hint of her real thoughts as she shook her head. "No. I almost was, when I was a queen, but it had been a political thing. Not real," she said.

Oh...? I wonder who she spoke of?

"Hm... see? That's the normal, Renn, I think all of you are the odd ones," Sap said with a light gesture at Merit.

I sighed at that. Hopefully Merit didn't feel too hurt over her innocent comments. It seemed Sap didn't know about her feelings for Vim. "Technically I'm not married to Vim yet either, you know?" I said.

"What? How so?" Sap asked.

"She means they've not had a ceremony. Or she's speaking about the fact they've not broken bed yet," Merit said.

"Broken bed...?" I said softly. I wonder if she meant that figuratively or literally, what with Vim being involved in all.

"Ah... Lellip had brought that up too. She wants to hold some kind of ceremony once her family shows up," Sap said.

"Are they going to then? That's good," I said, glad to hear it.

Sap nodded at me. "Since its obviously working between them, though I uh... don't know exactly where they're moving to. Sometimes they talk as if they're moving to the tree, then other times they talk about moving here. Who knows?" Sap said with a shrug.

"Vim bought some land in the forest nearby, he plans to make a compound up there for those like them," Merit said.

"Ah! Yeah!" I said with a happy nod. We had gone the other day to buy it from Haggo, I had been very happy to sign those documents... more than I had been even for the land we were on now.

"So... you'll not be living here, then?" Sap asked with a glance at me.

"For now. And it's not too far away. It's close enough that Vim says he's going to try and build a tunnel between us and that area, so we can go back and forth safely," I said. That might even be what he's already doing, or starting to do as we spoke.

"Lumen has those, as does Telmik," Merit said with a nod.

So did other places, like the Weaver's Hut.

"Hm..." Sap frowned as she nodded... and obviously contemplated something.

I studied her for a moment, and smiled as I realized what was obviously on her thoughts. "It'll be place you can easily visit and stay at too, Sap," I said.

She blinked and her wings shifted a little, as if shivering, and she gave me a gentle smile as she nodded. "That's good," she said softly.

"Hmph. It'll be better than this place, at least. I'm told Randle's going to request more aid now with... well," Merit shrugged gently at the nearby wall, likely implying the recent events in the room next to us.

I nodded softly. "Is Tristin still up in his room?" I asked.

"He's not left it, nor will, Renn. The lad has chosen to fast as to pray for his mother's soul. He'll starve himself for a few weeks, to the point he may even suffer or die from it. Not that I think Randle will let it happen, but it does sometimes," Merit said.

"They go that far?" I asked.

She nodded. "Some do, yes."

"Religion," Sap said with a scoff.

I frowned at that, since I wasn't sure if I agreed with her statement or not. It did sound... foolish, but...

I kind of liked how such an act showcased the boy's devotion. Not just to his gods, but to her. His mother.

How pure his love must be, and have been, for him to be willing to starve himself for so long just to honor her memory...

My stomach then made a tiny gurgle, one that made Sap laugh at me.

"I'm uh... going to get a snack, I think," I said.

"You notice she gets hungry whenever we talk about this stuff?" Merit asked as I stepped towards her and the door.

"She does! I'm going to try out the bed while you do!" Sap said happily as she started taking off her shoes and clothes.

I paused a moment as suddenly her breasts were fully visible. They were usually not too hard to see, since she wore shirts that only covered her front and not her back, but...

Glancing away as she happily crawled onto the bed we'd just made, I sighed softly at her free attitude. She really was like a wild bird sometimes.

Leaving Sap's guest room, I shut the door for her since she was naked... and then Merit and I headed down the hallway towards the kitchens and storerooms.

"I feel like apples now," I said. I'd prefer oranges, but we didn't have any at the moment.

"You're like a child," Merit said.

"Funny, was just thinking the same about Sap," I said lightly as we entered the kitchen, then I went to the storeroom behind it. There were large crates and barrels in it, recently stocked full the other day from the market. Vim and others had gone to buy a bunch of stuff, now that we had a proper place to store it all.

I found the barrel of apples I'd seen Vim carry in earlier, and happily took a few. I stuffed a couple of them into my pockets, for later and as to offer Vim some, and then took a bite out of one of them.

It was tasty. "Mhm...?" I offered one to Merit, who shook her head at me.

"Are you really not going to sleep with him tonight, Renn? If not I'll sleep with you," Merit asked as I left the storeroom.

For a tiny moment I debated going to the room next over, to the dining room. I heard Nessa and Celine in there, but...

"Actually, I think I might go try and invite him now," I said. It was late enough that if I didn't try now, there'd be no point. Since Sap and I planned on leaving first thing in the morning, so I could see the sunrise from the sky as we flew. If we didn't get into bed soon, there'd not be much time to talk at all.

"Good. I'm proud of you," Merit said.

I chuckled at that as I took another bite and headed for the main door. "The hole's fixed, right?" I asked with a small mouthful.

Merit laughed at me. "Yes, Renn. It is."

"Promise not to listen too closely...?" I asked, teasing her some more.

"If you actually get that far, yes. I do. But I doubt it," she said with a sigh.

"You never know..." I mumbled as I took another bite and paused at the door. I opened it, but didn't leave yet.

My little friend gave me a sad smile as she nodded, having obviously heard the truth.

I had no plans to try anything tonight... I just... wanted to sit and talk to him. We'd not done so in so long... and we were going to separate again, if only for a couple days. He was not going to go to the Owl's Nest with me.

"I'd invite you Merit, but I'm not sure what Vim would say about that," I said softly. It'd probably be really fun to sit in bed and just... whisper and talk with them all night long.

"If you ever do I'll shock you," she said with a deadpan voice and face.

I giggled at that, and nearly dropped my apple because of it. "Got it!"

She shook her head and sighed at me... and then nodded. "Good luck, Renn," Merit said softly.

"Hm... at least you're supportive, even if you tease me about it," I said.

She chuckled at me. "I'm your biggest supporter, Renn. In fact I'm such a supporter, if you don't figure it out soon enough I'll just use force to make it happen myself," she warned.

I smirked at her. "I almost kind of want to see how you'd accomplish that," I said. She forcing me to do something I could see, she was strong. Far stronger than she appeared... but Vim? No one could force him to do anything. Not even gods, it seemed.

"Don't tempt me. Go on. I don't expect anything tonight, but every moment like this is a step towards the goal... and knowing you and him, you'll need many more steps still. So go on and take it," she said with a small push on my butt, pushing me out the door.

I giggled as I obeyed... and stepped out of the dormitory and headed towards the new building being built. To find Vim.

I'll make sure to tease him as I invite him to bed, about all that just happened. He'd enjoy it as much as me, maybe, and even if he didn't... I'd enjoy it enough for the both of us.

Chapter 613 Vim – A Room Amongst Rooms

I stared up at the freshly fixed hole in the ceiling, and wondered again how it had happened.

Renn had asked me to fix a hole in Merit's floor... but neither of them had been around as I had done so, or had given me a chance to ask of its origin. Odds are it was Renn's fault though, considering it had been her who had sheepishly asked me to fix it and not Merit herself.

It was of course now fixed. I had chosen to just replace the boards and repair the subfloor between the ceiling and floor of these two rooms, and as such it had been an easy and quick fix... but...

Why had Merit chosen the room above Renn anyway...? Although one could just assume it was a coincidence, I knew better... though...

"I was going to invite Sap, be thankful!" Renn teased as she happily crawled into bed, moving aside the thick blankets upon it. She, like many who had come here had brought clothing and bedding suited for the colder northern climate... but honestly I wondered if she didn't feel hot under such thick blankets. One was a thick wool kind, the type that made even me feel stuffy just looking at it.

"Lilly used to sleep on my shoulders when we traveled. Back when she was young... her wings would droop and drag sometimes," I said as I remembered such times. They had been a tad simpler.

Renn's teasing smirk died a little as it turned into a soft happy one. "She probably still would do such a thing, if you'd allow it," she said.

"Probably... Sometimes I feel as if she sees me as some kind of brother or father, then sometimes she acts even weirder. She's hard to pin sometimes," I said as I stepped over to the only chair in the room. I had made basic furniture for everyone, but had somewhat neglected Renn as I had done so. Everyone else already had tables, multiple chairs, dressers and stuff... while Renn only had the bare basics. The bed, a single chair, a small stool-table, and a singular trunk alongside the few she had brought with her from Telmik. In comparison her room was half empty to the others.

Usually I'd feel bad for doing such a thing, not focusing on her... but I had not wanted anyone to feel as if I had prioritized her. They all knew I favored her; and of course I did, but I didn't need to rub it in their faces and actually do so. Plus, Renn was kind enough to not be bothered by such a thing.

Sitting down on the chair, I went to undoing my boots. As I undressed, Renn kept shuffling the blankets around in an attempt to find what she considered the most comfortable placement.

"Vim, how long does it take, you think, to eliminate smells?" she asked as she lifted one of the pillows to smell it.

"No idea Renn. It doesn't take too long though, at least for me," I said. Renn seemingly had something akin to my own ability now, though if it was actually her having it or simply my ability impacting her I couldn't and didn't know.

"Hm... It's a good thing it doesn't happen too fast, I guess. Even if I kind of want it to, concerning stuff like this," she said softly as she went to smell another pillow.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Food? If food lost its smell as you cooked it or something, that'd be terrible! Half the fun is smelling how tasty it is," she said.

I smiled at her and nodded. She had been snacking a few moments ago, and even now there were some apples still sitting on the small table near me. I was a little surprised actually she wasn't munching on them even now in bed.

You'd think she was pregnant with how often she liked to snack throughout the day... though I knew better than to say such a thing aloud.

"Funny considering you've mentioned before how you wished I eliminated the smell of my cooking before," I said as I got my other boot off.

Renn giggled at that. "Right! Really, Vim, why can't you just be perfect?"

"As my father would say, perfection is too perfect even for itself," I said as I finished taking off my boots and socks.

Renn hummed a little as I sat back for a moment and just... spent a small second to appreciate the world around me.

The dormitory I'd built was sturdy. People were maybe not loving it, but they were happy to have a real roof over their heads and real doors that locked. Everyone here was, relatively, happy with the progress so far too. The old woman's death, Krass, had put a small hamper on their excitement but... death did that. And death always came, no matter where or when. And in this instance it had not come unexpectedly, her age had been a concerning factor since before they had even left Telmik.

It was hard sometimes to consider the human members of the Society... but I did try my best to make sure they were as safe and comfortable as the rest of our members, when I could. I was actually a tad

concerned over her son, this Tristin... I'd not seen him leave his room once since his mother's funeral, though Randle has said he was keeping an eye on the lad.

Regrettably, like always for me, such death and sorrow was not at the forefront of my mind. I was too busy with other things, focused on bigger problems... at least in the grander scheme of things. Though one might argue building homes and such for people were not as important as the lives of members, even human ones, the truth was a bit different. These homes and buildings would ensure far more lives would be safe and secure. And not just the non-human members who needed such things as to stay hidden and safe, such as Liora or Sap. Sturdy homes over tents provided a lot of layers of security. Like Renn's thick blankets, they added up and became stuffy even once you added enough such layers of protection.

And I wasn't done with those layers. I planned to begin working on the fencing and walls soon, which would be another nice layer. I planned to make a large area around the back of the church, and then again here near the dormitory and the other buildings I was planning to finish up such as a warehouse and a barn.

Renn slipped her tail out from under the covers as to mess with it, poking at the end of the tip as if something had gotten stuck on it though I didn't see any such thing. She had a really nice smile on her face, obviously enjoying the moment... and I felt a little wrong to have the same emotions.

I should be a worried mess right now. As should she. There was so much on my mind, and thrice more I was doing all I could to keep off my mind... Yet here we were... about to pretend nothing was wrong at all and all was right in the world...

A small sound drew my attention back to Renn as I watched her blow out the lone candle that had been lighting up the room. There was a small shelf fashioned into the wall near her bed, for exactly its current use. A small candle holder sat upon it, as did another on the other side of the bed though that one was not lit. Her putting the candle out made the room dark. It took no time at all for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, and I glanced at the nearby window and its wooden shutters. The outside world was a bit darker than usual too, it seemed the moon was lighting up the other side of the world at the moment.

The darkness of course was not an issue for me, or Renn... but it was still a silly action on her part. Especially since it wasn't as if she was going to actually lie down and fall asleep. She planned to get up and leave with Sap a tad before sunrise, which was only in a few hours.

Another thing I wanted to worry about, but knew better than to not to.

I didn't want Renn to leave my side. Not with potential threats out there waiting for her.

But...

"Looking forward to meeting the rest of your family?" I asked as I stood from the chair. I kept my under-shorts on, and not just to prove a point.

"Yes...! I especially want to meet Branches, supposedly he's a lot more like Windle than not!"

Was he...? "He is in certain ways, I suppose..." I admitted. I'd always seen him as more like his mother than his father, but that was likely just because I really only knew the owl in certain ways.

Sitting on the side of the bed that was mine, I tried not to notice the way she grinned at me in apprehension.

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Renn loved it when we laid in bed and whispered about... anything really. From really important topics to the most inane or silly, she found such moments utterly delectable. It actually worried me that one day, when we actually decided to further our relationship... she'd find it not as appealing or fun as our little talks. Though I suppose I also wouldn't be too bothered, since I too enjoyed them as well.

"Feels a bit lumpy," I said as I carefully patted the mattress. It was, like most mattresses of this era, just a layered mix of feathers and cotton. It was soft enough to be comfortable, warm enough in the winter and cool enough in the summer and also well made... but it was still not as nice as I wanted it to be. My wife deserved better, especially since I could make much nicer ones without much effort.

"It'll even out," Renn said simply as she patted the bed next to her, ushering me to join her.

"Usually I'd make a joke about that, but I'll just pretend I didn't think of one for now," I said as I went ahead and laid down. She pulled back the covers for me, and before I knew it I was lying next to her as she giggled at me.

Glancing at her, and seeing how she was angled a bit above me... I frowned at the realization she had all the pillows. The only one I had was thin, and cold.

"That one stinks," she said.

I smirked at that. "I shall endeavor to fix that then," I said.

"Please do!"

Shaking my head at her, I relaxed a little... and nodded as I realized the bed was fine. It did indeed need to be broken in a little, but she was right. It'd even out and be fine... until of course it started to dip and curve as the cotton and feathers got too flat. But by then I'd likely have made a nicer one, so it was of no concern.

"It's been awhile hasn't it...?" I noted as I stared up at the ceiling I'd just made a few days ago.

"Too long! Do you know how many nights it's been since we've talked like this?" she asked.

"If you mean in a bed, then..." I pretended to think for a moment, since I didn't want her to realize I had already long since thought of it and knew the answer. "One hundred and seven days," I answered after a moment.

Renn then sat up, which made me glance at her in worry. Had I answered wrongly...?

"Wow..." Renn whispered as her tail smacked me on the stomach. I pretended to not notice it as it wiggled above me, over the covers. She had sat up enough for it to be able to do so, having made the covers move back a bit. "You knew," she said softly.

"Why wouldn't I...?" Did she think I didn't enjoy such moments with her or something? I might not get as much utter glee from them as she did... but I did love our little talks. I really did.

"Hm... just didn't think you'd remember the actual number, I guess..." she said, still speaking softly. I could tell she wasn't speaking quietly because she was still shocked, but instead another reason. The dormitory was quiet, since most were sleeping. She likely didn't want anyone hearing our conversation, no matter how silly and simple it was.

Renn was odd like that. She didn't mind flirting and saying things in front of even complete strangers, yet then acted as if she didn't want anyone to know how we acted when alone. Not even those she utterly loved and trusted, like Lilly or Merit. I wasn't sure yet if it was just her being embarrassed, or if she was actually a bit more of an introvert than most thought.

"Have you ever dreamt of me Vim?" Renn then asked quietly.

"Hm...?" What'd she mean?

"In your dreams," she added.

I smirked at her gentle silhouette in the dark. Her ears were standing up straight, and hadn't moved an inch since she had sat up. They were completely still, as if on edge and listening with all her might. "Most of my dreams, when I do dream, are nightmares Renn. I'd rather you not be in them, to be honest," I said.

Her ears didn't flutter, but she did lean a bit closer. "So... you don't?"

Resisting the urge to sit up as well, since I didn't like the way she was leaning towards me... I gently nodded. "I do. Or rather, I have. Though you might not like the kind of dreams I've had," I said, warning her gently.

"Oh...? What kinds?"

The kind that I didn't want to talk about here and now. "Your ears itch my nose sometimes when we sleep together, or your tail goes somewhere it shouldn't, and so I sometimes dream of you tickling me or something," I said.

Her left ear finally moved, twitching just once as she smiled at me. "What's with that?" she asked.

Falling in love with her happy tone, and the way her tail had started to coil around my left wrist... I nodded. "I've also dreamed of you and me sitting at a table. One that's full of food, and you stuffing your face," I said. That was one of my more recent dreams of her. I decided to omit the fact my parents had been there too, though.

