

Non Human 621

Chapter 621 Vim – An Owl's Loyalty

Good things always came with the bad. If not immediately, then shortly after.

Branches and Lellip were going to work out fine. Unless something drastic happened, the two would be together for the rest of their lives. It wasn't too surprising, since non-humans usually settled quickly in such a way, but it was a good surprise all the same. I had honestly expected Branches to cause issues or just not be well received by Nebl's granddaughter. But it seemed such worries had been for naught.

And the good didn't end there. Fly was running around acting as much like an owl as the rest, fitting in well as if she had been born into the family. Even the owls that were a tad... more normal, such as the ones who lived amongst humans, were calm around her and nice to her.

Then, to wrap it all up nicely, it seemed Crown was doing better too. She looked terrible, compared to how I remembered her, but she was at least active now. There was of course a long way to go for her to return to her former, normal, self... but at least she wasn't lying in bed all listless as I'd been told.

Basically the owl family was doing fine. Better than most of our members, I'd even be willing to say. Right now most of them were a floor below, in the middle of readying for dinner. Since I was here to visit, Lilly wanted to have dinner with the whole family. The whole parliament. Something that hasn't happened in years.

I was looking forward to it, even if upset and bothered. Since this would be the first time I'd get to have such an event with Renn. She and I have had dinners and such with many members, and friends, such as Berri and her family but there was something a bit special about this upcoming one. Renn personally felt very close to those here, and even had an active connection with many of them. I knew these next few hours for her would be ones she'd remember dearly. The kind of memories that would keep her strong

during even the hardest of times. So I wanted to make sure she got to fully enjoy them, damned the consequences.

I'd deal with the bad after. I'd break afterward.

After...

"Is there no other way, Vim?" Windle asked as I studied the tree from the window.

"Sadly, no. It'll become more erratic the longer I leave it be," I said gently.

Windle sighed as he leaned back in his chair. We were alone in his little study, I had asked him to write a few letters for me since Renn and I would be leaving soon.

She hadn't opened Light's letter yet. I had asked her to wait until after the dinner. After I did what I had to. She had not been very happy with my request, but had agreed all the same.

The world could wait.

"Do you... know how it happened?" Windle asked softly.

"No," I told a small lie. "Its mind is afflicted... by some kind of outside power. It might not be intentional, but it also might be," I said.

"How does one... afflict such a creature?" Windle asked.

I tried not to let my annoyance show as I turned to face the owl who was too smart for his own good. He knew I was beating around the bush, and was trying to see if I'd answer in other ways if given the chance. He was searching for answers, and not only did I not blame him for such a desire... I knew he also deserved them. He and his wife were both loyal and good people. They deserved answers. I owed it to them. To give them answers as to both explain why their home was in danger and also as to ease their worries.

Giving them such answers wasn't just justified... it was needed.

It'd not take much either. Just a few words... a few small bits and pieces of the truth of the world. And it'd be easy to give them it too.

But I didn't want to.

It was time I started treating the gods as I used to. As enemies meant to be destroyed, but also respected.

The less people knew of them the better. The less they knew the safer they'd be, since they'd not be suspected or targeted.

Though... maybe it was too late for that. Maybe it was all too late.

"It's actually easier than it sounds," I said simply, answering his question.

Windle studied me for a moment, and I knew he was thinking the obvious. I could see on his expression that he was upset with me for keeping secrets, especially since it concerned his family and their safety.

Gesturing lightly at nothing, I nodded. "The bear has always been a more simpler creature. As I mentioned when you and Lilly got together, the bear would eventually die or need to be killed if it ever became an issue. Well, it just did," I said.

"And it just so happens to occur at the same time all the other oddities spring up," Windle stated.

"I'd be lying if I said they weren't connected, yes," I admitted.

Windle sighed at me as he glanced at his desk, and the papers upon it. He'd already written the few things I had asked him to relay to those at SilverCreek. And was likely trying to see if there was any connection between them and our conversational topic. There were, but I doubted he could connect them in any meaningful way. I had simply asked him to let Randle and Merit know a few small things, such as warning them to keep an eye out for odd creatures.

"Ghosts. Monarchs. Creatures becoming corrupted... what has woken up, Vim? Why now? Is it related to the others returning from beyond the sea?" Windle asked.

Maybe. "I think the main reason they all returned is because of the volcano," I said. Had Renn and Lilly not mentioned to him that I'd been encountering gods? He had not included them in his statement.

Windle looked up at me, and frowned. "Volcano...? The one that sends us into the long winter?" he asked.

I nodded. "Celine foresaw it, as have others in their own way, but I had thought it hundreds of years from now. But..." I shrugged, deciding there was no point in talking in much depth about prophecies and their lies.

"And here I thought it was because Renn had shown up finally," Windle said simply, interrupting me.

My eye twitched. "Must you say it that way?"

"Am I wrong...? Lilly told me about the prophecies Merit and Renn found, confirming our suspicions," Windle said.

"I hope you've not said such a thing in front of Renn..." I said worriedly. She already blamed herself for such odd things, the last thing I needed was for Renn to think that all this chaos was because of her.

Windle scoffed at me. "Hardly. But I doubt anyone needs to, Vim. I'll admit I don't interact with her much, letting them all enjoy themselves, but even from the little I've spoken with her and seen there is no denying or doubting her intelligence. If you actually think that Renn isn't smart enough to connect the dots herself then you don't know your wife well at all," he said.

My eye twitched again. "So you and Lilly knew then? All this time?" I asked.

He frowned softly but nodded. "I hadn't, but Lilly had. Celine had told her of Renn, and had even sent her on missions to search for her supposedly."

What...?

My head felt numb as Windle leaned forward and picked up his pen again. "It's why we had not been shocked when she showed up the first time. Otherwise Lilly would have killed her on the spot... I mean really, Vim, didn't you ever find it odd?"

Yes. But I had ignored it.

Lilly had indeed allowed Renn into her home, even though she smelled of death. Typically that would have not been something to happen.

Which meant...

"I'm going to leave now before you or I say something that makes me break something," I said as I turned. I wasn't willing to think, let alone talk, about this anymore.

Windle chuckled at me. "I apologize," he said as I left his office.

I huffed at him, and myself, as I was forced to accept the fact that everyone had likely known since the beginning.

Merit had known. Lilly had too. Brandy and the others had as well. It wasn't just Celine and her flock, but... everyone...?

Has everyone known? This whole time? Has Berri...? Had...

I slowed as I neared a stairwell, as I realized something obvious.

Tosh had been odd when he first awakened not too long ago. He had called Renn my wife. Even though back then she and I had not even been as close as we are now. Back then Renn hadn't been introducing herself as my wife, far from it. In fact she had gotten unsettled over his misconception. To the point that she had even gotten embarrassed when he had said such things around her.

His misunderstanding hadn't been a misunderstanding at all, had it...? That hadn't been some ailing mind waking from a long dream and making a silly mistake... that had been a mixture of past knowledge and blurred reason as he regained his sense of self.

He had known. About Renn. By name, and maybe even description. Before he had lost his mind.

Which meant... the Society has known of Renn since before even Tosh had broken. Which was well over a century ago. Maybe even earlier than that...maybe even...

"Vim?" I blinked and watched Lilly walk up the stairs. She gave me an odd look as she stepped up next to me. She was alone, but I could smell the fresh foodstuff upon her. She had just been with the rest in the kitchens. "You okay?" she asked.

No.

"Dinner ready?" I asked.

Lilly frowned as she shook her head. "Still a bit longer..."

She sounded, and looked, a tad uneasy. I likely had a strange expression on my face, one that had perturbed her. I blinked and shifted a little, and did my best to wipe away whatever she had seen. "Your husband is in his study," I said.

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Lilly gave me a soft smile. "I figured. He mistakenly thinks he's doing good by giving us some distance, not realizing his children would prefer him not to," she said.

Oh...? "He had mentioned something similar, yes," I said.

"Hmph. Such a fool," Lilly said with a small scoff, but she had a smile on her face as she did so.

She really did love him, didn't she? If any other man would have acted so concerning her and her family she likely would have torn them apart. Yet instead here she was, likely praising him internally.

Hopefully one day Renn can have that same smile for me, when I make such mistakes.

"So... Uh, Vim..."

I focused again on Lilly and nodded. "Hm?" Was she worried again? Had I allowed my thoughts onto my face again? Hadn't felt like it.

"Anything I can do...? For you, I mean?"

This time I knew I couldn't hide my thoughts or emotions as my shoulders slumped ever so slightly. I felt an uneasy sense of being humbled as I slowly nodded. "Thank you, Lilly... but no. For now, at least," I said softly.

The owl gave me a sad smile as she shifted, and I watched her roll her shoulder in a way that told me if she still had her wings they would have fluttered unsurely. "Okay... you sure?"

Yes.

Reaching over, I gently patted the shoulder of the owl who had, once again, proved why she was one of my favorites. "Thank you, Lilly," I said softly, barely more than whisper, as I stepped around her and headed downstairs.

Leaving Lilly behind, I did my best to not give her a chance to say anything more. My heart was starting to hurt, and I wasn't sure if I could endure much more.

Such loyalty hurt. Especially when it was placed at my feet so purely.

Blinking slightly blurry eyes, I was glad I didn't run into anyone else as I reached the main floor. Down one hall I heard the noisy kitchen, and all the happy voices coming from it... but I directed myself elsewhere. Away from it. Away from the people and noise.

Heading for the front door, I opened it slowly enough to not be heard by even Renn... and after stepping out of the house I shut it just as softly.

Stepping away from the house, I took a deep breath of the fresh forest air as I stepped off the porch and onto the grass. It was the thick and lush kind, the type that was so soft one could sleep on it even with a stiff back. I knew from personal experience that it was comfortable. Not that I planned to sleep anytime soon.

Walking towards the large tree located in the center of the field, I tried to settle an unruly mind. It was difficult, especially since I couldn't decide how I wanted to do it.

Should I think of Renn? Her wry grin upon seeing me earlier? Or the way her ears twitched wildly when I had asked her to not open Light's letter yet?

Instead maybe I should think of Lilly's gentle loyalty. Her friendship. One that has lasted since I first met her, all those years ago...

What had I done to deserve such loyalty, I wonder? If I had asked her just now to join me into battle, to march against the very things that had once created her and her people... she would have done it. She would not have hesitated to agree.

Just how did I earn such friendship? And how could I ever repay it properly?

"How do I replace the bear...?" I asked the world softly as I neared the tree.

I had to kill it. I had no choice. It was being disturbed by divinity. It was why it had woken up and regained enough conscience of self when I had tapped its head. I had removed the corruption, if at least temporarily. But once that corruption returned it would again lose its sense of reason. And then it would again become dangerous. Unreliable. The kind of dangerous that left me no choice.

Of course I could not tell what had caused that corruption, other than it was clear it was from mana, but the how didn't matter. All that mattered was the...

"Does the why matter either?" I asked myself.

"Doesn't it always?"

Slowly turning my head, I frowned at Renn who was staring up at the massive tree nearby.

She was standing a few feet to my left... and was frowning in a way that told me she had likely been walking beside me this whole time.

"Where'd you come from...?" I asked as I glanced around to make sure no one else was here. If I had been so lost in thought that I had not noticed her, then it wouldn't have surprised me to see others here too. But there wasn't anyone else, it was just her.

"Hm? I followed you outside, Vim."

So she had. That meant she had opened the front door and followed me out after I had shut it. And I had not noticed.

"You should be enjoying the owls, Renn. We'll likely be leaving soon," I said gently.

She nodded as she looked away from the tree and at me. "I know. I plan to. But... I wanted to make sure you were okay," she said.

Me...? "Why wouldn't I be?" I asked.

Renn gave me a sad smile as she gestured lightly at me. "Are you?"

No. "Of..." I hesitated as I realized I had been about to lie to her. To say to her what I said to everyone else. To pretend. To fake it. As to keep the peace and stop others from freaking out too alongside me. But... "No," I decided to say after a moment. "No, I'm not," I admitted.

Renn's ears twitched, almost as wildly as they had earlier when we had been watching the bear leave and return to the darkness. "Because of the bear?" she asked.

"That's the source... but, well," I hesitated again, but realized I needed to just say it. Especially now that I had already basically admitted it. I coughed and made sure, again, we were alone. This time I even checked the skies, to make sure Sap wasn't flying around nearby. "This time, it's a tad... more personal," I said.

She tilted her head at me. "Personal...?"

Staring into her golden eyes, I found myself feeling oddly relaxed. As if suddenly I was without burden, my shoulders now felt a tad loose. As if I'd been on edge for some time. Likely had been. "Lilly offered to help me. Just a bit ago," I said gently.

Those golden eyes disappeared for a moment as she blinked, and in that small heartbeat where I couldn't see them I panicked. Once they came back into view I calmed down, and felt ridiculous as I did so. "And that bothered you Vim...? That's Lilly. She'd die for you."

Hearing Renn say it so blatantly made my eyes burn again, but I luckily kept the tears at bay. "Exactly, Renn," I whispered.

My wife's lovely lips quivered a little as she studied me, and then her shoulders too visibly relaxed as she sighed at me. "You're not actually this startled over it, are you Vim...? Really?"

I nodded, since I couldn't do much else.

"Oh, Vim..."

"What...? Don't look at me like that," I said as I looked away from her. She was looking at me as if she'd just fallen in love with me again or something. The smile on her face, and the way her eyebrows were upturned and her eyes were gleaming was almost how she had looked back in Lumen when I had suggested we name our first daughter Nory. She looked like she was about to weep, but in joy not sadness. Although I was glad to see such emotions on her, I wasn't glad over their source.

Renn's hands, both of them, found my left. She grabbed onto it rather harshly as she giggled at me. "Only you would get so upset over someone's love, Vim," she said.

Love...? Yes. I suppose it was a form of it. Lilly's loyalty was indeed a form of love, I could not deny that. But...

"Goes against everything I stand for," I said.

"Mhm... yes. So terrible, for someone to cherish you so much that they'd do anything for you. Terrible indeed," Renn said happily.

It was.

Because I was beyond such things.

I was supposed to protect such people. To suffer for them. To endure what they couldn't.

So why was it that the ones I protected were so obviously trying to protect me? How much of a failure was I that, at least in their eyes, I needed so much help? And what could I do to thank them for their willingness to do such a thing for me?

Especially those like Lilly. She knew so well what I was capable of. She knew the feats I could accomplish, and also the impossibilities I could suffer. So there was no doubt she realized the severity of what she had offered. To help me with my troubles, of divinity and the unnatural, was not some small task. It was something that no mere mortal could realistically do without great sacrifice. And Lilly knew it. Yet she still hadn't hesitated to offer her help. And would have given it had I just asked.

I didn't deserve such fidelity.

Renn stepped closer and one of her hands slithered up my arm. Before I knew it she was clinging to me as she giggled. "They're lovely, aren't they?" she asked.

Yes. Almost as much as you are.

I stayed silent as Renn clung to me, seemingly enjoying herself as she entwined our fingers and she leaned against me. I kept my eyes on the tree before us, looming over us, but only because I knew I'd say or do something stupid if I looked at her in this moment.

Taking a small breath, I held it in for a good moment before speaking. "What do I do, Renn...? That bear keeps them safe. It keeps the world around them dark, shielding them. Once it's gone..."

Killing it was needed. Because it was now a threat to them. A real one. Yet by killing it I made them susceptible to new threats. Ones just as real and just as dangerous.

Do I trade one danger for another? Did I have the right to choose, even?

"If you killed the gods, would it fix it?" Renn asked.

"I..." I hesitated again, this time for a new reason. One I usually didn't have. "I don't know," I answered honestly.

Renn turned a bit as to glance up at me, even as she kept her head up against my arm... but I stayed focused on the tree. "How long will it take? For the darkness to go away?" she asked further.

"Not long. A few years at best," I said. At least, based off similar situations I've encountered before. In theory it was already happening. The source of the darkness was not the bear itself, but instead its mother. I had buried the pieces of her all throughout the forest. The only reason her ability lingered was because of her child, once they too were gone the ability would dwindle until it no longer existed.

"So... can't we just solve it by then? Can't you think of something else to replace it? Or a way to fix it? That should give you time, right?"

There was nothing to replace this darkness. Not without resorting to similar divine influences. And that would just negate the whole point. "Nothing that immediately comes to mind, at least."

"Hm... and I've already overheard Lilly say they won't leave. Even if the darkness does go away," Renn said as she finally leaned back and away from me, though only to glance behind us towards the house.

I sighed at that. "I'd not heard that, but I can see her getting hardheaded about that, yes."

"Oh shush, Vim. You can't blame them. They've lived here for so long, and raised all those beautiful people here. Of course they wouldn't want to leave," Renn said.

Yet if they didn't they could lose all of that. Everything they are and were... This forest was surrounded by cities and enclaves. Tens if not hundreds of thousands of humans lived all around this forest, so close it was scary. If the darkness faded, its affect on the more basic creatures such as humans would also disappear... and it'd not take more than a few short years for this whole forest to be surveyed and hunted. This place, this home, and those who lived here would not last a decade. Even if they were willing to do the unthinkable and slay anyone and everyone who entered. And Lilly would, but it wouldn't be enough.

But Renn was right. Plus it wasn't my place. I couldn't count how many people, in the Society and out of it, that I've had to sit back and watch perish over such things. If it was their will, their desire, then...

Renn then sniffed. A loud one, that made me finally glance at her... and sure enough I found her crying. She went to rub her face against my arm, to wipe herself against my sleeve. "You're crying already...?" I asked, dumbfounded. I hadn't even killed the damn thing yet!

"But it's sad!" she argued.

It was, but... "Still..."

"I don't want to hear it from someone who was crying over Lilly's offer of help!" she chided.

My eye twitched as I nodded. Couldn't argue there... "It... humbled me, is all..." I groaned.

"It should! They're so wonderful! I... gah...!" Renn made an odd sound as she hiccuped and made a tiny whine of a cry. She reached up to wipe at her face as she spent a few moments crying, really crying. She still clung to my arm, but now for support.

"Mhm... they are."

It was they and those like them that gave me reason to be what I was. Those like them that made me feel justified in doing all I did, and would do.

In fact it was kind of sad to think that throughout all the years, I could only think of a few handfuls of such peoples. Those I truly and genuinely felt deserving of all I could give, and not just because I owed it to them. I'd protect and dedicate myself to those like Lilly and her family even without my debts, they were that precious.

Especially so now that I had Renn. She loved and cherished them so much I couldn't imagine letting anything happen to them. If she'd weep like this over the mere thought of Lilly and her family possibly having to endure hardship over something years from now, how would she act if something actually terrible happened?

"Come now, any moment now they're going to shout at us and tell us to come have dinner. Do you really want to return with such tearstains? Think of the teasing," I warned her as I patted her on the back.

"You're just worried they'd yell at you," Renn said, chuckling as she did.

Chapter 622 Renn – A Letter Speared

I was a tad anxious.

Standing alone with Vim, I fidgeted with the letter in my hands as I watched him tie his boot's strings. He called them laces, though I'd always heard them called strings and thus did so myself.

Vim was kneeling in front of me as he tightened his boots, and had his spear resting under his left arm and on his shoulder as he did. It was a tad odd to see him so comfortably carry his spear, even though it shouldn't be. Even back before he had retrieved his spear from Celine's Tomb he had occasionally carried similar weapons before as we traveled. I should be used to seeing him, and how comfortable he was, with such things... yet I still found myself a tad awed by how smoothly he moved it around as he did stuff.

To Vim the spear was as if a third arm or something. He acted as if he didn't even notice it, even when he had to move it in weird ways to accomplish whatever he was doing. If I had tried to tie my boot laces as he was I likely would have just put the spear down, otherwise I might have dropped it or would have focused on it too much to properly tighten the strings on my boots. Though it was likely the main reason Vim was so comfortable with weapons was simply because he didn't fear them. I was always very cautious and aware of the spear, or any weapon or tool, since I always worried about harming either myself or those around me on accident. Vim though wouldn't even flinch if his insanely sharp spear poked or cut him.

It was darker now; with the sun having set already... but the bright moon was lighting up the world well. Oddly the large tree overhead was shedding leaves at the moment, ones that were slowly falling all around us. There weren't many falling in the air, but enough to make me enjoy the moment. Some of the leaves were tiny, but a few were big. The kind of big that reminded me of the forests up north.