Renn's smile grew. "So I'm either tickling you, thus annoying you, or you're watching me eat!"

"Basically," I said, telling her a tiny white lie.

She chuckled for a moment and leaned back and away from me. Although insanely glad she had decided to do so, I also... regretted it.

Maybe I should have just reached out and grabbed her.

"I dream about you all the time, you know? In fact I don't think I've had a dream without you in... a long time," she said.

The fact she couldn't outright tell me the exact night, the exact dream, told me how long ago it must have been. She likely could remember, once she spent a moment to ponder it, but didn't seem in any hurry to do so.

"Don't lie now, how many are you eating in yours?" I asked.

"Quite a few..." she groaned.

"Then I have nothing to be ashamed of," I said, defending myself.

Renn huffed, but it was a happy one as she reached over and grabbed her tail. It was wrapped around my wrist, but she tugged it free... as if it had a mind of its own and hadn't wanted to release me. She lifted it up a bit to her face, and I heard her sniff it.

Rolling over onto my side, I rested my head against a balled fist as I watched her study the tip of her tail... as if it was now dirty for having touched me or something. "You sure you're okay with me leaving, Vim...?" Renn then asked while still half-hiding her face with her tail.

"No," I answered truthfully. "But..." I stopped her from saying anything as I raised a hand lazily. "One cannot live in fear, Renn. The things that make you happy, truly happy, are your friends and family. So who am I to keep you from them?"

Her ears fluttered as her eyes narrowed. "Being with you makes me happiest, though?"

Why's she got to say stuff like that here and now? "Going to stay then?"

"Not a chance!" she said as she happily smacked me with her tail.

Figured. "Just promise me you'll only be a few days," I said.

"Sure. Does this mean you're going to not leave to help the Society, Vim...? Don't you have some requests?" she asked, noting the fact I really didn't like us separating at the moment. What with the gods threatening her and all.

I sighed at that. "I know... my hope was to somehow convince you to leave with me, but if you keep getting dazzled by everyone and everything that obviously isn't going to happen," I said. I didn't just have a few requests, such as from Martin and others... but I also had some promises to fulfill. Berri and her family had wanted me to help them move closer, since Narli might still need assistance, for example.

"Dazzled?" she giggled at the word.

"Enjoy yourself, Renn. We'll deal with the consequences later," I said simply.

"You're speaking as if I'm always causing trouble, so you just have given up trying to fix me," she said.

"Actually it's me who can't be fixed," I said.

"Oh, I bet you can...! It just takes a long time for you is all. Like how a stone gets all small and smooth in the river, you just need a few dozen years or so," Renn teased.

Smiling at my wife who giggled at her own self, she again shook the tip of her tail at me in a playful way. As she did I heard a distant door open, somewhere on the other side of the building. Likely someone going to the bathroom, or something. Although a normal sound in the middle of the night, especially here where so many people lived under the same roof... it was an annoying reminder to the obvious.

We weren't alone.

This wasn't our home. I've yet to make it for her.

So not only had I not ensured her safety, by not destroying all the gods as I should have long ago... I also hadn't done something as simple and basic as provide her with what was expected from a partner and husband. A safe place to live and call home.

Seems I was a failure in far more ways than ever, now. Maybe Liora's dream, fake or misinterpreted or not, wasn't wrong at all. Mother would indeed call me a failure here and now, wouldn't she?

"So...? We could go on and on about the drama and worries... but your hours are short, Renn," I said gently, warning her that the handful of hours she had started with had already diminished by one.

Renn's ears fluttered as she hummed and glanced at the nearby window, it of course was still as dark as before... but I knew she could feel and tell I was right.

"You're right... I've got a few things I want to talk about, before I leave..." she whispered as she decided to focus. She returned to under the blankets, this time a bit closer to me as she did.

Figured. As much as she enjoyed these moments, I knew this was also her way of wanting to ask certain things... odds are most of them were mundane, but a few might be rather important. Either way I'd answer them as best as I could, since they'd also keep me from doing something stupid myself.

"By the way... why's Merit the one in the room above us?" I asked.

Renn giggled as she pulled the blankets back over her, getting comfortable once again. "I asked her to take it for me."

"Why...?"

"Well, she'll either sleep through the nights, snoring and not paying attention... or she'll listen in for a bit and snoop on us. But I figured if anyone does it, at least it should be someone who won't really tell anyone else what they heard," Renn said.

I sighed at her line of reasoning. "Should have just chosen the mute."

"Ah."

Chapter 614 Renn – A Tree's Crown

Root wasn't any different. As far as I could tell, she'd not gained any weight or lost a single feather.

Holding the young owl, I smiled as I stared out the circular window to the distant couple. Lellip was sitting with Branches near the large tree, having lunch together. I was very jealous that I couldn't join them, since the two were acting rather... interesting.

They weren't acting like as if they'd just met, or even just recently got together... they instead were acting as if they'd already been a pair for most of their lives. It was... startling, in a way, to see them so comfortable and natural with one another. It made me feel even more acutely aware of my relationship with Vim and how I acted with him, compared to them I was a little girl experiencing her first romance... which I mean...

"Maybe I am...?" I asked Root, who glanced at me with her huge eyes but said nothing. She smiled though after I held her gaze for a moment, and her wings opened up a bit as if to flap happily.

I happily giggled at the big winged girl, who weighed nothing even though she looked as if she should thanks to her wings. She was somehow more adorable than even the new couple I was spying on.

Swaying a little, I lifted the small owl up as to let her unfurl her wings even more. They flapped ever so slightly, almost as if they weren't flapping at all but instead only moving because of the movement. She giggled as she reached out towards me, rather the braids in my hair, and I lifted her up higher as if to help her soar in the sky.

"Flying is so fun, isn't it?" I asked Root as I stepped back and away from the window, to the center of the room where there was no furniture so I could spin and walk around a bit for her.

Root made noises at me that sounded happy but I couldn't tell if she was agreeing with me or complaining. Still I held her up over my head, moving around while lifting her up and down. Her wings flapped a bit more, and her giggling increased.

"Who's coming? Who is it?" I grinned as I turned to face the door, as to let Root watch Sap walk into the room.

Sap smiled at us as Root reached out to her older sister upon noticing her. I let Sap take her, a tad begrudgingly, and stepped back a bit to enjoy the sight of the way Sap's wings opened and stretched forward a bit as to cover her and Root, as if to protectively shield them from the whole world.

"Have you flown with her as you did me yet?" I asked Sap.

"No. She's hardy, far better off than I had been when a kid but she's still young. My parents wouldn't dare risk it until later, but I will eventually be the one to teach her how to fly and stuff," Sap said.

Right... she was the only one with wings now, after all...

"I'm jealous..." I said with a sigh. All I had was my ears and tail, and although my ears helped me hear well... supposedly far better than most if not nearly all people, it was actually growing to be something a tad annoying. I was hearing a bit too well lately, enough so it bothered me.

"You enjoyed a nice easy flight during a nice summer morning, genuinely one of the best times to fly ever. Trust me it's not always that nice," Sap said with a chuckle.

"Ah, but even the storms and cold you describe sound fun! I don't mind the cold at all you know, I used to sleep in snow while naked all the time," I said. She's told me about occasions where she's nearly died, even falling and breaking arms or legs, because of bad winds and weather. But even though she spoke of such things as if they were life-threatening, I could still see and hear her excitement as she spoke of them. Which meant it was probably a wonderful rush to experience such moments...

"That's just silly..."

I turned to watch Crown walk into the room. I smiled happily at not just seeing her, but hearing her voice. Sap and I had arrived late afternoon yesterday, but this was only the third time I'd heard her speak. She slowly headed over to the only couch in the room; a very long red cushioned one that was honestly a bit too stiff for my personal preference.

The middle sister of the owl family let out a soft sigh as she laid down on the couch, face first originally... and then rolled over to her side as to stare at us who stood in the center of the room.

"Don't like the cold, Crown?" I asked her, hoping to keep her talking. Yesterday when we had met, she had greeted me and shook my hand but had quickly retreated and disappeared as I got engrossed in conversation with the rest of the parliament.

Crown only shook her head as she half-closed her eyes and breathed out a heavy sigh once more, as if about to fall asleep there and then.

She was a pretty woman, with really long blonde hair, but she looked... worn down. She actually didn't look too much like Sap or Lilly. She was a tad taller than I was, but so skinny that she might even be half my weight... especially since all of these owls seemed to weigh far less than they looked from the get-go.

Just comparing her to her family members proved how underweight she was. Some of her joints and bones could be so clearly seen from under her thin clothes that it actually made me worry for her health.

If someone told me she was deathly ill, I'd believe them. She looked that weak and skinny.

Although a part of me couldn't understand the whole... not eating or doing anything thing that came with such depression, as Vim called it, I at the same time did relate to her. The people I've lost over the years had made me feel the same way much as her, though I don't think I had ever gotten as skinny...

Honestly I wasn't even sure if her condition was entirely because of this man she supposedly had loved passing away. No one's really been able to confirm it yet, it seemed most just assumed her current state was because of his early death... Though it seemed no one even really knew how the man had died, which was odd to me... at least until I considered who and what family we were talking about.

Lilly and the rest were the kind of people to give distance. To step back and let someone deal with their own issues... they even showed this in the way they lived. The family usually didn't gather and live together like this, usually they all lived separately. They were just that kind of family.

"Does it ever snow a lot here?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation going. Crown had not answered me vocally, and didn't seem to have any intention to continue it herself.

"Yes, but only sometimes. The great tree blocks a lot of it, sometimes," Sap said as Root started trying to crawl over her shoulder, as to grab at her older sister's wings.

For a small moment I worried over the way Sap just letting Root crawl all over her, even to the point of grabbing onto her left wing. Sap didn't seem concerned at all as Root clung to one of the thicker parts of the top of her wing, even though it looked as if at any moment she could take a tumble and fall backwards to the ground. Sap's wing shifted and opened a bit, and as it did it made Root's grip shift a little and become a bit more unsure.

I drew a bit closer, just in case, but it seemed my worry was unwarranted. Sap still had a hold on Root's foot, and the young owl kept hold of Sap's wing without issue.

"Do you really sleep in the snow naked...?"

I turned to the couch, and did my best to not let my utter glee of Crown speaking up on her own show too much on my face, or in my ears or tail. "Yeah! If you pack it right and lay in it, all curled up, it's actually not that bad!" I said, happy to tell her all about it.

Crown's eyes, though not as large as her more non-human family members, were still a bit noticeably bigger than usual... and they narrowed at me as she blew some of her long blonde hair out of her face. "Do you have a bunch of fur all over you or something?" she asked, as if that was the only way she could reason as to why I'd do such a thing willingly.

"She doesn't. What little she has is near her tail, and it's not much," Sap said.

My ears fluttered a little as I wryly frowned at her. How'd she even know that...? Had I ever gotten naked in front of her before?

"So she's just hardy, like you are then," Crown said simply.

"Hardly, sister. Even I'd not sleep in snow while naked," Sap said, and had a tone as she spoke that told me she found it as odd as the rest did.

"Why's it so odd to everyone...?" I groaned. Everyone always teased me about it.

"You like warm baths though, don't you?" Sap then asked.

I nodded happily. "I do yes," I said. In fact I was looking forward to later tonight, I had not bathed last night and had just wiped down since by the time greetings and stuff had gotten over it was too late to bathe. But tonight I'd be able to take a bath, a proper one, and I was looking forward to it. I was still debating if I wanted to take it alone though, since although they had a set of nice baths here they weren't really that big... going back to the nature of this family, who were all a bit distant with one another, they didn't have a bath big enough to really share it while using it. Not comfortably at least.

"So maybe she just likes extremes," Crown noted.

Sap nodded. "She was giggling happily as I carried her here, like a kid," Sap said.

"Who wouldn't like flying...? It's amazing!" I argued.

"Lots of people. Particularly everyone who doesn't have wings," Crown said.

I smirked at that, and was about to say something until I heard someone walk down the hall. The owl's home was very well built, likely one of the nicest built homes I've ever been in... but they had these thin rugs that made footsteps just a tad more noticeable than not. I watched Windle step around the doorway, and though he nodded gently at us he didn't enter the room.

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"Sap, dear... would you come aid your mother?"

"Hm? Sure," Sap didn't hesitate to agree and reached up to grab the little owl who was still grabbing at her wing. She lifted Root off her, who let out a slightly angry gurgle noise, and then she stepped over to me and handed me the bundle of wings.

I nodded, accepting what was likely the most precious responsibility in the world right now. "I don't have wings, but I have a tail you know," I said as I brought my tail around and wagged it in front of her. Root immediately stopped fussing and put her whole attention on my tail and went to grabbing at it. I twitched it around, keeping it out of her grip but close enough her little fingers brushed against it every so often as to keep her occupied.

She was a strong little girl, but I'd long since gotten used to her strength. I no longer worried over her breaking something, because even if she did it'd not be too damaging for me. Though I was still a tad cautious about letting her gnaw or chew on my fingers, or anything else, since her teeth were so sharp.

"A tail's much better. Can you use it to pick things up, Renn?"

I turned my attention from the precious little owl, to another precious owl who needed likely as much care and attention. "To a degree, yes. The problem with my tail is half the time I'm not paying attention to it, so it moves on its own... and so if I pick something up with it, or do something with it, I can break stuff or myself so I simply don't do it," I said.

"Ah... that makes sense. Their wings sometimes flutter without them meaning to, as well. Sap broke hers a few times because of strange twitches when she was young, banging them into walls and stuff on accident," Crown said.

I frowned at that. I'd seen their wings shift and do that so-called flutter thing... but had yet to see them move so violently as to cause such damage, yet. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it? We're all supposed to be so much sturdier than humans... yet I feel as if we're more fragile than they are half the time," I said.

Crown slowly shifted, and rolled onto her back. I studied the way she took in a deep breath, and then sighed it out. Like the rest of the women in her family, she didn't have much a chest which seemed only

further impacted by her lack of weight. "It's actually a point of contention amongst our scholars. The current widely accepted belief is that we, in human bodies, are not meant to have extra parts. So those who do have them are more likely to hurt them, because on an instinctual level we're not supposed to have them. It's like people who have extra toes stub them more often," Crown said.

Oh...? I perked up a bit as I studied the tired looking owl. She had just proved what everyone had said of her, that she was someone who enjoyed scholarship.

"You're saying the reason we hurt ourselves so much is because our parts our unnatural. Our extra ones, at least," I said.

Crown frowned at the ceiling. "Rather than unnatural, just something we're not supposed to have. Many of the theologian would get upset if you said it that way, since it'd imply our creators made us mistakenly. As if in error," Crown said.

Oh my, she sounded kind of like Witch used to! I stepped over to the couch she was lying upon, and with a wry grin I placed Root down onto Crown's stomach. The tired looking owl sighed, but did so with a smile as she reached up to grab at Root's small hands in greeting.

I knelt down in front of the couch, not just to keep myself close to Root... but to stay engaged with the owl who was suddenly talkative.

"If Vim was here he'd scoff at us and say everyone is natural, or something," I said happily.

Crown smiled at that. "A lot of people speak ill of him in the church, since he so obviously shows disdain and blasphemes so often... but I've personally always felt very comfortable around Vim. He's always been super nice to me, even if he is only so because of my mother I've always appreciated it."

"Are you religious then, Crown?" I asked. She was kind of talking as if she was.

"I want to be..." she said, ever so softly.

Oh...? I blinked at that, and the tone she had used. That had sounded... sad. Which was so disheartening to hear since this was such a happy moment. Root was giggling happily on her stomach, the whole owl family was fine and healthy... Lellip and Branches were now an official mated pair, and I was even here visiting! This shouldn't be a moment where someone sounded so sad!

"I'm still not sure myself, either," I said.

Crown turned her head to look at me, causing some of her long hair to cover half her face. "You...?"

I nodded. "Yeah?" Why was that so surprising? Oh... "You think it's odd because of who my mate is," I said, smirking at the thought.

"Well... yeah?"

Smirking at that, I nodded proudly. "Not even Vim can make that decision for me. Not that he'd ever try, that is." Vim was actually more likely to support me than try to convince me otherwise, being the way he was.

"Hm... makes me wonder the implications behind that," Crown said softly.

"All it really means is that Vim loves me so much he's willing to overlook anything and everything," I said.

She snickered at that, which made my ears twitch. What a cute sound! "I see...! Makes sense though, I've always wondered why Vim gave mother so much leeway," she said.

"Hm?" What'd she mean by that?

Crown noticed my confusion and shifted a little. She sat up a bit, causing Root to fall backward onto her wings and Crown's legs. The girl was fine though, and in fact started to giggle happily as she tried to roll back up off her wings.

"I was born not too long before the wars and cultist exterminations. So... unlike some of my siblings, I remember mom being a bit scary," she said softly.

Oh...? "I see...?" I wasn't sure what to say to that. How'd we go from giggling and talking about Vim's love for me to this?

Crown though didn't stop this topic, she raised a small finger... both to point upward at the ceiling and to twirl it in front of Root who she had helped back up and off her back. "Basically I remember them being a bit scary. When I was younger, I was... honestly a tad scared of him. Especially since he and mom would come back all bloody and stuff sometimes," she said.