"Where'd your happy smile go, Renn?" Vim asked as he went to mess with his other boot.

My ears fluttered. "I'm just anxious," I told him.

He likely was speaking of what I had worn during our dinner just now. I had undoubtedly been smiling so massively that I had looked weird, but I couldn't help myself. These last couple of hours had been so precious and amazing that I was still riding on the joy that it had given me. If not for Light's letter in my hands, that I was about to open and read for Vim, I'd still be grinning like mad even though Vim was about to go off into battle to kill the bear.

Just thinking of that table, full of people, made my eyes water and my tail curl and coil. I of course have had dinner with the owl family since arriving, but this had been the first time each and every member had sat all at once with everyone else... and Vim had been there too. It had been lovely, because unlike usual when Vim either was somewhat quiet or slips off half way through like he does everywhere else Vim had instead done the opposite.

He had eaten, talked and been a part of all the conversations as if he too had been a member of the parliament. And it warmed my heart in ways I couldn't explain to have seen such a thing. It was so rare for Vim to actually be treated like family by our members, and even rarer that Vim seemed to genuinely reciprocate.

And of course that was not to say the least of the mere experience of spending time with such a family. During tonight's dinner no one had argued, complained or acted odd or indifferent at all. Branches and his brothers had not even glared at one another once during the dinner. Crown had eaten everything, clearing her plates as she's not done once since I'd arrived. There had been nothing but good during dinner, in all forms... though that might only be because of the implications of the moment. What with the bear and all.

"And now you're smiling again."

I blinked and felt my smile turn into a wry smirk. "Either want to see it or don't!"

Vim smiled at me as he stopped messing with his boots and slowly stood up. I glanced at his spear as he did, and the way it slid along his shoulder and back into the cup of his hand. It sat between his thumb and index finger in a way that made me a tad conscious, though I wasn't sure why.

We were currently alone and a fair distance from the owl's house. We were far enough away that even I couldn't hear any sounds coming from it. Even though the whole family should still be up and about, active, as they cleaned up after dinner. I had offered, and had hoped, to help them do so but Vim had asked me to join him... as to see him off, and to do what he had originally come here to do.

Glancing down at the letter, I felt a tad uneasy again as I again noticed how thin it was.

This was not like the prophecy I had delivered to Telmik. That had been as thick as a book. This one, one so important that Vim had left SilverCreek to come here... was so thin it might likely just be a single page.

As if the letter was intended not for me but Vim. Since one would only write the bare minimum for him.

Yet Vim had said that he had been told to make sure I was the one who opened and read it. That, unless it was impossible, I was to be the one to read it first.

I'd volunteered to do this. To receive and interpret prophecies for him. For us. All of us. For the Society. To better get Vim to do what he had to... but...

Suddenly it was terrifying. I now felt as if I held the fate of the world in my hands, and the fact that fate felt lighter than a feather was scary.

"Hm... maybe we'll get lucky and it'll just be about the bear or something," Vim said.

"If only," I said, wishing it were so.

Vim sighed as he moved the spear a bit, grabbing it firmer as he seemingly leaned against it. As if using it as a crutch to support his weight, which was strange because it looked like the butt of the spear didn't sink into the soft grass at all as he did.

I studied the spear, and where it sat on the ground in the grass... and wondered again how his weight worked. He was sometimes so heavy the very earth broke around him, yet then was like this... as light as the letter I held.

Plus the spear itself was odd. It looked as if it should be heavy too, yet it wasn't. Then of course its tip, the spear point itself, was so sharp that it should chip and break yet didn't either. I knew if one of the floating leaves falling around us slid too close to it, the spear point would slice it in two as it brushed past. It was that sharp. It, like Vim, acted as if rules did not apply to it.

"Did you enjoy the dinner, Renn?"

Looking away from the spear that defied reason, I nodded. "So much so I'll remember it my whole life," I told him.

He smirked at that. "You remember everything, Renn, so that's hardly a sign of how important it was."

Hmph. "Had this night happened even just a year or so ago I likely would have wept so much it hurt... and then would have vowed to live here forever," I told him.

"That I've no doubt," Vim said gently.

"Plus..." I hesitated a moment, since I was about to tell him what I had really truly enjoyed during tonight's dinner... and I decided against it. At least, for now. "I've been enjoying a lot of happy moments lately," I decided to say instead.

"Hm..." Vim had likely noticed I had changed topics slightly, but he of course didn't say or do anything about it. "They're a good family, aren't they?" he asked.

I nodded, and thought of our conversation a few hours ago. The one before dinner. He had... been bothered. By Lilly's offer to help. I don't think she had offered to help in any specific way, such as with the bear or his gods or anything... but had instead just simply offered to help in any shape. A general offer for help. And it had... bothered Vim, it seemed. Deeply. To the point his eyes had even grown watery.

Such a thing was a bit sad, since it told me how rarely Vim got offered such help. And also how he perceived it.

He was humbled... but he was also upset over it. Because to him, someone offering to help him was a bit of an insult. Not to him, of course... but to his ethos. To his rules.

He was supposed to be the one helping, not getting help. And so to him, that moment of love and loyalty from Lilly... had been a moment of failure. In it and his own way.

"How do we... make sure our family is like them, Vim?" I asked him softly.

My ear twitched as I heard it, but didn't see it. I kept my eyes on Vim as I heard his spear finally dig into the grass. It didn't go too deeply, since Vim stopped leaning against it, but I heard it make an odd noise as he gripped it tighter... and then released it.

Out of the corner of my eye the spear stayed upright. Even though Vim had let it go. It was stuck so firmly into the grass it didn't fall over, even though it was angled ever so slightly. The sight of it stuck in the grass next to him was kind of funny, so I smirked at him as Vim crossed his arms and frowned at me.

"I... don't know, Renn," he then answered my question, a tad softly too.

"As you know... my family was not a happy one. We never ate together like that. They had been... nothing like them," I said with a small gesture with my tail towards the house. "I don't want ours to be like mine," I told him.

"Issues and all?" he asked.

"They do have issues... but they're not bad ones, Vim. Nor are they issues of their own making," I said, a tad upset he'd even say such a thing.

"Hm...? The different opinions and values are indeed of their own making, Renn," he said.

"For one who so values free-will why did that statement just sound judgmental?" I asked.

Vim's frown deepened, as if offended over my accusation. "I meant simply that their differences, that which is causing the strife amongst them, is of their own doing. They can't accept that the others might simply be different, and in their hard-headed ways they choose to be..."

I huffed at him, interrupting him as I shook my head. "So you blame their little disputes over their inability to accept and overlook each other's differences," I said.

"Well... yeah?"

Right... That was how Vim thought. "I agree that everyone should have a right to their beliefs... of course, but..."

"But?"

My tail squirmed, and I realized we were now suddenly talking about something very important. I wasn't really sure how this topic had come up, but now that it had I knew I had to just say it. "I... really don't like the fact that children could so readily go against their parents," I said softly.

Vim tilted his head at me, in a way that made me want to groan. He looked like he was enjoying himself, as if he was teasing me or something and was enjoying watching me squirm as I tried to get back at him. "So you think Lilly's children should just listen and obey...? Even if it goes against their own rules and beliefs?" he asked.

"I mean...! No...? Because if I did then I'd be the same. And I'd hate to imagine myself obeying my parents too... but I mean..." I groaned a bit as I realized I had just dug myself into a weird hole. I was being hypocritical, and we both knew it.

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Vim chuckled at me. "Yet it bothers you all the same. I do hear and see where you're coming from, Renn," Vim said.

"You do...?" That's good, because I didn't. I was really bothered by the way some of Lilly's children were so different, not just physically but mentally. But the reality was I shouldn't be. If they didn't want to live like their parents, it was their right. And in my own perspective a parent should go out of their way and do whatever they had to as to ensure a child's happiness. And so that meant if they would be happier away from me...

My heart fluttered as I sniffed at the idea of my own children not wanting to live with me or near me. Because to them I was too... well... different, or radical, or something weird. The thought of my own child wanting to rebel against me and everything I stood for was just... so heartbreaking.

"Just remember, Renn," Vim then said as he reached over. I closed my left eye as he gently wiped a tiny tear from my cheek. "Even if they disagree... they still come together. They still trust one another. They still have dinner together," he said.

I sniffed at that. "I know... I do. I just..." I feared what was to come.

Some of Lilly's children, namely Bark and Seed... and possibly Trunk too, were...

They weren't rebelling. Not outright. But...

If they left after all this and never returned, not only would I not be surprised... neither would anyone else.

And that was so heartbreaking. Especially when their only real grievances were things that I felt were so simple and stupid. It wasn't as if Lilly and Windle were abusive, or cruel. It wasn't as if they were bad parents. The owlets were just...

Different. More like many others in the Society. People who were timid. Who wanted to live in a certain way, a way that those like Lilly just couldn't.

It wasn't just this family, either. It didn't end here. This small little discord, this issue, was starting to become very prevalent. Something very obvious.

There were those in the Society who wanted to live one way... and there were those who didn't. And it was getting to a point where they could no longer co-exist.

Which was such a sad thing to think, even if it was obvious.

"This is where I suppose I should say we just will need to try our best. To raise them well," Vim then said.

I smirked at that. "That's what I'm worried about."

"Oh...? I think you'll be a great mother, Renn."

My heart grew hot. "Thanks... and I think you'll be a good father too, but I fear the silly ideas you're going to give them."

"Hm... I suppose that is a conversation we'll need to have, isn't it?" he said.

I sighed at that. "I'll add it to the list."

Vim paused a moment, and then laughed. "Right!?"

Smiling at him as he happily enjoyed such a joke, I wondered what he'd say if I was actually keeping a list... and it was indeed getting very long.

After he chuckled a bit, he sighed as if in relief and nodded at me. "See? We're problematic too. It's just a part of life, Renn."

"We're not problematic... we're just weird," I said. Rather, Vim was the weird one. Most of our conversations, or rather the severe lack of certain ones, were because of him. Since he was so touchy about talking about certain things.

"Hm... I've been called worse, I suppose."

"I've no doubt."

He smiled at me, and then once again he reached out. This time he didn't wipe a tear away, but instead some of my hair that had stuck to my tearstained cheek. Then after he did, he also reached over and plucked a leaf from the bundle of my hair.

It was a common occurrence lately. With my longer hair I have been noticing that stuff has started to get caught in it. Not just leaves either. One of Fly's feathers had accidentally gotten stuck in my hair the other night, and it hadn't even been on purpose.

"Maybe my hair grows so fast because yours doesn't grow at all," I said, teasing him.

"Hm... I do like the new color too," he said as he grabbed one of the thicker braids. He lifted it as if to study it like one would a precious jewel.

"Color...?" I asked as I glanced at my own hair in his hand.

What'd he mean...?

"It's getting darker, Renn. Rather quickly."

Was it...? "I uh... can't tell," I said admittedly. It in fact looked like normal to me, the same darker brown.

"Hm. Wonder if it's because of the length or your heart?" he wondered.

Oh...! "It's... getting darker because of my heart?" I asked. That made a lot of sense, actually! Especially since my whole family had dark fur!

"Wonder how dark it'll get...?" Vim wondered further.

"Instead of that, I wonder if I'll finally grow fur?" I asked excitedly.

Vim gave me an odd frown. "What?"

"You know? The hair? My sisters had hair, like I told you... I used to be really jealous, it wasn't just pretty it kept them warm during the winter..." I said as I gestured at my forearms. They had it in places like that.

Vim studied me for a moment, and then gently released my braid. "Don't get too hairy, will make it hard for you to blend in," he warned.

I giggled at that. "Right!"

He nodded... and then ever so gently tapped the letter in my hands. "Not to ruin the happy moment, Renn... but we should open it."

"Hmph. You're just trying to avoid saying how much you'd like it too if I grew fur..." I complained as I looked down at Light's letter. I went to carefully open it, tugging at the wax that had sealed it up.

"I'd find you beautiful no matter your appearance, Renn," Vim said as I opened the letter.

I glanced up at him, and did my best to not let my face get too hot. "Think our kids will have fur?" I asked.

He blinked at that. "I'm... not sure, Renn. I really don't know what to expect, to be honest."

"Hm... if they end up being ugly I'm blaming you. My family were all jerks, but they were at least good looking ones," I said.

He laughed at that as I finished opening the letter and looked down at it.

Huh. It really was a short one. I mean... really short...

"Um..." I whispered, and then gulped... as I read the only sentence written upon it.

"Hm... I'm ready. Maybe. Go on," Vim sounded stiff, as if we were about to pull an arrow from his leg or something. He wasn't looking down at me, but now was instead looking up. Maybe at the tree nearby.

My shoulders slumped as I again read the simple sentence. And I looked up... and wordlessly stared at Vim.

I had to tell him.

It was just one sentence.

But...

Gulping, I took in a deep breath... and went for it.

"Vim..."

"Hm..." he nodded, stiffly.

Say it Renn. You had to.

"Like pulling teeth, isn't it?" Vim said.

Pulling teeth...? Gosh...! What an apt way to phrase this!

Grinding my own teeth, now that I was conscious of them... I glanced again down at the letter... and hated it.

This might be the first letter I didn't want to keep. That I wanted to burn and never see or read again in my life.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded gravely as I looked back up to my husband. I knew our happy little conversations were over. Our lovely little moments would end. As would my nights here in the Owl's Nest. At least... for a bit.

I might now not even get to return to SilverCreek. It was that concerning.

Which was why I had to tell Vim. Which was why Light had so obviously written the letter in this way. So that even if I couldn't be the one to read it to Vim... others could.

Vim must have noticed my silence... for he glanced down. And as he did, and our eyes met, I felt a shiver run down my tail.

"Tor will betray us," I whispered the letter's contents.

For a single heartbeat... nothing happened.

His eyes didn't narrow. He didn't move. Didn't say a word.

But then... with another heartbeat... I noticed something odd.

Blinking as I looked up and a bit past Vim's right shoulder... I frowned at the leaf.

Hanging in the air. Motionless. As if caught in a spider's web, but... it was obvious there were none here. In fact I'd not really seen any bugs at all in this forest.

And it wasn't the only one. I slowly looked around us... and felt strangely uneasy as I realized they had all gone still in the air. Dozens of leaves of varying sizes were all around us, floating in the air... motionless...

"What?"

I blinked, since I had not been the one to say that. Even though I had been about to.

Vim looked... shocked. And not the good kind, like when I said something that shook his heart. No... this was a man stunned. Surprised. By something he had not expected, at all.

"Tor will betray us," I said again, unable to say anything else.

Vim's eyes then narrowed... and then with a blur of movement the leaves began to fall once more. I crumpled the letter as I stepped back, in shock, as Vim grabbed his spear in a flurry of motion and spun around. Before I could even comprehend what he was doing, he had stepped away from me... and then a silver streak blurred in the air, and then the world exploded.

I yelped as a familiar feeling hit me. A burst of air, like a wall of wind, sent me backward. I felt Light's letter fly out of my hand as I fell backward onto the grass, and then another loud pop of air exploded nearby.

Through half-closed eyes, thanks to the wild burst of air, I barely saw it. A flash of silver flew off from Vim's hand... and flew off into the distance.

Countless more leaves began to fall as my ears rang with a high pitched noise, and through the ringing I heard both the burst of air from Vim's violent movement rush outward and hit the trees that were all around the field we were in.

Blinking wildly as the air settled and the ringing in my ears started to dull... I groaned as I realized what had just happened.

He had just thrown his spear. Out into the darkness beyond, off to the north.

Just as back at the Crypt, when he had killed Tim... he had just done something so fast with such force that the whole world had shook.

Sitting on the ground, I reached up to rub my ears that still rung. They didn't hurt too badly, but I knew I'd likely soon have a headache. Once the blood rushing through my body, pumped by a fast heartbeat, settled.

"Vim..." I groaned at him as I winced and looked at him. He was still a few feet from me, standing with his back turned... and he looked stiff. His hands were balled into fists, his shoulders were lifted a bit, and...

Yes. He was angry. Furious, even. Yet...

Vim turned around, and as he did he relaxed and his shoulders slumped at the sight of me on the ground.

"Are you okay Renn...?" he asked as he stepped forward, as to offer me a hand. As he spoke, I noticed his voice sounded a tad odd. Was it because my ears were still ringing or was he just that upset? His voice almost sounded hollow, as if I was hearing him through a tunnel or something.

"I don't know," I admitted as I took his hand and he helped me up.

Getting to my feet, a little unsurely, I glanced around and wasn't too surprised to see Lilly and a few others hurrying over. Sap was even flying over to us, about to land next to us in a few moments. She'd reach us first

"I'm sorry..." Vim whispered, focused on me as Sap landed a few feet away.

"You should be... why'd you throw your spear, Vim? Where'd it go?" I asked. It wasn't anywhere in sight... had it actually flown off into the darkness?

Vim didn't answer as Sap walked over. "What happened...?" she asked worriedly. It was interesting to see her wings all fluffed up, as if she was agitated. Maybe she too had been hurt or bothered by the explosion of air that Vim had caused.

"Um..." I wasn't sure how to answer that. It was obvious that Vim had simply acted out; throwing his spear in rage, over being told the contents of the letter... but how did I really explain that?

No, maybe Sap and the rest would understand. This was Vim, after all. Him doing such outrageous things was expected...

"Tell your mother to get the gear. Let's go harvest it, while we can..." Vim said to Sap as he released my hand and turned.

"What...? Vim!" I reached out to grab him, but wasn't able to. Before I could take a step Sap had grabbed hold of my arm since I had almost stumbled.

"Careful, Renn... are you okay?" she asked worriedly as he held me up. I felt odd, as if dizzy...

"I uh... think so..." I mumbled as I stood back up straight. Yes, I was fine. I was just a tad dizzy, but now that I knew of it I wasn't going to fall over or stumble.

"Sheesh..." Sap didn't sound convinced and honestly neither did I.

Watching Vim walk away, heading for the darkness... I groaned at him. "You don't think he actually killed it just now, do you?" I asked, almost not able to believe it.

"Huh? The bear?" Sap asked.

I nodded. "He just threw his spear," I said.

The owl frowned at me. "If he really did just throw his spear, and that's what we heard... then yes. He might have," she said.

Great.

Reaching up, I cupped my left ear and was glad to feel and hear the lack of ringing.

I sighed as Lilly and arrived... and I had to explain to them what had happened, which was hard since I barely understood it myself.

Chapter 623 Vim – A Den

Plucking the spear out of the ground, I sighed as I spun it around my wrist and brought it at rest upward.

I glanced the spear up and down, but knew I'd not find anything upon it... and I didn't. Not only did it not have a speck of dirt on it, even though it had half dug into the earth, it also didn't have a drop of blood or a piece of flesh.

Like always it was perfect. Looking just as the day it had been placed in my hand by my mother. Untouched.

"At least you don't ever betray," I said softly as I spun it again. I glanced around at the darkness that surrounded me, twirling the spear a bit just to give myself something to do.

I wasn't in the mood to return to the others just yet. I had left Renn and Lilly's family at the bear's carcass. Lilly knew what to do when collecting materials from a beast, even one of monarch descent, so I wasn't really needed... but at the moment the real reason I didn't want to return to help was because I didn't want to have to be near anyone.

I was in a foul mood, though I was honestly not as angry as I expected myself to be.

Somehow, deep down, I had expected such news. I had been waiting for something like this... now that they were all back. Now that the gods were once again active. But... Tor? Such an odd betrayal. Especially since he was finally going to get what he wanted... unless of course the act of betraying happens upon my handing him his ancestor's heart.

Or maybe it is to happen now because I don't give it to him, since now I assume giving him the heart is what causes the problem in the first place.

"Or it's something else entirely..." I mumbled as I twirled the spear and looked around again.

I was alone, but only within reason. Not too far, a bit farther than shouting range, was everyone else.

Even in the darkness I could make out the silhouettes of Renn and the rest, off in the distance where the bear had died. We were pretty far from the Owl's Nest, about half an hour at a leisure walking pace, and it seemed...

Turning away from the direction of the bear's carcass, and the owl family who was currently chopping it up, I frowned at the lone structure here in the darkness.

Life didn't grow well in this darkness. Though occasionally there were patches of grass, and even sometimes a tree or two, it was mostly barren. Especially here where the darkness was thickest.

Yet not far from me, not far from where the spear had landed... was a mound. A large burrow.

"Can't be," I whispered as I walked towards it.

I felt no divinity here. Even in the bear the only divinity I had felt had been from an outside source. It itself had no divinity, no mana, it had simply been touched by the stuff.

Yet this mound...?

Walking up to it, I frowned as I studied the very dark hole in the ground. The mound was sitting above a very big hole, one that looked deep and dark. I didn't need to smell the obvious stink coming from it to know what was within.

This was the bear's den. I wasn't sure if I had slain it as it was entering it, or leaving it, but there was no denying this hole's purpose. The thing was obviously a huge hole that it had dug out, and... was I hearing what I thought I was?

I turned my head a little, as to make sure I was hearing the sounds from the hole and not from Renn and the rest. It didn't take me long to verify that I was in fact hearing little noises from deep within the hole. Ones that were of a certain kind of pitch, which was why I had at first questioned if they had been the voices of Renn and the rest on the wind.

"How'd it have children...?" I whispered as I tapped my head with the spear.

The hard metal rang my head a bit, and I wondered if I was mistaken.

Had another bear somehow made a nest here...? Surely not. The shadow bear had attacked anything and everything, it had been super territorial. But...

The shadow bear couldn't have had children on its own. It was a creature of normalcy, at least the kind that shouldn't have allowed it to propagate without help. But the idea of it mating with another bear was ridiculous... not only did it attack anything on sight, it had been huge. Far too big to have been able to mate with a normal bear, even the great big brown ones found here in the north.

But there was no denying the sounds I was hearing. The faint, little, cries from something inhuman.

"Odder things happen," I whispered as I stepped into the hole.

The hole, like the bear, was bigger than it seemed. I had to duck a bit as I went deeper, but as the slope into the den evened out I was able to stand up fully. The den was as dark as could be, somehow even darker than the world outside of it, and was strangely warm. The temperature down here was something fierce, as if there was a fire down here or something.

There wasn't though. There were only large dug out caverns, one of which near the end I found was occupied.

In the utter darkness, since my eyes had yet to adjust, I could only make out faint silhouettes of the creatures on the ground. Small bundles of movement were rolling and crawling around near the end of one of the den's caves, and as I stepped into the cave the creatures became a tad bit noisier.

Small cries, from multiple sources, filled the den as they noticed my presence. The cries were unmistakable, as were their shapes in the darkness, but they didn't sound panicked or angry. If anything...

"Hungry," I whispered softly as I recognized the cries for help.

Were they mistaking me for their mother, come home to nurse? It seemed so... since one of them was crawling towards me.

As what looked like the largest of the cubs crawled my way, my eyes began to adjust enough to make out finer details. The dark fur of the small cubs, and the extra set of legs, quickly verified my assumptions. These were the shadow bears cubs... and there were three of them.

Or at least, three that still lived.

I frowned as I stepped around the cub that had been crawling towards me and over to one corner of the cave. I used the butt of my spear to nudge a motionless bundle of fur... and could tell by the thing's firmness and the lack of heat it was radiating that it was dead.

Quickly counting three similar unmoving cubs, I wondered what had happened. I smelled no blood, at least not enough to tell me they had died from wounds of any kind. Yet I couldn't tell in this darkness if they had died from malnutrition or not. They looked as big and fluffy as the others did, the ones still rolling and crawling around, but I knew such large creatures could starve to death rather quickly if not careful. Especially bears.

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Turning to look back at the cubs that still lived, I found myself looking down as one of them crawled into me. A heavy, and hard, head thumped into my left shin... and it let out a tiny cry of a roar as it started to touch me with its already large paws. Ones that felt bigger than my own hands already.

It wasn't trying to attack me, even though its little cries sounded angry... but I could tell by how strong it was pushing against me as it tried to claw up my leg that it was not some normal bear. It was strong, even as small as it was.

"Yet no divinity," I said softly as I bent down. I grabbed the cub by the back of its neck and lifted it. The thing let out a new cry, this time one that actually sounded stressed and alarmed, but it didn't seem to wiggle or fight much as I lifted it up to my eye level.

Although my eyes had started to adjust, I could only make out a few of its finer features in this darkness. I saw the multiple eyes, gleaming in the dark. I saw sharp teeth, not white but pure black. Same with its claws. Its fur though didn't seem to be as dark as its mother's had been.

The cub let loose a whine of a cry at me as I studied it, and I sighed as I lowered it to my side... though I kept hold of it by the back of its neck.

With its cries, the other two cubs that still seemed to be alive began to move this way. They didn't crawl as fast as the one I held had done, but I couldn't tell if it was because they were being cautious or if because they were weaker and younger than it. One of them did look half the size of the others.

As they crawled towards me, I glanced around the dark den... and knew this was an opportunity.

They were the shadow bear's spawn. There was no denying that. Their appearance alone verified it, and the darkness of this cave further proved it. This cave was too dark, even in this absolutely dark forest, to be natural. Which meant these bear cubs were resonating with the leftover mana in this forest, as their mother had done.

"But will you be any less a threat?" I asked them as I bent down to pick another one up.

This one was startled by my grabbing it. It bit into my forearm, a bit angrily, as I hefted it alongside the other. I ignored it though as I then stepped over to pick up what seemed to be last surviving cub, and also the smallest of the three.

I had to hold them a tad awkwardly, since I carried my spear and since they weren't small in the least. But I got all three in my arms, and huffed at them as they cried out in annoyance. The one biting my forearm stopped, but only to then go about biting my left shoulder.

Heading for the exit, I held back the small urge to just... squeeze the creatures. To both put them out of their misery, and to rid the world of the unnatural.

But the thought of doing such a thing left my mind as quickly as it came... especially as I stepped out of the den and back out into the dark forest. A forest that now felt a tad brighter, thanks to my eyes having adjusted better to the dark.

One of the bears placed a paw on my face, right over my nose and mouth, as I glanced towards Renn's direction. I could still see them over there, working on the cub's mother. Now with my eyes better adjusted I could see that they had already skinned most of the bear.

Closing an eye as the cub's paw slid downward, scraping my cheek and lip as it did, I sighed as I felt blood start to drip down my face. "Sharp," I noted.

Studying the cubs in my arms, I realized they really were malnourished now that I could see them a tad better. They looked gaunt, even for odd bears, and the smallest of the three somehow looked the healthiest. Though that might simply be because it was a female, or possibly the runt of the litter, and not because of nourishment.

I walked a bit away from the den, as to make sure they couldn't run back into it easily, and bent down to drop them. The two larger ones slid out of my grasp easily enough to the ground, but the smaller runt clung to my arm rather strongly. It let loose a whine as I gently shook my arm and tried to unhook it from me.

By the time I finally got the cub off me, and it landed next to its siblings who were looking around and sniffing the air... A quiet, almost unnoticeable, wing-beat came from above.

Sap landed a few feet away, and I watched the cubs closely as she slowly approached. They all noticed her, but didn't seem too worried or startled by her sudden appearance. In fact one of them suddenly found my boot far more interesting, and started to gnaw on the tip of it. Another sign to their hunger.

"Vim... what..." Sap spoke quietly as she paused a few feet away, and I could hear her concern. She wasn't sure what to say or ask.

"Found them in the den," I said simply with a small point to it.

Sap's wings furled up a bit. "Cubs..." she whispered, understanding what was happening.

I nodded and sighed. "Hungry ones. The two bigger ones are so malnourished its concerning," I said. The runt had noticed its sibling had found something to chew on, my boot, and was trying to crawl over as to share in the delicacy but the other one was looking up at the sky... as if transfixed by distant stars, or the moon, though they couldn't be seen here in the darkness.

"We um... we're getting ready to go back. We've finished harvesting what we could, we think, and..." Sap spoke quietly, as if afraid to startle the bears.

"I'll come help. Or well... maybe not. I might carry these back first," I said as I shifted my foot ever so slightly. The bears had started to really gnaw on my boot, and had started to tear it apart. The damage

was likely already done, but I didn't want them to eat the leather. Even if it wouldn't outright kill them for doing so, in their condition it might do far more harm than good.

"Uh..." Sap wasn't sure what to say about that as I glanced out at the distant carcass, and sure enough could see everyone else in a small group near it. They were likely waiting for Sap to return.

I wonder why Sap had come over and not Renn. By now, with her heart, Renn really should have good enough eye sight to have been able to keep track of me from this distance. Especially now that she could smell me too.

"I know what my wife will say, but... what do you think, Sap?" I asked the young owl.

Sap stood up a bit straighter thanks to my question, and I heard her gulp as her wings unfurled a little. "Me...?"

I nodded. "Should I just... end them here and now? Or should I, should we, take the risk?" I asked her.

The owl lightly coughed as she glanced down at the bears, now all three were focused on my feet. Each trying to eat my boots. "They're... all shadow bears?" she asked.

"Cubs, but yes. Their den was basically an abyss. They likely share in their mother's ability, at least in part," I said.

Sap glanced at the nearby mound, and nodded. "You mean then to spare them. To see if they can replace their mother," she said, understanding my meaning.

"It's an idea, at least," I said. Even if they weren't as strong, or as connected to the divinity in the land that their mother had been... there were three of them. They'd make up in numbers what they lacked in singular ability. And, as of this moment, none of them had any mana within them. Not a one was disturbed by outside influence as their mother had been. And although it was possible they too could be afflicted as their mother had been, I wasn't going to justify needless slaughter and something that wasn't guaranteed. At least... not before first considering all options.

"I uh... for what it's worth I'd be willing to try it. It's better than just losing our home without a fight, at least," Sap said.

I nodded, glad to hear it. "Then here, if you would," I asked her to take my spear as I held it out to her.

Sap hesitated, but only for a moment. She stepped over to me and took the spear, and I nodded as I then bent down to pick the cubs back up.

Now without my spear it was easy to get a hand on all of them. They fought me a tad harder this time, though only because they had thought they had found something to eat. They made small groans and annoyed roars as I hefted them. "They stink a little," I said.

"They do, yes..." Sap agreed.

"Let's be off," I said as I stepped towards the bear's mother. Or rather, her carcass.

"Should you take them near... her?" Sap asked as she hurried to keep pace with me. It seemed she was going to walk back with me, not fly.

I hummed at that as I nodded. "Good point... I'll round it, then. Would you let the others know?" I asked.

"Sure..." Sap agreed, though sounded a tad resigned as she did.

As she flew off, I smiled at the owl who flew with haste. "She must think you guys are cute," I said to the cubs. She had wanted to linger.

Renn will think they're cute too. Hopefully the others do too... else I'll be forced to endure my wife's tears.

"One step forward, two back," I said softly as I headed back to the Owl's Nest... carrying lives while ending others.

Chapter 624 Renn – To Gnaw A Bowl

"So, here's my theory," Vim said as he held the baby shadow bear before me.

I nodded as I focused on the bear's mouth. Or snout? Jaw? I suppose mouth was a fine word to use, but it felt a tad odd since the bear's snout was so long and oddly shaped. A long dark tongue was wildly coming in and out of it as I held up the bowl of milk. It kept trying to lean forward, as if to dunk its whole head into the bowl, but Vim kept it steady. We kept it close enough to let it drink, but not so close it

could knock the bowl out of my hands or spill anything. Or at least, not spill more than it did just by drinking.

It really was a messy eater! I'd say about a quarter of the milk it'd tried to drink so far was everywhere but it's stomach. The milk instead was covering its face, and my forearms instead.

"The bear noticed its mind being altered. Afflicted. So it abandoned its den... as to not harm its cubs. It instinctively knew that it needed to stay away from them, less it killed them," Vim explained his theory.

"And once you cleared its mind, it went to head back to the den. To feed its babies," I said.

"Rather it had likely already done so. I think I had killed it after it had left," he said.

Although it was sad to think that Vim had killed the creature and thus orphaning these cubs... I knew better than to doubt his decision. He had made it very clear that the bear had become too dangerous. That it would harm Lilly and her family if we had left it alone, if he had left it alone, and so I didn't fault him for his actions.

But it still was sad...

"So... why do we think these ones won't get the same affliction, Vim?" I asked as some of the milk splashed again. I smiled as the thing went from licking up the milk in the bowl to licking my wrist instead.

It really was cute... even if it had multiple eyes, extra limbs, and smelled a tad odd. It smelled like old moss.

"We don't. It's a risk, but one that I'm going to let Lilly and her family decide to make or not. They're not as connected to the remnant divinity in the ground, in this forest, but they're connected enough that if we leave them alive the darkness will last that much longer. Which will in turn keep the Owl's Nest safe," Vim said.

I hummed as I nodded... and glanced behind me. Off in the distance, near the house, were the other two cubs... and the rest of the owl family who were likewise feeding them as I and Vim were this one.

On the side of the house was a small barn, one that had been basically empty for years I was told. Occasionally they had horses and stuff, but now they were going to let the bear cubs stay in it. The owl family was all sitting outside of the barn, feeding and studying the other cubs.

Vim and I had stepped aside, both to have a private conversation... but also because Vim wanted to verify something with the runt of the litter.

The smaller bear made me tingle. When I touched it, at least. The sensation was gentle and almost not even noticeable, but when I had told Vim he had frowned and grown serious over it.

It turned out he didn't sense a heart inside the cub, even though I tingled when touching it as if it had one. This of course made one think that the bear had no heart, since Vim in theory should know far better than anyone else... However, I didn't tingle when touching the other cubs... even though they were both bigger than this one.

Plus Sap had said she had tingled too.

"Would we really sense what you can't, Vim?" I asked as I tipped the bowl a tad. It had drank, and spilled, about half of the milk so far so I now needed to angle the bowl a bit as to let it easily drink from it.

"In theory, no. But at the same time yes. As I've told you, I don't have a heart. My method of sensing divinity is a tad different than yours or Sap's. So... it's possible that you're sensing what I can't. Or maybe, what I think is happening, is you're sensing something else," Vim said.

"Hm...? Like what? A heart forming or something?" I asked.

"If it was to have a heart, it would be formed already. The only..." Vim then went quiet as he frowned, and as he did so he had lowered the bear a bit... which caused it to let out a small cry of annoyance as it was lowered far enough that it could no longer comfortably drink from the bowl.

I smiled as I lowered the bowl a bit more, to let it go back to drinking.

Sadly the reason we had to feed it like this was because of its rough drinking. We had originally tried to just let it drink from a bucket, but it had knocked it over within moments and spilled it all. The bears were simply so hungry that they couldn't contain themselves, and as such we had to feed them this way.

"The only what, Vim?" I asked as I watched the bear slurp loudly. Gosh it was cute... especially with milk stains all over its face.

"It's... possible it ate a heart. Recently. And is absorbing it. It would explain why you and Sap sense it, and I can't. Especially if it was a small heart of not much power," he said.

Oh...? "I thought you could sense such things," I said.

"I can, within reason. But... well..."

I glanced up at him, and frowned at the look on his face. He looked upset, which I was more than used to by now... since he had every right to be. He had killed a creature he had not wanted to harm, had learned of bad news from Light's letter, and now we were talking about things he simply hated to talk about. Yet... amidst that emotion was something else. Something a tad scary to see.

Was that worry? I think it was. That wasn't good.

"What is it, Vim...?" I asked softly.

Vim's eyes softened as he slowly nodded and his shoulders slumped a bit, causing the bear to again let out a tiny whine of complaint as Vim angled it away from the bowl of milk. Why was Vim so negligent? Did he not care that it was trying to eat? Hopefully he was more mindful with our own child once the time came...

"It's possible you're not sensing a heart at all, Renn. You and Sap might just be feeling its connection with the darkness. With the divinity in the forest around us," he said.

"Oh...? And why would that worry you if so? Isn't that a good thing?" I asked. That meant not only was it not a monarch, not a real one, it also meant it was connected to the darkness... right? So we could use it for the very thing Vim wanted to use it for? To keep the dark around, to replace its mother's purpose?

He slowly nodded. "Yes. It would be a very good thing... but it means the other two, since they don't make you tingle, don't have the same connection."

Ah... My own shoulders slumped, but I made sure to not move the bowl I held as I realized what he meant.

If what Sap and I were really sensing was the cub's connection to the darkness... that meant the other two, who we couldn't sense, had no connection to it at all.

Which meant... "If that was the case... what then?" I asked.

"I don't know, Renn. If it was just me, I'd not be bothered by them. But no one else is as resilient as I am. These bears, once grown, could easily harm any of those here. Putting them at risk, far more risk than I am willing to allow," he said.

"What stopped their mother from entering this area, Vim?" I asked, hoping to get to the bottom of it.

"Beneath the tree is the heart of the owl. The one who had originally lived here, before even the darkness came," he said.

My ears shifted at that. "Really...?" I asked as I glanced down at my feet. I hadn't, and couldn't, feel it at all! It must be really deep...

"If I removed that heart, the darkness would take over this area too. The monarch, the bear monarch from before, had been able to venture into this place... which is why I had slain it originally. But none of that monarch's descendants have ever crossed into the light. At least not for more than a few seconds at best. They fear it the same way one would a mighty predator or threat, they instinctively just fear it."

"What about the cubs?" I asked as I reached over to pet the bear on the head. It didn't even acknowledge me as it kept on slurping the milk.

"Too young. They likely feel the sensation of fear, but are too young and hungry to really recognize it. As they grow older, if we allow them to do so, they'll start to grow uncomfortable and begin to keep their distance from this place," he said.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

"And if they don't...?"

"Then I'll kill them, as I did their mother."

Right...

I sighed at him as I watched the bear drink up the last bit of milk in the bowl I held. "If the other two have no connection to the darkness... what then?"

"Then they're useless, in my opinion."

Frowning, I looked to my left at Lilly... and wondered when she had shown up. I hadn't even noticed her!

I glanced at Vim, who looked calm, and the bear he held. It was likely the bear, both its cuteness that had held my focus and its strange stink that had kept me from noticing Lilly's approach.

Wonder how long she had been listening.

"I've not confirmed it yet, Lilly," Vim said simply.

"Hard to think of any other reason, Vim. At least it's something we can partly verify on our own, what with Sap and all," Lilly said.

He nodded at that as the bear started to gnaw on the edge of the bowl, since it was out of milk. It was a tad odd to see its teeth, since they were a glossy black. They kind of looked like those shiny black rocks one could find in rivers occasionally.

"As long as you're willing to risk it, and do so carefully... it'll be on you to figure it out, Lilly. I'll not be able to stay and help with this, not for a time at least," Vim said.

"It's okay. This is more than enough, Vim... it's a chance. And you know how I am about at least having a chance," Lilly said.

Vim smirked at that and nodded... and then he put the cub down. I bent down a bit alongside him, but not to pick it up. Instead I went ahead and allowed the bear to keep chewing on the bowl, since it was so focused on it. It went to chewing and licking it, as if to draw out every drop of milk from it. Even the stuff that had soaked into the wood.

It really was cute when it was just sitting there... but it was also dangerous. It had huge, sharp, teeth and claws. The kind that would cut into me, or anyone and anything for that matter, easily if we weren't careful. When Vim had first returned with the cubs he had a bunch of cuts and puncture wounds from them, since they had not liked him carrying them all together as he had done. He now of course had no wounds to be seen, but parts of his clothes still had stains from the blood they had drawn from him.

"How uh... how long would it take for it to grow? Or at least not need attention? If you guys kept them?" I asked.

"Only a few years," Vim answered.

Oh? That wasn't too bad then.

"If it turns out only this one has the darkness ability, then only this one will be kept. Raising one, even something as dangerous as this, won't be too difficult," Lilly said.

My tail squirmed, but I didn't say anything. Even if hearing the truth, that it was possible the other cubs would be put to death as their mother had been, made me want to whine.

They were just babies... but I knew, as Vim and the rest had said, they would grow up into things that would and could hurt our own babies. So... I understood, but at the same time...

"They'll need constant food. They're unnatural creatures, but not ones with divinity. Not true divinity, at least. They'll need constant food and drink, more than you likely want to provide," Vim told Lilly.