"Mhm..." I still was a tad unsure how the conversation had gone in this direction, but I knew better than to stop or change it. Maybe I'd learn more about Crown, and what was really bothering her, if I just listened. "He can be scary sometimes," I said gently.

She smiled at that and nodded. "Sometimes. But I learned fast that he was not something to fear. He visited me a lot after I moved out on my own. As I think he did for many of us... I know he likely only did it to keep an eye on us, since likely either my parents asked him to or out of respect to them, but I'm still glad he did. I enjoyed his visits," she said.

Ah. I see... this wasn't really her talking about religion, Vim and her mother being scary or anything like it. This was actually her way of just... talking. Of her situation. Of herself.

"Some people don't like it when he visits more than he needs to... did it bother you? Or rather, if he did visit because he felt you were special since your mother is his friend... does that bother you?" I asked.

Crown frowned and shook her head gently. "No... not at all. I know what you're saying though, I've heard people bring up such things before. Both ways, too. Some people complain when he shows up too much, and others complain he don't show up nearly enough. I think people are just picky and unable to see past their own lives very well," she said.

"Hm," I nodded gently, not really wanting to comment too deeply about that.

Root made an odd noise as her wings unfurled a little, to the point I had to lean back a bit lest I get hit by one, and then she went to trying to stick her sister's finger in her mouth.

"She's strong," Crown said softly as I watched her actually have to focus as to keep her finger out of her youngest sister's mouth.

I wonder to what degree Crown's struggle at keeping her finger in control was from her being less non-human than her sister and her general weakness from being unhealthy at the moment.

"Even I worry when she wants to chew on stuff. Do all children do that?" I asked.

Crown nodded. "Most do when they're teething... which is why it's odd for her to be doing it, her first set are already grown. Odds are they're sharp so poke her lips and gums and it bothers her, so she instinctively wants to dull them by gnawing on stuff. At least, that's my assumption," Crown said.

Huh... that was actually a very good point. It made perfect sense. "My teeth are sharper too, I've been told... but I don't remember chewing on stuff." Or people. Especially since no one had ever really played with me, even at Root's age.

"Haha... I've always wondered if my children would be born with traits too. It used to worry me, the idea of having a baby that's like me... but just enough like the others to make it so she needs to be nursed, yet has the sharp teeth too," Crown said.

My tail squirmed beneath me as I glanced at Crown who had a soft smile on her face. It at least didn't look sad anymore. "Have none of you needed to be nursed?" ia sked.

She shook her head and frowned. "Don't think so? But no one's had children yet. I mean, my generation. Each generation is always a step away from one's source, as they say... and not to mention I... well..."

Crown got a bit quiet, and I felt bad as I realized I'd just unknowingly directed the conversation into a place that hurt.

"You loved him that much...?" I asked softly, since I knew what she was saying and could tell she was struggling to say it aloud. She was basically saying she had expected her children to be more human, since she had loved a human and not one of us.

The daughter Lilly worried so much over slowly shook her head. "No... I actually didn't. But... I had always thought I'd end up with one, a human I mean," she said softly.

Oh...? "You hadn't...?" I asked with a bit of shock. Was she lying? Or was she just so distraught she was ignoring the obvious?

"Mhm... I know everyone thinks I'm depressed over his death, but... well..."

The hairs on my ears and tail stood up, as I realized she was about to tell me something very important... but then someone shouted at us from down the hall and down the nearby stairs.

"Come have lunch!" Lilly yelled at us.

Root immediately noticed her mother's voice, and her wings unfolded far more than before as she cooed and made happy noises. She turned around a bit, obviously expecting Lilly to walk into the room but she hadn't. She had simply called for us.

Crown sighed as she lifted Root and held her out to me. I stood, taking the child who was growing more excited as she realized we were about to take her to Lilly.

"I'll tell you later. Let's go eat, yesterday I took my time and she almost threatened to feed me herself because of it," Crown said as she went to get up off the couch.

I chuckled at that as I nodded. "Yes, better not to risk it." Lilly would not hesitate to force feed Crown if she genuinely thought it was needed. She wasn't like Vim in that sense, she'd not just sit back and let one of her children outright harm themselves.

Before leaving the room I glanced again at the window nearby. Off in the distance near the big tree, Lilly's son and Lellip were still sitting there. They were sitting a bit closer than before, and looked as if they were reading a large book together.

"I'm happy for him. I think she'll save him," Crown then said, noticing I had lingered a bit to study them.

"Huh?" I turned a bit, and Root glanced around at us... as if about to ask, rather angrily, why we hadn't taken her to her mother yet.

"He was a mercenary for a long time. Kept trying to die, we think. With her, and children if they can have some, he'll stop having such stupid ideas," she said simply.

Gosh...! Lilly hadn't said anything about that at all! I had known she had worried over him, in her own way, but hadn't gone so far as to say it was that bad...!

"Plus she's cute. Though she smells a little odd..." Crown then added with a frown as she turned away and left the room.

Taking in a deep breath, I sighed it out ever so softly as I glanced at Root in my arms... who gave me a look as if she agreed with Crown. "What? You saying I stink too?" I asked the little owlet.

"Guah!" she reached out to grab one of my braids, and I took the sound as confirmation she did.

Which was fine, since I'd use that as an excuse to sneak off into the bath after lunch.

Chapter 615 Vim – A Son for a Fish

I was running out of stone brick.

Randle had purchased a large quantity of bricks from one of the noble families in town. Someone had canceled the construction of some house or something, so he had gotten a hold of it rather cheaply... but I was already near out of them. I'd been building the main compound wall that was going to extend around the dormitory and its support buildings, and although I felt I had enough to finish it... I wouldn't have enough to finish the walls I planned and wanted to build that went from the church to the road, as to somewhat direct traffic and visitors and keep them from venturing to the dormitory.

It really wasn't too big a deal. We would just need to order more, if not from around here then from Telmik... but I had really wanted to get at least the basic structures done before I was forced to depart. And at this rate...

"Lord Vim...?"

I glanced up and away from my brick laying and quickly found the source of the voice. Off in the distance, over near the dormitory, was Rivonne. She was heading my way, and it seemed Nessa, Oplar's girl, had been the one to direct her in my direction.

Sighing at the human, I stepped back from the nearly finished wall section and brushed my hands off. The mortar I was using was just basic sand and lime mixed with river water. If I had the resources I would have made real concrete, or at least crushed brick and stone up into the mixture but I didn't have such luxury at the moment. Yet the stuff I was using was the kind that dried really quickly, so I just used my hands to settle and compact it. So... it made a bit of a mess...

By the time Rivonne reached me, I had gotten my hands mostly cleaned with a cloth. I nodded gently at her on her approach, and I noticed the way she studied the wall I'd been building. "Lord Vim, are you sure you don't want me to get you some crewmen?" she asked.

"Why, am I not doing good enough?" I asked, deciding to tease the human a little.

Rivonne immediately stood up a bit straighter, going wide-eyed... and then she started to giggle at me. "Gods, no! I actually can't believe how fast you are, just the other day there hadn't been any walls at all,

or those buildings and now look at it... At the rate you're going you could build a whole town in a moon or two," she said.

I smiled gently at her and nodded. "I appreciate the offer, Rivonne... but it's fine. This gives me something to do, and they don't care much for strangers being around for too long. Plus we're supposed to be getting more hands here shortly, anyway," I said. Randle had mentioned at any moment the twins were supposed to show up... and in fact he was kind of shocked they weren't already here.

Personally I had a good idea as to why they were late... and I didn't like the obvious answer as to why. Because I knew it would only make me upset, and annoy me, so I ignored it.

"Hm... all the same, Lord Vim, if you ever need any supplies or hands just let me know..." Rivonne offered again, for what was likely the hundredth time.

"I'm sure I, or those here, will need to request aid eventually... so careful with your continuous offer. You might end up biting off more than you can chew," I warned.

Rivonne smirked at that, and I saw her merchant and noble's pride peer behind it. "I eagerly await the day, Lord Vim."

Right... sometimes I forget just how fervent some of these humans got... "So...? Here just to visit or...?"

"Ah... Yes. I was wondering if I could invite your lady to lunch... usually by now she'd have shown herself, where is she?" Rivonne asked as she glanced around.

"Renn had to leave for a bit. She'll be back in a week or so, give or take," I said. Why'd it suddenly seem like the only reason she had come to offer help was just so she could see Renn?

The human noble notably frowned, a tad upset over hearing such information. "Where has she gone?" she asked innocently.

"To visit a friend nearby. It upsets me too, trust me, but I was raised to be the kind of husband that lets his wife do as she pleases. Happy wife, happy life," I said.

Rivonne frowned at that, for only a moment, and then smirked. "How lovely! I shall be sure to spread such a saying as well... Though I see, so she's gone... hm..." she glanced downward, likely at my still somewhat dirty hands and clothes, then glanced at the wall I was still working on. There was a stack of bricks, a large wooden pale with my mortar mixture, and other tools.

"I'm sure someone around here would love to join you if you asked," I said lightly, suggesting her to not ask me to join her. I was in no mood to have lunch.

"Hm... I suppose I shall. Okay then, Lord Vim... I beg your pardon," Rivonne gave me a very small bow of the head and then turned around, not even waiting for me to say more.

Watching her go, I sighed softly and shook my head. Did she just want friends or something...?

As the human left, heading back to the dormitory... a new figure emerged and headed my way. I paused a moment as I watched the tiny, white-haired Merit approach, and I watched as the two paused next to

each other as they spoke. From here I only caught a gentle invitation being exchanged, but didn't hear if Merit had accepted or not.

Returning to my wall... I again glanced at my pile of bricks and the obvious lack of them.

The sad part was even if I had enough bricks, it's not as if the wall would be finished with just them. I planned to plant vine-type bushes up and down the outsides of the wall, as to better insulate and block the outside world. I also planned to build similar fence-style walls along the church and road, and eventually along nearly the whole property line once able... I might even dig a nice sized ditch on the inside of the wall, not so much for a moat but just to add another layer of security. Humans couldn't handle falls very well, especially surprising ones. A good five or ten foot ditch along the edge of the wall would be enough to break nearly any intruder's legs.

Eventually, if this place got big enough and if enough people moved here, there would even need to be guards and stuff. Though if it would ever get to that point...

"She's becoming a tad too friendly."

I nodded without glancing at my wife's little friend as I kept studying my handiwork. I didn't like how flawless the wall so far was, even though it was being made with slightly sup-par materials. "I think she's had many prophecies concerning us. Add those to the obvious upbringing those like her receive, it makes sense," I said.

"She thinks she's one of us more than she does her own kind, though I don't think she has much of our blood in her at all," Merit noted.

"I don't think she does either... and to be honest, it's possible she's not even directly related to Bird," I said. The woman that Bird once had a little tryst with had several siblings if I remembered correctly, like... a dozen of them. But I'd be hard pressed to name a single one, even if they stood in front of me today.

"No matter. She's friendly and wants to help," Merit said simply.

"Hm..." I finally glanced at the little fish... and found her glaring at me.

For a tiny moment I stared back at her glaring... and wondered what was wrong. She had not sounded as angry as she looked just now, had she? But I guess Merit was always angry... though I had thought she had been doing better ever since Renn showed up.

"What is it?" I asked her.

"Do you not plan on having children?"

For a tiny moment I wasn't really sure what she had just said... but once it clicked, I had to shift a little... and I did so carefully, as to not break the wall I'd just been building all day. "Excuse me...?"

Merit's glare grew a bit darker as her tiny eyes narrowed at me. "You slept with Renn. Before she left."

"Uh... yes?" If anything wouldn't that statement confirm the opposite?

"But you didn't do anything."

Oh. "You know, I had thought Renn had been mostly joking when she mentioned you might listen in," I said with a sigh as I looked away from her.

Why was everyone so weird lately...? Gods returning, weird prophecies, people acting completely unlike themselves... It was as if the world was upside down. I mean even I was doing outrageous things, like letting my wife who just recently received a death threat from a god leave my side and go off on her own! Maybe I was the one who was insane, and not the world...

"Renn deserves better."

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

Glancing at the small woman, I frowned at her as I realized how serious her tone had just been.

"What's this about, Merit?" I asked carefully.

The little fish blinked at me... and then for the first time since walking over her glare broke. She glanced downward, and her tiny mouth quivered as if she was about to cry. "She's... got tiny cracks inside of her, Vim. Ones she ignores and hides by enjoying the world around her. You do know she sometimes cries in her sleep, I hope?"

"I've not heard such weeping or smelled such tears in some time, but yes... it does happen occasionally," I said. The last time I'd noticed such tears had been in Lumen, but that had been the night she had gotten drunk.

"Are you just unaware of her fragile side, or are you ignoring it as much as she is?" she asked accusingly.

"I don't ignore it. I just don't make a big deal out of it. She, like everyone, has moments of weakness and can get emotional... that's just a part of life. I'd be more worried about her if she didn't have such moments or emotions," I said.

Really, this wasn't the first time Merit had shown such concern for Renn... and also she wasn't the first. But why now was she bringing it up? And like this? Had something happened recently...? Other than the typical drama, and Krass's death, I couldn't think of anything too alarming...

"So you're just ignoring it until it actually becomes an issue, then," Merit stated.

My eye twitched, but I didn't grow annoyed... even though I felt I should, and would be justified in doing so. This was obviously coming from somewhere, likely concern, so... "What are you really trying to say, Merit?" I asked.

Merit's eyes softened ever so slightly. "Give her a child, Vim. She doesn't just deserve one, she needs one. It will make her happy, and keep her from breaking."

I didn't respond right away. I kept still... and quiet... as I studied the small woman who so obviously was being serious. That had not been a joke, or a snide comment in effort to hide her real emotions or disdain. She was... being genuine with me.

"Before something terrible happens. Before those tiny cracks break apart, and become irreparable. Give her the foundation she needs. The anchor," Merit then said, speaking a tad more firmer than before.

Again, I didn't respond immediately... I spent a moment to consider her words, and then ever so gently nodded. "It's dangerous, Merit," I said.

"When is it not...? And if her life really is in danger, because of these gods or whatever you're facing... then isn't that all the more reason to give her as much happiness as soon as possible? Stop pussy-footing around and do it already."

Thank goodness Renn hadn't been here to hear her say such a thing; I loved Renn's desire to learn new vocabulary and that was one she didn't need to learn and spread throughout the land. In fact, when had Merit even learnt such a term? It had undoubtedly come from me... but...

"I'll not deny that Renn wants children... especially since all the stupid prophecies keep promising her such things... but doesn't that just prove my rushing it would cause issues? If it's really something so inevitable, why stress over it?" I asked her. That had been my line of reasoning at least.

"Most men can't wait to jump into a bed. Why are you so backwards?" she asked, her voice once again growing thick with scorn.

Why am I being yelled at like this...? I was the one who recently tried to move our relationship forward, it had been Renn who had put it on hold not me... "Why have you gone from complaining about not being allowed into my bed to this? I know you adore her but it's a tad..." I went quiet as I realized something, and did so thanks to the way Merit had looked down at her feet... and slightly blushed as she did so.

Oh...

Wait...

Studying Merit, I suddenly remembered the few conversations we shared back in Lumen. Before and after Stance had shown himself, and I had proof of the god's return... and... even before then. Even before... Renn and I...

I took in a deep breath, but held it in. I didn't sigh it out... as I realized why the small fish was now not just quiet, but squirming in shame. A tiny bit of her electricity was even buzzing along the tips of her braids. When had she started braiding her hair alike Renn, anyway?

Coughing a little as I felt... a mixture of utter shame and awkwardness myself, I wondered why I had not realized it sooner. It was actually a bit too obvious, and... well... Especially when I considered her statement, her vague one, about a prophecy back in Lumen.

"So um... uh..." I coughed again, and felt stupid. I was suddenly less confident than ever. I could face literal gods without blinking, yet here I was... about ready to run and hide in a hole. "Is it a uh... son? Or...?"

Merit instantly looked up from our feet, and as she did her face that had been growing redder by the moment became a sheet of white. Her barely visible translucent skin became more apparent as I saw muscles and tendons, and she groaned as she lowered her head again and covered her face.

Great. So my assumption had been right...

I wonder... how and when? It had to be from a prophecy. But... "Does... does Renn know...?" I asked carefully. It was so hard to imagine she did. She loved Merit beyond reason, but I hadn't felt as if Renn had known that our child would one day be her...

"Gods, what is happening," Merit groaned painfully as she covered her face and scrunched downward. She kneeled down where she stood, as if to curl up in a ball.

"What! Don't make it so bloody obvious if you don't want me to realize!" I said, a tad angry she was so distraught. If anyone should be, it's me!

"Vim...!" Merit groaned, loudly, and I heard her voice break as she did. She was either about to cry, or already doing so.

Great! She's totally going to shock me now...