"Sap's already promised to stay and raise them herself, Vim. She can hunt and gather for them well enough on her own, and I'll help when I have to," Lilly said.

Right... with her wings Sap was likely a phenomenal hunter.

Vim sighed as he nodded. "That's one way to keep the parliament close," he said.

Lilly shifted and I glanced at her, and didn't like the sad look on her face... so I looked away. Had Vim said that on purpose? He was looking down at the bear, and looked as if he hadn't even realized what he had just said or how deeply his words had bothered her.

"What of us, Vim?" I asked him, to hopefully keep him from saying anything more that would cause Lilly discomfort.

He glanced up, then frowned and nodded. "Yes... we too must go. In fact we should be rushing, in this instance," he said.

"Does she need to go, Vim...?" Lilly asked softly.

Again I glanced at Lilly, and again I found her with a sad look.

"I of course do not need her help in dealing with Tor... but what I will need help with is the aftermath. Or maybe the rest of it. If this is all sourced from prophecies, there is no doubt there will be far more to deal with afterward. Renn's assistance will be very helpful in that case," Vim said calmly.

I nodded slowly, both to agree with him and to let Lilly know it was okay. "No matter what I won't let him keep me away long, Lilly. Not only do I want to come back, I have a lot to handle at SilverCreek," I said.

"You're telling me? Just when Crown was finally getting active again... I swear Vim, if Renn leaving right now causes issues I'll be very upset with you," Lilly warned Vim.

He smirked at that. "Duly noted. I uh... would like to leave immediately, but actually why don't we wait a bit? How about we wait till next morning?" he asked me.

Huh...? "You sure, Vim?" Tor's betrayal is serious, wasn't it...? We were at least a week, if not two, from Tor's Village. Shouldn't we hurry there?

"Her letter. Say it again," he said.

I blinked. "Tor will betray us," I repeated Light's letter from memory. Had he forgotten such a simple sentence already...? Surely not, right? Or was his dislike of prophecies so strong that he even blocked out something as simple as a few words?

He nodded. "Will. Not has, or is betraying us. Though she had only used a few words, they had been full of meaning and importance. She chose to phrase it that way on purpose. It is something that is about to happen, not has happened. And we will hurry there, but I want to make sure before we do," he said.

"Make sure of what?" Lilly asked.

Vim glanced down, and as we did too... I smiled as I found it now grabbing at Vim's left leg. It wasn't doing so strongly, or with seemingly any real purpose... it almost looked like it was trying to rub its face against Vim's leg more than it was climb or hurt him. Maybe it was trying to mark him with its scent, or wipe its face off from all the milk...? Maybe I should give it a bath...?

"I want a few hours to monitor these things... Ideally I'd do so for days, if not weeks, but I can't afford much more than that. I'm sorry, Lilly."

Lilly shook her head. "It's fine, Vim. Even if these things did go wild and try to attack us... they're not so dangerous I can't handle them without harm," she said.

"Yes. Though their claws are sharp, and they're stronger than they look, I too think I could handle them if I had to. Even without your spear, Vim," I said. They were, after all, in the end simple cubs. Large, dangerous cubs... but only cubs. They couldn't even walk yet, they crawled and even sometimes rolled around.

"Hmph. All the same. Daybreak is only a handful of hours away anyway, Renn," Vim said.

I frowned at him. "You just said that as if I was complaining," I said. Plus a handful of hours...? The sun was about to rise in a few moments. That meant he did not mean the upcoming sunrise, but the next one. Tomorrow, not today.

Maybe he was doing this on purpose...

Lilly chuckled at that. "Right? He had."

Vim ignored us as he bent down and grabbed the cub. He did so by grabbing it by the back of its neck, which I figured would make it complain or whine... but instead it just went slightly limp in his grip. He held it up, and since it had gone limp it now looked kind of silly... like a really big, fat, cat that was being carried by its parent. He lifted it until he could stare it in the eye, and it him, and he glared at it.

If the bear even recognized Vim's glare, or the seriousness of it, it didn't show it. It just... hung there.

"I think it's a girl," he said after a moment.

Oh? Was that what he had been doing? "Is that why she's smaller?" I asked. Here I had thought it had just been younger, or worse off physically from a lack of food compared to its siblings.

"She's just a runt," Lilly said.

Vim nodded. "Your family... they're okay with them?" Vim asked Lilly.

"Hm? Yes. Even the faint of heart Seed is doting over them, you should hear her," Lilly said with a small gesture towards the house.

How nice. Maybe I should sneak over there to hear such a thing...

"Hmph... one step forward, two back. Such is life," Vim said... and then he stepped away. He carried the bear as I would a basket, or a bag, at his side as he headed for the house... leaving Lilly and I behind.

"Shouldn't it be the other way around in this instance?" I asked Lilly as I bent down to pick up the bowl. It now had gnaw marks all over it.

"To him likely not."

I sighed at him. "I'm not sure if I should praise him for staying his hand, or chastise him," I admitted to her. Vim had likely heard me, since he wasn't too far away... but he didn't show if he had or not. He just kept walking.

"I'm glad for the opportunity... but yes. A part of me thinks we should cull them before they can do more harm than good. But sometimes risks must be taken, Renn," Lilly said.

Right... I figured she'd think like that. "Should I worry over his sudden lack of wanting to hurry to Tor? He had been so upset over it that he had thrown that spear as if to kill a god, and now he's acting all lazy or something," I said.

Lilly crossed her arms. "Not sure... He gets like that sometimes, Renn. Honestly I had expected him to do such a thing the moment he had seen the bear, not wait almost a whole day to kill it as he had," she said.

Yes... that was a tad weird. Maybe he had not wanted to kill it near Lilly's home?

Plus he had also had us gather its remnants. Lilly and the rest of us had gathered not just its claws, teeth and pelt but even some bones and organs. Lilly had not wanted anyone to eat its meat, surprisingly, but she had been interested in gathering stuff like its heart. Or rather, hearts. It had not had any strange orbs within it, but it had three large organs that had been or at least looked like hearts. Lilly had gathered each of them; though I wasn't sure what she wanted them for. If not to eat, what purpose did an organ like that have...? Certain organs could be used for some things, such as for water skins and whatnot... but hearts?

Even ones as big and weird as the bear's, I couldn't imagine their purpose.

Lilly then reached over and patted me on the back. "Come on. Let Vim have his hours of settling his mind. While he does we can ready you for your journey," she said.

"Ready me?" I asked. What'd she mean...? I only had a small bag with me right now, since I had only brought a few essentials here. Sap had carried me here on the wing, so I had not brought my usual bags. And it had seemed Vim had only brought a few bags too.

Lilly grinned at me as we both headed back to the house. "Like I'll let a fellow owl leave our branches without a full belly and clean feathers. Even if you're okay with it, and Vim obviously prefers it, I'll not be shamed so," she said.

Ah... I smiled at that as my tail happily wiggled. I knew she was partly teasing me, but I also knew a part of her wasn't. To her, in her eyes... we were family. As if I was in fact an owl just as she. And such a thing made my heart warm and full. Enough so to almost burst.

"I do need to wipe off the stink of that silly bear now," I agreed.

Lilly smirked, but didn't laugh. "They do kind of stink, don't they..."

Chapter 625 Vim – A Reason To

Holding Light's letter over the candle, I waited until it caught aflame... and waited some more until the parchment really began burning. Once it was on fire I stepped away from Windle's desk and over to the fireplace. I waited until the letter was mostly burnt before bending down and sticking it into the lit fire, and I held it in the flames to ensure the rest of it burnt away properly. I waited until I felt the heat burning my hand stop burning, telling me my body had adapted to the fire, and then once the letter I held was just a tiny piece of leftover charred remains, I released it and pulled my hand out of the fire.

"All that over a single sentence," Windle said simply from his desk.

"It makes me feel better," I said as I watched the tiny pieces of the letter crumple and burn away in the fire. It was honestly a tad too warm for such a fire right now, especially in Windle's office, but he had been willing to kindly let me use it. We had only lit a small log anyway, so it'd not burn for much longer. Half an hour at most.

Still... Windle hadn't been wrong.

She had only written a few words. But they had been heavy ones. Telling. Foreboding.

And I knew they were just the beginning.

I stayed kneeling before the fireplace, and its warm fire, as I wondered how bad it would get. Should I try to become more preemptive in containing the issues? But if I do, where do I begin and how far can I take it before it causes more harm than good?

Did I need to go kill Bray too? What of the other monarchs I've left alive? There were a handful, and some of them like my tortoise friend, were so dangerous that killing them would cause massive damage to the natural world. Plus what if doing so was wrong? Most monarchs could get affected by a god's power, but only the ones who created them could actually influence them and...

"Oh shit," I whispered as I realized something terrifying.

"Hm? Vim?" Windle sounded suddenly alarmed. He spoke so loud I knew others had likely heard him, but for a tiny moment I ignored him as I sorted through what I had just realized.

Who had made the bears? The shadow bear, the original one? The monarch...? Which god had it been...?

I couldn't remember.

But... that would explain the descendants going weird...

The god, who had made them or at least their ancestors, was active again. Doing... whatever, wherever, and thus had inadvertently disturbed them.

"Vim...? What's wrong? Should you not have burnt it after all?" Windle asked, and I turned a bit and realized he had stood from his desk. He was now standing nearby, giving me a worried look.

"No... I just realized something that I should have immediately, before this. I wonder if I'm getting stupid?" I wondered as I stood up.

"Hard to know unless you tell me what it is you should have realized," Windle said with a faint smile. He was obviously still unsure if he should be concerned or not yet.

The man had gotten a lot better over the years, but he was still a coward. Deep down, at least.

Tapping my thigh with a hard fist, I frowned as I debated killing the cubs.

Lilly and her family had modified the barn, one they rarely if ever used, for the cubs. They were willing, and wanted, to try to raise at least one in hopes of keeping the darkness around their home... The entire reason I had brought them back was for that hope. To keep the darkness at bay, and ensure the longevity and safety of the owls... and the newer members of their parliament. But...

If the god which created their ancestor did indeed still exist, and thus was the reason their mother had acted out, then there was more to consider.

Like their mother, particularly the one that made Renn and Sap tingle, would also be in danger of being afflicted by the mana coming from said god. Which meant the already dangerous creatures, what with their sharp claws and great size, would become even more dangerous by even further irrational behavior.

That being said, there was a positive to this scenario. Even if the god which had made their bloodline was indeed still alive.

"What's he brooding about now?"

I turned and frowned at Lilly who had just stepped into the room. "You heard your husband's worry but Renn didn't?" I asked. Windle had been a bit loud earlier, so I had expected someone to show up. I felt her below, not far from me, so she should have heard it too. Especially since her hearing was getting so bloody acute.

"Renn's in the barn, Vim. With everyone else," Lilly said with a chuckle as she stepped deeper into the office.

"Root too...?" I asked carefully.

Lilly nodded. "I've made it clear they're not to let her too close to them. She'll be fine."

My frown deepened at that as Windle coughed. "Maybe we shouldn't risk such a thing, anyway, Lilly? It won't be long now until our adorable little bird begins to hop around. Last thing we need is for her to feel comfortable sneaking off into such danger behind our wings," Windle warned.

"For once I agree," I said as I stepped away from the fireplace and over to the nearby window. Windle's office didn't overlook the barn, but it did overlook the rest of the area. I spent a moment to make sure no one, and nothing, was out there... and was glad to see the wall of darkness still beyond the pasture. It looked fine still.

If it did dissipate with the bear's death, it won't take long to start seeing signs. The sunlight would start to tear into the darkness, thinning it like old cloth. At the moment though I saw no sign of such a thing.

"A few scars wouldn't hurt her, Windle," Lilly said with a chuckle.

"Rather, worse yet, I'd worry about the bears imprinting on her or something," I added.

The two owls were quiet for a moment as I watched a small squirrel run across the yard and towards the tree. There weren't many creatures here, but they did show up occasionally. Their increased presence, if they started becoming more common, would be another sign to look for concerning the darkness.

"Do bears imprint? Birds do, but bears?" Lilly asked her husband.

"No. But... they're not normal bears," Windle said simply.

"No matter. Take care to be mindful of them, if at any point you feel they're acting odd I suggest putting them down," I said, choosing to ignore that my light joke had been completely misunderstood.

"Their whole existence is odd, Vim. But yes, we will be mindful," Lilly said.

Hmph.

"If anything it has given everyone something to focus on. Crown hasn't been out of the house this much since she's arrived," Windle commented.

Lilly nodded, rather briskly. "Yes. I'm thankful for that, especially since it seems Vim is stealing Renn from us," she said.

I frowned at that. "I'd leave her if I could..." I said, trying to defend myself.

"And risk who knows what? Please, Vim," Windle said.

I sighed. "If people weren't so willing to break the natural order of the world I'd not need help in dealing with such things, so blame those like Light not me," I said.

The two obviously didn't seem to agree. But that was fine; it had been a sad excuse even to my ears.

"Do you mind if we ask of that, Vim...? Since you so willingly brought it up?" Windle then asked, a tad bravely.

"Hm... I'd like to say no, but go ahead. Maybe I can at least answer a bit for you," I said. I did owe them that much, I suppose.

Plus it'd be good practice. Since I knew Renn would likely try to ask a lot of questions too once we left and headed south, as to confront Tor and handle his supposed betrayal.

Windle glanced at his wife and as if for support he waited until she nodded at him before looking back my way. "A monarch hasn't betrayed us in how long...?" he asked.

"The last one had been Tipp. If you can classify that as a betrayal," I said. That had not been a true betrayal in my opinion. They had simply been forced to make a decision, one that had resulted in me being forced to make one myself. Faulting them for choosing their own children over strangers was not something I could genuinely do, even if I had been the one to punish them in the end.

Windle nodded. "And before him... who?"

I frowned as I glanced at Lilly, and didn't like how I could see on her expression that she knew where her husband was going. Because I wasn't sure myself. Was he trying to say how rare it was...? If so that was stupid, because it wasn't rare at all.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

There was a reason I had slaughtered them back then. Without hesitation. "Well... Before Tipp there had been a couple that had been to be slain back before the wars started," I said.

Windle nodded once more. "And what happened to each location those monarchs guarded? After their deaths?"

Oh. Right. "Well..." I sighed as I nodded. "Only a few still exist," I admitted. Of all locations guarded by monarchs, only six still existed. Tor's location was one of them, and the Keep was another.

"Stop beating around the bush, Windle," Lilly said.

The tall owl's eyes narrowed. "I just worry... Tor's location has been a safe-haven for a long time. There are hundreds of people there," he said.

"And I'm sure Light has taken this all into account. Her sending me such a message is rather blatant, and as such I'm sure she has already gone into motion to ensure such issues are promptly handled," I said.

"Or they're already dead," Lilly said simply.

Windle's already narrowed eyes closed further, almost shutting close completely, but he said nothing. He had not wanted that to be said aloud.

"I had been told recently that they had been planning to send quite a few of the returning members there. I find it hard to believe that Light would..." I stopped talking as Lilly started to chuckle, and Windle sighed and shook his head at me. "At least let me pretend to believe in those who lead us, damn it," I complained.

Lilly's chuckling turned into actual laughter as Windle sighed and stepped away. He went over to the fireplace, bent down and went to moving the little bit of the firewood that was nearly about to burn out. He wasn't messing with it as to give the fire new life, but instead making sure the fire died down properly.

Had they just given up on me? Seemed like it.

"You two act as if I was in support of giving monarchs such responsibilities..." I said as I debated sitting down or going downstairs to find Renn. If I was going to be looked at with eyes of disappointment then I at least wanted those eyes to be Renn's, so at least I could enjoy something about it.

"May I ask why you haven't left already, Vim? Typically in these scenarios you run off before anyone can even blink," Lilly then asked.

"I firmly believe nothing has happened yet. Light's letter would have not been phrased to imply it was to happen, otherwise," I said.

"So...? That's still not a good reason," Lilly argued.

Well... "I do actually plan to leave shortly. I figured we'd leave after dinner," I said. It was almost that time, and I was sure Renn would enjoy it if we waited at least until after that.

Lilly sighed at me. "Still aren't answering the question..." she mumbled as she turned to watch her husband step away from the fireplace and over to his desk.

What...? I wanted to make sure they were, and would be, fine. I wanted to make sure there was no other factor at play here, and that the shadow bear cubs would be something they could actually handle. I had originally planned to leave shortly after killing the shadow bear, the mother, but after finding the cubs that plan had changed a little. But I knew if I said that was the real reason, all of them would be upset with me. Even Renn, who would find my concern for Lilly and her family lovely, would be upset with me for favoring them over others.

And they were right to think such a thing. As Windle had said, a lot of people lived under Tor's watchful eye. Two hundred and some, including humans. Maybe more by now, if they'd already sent those from the other continent their way. That was a lot of souls to compare a handful with. Many would argue the scales were not balanced between them at all.

Yet still... that wasn't all they were asking, was it?

Studying Lilly and Windle, and the way the former was gazing at the one now busying himself with some papers at his desk, I wondered what mother would say here.

Would she tell them not to worry? Or would she warn them of the threats beyond their understanding, even if they couldn't comprehend them or do anything about them? Would she lie as to keep the peace or would she just... tell them the truth?

It was the right thing to do... but if I told them, what stopped me from telling everyone else?

What of Renn...? I kept secrets from her, and I had even promised to stop doing so. It was such a struggle because each time I felt ready and able to tell her about something, another event occurred that made me even more cautious...

And if I started to just... talk about all the stuff happening, open and freely, then didn't I also need to start addressing and talking about prophecies? After all they were entwined. If I could talk of one side of the coin, then talking about the other side was to be expected.

"Well..." Lilly sighed softly, and it seemed she had abandoned the idea of trying to get me to say anything more. I had been quiet too long. "Fly doesn't seem to like them much," she said, changing topics.

Feeling useless, I nodded. "They remind her of her old masters, likely," I said.

"Can't blame the bird, it's best to have someone leery of them also," Windle added.

Lilly nodded. "Especially since the others find them so adorable. I'm surprised even Seed and Trunk find them interesting," Lilly said.

"They're gentle creatures, Lilly," Windle pointed out.

"Gentle...? They're babies yet already able to gut one of us with a single swipe if they wanted to," Lilly said.

Windle sighed at her. "I meant our owlets, honey."

Lilly blinked and frowned. "Ah..." she nodded after a moment, realizing what he had meant. He was just saying that her... gentler children, the ones more like him than her, were the kind to take preference to young babies. Even ones that would grow into a dangerous creature.

"Let us just be thankful. Not only do they give us a chance to keep that which guards our home, but they might have also given us a chance to mend our children's angst," Windle added.

Angst? That was one way to put it, I guess.

"Personally I think we should kill the two that have no divinity," I said, again.

And again the two owls glanced at each other because of my comments. I waited a moment as the two silently spoke to one another with their eyes, then they both looked back at me. "Why is it you can now so openly share such opinions but won't speak of other, lesser, things?" Lilly asked me.

I shifted since I had just gotten called out rather blatantly. "I'll have you know I've been trying my best here..."

"In a sense he has been. We just don't feel he's doing so quickly enough," Windle said.

"I'd blame Renn if not for the fact she's been complaining over it too," Lilly said.

Oh...? It hurt a little to hear that she's been actively, and vocally, doing so. Even if just to those she truly trusted like Lilly and Merit.

I gestured lightly at Lilly, wanting to sigh as I did. I kept it in though. "I suppose one could argue keeping the ones without divinity alive is also a positive. Since they might one day give birth to ones that do," I said.

Lilly studied me for a moment and then sighed for me, shaking her head at me. "He missed the point entirely, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," Windle said as he went to writing on a fresh piece of parchment.

No. I hadn't. I just didn't want to let them slide me back into the conversation about things I didn't want to talk about.

"Everyone sure has gotten real snippy lately," I said with a huff.

"Says you, Vim?" Renn said as she stepped into the room. She was carrying Root, who made happy giggles at the sight of her mother.

Lilly broke out into a lovely smile as she stepped over to take Root from Renn. I watched intently for a moment as my wife handed off the child to its actual mother, and wondered why Renn always looked as if she was about to weep as she did so. I'd think it was the simple fact that she loved Root that much but I had seen similar expressions on her face when she had handled other babies, even the human ones in Lumen.