Yet she didn't seem to become static-y. Every so often I heard the hum or pop of a small current, but... nothing compared to how she usually became when really upset... Merit instead just stayed there, kneeling a few feet from me and my wall... groaning at herself.

Gulping, I groaned myself and looked around. Thankfully no one was nearby... or seemingly paying attention.

If word got out I was bullying Merit, and Renn heard of it, I'd be in deep...

"A son." Looking back at Merit, I felt my skin go cold with a chill as she took a deep breath and whined it out. "Your second son, Vim," she then added, whispering through her tiny hands that covered her face.

Huh...

So not only was I to have a daughter, one who was a saint... I was to have a son? Did she mean he'd be the second child, after Nory, or...

Or a second son, as in two...

Stepping back, I had to collect myself as a piece of brick popped off my wall a few dozen feet away. I grimaced at it as it landed in the grass nearby, and did so with a bit of force. I'll likely need to redo that section now. With it doing so Merit glanced at it, then at me with a worried look.

"I'm uh... okay. I'm shocked. Without your electricity needed, even... I'm not sure what to say," I said honestly.

"If you threaten to make sure he's never born, Vim...!" Merit then stood, and her whole body popped and crackled as she did.

I quickly raised both hands and shook my head. "Please, Merit... Renn would tear my you know what off if I even suggested such a thing! I mean... I meant, that, by... well... I mean, you're old, Merit..." I said, suddenly feeling at a loss for words. How did I explain what I was thinking, when I didn't even really know what I was thinking myself?

Merit had a prophecy. One of our child. A son. One she'd... what? Marry? Partner? Mate with? Was I misinterpreting what she was saying, or...?

"Isn't that weird...? You're already so old..." I said as I thought about it for a moment.

"It'd only be weird if you made it so!" Merit shouted.

Right. Okay. Maybe... I mean, in theory I was the same... Renn wasn't even half my age... If Merit gave the boy time, just a few decades even, it'd not be as weird I guess... There were many in the world, in the Society, that were the same. Lately it wasn't that big a deal but back in the day it had been. Whole villages had been weird family trees that intersected and made no sense half the time, with people having not just decades but centuries in age gaps between their partners...

So even if she did end up with one of my sons, as long as he was old enough it really wasn't that big a deal... especially since they'd both live for hundreds if not thousands of years and...

"By my parents..." I whispered as I realized what we were talking about. Children. Multiple children. Sons. Mine. And one would... be hers... "Does she know...?" I asked softly.

Merit slowly shook her head, and I noticed some color had returned to her face. The bright pink kind. "Please don't tell her," she begged with a whisper.

"I won't. I promise... last thing I need her to know is this," I groaned. If she knew she'd not be as hesitant anymore, that's for sure. Renn would pounce on me and do everything in her power to give birth to him as fast as possible... as to make her dear friend happy... if anything the fact she hadn't done such a thing proved without a doubt that Merit wasn't lying. Renn really didn't know. But... if Merit knew, so did others. Because Merit had to have heard it from somewhere...

"You swear...?" Merit asked worriedly, and I hated how... she suddenly sounded like she appeared. A young girl.

"Yes... damn, Merit... why'd you let me figure this out? How long have you known...? And you kept it secret this whole time? Why couldn't you just keep it secret from me until it happened?" I asked, a tad miffed. Odds are this was something meant to happen only a few handful of years in the future, she really should have lasted until then!

"I had been! Trying my hardest, you're the idiot who's too smart for his own good!" Merit shouted at me.

I shook my head and raised my hands in defeat. "You obviously didn't try hard enough!"

"So now it's my fault...!? You were supposed to have found her and given birth to him years ago, Vim! Before my oasis dried up, even! It's your fault!" Merit then shouted.

I flinched at that, since I knew it was likely true. Renn hadn't gone into detail at all concerning what she had found in Celine's journals back at Telmik that she and Merit had found... but I got the gist of it. Renn was supposed to have been around since the beginning. Which would have meant...

"They're all supposed to have been born by now..." I groaned as I realized the future, or rather the past, which had somehow gone awry.

"And then some! Do you not see why so many of us are tired of waiting, then!?" Merit asked, loudly.

"Again you're making this all my fault! Even if it's true, you still should have kept it a secret from me!" I said, shouting back.

"Gah! Knowing you're his father is so...!" Merit made a groaning whine of a noise, which made me stop a moment and consider something.

She used to try to sneak into my bed. Claimed she had loved me, even... had that all been fake, then? Had that been genuine...? Or... some weird attempt by her to fix a future she had likely thought misaligned or broken...? Maybe once she realized that Renn wasn't going to show up she tried to take matters into her own hands or something...? Or...?

"Wait, what'd you just say?" I asked as I realized how she'd just insulted me.

"That you better not ruin my man!" Merit shouted angrily as she pointed at me.

"Says you!? I feel sorry for my son if anything, and...!" I was about to get defensive, yet before I really could she leapt forward and latched onto me... and shocked me with all her might.

Chapter 616 Renn – An Owl's Box of Toys... and Worries

Holding the lantern up for Lilly as she moved the small box, I watched her open the one under it... and sigh upon not finding whatever she was looking for.

"Gods... I know in Lumen he faced one and all, but it's... hard to wrap one's head around it, you know?" Lilly said as she put the lid back on the box and move to the next.

I nodded as I kept the lamp steady. We were underneath her home, in the Owl's Nest, in what Lilly had called the shelter. It was an underground... well, nearly a whole house to be honest. It actually reminded me a lot of the Keep's underground storerooms, more than anything else. We were at least three floors below the first floor of her home, and we had walked down a few hallways to get to this room. One room of many... and each was full of supplies, such as shelves lined with boxes... like the ones she was going through now.

"You're telling me...? I'll be completely honest, I've been trying not to think about it too deeply. I mean... it's hard to comprehend. Gods? As in actual gods...?" I said, agreeing with her.

"And if you're not able to wrap your head around it, then none of us have a chance either," Lilly said with a sigh as she opened the next box.

This one looked to have... books? Yes. Those were books. Or at least, they looked like them... but the covers looked as if made of stone...

"Hardly, Lilly. I was actually hoping you'd be able to offer me some insight, not to make me feel even more lost," I said. I'd brought it up since we had a moment alone finally, and I was starting to regret it.

Lilly scoffed as she put the box of stone-books away and grabbed another. "All I know about gods Renn is what little Vim or Celine have whispered around me without thinking. And I'd really not believe Celine's words, and Vim's although might be truthful... well..." she paused a moment, and not because the box she just opened was empty.

"Well... What are you implying?" I asked. It was obvious she was implying something, but I couldn't make sense of it.

Lilly glanced at me, and in the lamplight her big eyes glimmered at me. "He doesn't think like we do, Renn. When we think god, or gods or a god, we think of our ancestors. Beings who created us, if not all life, right? We think of beings of power. Of authority and rule... yet when Vim thinks of gods? When he speaks of them...? He thinks of an enemy. One not just to destroy, but one he has and can destroy. Much alike the monarchs he hunts, or how I would cultist. So, it's not the same, is it?" Lilly said calmly.

I hummed at that as I slowly nodded... "Right... just like his parents," I said.

"Now it's your turn to explain your meaning," she said.

"I firmly believe Vim's parents were gods. As in, the same ones he speaks of himself. The ones he fights... not so much the ones in our scriptures or stories," I said.

Lilly didn't say anything... and remained quiet for a very long moment, so long that I actually leaned back a bit as to make sure all was well. My ears fluttered at her as she eventually closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. "That would be the same as claiming he too is a god, Renn..." she groaned.

"I know... such a contradiction, isn't it? I've no doubt Vim is very special, hard not to be when he's able to do the things he does... but I mean... a god? I just can't imagine him as one, no matter how hard I try," I said, agreeing.

"Yet... it would give his words credit, wouldn't it? What if the gods he speaks of, the ones we worship and whatnot, are in fact them? The same ones he fights? After all, even if not real gods they're still powerful, aren't they? I mean... they make monarchs don't they? And we're supposedly descendants of them? Even Vim has said before that we all came from monarchs. I've heard him say such a thing many times, and not just lightly either," Lilly said.

I nodded heavily. "He's told me that too, very seriously as well. So it's... odd, isn't it? If he's telling the truth, it's the same as him saying the gods he speak of and even kills... are in fact our very gods. Yet, if they're our gods... how can he kill them?" I asked.

"By being one himself, duh?" Lilly said as she returned her focus to her boxes. She paused a moment upon looking at the one she'd just opened, the empty one, as if shocked to find it so. She then closed it back up and went to grab another off the shelf.

"But Vim is very honest about that stuff, Lilly... He's often said very plainly he himself is not a god. Yet at the same time, he's willing to call those people gods too. This Havoc, or Stance..." I said.

"Maybe he just calls them that because that's what we'd understand them as...? For instance the humans in general call us spirits or demons, not non-humans as we do," Lilly said.

"Still feels like I'm missing something... as if Vim's given me the answer, if even indirectly without him realizing it... and I just can't put one and two together..." I said.

Lilly sighed at me as she opened another box... and smiled at its contents. "Finally," she said as she found what she'd been looking for.

I stepped closer to her and the shelf and lowered the lamp ever so slightly as to get a better look at its contents. I found a box full of... "Toys?" I asked.

She happily nodded as she pulled out one of, what I could only assume were children toys. This one looked like a small horse, one that was made out of what I assumed was wood... and it moved around and made noises as she shook it. "Stuff she can break and chew on," Lilly said.

Chew...? I reached out and picked up one of the toys from the box. It too was made of wood, but this one was a bit bigger than the horse and... as I shook it, it made a bunch of odd noises. It sounded almost as if... "Are there rocks inside it?" I asked. It was painted, but the colors looked dull... and not just because we were in a dark storeroom underground. It was old.

"Beads, yep," Lilly said.

"You're... going to let her chew and break wooden toys full of beads..." I said, unsure if she was joking or not. Even if you disregarded the smaller pieces, wouldn't her eating wood... especially old wood, still be an issue? Make her sick or something? Or hurt her?

Lilly chuckled at me. "She'll be fine. Most of my kids did the same."

I hope so... At least it seemed not all of the toys were made of wood and stuff. Some looked to be made of cloth, or just outright stuffed animals.

"Anyway, for all we know the reason Vim calls them gods is because that's just their titles or something. Like monarch... who came up with that? It means ruler, or king, but only a few of them had ever actually ruled over anyone or anything... and even then they hadn't done it well. Gods might just be a term used back in the day for people with weird powers and stuff, and over time we just adopted it and used it for our deities," Lilly said as she turned to shake the horse toy at me.

Frowning at that, I nodded. "That... makes sense," I said admittedly. She was right... Vim's even hinted that languages and stuff had been very different way back then, when gods had ruled and existed normally amongst everyone else. I mean, just consider all the words he used that no else today knew...! It wasn't too much of a stretch to find Lilly's reasoning rather... well... reasonable.

"Though... that still doesn't explain the fact that even Vim says they made monarchs, and as such too made us. If that doesn't make them gods, Renn, I don't know what else could," Lilly then added.

The fact I couldn't argue with her only made it worse. She was perfectly right... no matter who or what these so-called gods were, if at the end of the day they indeed had made all of the monarchs that we supposedly had descended from... then...

Then they were our creators. Our gods. That was a fact...

Though, that didn't outright mean... "Even if they are our gods... that doesn't mean they're the things behind our faiths, though, does it?" I asked her.

Lilly didn't answer right away as I handed her back the toy. She put it back in the box and hummed a little as she studied the other toys in it. "No... it doesn't. I mean, I basically made my children right...? Just as my mother made me, and so forth...? Yet they're not gods. So maybe the simple matter of creation doesn't make one a god at all," Lilly said.

"Maybe we should switch topics, before my head starts to hurt," I suggested.

Lilly scoffed, then chuckled for a moment as she nodded. "Yes. Please. How about my son, think he's good enough for Nebl to praise him?" Lilly asked.

"Branches...? Yes, of course. He's very gentlemanly, I in fact plan to tease Vim about how he could learn a thing or two from him in how to treat a lady," I said. Branches was very gentle with Lellip, to the point it was kind of annoying and I wasn't even the one he was fussing over. He was the type to not just pull back her chair for her to sit in, and then pull it out for her to get up... he also even tried to cut her food for her, such as meat or bread. It was him just trying to be nice, but it was obvious he was taking it a tad too far... especially since Lellip was far from some weak and pitiful damsel unable to handle herself.

Stolen novel; please report.

Lilly though took my compliment, even if in slight jest, with a full smile of pride as she nodded happily. "Right!? He reminds me so much of Windle, before he got old and lazy!"

Oh...? So he was more like Windle than not, then. Sap and the rest hadn't fibbed...

"I'm not sure I like his beard though," I said. Unlike the rest of the owl men, he wasn't clean shaven. He had a nicely trimmed beard, one that was obviously in fashion since I'd seen similar styles in SilverCreek and elsewhere... but sadly it didn't fit his face. It was too narrow, at least so I thought, for such a beard.

Lilly chuckled at me. "Lellip's already mentioned she wants him to grow it out fuller, or to cut it off entirely. It won't last, he'll do whatever she wants him to."

Good... though to grow it out more...? That might actually work, surprisingly. It'd cover more of his lanky face and as such would likely make him appear better...

"Your other boys are nice. Though they're tall and... look young, so it's a tad odd. They all look just like Windle, which is why I find it odd I think. They look like brothers, not father and sons," I said.

"Right? At least my daughters are not so similar as to make me feel like I'm looking in a mirror!" Lilly agreed.

I smirked and nodded. She was right, to a point. All but Sap and Root had wings, of course... but a few had different hair colors too, likely inherited from Windle and his side of the family. But Sap and Root...? They looked nearly just like Lilly did. In fact the only real differences between them were that Lilly's non-human traits were just a tad more prominent than theirs...

"And I'm not sure why, but Crown and Seed smell really good. They smell sweet to me, while you and Sap smell like the trees. Which is funny, you'd think Sap would smell like sap, it's like you got their names backwards," I said.

"They smell sweet...?" Lilly asked, finding that odd.

I nodded. "Like... hm... maybe a little like honey?" I said.

"Huh... and we, or I, smell like trees?"

"Like the ones here. Your home, or that big tree. It's a good smell too, just not as sweet. I actually prefer your smell, and Sap's, since it doesn't make me as hungry as Crown and Seed's does," I said.

Lilly laughed at that. "So they're prey to you!" she concluded.

Gosh...! "No..." I groaned, not willing to admit it. Was that what it was...? Probably...

She chuckled for a long moment... and then as her chuckling died, I noted the way her large eyes lost a tiny bit of their glistening. As if the lantern I held had suddenly snuffed out, somehow... yet it hadn't.

"And Crown...?" she then whispered softly.

Hm. The real reason we were down here, no doubt. I had expected this.

It was why I was here, after all. To help her concerning her wayward daughter... the one who was depressed.

"She's sad. But... to what level, I'm still not sure yet," I said softly.

"A level so deep it keeps her from eating anything. She ate more just now during lunch with you than she has all week, Renn," Lilly said stiffly.

Gosh, really...? She had barely eaten half her plate and her plate had been half the size of my first one! And I'd eaten three, and still wanted more to snack on!

"I just mean... I've only spoken to her for a short time, Lilly. I've only been her a single day so far. And... to be honest, I really don't know what I'm even looking for or anything," I said. I mean, I wasn't stupid. I knew depression. Not only did I know it personally, I'd seen it often. Especially in humans... but... Did I know it well enough to understand it? To know what kind it was? Where it was from? How to get rid of it or cure it...? Not at all.

"Has she said anything at all to you yet...? About what happened?" Lilly asked softly.

I wanted to sigh, but didn't... since I knew this was serious. At least, for Lilly. For Lilly this was more dire than Vim and his war with his gods that wanted to kill us all or whatever...

Sap had explained it as we flew here, and landed occasionally on the way here to rest and such. She had said that Lilly was really hoping that at the very least I could figure out exactly why Crown was depressed. They all assumed it was because of this man's death, the one she had fallen for... but...

"She hinted to me earlier that something... else was the issue. She had commented that she has wondered what her kids would be like... you know, human or less so? But when I asked if she had planned to have kids with this man she loved, she had frowned and answered a tad indifferently. As if she hadn't been thinking that at all," I said.

"So... her depression might not be because of his death...?" Lilly asked, rather seriously.

I nodded. "Maybe."

"If only...! Though then what could it be...? That's the only thing I can think of that could have bothered her..." Lilly said as she went into thought.

Shrugging softly, I adjusted the lantern a little as to look at the other shelves nearby. Was that one covered...? It looked like it had a big cloth draped over it, hiding it from sight, though why I couldn't tell...

Honestly these underground rooms and hallways felt a tad... cold. And really dark... almost as if the darkness that surrounded the Owl's Nest, the unnatural darkness, was seeping in here somehow. Maybe it was...

"To be honest Lilly... I've been depressed before, but I don't think I've ever been as bad as Crown is right now. So it's... a tad odd to me," I admitted as I studied the darkness around me.

"I've seen it before Renn... especially amongst our kind. Such depression kills. Slowly. Very slowly... until it happens overnight," Lilly said softly.

"What can we do...? What can I do?" I asked.

"Well... to a degree, I think you're already doing it," Lilly said as she put the lid back on the box of toys.

"Hm?"

"You've gotten her to talk more. She even left her room on her own today... that's progress, in my opinion," Lilly said.

I gave a thin smile to her over that comment. "A few minutes of talking isn't much, Lilly," I said.

"That's more than I've gotten, or Windle or any of the rest of us," Lilly said.

Great... "Well... I'll keep spending time with her, of course... I'd do that anyway. With any of your children. Speaking of them, the other ones aren't really engaging with me much..." I said a bit reluctantly.

The sons, even Branches, hadn't really spent much time with me outside of our first meeting. Though Branches could at least be excused, since he was spending all his time with Lellip. But it wasn't just the boys who were keeping a bit of a distance, Seed and I had only said a few words between us... and they had been kind of short and awkward. I wasn't sure yet, but I almost felt as if she was avoiding me... though I wasn't sure as to why yet. Especially since she was like Crown, more human than not... yet Crown hadn't and wasn't avoiding me. And she was the one we were actually worrying over.

"You're... odd, Renn. They're likely not sure yet what to think of you, is all. But I'll be honest; right now my focus is on Crown. The others are, and can be, emotional and stuff but they're at least not going to up and die on me. Crown might," Lilly said, being her typical hyper-focused self.

I sighed but nodded. "Okay... I'll keep trying to spend time with her," I promised.

"Thanks... I uh... just do your normal stuff, okay?" she then said as she stood, picking the box up with her.

"Normal stuff...?" What'd she mean?

"You know...? Being nice? Making friends? Getting people to open up and stuff? I mean... you convince Merit of all people to do something different for the first time in what, a hundred years? Two? If you can do that for that stupid stinky fish you can do it for anyone!" Lilly said happily.

Stinky...? "We'll see... I'll do my best, but if it doesn't go well I think we should ask Vim for help," I said. He stayed out of personal things, and he might consider Crown's issue a personal problem... but I'd force him to help if I had to. He actually knew a lot more about such things than I did, or likely anyone really. And as such he probably could really help her, no matter her underlying problem.

"That's fine. Especially since you'll be there with him anyway," Lilly said as she nodded at me, implying she was ready to head back upstairs.

"So you really want me to take her back with me," I said.

"Please. It will help her. Give her something to do, something beyond just lying in bed or on a couch. Plus it'll keep her near you, Vim and the others. I... don't want to admit it, but she likes that church. Your church, or whatever. I... don't really know if she's a believer or not, but..." Lilly spoke softly, and shrugged as she did. In a way that told me she knew she was basically admitting that she was a tiny bit of a failure.

A parent should know their child's beliefs... even if they didn't agree with them. At least, that was my perspective. "Okay... if it's worth anything, I promise to keep care of her. However I can," I vowed.

Lilly smiled as she nodded. "That's why I'm asking you, Renn. I can trust you. And I'll not make you do it all alone, I promise. I'll come visit and stay with you often, and I'll bring others with me too. Lellip is already talking about going to get the rest of her family, so they might be coming soon too," Lilly said.

"Ah, she had mentioned it earlier but... well... you know," I said with a smirk as we left the room and headed out into the hallway. I walked ahead of Lilly, so I could light the way. Not that I thought Lilly really needed the light, even in this darkness.

Lilly giggled as she followed behind me as I headed for the stairs a few hallways away. "Yes. I think they spend more time in bed than they do out of it. I'm glad, to tell you the truth. Means even if it ends up not working out, at least I'll maybe get a grandchild or two out of it," Lilly said.

I smirked as I softly shook my head at her. Gosh she was so... well... her.

"Though I do think there is a tiny problem with it," I then said, slowing a little as to make sure no one heard what I was about to say. The stairs were around the bend, and the doors at the top of them that led into the house weren't closed. We had left them open.

"What's that?"

Lifting the lantern a little, so she could see my smirk, I fluttered my ears and nodded. "I think the other boys are jealous. That's why they're all grouchy," I said, suggesting my reasoning for their attitudes lately.

Lilly blinked at me... and then did the opposite of what I had expected.

Instead of laughing she got very serious, and suddenly looked unhappy.

"By the gods you're right..." she whispered as she realized what I meant.

"Hm..." I nodded softly and turned back around. I returned to walking, with Lilly and tow... who was now silent. She was now deep in thought, over what I'd said.

Great... I had slightly meant it as a joke, but maybe it wasn't one at all.

Sighing softly as we returned upstairs, box of toys in hand... I hoped that one day when I had sons they didn't get jealous too. Because, like Lilly, I would have no idea how to handle it if they did.

Chapter 617 Vim – Supplies, Letters, And Worries

The tents were being used again.

The Twins had arrived, bringing not just a bunch of needed supplies but also people. They'd come in a larger group of twenty-three, and a little over half of them were going to stay here in SilverCreek... though I was unsure how many were just staying as to help out and how many were planning to stay for good.

"This is all your fault sis," Ledger complained, a bit loudly, as he picked up another box off the wagon.

"By the gods stop your whining! Vim! Smack him or something!" Coin shouted as she carried a box off herself.

I shook my head at the twins, especially since Coin had sounded utterly serious. She and her brother were usually arguing and bickering, but right now it seemed she was put up with him beyond the norm. And the reason for it was... well, a tad odd.

Why hadn't Renn mentioned that she had snatched the lad's heart on their first, and short, meeting? She had teased me quite a bit about the young duck, Fressi, finding a liking to me yet I had not been able to reciprocate since I'd not known...

Ah well, I'll just tease her about it later.

"Did you already go see the others?" I asked Kapni as I picked up one of the larger crates. I had to hold it by wrapping my arms as much around it as I could, not because it was heavy but to evenly distribute its weight and my grip upon it. The wood it was made of felt a bit rickety.

"I plan to later. I've sent a letter, via that bear girl... I've been told it would be best if I waited for permission to visit," Kapni said as he joined me in carrying a crate, though his smaller, and we headed for the storage building together.

Wonder who had suggested that...? "Well, we're close enough that a response shouldn't take too long to reach you," I said. Twin Hills wasn't far from here, he might even get it any day if Oplar had been the one to deliver it herself. She had left some time ago.

Kapni, the old fox, joined me into the storage warehouse right as Ledger and Coin left. The two were focused on the other, arguing now not about Renn and her lack of presence but instead the way Ledger had not carried the heavier box just now.

I placed the crate I carried over by the others like it, though didn't stack it. They were heavy enough that if I did stack them, they'd likely topple and break and would also be difficult for others to unload and unpack them if I had to leave before being able to do so myself.

"Plus, I figured you could use some help... and glad I thought so. Not a single rug, Vim? really?" Kapni asked as he put his crate down as well.

Smirking at that, I nodded. "There's a few... I guess," I said. A few of those here had taken their rugs and stuff from their tents into their rooms, but Kapni was right. The dormitory was not well furnished at all.

"Hmph. I shall fix that while I'm here. And those beds, those mattresses are a joke and an insult to their frames," Kapni added as we left the warehouse.

I chuckled at that. Did he even know I was the one who had made them...? He might, but also might not. "I'm sure everyone would be very thankful," I said.

"Before that though, I think another house is in order. I do not mind such tents, but our younger fellows and the humans are not as weathered as we are, I fear," Kapni said, a tad quieter, as he and I both glanced over at the nearby tents. They were noisy, for the first time in a couple weeks. Not only were the new members settling in, more tents were being made to join them... since the other half of the Twins's caravan needed a place to rest for a few days before leaving again.

Kapni was right, of course... the twins had brought a few others like Kapni, real members of the Society, but they were younger. So young that I didn't even know any of them. They were all from the other continent. The rest of the group were humans though, members of the cloth and church. Here to aid and assist Randle and the rest.

"Well, with you here we can have another dormitory up post-haste," I said. Kapni was like me, not just good but quick and sure. He didn't make mistakes, and could work for days straight without stop.

"As much as I'd like to offer to start immediately... where is she, Vim? I'd like to meet her," Kapni then said.

Oh...? I glanced at my very old friend, and found him looking around impatiently... almost as if upset that I'd been hiding her from him or something.

Had he not heard...? Ledger had been whining about her absence for hours... Did Kapni just outright ignore the lad and his bemoaning or something? Likely did, he was like that.

"Renn isn't here. She's visiting Lilly and her family nearby, she should be back in a few days," I said.

Kapni frowned at that. "Lilly...? The owl? She still lives...? And has a family to boot?"

Was Kapni growing senile in his old age...? Lilly and Windle had been paired up before he had left with the others, hadn't they? Or... maybe they hadn't. Hard to remember. "She ended up with Windle, one of the other owls. They've had several children since, in fact they just recently had another daughter. A beautiful one, with mighty wings," I said.

Kapni glanced at me, and actually smiled. "Had they...? How wonderful. Bless the girl..."

"Root," I told him.

Kapni nodded and made a tiny gesture in front of his face, though not in the way the church folk of this land did. It was an old, likely forgotten, gesture in today's world. "Bless Root, may her wings always keep

her aloft..." he finished his little prayer to his odd forest gods, and then nodded again. "I hope to meet them too, soon. They live nearby you said?"

"At your pace, a few days away, yes."

"Hm... I suppose I'll have to ask permission to visit her too, then. What has the world come to, Vim? Needing permission just to visit friends and family?"

"You're telling me..." I said with a sigh. I had not even realized such a system had already been re-enacted. It had been like that during the wars... but such a thing had fallen out of practice. Though it seemed it was now back in play... I was half tempted to ask him who had brought it up, but didn't want to grow angry so I was trying not to.

I stretched my jaw a bit, it popped... and I realized that I had an opportunity to ask a rather specific question. One I'd likely not get to ask anyone else, at least not without causing issues. "The others... the ones you returned with, are the children...?" I asked Kapni gently.

The old fox sighed and nodded. "Lacking traits, yes. I'm not sure why, but many born lately have lacked any and all traits... in fact many children lately have been growing old very quickly, or are weak and infirm. It's one of the reasons so many rushed our return, they felt the land back there had been doing something to us," Kapni said.

The land...? Doubtful... but... "Yet you have more saints than I figured you would," I said. I didn't know the full details, but there had been several on that single ship I'd met recently, and there had been several that had returned ahead of them with Light. Odds are there were more on the others too.

"Odd, isn't it?" Kapni agreed.

No. Not when I knew what I now did.

Though...

An increased in activity from them would indeed cause more saints to be born... but it should have also...

"Vim?"

I blinked and glanced down a bit, and found Coin frowning at me. I squinted at her a moment, then glanced at Ledger and Kapni who were similarly staring at me with odd looks.

I'd gotten lost in thought again. Really, I was so bad when Renn wasn't around...

"What is it?" I asked gently, did they need me to move something for them again or something?

"At least some things never change," Kapni said with a sigh as he stepped away.

"Ah, hey...!" Ledger hurried after him, as if worried to be left alone with me and his sister.

I watched them walk away, heading back to the wagons nearby that were now being packed up. Most of the stuff had been unloaded, it seemed.

"Can we talk, Vim? Privately?" Coin then asked.

Hm...? I nodded and glanced around... and decided to just gesture for her to join me. Thanks to the new members, neither the tent encampment or the buildings were safe for a private conversation... especially since those like us were abundant now, those like Merit who could hear a mouse's footsteps. I walked towards the river, Coin joined me in silence until we were nearly to the river itself... more than far enough to be out of earshot.

"Is all well, Coin?" I asked as we kept walking.

"Yes... or well, no. Maybe."

That's not good. Unlike her brother, Coin was the stoic of the pair. The type that was reliable. Such uncertainty from her was... odd.

"If it's about your brother, worry not. I actually find it kind of adorable," I said with a small smile. In fact I was looking forward to teasing Renn about it.

Coin flinched, but grinned. "I'm glad to hear that... but no, if the fool wants to do something so dangerous he can do so on his own. I'll not protect him," she said.

"As I said, I'd not harm him for such a thing... I mean really, why would I be offended another man found my wife lovely? He's simply seeing and stating the obvious, is all," I said.

Coin chuckled at that as she finally came to a stop. I did too, joining her at the bottom of a small hill that rested alongside the river. The sound of the fast flowing water was loud enough that I knew now for sure we'd not be listened in on. "I'm glad to hear you say so. So many men are the exact opposite, especially our kind... Just so you know he thinks everyone's crazy," she said.

"Crazy...?" I asked. What'd she mean?

"He's stupid, Vim. He thinks everyone's warnings are jokes or something. He genuinely thinks you and her will break up any day now, since it's you we're talking about. He thinks he can grab her heart after you break it," Coin explained.

Ah... "Well... he can try if he wants, if it ever happens," I said gently. It never would though.

Coin smirked softly as she nodded. "I'll let him know that."

I bet she would. She used to intentionally push him overboard from their ships, even out at sea, forcing him to have to swim to shore and catch back up to them later. Many always figured it was her way of intentionally trying to kill him, but I knew the truth... though I'm not sure she's ever told me it.

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Coin wanted her brother to find his own path. To find his own way in the world... and in her opinion, him setting off on his own was the only way he'd ever do so. Yet no matter what she did, no matter how cruel or mean... he never left.

Because of that I had expected her to be supported of Ledger's fascination with Renn... but it seemed like she was not too keen on it. Which was interesting, since it told me how serious my relationship with Renn seemed to her.

"I hear you met my wife in Telmik... I know your brother's impression of her, but yours?" I asked, choosing to give her an option to ease into whatever topic she seemed intent to bring up.

Coin blinked, and then smiled. "I agree with my brother. She's adorable. I had actually been looking forward to spend some time with her, I'm almost as disappointed as him that she's not here."

"If you linger long enough she'll be back soon," I said.

Coin shook her head. "I can't wait that long, regretfully... which is actually why I asked for a moment of your time," she said.

Oh?

She sighed and gestured behind her with a thumb over her shoulder. "I have some letters for her. From... well, people that expect them delivered post-haste."

"Light and the rest," I figured.

Coin nodded. "I was told to deliver them to her in private... and to do so above all else. I uh... well..." She glanced down, and suddenly got a tad unsure of herself.

"Prophecies," I stated.

She nodded stiffly.

I sighed, but was not surprised over it. "Kind of figured I'd be the one getting orders," I said.

"Oddly I don't have any for you... which is kind of weird, now that I think about it," she said.

Yes. It was... "So we need to get Renn those letters as soon as possible," I said.

"Yeah... if I knew for a fact she'd be back in a couple days I would have left them with Randle, Vim... but..."

"We can't rely on such a thing happening," I said as I understood why she'd pulled me aside. She had likely been given strict orders to not let me know of the letters or their contents, out of worry of me destroying them before Renn got a chance to read them... yet Coin couldn't linger here long, and also couldn't trust the odds of Renn returning in time for her to read those letters.

Depending on their contents... if those letters weren't read in time, people could die.

Should I just read them or...?

"What should I do, Vim? I can't get to Lilly's," Coin asked softly.

For a tiny moment I thought of sending Kapni... but then I realized that odds are the letters or rather the prophecies, were although intended to be read by Renn... were likely for me too. Which meant Renn and Kapni would just have to come back here and get me anyway.

"I'll deal with them... I'll take them to Renn. I can get there pretty quick," I said.

Coin sighed a bit in relief. "Thank you. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault, Coin." If anything it wasn't even Light's fault either. It was mine... for being the kind that they'd go through such lengths to just ensure the letters even survived.

Honestly if not for the gods return, I probably would have destroyed them. Now though... now I couldn't.

Because the prophecies could lead me to figuring out where they were, or where they would next make their move.

I once again had no choice but to rely on them...

I'd brought Liora here for that reason, but by my parents did it upset me that such a reality was showing itself again so soon... and proving my worries right as it did.

"Also, can I ask something Vim...? Now that I got a moment of your time?" Coin then asked.

"Hm?" I nodded as I focused on her, and found her brow a bit furrowed.

"Should I be worried...?" she asked.

Another one...? "Of...?" I asked carefully.

"Being replaced?"

I blinked. "What?" Oh... "You mean Ledger and Renn...? Coin, I just said..."

Coin's eyes scrunched up as she half scoffed and half laughed at me. "Not that...! I meant... well..." She hesitated a moment, and then glanced back at our new home. She studied it for a moment, and then sighed as she looked back at me. "The reason I'm here, we're here... is because we lost our route, Vim."

"Lost your route...?" I asked, a tad shocked to both hear so and to see the sad look on her face. I'd not seen her this disturbed or sad since... well... Since I had pulled her and her brother out of that gutter. Where they had hid as their family were massacred.

Coin groaned as she nodded. "Karma and the others took over! They're setting up a new trade-base in Nevi, for whatever reason, and..." she started to raise her voice, but once she noticed she was doing so she forcefully stopped herself from continuing and closed her mouth so hard to shut herself up that I worried for her teeth. Had I just heard one crack?