She hated giving them up, even if they weren't hers. It made me wonder what she'd be like once she had her own. Would she not allow others to hold them? Some women were like that, especially predators... but it was hard to imagine Renn being amongst that small crowd.

Usually mothers longed for someone to take up the burden, even if for a short while. It was an odd trait.

Renn's sad, almost pained smile, turned back into a normal and happy one as Root went to making noise at her mother. Renn gently patted one of Root's wings as she stepped away from Lilly and over to me, and that happy smile finally came my way. "Don't feel bad, you two. The reason he's not talking about

anything too dire is not because he doesn't trust you but rather the opposite. He's scared of relying on you too deeply," Renn said, all the while grinning at me.

My eyes narrowed at her as I shifted ever so slightly. She looked as if she was teasing me... but anyone could have heard the truth of her tone.

She had been absolutely serious.

Lilly and Windle didn't say anything as they stared at us, and I tried to ignore their big eyes that dug into me. Tried and failed.

"We're going to need to talk about you listening in to all my private conversations," I said carefully.

Renn's grin turned into a wry smirk as her ears fluttered. "You're never going to be able to have them again, Vim!" she said happily.

No. Likely not. Her hearing was getting better. Quickly too. It was... strange. Hearts did amplify ones senses, but usually the increase in ability didn't keep happening after a certain point. The hearts she's absorbed have all settled, long settled even, so... why was she still getting stronger?

"He says that, but he had been expecting you to hear him and show up earlier," Windle said as he returned to writing whatever it was he was focused on.

Renn giggled at that and nodded in a way that told me she had indeed heard it earlier. My comment about Lilly showing up and not her from earlier.

Really... what was I going to do with her? I honestly didn't mind her listening into things I said, but such good hearing was eventually going to cause her problems.

Sometimes it was better to not hear certain things. And I didn't just mean the whispers people exchanged in private.

After a long moment... I realized Renn was still grinning at me, and yet hadn't said anything more.

I blinked at her, and got an ear flutter back.

Oh.

Great.

I coughed and glanced away from her eyes full of expectations, and I looked to Lilly first. She was smiling at me as Root grabbed at her ear, tugging on it as if annoyed her mother was ignoring her. Windle was still writing, but occasionally his eyes glanced upward at me and away from his pen.

Right...

"Now it's just awkward," I said stiffly.

"Even better, then. Go on, say it," Renn urged.

"Hm?" Lilly tilted her head at me, and Windle stopped writing... as Root noticed the odd air in the room and glanced around. She looked annoyed, likely because she had realized something indeed was keeping her mother's attention away from her. Hopefully she didn't realize it was me.

"Do I have to say the obvious...?" I asked Renn.

She nodded gently.

"They surely know," I said.

"Undoubtedly, but still," she furthered.

I glared at her for a moment... and then thought of my mother. She would likely have said something similar. That was annoying, how was Renn so... well...

Herself?

Taking in a small breath, I sighed as I looked to Lilly first... and then Windle.

Then, after a small moment of enduring all of their odd looks I went ahead and said it.

I told them how much I cherished them. And the real reason I had wanted to linger a bit longer. To make sure they were fine. Basically admitting that I had broken one of not just the Society's rules, but one of my own. That I had favored them over others.

And like I had expected, they had not been happy with me.

But still it felt good to say it.

Chapter 626 Renn – To Leave The Owl's Nest

I honestly didn't want to leave.

Not only did I like it here, I also wanted to return to SilverCreek. Vim had said new members had shown up, and I wanted to go meet those I'd soon be calling family members. To further settle and build our new home.

But I knew Vim wanted me to come south with him for more than just personal reasons.

Walking downstairs, I hummed softly as I wondered what to expect of this upcoming trip. We were to head to Tor, and... what? Kill him? Knowing Vim that was exactly what we were going to do. But it felt... well...

He had hesitated to kill the shadow bear, because it would then endanger Lilly and her family. Since the darkness that surrounded their home, the dark forest, would then disappear. Yet he was now willing to just go kill a monarch that did the same thing for others, and not just a few either? Hundreds of people relied on Tor for safety in their valley. Without him their village would get found rather easily, so I'd been confidently told.

Though maybe he had a plan. Or maybe Light did...

"Renn."

I paused and glanced to my left, then glanced backward and found... "Crown?" I greeted the thin owl who was peeking out at me from behind a doorframe. Was that her bedroom? I had been told it was on this floor but had not ever seen it.

Walking over to her since she didn't seem like she was going to leave the safety of her door, I smiled gently at her and nodded.

"Leaving already?" she asked, glancing at my shoulder. I had my bag, the small one I'd brought with me and Vim's spear attached to a small wrap upon it.

I nodded as I rolled a shoulder and shuffled the bag a bit. "Yep. Vim's waiting for me below," I said. Dinner was over, and I'd already said my goodbyes to everyone... even Crown, so it was odd for her to be asking such a thing.

"Hm... do you have a tiny moment?" she asked.

"Sure?"

She nodded then stepped back. As she did she pushed open the door a bit more, and sure enough I was able to see her bedroom. Like most of the owl's bedrooms, it was large and looked comfy... but also a bit plain. Though I noticed the bed, her bed, in the corner was messy. She... had pillows. And only pillows, it almost looked like. Did she not have any blankets at all? It looked like she had dozens of pillows of varying sizes, but not a single real blanket upon her bed. Maybe it was hidden beneath the pile of pillows...?

"I know you're going to do something important, but would you do me a favor if you can?" Crown asked as she stepped over towards one of the larger windows in the room. Beneath it was a desk, one that looked clean and almost untouched but she grabbed an obvious letter off it all the same.

"Of course, Crown. Who would you like me to give it to?" I asked as she walked back over to the door and me. I had not intruded into her room, since I didn't want to nick the top of her doorframe with Vim's spear. It wrapped in cloth up top on the spear tip, but it'd cut right through it and the wood if I accidentally walked in and hit the doorframe with it.

She smiled a little sheepishly as she held it out to me. "Actually... it's for Vim."

Huh...? "Vim...?" I asked carefully as I glanced down to the letter she was offering me. It was the same darker brown color as the other owl letters, and it looked like it had a few pages within it.

"It's a request for him. If you two get the time, of course," she said, adding the last bit quickly.

Slowly reaching out to take the letter, I frowned softly as I nodded. "Of course... I uh... I'll make sure he gets it," I said. Maybe she didn't want me to know what the request was, thus it being given in a letter. If so, maybe I shouldn't pry.

Crown giggled at me, which made my ears flutter a little. She sounded just like her sisters and mother when she giggled, but it also sounded a faint weaker... as if she was about to cough or something afterward. It worried me hearing such undertones in what should otherwise be a beautiful sound. "It's not that dire, Renn. If you two get too busy then don't worry about it."

I nodded softly but decided to fulfill her request no matter how busy Vim and I got. "All the same. Is there anything else I can do for you while I'm down south? Or get for you?" I asked.

Crown frowned for a moment. "I left a few things when coming here, but I plan to have Trunk and Seed pick them up and deliver them back to me since they're heading that way once they leave," she said as she thought about it.

Oh...? I hadn't heard of anyone planning to leave anytime soon. I wonder when they plan to do so, after we leave maybe? Lilly and Windle had been hoping they'd stick around a bit longer...

"We might end up heading to Telmik," I said, giving her a chance to just have us pick up whatever she wanted from her old home. I wasn't even sure what town it was in, but I knew it was north of Telmik and not far from the direct route from Telmik to SilverCreek.

"Hm... it's fine. Actually, instead of that can I ask something else?" Crown quickly switched topics.

I nodded, a tad happy to get a request from her. I know I had just gotten one, indirectly for Vim, but it seemed this one would be one I could actually handle.

"You left a saint, right? At this silver place?" Crown asked.

I frowned as I went to put her letter into one of the monarch pouches on my waist. "Yes. Liora. She's a sweet girl, really mature for her age," I said. I had expected her to get upset with my leaving the other day but she had only huffed and said she'd see me later.

Wonder if she had known this would happen...?

Crown hummed at that as I finished putting her letter away, and I noticed it had been an odd hum. Even for her. "Do you... know her? Or something?" I asked. She looked like she was questioning something in her head.

"Huh...? No. No... but I once knew a saint, who I... well..." Crown went quiet as I patiently waited to hear the rest. She had known a saint? I wonder who? Celine maybe? Light? "When I first started working amongst the church, a long time ago... a saint had been born in the orphanage I had been working at," she then said.

I blinked and nodded, surprised to hear this. That meant it had been a human one, like Liora. I wonder who it had been?

"I did as we're told to. To alert the church... the Singing Sisters. And not long afterward they eventually came and got her. As they have many of the children I've recommended to be members," Crown said.

Oh my...? "Right..." I nodded carefully. I knew we, or rather the Society and Church, basically ran the orphanages for that purpose. To find humans we could trust and utilize in such a way, but hearing someone talk about them in this way was kind of awkward. It was almost like we were talking not about people but objects, or animals, to be raised and nurtured like one would cattle. It felt weird, especially since I knew Crown wasn't like that. She was more like her other siblings, Trunk, Seed and Bark, who took more after Windle and were more human in emotions and philosophies than not. They weren't capable of such cruelty as to see human children as cattle.

"I... regret that. Many of the children I've sent into the Society have expressed their thanks over the years, either in person or letters, but... other than only a couple I've never gotten to see any of them ever again," Crown said.

"Do you... worry she had not been thankful or happy, or something?" I asked. This topic started over Liora hadn't it? Was she worried Liora would be sent to the same fate or something?

Crown slowly nodded, and did so in a way that made me again notice how thin she was. Her collarbones looked a tad odd as she moved her head, almost as if they were out of place. Hopefully she regained some weight soon. "I've always wondered, is all. As I said, many have reached out to me throughout the years. Yet she never had. I never heard from her again after the Singing Sisters took her away, and... I've always wondered why," Crown said gently.

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Oh boy... "I see... if you're worried Liora will end up the same way, there's no need to. Vim wants her with us up here, and he's lately become very possessive when he wants to be," I said.

Crown smirked at that, since she knew what I was hinting at. "I've heard. And I'm glad to hear it, but... all the same. Mother said you needed help... and now you and Vim are heading south? So you need help even more, right? Would you be okay with me going there, then? I can help Randle and the rest too; I've worked with him before. So I can keep an eye on this Liora for you while I do so," Crown offered... and seemed to be very serious as she did so.

It took all I had to not just leap forward and wrap her in a hug, as I nearly giggled with glee while nodding happily. "Of course! We honestly really could use the help, you know? Vim was even worrying about it, because we actually have a few kids that need some schooling and the older lady who was doing it died..." I said quickly, itching to toss aside my bag and Vim's spear as to wrap her in a hug.

Crown sheepishly nodded and smiled. "I see... then I'll head that way when I can. I don't know if you've noticed, but mother's become very protective of me lately. It might take a bit for me to convince her to let me leave the nest again," Crown said.

Oh gosh! "I'm sure she'll listen! If not I'll just come kidnap you later!" I said happily. How little she knew! Lilly had been hoping that we'd be able to convince her to move to SilverCreek with us, in hopes of getting her active again. Upon Vim deciding we would be heading south Lilly had been really worried that such a plan would go south alongside us, and ruin it completely. Turns out that worry had been for nothing!

"Good... thank you, though uh... maybe don't sound so serious about that. I can actually see you trying it," Crown said with a tiny laugh.

"Because I would, of course," I said proudly.

She laughed a bit more as I heard some voices down below. One particular, Vim's, told me I probably was about to get yelled at.

"Ah... he sounds annoyed. He's ready to go, Crown," I said as I heard Vim complain to... who I think was Fly? Why was he complaining to Fly?

Crown smiled as she nodded. "Yes, he's the one who taught mother urgency. Once they decide to go they go even if it means leaving us behind. So I know how it is," she said.

I wanted to groan at that. I didn't want to leave now, even more than before, now that something so interesting was happening...

"Can I uh... give you a hug, Renn?"

My mind went a tad blank as I stood up a bit straighter and stiffly nodded. "Of course...!" I said, and nearly flinched when my voice cracked and sounded all odd as I did.

Crown laughed at me as she stepped through the doorway and gave me a hug. I returned it, carefully, and tried not to notice how... cold and small she was.

She was taller than me. Like all the other owls. Yet felt so thin and light that she'd snap at a mere touch. It made my heart twist and heart.

Hopefully this recent excitement, and her desire to head to SilverCreek, will help her get better faster.

"Mhm... thanks," Crown didn't hug me long and separated after a moment, even though I had wanted to hold onto her. I sighed at her as I nodded and stepped back, as to glance her up and down.

"If you head to SilverCreek before I get back, your father has some letters we gave him," I told her.

She nodded and smiled. "I'll make sure to take them once I get permission to go, it might uh... take a bit, Renn," Crown said sheepishly.

"It's fine! Like I said, I'll kidnap you if I have to! I'll make Vim make a really nice sack to carry you off in and everything!" I teased as I stepped away.

Crown laughed, a bit shyly, as she and I waved at each other and I left. I hurried down the hallway, since if I didn't force my feet to take me away I'd never leave. I suddenly felt protective of the weakly owl, which was weird. It wasn't as if she was young, she was just...

Sad. Hurt. And I felt as if I was now abandoning her when she needed someone, anyone, the most.

She wasn't the only one either. I was being forced to leave my new home. My family. My friends. And on top of it, so many interesting things!

Rivonne, those bears, all the new faces and friends, and even Vim! He's been getting so odd lately, and it's been so fascinating to watch...! But now? Now we were heading away from all these interesting things, and to do something that will make me sad and Vim grouch too.

Tor was going to have to answer for this...

Heading downstairs, I slowed as I neared the front door and found exactly who I had thought I had heard. Vim and Fly.

The young robin had her hands on her hips, and was sighing at Vim as I walked up... which made me both happy, and upset.

See? This was so fun and interesting! Why were we leaving this?

"What'd he do this time?" I asked Fly.

The young bird sighed at him, flamboyantly shaking her head to such a degree her feathers danced. "He's being a stick in the mud!" she said.

Glancing at Vim, and the way he gently smiled and glanced back at me, I knew this was likely nothing too serious... yet all the same I took her side anyway, as if it were. "Why are you being so rude, Vim? Really? Look at her, she deserves whatever it is she wants!" I said as I stepped over to Fly as to wrap her in a small hug. I liked hugging her because her feathers made her feel soft.

She allowed me to hug her, but didn't reciprocate. Instead she turned to glare up at Vim defiantly, as if to showcase my hug as proof of my words. To further enforce it I even went to rubbing my face against her head, as to breathe in her scent for the road. She smelled like Lilly now, though hadn't before she had moved here.

"I'd usually agree, Renn... but your little friend wants something a tad odd," he said.

Oh? I glanced up from the feathers of happiness and frowned at him. His tone had been a bit off; maybe this was more serious than I thought? "What do you want, Fly?" I asked.

Fly huffed, and her feathers puffed up as she did. "I want a husband too," she said.

Oh...

Unsure if I should giggle or flinch, I took a small moment to glance up at Vim and found his calm face relieving. Moments like this his stoic calmness was invaluable. "Jealous of me are you?" I asked, teasing the girl.

"I mean... not really? He has no feathers," Fly said with a small point at Vim.

I couldn't help it, I laughed.

Vim smirked too as I giggled and squeezed Fly some more, causing her to groan at me as I likely ruffled feathers. "You're so adorable," I said.

"Vim said earlier that others like me had shown up! With feathers and wings! I want one of them!" Fly said as I hugged her, to the point of even lifting her off the ground as I did. She allowed it, and didn't seem too bothered, but she did seem like she wanted me to focus on the topic at hand instead.

"Oh...? Really?" I asked, a tad shocked to hear so. I had honestly not talked much with Vim about those who had come from the other continent, other than those like Fressi, the young duck who was related to Merit's friend Nasba.

He nodded with a small frown. "There were a few yes..."

I see... I glanced down at Fly as I lowered her back to the ground. "Well, I'll be heading that way... want me to take a look at them all for you?" I asked her.

"Would you!?" Fly spun around, happily and excitedly at my offer.

I nodded and smiled. "Of course I will. Any preferences? Do they have to be robins too?" I asked.

"No! I just want feathers!"

My smile faltered a little as I wondered how serious that statement was. Was that really all she cared about...? Maybe I should be worried... "Well, I'll take a look and let you know when I get back, okay?" I offered.

"Awesome! Thanks Renn! I knew I should have just asked you first!" Fly said as she stepped forward and gave me a quick hug, and then afterward she spun around to stick a tongue out at Vim and then ran deeper into the house.

Vim sighed as we watched her round a corner. "She's still young, Renn. She needs more time," he said.

"I know? But there's no harm in starting the process is there?" I asked. It's not like we couldn't slowly over years introduce her to others, until she found someone she liked. By then she'd not be so young, right?

"If you say so..." he mumbled.

"To be honest I was kind of hoping she'd pick one of Lilly's boys," I said softly. Vim and I were seemingly alone here near the door, but I knew just like how I could hear from across the home so could others. Or well, Lilly and Sap could. I wasn't sure if any of the other owls had any better hearing, even Branches who was mentally like his mother was a tad... different.

"Not possible anymore, Renn," Vim said simply.

"Because of her feather thing, yes, I know," I said.

He frowned at me and shook his head. "She's seen as an owl now. A sibling. They'll not court or mate her now."

Oh... right... Lilly had once mentioned, before officially adopting the young robin, that she had kind of hoped one of her sons might take an interest in her but now that did indeed seem to be no longer a thought. Maybe Vim was right, and it was because they genuinely all saw her as a family member now?

Still...

I chuckled at him and reached over to gently pat him on the arm. "At least she's not like Angie, you know?"

He smiled at that. "I like Angie's perspective. I hope Nory ends up like her," he said.

It bothered me that I couldn't tell if I agreed with him or not.

A lot.

Chapter 627 Vim – Again Southward, And To DillyDally While So

It's been a long time since this has happened.

"It's so sweet, Vim. To the point I almost didn't come with you," Renn said, continuing on with her rambling about how much she had enjoyed her time at both the Owl's Nest and SilverCreek.

She was not very happy she had been forced to leave them. To her, those people, was everything right now... to the point she had been willing to let me leave alone, again, as to continue dedicating her time and attention to those she perceived as family.

I was of course not so petty as to get offended over such a thing, and in fact vastly enjoyed the way Renn had found her own place in the world... and I was even more glad that the place she had found was a happy one. I was very glad she had found not just friends, but true friends. Family members. People she could rely on, and people she wanted to help and be with. Such a thing was... rare. Rarer than most people knew.

"I promise to handle this quick," I vowed, again. This was likely the tenth or so time I'd promised such a thing.

My wife sighed as she nodded as we neared a bridge. A smaller, wooden one, that looked rickety. We were walking along a small river, heading south to Tor's Village, and were only half a day from the Owl's Nest. We were walking quickly, but not so fast that it would draw attention. I planned to pick up our pace later, but...

"Think we should build a bridge over our river too, Vim?" Renn asked as we stepped onto the older bridge. I made sure to not break it as we crossed.

"Technically it's not our river, we simply own the land along it," I reminded her.

"Hm... is there a stream or river on the land you bought before we left?" she asked.

"There's a small stream, yes." And an underground spring, maybe even an aquifer, from what I could tell. I planned to use it for our water source, even for the buildings near the river once I connected them.

Renn slowed a bit, to pause in the middle of the bridge as to look over its railing and to the small river beneath it. I studied her who studied the water, and found myself...

At ease.

"Think this water came from our river?" she asked.

Our river again. She really has taken ownership of that area, hasn't she? "It's... not impossible. The river along SilverCreek bends and eventually connects to the one that runs through Ruvindale, and as you know those feed and are fed by the lake it's on which in turn feed all these other rivers too," I said.

Renn hummed as she continued studying the slow moving river, and then turned to tilt her head at me. "Are all rivers connected?" she asked.

"No... at least in the way you're asking. All water is connected in one form or another, endlessly cycling. But most rivers either flow to the ocean or into lakes, or end up in drainage areas."

She studied me for a moment, and then glanced back at the river. "Could you make a river? If you had to?"