"They... took your job from you?" I asked, unable to believe it. Them? The twins...? Not only were they one of the few willing to basically live entirely on the road, they were bloody good at what they did. They blended in perfectly with humans, and knew how to handle them. I couldn't imagine them wasting their talents, especially for...

Coin though nodded again as she groaned, as if suddenly having a stomach ache. She even grabbed her shirt near her waist, as a child would during such moments. "Not completely... I guess... but I can see it coming...! They're saying it's because we now have more members, so we both need places for them to work and stuff but also to better supply everyone! But I'm not stupid, do you know what we've been doing lately, Vim? Me and Ledger...?" Coin asked, seemingly on the verge of tears.

I shifted a little. "I uh... don't know," I said honestly. Last I heard they were still just running back and forth, delivering goods and stuff.

"Delivering letters! Letters, Vim!"

I narrowed my eyes at that. "They're making you take Oplar's job?" I asked.

"Huh...? Oh... no. We've been shipping people mostly, but as we do we're delivering the letters for the upcoming meeting. The one in the winter? We're helping Oplar out with it," Coin said.

Oh. That made sense... they were basically escorting all our new members everywhere throughout the Society. Maybe that was why so many were here... it wasn't just to help us out, but because they had more people than they had places to put them.

"Are you sure they're trying to depose you two? It could just be that they're stretched thin and using you and..." I tried to find an alternative answer, but Coin wasn't hearing it.

She immediately shook her head, rather harshly too. "I overheard them! In Telmik. They're restructuring, Vim... they're even imposing the old rules, like Kapni. He had wanted to go Twin Hills and he was told no, to wait until he got permission! He's related to Porka, Vim, he doesn't need permission!" Coin said with a wave to the encampment.

I frowned as I nodded softly. "He had mentioned that..." I said.

"And that's just the start Vim... I don't know if anyone's told you, but the Society's changing," she said.

The world was changing, so that wasn't shocking anymore. "How so...?" I dared to ask.

"The votes, for one."

"Votes...? You mean the ones for me?" I asked. I wasn't sure what else was being voted on at the moment. Had another vote been called, maybe?

Coin smirked at me. "You're going to win now, Vim. People are changing their votes."

"What do you mean...?" I asked. I was going to win what?

She gestured at me. "People are reverting their votes. Those who were going to vote against you, to change your contract, are now wanting to uphold it."

"Why...?" I asked worriedly. That wasn't good... how was I going to rightfully step down if the Society wasn't split enough to justify it?

"Because of everyone coming back...! They're worried now that something weird is happening. I can't tell you who, but one of the most recent votes to change their mind basically told me they'd rather have you who they know than people they don't," Coin said.

Ah... that made sense. "Well, I'm glad to be the better evil at least," I said with a small chuckle.

Coin groaned at me. "Don't even joke like that Vim... I'm being serious here."

"Sorry... I hear what you're saying... and you're not the first to bring it up, Coin," I said, thinking of Brandy. She had also had similar worries, though it seemed Coin wasn't willing to fight for it as hard as Brandy was.

"Oh...? Who else?"

"I can't tell you that, Coin... just know you're not alone. But, as you know, periods like this do cause such tribulations. Once people settle..." I stopped talking as I realized I didn't even partly believe in what I was saying.

Sighing softly as Coin groaned at me and grabbed at her stomach again, I wondered if she really was so stressed out over this that she was genuinely that discomfited. Hopefully she didn't have ulcers or something...

Reaching over, I grabbed the woman's shoulder and gave it a very gently pat. "Would you like me to inquire for you, Coin?" I asked.

"Would you...? If they take my route from me, Vim, what will I have left...? Will I just be delivering letters and supplies?" Coin asked.

A part of me wanted to comment that in a certain aspect, that's all she's ever been doing. She and her brother ran trade routes, with the occasional transport of people for one reason or another if I was busy... but I knew what she was saying.

It wasn't the route itself she was upset over losing... it was the trust.

The church, those like Light and the rest, had basically removed her because they felt they couldn't trust her or her brother. The contents of their ship's hold and wagons didn't matter; the trust of who held the reins or manned the rudder was what mattered.

"I'll find out what I can, Coin," I said gently, though I already knew the answers I'd find.

If they couldn't even trust Brandy, someone who was genuinely a member of their church and a member of the Singing Sisters... how could they trust these twins? They'd never officially joined the cloth, as far as I was aware.

Coin sighed in relief and nodded. "Thank you, Vim... I'm sorry I even have to ask."

Yes. So am I. "If it's any consolation, I'm being doubted too," I said lightly.

The comment I made, meant to relieve the moment and tension... seemed to backfire as Coin actually furrowed her brow and scowled. "How disgusting... what's happening to the Society, Vim...? What are we doing?" she asked, her voice thick with worry.

Wanting to sigh, I held it in as I decided to employ my old and sure tactic. "Hopefully it's just a bumpy transition. I'll find out what I can for you, Coin... though it might take me a moment. But speaking of worries, have you seen Meriah lately?" I asked.

Coin's upset face calmed a little as she looked up and frowned at me, this time in confusion. "Meriah...?" she pondered for half a moment, then nodded. "Maybe half a year ago, I did? She met us on the Fifth River. Waved us down and boarded our ship and stayed with us a few days," she said.

Half a year ago...? So before Renn and I had met her in Nevi. "Nothing since then?" I asked.

Coin shook her head. "Nope? Not even a letter. Why...? You said worry, is she okay?"

No. I don't think she is. "She was to meet Renn and I recently... and never showed. Nor has anyone else heard from her lately, either," I said. Oplar and the rest hadn't heard from her lately either.

"That's... hm..." Coin hesitated, and I knew it was because she was about to say that was normal for Meriah... since it was. Meriah going months without contact with anyone was typical, and expected... but...

Half a year or more, and not a single mention of her anywhere...?

Not normal at all.

"I... actually have a method to reach her. Would you like me to use it?" Coin then asked.

"Oh?" A method like one of mine, perhaps?

Coin nodded. "In Telmik there's a human family, one she stays with occasionally. She and I meet there occasionally and leave our letters for each other with them."

Huh... fascinating. "In Telmik?" I asked.

She nodded. "It's over by the," Coin started to give me directions but I raised a hand to stop her.

"I appreciate the offer, Coin... but I genuinely had not known of it, which means Meriah wants it that way," I said, stopping her.

She blinked... and then smiled happily at me. "Right... sorry, Vim. I'll go there right away, then, for you. We plan to head back straight to Telmik once we leave here," she said.

"Thank you... I'll write you a letter for her, if you'd deliver it for me," I said.

She nodded happily. "Sure...!"

So she was upset over being delegated to courier yet was happy to deliver a letter for me was she...?

Though...

Studying the twin, I realized I really didn't know her too well. I've of course spent plenty of time with her and her brother over the years, but like most members I'd kept my distance from them. We usually only interacted in small doses, such as now... so I really didn't know them too well.

In the years past I would have known already of her and her brother's issues. I might not have involved myself, but I would have at least been aware of their being upset over losing their positions in the Society... yet now I only hear of it during moments like this. Possibly months later, far after it was done and over.

Just like all the others. Like Brandy, or Oplar and Randle...

How pitiful. When had I become so neglectful of these people who deserved so much better?

Coin then sighed and glanced away from me. "I'll go get the letters for Renn, then, before my brother spills something on them like the idiot he is," she said.

"Thank you..." I said as I went to join her back... as I realized I likely now needed to leave shortly, to head to Renn.

Usually I'd be happy over that, but... considering the circumstances...

Ah well. The world wants to be noisy, so sometimes it was best to just go with the flow.

At least, until I broke it and quieted it for good.

Chapter 618 Renn – A Shadow of a Visitor

"Hmph!" Fly angrily put down the game-board piece, defiantly sitting back after she did as her feathers puffed up a bit. She looked utterly furious, but had a huge grin on her face.

She was losing, but seemed to be enjoying the challenge.

And a challenge it was...

"You're a very bold player, Fly... always attacking head on and purely," Seed said as she moved her own piece to counter Fly's attack. She did so with grace, but not in a competitive or audacious way. She was not insulting Fly with her mannerisms, but instead calmly evening them out. As if she wanted to teach Fly, but only from a distance.

"Sneak attacks are mean," Fly said as she went to move another of her pieces. This time she took one of Seed's pawns, and did with a happy noise. I watched her put the piece daintily along the others she's taken so far, near the edge of her table... and she happily grinned at them all lined up as if they were mighty trophies.

"Quite a statement. Many scholars of war would outright disagree," Seed said as she returned the favor and took the piece that Fly just used.

Fly groaned as she watched her proud knight get put into his own graveyard. It was a bit more alone than Fly's, but...

Studying the remaining pieces, and their placements... it was obvious what was about to happen. In the next three, maybe four, turns... Fly would lose. Seed had several lines of direct attacks, and it didn't seem Fly had any real method to defend against any of them at the moment.

Just like the last few games, Fly would lose. Though... that wasn't because Fly was a bad player. She was, just as Seed said, very honest in her play style. So honest that it was a detriment.

Which was a tad surprising... since I had figured Fly to be the type to do anything and everything necessary to win.

I could see how someone would argue that Fly, someone who had grown up in one of the worst conditions imaginable in those sewers beneath Lumen... would be very willing to do what most would not. Especially when one considered how she had survived in those sewers. She had cheated, stolen, and possibly even killed...

Yet here she was... acting like a prim and proper knight of justice, at least on the game board.

Smiling happily, I gently glanced at Seed.

She was the youngest daughter, or had been until Root and Fly, but didn't look it. She had the same tall and slender appearance as the others in this family, but...

Seed was older. Or at least, looked it. Sap and Crown, and even Lilly... looked like young women. They looked a tad older than I, but not by much. Seed however...

Her non-human blood was obviously thinner. Maybe even the thinnest of all the children. She looked mid-age. Some of her hair was even starting to gray and lighten in color, and the rest of her appearance such as her skin just had a tad more of a weathered look than the others. And it wasn't from stress, or illness, like Crown. She just... looked older. If you lined all the women up in this family and asked any stranger who was the oldest amongst them, there was no doubt anyone and everyone would pick Seed to be so.

I knew she was not so thin in the blood that I should worry over her passing anytime soon... since supposedly she was at least a century old if not more, but...

"Rennalee...?"

I perked up and glanced away from the game board, as Fly made another bold and direct move... and I studied the nearby door and the hallway it led to.

Someone had just called for me. But who had that been...?

Slowly standing, I quietly stepped away as Seed went to start the process of victory. Fly must have noticed with that move, for she let out a loud groan of shock. I giggled as I left the room and glanced up and down the hallway.

I was on one of the upper floors, and I had felt whoever had said my name had been up here too... but which way? Both ways down this hallway led to large open rooms, ones with windows that overlooked the open fields around us...

"Renn."

Ah. There. I smiled as I stepped forward, heading for the one calling for me... but as I did I slowed a bit as I realized something odd.

Who was that?

Narrowing my eyes, I shifted my ears as I slowly headed down the hallway. My heart felt oddly heavy as a thousand thoughts filled my head.

I didn't recognize that voice. At all. It wasn't the voice of anyone here... I'd been here for a couple days now and knew them all well. Plus... I couldn't think of the voice off the top of my head for being anyone else's I recognized. For a tiny moment I thought of all the people I knew and had recently talked to, as to put a face and name to the voice, but...

Reaching the end of the hallway, I peered into a large room and relaxed a little as I found Crown. The sickly looking owl was sitting at a table, near one of those large circular windows and a door that led to the balcony.

But my relaxing reversed, and I grew uncomfortable as I realized Crown had not been calling for me.

"Crown...?" I slowly glanced around the room, looking for whoever had actually called for me. Crown was reading a book, and had been very focused in it. She glanced up and frowned at me, in a way that told me she had not been the one to call for me.

Yet...

Entering the room carefully, I took a moment to take a few deep breaths. If I couldn't hear or see them, maybe I could smell them?

"Renn? Is something wrong?" Crown asked quietly as she watched me enter the room.

Yes, but did I say so aloud?

There was no one else in the room. There were a few couches and chairs, the table Crown sat at... some shelves of books and other things, and even a few paintings but nothing else. This room did though lead to another, since the whole building was built in circles basically every room always led to another and then another. Endlessly circling. So...

Walking across the room, I tried to keep my calm as I went into the next room. This one was much smaller and housed a stairwell, and led to another hallway that would round back to the other side of the house I'd just come from.

Staring down the stairwell, I frowned as I wondered if the voice had come from there, or the hallway nearby.

"Renn...? What're you doing?" Crown asked as she stood away from the table.

"Did... did you just call for me?" I asked carefully.

The malnourished woman gave me a look. "No...? I've been reading."

"Right..." I whispered, unsure of myself.

Had I misheard...? Or maybe someone down below had said my name? Maybe I had overheard someone else, someone several floors down, talking about me... and had just not been focusing enough to realize it.

"You okay? Did you hear something?" Crown asked as she walked over to stand next to me. She was frowning as she warily glanced down the stairwell, as if also expecting to find something odd.

As she did, and I began to worry a bit more... I heard a muffled sound. One that was instantly recognizable, since I was now focused on such things.

Voices. From below. Though I couldn't hear the words themselves, I heard enough to know it was someone talking. Likely a couple floors down.

"I... think I might have just heard someone else talking down below, and misheard it," I said honestly as I calmed down.

Was my hearing getting better again...? Or was I just sometimes noticing what I shouldn't?

"Ah... well you do have nice ears," Crown said with a small smile.

"Do you think they're cute?" I asked innocently as I reached up to cup them.

The woman, who had when I first arrived, not even cracked a smile or showed any emotions at all gave me a huge smile as she laughed. "The cutest!"

Happily watching, and listening to her laugh, I relaxed even more as she even grabbed at her stomach. "Vim thinks they are too, he always wants to touch them and stuff," I said, hoping to keep her both happy and active.

She really was getting better! She was reading a book, talking and walking... laughing even! Lilly would be so happy if she heard and saw this!

Crown's laughter came to a stop as she tilted her head at me. "Does he pet you or something?" she asked with a grin, telling me she was trying to tease me a little.

I accepted in stride as I sighed and shrugged. "He wants to, sometimes, I think. But he doesn't," I said. Regretfully.

"Oh...? Do you not let him touch your ears then? I've heard some of us don't like it, while others do. Mom used to say she hated it when people touched her wings, but then Sap says she doesn't mind at all. Always figured it was a personal thing more than not," Crown said.

Huh... "I don't mind people touching them. Vim though... he's odd. He doesn't like showing affection so physically, I think," I said.

"Ah, right... Wait, really? I've heard you two tease and flirt as if there's no tomorrow?"

"We do..." I groaned.

"Heh, so in other words he just does it when you're all alone then."

Gosh! No! But what do I say? How would I explain to her why Vim would so willingly flirt and stuff, yet not once has ever actually on his own reached out to touch me like that!?

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I groaned for a moment as I squirmed and reached over to grab at my tail. I now felt like I should be the one mopping around and being weird.

It was all Vim's fault... other than that small peck of the lips on his return, he's not done anything since! Where did all that passion from Lumen go!? I had been so... expectant and...

"Renn?" Crown asked calmly, obviously seeing my obvious discomfort.

"I'm just upset. Don't mind me," I said honestly.

"Is it... something I said? I'm sorry."

"Huh? No. It's Vim. He's not been very affectionate lately, and you just reminded me of it. He's just a jerk sometimes and," I started to tell her what was bothering me, but then heard something else.

Turning my head, I looked back to the room that Crown had just been reading her book in. It was... still empty. The book on the table, opened. The hallway and rooms beyond it, seemingly quiet...

"Renn...? What is it now?" Crown asked softly as she stepped towards me, as if to hide behind me in case there was danger.

"I just... heard something odd..." I said as I stepped forward. What had that been? That time I had not heard a voice, or my name, but... the sound of grass in the wind maybe? But it was distant. And... there wasn't any wind at the moment, I had thought.

Stepping over to the large window, I frowned as I looked out at the field. The large tree, the one this whole area was growing around, was only in the corner of view since we were facing a bit away from it. Because of that we could see out into the large open field, but only part of it... and...

"Uh oh..." I whispered as I watched something huge walk out of the black wall of darkness and into the lit up field of grass.

"Uh oh? I don't like the sound of..." Crown hurried over, and went quiet as she too watched what I did.

The huge creature walking out of the darkness was unmistakable. And not just because it had once chased and nearly killed me.

"The dark bear..." Crown whispered.

The huge, six-legged, bear slowly sauntered into the field of lit up grass. As it did, I was a tad shocked to see how it still looked... dark. As if it was still covered by shadows, it looked... like a giant black spot amongst the bright green grass around it. Other than the thing's outline, it wasn't easy to see much else.

A part of its ability maybe...?

"Does it uh...?" I pointed at the thing through the window, wondering if maybe this was something that just happened occasionally. As far as I was aware, it didn't. Lilly had once said that the bear never came here, since it feared Vim's scent.

"No. Never," Crown said sharply.

Great.