Oh...? "Yes. It's actually not that hard, just time consuming. Lakes too," I said. I once made a massive dam system for the nation I'd once built, one that had encompassed thousands of miles.

"Lakes...? A river I'd understand, since you can just dig one, but a lake too?" Renn asked, smirking at me in a way that told me she'd demand I show her proof if we had the time.

"If I can just dig a trench and make a river, why can't I then also dig a big hole to make a lake?" I asked.

She blinked, and I watched her smirk worm into a weird frown as she thought about that. "I... suppose," she admitted reluctantly.

Smiling at her, and the obvious annoyance on her expression over having not realized the obvious from her own statement, I wondered if I should tease her or not.

Was she done complaining about our having left the north...? Although she had been doing so for several hours now, I had been enjoying it. Just as I was enjoying this moment alone with her.

It's been... a long time since we had been alone like this. Traveling. On the road. Without anyone else with us.

Almost too long.

"You've... said before you like the sea. Prefer it, even," she then said as she stared out at the river.

"Hm?" I did, in a way, what was she going to ask now? If I could make a whole sea, maybe?

"Do you... not like our new home, then?"

Oh. "I like the sea because I like the peace I find upon it, or in it. But that peace is a lonely existence. I'd not trade our home, wherever and whatever it may end up being, for all the seas in the world," I said.

I heard Renn's ears shuffle under her hat as she glanced from the corner of her eyes. She wasn't looking at me as if she didn't believe me, but instead as if she was unsure of what to think of my statement. She was likely trying to tell if I was teasing her or not.

But I wasn't. I did indeed love the sea... far greater than she likely knew. But what I loved more was her. And the world she was slowly creating around her. I might not feel as attached to those she was circling herself with, but I was attached to the relationships she was building with the ones in question.

I loved her love for them, and as such wanted to be near it. As to watch it grow and enjoy it... and to, hopefully, one day either learn how to do the same... or at the very least help raise our children to also enjoy it.

"Basically you're happy anywhere I am," she said, understanding my meaning.

I frowned but nodded. "I do enjoy the deep forests of the north, Renn. But yes, to sum it up I'm happy to go and be anywhere you are, for so long as you are too," I said.

She smiled but sighed at me, and went to leaning on the railing of the rundown bridge. I kept an eye on her, and the wooden rail she now rested on, to make sure it didn't break and cause her to fall in. It looked like it would snap if she wasn't careful.

"Did you want me to say something else...? I'm being truthful you know?" I asked.

"Yes, I can tell. But honestly... I want you to start being a tad more selfish. Why do you think I forced you to openly admit to Lilly and Windle why you had kept us there for longer than you wanted? It wasn't just because it needed to be said, you know," she said.

"I would have preferred that topic to not have been brought up again..." I grumbled.

She chuckled at that. "Why not? There's nothing wrong with you admitting you love someone, Vim."

Yes there was. "If others in the Society heard such a thing..."

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"You plan to step down this winter, so what does it matter?"

"I've not done so yet," I said defensively.

Renn sighed at me and turned away. She returned to walking, and as such I followed her off the bridge and back onto the dirt path. "Will you not tell our daughter you love her? That you cherish her?"

"Of..." I hesitated a moment, and then frowned as I realized what she was actually trying to say. "I tell everyone I love you, Renn. I introduce you as my wife all the time," I said, challenging what she was trying to say.

I heard her ears shuffle under her hat again. "You do... but..."

"No butts," I said.

"Why do you always say that in a weird way while looking at my behind?" she asked as she turned around, yet kept walking. She walked backwards while grabbing her own rear, as if to protect it from me.

"You've noticed...? Most don't," I said with a smirk. It was a silly, stupid, little play of words I always used in such scenarios.

"I notice far more than you think," she said with a raise of her head, as if to challenge me back.

"Of that I've no doubt. And it's not just my rules with the Society, Renn... that keeps me from admitting aloud I favor one member over others. It's also my own personal beliefs, my own ethos... it's also something I was taught," I said carefully.

Renn stopped holding her butt as she slowed and turned back around, as to walk beside me instead of in front of me. "Taught...? By your parents you mean?"

I nodded.

"Your parents taught you not to favor anyone...? Is that why you don't ever let yourself get close with anyone?"

"Well... kind of. Mother taught me to always treat everyone equally. That I was too..." I hesitated, but only for a moment as I stopped my own self from stopping here and now. "She taught me to believe that I was, and am, too special to give such favoritism. That if I was picky in my favor, it would be an insult to not just those I ignored and neglected but also my parents. Basically it's a form of noblesse oblige," I said.

She nodded slowly at me. "You've spoken of that before."

Had I...? Likely. "I'm... human, Renn. I love. I hate. You know that better than anyone. So I can't help it when I do end up wanting to favor certain people more than others... but I'm not supposed to. I love Lilly and her family. I think highly of them. But are they really more important than say... those in Telmik? Or Lumen? Truly?" I asked.

Renn was quiet for many steps before she said anything. "But surely there's nothing wrong with admitting it, Vim...? Even if you make it clear that you can't actually act on it, or at least are not supposed to, can't you still at least let them know that? What's the harm in letting Lilly and the rest know how much you care for them?" she asked.

"I warned you when our relationship began that you'd grow to be upset with my choices, and would have to accept them if you wanted this to work. Well... this is the de-facto moment of it. One day, not if but when, I will sacrifice someone like Lilly... or maybe even she herself, for someone you will hate. Because it is what I was created to do. To not weigh one soul over another without just reason to do so. You can disagree with me on it, and I don't just expect you to... I hope you will, but you and I will have to simply agree to disagree on it," I said calmly.

Renn again went quiet, this time waiting until the path we were on separated from the river. We now headed a bit west, towards the coast. If we followed this path until the end we'd reach Nevi, but I planned to have us step off it and head more south once we reached the next river. The major one in this region, the one that Liora and I had followed up here. "I... would be okay with you sacrificing me, Vim. For others. I'd even be angry with you if one day you didn't. But..." Glancing at her, I found a sad smile as she glanced at me. "I hope one day you break your own rules. At least, when not if, it's our children you do it for."

I gulped at that, since I didn't like how she had said it. Was she... implying something? Did she know something, maybe? A prophecy...?

"I... I hope I do too," I said softly.

Her sad smile turned into a calmer, happier one, as she stepped closer and reached over to grab my hand.

Gently grabbing her hand as she squeezed mine, I took in a deep breath and sighed it out. How had I gone from happily enjoying her complaining over us leaving her new home to this? I now felt tired.

"Okay, next topic. I feel tired now," I said.

Renn giggled at that. "What? I hadn't even started teasing you about it yet!"

"Please..." I groaned and almost shivered at the idea. How was she going to do it? I didn't want to know. "Quick, ask something else. I was able to say something earlier I hadn't wanted to, maybe I'll answer another question too," I offered her an olive branch.

"Oh...!? Oh...! Uh..." she stammered a moment, and then nodded. "Do you actually like my hair like this? Your mother had a lot of hair too, right? With bows and braids?" she asked as she picked up one of the larger ones to show it off to me.

I frowned at her. "I... do?" I said, not sure how to answer her. I would like her even if she was bald, what was she saying?

"Merit said most men don't like it when women remind them of their mothers, though."

Ah. I chuckled at that. "Right. Some don't. My mother did indeed have a lot of hair, which she braided, but it wasn't like yours. Hers was kind of poofy, yours is smooth and gets all wild in a certain way hers never would have done. So I don't have any issue with it in that way, no," I said.

"Hm..." she didn't seem too happy over that, as if she had wanted me to say otherwise. I was going to tease her about it, but before I could she asked another question. "Bird, Rivonne's ancestor. He was your friend, right?"

"Yeah...?"

She squeezed my hand as she looked around, as if to make sure we were alone or something... but we were. Completely. We were over a day from even the nearest human village. "From what I gather though they hadn't really been husband and wife, though, right?"

"I mean... in a certain sense, I suppose..." I said. Bird had loved her, but maybe not in the way that Renn was thinking. "He had been... well, like his moniker. More non-human than not," I explained.

She nodded and smiled. "Knew it! Explains Rivonne's weirdness, I think," she said.

Weirdness...? Had that human been weird? I hadn't noticed. She had seemed like any other human who felt spiritually connected to us, yet also saw us as something special. Such humans were odd but not outright weird. No more weirder than the other religious fanatics at least.

"Would you, or will you, tell Lawrence about her? They're family in a sense, aren't they?" she then asked.

Was... was she just going to ask a bunch of questions like these? I mean they were personal, but not... well... nothing that would be secretive, I guess. I had expected her to ask about the gods, or something... well, something that would make me regret offering the opportunity.

Oh well.

"I don't plan to, no. Lawrence and Bird had not gotten along, Renn. At all. Something similar to you and your siblings, in a way."

She didn't seem to like the sound of that, based off the sad frown she gave me. "I see..."

I nodded. "Not all families are like Lilly's, after all."

She giggled at that. "And they're having problems themselves!"

They were. But I wasn't sure if I really wanted to talk about that right now, since it was something that I'd not allow myself to get too involved with.

Renn stepped closer, bumping into me as she did. I noted she did it on purpose. "You just showed your annoyance on your face, Vim."

"Sorry," I said as I reached up with my free hand to rub my face. Had it been that obvious?

She laughed at me. "You really should start getting used to it, Vim. It won't be long now and we'll all be one big happy family. What are you going to do when our children start growing up with theirs? You might even one day be related to them, you know!"

Oh...? I glanced at Renn and wondered if she was hinting at something I knew of, or was just talking of hopeful hypotheticals. Did she possibly know of Merit's prophecy...? Merit had begged me not to say anything... so I had thought Renn hadn't known yet. "I look forward to your troubled face when your daughter eats one of her so-called friends," I said.

She nearly stumbled, but I held on to her as she went to laughing loudly. "Vim! That was terrible!"

It had been. Maybe. Not really. "To be honest I'm a tad worried over it, what if they end up ugly like me?" Or strong. Too strong. Hopefully they were more normal...

More laughs. "Vim!"

"Or worse what if they're as adorable as you...? How am I going to keep all the riffraff off them?" I asked myself.

She kept on laughing, and they turned into happy giggles. "We can only hope that our children have an easier time of finding partners than us," she said.

"Mhm..." It was here that I wanted to say, again, that we needed to agree to disagree but I let it be.

Renn eventually sighed happily at me, and again stepped closer. This time though she didn't do it as to bump into me but instead to lean against me... as if she needed support just to walk. "I've missed this..." she said softly, with a tone that told me she hadn't really said it to tease me but instead had really meant it.

Slowing a little... as to make this moment last as long as possible, I gave her hand a tiny squeeze. "Me too."

Me too.

Chapter 628 Renn – A Village Within The Valley

Well... it looked fine, I guess...?

"Doesn't look like anything's wrong, Vim," I said as I studied the large village.

We were up on an extruding cliff, overlooking one of the several villages that rested in Tor's Valley. From up here one could see hundreds of buildings of various sizes scattered and bundled between trees or amongst huge swaths of farmland with golden wheat and other foodstuffs, and I could even see distant figures as they walked around and working in the fields.

Our last visit, thanks to Tor's order of letting me in, had given me the opportunity to actually visit the village for once. It took me a moment, but I eventually found the large building where the head of the priestess family lived. The new head priestess, Frerit, the daughter of Silkie who had originally banished

me on the mere sight of me, lived there. She and her family had at first been a tad uneasy around me but had quickly warmed up and welcomed me.

I had expected us to go there, but instead Vim had brought us here up on this mountain. He hadn't said why yet, but I had a good hunch. He had simply wanted to assess the situation. Hard to blame him, really. Though from up here, even though from a great distance, I couldn't see anything... alarming. No fires. No chaos. Just... a normal, seemingly happy, village.

"Looks normal," I said again as I kept on studying the village.

"He's an illusionist Renn," Vim said softly.

Glancing at my husband, and the concerned look on his face... I wondered if I should ask what such a thing actually entailed. It wasn't the first time I'd heard him use such a word before and once he had even somewhat described its meaning... but...

Was he saying that the village we were looking at, with all the people walking around and stuff, was somehow not real...? How was that possible?

Though I suppose Tor did make a moon and even water in that cave, so... maybe it wasn't as strange as I thought.

"Do you uh... see anything? Or notice anything?" I asked him. Not only did the village look fine, it actually looked lovely. We had arrived a few hours after sunrise, and the warm sun was beaming down without a cloud in the sky. Plus there was a slight breeze, so it felt amazing at the moment. If I had called this place my home, right now I'd likely be lying in one of the large open fields and resting under the warm morning sun.

Basically Tor's Village looked peaceful and calm. Nothing at all like a place that had been destroyed, or about to be destroyed, by a rampaging monarch.

"I'm not sure..." Vim whispered.

"Would you, if there was something wrong?" I asked. He said illusions right? How did one tell if that was what we were seeing or not?

He frowned as he kept studying the distant village. "Right now I'd say the fact I can't see or sense anything wrong... makes me assume something is in fact wrong," he said.

"Okay...?" I didn't like the sound of that.

Vim sighed as he crossed his arms and tilted his head, while still studying the village. "Not that it matters. Even if nothing is wrong at the moment, something will go wrong once I confront him. Instead of saying something is wrong, I should say that something is inevitably going to go wrong either way," he said.

"Can we... not avoid that?" I asked. On the way here we had talked in length about this, and he had said his expectations were that Tor had simply acted out over the lack of us giving him his ancestor's heart. So he was hoping that this could be handled, or at least dealt with properly, by simply handing it over.

Though he had also said the act of us giving him his ancestor's heart could also be the cause... what with it then causing Tor to go insane, or something.

Made me feel like we were stuck between a rock and a hard place. Or rather, the way I felt when I couldn't decide if I should sleep with Vim or one of my dear friends instead.

"We're going to do what we have to. And that is to ensure that Tor is not a threat," Vim said, saying the same thing he'd been saying the whole way here.

And how exactly he planned to do that he hadn't been willing to share, but I knew better than to ask. I'd asked probably twenty times since leaving Lilly's home, and he's yet to answer. Though I knew better than to think he didn't have an answer to such a question, I was honestly starting to worry over the one he was inevitably going to show me.

Hopefully it wasn't the same kind of answer he used for similar situations, such as for Tim or the gods he encountered.

"So... what's the plan, then?" I asked carefully.

Vim nodded as he gestured down the cliff. "I'll head down first. Until I verify there's nothing amiss, I'm not going to endanger you. Once I'm sure all is safe... or at least, safe enough that I can ensure I can protect you, I'll light a torch and swing it until you notice. It's hard to make out from here, but you can actually see Tor's cave there," Vim pointed and I stepped closer as to follow it... and sure enough I found where he was pointing. I couldn't see the actual cavern entrance from here, but I could see the path that led up to it. It was a larger dirt path with a bunch of little lanterns running along it.

"Then what? I just... come down and join you?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. Nice and easy."

Easy for you to say... "What if you uh..."

"Have to kill him? Then once I'm done I'll light a torch and alert you all the same, that means it'll be safe then," he said.

Gosh that wasn't what I meant... "Okay... I guess," I mumbled, not sure what else to say or do.

I mean, I got it... it wasn't like I could actually help him here and now. I couldn't help him fight Tor, if it came to that. In fact the only real reason I was even here was more of a contingency than anything else. I was here to handle and deal with prophecies or things alike them, for him. If it ended without having to deal with such things, then I was useless.

Which was honestly the best outcome for this scenario. I'd much rather be useless and have wasted a trip down here than have to actually deal with prophecies, since that would mean the worst had happened.

At the very least hopefully everyone is okay... I had not liked how they had outright banished me originally, or how they didn't allow some of my friends and family here as other locations did, but that didn't mean I wanted them to be in danger.

Especially Frerit. She had been a nice young girl...

"If, by some weird chance, something terrible happens... take the bags and run. Go to Rapti, since she's nearest, and alert Light and the rest. Then once you confirm they got your message head back north where it's safer," Vim then said.

I frowned at that. "And what...? Abandon you?"

Stolen novel; please report.

He frowned back at me and nodded. "Yeah?"

Staring at him, I wondered if I should sigh or smile at him. He wasn't joking at all, he meant it.

I know he didn't really fear death or pain like I did, or any normal person... but still...

"How about you just... handle this properly? Please? So nothing bad happens?" I asked.

Vim held my gaze for a moment, and then looked away from me and sighed. "Tor is not a slouch, Renn. No matter how tiny and cute you see him as... he's not something to underestimate. He is not a Miss Beak, but he's as close to one as those like him can get. He's beyond the realm of normalcy, and as such should be treated with such caution," Vim said.

"This information would have been far better shared before we got here, Vim..." I said with a groan.

He flinched, but nodded. "I know. I'm sorry... if anything it's your fault, you flirted the whole way here what else was I supposed to do but drool over you?"

I couldn't help it; my face flushed with heat as I tried to not laugh and failed to do so. "What...! Vim!" I groaned as I chuckled and tried to stop myself from doing so, which only made me make even weirder sounds than usual.

He laughed back at me, which only made my face even hotter as he reached over and gently patted my back. "I promise to do what I can, Renn... really. Now that the gods are back in play, I need as many allies as I can get... as we can get. So I'll not waste one of the better ones we have without just reason," he said.

"Vim..." I groaned as my face quickly cooled. Why was he again saying something so drastic...!?

"Honestly this might just be something like what happened to the bear... so..." Vim went quiet as he shrugged.

Great. "So uh... since this might be that serious, can I ask what you mean by illusionist, Vim?" I asked.

"Hm...? I've not explained it?"

I shook my head. "Not... in detail," I said.

He slowly nodded as he gestured at the village below. "Illusionary abilities are a play on one's senses. They're things that trick you into believing something that isn't real. Most abilities and techniques can only trick the eyes, making you see what isn't actually there or changing the appearance slightly of something that is. And that's why most fail, because those like us can easily notice them because of it."

"Because of what...?" I asked. What'd he mean?

"The eyes," he said as he pointed at his own. "Even if one could trick your eyes, Renn, they cannot fool the rest of you. Your nose, your ears, your sense of self and surroundings... your instincts and so forth. Something that can trick your eyes cannot trick the rest of them, and so because of it you'd notice right away. The proof of that is in the way Folz makes you feel uncomfortable. You notice the odd and your nerves become unsettled because of it," he explained.

Ah... "That water and fog had felt very real to me," I said, talking about the so called illusions Tor had shown me last time.

Vim nodded. "Thus his danger. Tor's illusions can do far more than trick one's eyes. They can make smells, tickle hairs on the back of your neck, make you feel wetness, make you feel fear or other emotions when there aren't any... basically they can actively influence the mind. They're potent things that turn the fantastical into real. They can even outright kill you, by making you believe you died without you actually doing so," he said.

"That's uh... not good," I said.

"No, it's not."

"Especially since that's basically Liora's prophecy concerning your mother," I added.

Vim flinched. "By my parents Renn, please don't point it out so blatantly. I'd been avoiding that this whole time for a reason," he said stiffly.

Woops... "Bad time to also ask if Tor might have been the cause for the bear's oddness too?"

"Rennalee..." he groaned.

Although the situation was serious, I couldn't help but smile. It seemed I wasn't just onto something, it was so serious that it was making Vim utterly uncomfortable. "Sorry..."

Vim took a deep breath and reached up to rub his eyes, as if suddenly tired. "Really..." he whispered with defeat.

"Sorry, Vim... but I mean... aren't you used to such things? You've said you fought them, or have been fighting them, all this time right...? So you should be used to it," I said.

"I am... but it's a terrifying truth I really don't want to admit. Because there's something beyond what even you are hinting at, and if it's all true, then..."

"Like a god being behind it all?" I asked.

Vim flinched again, and did so with such a quick jerk of a motion a large piece of nearby cliff broke off and started to tumble down the cliff face.

I awkwardly stepped back a step, not just from the ledge but from Vim... as I listened to what was likely a bunch of stones heavier and as big as me fall down the cliff and start hitting trees beneath the mountain.

Woops...

Vim didn't sigh... but he did groan as he rubbed his eyes some more. "Now I need to go right now," he said stiffly.

Right... cause the sound of those rocks falling had likely echoed throughout this whole cavern... "Sorry," I apologized again.