"Mother!" a deep voice shouted beneath us, and I recognized Lellip's mate's voice. Branches alerted the whole parliament, and I hurried to the nearby stairwell and ran down it.

I only had to go down two floors, and I found the rest of them. Lilly and her family were standing before a similar large window that Crown and I had just been gazing out of.

Branches and Lellip glanced at me as I stepped over to them, and I worriedly glanced over their shoulders and out the window. The bear was still out there... just slowly walking towards the tree, it looked like.

"What's it doing...?" Trunk asked.

"Has it ever come this close?" Bark asked worriedly.

"I've never even seen it before," Seed said as she walked into the room from the other entrance, Fly in tow. The young bird hurriedly squeezed between people to step up to the window, nearly planting her face on it as she stared out of it too.

I glanced around, realizing everyone was here... except Root.

"Where's Root?" I asked.

"In her bed, sleeping..." Windle answered, rather quietly, as he kept his eyes on the bear.

Hm...

"What should we do, mother?" Branches asked. I glanced at the lad, and smiled softly at the look on his face.

He was ready. That was the look of a man willing, and able, to go into battle. It looked good on him, almost as good as that weird smirk he wore when he and Lellip were flirting alone.

Was that just his natural self, or was he now even more willing to protect his family and home... because of Lellip, I wonder?

"Renn... you brought his spear, right?" Lilly then asked softly.

"Huh...? Yes..." I nodded, though Lilly hadn't been looking at me. She, like Windle, couldn't take her eyes off the bear.

Vim had made me bring it. Just as he always told me to keep it on me, though right now it was up in my room...

"Spear?" Branches whispered to Lellip.

"Vim's," Lellip whispered back.

The rest of the owl children all glanced at me, and I tried not to notice the mixed looks upon their faces. Some were now looking at me with just as much fear as they had just been giving the bear.

"Arms. Meet me outside," Lilly then ordered, and before I even realized what she was saying... people went into motion.

I panicked for half a moment as I felt suddenly out of place when it was only I, Fly, and Crown left in the room. Everyone else had hurried away... even Lellip, who should have been just as startled as me.

"Um... you'll need to get your spear, Renn," Crown said softly.

Ah. Shoot. Right. I groaned as I too hurried away, and I ran back upstairs to get it.

I wasted no time. I grabbed Vim's spear and hurried back downstairs, to the main level, and I found myself to be the last to arrive. Lilly, Branches, Sap and even Windle were out on the front porch of the house... and all but Windle had weapons.

The silver look of spears, swords and even a large axe in Branches hand told me that they were like the stuff Vim made before. Steel. Deadly. Sharp. Branches was even tightening a leather bracer on his arm as I stepped over to Lilly.

"Are we..." I started to ask as I looked out into the field. Far off in the distance was the bear... its dark and shadowy figure was a bit ominous, though it didn't look like it was doing anything. Was it sitting down? It didn't seem to be even walking anymore.

"Should we really kill it, mother?" Branches asked.

Lilly gripped her own spear a bit harder. "I'm... not sure. Half the reason our home is so secure is because of that thing," she said.

Oh? "Is it even doing anything? It looks like it's just sitting there," I said.

"It won't take it long to notice us. And we can't have it attack the house," Windle warned.

"Yes. We must keep it from the house, no matter what," Lilly agreed.

Right... not only was Root and Fly in there, the rest of the parliament were similarly fragile beings.

Holding Vim's spear, I wondered what to say. Vim had warned me that the world was becoming weird again... was this a sign of it? Or was this just...?

"Take the others to the cellar. The stones should keep your scents from being found," Lilly then said to Windle.

I frowned as I watched the tall man nod rather gravely and then step back into the house. He shut the door behind him, and I heard the heavy latch of a lock they had click into place.

Cellar... maybe the underground rooms we had gotten that box of toys from? I had noticed odd bricks but hadn't noticed anything odd about the smells down there.

"Sap," Lilly then turned to her daughter, who nodded and stepped forward. Without a word Sap took to the skies, flapping without a noise as she ascended quickly above the house... and then flew over towards the bear's location.

"Renn, I might have Sap pester it with your spear if that's okay," Lilly then said to me.

"Hm? Sure..." I nodded quickly, not willing to argue. I'd of course not hesitate to do it myself, if needed, but Lilly was right. The bear, though big and dangerous, had no wings. Sap would be able to do a lot of harm to it from the skies, especially with Vim's spear.

It didn't take long for Sap to return. She landed a few feet away, her wings folding up as she frowned and stepped over to us. "It's... just lying down. It almost looks as if it's sleeping," she said.

Sleeping...?

I glanced out at the thing, and I could see how it looked like that. It hadn't moved from the spot it was in since I'd left the window to get the spear.

"Maybe it's hurt?" I wondered. The group glanced at me, and I felt a bit awkward since they all were looking at me as if I'd just said something weird. "What...? If I was hurt, lying down in a place that's safe and warm is where I'd go," I said. Even if it was just a simple bear, it still had such instincts. Any creature did.

"I mean... it's possible...?" Branches whispered.

"But then who or what hurt it?" Sap asked.

"Did it look hurt?" Lilly asked.

Sap shook her head, and her wings shuffled as she did. "I didn't see anything like wounds or blood... but I mean, it's hard to tell," she said.

"Is it as dark up close as it is from here?" I asked.

Sap nodded.

Huh. One of its abilities then...

"Is it a monarch?" I asked.

They all glanced at me, but Lilly was the one who answered. "No. It's the child of one. It has no heart," she said.

Right... Vim had said the same once, but I just wanted to make sure...

"Let me get a better look at it..." Lilly said as she stepped forward.

Quickly her children went to join her, so I hurried to do so as well. I walked behind them though, as we quietly left the house area and headed closer to the bear. It didn't take too long to get close, and we all remained quiet as Lilly eventually came to a stop and studied the thing.

The bear was bigger up close, and was indeed lying down. It had curled up a bit, so its head and face was somewhat hidden... but it did indeed look and sound as if it was sleeping. Its heavy, deep breaths, were loud. The kind of loud that I knew I'd now be able to hear from a far distance, such as from the house, since I now recognized the sound so well.

"Mother...?" Branches spoke ever so softly, and Lilly raised a hand to hush him. He went still at it, and we all watched the bear for a moment to see if it'd respond in any way to his voice.

It didn't. It just kept... slumbering?

Maybe it really was just sleeping...?

Lilly then turned around and nodded. I hesitated a moment as she and her children stepped away, heading back to the home... but eventually joined them.

I didn't feel any weird tingling from the bear, but we had not gotten close enough for me to have felt anything even if it did cause the same sensations others with divinity did. Liora I could feel from a short distance, but the minute I left the building she was in or got farther than that I stopped feeling her. So I assumed the bear would be the same, if it did have a heart or something like it...

Sap too. I only tingled when she touched me, or I her.

Once we got back near the house, we didn't go back in. we all stopped a bit before the porch... and Lilly went quiet as she went into thought.

I glanced at Branches and Sap, who glanced at me in return... and I could tell they also weren't sure what was going on or what we were to do.

"I..."

Lilly turned to look at us, and I stood up a bit straighter as the owl eventually met my eyes... and I found that they looked lost.

"I don't know what to do," she softly admitted.

"If it attacks the home, people will die," Branches said stiffly.

"But it's just lying there," I said.

"I didn't even know it could come into our home. It's never done that before," Sap said.

Lilly nodded. "It hasn't. Not once. Ever. Nor had its mother, as far as I'm aware."

"Mother?" I asked.

"The things parent had been a real monarch. A dangerous one. It's why the forest around us is all dark, it had stolen the light... as Vim explained it," Lilly said.

"Maybe we should summon Vim? Sap can go get him real quick," I said. It had only taken her half a day to fly me here, and that was with us making stops and stuff for rest and to stay safe. I bet she could get there in only a few hours if she really tried.

Lilly slowly nodded. "Yes... he had warned me that oddities will begin to occur..." she said softly.

I shifted as Branches and Sap glanced at me, and I nodded. "He... had said that, yes."

Lilly sighed. "Let's summon Vim... but not Sap. If it gets up and starts attacking, we'll need her."

Oh...? I got the reasoning, I suppose. In reality right now the only people who had any chance to face that thing were us, and Sap with her wings made her very valuable in that perspective. "Then who...?" I asked. Was she implying I go get him? I mean, I could, but...

"Let's send Windle," Lilly decided as she turned and headed back into the house.

Watching her go, I sighed as I turned to look at the bear. It was still just... sitting there.

"Open up!" Lilly banged on the front door, and I smiled softly at her as she did. Did she forget she had told Windle to take the rest of the family into the basement...?

"I'll open it, mother," Sap said as she flew upward. I watched her fly to one of the balconies on the third floor, and she disappeared as she entered the home from up there.

Branches sighed softly as he tapped his axe against his boot. "If that thing scares off Lellip, I'll make it into a rug," he said.

Chapter 619 Vim – To Leave SilverCreek, Unsettled

"If she doesn't return shortly, she likely will be with me for a bit. We might not be back for a few months," I told Rivonne.

The noblewoman had a bit of a pouty face on, but she was obviously understanding as she nodded... even if a tad reluctantly. "I understand... thank you, Lord Vim, for telling me. I promise to keep an eye on your people while you're gone," she said, again agreeing to what I requested of her.

"Thank you. Honestly they should be more than fine on their own... but Renn would be upset with me if I didn't at least make sure of it," I said.

Rivonne giggled at that. "She would be...! She really adores those people!"

Yes... she did.

"I've told Randle to keep in contact with you, just to be sure. Odds are you'll not have to do anything, but in the off chance you do just use your best judgment or refer to Randle. He's like Bird, a wise man," I said.

"Oh...? That one-armed reverend is like Lord Bird?" Rivonne perked up at that, now very focused on the topic at hand.

Woops. I probably should have specified a... wait...

Deciding to let the woman make that tiny misunderstanding, since it wasn't too far off, I went ahead and nodded. "He's someone you can trust, yes. As insufferable as he can be sometimes," I said.

Rivonne grinned and giggled at that. "I've heard plenty of the tales of you and grandfather getting into trouble!" she said happily.

Wonderful. Hopefully she hadn't shared too many of those stories with Renn... "Yes... I'm glad my wife isn't as rambunctious," I said.

Well, that wasn't true. Renn did in fact get into trouble often... just not that kind of trouble.

At least not yet. I've not had to pull her out of pyres or from under corpses yet, at least.

"That's funny, since I think Renn's quite playful! I bet she's always causing mischief!" Rivonne said as I stood. It was time I left.

I sighed at that. "Well, she is a cat I guess," I admitted.

Rivonne found that delightful, and had smiled and giggled as I bid her my farewells and left her castle. I retreated before she could ask anything too important, and because I really did need to get moving on.

Heading deeper into SilverCreek, I wondered if there was anything else I needed to do. I planned to leave shortly, as to deliver the important letters to Renn that Coin had brought... but honestly I was a tad hesitant.

I had much to do here... and I feared the result of delivering said letters, too. If they were as important as Coin made them out to be, then who knows what was going to happen. What if I got involved in some grand issue that took months or years to handle...? Then I'd not be able to enjoy Renn and her new home and...

"Stop, Vim," I whispered at myself, keeping me from thinking of things that made me angry. The mere thought of me missing out on watching Renn slowly make her new home, while surrounded by friends and whatnot was infuriating. The kind that almost made me want to do something stupid.

We were supposed to have children, weren't we? So said their stupid prophecies...?

How was that supposed to happen if fate kept separating us? And put us in positions where such a thing became either difficult or impossible...? And what of me being there for it all? Was fate not going to let me stick around and be there throughout her pregnancies? What of when the children are born? Will I be there during their upbringing, or will I be off on some stupid request... only to return later...?

The thought of me not being there to see my child's birth, or important little moments thereafter, made me sick to my stomach. I was used to leaving homes, like those in the Society, and returning years later to find the children fully grown... and it was normal for me. One did not live as long as I have and not grow accustomed to such things. But would I really have to experience that with my own children? It was bad enough that I'd likely outlive them all... but to also not get to enjoy their upbringing? To not watch them grow old? To not get to be a parent, and to only occasionally see them here and there when I could in-between my duties?

Plus what of Renn? I personally had no doubt she'd be a wonderful mother, and could likely raise children on her own with ease. But... was I really going to force her to endure such a thing? Even if she had all her friends and family around her, such as Merit and the rest... should I not be there for her?

I'd not be able to, though, if I kept being the protector of the Society. I've only been here for a little over a month and already the world was forcing me away. And true chaos hadn't even set in yet. Once the other ships arrived, with the rest of the inhabitants of the other continent, and all the other prophecies began to fulfill themselves... those moments I got of peace and rest would only grow more and more rare.

If the undersea volcano really did erupt soon, that too would make it even worse. To the point I'd likely only get to return here and see Renn, and my children, once maybe every few years at best...

Such a joke. I may as well not even be a father, then. I'd just be some distant family member who showed up occasionally, at best.

What would my parents say if they knew of this? If I wasn't there to help raise my own children...

I shivered at the thought, since I knew full well what my parents would do to me. My mother would likely obliterate me, and my father would do far worse.

But what was I to do...? Now I'm being told that the Society doesn't want me to step down...? Likely Light's influence, no doubt... but that will make it harder for me to do what I felt I needed. Could I step down as protector even though the Society doesn't want me to do so...? Really?

A part of me wanted to say I could, that I could be firm enough in my own decisions... but the reality was far different. Because I knew the moment I heard someone died because I wasn't there to help them would make me feel immense regret and shame... and thus force me back into the position.

And that was to say nothing about the gods and their schemes...

A brick cracked beneath me as I walked, and luckily no one else had noticed. I calmed down a bit, forcefully, and tried to stop thinking of certain things... and wasn't doing very good at it.

So it was a good thing that I ran into familiar faces in the middle of town, as to distract me.

"Randle," I greeted the priest as he and the mute that Renn didn't care for walked out of a small shop. Folz carried a small bundle in his arms, though I wasn't really sure what was within them. Whatever they were, they were wrapped by thick leather. But I didn't smell food or anything...

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Studying the shop they came from, and the lack of signage or anything to hint as to what was within, I decided to let it be.

"Vim. I figured you'd be gone by now," Randle said as he and I started walking side-by-side. Folz followed behind, quiet as ever.

Really... why was Renn so bothered by him? I'd already spent some time with him the other day. The man was as I remembered. A half-breed who was just a tad thicker in the blood than usual. A pitiful man who found solstice in his religion, and stayed in its safe clutches. There was nothing to hate or fear, at least not from him.

It was a tad odd to think, but Renn might just actually dislike the fact he's a mute. Which was... strange. Renn was not the type to hate someone for their conditions or something beyond their control. She was not that type at all. So...

"I plan to leave in a bit. Just wanted to take care of a few things before I did," I said as I stopped focusing on the mute ardent.

I'd keep an eye on him when I could, but it was likely nothing to worry over.

"Will you be returning?" Randle asked.

"I'm... not sure. I planned to, but," I said with a small shrug. We were alone on this road at the moment, but it was the middle of the day and the town was noisy. Too many people around us for me to speak of anything too important.

"Well, either way take care. I shall pray for your wife's success," Randle said.

"Not mine?" I asked with a smirk.

"The day a prayer works on you is a day I do not wish to see," the priest said with a huff.

I chuckled at that and nodded. "I'm glad we agree on that, at least."

"For different reasons, sure."

Rounding a corner and stepping onto another street of homes, ones a tad more humble than the ones I'd just left, I spent a small moment examine the residents here and there on the street.

They were all dressed moderately, and I was surprised to see so many families out and about. There were quite a few young children amongst them and...

"It's a nice town, isn't it Vim?" Randle asked.

Hm... "It is, yes," I said. I wasn't going to argue that fact, even if I knew the only reason it looked so healthy and nice was because of the wealth pouring out the mine. The minute that flow of wealth stopped, or even stuttered...

It wasn't wise to have a whole city's economy rely so heavily on a singular source. Especially not something that was unreliable. Most mines could and did last for years, decades even, but they had ups and downs. And those trends were only further more common in this era without certain technology.

And the human settlements in this world, in this era, were already so fragile...

"By the way, Vim." I slowed a little to glance at the one-armed priest. He was fussing with his sleeve, as if his missing arm had been tangled up in it or something. He looked frustrated as he tugged at it, but eventually got it handled. "I received a letter. From a colleague in the east," he said.

Hm...? The fact he didn't name them was odd. Although we were out and about, he still could have just said whoever it was. "And?"

"These apparitions... will you go handle them?" he asked.

Ah. Abel was it? Why hadn't he just said so? "I plan to... yes," I said a little reluctantly. Not only did I need to go handle that, I had other things I was being requested for too. Such as the one down south...

"Then before you leave can I give you my response?" he asked.

Oh. "I plan to leave shortly," I reminded him.

"Already handled, Vim," Randle said as he dug into his robe... and sure enough procured a small envelope.

Taking it from him, I nodded and sighed. "What if I had ran off, Randle?" I asked. Or what if I had not ran into them just now?