He took in a deep breath and held it in as he nodded. "It's okay. Yes. So uh... stay here. Safe. Keep an eye out for my signal," he said, still talking stiffly. It seemed my comments had really disturbed him.

"Okay... Be safe."

Vim hesitated a moment as he glanced at me, and I felt a tad sheepish as he did. He had obviously not wanted to leave just yet, but now had to, and it was my fault.

"Stand Tall, Vim," I said softly.

His eyes softened. "Stand Tall, Renn... but not too tall, okay?"

Oh...? "Okay...?" I whispered as he stepped forward. "Ah! Vim!" I panicked as he nearly stepped off the ledge, and I reached around to grab at his spear. He had almost forgotten it!

"It's okay. Keep it. You might need it more than me," he said.

"You sure...?" I might need it more than him...? I didn't like the sound of that.

He nodded with a frown. "Tor's... weak, Renn," he said simply... and then stepped off the ledge.

I groaned as I stepped forward, and flinched as I heard and watched him slide down the side of the cliff... sounding not too unlike the rocks and boulders that had just done the same.

"Weak...? Saying that after going off on a long tangent on how dangerous he was...? Really, Vim..."

Sighing at him as I watched him reach the end of the cliff, and disappear into a cloud of dust and trees, I waited impatiently for him to emerge again from the dense forest below. Oddly I didn't find him until a few minutes later, not until he entered the village proper.

From here, so far away, I barely recognized him. The only reason I even did from here was because of how fast he was moving. Could I even run that fast...?

For a long time I just... watched him. Vim seemingly didn't run straight to Tor's cave. Instead he stopped to talk to someone. From here I couldn't really see who he was talking to, but it looked like a villager. They wore some tan robe looking styled clothes here. A few minutes passed, and Vim still continued talking to them.

Daring to take my eyes off Vim for a moment, I looked around for what I could use as a seat. As to wait... since it seemed this might take some time. But there wasn't really anything more than a few trees and some small rocks and pebbles around me.

Stepping away from the cliff, I went to find a log or something like it. I guess it was time I just... patiently waited.

Usually waiting for Vim was something I didn't mind, even if it made me anxious. Since it felt good to actually have someone that I could wait for, and it usually meant upon his return I'd be able to become very happy. For one reason or another. But right now it wasn't a good feeling at all.

"Hopefully all goes well..." I mumbled as I found a decent log to use as a chair.

By the time I brought it back to the spot Vim had left me at, Vim was gone. I sat down and tried to find him again amongst the village but couldn't... so instead went to watching the distant figures instead.

People were working the fields. A small group was fishing a river to the north. Someone was on the roof of one of the bigger buildings, seemingly working on it.

They were all... seemingly busy. Fixated. Going about their daily routines.

Maybe this was all for naught. Maybe nothing was wrong... maybe Light, like many of Celine's prophecies, had been mistaken...?

"If only," I whispered as I went to dig out a snack from one of the bags.

I felt bad for Vim, since I knew he might be soon fighting a deadly battle with Tor... but I was now hungry. And it was his fault.

"We hadn't flirted that much on the way here," I mumbled as I dug out some dried meat, then went to chewing on it angrily... as my face once again felt a tad hot... which only made me angrier and hungrier all the more.

Tor better sort his issues out, or I was going to personally give him a piece of my mind. Really!

Chapter 629 Vim – Tor's Last Illusion

"He's been rather quiet lately... but we've definitely had no problems at all, Vim. I don't know why Light and the rest seem to think he's going to do something, we've not seen any sign of such a thing," Frerit said as she led me up the path to Tor's Cavern.

"Such instances don't always show signs. Plus... all monarchs eventually go astray. It is not a matter of if but when," I said calmly.

The young priestess sighed, her tiny shoulders shaking a little as she nodded. "To happen right after mother's death... is it my fault, Vim?" the young chicken asked as she slowed and looked back at me.

I stepped a few paces forward as to get nearer, and gently reached over and placed a hand on her shoulder. "No, Frerit. Nor would it be your mother's fault either. As you've undoubtedly been taught all monarchs eventually descend into madness, or a form of it. It's... just something they do. If Tor really is about to betray us, it is of no part on yours or anyone else's. Just his own," I said, speaking calmly as I did.

The young chicken gave me a worried frown but nodded. "Is there... anything I can do? We can do? To make sure it doesn't happen now?" she asked, hopeful.

"If there is I will be sure to let you know. If it's any consolation, by my agreements with Celine and the Society I am to do all I can to first try to find any chance of peace. If possible," I said.

She sighed a bit in relief upon hearing such a thing and nodded again. "That's good to hear, Vim..."

Not really. Because there was little doubt in my mind that I was going to kill Tor here and now.

Light's prophecies, all prophecies really, were things I despised... but knew better than to doubt their source. I respected them, and knew better than to discount them completely. Taking Light's prophecy, foretelling Tor's betrayal, and taking into account all I knew of monarchs made it very easy to know the expected outcome of this moment.

But Frerit didn't need to know such bad news. For now it was best to just let her, and the rest of her villagers, be anxious but at ease.

Light had already put people into motion. Almost a dozen of her people were already here, two of which were full-blooded members. People who could coexist here in this herbivore community while at the same time were strong enough, and capable enough, to protect them from outside influences. Maybe not as well as Tor and his abilities have done all these years, but they'd be able to do enough for now after Tor's death.

I wasn't entirely sure what Light had in plan for this village, or the people here, after Tor was gone... but I figured I'd found out shortly once the deed was done.

Hopefully it wasn't something too serious...

"Ah!" Frerit then stopped walking again, seemingly startled. I paused, frowning at her as she turned around to look at me with a worried expression. "Where's Renn!?"

Oh...? "Nearby. I hadn't known the condition of the village, since Light's letter had been... straight and to the point," I said, almost choosing the word ominous instead. "I'll go get her once I speak with Tor," I added.

Frerit calmed a little with a sigh of relief. "Oh, good... she was meant to be here, after all," she said lightly as she turned back around.

My frown deepened upon being informed of something I hadn't wanted to know.

Renn had been involved in the prophecy then, had she...? Did that mean Frerit already knew the expected outcome...? How long had she known, I wonder?

Choosing to not dwell too deeply on such information I simply went quiet, and cleared my mind, as Frerit led me to the entrance to Tor's Cavern. It, as always, looked like a simple cave entrance. Nothing too extravagant or showing any signs to importance.

Frerit slowed as we stepped up to the entrance, and she turned to give me a worried look. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" she asked.

A tad humbled by the young girl's offer, I gave her a gentle smile and nodded. "I'm sure. Thank you. While I go confront him, would you mind having the village gather? And go to those Light sent and ask what they think are the next steps for me, if you would," I asked. Frerit had wanted me to go see them, before confronting Tor, but I had declined.

I was here to deal with a monarch. Such a thing didn't wait.

Frerit nodded with an odd frown. "You don't know already?"

Oh? So she did. "No... I don't like knowing more than I need to. It's part of how I operate. They'll know what I mean," I said.

She slowly nodded again, and I could tell she didn't really understand but knew better than to pry further.

I gestured at cave. "While you're at it, also find out if anyone has any urgent requests of me if you would. I might not be able to stay long, considering the circumstances, but I'll try my best," I added.

The young priestess nodded, and then as I stepped forward as to walk past her and into the cavern... she coughed and cleared her throat. "Good luck, Vim..." she said gently.

Nodding as I entered Tor's Cavern, I wondered if that was heartfelt or because of some other reason.

What had they told her, I wonder...? What had they told the villagers here in general, for that matter?

Hey the monarch, someone many of you have worshiped like a godly being, is going to betray you and Vim will come and slay it. Sleep well tonight!

I shook my head and sighed at such thoughts as I heard Frerit's light footsteps as she hurried off and I headed deeper into the darkness.

Passing the small crate of torches, I went deeper into the cave and the darkness it held without worry or hesitation.

I could feel Tor now. He was still here. Still alive, too. He was quite a distance into the cave, which told me he had not retreated or run... which was a tad odd.

Did Tor even know he was going to betray us...? Usually when I got notified of a monarch's intent to betray, or it already having done so, I usually had to track them down because they had fled. It wasn't common that the monarch in question just... waited for me.

A trap maybe...? Did Tor somehow think that I could be sealed and trapped in one of his illusions...? Surely not, right? Even he, for all his pride, knew better than to do that.

Or maybe he simply didn't care. More than a few monarchs in the last few hundred years had simply... waited for the end. Even the ones not friendly had sometimes just... given up. Maybe this was going to be that kind of moment.

And that was likely exactly what I found.

Stepping out of the darkness and into a starry, moonlit sky... I frowned at the small mound of sand before me. Like a tiny island surrounded by clear and clam waters, a patch of white sand sparkled underneath a moon so big it took up nearly half the sky.

For the smallest of moments I took in the scene. It wasn't one too unlike the many I've seen Tor conjure before... but there was one glaring oddity to be found.

Tor sat upon the sandy mound. Out in the open, in his real form. A bit off the center, a few feet from where the clear waters rolled along the white sand like tiny waves, was the small hedgehog. Tor was staring up at the huge moon hanging overhead, as if lost in thought.

I stood still for a few moments... half expecting something to happen, but when nothing did I decided to step forward. The shallow water splashed as I walked towards the sandy mound, and the monarch somberly sitting upon it.

It didn't take me long to reach the sandy mound, and I stepped up onto it without hesitation. My feet sunk into it a bit as I walked onto the mound, as if it was snow.

"Tor," I greeted the monarch as I walked over to him. I stopped a few feet from him, and noted the way not even a whisker or his little nose squirmed upon my arrival. He was staring up at the huge moon, it reflecting in his eyes as if it was all that mattered in the world, and he looked moonstruck. As if completely unaware of my existence.

A long moment of silence came and went... and then right as I was about to say something more, his little whiskers shook. "Welcome, Vim," Tor said.

My eyes narrowed upon hearing his normal voice. It didn't boom, or shake the world around me. It didn't shiver the waters, or make the moon above tremble.

I see.

Stepping closer to the tiny monarch... I knelt down and took a seat. Right next to Tor, I sighed as I looked up at the huge moon looming over us.

It looked impossibly large. Although it looked real, it and the sky looked flawless even to my eyes... it was not hard to feel it was fake. Its size alone made it obvious, it took up more than half the sky overhead.

If the real moon was this big, or this close, it'd be quite concerning.

Plus, another aspect of its falsehood was clearly visible. Especially now that I was standing in the middle of the seemingly unending lake.

There was no reflection of the moon upon the waters. Though it did reflect off Tor's little eyes, somehow.

"Not even going to do the voice this time?" I asked him calmly.

The small hedgehog shivered, his tiny little quill-like spines flattened then opened again as he did. "I had thought you would bring her with you... so I had been planning, and hoping, to abuse her sentimentalism," Tor said.

I smirked at that. "Thus why I had left her outside," I said. And that was a scary thought too, since it might have worked.

The odds of Renn being able to stay my hand, one clenched in anger, were so thin and unlikely it was almost ridiculous to even consider it... but it was still a chance. One that I would not be on guard against.

"Hmph... it's always annoyed me how you somehow always keep yourself one step ahead of me, even when you don't even try to do so. Makes me feel like an absolute idiot," Tor complained.

"Rude," I said.

A tiny squeak of a huff came from Tor as he slowly looked down from the huge moon in the sky and over at me.

I waited for Tor to say something... since now the niceties were out of the way, at least so I thought, but instead... he just stared. And stared some more.

Did he... expect me to say something first...?

Honestly he didn't want that. Even if he didn't know it. If I started the conversation, the one we really needed to have, then he was not going to be happy... because I'd start it with violence. Not words.

But...

Staring at the tiny creature, a monarch of immense power but tiny all the same, I thought of Renn for a moment.

Our entire trip here had been her talking about all the many possible reasons Tor could be betraying us for. She had asked me thousands of questions, most I hadn't answered, and not just because I hadn't wanted to.

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I could only imagine a few possibilities myself. And... so...

Should I just end him now? Did it matter? Did his reasons matter at all? Did Light's? Did a prophecy or two really matter?

No. They didn't. A monarch was a monarch in the end. Even Miss Beak, and those like her, those I saw as friends... even they knew that if they ever stepped out of line they'd inevitably meet my wrath. And they knew it well. But...

He's protected this place for centuries. Thousands of people, those I had vowed to protect, over the years have lived under his watchful eye.

And in that whole time, not once has he ever allowed anything too drastic to happen. A few times I've had to come and deal with things, but nothing ever too serious. All those who have died under his care have done so either from natural causes or ones beyond anyone's control, such as disease or accidents.

Hundreds of years... without fault or failure...

That deserved a bit of respect, didn't it? At least a little...?

Yes. Renn would say so. Surely.

So...

"What's going on, Tor...? Why am I being told to cull you? I was even bringing you your ancestor's heart," I asked, finding the bit of Renn in me to do so.

Tor didn't even twitch. "Because I've been given orders," he answered.

My mouth twitched. Orders...? "By who...?"

"My creator, Vim."

I blinked, and before my eyelids even finished the motion Tor had squeaked wildly in shock as I grabbed him. I stood up, lifting Tor in my grasp as I slowly started to squeeze him. Before my mind even fully comprehended what he had just said, I was already crushing him in my grip. As I would an egg.

"Wait...!" Tor barely got out between his wheeze of a squeaks as I squeezed harder.

"Why should I?" I scoffed as I clenched even more. Veins and tendons began to enlarge as my muscles strained. For as soft and squishy he felt, he was still a monarch. I was putting enough strength into crushing him that if he had been a natural creature he would have popped and exploded long ago. His tiny spiky quills were stabbing into my hand, some even breaking under the stress, but I ignored them.

"The command... isn't... it..." Tor tried to say more, but I finally squeezed out the last bit of air from him.

My left eye twitched as I stared at the strange glob of white and black in my hand. It looked... weird, since I was squeezing it so tightly. Parts of Tor were poking out between my fingers and grip, and they did so oddly. It looked, and even kind of felt, as if I was crushing some kind of squashy marshmallow or something.

Marshmallow...?

I blinked as I thought of something I'd not thought of in...

A high-pitched wheeze of pain drew me out of my thoughts, of memories of my mother, and I uneasily watched Tor take in deep breaths.

I had slightly eased in my squeezing.

"Let me... explain... please..." Tor wheezed out, and as he did some blood leaked and splattered onto the back of my hand.

There was no need to. I shouldn't.

Wouldn't...

But I did anyway.

Shifting ever so slightly, I ignored the huge waves splashing all around the tiny island of white sand I stood upon. "Explain then," I said through clenched teeth.

What was I doing...? Giving a monarch, one who was still connected to its creator, time? Time to think? To relay information? To plan and scheme...?

This was folly. Ridiculous and...

Glaring at the tiny creature that had just made my mind full of complicated thoughts, old and new, I hated how it didn't take much effort at all to keep myself from finishing the job and crushing him completely. I could feel his heart, settled within him. It was thumping wildly, likely because he was now hurt. I had undoubtedly harmed many organs, if not all of them, just now... and he was now likely healing as fast as possible.

Tor coughed some more, and his tiny little paws clawed at my thumb. One of them looked twisted badly as he wiggled it out from under my grip. "I'm to deliver a message. That's all," he wheezed.

A... message...?

I went cold as I realized, and hated, how much sense that made.

This was why he had still been here. Even after Light and all the rest had prophecies of his betrayal. Ones that had likely taken weeks, if not months, to reach me. He had been patiently waiting, because he had been told to do so.

Monarchs could not disobey their creators.

"When'd you get it?" I asked. My voice sounded stiff. Cold. Hard.

If Renn had heard it, her ears would have fluttered in annoyance. The fact I could imagine the look on her face, that worried one she got when upset and concerned, made me sick to my stomach.

"Not too long after you and her left the last time... I was to wait until you showed up once more," Tor said, then coughed some more blood. This time it was a bright red in color, telling me his internal organs were already being restored. "I'm supposed to give you a message," Tor added after he regained some breath.

A message...

I lowered Tor for a moment, but kept firm hold of him. I glanced around, and didn't like the fact that I didn't feel anything amiss. I felt no other divinity around me, other than the source in my hand.

And not just here either. From that mountain top where I'd left Renn, to the village and then into this cavern system... I had not felt anything or anyone else. No one other than Tor and Renn, no other sources of divinity, were nearby.

"Just a message, Vim... just a message," Tor then said, sounding weak as he did.

Returning my focus to the tiny monarch, I lifted him a bit as to glare down at him. I ever so gently squeezed a bit tighter, causing him to let out a tiny wheeze of a groan as I did. "What's the message?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Vim..." Tor wheezed, as if he hadn't heard me. And... maybe he hadn't. I was squeezing him rather harshly, to the point it seemed he couldn't even force air into his lungs. I softened my grip on him a little, enough to let him breathe again, and then waited for him to cough up a bit more blood before continuing.

"Say it."

Tor closed his tiny, glistening eyes. "I've been obeying her this whole time, Vim... from the beginning," he admitted, sounding defeated as he did.

My left eye twitched as I shifted... and something loud snapped. Something big. Something heavy.

Slowly looking up, I glared at a huge crack that had just ran from one side of the massive moon above us to the other end. The crack was a massive rigid line that had sounded similar to what a piece of tile or a heavy plate made when broken. Just... a lot louder.

Then, as if like a deflated balloon, the shining moon started to shrink and fade away... It disappeared into the darkness more like a distant fog than an actual object, and I felt a shift in the air as the illusion shattered.

I was no longer standing on a mound of white sand, surrounded by water. I was now standing in the center of a huge cavern of rock. My eyes quickly adjusted as I again focused on my hand, and the tiny rodent who was wheezing in pain. It sounded like he had a collapsed lung, and was likely what had broken his illusion. Pain. He was in a lot of it. His head, with his tiny but slightly long snout, was resting against the crook of my thumb. He felt limp in my grip, and was trembling lightly in sporadic bursts.

Had I already killed him...? I had been squeezing rather hard, but I had thought him a tad stronger than that... plus I had thought he had been healing already... maybe I had misjudged Tor's strength all this time? If so, then it was a good thing I had kept him from trying to absorb his ancestor's heart all this time.

He would have never survived it, if this was all he was capable of.

"Her name?" I asked as I watched the way his snout didn't even tremble.

If not for his tiny wheezes, I'd think him dead. But he was definitely still breathing... After a few moments of silence, I shook him. His tiny face rolled along my thumb, but ended back where it had been originally. Was his neck broken...? It seemed like it.

"I don't know, Vim..." Tor said softly as he opened his tiny little eyes. They leaked, and not just tears. "I've never seen her before. She talks to me in my head. Her words are so... so loud... and I only know that I have to let them know whenever you visit. Or anything I learn about you, such as from a visitor," he said. As he spoke, I realized he wasn't just hurt... he was defeated. He knew it was over, and had no plans to fight or struggle. His broken voice sounded so thin and hollow that it almost made me feel like the bad guy. As if I was the one abusing him, betraying him, and not the other way around.

"Renn," I said my wife's name solidly, unafraid to do so.

The tiniest of movement came from Tor as he tried to nod, but couldn't. It seemed his neck really was broken, or at least something was broken enough to keep him from moving it in any real manner. "Yes... They're very interested in her."

Of course they are.

Her though...? And he didn't know his creator's name...? Not too hard to believe, since he wasn't a firstborn. He was several generations separated. It was believable that he'd never actually met the god who created him, and even more believable that they only ever gave him orders from afar. Especially since they likely never wanted to risk me catching wind of them, and thus never came here themselves.

"I told her. I'm sorry. I... I had to. Even when I didn't want to," Tor whispered, tiny little hiccups came as he started to tremble again. Though if it was from the pain, or shame, I couldn't tell.

"When did she first learn of Renn? Did you tell her first, or did she ask first?" I asked, uncaring for such sentimentality. I didn't fault Tor, not really, but I also didn't pity him. A monarch could not disobey its creator. It was impossible. Yet that didn't mean I'd overlook or forgive his transgressions.

"She hadn't believed me when I told her. The first time I smelled her. Years ago," Tor said.

Smelled her...? I pondered for a moment, and realized he was right. He had smelled Renn on me on one of my visits here, back in beginning. It had likely been because I had been carrying something of hers and hadn't given it time to eliminate the smell yet.

A mistake on my part then...? But back then Renn and I had not been romantically involved. So it hadn't mattered...

Or had it...? After all... as so everyone kept hinting and telling me, Renn and I were supposed to have met and mated a long time ago...

"What do you mean she hadn't believed you?" I asked carefully.

Odds are the god was listening in now. Or at least, talking to Tor at the moment. I didn't feel his heart expending much divinity, even to the point it felt as if he was barely even trying to heal from the damage I'd caused him. But I knew a god had ways. Ones even I didn't know full about, or fully understand.

"She didn't believe me. Even yelled at me... wanted me to prove it. It's... why I asked for the heart," Tor said as he blinked a heavy drop of blood out of his right eye. It landed on my thumb, and as it rolled

down along it and down my wrist I realized it had been a tiny drop, it had just looked big and heavy on him.

"Your ancestor's," I said softly.

He flinched in a way that told me had again tried to nod his head. "Yes. You would have never allowed it. You knew this whole time I couldn't do it. That I wasn't strong enough... but I figured, if the prophecies were true, she'd change you. Make you, or let you, make mistakes. And well..."

"And I did," I finished for him. Renn actually had his ancestor's heart right now. In her pocket.

Tor took in a deep breath, and then coughed it out before he could relish it.

I allowed him to cough for a bit, and as I did I glanced around. The cavern we were in was pitch dark... but my eyes had long adjusted. This place looked solemn. Dark and damp. Without his little illusions the place didn't look comfortable at all. Hardly fitting for a monarch's resting place.

"What is the message, Tor? Exactly," I asked, starting to lose interest.

He shivered a bit as he took in a small breath... but then didn't answer.

"Tor..." I warned him, and readied myself to squeeze once more.

"Your vengeance must end," Tor then said, speaking clearly. Loudly. As if no longer broken, physically or mentally. I narrowed my eyes at the tiny rodent who lifted his head and stared me straight in the eyes as he did. "You have one opportunity. If you don't take it, she might."

I glared for a long moment after Tor finished... and then his head leaned back down and plopped back onto my thumb, and he released a great sigh of relief.

"That's... it?" I asked. Really?

"Yes... yes... I'm sorry," Tor whispered weakly.

Hmph.

"Not much of a threat. At least, not anymore than I've already received," I said.

The threat could be interpreted two ways. Either the god was saying she herself was going to do something, presumably take advantage of an opportunity I was ignoring somehow... or Renn was. I couldn't imagine who else she spoke of.

But it was not very threatening, in my perspective. Even Havoc's threat had more weight than that. I wonder who this god was...? Did I know them well? Was I misinterpreting something? I doubted Tor had misspoke or forgot to say something... it would not be possible for him to do so. Such was why his body

had no longer failed him the moment he went to fulfill his creator's demand. His very body, even broken, did the impossible to fulfill it. That was how monarchs worked.

Yet...

Rather than a threat... it felt more like a friendly warning, somehow. Which made no sense...

No matter.

"I'm sorry, Vim..." Tor whispered again. He sounded distant, as if he wasn't even aware of what I'd just said. Maybe he hadn't.

"I'm sorry too, Tor," I whispered back as I steeled myself. I took in a small breath as I readied, and nodded. "Know that I don't fault you. But... now I can't trust you."

The small monarch, the hedgehog themed rodent... simply closed his eyes as I squeezed before he could say or do anything in response.

This time I didn't hold back. I didn't stop. In an instant I allowed the hatred and pure anger I kept deep within me out, and with a rush of heat up along my spine and then down and out my arm... I crushed Tor.

He popped this time. No longer did he feel like a marshmallow as I squeezed so tightly that no flesh or bone was left in my hand... only one thing remained as blood and flesh fell to the ground with wet noises that echoed throughout the now empty and dark cavern.

Or well, not so dark anymore.

I blinked as I stared at the only thing left in my hand. A glowing orb, about the size of the Renn's eyeball. It was glowing a brilliant mix of colors of blue and green, swirling with divine energy... and it glowed so brightly that if it had been natural light and not divine light it would have likely blinded my current set of eyes.

Swiping my hand, and the heart, clean of gunk... I stepped away and headed for the exit. Carrying Tor's heart as I did.

"You didn't resist at all," I whispered softly. I'd likely never know if that was by design or not.

Chapter 630 Renn – Tor's Death

Placing our bags down for a moment, I frowned at the answer I'd been waiting for... as Vim handed me Tor's heart.

With a heavy heart of my own, I sighed as I held the small heart that surprisingly had multiple colors within. There were blues and greens and... maybe some other colors too? It was hard to tell here in the sunlight; surprisingly the heart wasn't very bright at all. Nowhere near as bright as some of the others I'd seen.

"Vim..." I whispered a bit disappointingly as I glanced at him. He looked... fine, I guess. None of his clothes looked even dirty, let alone torn or ruined. Had Tor not put up much a fight or something...?

"I had to, Renn," Vim answered.

"Did you? Really...? Honestly?"

He frowned and nodded at me. "He did not resist, Renn. He accepted it... because even he knew it was the only acceptable outcome," he said.

"Why though? What was his reason? How did he even betray us, did he even betray us?" I asked, correcting myself at the end there. As it was I had no real confirmation he'd even done so.

Vim though nodded again. "He had been getting orders. From a god," he said simply.

From... a god? My shoulders slumped as I again looked to his heart. It now felt heavy, even though it was everything but. "So..."

"So he was no longer trustworthy, on any level. Because a god, rather their direct creators, can give monarchs orders. Ones that they fulfill and obey, regardless of their own desires. It is an order bound by souls. Tor was no longer safe to trust because of it," Vim said.

Orders... he'd brought that up before, but I wasn't entirely sure how that worked. Was he saying that a god could give someone an order, and no matter what they wanted or felt they'd do it? Or at least, attempt to do so...?

I mean, in theory that was what made a god a god... but...

Sighing softly, I glanced around for a moment... as I expected something, or someone, to say or do something odd.

Vim and I were alone in front of the cavern that led to Tor's home... or at least, what had once been his home. He had done as he had promised; he had lit a torch and waved it at me from a distance. It had taken me a bit longer than I had wanted to get here after seeing the signal, since I had rounded the village and not gone through it, but it also felt like it hadn't taken me long at all. Mostly because I had been stressed out the whole way here.

It had not taken Vim long to signal for me. Less than an hour after he had left me on that mountain, he had been waving me down. It was almost... sad how swiftly he handled things, sometimes.

"Couldn't you have just... killed the god instead?" I asked softly as I stared down at Tor's heart. It almost made me feel dirt holding it, though not because it actually was. This should not be in my hand, it should still be in that cute little monarch...

"And how many souls would you have sacrificed willingly until I did so, Renn?" Vim asked.

I bit the inside of my lip, and wasn't able to answer. Because it was something I couldn't answer.

He was right. I'd not sacrifice anyone, no one here in this village or even complete strangers, just to give Vim time to track down and kill this said god.

But did that really make his actions right? Were they truly justified...? Was there not possibly another way, somehow...? I looked around again, as if in hopes of an answer, and of course found nothing.

"This feels wrong, Vim," I said as I stopped looking around. I felt as if someone should be crying, or throwing a fit or something... and instead we were just... standing here and talking all nonchalantly. As if talking about the weather, and not the death and betrayal of a monarch. One who was important, too.

"I'm sure. But... this was expected. Even if Light and the rest had never had such prophecies of his betrayal, I always expect each and every monarch to eventually need culling. For most of the time I knew Miss Beak, I had even expected a day to come that I'd be forced to put her down," Vim said.

I groaned at that. "Do you think that way about me too?"

"What...? Of course not, you're not a monarch," he said with a chuckle.

But I had the heart of one now, didn't I...?

"Can a god give me orders, Vim...? Like they do a monarch? Like one did Tor?" I asked. I was afraid to hear the answer, but had to.

Vim frowned at me. "No. Even if the creator of one of the hearts you've absorbed showed up, you're technically not a monarch. Also, you don't have those hearts inside you Renn. You have your own heart. You made a new one, in a sense, inside of you. One that was formed by the original one you absorbed, yes, but nonetheless your own. Not one made by someone else," he said.

I noted he spoke calmly, and with a tiny smile. He was amused I'd even asked which was relieving. That meant he wasn't telling me some kind of half-truth or avoiding the subject. And that the mere idea of it was funny to him, which further told me how unlikely it was.

"So... the, or a, god's ability to control someone is dependent on the heart inside?" I asked, for clarification.

"Well... no. To be honest you're not... entirely safe. If the god who created your ancestor, the firstborn in the line of the heart you absorbed, then there is actually a connection. They'd not be able to outright order you around though, the way they would be able to a monarch. You're... different. Enough so to keep you free and safe from such threats," Vim said. This time I noted the way he frowned, and the words he used.

He didn't want to outright tell me the truth. I could tell it rather clearly, even if I didn't or wasn't able to see the way he was kind of keeping his eyes away from me. As if to make sure he'd not meet my gaze and look me in the eyes.

Vim confidently said I didn't need to fear being ordered around by a god. Yet... I was also not completely free of their influence either. That was what I got from his words, and the way he didn't say certain things so obviously.

I was used to him not telling me the whole truth. Long used to it.

But why...? What truth was he trying to hide? It was likely for a good reason, a just purpose, but... what could it be?

If there was no threat of a god being able to order me around... what point was there in keeping such a thing a secret...? Was it something to do with the hearts themselves? The monarchs? Maybe something he knew that he wasn't supposed to? Maybe he wasn't worried over telling me such things at all, but simply realized he was being so open with me and thus instinctively retreated? I sometimes noticed he did so without even realizing it. As if it was some kind of weird defense mechanism or something.

Should I prod some more...? Or would he get upset? I had other things I wanted to talk about, after all, and I didn't know if I should push the limits just yet...

"So he's really gone," I said softly, as to both change the topic a slight and to set up my next question.

Vim nodded. "Yes. He mentioned he'd never met his god, though he had called her a she. So their voice, the one that he heard in his head at least, had likely been very feminine," Vim said, and did so with an odd frown... as if such information was very odd.

"Are... female gods rare...?" I asked carefully. So far, Stance and Havoc, had been men, right? But many of the gods spoken about in the bibles and tomes I'd read spoke more of female gods than not... not to mention the obvious one, his mother.

Vim frowned as he reached up to scratch mindlessly at his neck. "Actually no. There hadn't been many men amongst them, and a lot of them died quickly for one reason or another... Taking that into consideration it is a bit odd the last few I've encountered have all been men, huh?"

Oh...? "You said once that they can change themselves at will, though," I said.

He blinked and his frown deepened as he glanced at me. "Had I...?" he said softly, but then shrugged. "They can, but as far as I'm aware most didn't go that far with it. The few who went too far died... you can only change yourself to a point before something breaks," he said.

Breaks...? "What breaks."

"Not sure. Sometimes I just... found dead gods. Torn apart by their own spells. Much like how Stance's mind had been broken, he had attempted something that his body could not endure. I'm honestly not sure why some break and others don't," he said.

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A hurried question nearly escaped my lips, but I bit it back. I chewed on the inside of my lip for a moment as I kept myself from asking if his parents had done such things too.

Luckily Vim hadn't noticed as he gestured down the path that led up to the cave we stood in front of. The one that led to the village in the canyon. "Let us go then, I guess," he said.

Go...? "Where, Vim? To report to Light what happened?" I asked. Vim walked over to the bags I'd brought down from the mountain and went to picking them, as to carry them once more.

"Hm...? To the village. To let everyone know what happened. Light already sent people here, some of her people. They've all been expecting this for some time, likely for months," he said.

Huh? "Really?"

He nodded and sighed as he tightened one of the straps on the bags. "I've not talked to them yet, or even know who they are, but Frerit had said there's a small group here and more are planning to show up. They've been planning for Tor's death, or at least his removal, for some time."

"Why didn't they bring it up earlier? If at least to me?" I asked, a tad offended. Hadn't Light promised to let me know of such things from now on?

"Maybe they hadn't known until after we parted ways, Renn. We have been busy up in the north," he said.

We had been, but it hadn't felt so long ago. It had only been a few months since I'd left Telmik, and not long before that Lumen... and also...

I tried not to think too deeply of all the prophecies I'd read about last time I had been in Telmik. None had been about Tor's betrayal, but... quite a few of them had been about stuff that had yet to happen. Namely, the supposed biggest one, being a never ending harsh winter that would wipe out more life than not.

I'd been wanting to ask Vim about it, but I'd been hesitant to. Since I wasn't sure yet just how far away such troubles were. He hated being told of dangers and prophecies as they happened, or even the ones from the past, let alone ones far in the future.

While I squirmed a bit over what to ask, and what not to, Vim stepped over to me. I stood up a bit straighter, and as I did my ears went stiff as I frowned up at him. He was looking down at me with a sad look, one that made me a bit on guard.

Had killing Tor been difficult for him, I wonder...? Not physically, but...

"From what I gathered, Renn, Tor's been under the command of his god for the whole time," he then said.

My ears softened, and one of them fluttered as I slowly nodded. "Okay...?"

Vim's eyes held my own, unwaveringly, as they narrowed. "This whole time. A shock, but not... really. Not anymore. Yet, the cause for him and her to become active, and thus cause this..." Vim then pointed downward, and I didn't need to glance to know what he was speaking of. He had pointed at my hand, and the heart clasped within it. "Was recent."

I gulped. "How recent...?"

"About the time we met, recent," he answered.

Great. "How...? Or... why?" I asked, my tail coiling behind me. Why'd he look so worried? Should I be worried too now?

Vim took in a deep breath and after a moment of holding it in he sighed it out. We were close enough that I felt his breath on my ears, and I didn't like how hot it had felt. If that heat had come from a normal person I'd think them sick. "I'm not sure what they're planning Renn... but I think it's time I made a new rule, one for us. A personal one," he said.

I blinked as he reached over... and with a gentle touch he grabbed my leather breastplate. He tugged on it ever so softly, since it had gotten a bit off-centered thanks to my hurrying here while carrying more bags than I usually did. He put it back in its proper place and even tugged a bit on my shirt and undershirt too as if to make me look presentable again or something.

Waiting for him to continue, to tell me of this new rule, I found myself instead watching him focus on my attire. He started to fuss over the way my sleeve rolled up, then went to untangling one of my longer braids that had gotten stuck under one of the leather hooks on my shoulder.

Although a tad annoyed he had gone quiet, I ended up enjoying the few moments of his attention. He usually did occasionally did such things, but he hasn't had the opportunity to in a long time since moments like this only came when we traveled together. It wasn't often my clothes got ruffled or out of place at home, after all...

Honestly it wasn't often that I became so disheveled in the first place. I was usually pretty good at paying attention to my clothes and stuff.

"Your braids are coming undone," he then said.

"Well..." I wasn't going to tell him that I'd been neglecting them on purpose.

Vim sighed as he went to retying one of them. I was a little surprised to see him so easily braid a section of my hair, and do so almost... perfectly. Should I be annoyed or glad that he was so adept at it, I wonder?

"Tor didn't say much. But I read between the lines," Vim then said, forcing my attention away from him braiding my hair. I frowned up at him and waited for him to continue, as he sighed again. "Whoever he was speaking to... from what I can tell, only really became interested in what was going on here once you were brought up."

I slowly blinked as I nodded. "What's that mean, Vim...?"

"I'm not sure yet. At first I figured it was just a threat, like the one Havoc had given... but what if it isn't? I'm not even sure if her message this time was a threat, really," he said.

"Her message...?"

He blinked, and then glanced up at me as he finished up with my braid. "Tor had a message. From her to me. Or us, maybe... He told me that my vengeance must end, and that I have one opportunity. That I need to take it, or..."

"Or what? I'll be dead? So the same thing as Havoc then?" I asked. If so then nothing changed, right...? Vim had not been willing to entertain that threat with Havoc either, not sure why it coming from another god or monarch would change that.

"Rather..." Vim paused a moment, tapped my chest with a soft finger and frowned. "If you don't take it, she might," he said, obviously repeating what he'd been told.

"She might...? Me you mean?" I asked, trying to understand. Was the god saying I had an opportunity...? To do what? For what reason? And even if I did, what would I possible do that would go against Vim's own desires and choices?

"Honestly that's what I'm wondering. At first I interpreted it as Tor linking it to the god who made him, but... what if it's you?"

"What if it is...? And what kind of choice are we even talking about?" I asked.

"Rather than a choice, it's an opportunity. That can be more than a choice... it's a more... hm..." Vim went quiet as he pondered it, and he glanced down a bit as he did. I watched him study something beneath my face, either my chest or maybe my hands and tail that kept wiggling near him, and waited some more.

After a few long moments, I decided to stop waiting. "Do you know which god he speaks of?" I asked.

"No. There's... a few that come to mind. Tor and his line had been those whose abilities dealt with illusions. There had been several who had dabbled in that back then, but I had not paid any of them much mind so I can't remember."

"Why hadn't you?"

"They had not been a real threat to me. As I told you, illusions don't work on me. Even the ones that do."

Even the ones that do...? "Doesn't explain how I'm able to put the wool over your eyes so easily," I said, teasing him a little.

Vim smirked at that. "Right?"

I enjoyed his smirk for a moment... and then decided to return to the important matter at hand. "So...?"

His smirk faltered a bit, but didn't die off completely. It lived on as a soft smile. "I want you to stay near me from now on. No matter what happens, where I must go, or what anyone says," he said.

For a tiny moment my heart swelled at such a thing... but then the realization of his meaning, his true meaning, dawned on me and my shoulders became heavy and slumped. "It's that bad, Vim...?" I asked softly.

He nodded slowly. "It might be. Until we know for sure...? I just want to be safe. Please."

But... "But..." I whispered as I thought of my home. The one I was trying to build up north. All my friends. Family. The people who had even left their own homes, such as Merit, to come join me. The people that were waiting for me to prepare a place for them, like Tundra or Narli and her family...

Vim held my eyes as he nodded again, this time a tad gentler. "Yes. That means you might not get to go back north anytime soon. I'm sorry."

I gulped. "But Vim..."

"Unless... you really wish to. Then I won't fight it. I'll never stop you Renn, from doing what you want to do... just know the risks. Know that if you do..."

Taking in a deep breath, I shuddered it out as I realized what he was saying. Actually saying.

He was saying that it was about to get so dangerous... that if I wasn't near him I could die. If it wasn't already that dangerous this moment.

"But our home..." I whispered.

"Mhm... think about it as we deal with the headache heading our way," he said.

"Hm?" I turned, and sure enough could hear the sound of footsteps. Coming up towards us from the path. Though I couldn't see the owner, I could tell whoever was coming this way was light-footed... and wearing thin sandals maybe. Not too uncommon, especially in the warmer weather.

Vim patted me on the shoulder as he sighed and stepped around me. Likely to head first and greet whoever was coming our way. "Just ponder it, Renn. I'll always support you, regardless. But... I love you, and I want you safe. And if there really are gods out there interested in you, for whatever reason, then I can't do that with you too far away from me," he said.

Grumbling at him, and the person getting closer who was going to keep me from asking questions and expressing concerns... I decided to quickly put Tor's heart away. I opened the small monarch pouch, the one on my waist, as to put it away and as I did...

"Uh oh..." I groaned as I stared into the small pouch. And how dark it was within it.

"What...?" Vim turned around right as a younger girl, Frerit by the looks of it, enter view. She noticed us as I did her and picked up her pace, but was still too far to greet just yet.

"Um... the heart. Ugh..." I wasn't sure how to say it, and I didn't need to. Vim didn't even need to glance into the, now empty, pouch to realize what I meant and he closed his eyes and groaned even louder than I just had.

Smiling a little sheepishly, I wondered again just how I did it... as I put Tor's heart into the pouch that was now empty, since I had seemingly absorbed the other heart that Vim had given me only hours ago before he had headed into Tor's cave as to confront him.

It was either that or I had dropped it somehow, but I knew that wasn't the case. These pouches were made of monarch leather, and had these neat little things he called zippers on them. They didn't come loose like a normal pouch did.

"Sorry," I said lightly as Frerit drew near, waving happily at me as she did.

Vim only groaned even more, showing more emotion over this than Tor's death or the cause of it.