"I would have then sent it under normal channels, of course," he said simply.

Hmph. I went to putting his letter into one of the smaller pouches at my waist, and as I did I noticed out of the corner of my eye Folz staring at me. I figured he was just shocked to see me put something away into a pocket he had likely not noticed I even had originally. Most people didn't even see the monarch pouches at my waist, even when I touched them openly.

"Anything else before I leave, then?" I asked.

Randle shook his head. "With the extra hands here now, we'll be more than fine Vim. Go where you're really needed," he said.

I wanted to scoff at that, since where I was really needed was exactly where I was. Or rather, where I was about to be.

Next to her.

"Make sure you keep Kapni busy while I'm gone," I reminded Randle. He and I had already talked of it, but I wanted to make sure he knew I was being serious.

The priest nodded gently. "I shall, Vim. Luckily we have plenty to do, so it shall not be difficult," he said.

"Thank you," I said.

I feared Kapni's mindset at the moment. He was not as upset over his inability to go see his fellow foxes at Twin Hills than he should be. For him especially. He was not like the people in the Society today... he was more like Lilly in his belief in personal freedom. He should be furious over being told no over something as simple as going to see someone he was related to. Yet he wasn't even complaining about it. It made me... concerned.

I had thought when I had last seen him that he had indirectly asked me for permission to die, and now that I met him again I still felt that same feeling. He was on the ledge. On the precipice. If we weren't careful he'd do what so many others have done... like Trek most recently.

I didn't want that. At least not until he met Renn and got to spend some time with her. I wanted Renn to meet more people like him, those like him were a dying breed... a relic, a remnant, of the old ways. And...

"Will Renn be..." Randle was about to ask of Renn, and likely if she'd be returning here or joining me elsewhere, but before he could someone interrupted him.

"Reverend!"

I paused as a family hurried over. A young girl hurried over to grin up at Randle and offered him a flower. Her parents, both young looking themselves, slowed a bit as they watched Randle humbly accept the flower.

"Why, thank you Filly. Where did you find such a wonderful piece of god's creation?" Randle asked as he went to smell the flower. It was a rare one in this region, but likely something she had simply plucked in any random garden. Rare, but not so rare it couldn't be found.

For a tiny moment... I was transfixed. The young girl, likely only a dozen or so years old, had the smile only a child could possess. One full of happiness and joy. One that has never known struggle, or terror. The girl's parents, likewise, had easy going smiles. They weren't nobles, and based on their slightly rough clothing they weren't even that well off... but they were happy. At peace. Hopeful.

If they had been my people, members of the Society, I'd consider myself successful based off their expressions alone. They at least had no worries, not ones that required someone like me at least... and the sight of such pure content happiness made me unsettled.

Some of my people had those looks. But only a few. And rarely did it last.

Most of the Society looked troubled. Even when they weren't. At least, they did when I saw them. Because usually I only met people when they needed me. And lately it has felt as if I'd not just been failing even harder at such a thing... I've also been slightly indifferent and negligent. Enough so it was worrying.

How could I be expected to give such smiles to Renn and our children when I couldn't even give it to those I protected...?

As the young girl and her family went to talking to Randle, I chose to step away and leave. Knowing Randle he'd stand there and talk to them for some time. Unlike most in the Society who played their parts in the church just to survive... Randle actually was what he pretended to be. The man was not just a good man, but one who genuinely believed in his faith and cherished the chance to spread it. So he'd likely talk to the family, and others, for far longer than I was willing to endure.

And it was better I left now anyway... since I wanted to hurry to Renn.

Maybe she could calm my heart. One that was now writhing in worry... and not over the threat of gods and fate, but something worse.

What if I was going to be a bad father? Or rather, how did I stop myself from being one?

And how did I do it without ruining the world in the process...?

Chapter 620 Renn – A Bear's Last Kiss

I sighed as I tapped Vim's spear with my thumbnail.

My nails were getting longer and sharp again... And my hair too was starting to get a tad out of hand. It was so long now that it reached my tail.

I knew Vim liked it when my hair and nails were grown and a tad unruly... but I really did need to tend to them. If I let them get too wild it'd make it harder for me to hide myself amongst humans, which was why even Vim went against his own little desires and rules to ensure I kept them tidy. Though I had not brought my little box for my nails... Since Sap had flown me here, I had taken as little as possible. I had almost even left Vim's spear, but it turned out the spear doesn't weigh anything so it had been fine.

Walking through the hallway on the third floor, I headed for one of the rooms with the large windows. So I could again keep an eye on the bear.

It has been roughly a day since the bear had shown up, and Windle had left to go get Vim. The shadow bear, as Lilly called it, had not moved from where it had plopped down upon its arrival. We still weren't sure what it was doing, but we all assumed it was just sleeping.

Most of the owl family had calmed down, but I still felt strung up. My tail kept twitching wildly, to the point that others had even noticed and commented on it. It was kind of upsetting that I'd been told several times already that all would be well, and that I could calm down.

How were they so sure...? Yes, Vim would come. And he would handle it. But... until then...

I mean there were so many important people here! Each and every one of them here were precious. Lilly and her family... Lellip and Fly... they were so important to me... the mere thought of them being in danger was making me stressed out beyond reason.

I'd suggested, lightly, that they should all retreat. To leave the Owl's Nest, until Vim could come and handle the bear... and I had been rather shocked at how angrily they had all disagreed. Even those like Seed and her other brothers, Bark and Trunk, had very vocally told me that retreating was not an option.

Really...! I know this home was important, and wonderful beyond measure, but...!

"Ah, Renn."

I rounded a corner and found Fly. The young bird hurried over to me, grinning happily as she wrapped her feathered arms around my waist.

For a tiny moment I relaxed, as I made sure to keep the spear out of her way as I accepted her hug and returned it with a pat on her head. "Hey Fly."

She rubbed her face into my stomach for a moment, something I'd grown to realize was a way she showed affection... and then she looked up at me and smiled. "I like how you don't smell like anything!"

Oh... was that why she rubbed her face against me then? Not because she was trying to show her feelings...?

"Would you not do that if I stunk then?" I asked, as to find out.

Fly frowned for a moment, and then smiled. "I probably would, but only because it's you!"

Patting her head, I chuckled as I wondered if my own children would be as affectionate. I personally hoped they would be, but... I mean...

Not only would they possibly inherit Vim's stupid hesitation at being openly affectionate, they might also inherit my own traits too... and it wasn't as if I had a long history of being willing or able to touch people so openly. I had probably only hugged my own siblings a handful of times in my youth... and most of them, if not all, had been with Fellisee.

I paused a moment as Fly dug her face into me once more, giggling as she did. I took the moment to collect myself as I realized I'd not thought of my younger sister in a long time...

Would... would Nory be like her, I wonder...?

"Ah!" Fly then stopped what she was doing, and stepped back a bit though she held onto me. "Can I ask a favor, Renn?"

"Hm?" I nodded down at the young girl that had somehow reminded me of my sisters. Which was odd, since she was so different. Fly was a bit more like Lilly and her family than not, thus why she was here and not elsewhere in the Society... but she was a far cry from my siblings. They had made Lilly and her family look like feeble wimps.

Fly unhooked her arms and gestured at her back. "I have some feathers that I need to pluck, and I can't reach them... they itch, would you help?"

Oh...? "Of course I will," I said.

Fly smiled happily as she nodded. "Thanks! We can do it later, after everyone's uh..." she glanced around again. "Not so stuffy," she whispered after a moment.

I smiled and nodded as I reached over and patted her on the shoulder. "They're just on guard is all, Fly," I said.

"Hmph... it's like they've never lived near a monster before," Fly said with a small laugh as she turned away. "I'm going to go grab a snack!"

Fly ran off, not even waiting to see if I wanted to join her or not. I sighed a bit, since I would have. I was in the mood for a snack too...

"Renn."

For a tiny moment my heart fluttered, but I calmed down as I instantly recognized both the voice and where it was coming from. I walked down the hallway, going farther than Fly had since she had turned a corner... and found Crown in one of the rooms with the large window. She was standing in front of it.

"Crown, you okay?" I asked as I walked in.

She nodded. "Your husband's here," she said with a point to the window.

Hm? I hurried over, and quickly found him. It was early morning, so the world wasn't very well lit up... but I quickly found Vim. He was standing near the bear off in the distance.

"Vim..." I said his name with a little of relief, but also with a bit of annoyance. Had he already killed the thing?

"I'm not sure how long he's been there. I just noticed him," Crown said.

"Hmph... I'll go see him. Let your mother know he's here, would you?" I asked as I went to the nearest stairwell.

Like Fly had just done to me, I hadn't waited to hear Crown's response. I hurried downstairs and out of the house before I even realized what I was doing. I didn't even realize I was barefoot until I was half way to Vim and the bear.

Slowing as I approached them... I gripped his spear a tad harder as I watched Vim kneel down next to the bear, near its head.

What was he doing...? The bear was still breathing; I could see it clearly thanks to how huge it was. The thing's massive back was going up and down and...

I came to a stop as the bear suddenly moved. I went still as the bear lifted its mighty head... right up to Vim. I half expected the thing to try and bite at Vim, or for its head to disappear in a flash of wind and sound like how Tim's head had disappeared once, but... nothing happened.

A soft voice made my ears flutter as I watched Vim reach over and pat the thing on the nose. "Go on, go home," Vim whispered to it.

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The bear's massive eyes held Vim's... and then it lurched upward. I shifted back a step as I felt its heavy footsteps, even from a distance, as it stood up and shook itself. Vim remained kneeling in his spot as the bear then noisily turned, huffing loudly as if in great strain and annoyance... as it then turned away and began to walk back to the darkness nearby.

My heart thumped alongside the bear's massive footsteps. They were heavy, solid and deep. They left huge divots in the grass, and its huge claws left gouges... though it didn't seem to be doing such damage on purpose. It was just simply that heavy. That big.

Too unnatural...

Vim sighed as he stood as the thing kept walking away. It didn't hurry, but it also didn't stop. It kept walking, leaving us behind as it headed for the wall of darkness.

I waited until the thing was near the darkness before stepping forward... and then I waited until it had actually stepped beyond the boundary of the Owl's Nest and back into the dark before speaking. "Does it actually understand you?" I asked him.

He softly shook his head. "No... it's just a basic creature, not like you or I. But all things can understand instinctively some things."

"So you threatened it," I said, understanding what he meant.

"Yes... I sadly fear I will have to end it. It's being... affected by something. As if it's not in its right mind," Vim said as he crossed his arms. "Pitiful creature. Born without a heart, yet not natural. And now being manipulated by the very things that wronged it so..." he added softly as he shook his head.

I gulped at that. How did Vim so quickly realize such things...? He was saying it was acting unnaturally because of the gods, right...? How had he noticed? Was it something to do with the divinity he felt? But... it had none, right? So...?

Glancing away from the darkness, where the bear had slipped through it, I looked to my husband and... found he was rather lacking. Usually when he showed up from somewhere else he had a bunch of bags on his person, yet right now he only had the stuff at his waist. Had he hurried here maybe?

"Windle got to you quickly, did he?" I asked, carefully choosing not to bring up what he had just mentioned. Both because it was scary, and to be gentle with him.

"No. I encountered him on the way here myself. He shouldn't be too far behind, I rushed ahead," he said.

Oh...? "You were heading this way already?" I asked, surprised to hear so.

He nodded slowly... and then looked over at me. And as he did, he smiled. "You look good. Why is it you look so lovely when I'm not around, Renn? It's not fair," he said.

My face got hot, yet before I could say or do anything something, or rather someone, landed next to us. Sap chuckled as she folded up her wings and stepped near me. "So you like it when she's tousled and messy?" Sap asked, teasing me without hesitation.

"Disheveled would be a better term, but yes it looks good on her. Doesn't it...?" Vim asked, unafraid to keep saying so.

"Gosh..." I groaned at the two as I reached up to brush my hair a bit. Was it really that messy...? Yes it was really long right now, but I hadn't figured it was messy...

"Did you hurt it Vim?" Sap then asked, changing topics luckily.

"No... but I will have to. The fact it even dared to come here is telling. It's no longer something we can abide," Vim said simply.

"That's too bad... mother was hoping you could have fixed it without killing it," Sap said, sounding regretful.

I nodded, agreeing. "Will the darkness disappear, Vim? Once you kill it?"

Vim shifted ever so slightly as he frowned. "Yes... it will. In time, at least," he said softly.

Ah...

Some movement drew my attention away from him, and I found Lilly hurrying over. She was alone, but beyond her still at the house were others. I saw Branches and Lellip at the door, but they weren't in a hurry to join us. Likely because they knew Vim would, and had, handled whatever he needed to do.

I stepped back a bit to let Lilly comfortably step into our little circle. She glanced around, notably at the spot where the bear had just been, and then frowned at Vim. "Windle?" she asked.

My left ear twitched as I happily smiled. See! I knew she loved him! Worrying about him before anything else was so adorable!

"He'll be shortly behind me. I hurried, just in case," Vim explained.

Lilly nodded at that. "Did you hurt it? I don't see or smell any blood," she asked. Now that she knew her husband was fine she was focusing on the next most important thing.

"No, but I'm going to have to. I'm sorry, Lilly, but I will have to slay the creature... it is no longer trustworthy. It breaching the light is a sign it is no longer safe," Vim said.

Lilly's expression softened, but not much more than that as she nodded. "I understand Vim. We knew this would happen eventually..."

Had we...?

Vim sighed as he glanced at the darkness beyond. "What a shame," he said simply.

I studied him for a moment, since the look of actual disappointment was so pure and real... it almost made me want to cry.

It wasn't often Vim showed such pure emotion. But was he showing such a thing for the bear itself, or for the aftereffects its death would bring?

"So... is it safe now?" I asked carefully.

"Hm...? Yes. For now," Vim said with a nod.

Sap sighed in relief and nodded, glad to hear so.

"I'll go let the rest know," Lilly said as she turned and left, heading back to the house.

"Whew... I can finally take a nap!" Sap said happily as she also stepped away. It seemed she planned to walk back to the house with her mother. A cute gesture since she normally flew such distances.

Being left behind, I smiled gently as I glanced at Vim... who was staring at me.

"Long time no see," I said to him after a moment.

He blinked at me. "Don't lie, you've likely not thought of me once since you got here... or even during the flight here either," he said.

I smirked at him. "Hey, don't sell me short! I've thought of you at least twice, for sure," I said, teasing him.

He smirked at that and nodded. "Likely only because someone was teasing you about something, I'm sure," he said.

Hmph! And here I was going to offer him a kiss! "Keep that up and I'll make you sleep in the birdhouse!"

Vim frowned at that, then looked upward... over to the tree itself.

Ah... "It was a joke, Vim," I said softly. Had he actually thought they had a house up in the tree somewhere?

"Hm... it hadn't used to be," he said softly.

My grip on the spear tightened, since I realized I'd just brought up something a tad sad.

He was right. I'd been told already that Lilly used to live up in the tree. Actually up in it, like... so high it was silly. Back when she had her wings...

Gulping softly, I glanced over at the house and was glad to see Lilly and Sap already back at it. They were walking through the front door.

They likely hadn't heard me, since there looked busy talking to everyone else. Likely updating them on what Vim had said and done.

"They'd not be offended, Renn..." Vim said softly, obviously noticing my gaze and thoughts.

"I know... but I've decided to stop reminding people of sad things. Since it hurts so much," I said.

"Hm... when'd you decide this?"

"A few months ago. Before we came back north," I said. I had decided it upon reading the prophecies. The ones Merit and I had found under Telmik.

I myself did not want to be constantly reminded that I was supposed to have been here, with Vim and in the Society, hundreds of years ago. Such knowledge hurt. So much so that it made me want to weep even now. So... I too didn't want to remind others of similarly sad things, since I now so readily understood the pain such knowledge brought.

A gentle hand placed itself on my shoulder, making me shift as I glanced at the man who had a sad smile on his face. "You're supposed to be happy, Renn... not melancholic," he said.

"Melons?"

He frowned at me. "You don't know that word?"

Darn. "I do... I was just trying to liven up the moment, I guess..." I said, a tad embarrassed over being caught so readily.

Vim studied me for a moment, and then chuckled... but only for half a second. Before I even realized it, he pulled me closer thanks to his hand on my shoulder and gave me a kiss.

A tad stunned, I barely got to enjoy it as he leaned back and licked his lips. "What were you eating?" he asked.

I groaned at him. "Last thing I had was honeyed tea..." I hadn't eaten anything yet this morning.

"Hm," he frowned but nodded, telling me that was indeed what he had tasted on my lips.

Licking my own lips, I wondered why I couldn't taste it myself. It was kind of rude that I couldn't, especially since... "You know your kisses never taste like anything," I told him as we started to head back to the house.

"They don't?"

"How would I know?" I asked him, doing my best to keep the wry smirk that wanted to wiggle itself onto my face.

"You just brought it up..."

I elbowed him gently as he took my hand. "You don't even kiss me often enough for me to find such things out, Vim!"

He flinched, but not from my elbow. He had walked right into that one.